# THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

## EPISODE 140: YOU SAY 'TO-MAY-TO'

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 140: You Say 'To-May-to.' In this episode, we're going to begin our look at one of the most fascinating topics in the overall history of the English language – the Great Vowel Shift. That term refers to a series of changes that affected the way many vowel sounds were pronounced in English. It's important to the overall story of English because it helps to explain why English words are pronounced the way they are today, and it also helps to explain why English spelling is so weird because many words are spelled the way they were pronounced before the vowel shift occurred. But in order to understand what happened, we really need to have a sense of what vowels are and where each vowel sound is pronounced in the mouth. Armed with that knowledge, we can start to see how the vowels relate to each other. And how a change in one vowel might impact the vowels around it. So this time, we're going to take a break from our regular historical narrative, and we're going to focus on vowels. What they are. Why they're important. Where they're pronounced. And how they're spelled. And then, over the next couple of episodes, we'll explore the actual changes that are known today as Great Vowel Shift.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can sign up to support the podcast and get bonus episodes and transcripts at Patreon.com/historyofenglish.

Now this time, we're going to begin our look at the Great Vowel Shift. I've touched on it briefly in earlier episodes, but in order to understand why it is so important to the story of English, we need to take a step back and look at the big picture. This is definitely one of those developments where it is easy to miss the forest for the trees.

The Great Vowel Shift was a systematic change in the way many words were pronounced in English. Words that had been pronounced with one vowel sound started to be pronounced with a completely different vowel sound. Of course, every vowel sound is pronounced in a specific way in a specific part of the mouth. So that didn't change. When we make a sound with our mouth like 'ee' or 'ah,' we do it the same way that people have made that sound since the beginning of human speech. But the thing is, we don't all use the same vowel sounds. I may say ***either*** ('EE-ther'), you may say ***either (***'AI-ther'). I may say ***tomato*** ('to-MAY-to'), and you may say ***tomato*** ('to-MAH-to'). I may say ***data*** ('DÆ-ta'), and you may say ***data*** ('DAY-ta'). Vowel sounds vary within English. Some reflect broad differences in accents. And some are just a matter of personal preference.

At certain points in history, this type of variation was even more widespread within the language with many words being pronounced with different vowels sounds side-by-side among the same speakers. Old pronunciations existed alongside newer pronunciations. Over time, as this variation declined and people settled on specific pronunciations, they often settled on the newer pronunciations. The result was a systematic change in the way words were pronounced. It appears that the Great Vowel Shift involved a similar process.

Over several generations, from the end of the Middle English period through the early Modern English period, vowel pronunciations became unsettled, and many words could be pronounced in two or more different ways. In the early 1600s, the English playwright and poet Ben Johnson wrote that "All our Vowels are sounded doubtfully." But eventually, that confusion was resolved as speakers settled on a more fixed set of pronunciations. The new vowel pronunciations came to dominate the southern half of Britain and eventually reached the New World and the other English colonies. But in other parts of the British Isles, the new pronunciations were only partially adopted. The result was a basic split that contributed to many accent differences that can still be detected throughout the British Isles. Of course, not all accent differences are the result of the Great Vowel Shift. Accents have never completely settled down. Shifts continued to occur in the centuries that followed the vowel shift. And modern linguists are quick to note that regional vowel shifts are still occurring within English to this very day.

Historically, these changes not only affected the way words were pronounced, they also affected the way those words were spelled. I don't have to tell you that Modern English spellings are crazy and inconsistent, but it is important to keep in mind that they were once much more logical and much more consistent. When English spelling came to be standardized, those spellings generally reflected the way words were pronounced at the time. The problem is that the Great Vowel Shift was still underway, and the pronunciations continued to change after those spellings were adopted. So today, there is often a disconnect between the way a word is spelled and the way it is pronounced. And while that can be incredibly frustrating, it can also be the key to unlocking and understanding how the vowels changed in the past.

When we encounter words like ***day*** and ***great*** and ***take***, we probably notice that they are all pronounced with the same vowel sound – /ei/. But in each case, that sound is spelled differently – ***day*** with its [AY], ***great*** with its [EA], and ***take*** with its [A] and [silent E] at the end. It all seems kind of crazy until you realize that all three words were pronounced differently before the Great Vowel Shift. And those spellings reflect the way those words were pronounced at that time. ***Day*** was /dæi/, ***great*** was /grɛt/, and ***take*** was /tɑ:k/. The spellings reflect those old differences in pronunciation. But during the Great Vowel Shift, the pronunciations merged. They all acquired a modern /ei/ sound, and we were left with different spellings for the same sound. So that's why the story of the Great Vowel Shift is important to both modern pronunciations and modern spellings. And that's also why I wanted to discuss the printing press in England before delving into the details of the Great Vowel Shift.

