Tracing Change

A Historical Sociolinguist's Investigation of an English in Flux

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Abstract

This paper is an historical sociolinguistic study of the English language primarily utilising the works of Meyerhoff (2006), Bergs (2005), and Fennell (2001) to investigate phonetic changes in English caused by the Great Vowel Shift. Our research explores the '*Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century, Part I*' as chronicled by Davis (1971) as a means of discovering to what extent the Great Vowel Shift had materialised in the 15th century. Prefacing our study is an historical overview spanning from the 11th century and leading up to the Late Middle English period of the 15th century, which is intended to provide the reader with a historical, linear plotting of the English language, mapping its rise to dominance in England.

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1. Introduction to the Project

1.1 Motivation

> *Dearest creature in creation*
> *Studying English pronunciation,*
> *I will teach you in my verse*
> *Sounds like corpse, corps, horse and worse.*
> *[...]*
> *It's a dark abyss or tunnel*
> *Strewn with stones like rowlock, gunwale,*
> *Islington, and Isle of Wight,*
> *Housewife, verdict and indict.*

(Trenité, 1929)

As students of the English language we often wonder about the peculiarities of spelling, or is it the peculiarities of pronunciation? What lies at the heart of some of the unintuitive incongruencies between written and spoken English? Are we dealing with arbitrary conventions or is there a system to the chaos? If so, what can we trace this back to?

Pondering these questions motivated us to investigate the history of England and *diachronic* change to the English language itself. Our coursework helped equip us with the necessary tools to delve into a historical period, and we finally chose our focus to be the High to Late Middle Ages.

First and foremost, then, researching and writing this paper presented a learning opportunity; a vehicle for us to apply some of our newfound phonological as well as (socio-)linguistic knowledge. In order for this paper not to become an unfocused mess, we chose to hone in on a particular corpus that has proven time and time again to offer a wealth of information to researchers in the field of historical sociolinguistics. The so-called Paston Letters (PL) are a collection of correspondences between members of the Paston family of Norfolk, dating from 1422 to 1509, a period in the development of the English language Alexander Bergs calls "[one] of dramatic changes and rapid developments". (Bergs, 2005:2).

Coincidentally, the timing of these letters was within the span of the Great Vowel Shift – a theory to which major changes in pronunciation over the length of 400 years are attributed – which we discovered after researching into established theories regarding historical language change. Realising we would not be able to conduct an exhaustive linguistic investigation into the whole corpus of the Paston Letters, we decided to incorporate these two historically valuable resources, choosing to trace evidence of the phonetic changes attributed to GVS within the Paston Letters corpus.

1.2 Delimiting Theory and Fields

The involved field of historical sociolinguistics poses some obstacles. Whilst "present-day sociolinguistics is concerned *mainly* with spoken data" (Bergs, 2005:14), thus having the advantage of being able to record new data at a whim, "historical sociolinguistics [is] *mainly* [concerned] with written documents" (Ibid.) and thereby can only address pre-existing historical data. It is here where Labov's description of historical sociolinguistics becomes pertinent, describing the field as "the art of making the best use of bad data" (Labov in Ibid.: 13). With this statement it is expressed that by anchoring a sociolinguistics study within a historical timeframe, we as historical sociolinguists must make do with the data we have. This creates a problem when undertaking such an investigation as ours, where the inability to record or access new relevant data limits us to a fixed selection of corpus.

One of the most notable challenges faced by historical sociolinguists is of scarcity in the range of assessable material relating to casual speech. We can only analyse historical vernacular to a limited extent, found only in the written form excavated from the past. The process of writing itself requires the writer to construct sentences and, therefore, consciously think about what and how they are conveying their words, mostly with a reader in mind. This conscious process lowers the naturalness of speech and reduces the use of casual speech elements such as the slang or jargon of their time, resulting in a more intentional, calculated language. This process trims down the *vernacular* elements found in speech, lessening the clues on language at that time. We will offer more thoughts on this matter in the section where we conceptualise innovation in the spoken and written modes.

Another issue with historical sociolinguistics is the field itself. This hybrid discipline creates a scenario where one not only has to "incorporate theories, practices, and paradigms from all three fields, but [...] also has to struggle with and in conflicts that originate in all three areas." (Ibid.:12).
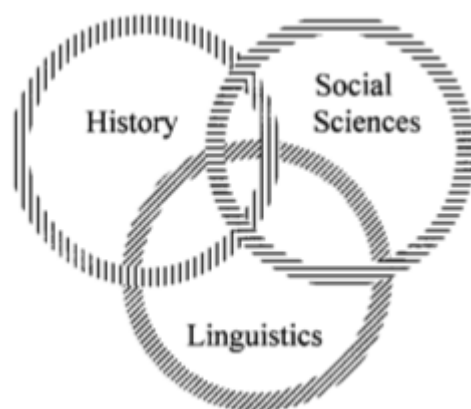
Figure 1. A model of historical sociolinguistics (Berg, 2005:8)

As shown in *Figure 1* above, historical sociolinguistics can be better understood as a hybrid of *history*, *social sciences* and *linguistic* studies utilising elements, theories and frameworks from all three to, in our case, enable a study of linguistic change and variation within a historical context from an anthropological-societal-cultural perspective. With this social approach to language history and change, we are able to draw upon a number of sources within the English landscape of the time in order to help trace the formation of the English language historically. However, the labels *history*, *social sciences* and *linguistics* are broad, all encompassing headers, and require an explanation. Yet these are also not decidedly standalone components, instead overlapping often, leading to a more amalgamated summary rather than isolated definitions.

The historical-linguistic element of our project is grounded in philology, focussing on the historical development of both, French and English, as well as the "external history" (Ibid.:10) of these languages within 11th-15th century England. Delineating the development of both languages across four centuries, the political, economical, theological, and social perspectives throughout this time are all touched upon to a degree in order to construct a template of the external influences on language change taking place within various circles of society. Sociolinguistics thus comes into the fore, with anthropological linguistics (Ibid.:9) applying to our charting of how language affects these aforementioned social circles, and later how language change occurred within the Paston Letters corpus in particular.

However, for the most part our investigation is based within the confines of linguistic variation and change, and accordingly our research into both the historical foundations and the social strata of England during the 11th to 15th century all seek to "answer questions relating to politics and language, anthropology and language, geography and language, etc" (Ibid.:12). Such factors are of great importance to historical sociolinguists, and because "[l]inguistic and social factors are closely interrelated in the development of language change" (Weinreich, Labov, and Herzog in: Bergs, 2005:4), there is a clear understanding of the relevance of the field in this particular case.

So as to not overwhelm the reader with information that first becomes relevant in later chapters, we will over the course of the paper introduce some more concrete theoretical frameworks and termini pertinent to our investigation.

1.3 Methodology

If we were to sum up the methods we employed in the creation of this paper in one phrase, it would be 'reading critically'. At this point we will shortly introduce some works which have proven invaluable to our research. For the first half of the analysis we found a wealth of information to be Barbara Fennell's *'A History of English: A Sociolinguistic Approach'* (2001), which is wedged firmly within the abovementioned hybrid field of historical sociolinguistics and as such not only offered insights in regards to the development of the English language, but situated these developments within society at large at the time. To this end we found it beneficial to draw upon Miriam Meyerhoff's *'Introducing Sociolinguistics'* (2006), which was included in our course literature and provides complementary theoretical explanations of sociolinguistic concepts.

Of huge importance to our examination was Alexander Bergs' tome with the unwieldy title *'Social Networks and Historical Sociolinguistics: Studies in Morphosyntactic Variation in the Paston Letters: (1421-1503)'* (2005). This comprehensive study on the one hand served as inspiration and motivation in regards to using the PL corpus to map linguistic change but, moreso, introduced us to some of the theory and linguistic frameworks that inform our paper. Of importance is also the fact that Bergs did a lot of the quantitative and qualitative 'legwork' in regards to the Paston correspondence.

One of the biggest challenges we encountered during the research period was making sense of the complex phonetic theory behind the Great Vowel Shift (GVS). To this extent Seth Lerer's succinct *'Inventing English: A Portable History of the Language'* (2007) proved an engaging read that broadly introduced us to some of the theory and history behind GVS without sacrificing academic merit. Cited not only by Lerer but in most of the literature on the topic is the Danish linguist Otto Jespersen, who first coined the term and unified some existing theories in his work *'A Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles'* (1961). We use Jespersen's work not only to tag our paper with the more technical elements of GVS, but to provide the reader with graphs that make an invaluable contribution towards defining GVS in the reader's mind.

While there is a great deal to be said about a more applied, practical methodology we will reserve this for the last chapter of this paper where we detail our own research drawing on GVS theory and the Paston Letter corpus.

1.4 Problem Definition and Research Questions

The High and Late Medieval Periods of England are characterised by an English in flux: to what extent is it fair to credit societal upheaval with leaving a lasting mark on the language and is it possible to map some of the ensuing phonetic changes based on extant correspondences of this period?

Research Questions:

- How can historical sociolinguists research pronunciation utilising only written records of the past?
- Relating to language contact with French following the Norman Conquest, in what way can the concept of *prestige* be understood to have influenced the lexicon of English to this day?
- How can Labov's *vernacularity* framework be applied to the 'bad data' that are written records?
- What are some common conceptualisations of the Great Vowel Shift?

2. Analysis

2.1 Introduction

> [N]o other topic of English historical phonology has excited so extensive a debate, no other topic of English historical phonology has received so wide a coverage as the Great Vowel Shift (GVS). [...] the amount of discussion that deals with it would fill a small, or even not such a small library or, in terms of modern conveyors of information, innumerable gigabytes of computer memory. This circumstance, one could say, raises an almost insurmountable barrier to attempts at comprehensive summaries.
> (Lieli, 2014:1)

In his seminal work *'A Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles'*, originally published in 1909, Danish linguist Otto Jespersen comprehensively depicts the term Great Vowel Shift (GVS) as describing an unprecedented change in the pronunciation of the long vowels /aː/, /eː/, /iː/, /oː/ and /uː/. These were diphthongized or raised to /eɪ/, /iː/, /aɪ/, /uː/ and /aʊ/, respectively.

This change can be better understood consulting the following table, taken from Jespersen's work:

ME	Mod. spell.	Chaucer	Shakespeare	now
bite	*bite*	/biˑtə/	/beit/	[bait]
bete	*beet*	/beˑtə/	/biˑt/	[biˑt, bijt]
bete	*beat*	/bɛˑtə/	/beˑt/	[biˑt, bijt]
abate	*abate*	/aˈbaˑtə/	/əˈbæˑt/	[əˈbeit]
foul	*foul*	/fuˑl/	/foul/	[faul]
fol	*fool*	/foˑl/	/fuˑl/	[fuˑl, fuwl]
fole	*foal*	/fɔˑlə/	/foˑl/	[foul]

Figure 2. Examples of the Great Vowel Shift (Jespersen, 1961:232)

We think it worth mentioning that Jespersen's notation does not exactly conform to the contemporary International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) standards. However, it is evident from the table that the phonetic realisation of these variables nowadays differs significantly from Chaucer's time (14th century) and even Shakespeare's time (17th century).

