Long-Vowel Shifts in English, c. 1050–1700
Evidence From Spelling
The English language has undergone many sound-changes in its long history. Some of these changes had a profound effect on the pronunciation of the language: a number of these significant instances of language evolution are generally grouped together and termed the ‘Great Vowel Shift’. These changes are generally considered unrelated to other, similar long-vowel changes taking place a little earlier. This book assesses an extensive range of irregular Middle English spellings for all these changes, with a view to identifying the real course of events: the dates, the chronology, and the dialects that stand out as being innovative. Using empirical evidence to offer a fresh perspective and drawing new, convincing conclusions, Stenbrenden offers an interpretation of the history of the English language which may change our view of sound-change completely.

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Evidence from Spelling

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Abbreviations

acc. accusative
AN Anglo-Norman
Bck Buckinghamshire
Bed Bedfordshire
Brk Berkshire
Cam Cambridgeshire
CF Central French
Chs Cheshire
Cnw Cornwall
Cu Cumberland
Da Danish
dat. dative
Dby Derbyshire
Dor Dorset
Du Dutch
Dur Durham
Dvn Devonshire
E East(ern)
e early
Ely Isle of Ely
ERY Yorkshire, East Riding
Ex Essex
f[em]. feminine
Fr French
G German
GA General American
Gael Gaelic
gen. genitive
Gl Gloucestershire
Gmc Germanic
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<td>Gothic</td>
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<td>Great Vowel Shift</td>
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<td>Hu</td>
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<td>Linguistic Profile</td>
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<td>m[asc].</td>
<td>masculine</td>
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<td>ME</td>
<td>Middle English</td>
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<td>MEOSL</td>
<td>Middle English Open Syllable Lengthening</td>
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<td>Midland</td>
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<td>N</td>
<td>North(ern)</td>
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<td>n[eut].</td>
<td>neuter</td>
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<td>n</td>
<td>noun (in tables)</td>
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<td>Northumberland</td>
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<td>NF</td>
<td>Norman French</td>
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<td>Norfolk</td>
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<td>Nht</td>
<td>Northamptonshire</td>
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<td>NME</td>
<td>Northern Middle English</td>
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<td>nom.</td>
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<td>NRY</td>
<td>Yorkshire, North Riding</td>
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List of Abbreviations

Nt  Nottinghamshire
OE  Old English
OFr Old French
OFRIS Old Frisian
OHG Old High German
OK  Old Kentish
OL  Old Latin
ON  Old Norse
ONBN Old Northumbrian
OS  Old Saxon
OSL Open Syllable Lengthening
Ox  Oxfordshire
PDE Present-Day English
pers. personal
Pet Soke of Peterborough
pl. plural
poss. possessive
ppl. participle
pres. present
PrGMC Proto-Germanic
PrIE Primitive Indo-European
pt. past tense
pron. pronoun
RP Received Pronunciation
Ru  Rutland
Run Runic
S  South(ern)
Sal Shropshire
sb. noun (substantive)
SE  South-East(ern)
Sfk Suffolk
sg. singular
SHOCC shortening of vowels before fortis consonant clusters
SME Southern Middle English
Som Somerset
StE Standard English
Stf Staffordshire
Sur Surrey
Sw Swedish
List of Abbreviations

Sx  Sussex
TRISH  tri-syllabic shortening of vowels
v.  verb
vn.  verbal noun
W  West(ern)
WGmc  West Germanic
Wlt  Wiltshire
Wmld  Westmorland
Wor  Worcestershire
Wrk  Warwickshire
WRY  Yorkshire, West Riding
WS  West-Saxon
Yk  York
Yks  Yorkshire
*
indicates a form not actually found but inferred, or an incorrect form

>  is reflected as
<  is the reflex of
Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Chain-shifts

Few linguistic phenomena capture the imagination like chain-shifts. Chain-shifts refer to linguistic changes that involve at least two consecutive changes, which are seen to be interrelated: essentially, A > B > C (Jespersen 1909; Luick 1914–40; Martinet 1952, 1955; Wells 1982: 97–101; Labov 1994). If stage 1 is B > C and stage 2 is A > B, there is a ‘drag-chain’, by which the vacated B-slot has pulled A into its place. If the first stage is A > B and the second is B > C, there is a ‘push-chain’, by which A has pushed B out of its slot. The metaphors ‘drag-chain’ and ‘push-chain’ are thus merely descriptive labels and their existence is open to empirical testing. Chain-shifts may also be observed within semantics and morphology, but the term is most commonly used about phonological change. The reason may be that sound-shifts involve phonemes, the smallest contrastive units of language, and are both more easily observed and more easily divided into discrete stages than for instance semantic shifts, which require a linguistic context to be identified.

