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The Great Vowel Shift and Its Impact on English

Languages continue to evolve through the ages even though we may not be aware of it. Of course, changes in language sometimes takes place so slowly that we do not realize how much it does change, until we read written works from a couple of centuries earlier. For example, if you try to read the original works of Chaucer or Shakespeare, you will surely notice that something has changed in comparison to how we talk and write, nowadays. One of the aspects that changed the way we speak today is the Great Vowel Shift.

The Great Vowel Shift was first described by the Danish linguist Otto Jespersen as a change in the way vowels are pronounced. This change took place in the period between 1300 and 1700. The changes can be illustrated as follows:

“size” – long /i:/ changed to a diphthong /aɪ/

“green” – /e:/ changed to /i:/

“meat” – /ɛ:/ changed to /i:/

“bake” – /a:/ changed to /eɪ/

“house” – /u:/ changed to /aʊ/

“food” – /o:/ changed to /u:/

“boat” – /ɔ:/ changed to /əʊ/

This is, however, a simplified illustration of what has happened over several centuries. In fact, scientists claim that the Great Vowel Shift can be divided into eight steps (Mazeroff). This does not mean that all the changes happened overnight. While some of the vowels were pronounced by

certain groups of people with some of the changes described above, other more conservative groups continued pronouncing vowels as before. It was also possible that one person might have pronounced the same word in two different ways which, in fact, still occurs today.

Scientists do not have difficulty explaining how the Great Vowel Shift took place, but there is no clear answer as to why. Two hypotheses exist. The first one states that there were people migrations which led to contacts between individuals from the Midlands and London. As a result, the mixture of two dialects caused changes in pronunciation of certain words. Moreover, people who moved to the city willingly changed vowel pronunciations in order to correspond to the norms of the new social group to which they wished to belong. Another important factor is that the French, which had a great impact on how the English language developed due to the Norman Conquest in 1066, lost its prestige. So, there may have been reason to elevate the English language by standardizing vowel pronunciation. This led to what we know as modern English language pronunciations (Origins of English).

The spelling of the Middle English vocabulary was also different from what we see today. For one, there were numerous ways to spell a single word, and they were equally used among the general populace. Edmund Weiner, the current deputy chief editor of the Oxford English Dictionary, states that there were numerous ways to spell the word “height” before 1500, for example “heyth” or “highth” (Weiner). The invention of printing meant that the spelling had to be standardized in order to avoid misunderstanding. However, there still exist spelling variants in handwriting.

As we can see, language is a communication system that keeps on evolving. There are several factors that cause changes in both spelling and pronunciation: interactions between cultures and between social groups within one culture or society, wars, social stratification, and scientific inventions that change the media of communication etc. One of the phonetic changes in the period between the 14th and 18th centuries was the Great Vowel Shift. It influenced the way the certain sounds are pronounced, which resulted in the standardization of pronunciation used in today’s Modern English.

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