We will further expand upon the technicalities of the GVS in the last chapter of our paper. For now, we want for the reader to keep in mind that while *diachronic language change*

(shifts in sound, usage, grammar, and vocabulary over time) (Meyerhoff, 2006:22) is inevitable and a feature of all living languages, this particular change can be seen as symptomatic of an era of not only linguistic fluctuation, but also social and political upheaval. It is this era, commonly referred to as the High and Late Middle Ages, that provides the historical background on which the investigation at hand should be understood.

We leave the reader with the following quote by Jespersen, encompassing the systemic change that is the GVS, before turning towards the aforementioned historical backdrop:

> So comprehensive a change cannot, of course, have been accomplished all at once. It must have been very gradual, taking place by insensible steps. And the changes of the single vowels cannot be considered separately; they are all evidently parts of one great linguistic movement, which affected all words containing a long vowel in ME [Middle English]. (Jespersen, 1961:232)

What prompted this "great linguistic movement" (Ibid.)? Is it possible to point to societal factors? We aim to provide an answer to this question later on. However, we deem it necessary to first paint a picture of English history, society and language, starting with the so-called *Norman Conquest* of 1066, and the resulting introduction and implementation of Anglo-Norman French as the language of the court. Mapping the ensuing centuries – and the most pivotal events to occur within this timeframe – we aim to detail the transition from what is referred to as the Middle English (ME) period to the Early Modern English (EME) period, and will continuously acquaint the reader with concepts relating to – as well as reasons for – several changes the English language was subjected to.

The fifteenth century will then serve as our point of departure in regards to the study of internal language change using the Great Vowel Shift as our primary exemplar, wherefrom we will introduce a corpus of extant correspondences between members of the Paston family to discover the extent of this shift.

The Norfolk-based Pastons steadily climbed the social rungs and achieved considerable wealth and political influence amongst the gentry as the plague plunged the English tapestry into disarray. On this matter, historical linguist Alexander Bergs has to say that:

> [t]he development of English can be characterized as one of punctuated equilibriums [...], i.e., there are equilibrious periods of relative stability and very little linguistic change, interspersed by punctuation periods of dramatic changes and rapid developments. (Bergs, 2005:2)

The Paston Letters (PL) are situated historically in precisely this period of a punctuated equilibrium, which makes them especially important to study in regards to the change of the English language. Having introduced the family, we delineate the significance of written

correspondence for historical inquiries into diachronic language change, as well as critically address the question of if, and to what extent, written records can inform and support a reconstruction of spoken vernacular.

The latter half of the paper is dedicated to the proposal of a study utilising the PL corpus: as foreshadowed by the opening paragraphs of this introduction, we submit a methodology to analyse the corpus with attention to the usage of *ad-hoc spellings* reflecting a vowel realisation in accordance with the GVS hypothesis. This is followed by a preliminary sampling of relevant variables and an exploration of possible results of the proposed real time trend study.

2.2 Historical Perspective I: 11th-13th Century

As stated by Bergs, "linguistic variation is not random, but mostly influenced by a number of definable factors" (2005:3). We agree that the causes for the general changes in the English language can be attributed to a number of circumstances. Over the following chapters we focus, not exclusively, but largely on the historical *external* factors which have influenced this variation by utilising historical sociolinguistic methods which are not so much "concerned with the present, but [...] (linguistic variation in) the past." (Ibid.:12). This lays the groundwork for the last section of our paper, where we discuss the *internal* factors which affect language change and variation directly. We will show that "that these two groups of factors are not independent and mutually exclusive, but rather that they complement each other and should, therefore, not be studied in isolation." (Ibid.:4).

By *external* changes to the English language we mean outside factors which can affect a language, such as the geographic landscape of England or the mixing of foreign languages and cultures. The following pages will see a concise summary of English history starting in the late 11th century, and ending in the 15th century. We introduce some crucial figures and incidents that set the stage for many political, societal and, last but not least, linguistic developments of the Middle English period. Having established this foundation we venture into the development of the English language at the time and discuss key terminology such as *diglossia* and *prestige* in relation to it, and exemplify to what extent these concepts have left a lasting mark on the English language.

The year 1066 AD is ingrained in the minds of many as the year of the pivotal *Battle of Hastings*, which marked the end of an Anglo-Saxon England ruled by King Harold II. Even before he ascended to the throne Harold II had long been right hand to King Edward the Confessor and as such, the de facto ruler of affairs of the country. Also known as Harold Godwinson, the king was killed in the aforementioned battle when William I, Duke of Normandy, invaded England and exercised his claim to the throne – a claim based mostly on a supposed promise by King Edward the Confessor, of whom William was a distant relative (in this case first cousin once removed).

On Christmas day 1066, William I, later attributed the title of William the Conqueror, was crowned the new King of England. As we detail over the next paragraphs, his rule would crucially influence the development of the English political system, language and society (Fennell, 2001:95).

William I, being the first French-Norman regent, introduced a plethora of changes to the English landscape not the least of which, and of particular interest to the topic at hand, was the establishment of French as language of the court. William I himself, as well as his entourage, spoke a Norman dialect of French, which constitutes part of the language of Anglo-Norman that would become prevalent in the higher social strata of England.

To consolidate his dominion William I soon commenced the process of installing Norman nobility in notable clerical and military positions and the dispossessing of English landowners, and "once important posts such as that of archbishop were all Norman, the lower echelons soon also filled with Frenchmen" (Ibid.:106). This process is meticulously recorded in the *Domesday Book*. This ledger, containing an extensive survey of taxes owed to the crown, was instrumental to an almost absolute subjugation and expatriation of English nobility and upper classes, virtually confining the use of the (Old) English language to the peasantry. By the late 1080's England was firmly under Norman rule, and most civil unrest could be prevented from escalating into revolts.

Around one hundred years later, the so-called Angevin lineage established by the marriage between Mathilda, granddaughter to William I, and Count Geoffrey Plantagenet of Anjou was jeopardised when Richard I was crowned king. His reign would last for 10 years, and even though he came to be "renowned as the Lionheart, he was in fact a miserable statesman and administrator, who spoke little or no English and spent only six months in total on English soil." (Ibid.:95). Richard the Lionheart's reign is marked by the *Third Crusade*, on which he embarked in cohorts with King Philip of France, and with relative disregard towards domestic, i.e. English, matters. Upon Richard I's death his brother John I was crowned king, who proved "a complete failure both at war and at home" (Ibid.). His ineptitude culminated in 1204 when Philip II finally succeeded in reclaiming Normandy for France and the English nobility were forced to concede their lands. Having to retreat across the channel naturally angered the landowning English barons, and after King John's unsuccessful and exorbitant campaign to reclaim lost territory in Northern France, the barons revolted with the support of the French crown, of whom the barons had close political and personal ties. King John was subsequently forced to sign the proto-constitution *Magna Carta*, which would limit royal power. However, the following ignoring and discrediting of this led to the *First Baron's War*.

2.2.1 Diglossia in England

If anything, over the last century the rift between lower-class peasantry and upper-class nobility was reinforced by means of differing cultural and linguistic identities. England was now a firmly *diglossic* country, with "French as the High language and English as the Low

language" (Ibid.:117). At this point, we will issue a disclaimer that we will be using the word *French* to describe what is technically the *Anglo-Norman French* dialect or language, itself encompassing various *Oïl* and *Picard* varieties spoken by William the Conqueror's followers from Northern and Western France.

To speak of 13th century England as *diglossic* leads us to a more general excursion in sociolinguistic theory within a bilingual setting. Where *bilingualism* does not inherently make a distinction based on class but merely denotes the ability to speak two languages, the term *diglossia* commonly refers to the application of two varieties of the same language, or in a broader sense any two languages used within a speech community for differing social functions. (Meyerhoff, 2006:103) English had been and continued to be the language of paupers and peasants for nearly two more centuries. Going about one's daily business, one was sure to overwhelmingly encounter English in the public domain. One exception, however, was Latin as the language of the church, though "Churchmen, at least at the lower levels, needed knowledge of English" in order to interact with their followers. (Fennell, 2001:117) Another exception were immigrants from Northern France, though those as well had incentive to have at least a rudimentary command of English to ensure integration into the local community. Initially, then, the use of French was based mostly on ethnicity and cultural heritage but by means of "intermarriage and association with the ruling class" the language would soon become conflated with high social status and thus gain *prestige*. (Ibid.).

The term *prestige* may refer to any variant in a certain language, a variety of that language or, in the case at hand, the language which speakers associate with the speech of those having a high status in the community or society at large. This might include being able to understand Latin in the case of pious churchgoers. The priest reading out loud and speaking Latin during mass holds even more *prestige* within the religious community. This visible kind of *prestige* is referred to as *overt prestige*. We have chosen this example in order to highlight that while a linguistic variable or entire language might enjoy prestige because if its association with high status, one should not necessarily conflate *prestige* with denoting higher class of the speaker, even though this is often the case. (Meyerhoff, 2006:37).

To reiterate and frame *prestige* in terms of *diglossia* between the 11th and 13th century, English as the functionally lower language enjoyed low *prestige* whereas French as the functionally higher language enjoyed high *prestige*, a dichotomy that was increasingly based not on ethnicity but societal domains.

An example of this domain-based distinction is the as-of-yet small but increasingly visible middle-class that would adopt the use of the French language in order to facilitate commerce, chiefly in larger cities and trade hubs. As Lerer puts it, "urban merchants and provincial gentry learned to read and write for economic and social advancement (indeed, as it became clear that literacy was the pathway to such advancement) [...]" (2007:104), thereby further bolstering the prestigiousness of the French language. Attaining a knowledge of French, then, was becoming not only desirable to individuals 'climbing the social ladder' but essential to the pursuit of careers where French was becoming *lingua franca*, a process not only perpetuating the language's *overt prestige* but increasing the languages *vitality*.

The term *vitality* "describes the likelihood that a language will continue being used for a range of social functions by a community of speakers [and is] influenced by institutional, social and demographic factors." (Meyerhoff, 2006:103) Though this does not necessarily need to be the case, *vitality* is often closely tied in with the concept of *prestige*: with French the dominant language of the court and aristocracy, and thereby the prevailing language in matters of state business and royal decrees, the *prestige* afforded to French during this time period ensured its longevity. Here (*overt*) *prestige* is constitutive to *vitality*.

Much more *vital*, however, was the English language itself: spoken by around five million people across the country and functioning as vernacular in nearly all social situations, English might not have been especially *prestigious* other than in terms of denoting kinship, but inarguably enjoyed very high *vitality* by virtue of its ubiquitousness. It begs the question whether French at some point would have 'won out' against English; with the higher social strata exclusively speaking the former, and a rising Middle Class in the process of its acquisition, would this development eventually have trickled down to the vast majority of the lower class? The loss of the Northern French provinces, return to a strictly insular monarchy and growing eventual rivalry between England and France thwarted this hypothetical development. Instead, select elements of French seeped into the English language, leading to many features we now perceive as idiosyncrasies. The following sub-chapter sees some concrete examples of the theoretical scaffolding erected in the present section.