Why do chain-shifts occur? Proposed explanations virtually always refer to the phonological systems in which the changes take place, because the rationale behind chain-shifts seems to be the maintenance of functional contrasts, that is phonemes. Push-chains are believed to occur in order to avoid merger of previously separate phonemes; thus, explanations for push-chains are typically functional and teleological (Samuels 1972). In a drag-chain, however, there is no danger of loss of phonemes; therefore, explanations usually invoke the principle of equal phonetic/perceptual spacing between phonemes (Luick 1932; Martinet 1955; Liljencrapts and Lindblom 1972; Ladefoged 1982: 236), or that of maximising acoustic contrasts (Wells 1982: 97–98), or principles of universal phonology, for example that the high-vowel slots must be filled (Crothers 1978; Stockwell and Minkova 1988a: 367–368; but see Lass 1988: 399–400).
There are problems associated with most explanations put forward for chain-shifts. First, functional explanations seem to be teleological, suggesting that languages in a sense know where they are heading and hence resort to chain-shifts to avoid mergers. But such a suggestion is counter-intuitive and illogical (Lass 1997: 300–303; Bermúdez-Otero 1998: 180–183); rather, it could be that the speakers of a language have a subconscious ‘feel’ for the system of functional contrasts, and wish to uphold this system (Stockwell and Minkova 1988a: 365), cf. the principle of equal spacing between contrastive elements. However, neither phonemic mergers nor phonemic splits are rare in the history of languages; thus, phonemic systems are hardly fixed entities, and no chain-shift or other sound-change is ever necessary (for instance, in the ‘Canadian Shift’, the LOT–THOUGHT merger has in fact traditionally been held to trigger the shift, cf. Durian and Gordon 2011).

The third alternative, that changes in a shift may be simultaneous, constitutes a second problem, because it leaves open the possibility that the changes in a perceived chain cannot be accounted for as a simple push-chain or drag-chain. The fact that it is frequently difficult to determine whether even ongoing chain-shifts constitute push-chains or drag-chains suggests (1) that allophonic variation is greater at any given point in time than is often acknowledged, with a great deal of overlap, and (2) that the terms are too simplistic to capture the reality of sound-change (Frankis 1986: 135). Wells (1982: 98–99) and McCarthy (2010b) both describe PDE chain-shifts in which the constituent parts appear to be simultaneous.

A third problem is the fact that the labels themselves (‘push-chains’ and ‘drag-chains’) are often seen as sufficient to explain the changes they purport to describe. In other words, if it is determined that a given chain-shift started with the change A > B, and therefore constitutes a push-chain, this is deemed sufficient to explain the chain-shift also. Related to this is a fourth problem, namely that the explanations offered refer solely to the phonology of a language, or to language typology, rather than seeing all sound-change as having phonetic (viz. articulatory, perceptual, prosodic, physiological) bases. Besides, typological universals (if indeed they are universal) do not constitute explanations, but rather require explanations themselves. Instead of merely working out typological accounts of shifts, the linguist ought to ask questions such as (1) What types of sound-changes occur and recur (in chain-shifts)?, (2) What phonetic bases may be identified for these recurring sound-changes?, and (3) Why do these types of sound-change recur? I will attempt to answer questions
A fifth problem has to do with the theoretical frameworks used to provide the most suitable model for chain-shifts. For instance, Optimality Theory uses constraints rankings to determine the course of change, and the winning ranking is the one that gives the expected output; this is circular, however, in that the output is known \textit{a priori} and is exactly what the constraints and the rankings are supposed to capture. A case in point is Łubowicz, who addresses ‘the typology of chain shift mappings in the context of various theoretical proposals’ (2011: 1718). Even if she allows diachronic drag-chains, she questions ‘whether pull shifts are possible synchronically’ because they ‘are not admitted under any of the theoretical proposals’ she examines (2011: 1720). This is putting the cart before the horse: Drag-chains and pull-chains are descriptive labels and open to empirical observation; if the theories cannot account for them, the conclusion is not that such changes cannot happen, but that there is something wrong with the theory. Łubowicz claims that diachronic drag-chains ‘are different, as they can be seen as different processes that apply at different stages in the development of the language’ (2011: 1728), but it is unclear why this cannot apply to synchronous drag-chains also.

\section*{1.2 Topics and aims}

\subsection*{1.2.1 Middle English long-vowel change}

This work is concerned with a number of changes in long-vowel pronunciation that took place between c. 1050 and 1700. There is general consensus among scholars as to the phonetic nature of the OE vowels (Quirk and Wrenn 1990; Mitchell and Robinson 1992: §§7–8; Sweet 1992: §2). A comparison between the OE realisations and that of their modern reflexes reveals great differences, especially regarding long vowels. In other words, it is clear that changes must have happened to the pronunciation of long vowels sometime between OE and PDE. Traditionally, these changes have been assigned to two separate groups.

The first group consists of four IOE or eME changes, namely (a) the unrounding and/or lowering of OE \( \ddot{y} \) to [i:] or [e:]; (b) the monophthongisation and subsequent unrounding of OE \( \ddot{e}o \) to [ø:] > [e:]; (c) the backing, rounding, and raising of eME \( \ddot{a} \) to [ɔ:], which took place in the dialects south of the Humber; and (d) the fronting and raising of eME
\[ \ddot{o} \text{ [o:]} \text{ to [u:]}, \text{ which took place north of the Humber.} \]

Changes (c) and (d) are assumed to have been completed before 1350.