Now most discussions about the Great Vowel Shift usually include diagrams to help show how the vowels shifted around. It is certainly easier to understand when you can see and visualize the changes. But this is a podcast, and I don't have the benefit of pictures and diagrams. So I want to help you form a mental image of what happened. And that really begins with a basic understanding of where the vowels sounds are produced in the mouth. So in this episode, I want to lay the foundation for the following two episodes by taking a tour of the mouth to see how and where the vowels are pronounced. And also to see how slight shifts create many of the different accents and pronunciations that we have today.

But let's begin with a very basic and very important question. What is a vowel?

Well, I think we tend to think of vowels and consonants in terms of letters. If someone were to ask you what a vowel is, you might reply "A, E, I, O, U and sometimes Y." Well, those are the letters we use to represent and spell vowel sounds, but we really need to consider the more basic and fundamental questions. What is a vowel sound? How is it different from a consonant sound? And why did our English teachers feel the need to distinguish the two?

Well they all involve sounds created in the mouth, but the main difference between a vowel and consonant is whether or not the sound is restricted as it passes through oral cavity. If the sound is blocked or restricted in any significant way, it is a consonant. If the sound flows through in an open and unrestricted way, it is a vowel. Now the vowel sound may be altered by the shape and placement of the tongue, but it otherwise flows though the vocal tract without being restricted by the throat, or the palate, or the teeth, or the lips.

If we think about common consonant sounds like the 'p' sound (/p/), or the 'b' sound (/b/), or the 'd' sound (/d/), they all involve some type of blockage of sound in the front of the mouth. And sounds like the 'g' sound (/g/) and the 'k' sound (/k/) involve a blockage of sound in the back of the mouth in the throat region. Sometimes consonant sounds don't involve complete blockage, just a tight restriction like fricatives. The air flows through, but the sound is restricted creating a hissing sound. That produces sounds like the 's' sound (/s/), the 'v' sound (/v/), or the 'sh' sound (/sh/), or the 'j' sound (/j/). Some consonant sounds resemble vowel sounds like the 'r' sound in ***car*** or ***rain***. There's not much of a restriction there, but there is a tightening of the vocal tract that helps to produce that sound. Similarly, the 'w' sound (/w/) and the 'y' sound (/y/) involve very slight restrictions and are sometimes called 'semi-vowels' because they resemble vowels in some respects.

But pure vowels don't involve those types of restrictions or blockages in the vocal tract. The sounds flow through the mouth with no blockage or restriction other than the shape of the tongue itself. The sound is produced in the open part of oral cavity, and the specific point where the sound is made is largely determined by the shape and placement of the tongue. So the sound /a:/ ('ah') is pronounced in the lower back part of the oral cavity, and the sound /i:/ ('ee') is pronounced in the higher front part of the oral cavity. But between those two extremes, there is a continuous series of sounds that can be produced in the mouth. We can easily shift between those sounds without any stoppage, even though they are produced in completely different parts of the mouth – /ahhh – eeeee – ahhh/. So whereas consonants tend to be produced in very specific ways in very specific parts of the mouth, vowels are produced in the open cavity of the mouth and can easily shift around.

Since there are no barriers between the vowel sounds, that allows them to vary a bit from speaker to speaker. Whereas we might all pronounce the 'b' sound or the 'k' sound or 's' sound the same way, our pronunciation of the vowels may vary a bit. Some people pronounce the words ***caught*** and ***cot*** with the same vowel sound. Some people – like myself – find it difficult to distinguish the words ***pen*** and ***pin***, and ***wheel*** and ***will***. You've probably heard me pronounce those pairs the same way from time to time in the podcast. And vowels not only vary from accent to accent and

person to person, they sometimes vary within the speech of the same person. You may not realize it, but there are certain words that you probably pronounce differently over the course of a conversation. That's very common, and it happens in part because vowel sounds flow into each other. It's easy to pronounce a vowel in one place one time, and then to pronounce it in a slightly different place the next time.

So how many vowel sounds are there? Well given that vowel sounds exist along a continuum, the number of possibilities seems almost infinite. But in actuality, each language uses only a handful of vowel sounds among the many that can theoretically be produced by the human mouth.