2.2.2 Lasting Effects of Diglossia on the English Language

We mentioned before the domain-based functioning of English as the low and French as the high variety spoken in England in the time following the Norman conquest. This relatively clear separation closely adhered to the demographics of an England consisting of a large majority of poor, English-speaking peasants and craftsmen and a small minority of affluent, French-speaking nobles and traders.

The *diglossic* function of French as high variety had slowly fallen out of favour following the loss of the provinces in the Northern part of France in 1204, but the English lexicon continues to bear witness to this social and cultural divide. The naming conventions of different kinds of livestock and the meat acquired from them offer a particularly striking example: etymologically, the names of farm animals such as *cow, sheep, swine, deer* and *calf* are derived from their Old English counterparts *cū, scēap, swīn, dēor, cealf*. These are animals an ethnically Anglo-Saxon farmhand would regularly encounter, yet not be able to afford to eat. Sustenance for the lower classes was based mostly on a "diet of grains and pulses." (Fennell, 2001:107).

The luxury of a more varied, meat-based diet was reserved for the often ethnically Norman-French nobles and upper classes, which is reflected in the terms for the processed and prepared meats of the animals mentioned above: *beef, mutton, pork, venison* and *veal* are derived from their Old French (OF) or Old Norman counterparts *boef, moton, porc, venesoun* and *veel.* (Ibid.). One interesting exception is the word *chicken* (OE *cīcen, cȳcen),* which may refer to

both the animal and its processed and prepared meat, whereas the word *poultry* (OF *pouletrie)* only refers to latter. As opposed to the animals mentioned above, the consumption of which only minority groups were privileged to, "[the] social importance and omnipresence [of chicken] cannot be understated [...] Chicken meat constituted an important part of everyday diet, and it was afforded by virtually every social stratum both in England and the Continent." (Slavin, 2009:35). Reared only by the lower classes but consumed by all, the English language retains the OE word *chicken* for the bred animal but two words for the processed meat (*chicken* and *poultry*). (English Stackexchange, n.d.)

      This short excursion into animal husbandry serves to underline the concept of language function in our particular case. The way that foreign French words eventually found their way into the English spoken today can be understood as a type of *prestige borrowing* based on social rubrics. For historical sociolinguists the etymology of semantic fields in the English lexicon stand testament to the societal makeup of medieval England. To exhaustively map out these fields goes beyond the scope of this paper but other examples include *prestigious* terms relating to institutional organisation (*parliament, bill, act, council, county*), to law (*justice, court, judge, jury, prison*) and to war (*siege, standard, battle, assault, fortress*). (Fennell, 2001:108).

      The types of words borrowed from the French language offer not only inferences about the cultural and political influence of the Anglo-Norman elites but furthermore prove revelatory in regards to the royal line of succession. As mentioned before, labelling the language spoken by the ruling class as French simplifiers matters to some extent – to be precise it was the Northern dialect that first made its way to England following the Norman conquest. However, "[w]hen the Angevin dynasty began in the middle of the twelfth century [...] the dialect of Central France became the norm in the court and fashionable society." (Ibid.). Between the two dialects of Northern French (NF) and Central French (CF) the pronunciation of certain consonants differed enough that words were often borrowed twice. For example, where NF had [w] CF had [g], which can be seen today in the existence of the etymologically related yet semantically differing pairs *warranty/guarantee* or *warden/ guardian.* (Ibid.).

      Word borrowing and language contact in the Middle English period was extensive enough that there at one point was considerable debate within the field of historical sociolinguists about whether Middle English underwent a process of creolisation, even though that hypothesis is nowadays largely discredited. Arguments speaking against creolisation include the – compared to French influence on the English lexicon – insignificant impact French had on English syntax, morphology and phonology.

Before we turn our focus to the historically motivated decline of the importance of French we will single out a variable that exemplifies the process by which linguistic features might suffuse society up to this day.

2.2.3 On the Prestige Awarded to and Stigmatisation of /H/ Dropping

In his 1982 work *'Accents of English'* J.C. Wells issued this statement: "H Dropping does appear to be the single most powerful pronunciation shibboleth in England. A London school teacher tells me he has only to look sternly at any child who drops an /h/, and that child will say the word again, this time correctly." (Wells in López, 2007:160). Wells refers to the stigma associated with the zero realisation (or failure to pronounce) the /h/ sound at the beginning of words starting with the letter <h>. The term *shibboleth* for a linguistic variable betraying for example one's class background dates back to the Hebrew bible, where the following events are described: having suffered a defeat against the Gileadites around 1200 BC the surviving Ephraimites tried to retreat across the river Jordan only to be stopped by the victors and made to enunciate the word 'shibboleth'. This proved impossible for the Ephraimites, whose dialect did not contain the /ʃ/ sound, resulting in their identification as enemies and subsequent execution. (Meyerhoff, 2006:14).

While /h/-dropping today carries a strong connotation with lower-class speakers this was not always so, and indeed during the Middle English period it can be reasoned that this variable was seen as *prestigious*. How can we explain the fact that what is now a *shibboleth* once carried *prestige*? Over the next paragraphs we map out the spread of /h/-dropping in a concise manner, showing once more the conclusions researchers are able to draw from the interplay of the fields of history, sociology and linguistics.

A linguistic *stereotype* of an English spoken by Frenchmen is their difficulty pronouncing the aspirated phoneme represented by the Latin letter <h>. This sound does not naturally occur in modern French, and neither did it occur in the Norman and Central French varieties of the 13th century. The close contact the English and French languages enjoyed at the time prompted the loss of the initial /h/ for simplifying reasons, a development notable by 1300 in eastern England from Kent and Surrey to Lincolnshire. "The progression of the loss of /h/ seems to have proceeded from pre-sonorant environments through pre-glide environments to pre-vocalic environments [...]" (Fennell, 2001:132). Firstly, /h/ was lost before sonorants (a feature present in OE), i.e in the clusters of /hn/, /hl/ and /hr/, a categorical development across all dialects. Secondly, /h/ was lost before glides, i.e. in front of /w/, a development in some ME dialects that eventually spread across all dialects. And thirdly, /h/ was lost before vowels in some ME dialects, which nowadays is seen as a stigma or *shibboleth*. In fact, the dropping of /h/ before vowels, or zero-realisation, is still evident in some words borrowed from French; *honour, heir* and *honesty* are some examples. This habit might have crept into the English language and subsequently been applied to etymologically non-French words. (López, 2007:160).

The fact that /h/-loss in ME is first documented in formal and learned texts produced in regions of commercial and administrative importance leads Fennell to infer that this variant enjoyed some *prestige*. As mentioned before, high *prestige* of a variant of speech needs

not exclusively be associated with belonging to a higher class, though in this case there is a point to be made that initial /h/-loss in English was a transfer due to language contact through the Anglo-Norman aristocracy. The retention of an initial /h/, conversely, could be seen as conservative and less *prestigious*. Social groups in frequent contact with the aristocracy were therefore most likely to adopt /h/-loss into their native English. "Once /h/-less pronunciation was established in the middle-order English of the South-East and the East Midlands", the variable likely 'trickled down' into society at large via the budding middle-class to lower classes, from important political and commercial, urban centres to more sparsely populated rural regions. (Fennell, 2001:132). This development continued until the dropping of the initial /h/ morpheme was spread throughout all strata of society and up until the *Enlightenment* period of the 18th century. With the publication of the first encyclopaedias the attitude towards /h/ dropping changed significantly:

> [...] it contributed to make people aware of how words were to be written correctly. In this context some people became aware that words where they had never used initial aspiration were spelt correctly with an initial <h>. The consequence of this was that those with more access to education, that is to say, the upper class, tried to aspirate initial <h> in those words which had it in their correct spelling [...]
> (López, 2007:162)

Those not privy to the sudden rise in *prestige* of the /h/-full variety, i.e. the uneducated working classes, continued to omit the realisation of initial /h/. The latter variety was now well underway to becoming a *shibboleth* betraying one's (lower) class, leading to the *stereotypical* social stigma surviving to this day.

Over the last few paragraphs we have shortly outlined a principle of the perception of phonetic features based on *prestige* and stigmatisation. A phonetic development seven centuries in the making, the initial /h/-loss first became associated with the French-speaking aristocracy, slowly found its way into a more general usage by all social strata, only to be condemned as lazy and uneducated.

Suffice to say, the history of the English language is a turbulent one, which is especially true for the period immediately following the Norman conquest. For a time, and owing to its relative *vitality*, it was unclear whether the French language would eventually eclipse English and become the language not only of the ruling class, but of the common people as well. The extant and extensive lexicon of borrowed words speaks volumes about the linguistic tensions and societal divide between the Anglo-Saxon majority and Anglo-Norman minority. In the next section we continue our investigation of historical events contributing to the state of the English language and outline in what ways it is fair to speak of a reestablishment of English dominance and which *external* factors helped lead to this.

2.3 Historical Perspective II: 13th-16th Century

Continuing with the historical perspective, we last mentioned the reclamation of Normandy by the French crown. This moment would prove to have far-reaching consequences of which the result would be a drastic defamation of the French language among the nobility of England, and the beginning of an intense rivalry "between England and France, which culminated in the Hundred Years War" (Fennell, 2001:118).

With the confiscation of English-owned French estates, the English crown and aristocracy no longer possessed a foothold in Normandy, and thus the importance of a knowledge of the French language would begin its decline. Magnifying this split, Louis IX of France also "declared that it was impossible to show allegiance to both England and France" (Ibid), and thus English nobles were impelled to "declare themselves either English or French" (Ibid.), and so the divide would begin, leading to the establishment of an English 'national' identity eschewing the French.

However, this is not to say that French suddenly lost all of its usefulness, nor the *prestige* it held. Normandy was not the only region in which English nobility owned land, with many owning estates in Southern France as well. Furthermore, after the death of King John the francophile in 1216 – and acquaintance of the newly crowned Louis of France – Henry III ascended the throne and would initially continue the favouritism of French, bestowing "high office on many Frenchmen" (Ibid.). Moreover, due to the sustaining *prestige* enjoyed by French, it was also regarded as an "important literary language in England" (Ibid.), and so its foothold and influence in the upper echelons of English society would continue even after the death of Henry III in 1272.

Yet it is during Henry III's reign where English would begin its reestablishment as the language of not only the common man, but the nobility. As he was accused of favouritism and a failure to regain continental landholdings, "great resentment amongst the native English" would eventually evolve into revolt by barons and the middle class, and lead to the creation of the *Provisions of Oxford* (1258). This document saw the appointment of a 'Privy Council' to advise the king and oversee administration, effectively dismantling the absolute rule by the Anglo-Norman monarch and opening it to scrutiny. However, after unsuccessful meetings between the King and the council, the barons would further show their displeasure with the preference shown towards France and attempt to regain some manner of control over their country by instigating the *Second Barons War*. Defeat would ensue in 1265, leading to the later total annulment of the *Provisions of Oxford* by King Henry.