The second set of changes is usually collectively referred to as ‘the Great Vowel Shift’ (GVS), and denotes a vocalic restructuring whereby the eME non-close vowels \( \ddot{e}, \ddot{i}, \ddot{o}, \ddot{u} \) and lME \( \ddot{a} \) were raised one height to \([i:], [e:], [u:], [o:], [\dddot{a}:]\) respectively, and the close vowels \( \ddot{i} \) and \( \ddot{u} \) were diphthongised, first to \([\dddot{i} i]\) and \([\dddot{u} u]\), later to \([\dddot{o} i]\) and \([\dddot{u} u]\). Through later changes, the \([e:]\) (< ME \( \ddot{e} \)) was further raised to \([i:]\) in most words in StE, but diphthongised to \([e\dddot{i}]\) in a few words (\textit{yea, break, steak, great}); the \([\dddot{a}:]\) (< lME \( \ddot{a} \)) was raised to \([e:]\) and then diphthongised to \([e\dddot{i}]\); and the \([o:]\) (< ME \( \ddot{o} < \text{OE} \ddot{a} \)) was diphthongised to \([o\dddot{u}]\) (and eventually to /\dddot{o}\ddot{u}/ in RP). The ‘GVS’ is generally held to have begun around 1400 and to have been completed c. 1750; the following vowel diagrams capture the stages of the ‘GVS’ (Figures 1.1 and 1.2); the shape of the articulatory vowel space follows Prokosch (1939: 97–98) and Labov (1994: 256–261).

Table 1.1 gives an overview of long-vowel changes in the ME and eModE periods. No attempt has been made to date the changes exactly or to indicate the internal chronology. The term ‘eME \( \ddot{e} \)’ includes the reflexes of OE \( \ddot{i}, \dddot{y}, \dddot{e}g/\dddot{e}h, \ddot{e}g/\ddot{e}h, \ddot{e}ht, \ddot{y}ht, \ddot{e}oh/\ddot{e}h, \ddot{e}ht, \ddot{e}h \) and OE \( i/\ddot{y} \) in lengthening contexts; ‘eME \( \ddot{u} \)’ includes the reflexes of OE \( \ddot{u}, \ddot{o} u \) in lengthening contexts, and OE \( \ddot{e}g/\ddot{e}g, \ddot{e}m/\ddot{e}h \); ‘eME \( \ddot{e} \)’ is generally the reflex of OE \( \dddot{e} \); ‘eME \( \ddot{a} \)’ is generally the reflex of OE \( \ddot{a} \) (south of the Humber); and ‘ME \( \ddot{a} \)’ is the product of Middle English Open Syllable Lengthening (MEOSL). A dash indicates no further change.

Anglicists in the nineteenth century soon came to regard the changes of the second group as being somehow interrelated and interdependent, that is, they were part of a chain-shift. Most notable among these linguists
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are Jespersen and Luick. Jespersen named it ‘die große Vokalverschiebung’ (1909: 231). At first, he no doubt coined this phrase to serve as a conceptual map, or some kind of mental shorthand, which was useful as a way of organising the material and for getting a mental grip of the nature of these changes. The English translation of this phrase, ‘the Great Vowel Shift’, was soon adopted by other linguists. Jespersen also presented the changes in terms of a diagram (1909: 232; the raised dot is Jespersen’s symbol for vowel-length) (see Figure 1.3).

However, although there may have been no idea of a process involved in this concept of ‘the Great Vowel Shift’ at first, it was soon reified: the concept itself acquired near-factual status. That is, the capitalised vowel shift was conceived of as a unitary event with its own inner coherence, which needed a special kind of explanation. The question soon turned to which vowel(s) moved first, and whether this initial change triggered a push-chain or drag-chain. What is more, the shift was considered unique

Table 1.1 Middle English and Modern English long-vowel changes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>eME</th>
<th>ME</th>
<th>eModE</th>
<th>PDE</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ĕ [iː]</td>
<td>[iː] [ɔi]</td>
<td>/aɪ/</td>
<td>white, sty, bind, night, bright</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ū [uː]</td>
<td>[uː] [ɔu]</td>
<td>/aʊ/</td>
<td>brown, pound, fowl, bough</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ē [eː]</td>
<td>[iː]</td>
<td>/iː/</td>
<td>green, see, teeth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ō [oː]</td>
<td>[uː]</td>
<td>/uː/</td>
<td>tooth, tool, moon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ō [oː]</td>
<td>[iː] or [eɪ]</td>
<td>/iː/ or /ei/</td>
<td>deal, sea, great, steak</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ō [oː]</td>
<td>[ɔɜː]</td>
<td>/ɔː/ (RP), /ɔː/ (GA)</td>
<td>home, stone, boat</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ā [aː]</td>
<td>[æː]</td>
<td>[ɛː] → [eɪ]</td>
<td>/eɪ/</td>
<td>lady, take</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
to English. This view of the ‘GVS’ has been challenged, most notably by Stockwell since the early 1960s, and by Stockwell and Minkova (1988a, 1988b, 1997). It is the contention of this book, in agreement with Stockwell and Minkova and many other scholars, that the concept of a ‘GVS’ as a unitary event is illusory, that the changes started earlier than has been assumed, and that the changes of both the sets mentioned above took longer to be completed than most handbooks claim.

Evidence for these vocalic changes is found in (a) previous stages of English, (b) the sound system of PDE, (c) comparative material from other Gmc languages, (d) spellings, (e) rhymes, and (f) ‘eyewitness’ accounts by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century orthoepists. Each of these is treated below.