Let's consider a word like ***bite***. By changing the vowel sound in the middle, we can create lots of other English words – ***beat***, ***bit***, ***bait***, ***bet***, ***bat***, ***boat***, ***but***, ***boot***, ***bought*** (as in 'I bought a car'), and ***bot*** (as in 'robot'). That's eleven different vowels giving us eleven different words. But we also have the vowel sound in ***book*** which is another distinct sound. And we have the vowel sound in ***boy*** which is also unique. There are also a few other vowel sounds that vary a bit from one accent to the next. All in all, linguists tell us that the there are about a dozen pure vowel sounds used in English, and there are also a handful of diphthongs consisting of two pure vowel sounds pushed together. So in all, we have around twenty different vowel sounds in Modern English, depending on the accent and dialect.

Unfortunately, we only have six letters to represent all of those sounds – A, E, I, O, U, and sometimes Y. And to be fair, when [Y] is used as a vowel, it's mainly just as a substitute for [I]. It doesn't really represent a distinct vowel sound on its own. It did represent a distinct sound in Old English, but that sound disappeared from the language. So today, [Y] is really just a variation of [I]. So all of that means that we have to make those five or six letters do a lot of work to represent around twenty different vowel sounds.

One way to do that is to use letter combinations like when we use [OU] to represent the vowel sound in ***house*** or when we use [OY] to represent the vowel sound in ***boy***.

Another more common way to stretch the use of vowel letters is to assign more than one sound to each letter. That isn't an ideal solution, but that's the way English has worked from the very beginning. That's why we sometimes refer to the 'long' and 'short' sound of each vowel letter. When we are learning to read, we are told that the /ai/ sound in ***bite*** is the 'long I' sound, whereas the /i/ sound in ***bit*** is the 'short I' sound. The /ei/ sound in ***hate*** is the 'long A', whereas the /æ/ sound in ***hat*** is the 'short A'. Each of our vowel letters has a so-called 'short' sound and a 'long' sound, thereby allowing us to double the number of sounds represented by each letter.

But if you're like me, you may have found that terminology confusing when you were in English class. When I pronounced ***bite*** and ***bit***, the length of the vowels seemed pretty much the same. And when I tried to say /ai/ really fast and quickly, it came out more like /a/ than /i/. What I didn't know then is that those terms 'short' and 'long' didn't really mean than the short vowels were pronounced shorter and quicker than the long vowels. That terminology is really just a holdover from an earlier period of English when the short vowels sounds really were shorter and

quicker pronunciations of the long vowel sounds. During Old English, speakers could pronounce a particular vowel sound slowly or quickly. And the nature of the sound was a little different in each case. The short vowel sounds really were the shorter versions of the long vowel sounds. But that old relationship broke down completely during the Great Vowel Shift.

By and large, the short vowel sounds remained in place and didn't change. And for that reason, we tend to use the same letters to represent those sounds that the Anglo-Saxons did. But the long vowel sounds shifted around. Words that were pronounced with the longer pronunciations acquired new pronunciations. Each long vowel sound was replaced with a new long vowel sound. So when the Great Vowel Shift was completed, each vowel letter continued to represent at least two sounds. One was the traditional short sound of the letter, but the other was a brand new long sound unrelated to the short sound. That's why the modern short and long sounds don't match in most cases. When I struggled to make /ai/ sound like /i/, I wasn't crazy. /ai/ (the 'long I' sound) is really unrelated to /i/ (the 'short I sound'). That's why they don't match today, and that's why the so-called 'short' vowels aren't just quick versions of the 'long' vowels. They're really completely different vowel sounds represented by the same letter.

After the Great Vowel Shift, the length of the pronunciation didn't really matter as much anymore. The two sounds of each letter were completely different, so it didn't really matter if you pronounced one vowel longer than the other. And over time, English speakers have tended to disregard the differences in length. Now some vowels by their very nature tend to be pronounced a little longer. And linguists say that speakers in Britain are a little more likely than Americans to pronounce their vowels with different lengths. But beyond those broad generalizations, we don't really distinguish the long and short vowels by length anymore. We just use that old terminology to identify the two sounds of each letter. A 'short' vowel sound simply refers to the original short pronunciation of the letter, and a 'long' vowel sound refers to the newer vowel sound that emerged during the Great Vowel Shift or during the centuries that followed that shift. [*SOURCE: A Biography of the English Language, C.M. Millward, p. 256*]

Beyond those basic two sounds represented by each letter, each vowel letter can also be pulled into service to represent other sounds. For example, the letter A not only has the so-called 'short' sound of ***hat*** and the so-called 'long' sound of ***hate***, it can also be used to represent other sounds like the /a:/ sound in ***father***, and the /ə/ sound in ***about***, and the /ɛ/ sound in ***any***. So even though each letter has its primary short and long sounds, it can sometimes be used to represent other sounds as well. And that's what creates a lot of the confusion in modern spelling.

