Changing Vowels, Changing Accents

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The evolution of English

• How has English changed in the past?
  Why is English spelled so weirdly?
  – Focusing on vowel sounds
  – Brief overview of the history of English
  – Main culprit: the Great Vowel Shift

• How are accents changing in the present?
  – Different vowel shifts continue to operate in different groups of people (region, class, gender)
The historical basis for English in 60(ish) seconds
Saxons
Jutes
Old English (Anglo-Saxon)

- Oldest written evidence from a direct ancestor of Modern English
- Descended from West Germanic dialects brought to the British Isles c. 380-450 AD
- Main written sources mainly from 600-1000 AD
Đā ğeseah ďałt wīf ďałt ďałt trēow wæs gōd tō etenne, be ďām ðe hyre ďūhte, and wлитиğ on ēagum and lustbāere on ğesyhōe; and ģenam ďā of ďās trēowes wæstme and ģeāt, and sealde hyre were: hē āet ďā.
And heora bēgra ēagan wurdon ēopenode: hī oncnēowon ďā ēlēt hī nacode wāeron, and sīwodon him fīclēaf and worhton him wāedbrēc.
(1000)
VBI HAROLOD SACRAMENTVM FECIT: HIC HAROL D: D:
VIVEL MO DVCI:
Therfore the womman seiy that the tre was good, and swete to ete, and fair to the iyen, and delitable in bi holdyng; and sche took of the fruyt therof, and eet, and yaf to hir hosebande, and he eet.

And the iyen of bothe weren openid; and whanne thei knowen that thei weren nakid, thei sewden the leues of a fige tre, and maden brechis to hem silf.

(1382)
Da geseah ðæt wīf ðæt ðæt trēow wæs gōd tō etenne, be ðām ðe hyre ðūhte, and wlitig on ēagum and lustbāere on ēsyhðe; and ġenam ðā of ðæs trēowes wæstme and ðeæt, and sealde hyre were: hē æt ðā.

And heora bēgra ēagan wurdon ēopenode: hī oncnēowon ðā ðæt hī nacode wāeron, and sīwodon him fīclēaf and worhton him wāedbrēc.

(1000)
Sample conversation

Is that thy child? 1350-1450

Yea, her name is Ann. 1450-1550

A good and holy name. 1550-1650

Soon she will be three years of age. 1650-1750

Will she speak to me? 1650-1750

Yea, she speaks wonder(fully) loud.
Great Vowel Shift

bite
thy, child

beet, beat
speak, me, year, she, three

abate
age, name

Middle English

about
loud

boot
good, soon

boat
holy
Great Vowel Shift

beet, beat ɪː  uː  boot

abate  ei  ʊʊ  boat

bite  about

Modern English
So… did people just wake up one day and decide to speak differently?
London Vowel Shift

Upper class

Popular London

Cockney

Working class

be   bay   buy   boy

RP   iː   ɪː   ɑːɪ   ɔːɪ

iː   ɪː   ʌɪ   ɒɪ

Working class
London Vowel Shift

beet, beat
abate

ar

boy

Upper Class
London Vowel Shift

beet, $\varepsilon i$

beat $\varepsilon i$

abate

$\mathbf{or}$ $\mathbf{boy}$

$\mathbf{or}$ $\mathbf{bite}$

Working Class
So… why are English vowels spelled so strangely?

- Spelling was standardized during the Great Vowel Shift (1400-1700)
- The upper classes doing the standardizing were speaking in an older, less innovative manner, so our spelling reflects the state of the language before the GVS
Tell me more!
Other Vowel Shifts

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{beet} & \quad \text{i} \\
\text{bit} & \quad \text{ɪ} \\
\text{bet} & \quad \varepsilon \\
\text{bat} & \quad \text{æ}
\end{align*}
\]
Other Vowel Shifts

bit → i
bet → i
bat → ɛ

Australia

beet
Other Vowel Shifts

New Zealand

bet ɪ ʌ bit

bat ɛ

Yeah, a chip?
A potato chip?
This one, a chip, a chip.
I would bro, but I don’t eat chips. You don’t understand, I might look big, but I can’t chew bro, I only have plankton. That’s pretty deceptive.
I know, it’s very misleading. Do you have any plankton?
Other Vowel Shifts

Canada

bit ɪ
bet ɛ
bat æ
caught cot
Other Vowel Shifts

Canada
Non–high short vowel space, group means

“Go past the lab, and then turn left”