On the correspondences between spellings and phonetic value, Campbell observes that ‘our knowledge of the sounds of a dead language can never be more than approximate’ (1959: §31). Further (1959: §31),

The following reconstruction of the phonetic system of Old English is based on the probable value of the symbols when they are used to write Latin of the same period, and upon reasonable deductions from the history of the sounds both in Germanic and in the later periods of English.

Thus, the sound correspondences of the OE vowel letters are relatively transparent. When these sound values are compared to the PDE vowels on an etymological basis, it is clear that the phonetic realisations of long vowels changed at some point in time. Further evidence for the initial sound value of OE vowel symbols is found in other Gmc languages: PrGmc ı is still realised as /i:/ in Danish and Norwegian (e.g. Norw. hvit /vi:t/ ‘white’); PrGmc ư is still realised as /u:/ in Danish (e.g. hus /huːs/ ‘house’); and PrGmc ę still has the sound value /e:/ in Norwegian, Danish, and Swedish (e.g. Norw. se /seː/ ‘see’).
Spellings and rhymes provide a different kind of evidence, especially when they depart from traditional orthography. Such evidence, along with its status as proof of sound-change, is treated in detail in Section 1.5. After the rise of StE in the fifteenth century and the introduction of the printing press in 1476, there arose a need for a uniform spelling. The press entailed mass production of texts, so that the variety of spelling shown by a manuscript (MS) corpus inevitably disappeared. But consistency within the typesetting was another matter. Consequently, from c. 1530 onwards, numerous orthoepistitical works on the ‘right’ spelling and pronunciation were published. Much information about the pronunciation of English can be gleaned from such works, but they are generally too late to offer any insights on the initial stages of the ‘GVS’, and even less on the earlier set of changes; they do sometimes provide confirmation of changes that have already happened or are taking place in the authors’ own dialects. Evidence from the early orthoepists has been used in this work to cast light on the later stages of the long-vowel shifts examined here.

1.2.2 Previous research on the ‘Great Vowel Shift’

This section gives a brief survey of research on the ‘GVS’; previous research on each individual vowel is dealt with in the relevant chapters. Following Luick (1896, 1899, 1901, 1912, 1914–40, 1932) and Jespersen (1909), who were among the first to see these changes as a set of interdependent changes, most handbooks present the ‘GVS’ as an event which needs to be explained (e.g. Algeo and Pyles 2005). According to Wolfe (1972), questions regarding the shift can be grouped into five categories: (1) how questions, (2) what questions, (3) why questions, (4) where questions, and (5) when questions.

What questions seek to establish exactly what happened at the phonetic or sub-phonemic level during the ‘GVS’. For example, the diphthongs that developed from eME ĩ and ĭ pre-suppose that a glide vowel must have developed before the original vocalic nucleus, and there is general consensus that the first stage would have entailed the formation of minimal diphthongs, [ii] and [ʊʊ]. What questions then try to identify the later development of these minimal diphthongs, producing PDE [ai] and [aɪ]: for instance, the on-glide may have centralised to [ə] and then ‘dropped down’ in vocalic space, or the on-glide may have been front [ɛ], which lowered along a front path. The answer to this may be crucial in determining why the diphthongised reflex of etymological ĩ did not merge with the etymological diphthong [ei]. Such ‘near-mergers’ have attracted
attention from, for example, Kökeritz (1932), Orton (1933), Stockwell (1978), and Labov (1994).

How questions try to ascertain by what stages the ‘GVS’ came about; three basic views have been put forward. The first states that the close vowels diphthongised first, leaving a void in the close front and back position, and pulling the other long vowels up to fill consecutively vacant vowel slots, in a drag-chain process. The second position holds that the half-close vowels ē and ō moved first, forcing the close vowels ī and ū to diphthongise in order to avoid merger, in a push-chain process. The third suggests that all the ‘GVS’ changes were more or less simultaneous. Naturally, such questions are related to when-type questions (see following text). Luick was the first scholar to present arguments and evidence for a push-chain (although he did not invoke any such metaphor; Luick 1914–40: §479). An examination of the northern dialects of England provided his basis for concluding thus: in some northern dialects, eME ū did not diphthongise; in the same dialects, OE ō had previously been fronted and raised to ū; and eME ī seems to have diphthongised earlier than in the southern dialects. Luick clearly saw a causal relationship between these changes. His push-chain theory was rejected by Jespersen, who postulated a drag-chain, and claimed that the northern evidence could be interpreted the other way round (Jespersen 1909: 233):

But the nexus may be equally well established the other way: after /i/ and /u/ had been diphthongized, there was nothing to hinder /e/ and /o/ from moving upwards and becoming /i/ and /u/; where /u/ subsisted, /o/ was not allowed to move upwards.