Now the use of individual letters to represent all of those vowel sounds has a limit. To make five or six letters represent about twenty different vowel sounds, we would have to give each letter at least three or four different pronunciations. That would be stretching it a bit too thin. So very often, if we need to represent a specific sound, we simply combine two letters to create a new spelling like the [OU] in ***house*** and [OI] in ***avoid***.

By using these various spelling techniques, we can represent all of the vowel sounds used in English – not that we do so consistently, mind you, but we can at least represent those sounds.

Of course, much of that inconsistency is the product of changes that have taken place over the past few centuries. And we'll look at those changes in some detail over the next couple of episodes. But before we delve into the Great Vowel Shift, I think it's important to get a sense of how the various vowel sounds relate to each other. We need to get a better idea of where the sounds are made in the mouth because that actually helps to explain how one sound can shift over to an adjacent sound. Again, I can't show you a picture or diagram on a podcast, so I'm going to take you on a tour of the open cavity of the mouth, and hopefully, I can help you visualize where the various vowel sounds are articulated.

Now linguists tend use a specific type of diagram to show where the vowel sounds are made. It's essentially a profile view of the mouth with specific phonetic symbols to show where the various sounds are located. If you think that would be helpful as I go through this discussion, you can go to the website ipachart.com. IPA stands for the International Phonetic Alphabet. It's a series of symbols that have been created by linguists to represent each unique vowel sound. Unlike the regular letters of the alphabet which represent multiple sounds and are used inconsistently, each IPA symbol represents one specific sound and only that sound. The good thing about the website I mentioned is that it not only includes the IPA symbols and the location where each one is made in the mouth, but it also includes the actual sound of each symbol. Just click on the symbol at each point in the mouth, and you can hear the sound that's made there. So again, if you're visually oriented, you might want to pull up that website ipachart.com, and then you can see where each of these vowel sounds is articulated.

Let's begin with a sound that I've talked about in recent episodes because it was apparently one of the first sounds to be affected by the Great Vowel Shift. It's this sound /i:/ ('ee'). Again, I'm not talking about the letter [E]. That's just a symbol. I'm talking about the sound /i:/ when it comes out of your mouth. Those are two different things because there's only one /i:/ sound, but as we'll see, it can be represented with several different letters.

That /i:/ sound is made very high up in the front part of the mouth. It is the highest front vowel that we can make.

Here's how the IPA chart represents that sound – (/i:/).

This is the sound we find in words like ***tree***, and ***bee***, and ***seem***, and ***feel*** and ***easy***. Now in terms of spelling, we generally spell this sound today with letter [E] or a double [E]. But another common spelling for this sound is the letter combination [EA] as in ***beam***, and ***speak***, and ***leaf***, and ***please***, and ***team***. Now you have probably wondered why we have those two different spellings. [E] or double [E] on the one hand, and [EA] on the other. Well, generally speaking, those spellings reflect different pronunciations in the distant past. The words spelled with [E] or double [E] had one pronunciation, and words spelled with [EA] had a slightly different pronunciation, and during the Great Vowel Shift the vowel sounds in those respective words merged together into the modern sound /i:/ ('ee') that we use today. Again, we'll look at that

development in more detail in the next episode, but I just wanted to make the point that sometimes two or more vowels sounds merged together in the past, but the older spellings were retained, and that helps to explain why we have different ways of spelling that sound today. Remember that English spellings tend to reflect pronunciations that existed BEFORE the Great Vowel Shift.

Now historically, English spelled this sound with a completely different letter – the letter I. That was the normal letter used for the /i:/ ('ee') sound before the Great Vowel Shift. It was the letter used by the Romans, and it was the letter adopted by the Anglo-Saxons. It was the letter used in English all the way up to the Great Vowel Shift, and it's still the letter used today in much of continental Europe.

