

The ‘Great Vowel Shift’ again: The evidence of the traditional Northern dialects

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The term ‘Great Vowel Shift’, coined by Otto Jespersen (1909:231), refers to the sweeping changes in the tense vowel system between late Middle English and Modern English. A comparison of the modern reflexes with the reconstructed tense vowel system of Chaucerian Late Middle English (cf. Fig. 1) shows the following differences:

- (1) The *mice* and *mouse* diphthongs were high monophthongs in Late Middle English.
- (2) The *geese*, *goose* and *bone/throat* vowels were one level lower on the vowel chart.
- (3) The *bean/speak* and *gate* vowels were two levels lower.
- (4) The *gate* vowel and the *bone/throat* vowels were monophthongs.
- (5) At least seven tense vowels participated in the Great Vowel Shift. Because of the merger of the *bean/speak* vowel with the *geese* vowel there are only six left.

(1)	<i>mice</i>	/i:/	/u:/	<i>mouse</i> (1)
(2)	<i>geese</i>	/e:/	/o:/	<i>goose</i> (2)
(3)	<i>speak</i> <i>bean</i>	/ɛ:/	/ɔ:/	<i>throat</i> (3) <i>bone</i>
(4)		/a:/		(4)
		<i>gate</i>		

The late Middle English tense vowel system according to Lass (1999:72)

This fairly neutral account covers at best south-eastern English, i.e. the area that gave rise to the modern Standard, but it neglects the traditional dialects of Northern England and the North Midlands in which the *throat* vowel and the *bone* vowel as well as partly the *speak* vowel and the *bean* vowel remained separate phonemes. A look at these dialects with the help of the material from the ‘Survey of English Dialects’, the dialect monographs and the volumes of the ‘English Place-Name Society’, in particular the early spellings of field-names, favours a ‘Great Vowel Shift’ that affected the North of England before the South.