After King Henry's death in 1272, his son Edward I, who was known for his well-spoken English, was crowned as the new King of England. With peace finally established between the barons and the crown, "England was a nation aware of its national identity" (Ibid.). Yet the transition from a French speaking nobility to an English speaking upper class would not be immediate. With France at the head of culture and fashion within 13th century Europe, "in high society, a knowledge of French was essential" (Ibid.). In

addition, French would continue to be the language of the court, church and administration right up until the middle of the 14th century. However, French amongst most had gone from being an "economic and political necessity" (Ibid.) to "purely a fashionable or cultural custom" (Ibid.:121). French was now well on its way to becoming a muse, rather than the first language of nobility – even becoming the butt of jokes by the likes of Chaucer – and by the middle of the 14th century, English was assuredly the "language of Englishmen" (Ibid.:119). This would be further cemented by the start of the *Hundred Years War* in 1337, and the eventual defeat to France, which marked the "the death warrant for the use of French in England" (Ibid.:120).

In order to truly map the rise of English, however, the years between the start and end of the *Hundred Years War* provide some of the most vital points of discussion. With the plague (1348-1350) ravaging the working class, and higher taxes employed to fund the war, the divide between rich and poor was made all too clear. The ensuing shortage of labourers meant that peasants were in great demand, a position from which they would demand better working conditions and wages, and the abolition of serfdom. The resulting economic and social upheaval following the plague would inevitably become a catalyst, and with negotiations between peasants and the royal administration failing to secure any substantial changes, conditions were ripe for violent protests to erupt across the country resulting in what would be known as the *Peasants Revolt* of 1381.

Though the aftermath of this period is questionable in regards to any significant results for the lower classes, it did create a climate whereby the voice of the working man was now regarded, rather than muted. The importance of a command of the English language was thereby heightened, since "poor people now had more say in the affairs of the country" (Ibid.:121), which can be certainly viewed as setting a precedent for the later establishment of the influential Middle Class.

The rise of English cannot be solely placed on the lower or middle classes however, as though they had indeed proceeded to speak forms of English over these fluctuating periods of time, any change is nearly always associated with those in positions of influence, in this case the crown and nobility. One such moment of import can be attributed to "Edward III's consultation with parliament about the invasion of France [which was] conducted by a lawyer in English" (Ibid.:121). Events such as this enable the tracing of the rise of English amongst the upper classes and crown, of which the consequences are substantial. With English given such preference, the linguistic rift between the upper and lower classes was beginning to dismantle. This culminates in the *Statute of Pleading* of 1362, which stated that "all lawsuits should be conducted in English, since 'French is much unknown in the said realm'" (Ibid.). Without a visible divide in language between social classes, the *Statute of Pleading* served to level the linguistic playing field between the peasantry and the upper classes. This is exemplified by Henry IV in his "speech of accession" (Ibid.), which he held in English upon his coronation in 1399. The beginning of the 15th century can thereby be seen as the start of English linguistic reign in England.

The increased *vitality* afforded to the English language due to political, economical and societal dominance meant that the importance of English in the 15th century continues to expand and encompass other areas of linguistic importance. One such area is the matter of written documents, and more relevant to the investigation at hand, letters. Historical sociolinguistics now have an entirely new source of documents to research, and the change in use of French to English has provided linguists with historical evidence of this change over a period of time in not only official documents, but also personal letters. Closer to vernacular language, this unrivalled source of linguistic data enables linguists to document the transition from a dominantly French inspired upper culture to a totally English one. Henry V (reigning from 1413-22) himself "promotes the use of English in writing" (Ibid.), proving that English is now the norm and preferred even by the monarch. Where Latin and French had both previously been unrivalled in their use as a source of social and political consciousness and elevation, by the 15th century "English succeeded in displacing them both" (Ibid.). By 1420 letters are beginning to be written in English, and "are the rule by 1450" (Ibid.), thus leading us into the period aligning with our research of the Paston Letters, of which the first is dated 1422. With the production of documents now written in English, the *vitality* of the English language is ensured for the ensuing centuries.

As we have shown, *external* factors which lead to language change and variation can be numerous, yet we wish to summarise the historical background by giving a more concrete insight into the linguistic change these *external* factors can be attributed to.

As mentioned previously, the geographic makeup of England from the 11th to the 15th century underwent such systematic adjustment – first through the Norman invasion and subsequent relegation of English to the lower class, and secondly through migration caused by the plague – that the English language was now a conglomerate of dialects, accents and influences. Yet this *home language* (Fennell, 2001:7) had continued to exist throughout Norman rule alongside the Anglo-Norman French spoken by the court and nobility. Through this "cultural and physical separation" (Ibid.:4) both languages persisted "in their separate domains with very little influence of one on the other" (Ibid.). However, this it not to say that no influence ever occurred, as the reader will have learned – it is more a question of when and how.

With the beginning of the decline of the French language in England signalled by the death of John I in 1216, French would shortly afterwards be relegated to what is known as a *substrate* language (Ibid.:7). This relegation occurred when the French language, which was prevalent in the higher strata of society, went through a shift in *prestige*. This shift meant that the language went from enjoying high *prestige* previously to now having its influence drastically eroded within political spheres – mainly through ongoing war with France – whilst simultaneously the English language gained traction through the creation of an English national identity. With the elevation of English, French was ultimately supplanted as the prestigious language of the nobility and crown, and English thereby became the *superstrate*

language. However, the French language, as the unrivalled language of the nobility for nearly four hundred years, had obvious lasting repercussions on the English language, and English society changed to such an extent that there was a need to adapt the language synchronously. This is exemplified predominantly through the integration of borrowed French words and terminology now manifold within Present-Day English as designators for certain domains.

2.4 Conceptualising Innovation in the Spoken and Written Modes

While the first half of this analysis can be seen as a historicised excursion into societal factors prompting language change during the Middle English period, the second half focuses on an extant corpus of letters and discusses the question of how and to what extent one can map phonological change based on orthographic data.

Before we introduce the Great Vowel Shift, the Paston Letter (PL) corpus, as well as describe our methodology for detailing the progression of GVS on the basis PL corpus, we offer more thoughts on the relationship between written and spoken language. We examine some different conceptualisations of variables surfacing in these language modes, challenge a common Labovian framework and illustrate some factors worth considering when performing historical sociolinguistic research.

Innovation in language does not happen uniformly. There are a myriad of possible factors contributing to the evolution of a language, some of which were highlighted in the section on the lasting effects of *diglossia*. Change may come about via prescriptive means (e.g. *l'Académie Française* coining etymologically French terms for emergent technologies) or spread from a single innovator (e.g. elements of Orwell's "newspeak" finding their way into popular language); whatever the case may be, there are certain typical scenarios pertaining to innovation in spoken versus written language, as suggested by Wallace Chafe:

An innovative variant might first surface in speech and only later appear in written language. The spoken medium is a dynamic domain that provides a fertile substrate for change. After a certain period in which the variant gains traction some adopters might consolidate it into written language. This, for example, is the case with slang terms that originate in specific speech communities but spread beyond those communities; the word 'chick' was first used to refer to women or girls by speakers of *jive-talk* in black communities during the 1930s and subsequently included in Cab Calloway's 1939 *Hepster's Dictionary: Language of Jive* (2015).
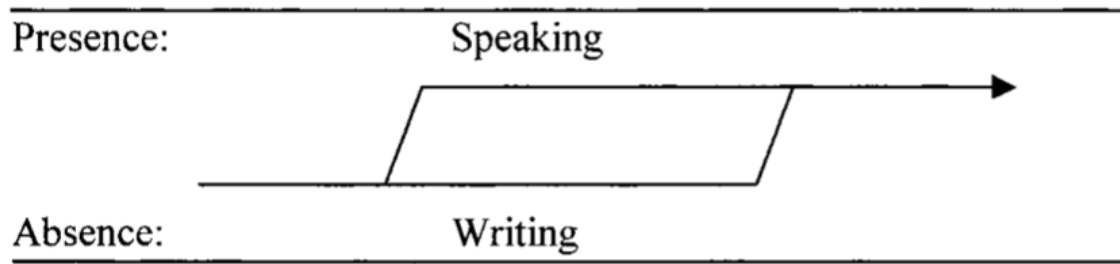
Figure 3. Innovations between Writing and Speaking (Chafe in Bergs, 2005:15)

Furthermore, a variant already present in both speech and writing might "suddenly disappear from writing (e.g. for prescriptivist or stylistic reasons), only to resurface a while later (again, for stylistic reasons)." (Ibid.) Though this hypothetically marks an extreme case, one development following this general pattern could be the once prevalent negative attitude towards ending sentences with prepositions, assumed by grammarians of the 18th century in order to make English syntax conform more to Latin syntax standards.
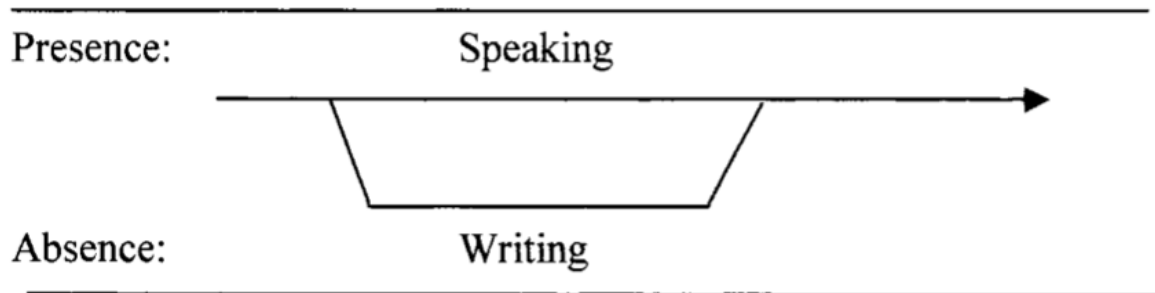
Figure 4. Innovations between Writing and Speaking, model 2 (Chafe in Bergs, 2005:15)

A third model purports a variable to exist in written but not in spoken language, only to disappear altogether before later resurfacing once more in writing. An example of this admittedly abstract case could be certain legal language (which for all intents and purposes only exists in the written medium) being forcibly restructured following a regime-change, only to revert back to some of the original language following another regime change. In 1919, after a devastating defeat in the First World War, the first democratic German constitution *Weimarer Verfassung* was signed. It is this constitution that forms the basis for the current *Grundgesetz für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, having taken effect in 1949. During the national-socialist rule, however, the *Weimarer Verfassung* and the precedent set by its legal language had been systematically dismantled.
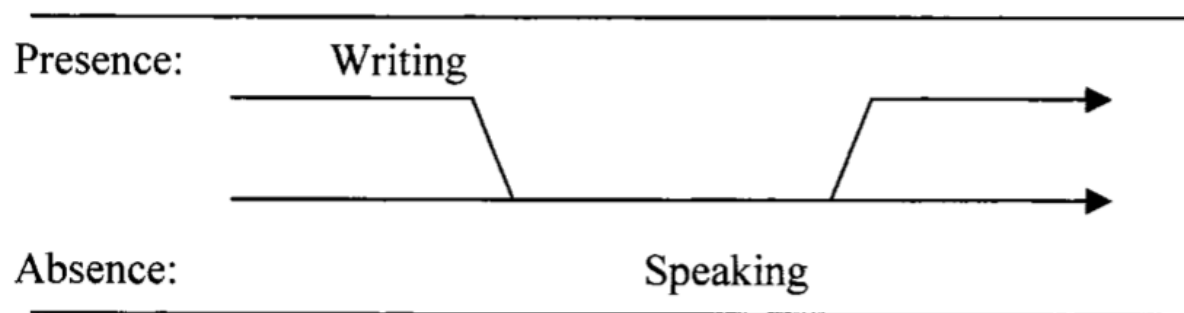
Figure 5. Innovations between Writing and Speaking, model 3 (Chafe in Bergs, 2005:15)

While "the written mode may be more conservative on average than the spoken one [...]" (Ibid.:17) we suspect there to be another, more immediate model of innovation, where a variant finds its way into writing simultaneously with its emergence in spoken language by means of *ad-hoc spellings*. We further delve into this concept in the section where we outline our plans to trace the existence of the Great Vowel Shift – a decidedly phonetic phenomenon – based on surviving written records. But is there an inherent problem when trying to map innovation in the "conservative mode" of written language?