After the Great Vowel Shift was completed, English continued to borrow words from other languages, and it tended to retain the spellings from those languages. That's why we have quite a few words where this /i:/ ('ee') sound is still represented by letter I – the same as it was before the Great Vowel Shift. We find it in French loanwords like ***police***, ***ravine***, ***machine*** and ***elite***. We also find it in Italian loanwords like ***spaghetti*** and ***pizza***. It's also in Spanish loanwords like ***fiesta***, ***siesta*** and ***tortilla***. We also find it in the recent Scandinavian loanword ***ski***, and the Japanese loanword ***tsunami***, and even the Swahili loanword ***safari***. We also have it in loanwords from South Asia like the Hindi word ***yogi*** and the Urdu word ***khaki***. Whenever we come across a word where this /ee/ sound is spelled with letter I, we can generally assume that it's a loanword from another language, and we can also assume that it was borrowed at some point after the Great Vowel Shift was underway – sometime after the mid-1400s. And that's because letter [I] became disconnected from its original /i:/ sound during the Great Vowel Shift. A new set of words started to emerge with this /i:/ sound, and they were typically spelled with [E], or double [E] or [EA] as I noted earlier.

Now remember that vowel sounds could be pronounced either long or short in earlier periods of English. And when this /i:/ ('ee') sound was pronounced short and quickly, it came out as /i/ – the sound we have in words like ***sit***, and ***in***, and ***miss***. Remember that the short vowel sounds didn't really change during the Great Vowel Shift, so those pronunciations are very old. And that's why those words are still spelled with their original letter [I] in English.

So we've looked at the highest vowel sound in the front of the mouth. Now let's shift down to the vowel sound that is slightly lower and located next to the /i:/ sound – and that's the /e:/ ('ay') sound. So we go from high /i:/ ('ee') to slightly lower /e:/ ('ay').

Here's how the IPA chart represents that sound – (/e:/).

This is the sound we find in words like ***face***, and ***tape***, and ***cake***, and ***age***. We generally spell this sound today with letter [A]. But another common spelling for this /e:/ sound is the letter combination [AI] and [AY] as in ***wait***, and ***raid***, and ***day***, and ***way***. Sometimes, we spell this sound with the letter combination [EI] and [EY] as in ***they*** and ***obey*** and ***weigh*** (W-E-I-G-H). And sometimes, we even use that letter combination we saw earlier [EA] as in ***great*** and ***steak*** and ***break***. Well, once again, the reason why we have those different spellings is because each of

those spellings once represented different and distinct vowel sounds. But during the Great Vowel Shift, words with those various pronunciations merged together into this vowel sound /e:/ ('ay'). So even though they are pronounced with the same basic vowel sound today, most of those words still retain their older spellings which can be traced back to the period before the vowel shift was completed. Again, we'll look at the details of those changes in the next episode.

Now this vowel sound /e:/ ('ay') also existed in Latin, and the Romans represented it with letter E. And the Anglo-Saxons adopted the Roman alphabet and also spelled this sound with letter E. That was the traditional letter that was used until the Great Vowel Shift moved everything around. And again, most of the languages in continental Europe still tend to use the letter E for the /e:/ ('ay') sound. We can find many recent loanwords in English where that sound is still spelled with an E. We find it in words like ***café***, ***fiancé***, ***resume***, ***saute***, ***ballet***, ***buffet***, ***beret***, ***gourmet*** and ***melee***. When we encounter that spelling, we can generally assume that we're looking at a loanword that was adopted during or after the Great Vowel Shift.

Now there is one other important note that I should make about this sound. Linguists are quick to note that the pronunciation of this sound has changed a little bit since the Great Vowel Shift was completed. By the late 1700s, it had become common in the south of England to pronounce this sound with a little glide at the end – to pronounce the /e:/ ('ay') sound with a little /i:/ ('ee') sound at the end. So /e:/ became /ei/. In other words, it shifted from a pure vowel sound to a diphthong – a combination of two vowels put together. And that diphthong has become the standard pronunciation throughout much of Modern English.

Now having looked at the high /ee/ sound and the slightly lower /ei/ sound, let's move down a little further to the next vowel sound which is /ɛ/ ('eh'). Here's how the IPA chart represents that sound – (/ɛ/).

This is the sound we find in words like ***set***, and ***pet***, and ***dress***, and ***head***, and ***egg***. We typically spell this sound today with the letter [E], and in fact, this is what is known as the 'short E' sound. So in the past, English had that sound we looked at previously – the /ei/ sound, which was spelled with letter E like in ***café***. And they had this adjacent sound /ɛ/, which could be pronounced either short or long. And all of these sounds were close enough and similar enough that they could all be represented by letter E. The long version of this /ɛ/ sound shifted and disappeared in the Great Vowel Shift, but the short version survived, and it survives as our modern 'short E' sound. Remember that these short sounds didn't really change that much during the Great Vowel Shift. That's why we still tend to spell this short sound with letter [E].