Strang (1970: §§101–4) offers arguments in favour of both views, whereas Western (1912) maintains that the changes of the ‘GVS’ were simultaneous. What these scholars have in common is that they all regard the changes as connected and systemic, and they see the ‘GVS’ as caused by language-internal factors, that is, by some ‘drift’ or tendency within the language itself (Luick 1914–40 II: 449). Crucial to any such ‘conspiracy’ view is the ‘displacement theory’ (so named by Stockwell and Minkova 1988a: 365), first presented by Luick (1932), which states that native speakers have a subconscious feel for the phonetic distance between phonemes, and that they tend to want to preserve that distance. In other words, if one phoneme were to move in phonological space, the other phonemes would move as well, in an attempt to (1) avoid merger and (2) ‘remedy’ the imbalance caused by the first change. It is claimed that since merger results in the loss of at least one distinctive phoneme and also in
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Homonymy – which, it is assumed, is detrimental to communication – it is therefore avoided (Luick 1896: 315; but see Ringgaard 1982). Against such views it may be argued, (a) that merger between the reflexes of OE ē and ē in fact did take place in the ‘GVS’ itself; (b) that Strang (1980) has shown that the average number of meanings for any English word is roughly four, and that homonymy thus does not impair efficiency of communication; (c) that vowel systems are rarely symmetrical; and (d) if changes cause an ‘imbalance’ in the system, and must be remedied, it is difficult to understand why they happened in the first place.

Linguists who pose why questions attempt to find explanations or causes of vocalic chain-shifts of the type seen in the ‘GVS’, and in so doing, they have investigated (a) prosodic factors (Samuels 1972, Jordan 1968, Johnston 1992), (b) functional causes (Samuels 1972), (c) system-internal causes (Jespersen 1909, Luick 1914–40), (d) socio-linguistic factors (Labov 1994), and (e) typological issues (Donegan 1985, Donegan unpubl.). Tendencies discovered in related languages, as well as general principles of sound-change established by modern linguistics, are key in framing and finding answers to these questions. For instance, work carried out by Labov (1994) on chain-shifts of various kinds suggests that in Gmc languages, long vowels tend (1) to be raised, (2) to be fronted, and (3) to diphthongise, but not to be lowered or backed, except in combinative changes (i.e. changes conditioned by the phonetic context). It should be noted that such tendencies in themselves require an explanation. Samuels, believing suprasegmental variants are responsible for a number of sound-changes, points out that ‘forceful styles may show a higher or more fronted tongue-position, whereas the less stressed variants of relaxed styles may show lower, more centralised or retracted tongue-positions’ (1972: 21, his emphasis). If so, this goes a long way towards explaining why vowel shifts of the kind investigated here are a common feature of Gmc languages, which are stress-timed.

Where questions and when questions are somewhat different in nature. Where questions try to uncover the geographical dialect(s) in which the ‘GVS’ was initiated, and when questions try to identify more precise dates for the successive stages of the shift. Luick (1914–40: §§479 ff.) pays some attention to the geographical spread and distribution of the ‘GVS’ changes, whereas Kökeritz (1932), Orton (1933), and Johnston (1992) all devote part of their discussions to attempting to establish the dates for the stages of the ‘GVS’. The aim of Boisson (1982) is to identify the internal chronology of the ‘GVS’ changes. The present work also attempts to answer where and when questions.
Finally, in more recent years, *who*-type questions have been posed by socio-linguists (e.g. Smith 1993, 2007; Labov 1994), and have been concerned with social variables such as gender, education, class, prestige, mobility, and types of social links as important factors involved in the adoption and spread of linguistic changes, including the ‘GVS’.

1.2.3 What is wrong with the traditional account of the ‘GVS’?

Most handbook accounts deal with the particular nature and outcome of the ‘GVS’ in *Standard* English only and disregard dialect evidence altogether. Yet, most non-standard dialects of English do not show the mostly symmetrical pattern of vowel-raising and diphthongisation seen in RP; this is evidenced by for example Dieth (1932, for Buchan), Kökeritz (1932, for Suffolk), Orton (1933, for Durham), and Widén (1949, for Dorset). In parts of the North, for instance, OE ā remained and was later fronted and diphthongised; OE ē was fronted and raised to [uː]; and OE ū [uː] remains (Orton 1933). Moreover, the vowel systems of various PDE dialects may shed light on the stages of, for example, the diphthongisation of the close vowels in the ‘GVS’. In Eastern Canadian English and Scots English, for example, OE ū is reflected as [ɔu], at least in certain contexts (e.g. in *our* and *about* in the former dialects, and in *down* and *pound* in the latter), which points to centralisation of the developing on-glide (cf. the *what* questions treated above). Smith (1993) has used dialect evidence in his treatment of the ‘GVS’.

Furthermore, up until about thirty years ago (with a few notable exceptions), chain-shifts of the ‘GVS’ kind were treated as uniquely English and unique *within* English. However, it is now recognised that similar chain-shifts affecting the long vowels have taken place in most Gmc languages, except Danish. Thus, PrGmc ĕ and ū have diphthongised in German also, giving Modern High German /ai/ and /au/, for example in *Wein*, *weiss* and *Haus*, *braun*; a similar development can be traced for these vowels in Dutch, where, in addition, the etymological ē has been raised to /uː/ (Pelt 1980; Frankis 1986; van Reenen and Wijnands 1989; Peeters 1991); on the South-African chain-shift, see Lass and Wright (1985). Again, such changes are regarded as connected and systemic, as are diachronic long-vowel changes in Swedish and Norwegian, in which two etymological non-close back vowels were raised and the close back vowel was fronted: ON á > /oː/, ō > /uː/, ū > /uː/ (Benediktsson 1970a, 1970b; Haugen 1970, 1976; Torp and Vikør 1993: 61–62; Eliasson 2010). Besides, Swedish /iː/ is now pronounced as a minimal diphthong /ij/ in
some regions, and sporadic diphthongisation of SEN /ʉː:/ is found in Norwegian dialects. However, neither the Swedish diphthongisation of /iː/ nor the Norwegian diphthongisation of /ʉː:/ is seen as part of any systemic shift. Finally, chain-shifts affecting vowels have been going on and are going on in various PDE dialects, for example in Australian and Cockney English (Sivertsen 1960; Mitchell and Delbridge 1965; Wells 1982: 301–334) and eastern and southern American English (Labov, Yaeger, and Steiner 1972; Labov 1994, 2002).

