

Northern dialect evidence for the chronology of the Great Vowel Shift

The Great Vowel Shift (GVS) is by now a well-studied phenomenon, as it represents the defining change in the transition from Middle English (ME) to Early Modern English, and affected the entire ME long vowel system. However, decades of theoretical debate have failed to produce a consensus concerning the chronology of the shift. This paper demonstrates how the tools of dialect geography may be brought to bear on historical data, showing how dialectal differences in the outcomes of the GVS may inform our understanding of the shift itself. In doing so, we offer an alternative explanation for the type of seemingly irregular dialect data cited as evidence for a lack of unity in the GVS; namely, these irregularities are the result of linguistic diffusion.

Most past work has claimed that the GVS proceeded as a unitary chain shift with a coherent internal structure (Luick 1896, Jespersen 1909, Lass 1976), but some have called attention to irregularities in the English dialect data in order to challenge these theories (notably Stockwell and Minkova 1988). We argue that the apparent inconsistencies in the Northern dialect outcomes of the GVS result from the piecemeal linguistic diffusion of the shift to the North, and as such, do not pose serious problems for a unitary model of the shift. In this argument we follow Dinkin (to appear), who draws on Labov's (2007) characterization of the differing roles of transmission and diffusion in language change in order to explain how the structural relationships in unitary changes can break down in diffusion to other speech communities. Dinkin uses data from the Northern Cities Shift, an ongoing change in the large northern cities in the United States, to observe the irregular effects of diffusion in real time.

Data is drawn from Kolb's *Phonological Atlas of the Northern Region* (1966), which consists of maps for individual lexical items. By taking 4-5 words for each ME long vowel and mapping the most common outcome at each location, we achieve a more comprehensive view of the vowel system, as well as the spatial patterns of diffusion. We focus primarily on the ME /u:/ and /o:/ classes, which have played a crucial role in the debate surrounding the chronology of the GVS. Using detailed maps to illustrate the relationship between these vowels, we show that despite the lack of uniformity in the outcomes across the region, there is a striking regularity in the patterns observed: distance northwards and geographical boundaries reliably predict how advanced and coherent the GVS is in any given location. For example, Figure 1 shows that while there was not a uniform shift of /u:/ to /au/ across the region, there is a clear nesting pattern. The most advanced forms are diffusing northward from the southwest, while the least advanced forms are north of a line formed by the Ribble and Humber rivers.

By applying arguments from modern sociolinguistic studies to historical data, this research presents evidence that irregular dialect outcomes need not challenge the unity of large-scale chain shifts.

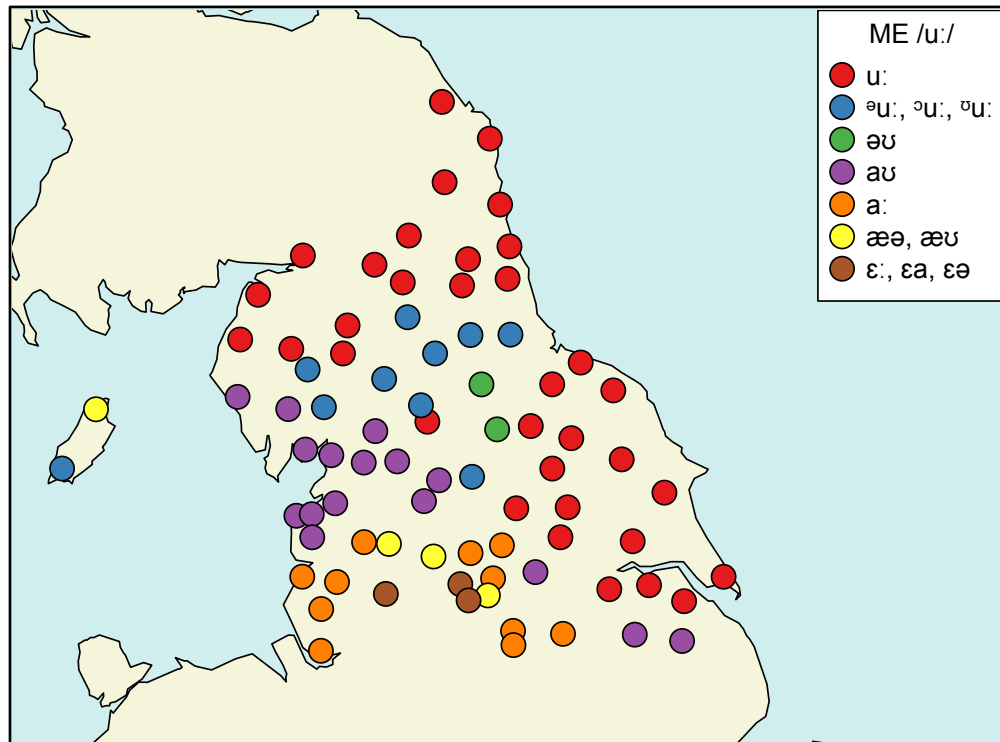


Figure 1: Outcomes of the ME /u:/ vowel (modern MOUTH class) across the North.

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