This issue is expressed in Labov's conception that speech styles "may be arranged on a linear continuum, from the most public, monitored and constrained ("high") style to the most private, least monitored, and relaxed ("low") style." (Ibid.). In order to visualise this notion one could draw a line between two points, thus establishing a scale ranging from the *vernacular* to *standard (written) English*. For many sociolinguists the *vernacular* style presents the most opportunity to map language change, as it is least susceptible to stifling prescriptivism and stylistic conventions. On the other hand, this "least monitored" variety is very susceptible to comparatively rapid, memetic spread of spontaneous innovation. It can be argued, however, that this is essentially a false dichotomy; it is simply not predictable to what extent a speaker monitors their speech in any given situation. Not only sociolinguistic interviews but even the most informal exchange of pleasantries in an accidental meeting of two old friends on the street might be prone countless unknown and unknowable factors, making it a futile exercise to determine a point at which a speaker is "most relaxed/least monitoring". It may thus be prudent to conceptualise speech acts as inhabiting a spot on a line extending from *Standard (Written) English* along an axis of increasing *vernacularity*. Milroy rephrases this understanding of language varieties as "'real language in use' [...] on a continuum of relative closeness to, or distance from, the idealized *norm*, or (in some cases) the idealised *standard language*". (Milroy in Bergs, 2005:17).

We operate under the assumption that innovative variants first surface in the *vernacular* before finding their way into written standard. However, whether it is fair to speak of a written standard in the late ME period is up for debate. There certainly were considerable differences between e.g. a Northern and a West Midland dialect, and for dialectologists this diverse period in the evolution of the English language proves a wealth of information. Before the so-called *Chancery Standard* of written English spread throughout the country

starting in the late 14th century, it is perhaps most sensible to situate a speech act on a continuum without any endpoints – a continuum of increasing *vernacularity* stretching in one direction and increasing formality in the other. To the historical sociolinguist on the hunt for language variation and change this process is necessarily hindered by the availability, or rather lack of, data. It is fortunate, then, that the late ME period is one of language variation not only in terms of the spoken – the *vernacular* – but also in terms of written language.

We would like at this point to shortly discuss an issue not usually applied to historical sociolinguistic research – the so-called *observer's paradox* (Meyerhoff, 2006:38). In short, this phrase denotes a phenomenon researchers should consider when performing any sort of study aimed at observing behaviour or language in its most naturally occurring form. While a more stringent testing environment and a more rigid testing framework would in theory yield data that is easier to qualify and quantify, it is precisely this artificiality that might taint the results. "The task of the sociolinguist, according to Labov, is to record and to analyze the vernacular as the least monitored and best structured variety of speech. Any attempt to record this variety, however, must necessarily lead to monitoring on part of the subject." (Bergs, 2005:19). A researcher trying to document the naturally occurring speech situated on the *vernacular* side of the continuum would do well not to intimidate the participants with a boom mic, clipboard and lab coat.

The ultimum of spontaneous and most importantly unmonitored speech could be achieved through clandestine recordings, though this of course would clash with ethical considerations. Performing research on written records dating centuries back would surely circumvent this problematic altogether, would it not? However, if we in line with Labov assume written language to be an inherently more monitored and self-conscious way of expressing oneself linguistically, then must there not be a kind of *observer's paradox* present in any form of written record? As we have spent the previous paragraphs discussing, there are other ways of conceptualising linguistic records than via the classic Labovian framework.

A different approach to answering these questions a historical sociolinguist might and should ask themselves would be to look at records in terms of *register consciousness*. The 'monitoredness' paradigm is here reframed as one of varying awareness of which language variety or style one invokes in certain contexts. Now, just as several centuries ago, writers must not only be aware of the possibility that what they write could be read by people other than the addressee but also that there are compositional conventions and expectations. "Writers were also probably aware that any deviation from these rules and models, like the use of particularly old or new constructions and forms, would be noticed and therefore subject to speculation [...]." (Ibid.:20). To the historical sociolinguist, then, the moments when *register consciousness* shows on the part of the author, or when deviations from whatever norm that can be established become evident, prove the most telling.

It is these thoughts that accompany us on our project and we will continue discussing the historical sociolinguists' aims and role in the next chapter of our paper, which concerns itself with a phonological event of unprecedented scale: the Great Vowel Shift.

2.5 The Great Vowel Shift

> [GVS] made modern English "modern." It was the systematic raising and fronting of the long, stressed monophthongs of Middle English [...]. This was the change that made the language of the age of Chaucer largely opaque by the time of Shakespeare. While scholars of English from the Renaissance onward had been aware of these changes, it was not until the rise of empirical historical philology in the nineteenth century that a way was found of explaining them as a single phenomenon. And it was not until 1909 that the great Danish linguist, Otto Jespersen, codified these philological researches into a concise statement of what happened and why it was important.
> (Lerer, 2007:101)

The phonetic changes of the Great Vowel Shift (GVS) took place roughly from the middle of the 14th century – around the time of Chaucer (1343-1400) – and carried on through to the end of the 17th century (Ibid.). The span of GVS is not of a fixed kind, so we caution the reader that dates encountered in other sources may vary. Perhaps, most notably GVS is considered to be the transition mark from Middle English (ME) to Modern English (MoE). As mentioned earlier, the Danish linguist and anglicist Otto Jespersen (1860-1943) played a large role in investigating and uncovering details of this major change of pronunciation. He was the one to coin the term and present a holistic view on the subject.

Jespersen characterized it as a *chain shift* that describes a process where several phonemes change along a scale, which in the case of GVS, had a general shift upwards. Over the course of the shift, while the value of the short vowels overall remained intact, that of the long vowels began to change (Jespersen, 1961:231). This means that GVS affected exclusively the pronunciation of long vowels, while leaving the short vowels largely unaffected. To summarize, during GVS, the articulation of all the long vowels, including front and back, were raised and the high vowels that couldn't go any higher without becoming consonants (/i/ and /u/) were lowered and diphthongized.

We refer to a figure attributed to Jespersen in Lerer depicting the graphical representation of the vowel shift:
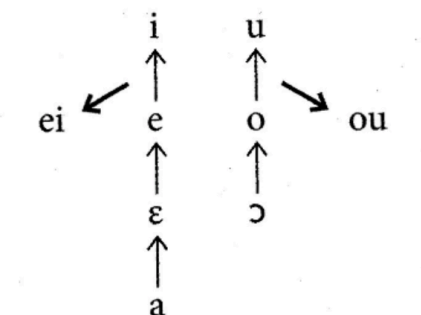

Figure 6. schematic diagram of the Great Vowel Shift (Lerer, 2007:105)

The above figure is Jespersen's version of understanding changes of GVS. He imagined the vowels as a chain, where shifting of any one link would pull the other vowels in the chain. (Ibid.) We remind the reader that the profound vowel shift which we speak of did not occur overnight but was a gradual and progressive process spanning over 300 years.

Please refer to the table below for a more detailed visual representation of the shift over time.
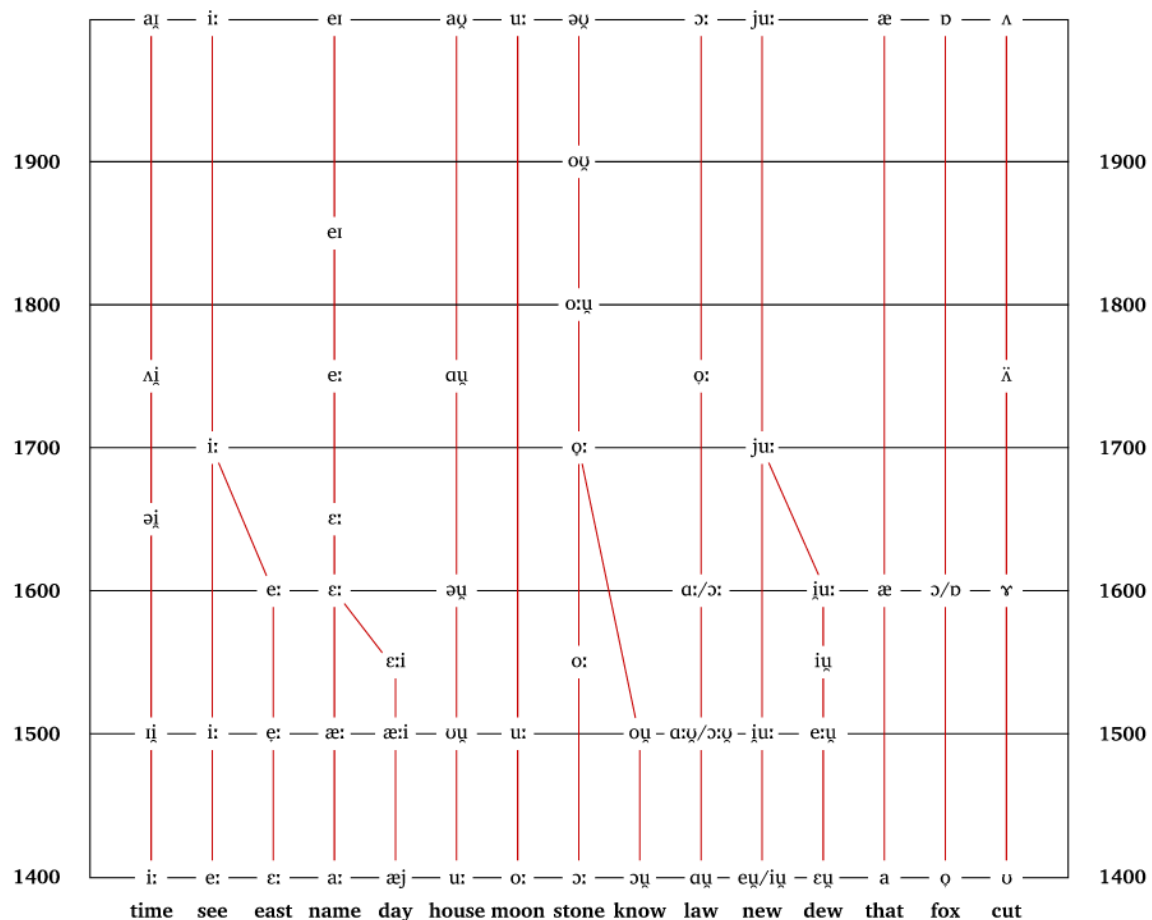
Figure 7. The long and short vowels of English, pronunciation 1400 to today. (Simons, 2007:n.p.)[1]

2.5.1 Technical Details of GVS

To understand GVS further, we offer a more detailed explanation in this part. We do not investigate or prove how the shift began nor which changes occurred first since these topics are still unclear and highly debated, and are not the focus of our paper. Luckily, not knowing the reasons behind GVS does not necessarily hinder our research, and Fennel agrees that GVS "can be studied purely from the structural point of view, that is, without recourse to

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[1] Retrieved: December 14, 2016, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Great_Vowel_Shift.svg

social issues" (Fennel, 2001:158). We do, however, refer to the most authoritative sources on the subject and commonly held theories and later on mention briefly the commonly held reasons behind GVS.