Now so far, we've looked at the three highest vowel sounds produced in the front of the mouth in descending order from highest to lowest. We have /ee, /ei/ and /ɛ/. I tried to think of a good mnemonic device to help you remember that order because it is important to the Great Vowel Shift. So try this one. "Eat Aged Eggs." Notice that all three words begin with a different vowel sound – /ee, /ei/ and /ɛ/. So if you can remember to "Eat Aged Eggs", you can also remember the order of these front vowel sounds from high to low.

As we'll see next time, these three sounds are not only adjacent to each other, but they also have a historical relationship. These vowel sounds have tended to move around and bump into each other at times, especially the lower vowels moving up into the space occupied by the higher vowels. I should also note that some words in Modern English have pronunciations that fluctuate between those sounds. Think about the pronunciation of the word ***economic*** ('ee-conomic') or ***economic*** ('eh-conomic'). One version uses the higher vowel sound /i:/ ('ee'), and the other uses the lower sound /ɛ/ ('eh'). Also consider the American pronunciation of ***leisure*** ('lee-zhure') versus the British pronunciation as ***leisure*** ('lɛzhure'). Again, we see that one version uses the higher vowel and the other uses the lower vowel.

And if we focus on the so-called 'short' pronunciations of these vowels as /I/ and /ɛ/, we actually have the complete merger of those sounds in certain words in some accents. That process is the source of the so-called 'pin-pen merger' where certain word pairs like that are pronounced exactly the same. This pronunciation is common in the American South. And as I noted earlier, my native accent does that, so I actually have a hard time pronouncing ***pin*** and ***pen*** with different vowel sounds. I have to concentrate to do that. Again, we'll look at that phenomenon in more detail in future episodes.

Also, with respect to these short vowel sounds, the shift from the lower /ɛ/ up to /I/ is one of the most notable features of the modern New Zealand accent. Many people from New Zealand will shift that sound up in much the same way that I do when I pronounce ***pen*** as 'pin.' But in a Southern accent in the US, that only happens before nasal sounds like the 'n' sound, whereas in New Zealand, it is much more widespread and can happen in just about any context.
***Yes*** become 'yis.' and ***head*** become 'hid.'

Here's a comment from listener Annie who hails from New Zealand. She mentions how this particular vowel shift continues to expand among younger generations in New Zealand. [CLIP]

Here's another voice sample from Dan who is from Aukland, New Zealand. He read several of the sentences I provided, and notice his pronunciation of ***tent*** as 'tint,' ***ten*** as 'tin,' ***pencils*** as 'pincils,' ***pen*** as 'pin,' and ***egg*** as 'igg.' Again, some of those are tough for me to distinguish because my natural accent does the same thing in all of the words except ***egg***. But here's Dan's readings: [CLIP]

So I hope you can hear that. Ultimately, the main point here is that there is still movement and merger between the short versions of these three highest front vowels.

Now let's move down a little bit lower to the next vowel sound – the /æ/ sound. This is the sound that's adjacent to the /ɛ/ sound that we just looked at, and this is one of the lowest front vowels.

Here's how the IPA chart represents that sound – (/æ/).

This is the vowel sound that we hear in words like ***trap***, and ***cat***, and ***math***, and ***hand***. It is almost always spelled with the letter [A], and it is sometimes simply known as the 'short A' sound. Now this sound had a close historical connection with the sound that's pronounced slightly underneath it, and that's the /ɑ:/ ('ah') sound. The /a:/ sound is the lowest vowel sound of all. Linguists will note that there are actually some very subtle variations of this sound within Modern English, with the pronunciation in some words being slightly more forward and the pronunciation in others being all the way back in the throat region. For our purposes, the differences are so slight that I'm going to treat them as one vowel sound – /ɑ:/. Now there is a slight difference in the British and American pronunciations of that sound, but that difference has more to do with the shaping of the lips than the location of the sound itself. And I'll discuss that difference in a moment.

But first, I want to focus on the relationship between that lowest front vowel /æ/ as in ***hat*** and this low central or back vowel /ɑ/ ('ah') as in ***what***. I mentioned that there was a historical connection between those two sounds.

First, they are neighbors, both being located in the bottom part of the mouth – /æ/ being slightly higher and more forward and /ɑ:/ being lower and further back. As we move down or move up, we transition from one sound to the other.