Related to the view that vowel shifts like the ‘GVS’ are unique to English, is the view that the ‘GVS’ was a single, unified, coherent ‘event’, with a definite beginning and end, requiring its own explanation. The very fact that the name of the shift is usually capitalised bears witness to this attitude, which has been held by, for example, Algeo and Pyles (2005), Baugh and Cable (2002), Strang (1970), and notably by Lass (1976, 1980, 1987a, 1987b, 1988, 1990, 1992, 1997); in later years, however, Lass has abandoned the concept of a unitary ‘GVS’ (pers. comm.). Stockwell (1960, 1964, 1972, 1978) has always maintained that vowel shifting is nothing out of the ordinary in the history of English and the other Gmc languages, and has in fact been going on for the last 1500 years (Stockwell 1969: 93). Stockwell and Minkova (1988a, 1988b, 1990, 1997) elaborate this theory, which holds that the IOE mergers of i and ĭg/īg and of ŭ and ĭg/ūg resulted in minimal diphthongs, and that this opened up for the further diphthongisation of etymological ĭ and ŭ. Stenbrenden (2010) finds in favour of their basic claims.

The dates postulated for the beginning of the ‘GVS’ provide another problem. Jespersen (1909) believed the shift must have started around 1500, and this is the date still indicated in many handbooks; Luick (1914–40: §§479ff.) postulated a somewhat earlier date. Attention has since been drawn to a short poem usually referred to as the ‘Hymn to the Virgin’, written around 1450 (Prins 1972); Dobson (1968: §§137, 156) dates the poem to the fifteenth century. This poem is written in English, but according to Welsh spelling conventions; and in it, etymological ĭ is spelt <ei>, etymological ŭ is spelt <ow>, etymological ō is spelt <w>, and etymological ĕ is spelt <i>. According to Welsh orthography of the time, <ei> and <ow> must represent diphthongs, <w> must represent a close back vowel, and <i> a close front vowel. In other words, this poem indicates very clearly that the vowel shift was well under way c. 1450; accordingly, the initial stages of the shift have been set to around 1400 by most recent scholars. Wyld (1927, 1936) and Kökeritz (1954) in fact date the early stages to the fourteenth century, but their views have been generally ignored.
A pilot study was carried out earlier (Stenbrenden 1996: 121–132), for which irregular spellings for historical long monophthongs were extracted from corpora of ME sources not previously available (*SMED* and *LALME*). This and later studies (Stenbrenden 2010, 2013) concluded that the incipient stages of the shift likely took place much earlier than 1400, in fact as early as the mid-thirteenth century (which conclusion is accepted by Minkova 2014: 253–254). Moreover, the ME spellings also indicated that the set of earlier changes took longer to be completed than was thought before, such that there appeared to be a lengthy temporal overlap between the two sets of changes. If this were the case, it would open up a number of new questions concerning the internal chronology of ME long-vowel changes; besides, there seemed no valid reason to treat the two sets of changes separately. These preliminary conclusions strongly suggest that a large-scale investigation of ME irregular spellings would be worthwhile in order to reassess some aspects of the history of English phonology.

1.2.4 The purpose and scope of this study

The present work analyses spelling evidence from the entire ME period, with a view to answering *when* and *where* questions concerning ME long-vowel change. Due to the lack of recorded ME speech, and the fact that early phonetic accounts of English do not start to appear until the sixteenth century, this book treats ME unorthodox written forms that are potential manifestations of the changes in question. More precisely, I attempt to determine which irregular spellings may be used as evidence of sound-change, to find out where and when such spellings appear first, and how they spread regionally and temporally, in order to see if any patterns emerge. Ultimately, the goal is to determine whether it is possible to establish an internal chronology of ME long-vowel changes and to see if there are any particular ME regions that stand out as loci of change.

Vastly more material is presented here, and on a much larger scale, than has been done hitherto. The irregular spellings extracted are *prima facie* evidence of sound-change, and the extent of such forms suggests that the case for postulating early vowel shift from occasional spellings is considerably stronger than has been assumed. However, simply listing irregular spellings for ME long vowels hardly proves anything; rather, each unconventional spelling ought to be assessed in terms of the entire orthographic system in which it occurs, that is the full range of spellings for that vowel (and other long vowels) in the scribal text in question, as
1.2 Topics and Aims

far as the material allows. Likewise, spellings for one long vowel may be compared to those for other long vowels within the same system, thus revealing whether or not the scribe’s orthography is irregular in general. In this context, two avenues present themselves: (1) all the irregular spellings extracted may be included and analysed; or (2) the most promising parts of the material may be presented, and the spelling system of each and every source of aberrant forms could be analysed in minute detail. The first avenue was chosen, simply to demonstrate the bulk of the material. The discussions and analyses contained in the individual chapters partly sift the material, and detailed examination of spellings systems has been provided in many cases. Such examination has shown that when the entire orthographic system of a particular source is assessed, the initial interpretation of the aberrant spellings and their phonetic correspondences may have to be reconsidered. For this reason, the second avenue must clearly be travelled too…