The shifts of the long vowels over the course of GVS are peculiar because their transformation can almost be referred to as uniform: "All the long vowels have changed very considerably [...] [but] the distance between one vowel and another has been preserved (Brook, 1958)" (Lorenson, 1991:7). In her paper *'The Great Vowel Shift: Its Rules, Its Legacy, and Its Evaluation as a Natural Process'* (1991), Lorenson describes how sound change can be understood as a change in pronunciation where one phoneme replaces another within a phoneme system. There are no gains or losses within this type of change, as phonemes simply replace one another as a different sound is assigned to the same grapheme (Lorenson, 1991:8). We can see this kind of development clearly in GVS, where one phoneme's pronunciation glides over to another: e.g. the grapheme <e> initially realised as the phoneme /e/ is assigned the new realisation /i/. At the same time the grapheme <e> does not disappear from use and is reassigned another phoneme.

Below is a detailed version of Otto Jespersen's often cited pull-chain diagram depicting the sequential steps of the Great Vowel Shift where we can see clearly the above-mentioned sound change:
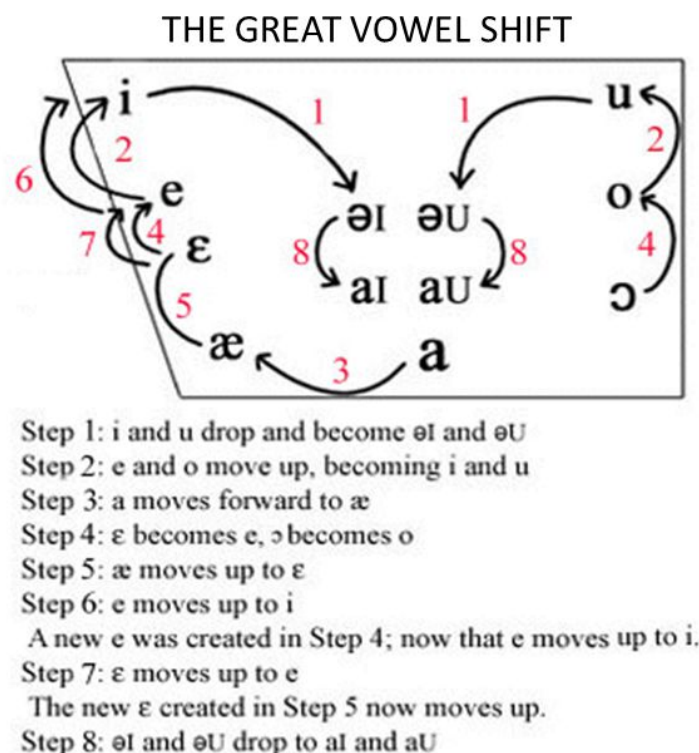

Figure 8. Sequential diagram of the Great Vowel Shift. (Lerer, 2007:104)

In accordance with Jespersen's diagram utterances that contain these phonetic symbols shift through the given realisations.

Despite the fact that the majority of changes caused by GVS depict the replacement of existing phonemes, thus maintaining the overall phoneme structure, there's a catch. GVS is also responsible for the loss of phonemic length as a means of differentiating two words:

> Throughout Old and Middle English, the words [sɪn] and [sɪ:n] were considered two different, distinctive words merely because of the quantitative difference in length between their vowel sounds. In Modern English, these differences are not distinctive; [ɪ] and [ɪ:] [...] are allophones, and whether a word is pronounced [sɪn] or [sɪ:n] it is still "sin." Since the GVS, vowels must exhibit a qualitative difference, regardless of a quantitative difference, to be distinctive from each other. (Lorenson, 1991:9)

Changes in vowels such as these have the power to alter the progression in how people read, write, and speak, thus, affecting spelling in many ways, especially when spelling and pronunciation do not take the same paths in development. Before we move on to the effects of GVS on spelling, we would like to brief the reader on the reasons behind GVS.

2.5.2 Possible Causes for the Great Vowel Shift

The causes for GVS are still highly debated and are not known, at least not with a degree of certainty. One thing can be said for sure, that GVS was not an occurrence of a conscious decision by someone or something, since its span was across generations, and thus, it was a natural phenomenon, escalated by external influences over the centuries. Lorenson argues for this statement in her paper, stating that:

> humans are not aware of their need and/or desire for change in pronunciation as in other things. It is not as though humans say, 'Let us change the pronunciation of our long vowels so our perceptive abilities will be continually stimulated' or 'We're bored with our old pronunciations, and even though it will serve no pragmatic function, why don't we change the way we pronounce half our words?' (Lorenson, 1991:16)

Further on she argues that because these changes are not conscious they must occur gradually, otherwise a sudden introduction of a distinct variant can come across as a mistake and be corrected instead of being perceived as a possibly *prestigious* version of the former variant. Thus, phonetic changes must be subtle enough for people to interpret it as a variation – this takes time, and so did GVS (Ibid.).

Myers in his book titled *'The Roots of Modern English'* (1966) cuts short the need to understand the origins of GVS by stating that "[n]obody knows why it happened, so there is no use to worry about that" (Myers in Lorenson, 1991:15).

Regardless, there are numerous theories on the subject that can shed light on what could have contributed to the vowel shift. Since most of the theories about GVS origination are speculations and cannot empirically be evidenced, and together compile a vast amount of literature that does not necessarily represent an imperative to our paper, we have decided to not delve into this area of investigation. However, we will refer to a few of the leading theories in short.

Some linguists hypothesise that the cause was due to the redistribution of the population mostly attributed to the *Black Death* or bubonic plague which reached England in the late 1340s and instigated migrations of Englishmen throughout the country. This in turn caused the mix of various dialects and constituted to social pressures on creating more of a collective pronunciation which would have new social status and prestige, resulting in the dialects' gradual fusion. Others say the constant hostilities with France brought the loss of *prestige* for the French language as the High language and called on the need to create a new prestige for English, as mentioned in the section *Historical Perspective II*. One other theory, although without much weight, holds that some highly influential rulers had speech impediments which caused people around them to adapt their style to that of the rulers in order to sound more *prestigious* (Hutchinson, 2015).

There are more ideas on why GVS happened, but overall, the reasons given all relate to dialect contact but because these environmental processes are so complex researchers generally do not commit to finding out why the GVS happened.

There is no reason to suppose that there is one lone cause for this great linguistic change, the above-mentioned theories are not mutually exclusive and they may have all played a role and contributed. But neither of the theories provide a firm evidence of the details of the phonological shifts. If there are no empirical evidences for the reasons behind GVS, a curious mind might ask then if GVS is actually real.

Stockwell and Minkova suggest that GVS could merely be a 'linguist's creation through hindsight' (Schendl & Ritt, 2002:414). Did GVS really happen or was it the collection of events that all coincidentally accelerated the language change that would have naturally occurred over time anyway? The answer to this question is not a matter of yes or no but depends on the choice of perspectives from which one looks at the subject. Some linguists do not find the need to prove GVS any further and accept that "historiography is both conventionalist and constructivist" and thus, "the answer must clearly be 'yes—but where is the problem? All linguistic history is created through hindsight, anyway.'" (Lass in Schendl & Ritt, 2002:414).

2.5.3 On the Peculiarities of English Spelling

Most foreigners will say that English spelling is unintuitive and especially strenuous to learn. We will begin by referring to one of the most widely known English spelling idiosyncrasies often wrongly attributed to George Bernard Shaw. The word "Ghoti" is a famous creative respelling of the word *fish*. Its first appearance was found in 1855 in a letter sent by Charles Ollier, stating that his son had "[...] hit upon a new method of spelling 'Fish'" (NY Times Magazine). This may sound baffling at first, but really, we could legitimately pronounce *fish* by using the "f" from *laugh*, "i" from *women*, and the "sh" from *nation*.

'The Chaos' by Gerard Nolst Trenité is another great example for demonstrating the irregularities of English spelling and pronunciation (Trenité, 1922). We have quoted its opening lines in the beginning of the paper, and thought it worthy to expand on it a little on the poem's profound ability to demonstrate the peculiarities of spelling and pronunciation. Notice in the following examples how the most similarly written words compare with each other in pronunciation (text from ibid.:1; transcription from Mural, (n.d.)):

But be careful how you speak,

bʌt biː keəfʊl haʊ ju spiːk

Say. gush, bush, steak, streak, break, bleak,

sei, gʌʃ, bʊʃ, steik, striːk, breik, bliːk,

[...]
Woven, oven, how and low,

wəʊvən, ʌvən, haʊ ənd ləʊ

Script, receipt, shoe, poem, toe.

skript, risiːts, ʃuː, pəʊim, təʊ.

In the light of the inconsistencies as those encountered in English orthography, it may be hard to imagine that spelling once used to be in sync with how it was read. However, throughout the OE and most of the ME period spelling was phonetic (Lorenson, 1991:3). Within this period, phonology was changing together with spelling (Lerer, 2007:104), however, then came a time when the spelling had to be standardised.

GVS is responsible for answering questions on the strangeness of the English spelling in Modern English (MoE). It is a primary source of spelling inconsistencies found in English since the spelling system still reflects the way words were pronounced before the GVS (FRH, 2011:494) . Words such as *threat, great*, and *meat* all contain same sequence of vowels and yet each is pronounced differently. This is due to the phonetic changes that occurred during GVS, where a majority of graphemes (written letters) remained the same while their pronunciation altered and simultaneously, words went through standardisation.