Now the basic connection between those sounds is probably apparent if you think about spelling. Both sounds can be represented with letter A. As we saw, the higher /æ/ sound is the so-called 'short' A sound as in ***hat*** and ***cap***. And historically, that lower /ɑ:/ sound was also represented with letter A. In fact, /ɑ:/ is the original sound of letter A, and it's still the sound of letter A in much of continental Europe. Again, the Great Vowel Shift moved things around in English. But in some words, we do harken back to the original sound of letter A and use it to represent the /ɑ:/ sound. We find it in words like ***father***, and ***what***, and ***swan***, and ***watch***.

So other than a common spelling, what is the deeper historical connection between the /æ/ and /ɑ:/ sounds? Well, both of those sounds could be pronounced either long or short in Old English. But in the early Middle English period, the short /æ/ sound shifted down to the /ɑ/ sound in many words, and the short /æ/ sound largely disappeared from English.

But then in the 1500s and early 1600s, a large group of words that had that low /ɑ/ sound shifted the vowel back up to /æ/. That's how we got the modern pronunciation of words like ***hat***, and ***man***, and ***trap***, and ***back***.

But then, in the 1700s and 1800s in southern England, another group of words with that higher /æ/ sound shifted back down again to the /ɑ:/ sound. That's why English speakers in southern England use the /ɑ:/ sound in many words where other speakers use the /æ/ sound. So in southern England, you're likely to hear ***bath*** ('bahth') instead of ***bath*** ('bæth'), and ***pass*** ('pahss') instead of ***pass*** ('pæss'), and ***glass*** ('glahss') instead of ***glass*** ('glæss'). So that difference was due to a relatively recent vowel shift from/æ/ to /ɑ:/ in southern Britain, and only in certain words, mainly words where the vowel appeared before specific consonants. So even in southern England, you'll still find words like ***hat*** and ***man*** and ***trap*** pronounced with that higher vowel like most of the rest of the English-speaking world.

The main point here is the /æ/ and /ɑ:/ sounds have a close historical relationship, and words with those sounds have shifted back and forth over the centuries. And we can still see a close relationship between those sounds in Modern English. Think about the pronunciation of the word spelled A-U-N-T. Some people say 'ant' and some people say 'ahnt.' So the pronunciation is divided between those vowels.

For those listeners who have left voice samples at the website, I included a sentence that read, "We bought the lot with a large pecan tree in the back yard." One of the reasons why I composed the sentence with the word ***pecan*** ('pee-can') – or 'pee-cahn' – was to see how everyone pronounced it. Interestingly, there was about an even split, and didn't always break down on neat regional lines. Here's a sample from listener Shasti from Washington State in the northwestern US. [CLIP]. And here's Jennifer from Los Angeles dealing with the same issue. [CLIP] Now here's Steve from Florida with his take on that word. [CLIP]

The point of those examples is to illustrate that there is still a basic connection between the neighboring /æ/ and /ɑ:/ sounds in the bottom part of the mouth. And these types words that have two different pronunciations are a good example of how vowel shifts occur. At certain times in history, it wasn't just a handful of words that did this like 'ant' and 'ahnt,' and 'pe-can' and 'pe-cahn.' It was a lot of words – some with an older, more traditional pronunciation and some with a newer pronunciation. When most speakers eventually settled on the newer pronunciation, you had a vowel shift.

Now so far, we've completed our look at the vowel sounds pronounced in the front part of the mouth. We've gone all the way from /i:/ at the top down to /ɑ:/ at the lower back part of the mouth. Again, that progression was /i:/, /ei/, /ɛ/, /æ/, and /ɑ:/. Earlier, I gave the mnemonic 'Eat Aged Eggs.' Now let's extend that to cover all of the sounds we've explored so far. So let's make it 'Eat Aged Eggs At Ollie's.' If you can remember that, you can remember the order of all of the front vowels from highest to lowest. Again, /i:/, /ei/, /ɛ/, /æ/, and /ɑ:/. And /ɑ:/ is really a central or back vowel because it is pronounced so far back in the throat region.

So now, let's continue our movement around the perimeter of the oral cavity, and let's shift our focus to the back vowels. I just talked about the /ɑ:/ ('ah') sound in words like ***father***, and ***what***, and ***swan***, and in some British and Commonwealth pronunciations of ***bath***, and ***pass***, and ***glass***. But you may have noticed that we also use that sound in a lot of words spelled with the letter O – like ***hot***, and ***stop***, and ***box***, and ***sock***. In fact, even though this /ɑ:/ sound is historically associated with the letter A, we actually call that sound the 'short O' sound. So what's the deal with that? How did the letter O get into the mix?