Thus, it is not the main objective of this work to treat the how, what, or why questions relating to the ‘GVS’, but to establish, so far as it is possible, a chronology of change. This will of course shed light on whether it makes sense to talk of a ‘trigger’ of change, or whether a push-chain or drag-chain mechanism was at work, or neither. Nor does this study find support in any current linguistic theory. The decision to leave theory out is a fully conscious one: firstly, it allows other linguists, regardless of theoretical orientation, to make use of the collections of ME data found herein and to interpret them how they see fit. Secondly, it is often the case that theoretical persuasion will influence both which data are included and also their interpretation: one’s recognition of relevance itself often depends on a theoretical persuasion. Hence, this work simply offers a systematic compilation of ME occasional spellings for long vowels, and a discussion of what such spellings may imply about ME phonology. Rhyming evidence has not been systematically exploited, but occasional reference has been made to rhymes which may imply vowel shift.

This study is an exercise in the art of the practicable: since the publication of SMED and LALME, and the relatively recent online publications of LAEME and LALME, there is now much more material easily accessible for analysis on a large scale than has ever been the case before, and the material contained in these sources is reliable, since it has been collated against MSS. However, the spellings collected in this book in no way exhaust the ME material: hence, it is certainly not the case that ‘if it is not in the corpus, it is not in the language’. The existence of LAEME, SMED, and LALME facilitates the review of a very much wider range of
attestations than has been attempted hitherto, with regard to both partic-
icular spellings and the dates at which they appear. The written record
of eME is variously fragmentary, in respect both of time and particular
places, but what there is can now be much more comprehensively sur-
veyed than before. Thus, despite the limitations pointed out before, there
is still enough material to determine whether the story of ME long-vowel
shifts, as conventionally told, adds up or not.

1.3 Description of sources and method

1.3.1 Introduction and description of LALME

LALME covers the period 1350–1450 for most of English-speaking Britain,
although some very late documents have been included as well, and the
southern corpus contains some material from the late thirteenth and
early fourteenth centuries. It includes documents that are localisable with
respect to time and place, and uses wholly vernacular texts. Although its
local documents are usually of known date, the literary manuscripts, most
of which are copies at indeterminate remove from the original works, are
generally datable only on palaeographical grounds. The data are organised
on a regional basis, and can be looked up county by county. In addition,
LALME provides maps with a very high density of attestation: there are
c. 1200 survey points for the whole country (as compared to 300 in SED,
Orton and Dieth 1962). The lME manuscripts examined for LALME are
all listed in Volume I (LALME, I: 57–171).4

The material in LALME is organised mainly on a lexical basis, and was
compiled by the use of questionnaires. These questionnaires record the
orthographic variants occurring for a set number of items (i.e. a word or
morpheme, and sometimes a phonological category), thus creating a lin-
guistic profile (LP) for the text.5 Since the same items were recorded for all
the documents (with some differences between the northern and southern
corpus, and always provided that the relevant items were actually found
in the texts), their LPs constitute a good basis for cross-dialectal compari-
on, at least with respect to particular lexemes and their regionally based
orthographic representations.6 A list of all 280 items, with notes, is found
in Volume III (pp. xviii, xx-xxii).

The aim of any dialect atlas of ME is two-fold: firstly, to determine
the provenance of the writers of the various texts, and secondly, to use
this information to ‘elucidate the geographical distributions of the mate-
rial’ (LALME, I: 9). The main problem is that mediaeval scribes mostly
remain anonymous, and so the dialectal provenance of their language
must be determined on linguistic or extra-linguistic grounds. Now, if texts were to be localised *a priori* solely on linguistic principles, one could certainly run the risk of committing dialectal tautologies. Therefore, there is a need for texts that can be localised on non-linguistic grounds, that is, texts which have definite affinities with given places or areas. Such texts are called ‘anchor’ texts, because they provide dialectal anchors or fixed points of reference; and the linguistic material they contain is plotted on maps (*LALME*, I: 9–10). Anchor texts are predominantly local documents, most of which are short texts with limited vocabulary. In order to compile a dependable dialect atlas for ME, one is therefore in need of longer texts with much larger vocabularies, which usually means literary texts. The problem with literary texts is that their language in most cases has not been localised. This is where the ‘fit’-technique comes in (*LALME*, I: 10–12). Modern dialectology recognises that languages cannot be divided into neat and discrete dialects; rather, there is a dialect continuum, with ‘non-random, orderly patterning [of linguistic features] over space’ (*LALME*, I: 10). Since every lexical item (or phonological category) displays a unique ‘non-random, orderly patterning over space’, each regional dialect would also show a unique combination or cluster of linguistic features. Thus, given a sample ME text, it would be possible to localise the language of the said text within a restricted area, from an analysis of the *combined* set of orthographic linguistic features found in that text, using information from maps of plotted items from the anchor texts. Since for any dialect it is the *combination* of features which is unique, it is vital to plot as many features/items as possible on the maps. The more ME texts that are safely localised by the help of items maps, the more dependable the grid becomes, and the easier it will be to localise other texts. Description of the ‘fit’-technique is provided by McIntosh (1963) and Benskin (1991a). For critique of *LALME*, see Burton (1991), and Benskin’s rejoinder (Benskin 1991b).