In the OE period and most of the ME period it was an uncomplicated process to write words however they were pronounced, but the difficulties with spelling arose when people needed to get their ideas across different dialects. There had to be a common ground,

a universal way of communicating through different dialects so that everybody could understand each other's writings.

In the early dawn of the Great Vowel Shift, William Caxton (1422-1491), after spending time in Cologne learning the art of printing came into play as the first Englishman to introduce the printing press into England. In 1476, he established a press in Westminster (BBC History, n.d.). After the introduction of the printing press and the ability to produce literary material quicker than ever at the time, literacy mushroomed. Soon works in English became even more popular than books in Latin. But a huge variety of different spellings was an issue. At the time of introduction of printing technology, England was divided into five major dialects: Northern, West Midlands, East Midlands, Southern, and Kentish (The History of English, n.d.). Going back to this time of history one would encounter various spellings of common words. The word *church*, for example, at the time could be spelled in 30 different ways, and the word *receive* in 45 (Ibid.). Spelling variations such as these caused a lot of confusion, so it was intuitive that English word spellings had to be standardised sooner or later.

Most notably, even before the introduction of printing, the Chancery of Westminster tried to provide solutions to this concern from the 1430s. This was attempted by standardising the spellings of official documents, specifying *"I"* instead of the Germanic *"Ich"*, and other important everyday words from the closed word classes (Ibid.). The Chancery's contributions to the development of standardisation of spelling was significant and a stepping stone towards unifying the burgeoning of the literary medium at the time but the advent of mass printing was what really amplified the process. Caxton, who ran the printing press, aside from having interest in the art of printing was also business-minded. He wanted to sell his prints to a wider audience and thought he could gain further profits if more people could read and thus, contributed to the process of standardisation (Martin Hilpert, 2014).

Soon, the spread of the uniform printed material throughout different dialects of the country began the gradual fixation of spelling and grammar throughout the island.

As we will detail in the section describing our research on whether one can trace the Great Vowel Shift in the corpus of the Paston Letters, the way words were spelled in the early years of GVS can prove informative in regards to their pronunciation. Especially telling are instances of non-standard or *ad-hoc spellings*, which will be our focus in the section after next. The analysis will show us also if there is any evidence of the spelling uniformity brought by the standardisations of the time but before we proceed any further we would like to introduce the reader to the letters of Pastons.

2.6 Introducing and Delimiting the Paston Letter Corpus

In his book, *'Inventing English',* Lerer names the 15th and 16th centuries as a kind of golden age of English personal-letter writing (2007:105), as during these times merchants and the provincial gentry started to increasingly learn how to read and write in order to further their economic and social advancement. An increasing number of people began to communicate remotely to keep in touch with their families or loved ones. The Paston family are one such valuable exemplar of 15th century correspondence, and are the basis from which we aim to discover evidence of the Great Vowel Shift.

The corpus used as the basis for our analysis and investigation is an online edition of the *'Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century, Part I',* edited by Norman Davis in 1971. Though using an online version means that we do not have the original texts at hand and can therefore not verify the accuracy ourselves, Norman Davis' transcription is aimed at closely replicating the original texts including orthographic idiosyncrasies, thereby generating a more accessible bank of reliable data out of which we have chosen to utilise the full corpus of the first volume of the Paston Letters. This corpus contains 423 documents totalling around 250.000 words, with the majority being private letters but also including wills, petitions, inventories and other types as well. It must be stated that we are not attempting to analyse the language used by each particular member of the family nor the context, instead we are using the corpus to present an overall picture of 15th century English using the letters as a base from which to discover the extent of the Great Vowel Shift.

Davis, to our benefit, was capable of identifying the author of each letter in the first volume of letters, gifting us a corpus already divided into legible sections separated by name of the attributed author. (Bergs, 2005:79). We must mention here that when referring to the attributed author of a particular letter we do not claim the author to be the same person who penned the letter, as during the time of the Pastons it was common for wealthy families to employ scribes for the writing of written documents. This practice was particularly employed by the female members of the Paston family since women's literacy during this period was still extremely low, and thus the majority, if not all of their letters have been dictated rather than personally written. However, we have chosen not to base our selection on whether a scribe has been used in the writing of letters or not. We came to this decision by realising that, due to not being able to identify in which individual letters a scribe has been used, any discounting of letters written by scribes would be an almost impossible task to accomplish, especially since according to Watt, "it should be clear that just because individuals sign letters in their own names, we can not always be certain that they composed them. Furthermore, judgements based simply on style or content may prove deceptive." (2004:Preface viii). Moreover, because we lack any background data on the scribes themselves, important details pertinent to historical sociolinguists such as date of birth are missing which would be a central piece of relevant data providing us a linguistic timeframe from which to judge the language used. To our advantage, however, this does not represent a huge problem, since it has also been

concluded that the "[l]etter writers and their scribes often spoke in the same voice." (Ibid.). Thus, by overlooking this notion of authorship, it helps us to some extent eliminate any uncertainty regarding the language used by scribes in letters written for somebody else, since the scribe most likely has intimate knowledge of the language used by the person dictating.

To briefly acquaint the reader with the Paston family and give an overview of the three generations we refer to, below is a table of the Paston family tree:
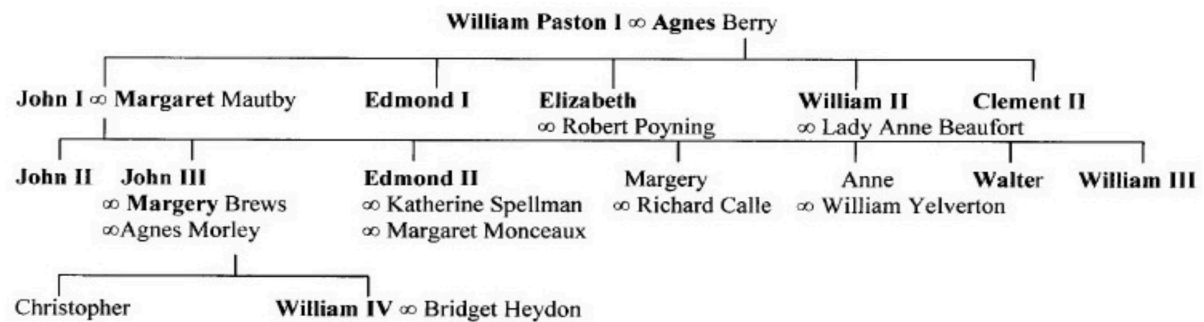
Family members of whom letters have survived are printed in **boldface**.

Biodata (excl. *Generation IV* William IV ?1479-1554)

Generation I		*Generation II*		*Generation III*	
William I	1378-1444	John I	1421-1466	John II	1442-1479
Agnes	?1400-1479	Margaret	?1420-1484	John III	1444-1504
		Edmond I	1425-1449	Margery	?1455-1495
		Elizabeth	?1429-1488	Edmond II	?1443-?1504
		William II	1436-1496	Walter	?1456-1479
		Clement II	1442-?1479	William III	?1459-after 1504

Figure 9. Paston family tree. (Bergs, 2005:61)

2.7 Mapping GVS on the basis of the Paston Letters

The following section is concerned with setting the stage for our research regarding GVS and the PL corpus. We will reacquaint the reader with some key terms introduced throughout the paper and relate those to the matter at hand before turning towards the practical side of the methodology for mapping the Great Vowel Shift on the basis of the Paston letters.

The oldest letter in the collection can be dated back to 1425, whereas the most recent letter was authored in the year 1503, giving us a time span of around 80 years. Seeing as the beginning of the Great Vowel Shift is usually placed around the middle of the 14th century, one can assume that the Paston Letters were written when the first phonological changes of this systemic shift were well underway.

However, with the Great Vowel Shift situated in a time of uncertainty in regards to spelling, and without a standardised means of spelling, words for the most part were spelled phonetically (which led to various spellings depending on locale and dialect). The Paston Letters are a prime example of this English in flux. In the Paston corpus this is shown most intimately through the purposeful crossing-out and replacing of words, as well as occasions where numerous spellings of the same word can be found in the same letter. An example of

this indecisiveness can be found in William Paston II's letter to John Paston I in 1454 where numerous spellings of the (Present-Day English) word "counsel" can be found: "cownsayle", "consayll" and "consalle" all are present, and in further letters William Paston II utilises the spelling "counseill". (PL, 1:5.3)[2] In accordance with Lerer we refer to these spellings as *ad hoc spellings*.

> Behind these ad hoc spellings we can see people coping with their language changing in their own lifetimes. More than just illustrating details of linguistic use, these letters reveal writers measuring their writing against new standards of speech or spelling. (Lerer, 2007:107)

These *ad hoc spellings* then can divulge information about the manner in which certain words would have been pronounced by the records' authors. In theory it would be possible to conduct an *apparent time study* mapping a change in pronunciation of certain variables if we had sufficient information about whether documents were penned by family members or by scribes, and if the latter some more details about the scribes themselves (most importantly date of birth). This type of study is concerned with speakers of differing ages in a particular speech community at a particular point in time. (Meyerhoff, 2006:128)

The fact that we have a time span of 80 years to work with, however, makes this corpus suitable for a *real time trend study*, where we collect spellings adhering to developments in line with GVS and compare the frequency at which these spellings occur over time with competing spellings of the same words. By ways of an example, we expect that words etymologically containing the high front vowel /i:/ could be transcribed phonetically as containing <ey>, indicating a diphthongisation to /ei/. Lerer describes the word "abide" being spelled "abeyd", though this spelling likely occurs in another volume of the Davis edition, seeing as we are not able to replicate this finding with the corpus at hand (Lerer, 2007:106).

It begs the question whether an individual speaker living in the 15th century might have changed the way they pronounced certain phonemes over the course of their lifetime. Would John Paston I aged 80 have used innovative pronunciation more often than John Paston I aged eight, or would his pronunciation not have changed significantly after the *critical period* of language acquisition?

In any case there are certain expectancies guiding our research: as detailed in the section on the technicalities of GVS, the systemic shift did not occur abruptly but was a gradual development spanning centuries. Seeing as the PL corpus occupies what the literature agrees to be the early phase of GVS, one would be ill-advised trying to prove the dropping

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[2] We have devised our own notation for the PL corpus "1:x.y" , where the first number refers to Norman Davis' first volume, followed by a numbered member of the family "x", followed by the numbered document "y" authored by member "x". "(PL, 1:5.3)" thus refers to the third document attributed to William Paston II published in Davis' first volume of "Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century". Furthermore, in the online version of the corpus the member carrying the identifier "5" is erroneously referred to as William Paston I when it should be William Paston II.

of /ɔɪ/ to /aɪ/ since this marks the last manifestation of the shift. Furthermore we assume that frequently occurring, simple lexica prove more stable in terms of pronunciation and thus spelling.

In the following sections we describe in more detail how we performed our research, show some of our findings, and contextualise them in relation to the Great Vowel Shift.