Most of the *LALME* categories are lexical. Nevertheless, much phonological evidence may be abstracted from it, and some categories of survey, particularly for the southern half of England, are overtly phonological. This phonological material is contained in the *Appendix of Southern Forms* (*LALME*, IV: 309–25). Irregular spellings were extracted from both the *Appendix of Southern Forms* and the *County Dictionary*.

1.3.2 Introduction and description of SMED

of England, and has been extracted from Lay Subsidy Rolls (LSR), or from comparable material when such rolls are lacking for a particular area. Where possible, SMED makes use of two Subsidy Rolls of diverse dates from each county to cover the area twice. The LSR are essentially Latin documents, but since they are records of tax-payers and their tax payments, recorded district by district, they contain a great deal of vernacular material on personal names and place-names. The Lay Subsidy was collected almost all over the country, at times fixed by parliamentary grant of such subsidies. Therefore the Rolls are precisely dated. Tax payments were often recorded by local officers (Kristensson 1967: xii); thus, the material is assumed to reveal the genuinely local pronunciation of the various names listed. The result of Kristensson's investigations is a delineation of the Northern, West Midland, East Midland, and Southern dialect areas, which delineation remains Kristensson’s main objective. The forms presented are organised on a phonological basis; from the standpoint of the present study, this organisation is ideal. The lists of material from SMED are by intention exhaustive, unless otherwise indicated.

The material in SMED was collected on the assumption that the original tax assessment rolls were recorded by local people, and that the names therefore reflect local pronunciation. Serious reservations were voiced against this assumption after the publication of SMED1, notably by McClure, who pointed out that Kristensson’s sources are in fact not the original local assessment rolls, but summaries of these ‘copied out into “county” rolls by clerks of the chief taxers’ (McClure 1973: 188). Nor does Kristensson record different hands. The linguistic trustworthiness of the rolls therefore depends on the probability of copying errors and […] the possibility that scribal influence is interfering at two stages with the reliability of the forms’ (1973: 188). McClure demonstrates that copying errors are not infrequent, that the ‘county roll clerks were not especially familiar with the local nomenclature’ (1973: 190), and that scribal influence is responsible for much of the spelling variations. Essentially (1973: 191),

professionally trained scribes were among the more mobile members of medieval society […] The fact that some of the chief taxers’ clerks made elementary mistakes in local nomenclature should warn us not to assume too readily that the spellings in the subsidy rolls are wholly representative of local usage.

Kristensson’s reply tries to refute McClure’s most serious arguments, but he admits that some degree of scepticism is sound, and that a local assessment roll must be compared with ‘the corresponding part of a county roll’
1.3 Description of Sources and Method

(1976: 52) to determine its reliability. This is what Kristensson does next, distinguishing three categories of spelling discrepancies: (a) scribal errors, (b) orthographic variants, and (c) normalised spellings ‘which belonged to the county roll scribe’s spelling conventions’ (1976: 55). Kristensson states that categories (a) and (b) need not concern us, since they occur in all ME texts. As for normalised spellings, they are said to be a corrective (on the part of the county roll clerks) to the various forms found in the local rolls, which, he claims, were recorded by ‘persons barely literate’, who ‘wrote what they “heard” or what they thought they “heard”’ (1976: 56). But since the original assessment rolls are nearly all lacking, it is disturbing indeed if the surviving county rolls display standardised spellings (although appeal to standardisation is anachronistic at this date), because such spellings would obscure the ‘local speech’ that is supposed to be the very foundation of SMED. However, Kristensson and McClure agree that the spelling changes in the county rolls do not imply a different pronunciation of the names involved, and hence that ‘their presence is unlikely to affect seriously any broad generalisations about the phonology of an area’ (McClure 1973: 190). Kristensson (1976) concludes that spellings of onomastic material are a better and safer source of local pronunciation than literary texts, because (a) in onomastic material there would be no considerations of ‘vulgarity’ of form, and (b) onomastic material often appeared in a legal context, and had to reflect the pronunciation correctly in order to avoid having its authenticity called into question.

Hence, Kristensson regretfully seems to sweep the differences under the carpet. Moreover, when irregular spellings and their phonetic implications do not fit in with Kristensson’s preconceived ideas of their regional distributions, they tend to be dismissed, either as scribal errors or as showing influence from neighbouring dialects (cf. Hudson 1969: 69). In other cases, Kristensson invokes ‘influence’ from non-local people who, it is claimed, had moved to the area in question; but evidence for such migration is thin on the ground.\footnote{ McClure’s most critical argument, and one which Kristensson has never really refuted, is the fact that spellings for a given item – within the same county – change with the scribe. The example quoted (1973: 191–2) is the reflex of OE hyll hill in Nottinghamshire: Nottinghamshire generally has <i> for OE y, but for hyll, <u> is dominant, although <i> appears also. On closer inspection of the 1327 roll, it turns out that the two hands in which the roll is written demonstrate different usage: hand A writes <Hill> or <–hill> (in compounds), hand B writes <Hull> or <–hull>. The 1332 roll is similarly written in two main hands, of which hand C uses <i>, and hand