2.7.1 Methodological Considerations

Our methodology for locating innovative variables in the text is fairly simple and straightforward: on lists of the most frequently occurring English prepositions and nouns we identified the ones containing vowels (or vowel digraphs) that nowadays are pronounced as a diphthong. As the reader will recall from *Figure 8* in the section on the Great Vowel Shift it was the diphthongisation of close vowels /i:/ and /u:/ that were the first shifts to occur. Furthermore, the word 'meet' contains close-mid vowel /e:/ as in [me:t], which shifted early on to /i:/ as in [mi:t]. Analogously for the word 'boot', /o:/ as in [bo:t] → /u:/ as in [bu:t]. Generally speaking in ME spelling long vowels were marked either via doubling or by adding final <-e>; compare OE 'on līfe' → ME 'aliue' (CHASS, n.d.)

At this point we reiterate that in order for us to confirm a vowel shift we need to be able to find orthographic evidence of an innovative variant via *ad hoc spellings*. This makes diphthongization prime material for research as the ensuing spellings should be quite distinctive. The second shifts of /e:/ → /i:/ and /o:/ → /u:/ are expected to be less straightforward to identify but will be investigated as well.

The qualifying words were then looked up in an etymological dictionary to confirm whether or not their OE or ME ancestors would have contained /i:/ or /u:/ (first shift), or /e:/ or /u:/ (second shift); if so, the fact was noted. The next step includes some creative misspellings on our part, as we entered all manners of permutations of a particular word into the search engine built into the PL corpus website. To exemplify, if a word now contains the letter <i> pronounced /ai/ our familiarity with the corpus has shown that this could be spelled alternatively <i>, <y> or <ey>; conversely, the <ey> spelling would point to the fact that /i:/ had been diphthongized.

Here it needs to be said that words of Old French and Anglo-Norman origin were treated differently, seeing as we assume that speakers of ME might not be sufficiently sure about the pronunciation of comparatively recently borrowed words, and in return that the pronunciation of certain borrowed words showed more random variation than words traceable to OE or Scandinavian borrowings. We suspect this to be the reason for the varied spellings of what in today's English is the word 'counsel' in (PL, 1:5.3) mentioned above. The fact that the morpheme *con-* is spelled alternatingly as 'cown-', 'coun-' or 'con-' is by this logic attributed to an uncertainty in regards to its pronunciation.

We will now present some of the results of our research.

2.7.2 Presentation of Results

- /uː/ → /aʊ/

If it myght please yow, I wold be glad that she myght dyne in your howse on Thursday, for ther shold ye haue most secret talkyng.
(PL, 1:10.59)

For this rubric we singled out the words MoE 'house', MoE 'how' and MoE 'about'. Etymologically, these stem from OE 'hūs', OE 'hū' and OE 'on' + 'būtan'.
In the PL corpus we can find 88 instances of 'hows*' and 45 instances of 'hous*' – this includes declensions but not compound nouns such as 'howsold' or 'housband'; there is only a single instance of 'hus' occurring by itself, implying that /uː/ was mostly diphthongised.

Confirming this is the fact that there are 236 instances of 'how' (and two instances of 'hou') but no instances of 'hu'. The word 'about' shows more variation, with 24 instances of 'abowt' and 4 instances of 'abut', though here as well there is a clear tendency favouring the innovative diphthong.

- /iː/ → /aɪ/

[...] arest, take, and expungne traytorys and rebellys, of which be Goddis grace is no nede in this contré at þis tyme.
(PL, 1:3.12)

Here we researched the words MoE 'time', MoE 'wise' and MoE 'side'. Etymologically, these stem from OE 'tīma', OE 'wīse' and OE 'sīde'.

In the PL corpus there are 586 instances of 'tym*' and 11 instances of 'tim*', including declensions. No instances occur of innovative spellings such as 'teym', 'taym', 'taim', etc. There are 191 instances of 'wys*'and 20 instances of 'wis*'; the spelling 'weys' occurs 5 times but refers to MoE 'ways'. There are 39 instances of 'syd*' and 5 instances of 'side'; the spelling 'seyd' occurs 893 times but refers to MoE 'said'.

We can interpret the results in two ways: either that /iː/ had not yet been diphthongized in the direction of /aɪ/ by the 16th century – at least in the Norfolk county of England – or, which we deem more likely especially considering the findings of the next subsection, that while /iː/ was undergoing a process of diphthongisation the vowel had not shifted sufficiently to warrant an innovative spelling; over the centuries /iː/ shifted to today's /aɪ/ via /ɪi/, /əi/ and /ʌi/.

- /e:/ → /i:/

I wull that the residewe of the stuffe of myn houshold vnbiquothen be diuided equally betwen Edmund and William, my sones, and Anne, my doughter.
(PL, 1:8.107)

In accordance with the diagram depicting the different steps making up the systemic vowel shift, the development of long closed /e:/ → /i:/ should be prompted by the diphthongisation of /i:/ as there is an 'empty' position in the system that needs to be filled.

We looked at the words MoE 'between' and MoE 'seek'. Etymologically, these stem from OE 'betwēonan' and OE 'sēċan'.

We have located 13 innovative spellings (5 'be-twyn*', 4 by-twyen, 3 'betwyn*', 1 'by-twyn') and 58 conservative spellings (32 'betwen*', 11 'be-twen*', 9 'bitwene', 4 'by-twen*', 1 'betwejn' and 1 'bithwene').

The verb 'seek' shows one innovative spelling 'be-syke' (MoE 'beseech') and 12 instances of the conservative spelling 'sek*' (including one instance of 'seek'). There seems to be no correlation between innovative forms and age of speaker, or innovative forms and year of writing. However, innovative forms are present to some degree and it is assumed their frequency would have increased over time.

- /o:/ → /u:/

Soon, I grete ʒow wel wyth Goddys blyssyng and myn; and I latte ʒow wette þat my cosyn Clere wrytted to me þat sche spake wyth Schrowpe […]
(PL, 1:2.6)

Analogously to the preceding subsection we expected this shift to take place because of the shift /u:/ → /ou/. However, of all the queried words (amongst those MoE 'soon', MoE 'boot', MoE 'noon', MoE 'none') no innovative spellings could be found. We take this to either imply that /o:/ and /u:/ were not distinguished in writing (and consequently spelled as <o>) or that this particular shift had not taken place yet.

2.7.3 Conclusion of Research and Discussion

We will now summarise the results of our research and perspectivise. To reiterate, the Great Vowel Shift was a gradual but clearly not a uniform development spanning centuries, and as such it comes to no surprise that the evidence for it is not decisive within the short time frame offered to us by the Paston Letter corpus. What we can state with certainty is that /u:/ had diphthongized to an extent that speakers of the 15th century were consistently transcribing this vowel with digraphs. The case presents itself rather differently for the vowel /i:/, which is

never found to be transcribed as a diphthong; this can be explained in two ways, either owing to the fact that the shift was too slight still to warrant a digraphic transcription or that the shift had not taken place yet. If we accept the latter, however, this clashes with the common conception of the diphthongisation of /i:/ as a first step followed by the shift /e:/ → /i:/; undermining this assumption (and pointing towards the first explanation) is the fact that there is evidence of /e:/ → /i:/ taking place (~16% of all forms are innovative). For /o:/ → /u:/ the situation presents itself similarly to the (lack of) diphthongisation of /i:/; either this shift had not yet started to happen or was still too slight to warrant a transcription.

Initially we expected there to be an increase in the use of *ad-hoc spellings* hinting at innovative pronunciations over time, or in other words we expected there to be a trend of the ratio of innovative to conservative forms to be swaying towards innovation in the later documents. Based on the data collected by us we were not able to confirm this suspicion. A follow-up study with a more extensive amount of data might prove fruitful in this regard. Along those lines it might be prudent to extend the temporal dimension to more than 80 years, for example by including correspondences of the Stonor family, which span ~200 years starting in the late 13th century, well before the earliest estimates for the beginning of the Great Vowel Shift. In any case, while initially devised as a *real time trend study*, it seems there is a need for more research to sufficiently show GVS as a trend over time.

As mentioned before, the quest of the sociolinguist is often understood as the quest for the *vernacular*, which in the case of historical sociolinguistics is an exercise in "making the best use of *bad data*" (Labov in Bergs, 2005:13). The Paston Letters constitute *bad data* in the sense that there is a necessarily finite amount of extant data; barring time-travel it is hard to imagine a means by which one could perform a repeat survey or interview the unwitting participants of the present study about their familial ties, reading and writing habits, or education. These last two points hint at another aspect to the *bad data* problem: with literacy in the late Middle Ages an ability reserved for a comparatively small part of the population, it would be fallacious to assume that this data is representative of society at large. However, as this chapter is concerned with the *systemic* change that is GVS, it is safe to assume that the fact that the Paston's are an upper-middle and later upper-class family does not play as big a role as it would in a research into e.g. ME salutations. On that same note the individual letters' degree of vernacularity/formality should not be of much importance unless it can be proven that spellings which reflect an innovative pronunciation differ in frequency depending on context or addressee. If we were to devise a follow-up study the paradigm of *register consciousness* and how this relates to the manifestation of the Great Vowel Shift in writing should prove a worthwhile endeavour.

3. Overall Conclusion and Reflecting thoughts

Over the course of this paper we hope to have conveyed to the reader a comprehensive insight into the history of England in general and the English language in particular during the transition from the Middle to the Modern English period. In the early stages of our research it had become evident that an insular discussion of language change, that bracketing the larger historical frame is a futile exercise. To this end we assumed the role of historical sociolinguists and launched inquiries into some of the forces facilitating language change; these forces fall often under the umbrella of politics which inadvertently has an impact on culture and society: the *Norman Conquest* of 1066 and the ensuing installation of Norman-French-speakers in the court put an everlasting mark on the English language.

In order to conceptualise the effects of language contact we introduced the reader to theoretical constructs such as *prestige* and *diglossia*, and in turn exemplified these terms by providing some examples of *prestige borrowing* and *stereotyping*. Having retraced the reestablishment of the English language throughout all strata of society up until the 15th century we turned our attention to a critical view of some common frameworks describing the relationship between the *vernacular* and written language and thus further delineated some aspects central to the field of historical sociolinguistics.

The second part of our analysis was then devoted to a more practical research: to set the stage we presented a concise view of the defining characteristic of English language change during the Middle English and Early Modern English period – the Great Vowel Shift. After introducing Otto Jespersen's initial appreciation of the complex we further elaborated on its technical make-up and consolidated an understanding on the part of the reader by contextualising some theories surrounding the origin of GVS. This knowledge then served as a canvas against which the following sections were to be interpreted. In turning our focus towards orthography and the written word in its many forms – most importantly the immortalised language of the Paston family – we drew closer to the heart of the matter.

Seeing as spelling during the period under investigation was largely phonetic and much less rigid than nowadays it is possible to see changes to the English vowel system in accordance with GVS theory by analysing the transcription of certain words, and drawing conclusions about the progress of the shift. After setting up the theoretical framework for our research we described in depth the methodology employed in order to map the changes to the vowel system on the basis of the PL corpus. Finally, we presented our findings and offered some discussion on them, as well as critically evaluated our methodology.

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