Well, the answer lies next door – specifically the sound that's located next door. If we start at the /ɑ:/ sound in the far back of the mouth, and we move up slightly, we come to the /ɔ:/ ('aw') sound. This sound is not only slightly higher that the /ɑ:/ sound, it's also pronounced with rounded lips. In other words, we make a little 'O' shape with our lips when we make this sound. None of the front vowels are pronounced with rounded lips, but most of the back vowels are pronounced that way.

Here's how the IPA chart website illustrates this sound – /ɔ:/.

There were a lot of words with that sound in Middle English, and they were often spelled with a letter O. As we'll see this sound is located adjacent to the /o:/ ('oh') sound, so it made sense to use the letter O since there was no Roman letter that specifically represented that sound. But in the 1500s and 1600s, that /ɔ:/ ('aw') vowel sound in a large number of those words shifted down to that /ɑ:/ sound we looked at previously. That's how we ended up with words like ***lot***, and ***pot***, and ***rock***, and ***stop*** – all spelled with a letter O, but pronounced with an /ɑ/ sound. And that's how we ended up with /ɑ/ as the so-called 'short O' sound.

Now to be fair, I should note that there is a subtle difference in the pronunciation of this sound in standard American English and standard British English – also known as Received Pronunciation. For most people, the difference is very small, but for people who study accents, it's very important. Generally speaking, Brits pronounce this sound with rounded lips, retaining that roundness that existed in the original /aw/ sound. But Americans don't round their lips. Notice the following differences in pronunciation for the words ***hot***, ***sock*** and ***stop***. First, the standard British pronunciation, then the standard American pronunciation. Notice how the first pronunciation in each sound is more rounded. [CLIP]

I hope you heard the difference. Again, the difference may be subtle or very obvious, depending on your ear. But this is a good example of how small differences help to distinguish accents.

Now, here again, we see a close connection between neighboring sounds. And even today, we still find a close relationship between this /ɔ:/ sound and the adjacent /ɑ:/ sound beneath it. In fact, the relationship is so close that many English accents have merged the two sounds together. This is the phenomenon that linguists call the 'caught-cot merger.' And they call it that because many English speakers pronounce those two words the exact same way. And it's not just those two words. It's almost all words that have that /ɔ:/ sound. They tend to be pronounced with the lower /ɑ:/ sound or with some sound in between. The two sounds have merged in those accents.

This phenomenon is common in many parts of the northern United States and Canada. It can also be found in some other accents – like some accents in Scotland.

So let's listen to a few examples. This feature is especially strong in the upper Midwestern part of the United States. A lot of the voice samples I received from that region featured this merger. So here are a couple of sentences that illustrate how the sounds have merged. One sentence is "I caught Jimmy sitting on a cot in the tent." You'll notice that ***caught*** and ***cot*** are both pronounced as 'cot.' The other sentence is the one we saw earlier, "We bought the lot with the large pecan tree in the backyard." Again, you'll notice that ***bought*** and ***lot*** are pronounced with the same vowel sound as 'bot' and 'lot.'

Let's begin with Nicole from Minnesota: [CLIP]

Now we'll go a little further west. Here's Melanie from Montana: [CLIP]

Again, that's the so-called 'caught-cot merger' where the neighboring /ɑ:/ and /ɔ:/ sounds have merged in certain dialects.

OK, so we've covered the link between the low /ɑ:/ sound and the slightly higher /ɔ:/ sound. Now let's move up to the next highest vowel sound in the back of the mouth – the /o:/ ('oh') sound. This is the so-called 'long O' sound. This is another rounded vowel where the lips are rounded when it's pronounced. Again, all of these back vowels have rounded lips in English.

Here's how the IPA chart website represents that sound: /o:/.

Now in Modern English, words with this sound can be spelled in a variety of ways. We sometimes use a simple letter [O] as in ***gold***, ***gross***, ***stone***, and ***hope***. In other cases, we use the letter combination [OA] as in ***boat***, and ***float***, and ***road***. And sometimes, the sound is spelled with [OW] as in ***blow***, and ***grow*** and ***snow***. It can even be spelled with [OU] as in ***soul***.

Modern words with this sound come from a variety of sources, and they had a variety of sounds in the distant past. Unfortunately, the modern spellings don't really help us to trace those original sounds like they do with some of the other vowels sounds. The spellings in these words have become mixed together over the past few centuries.

I should note that this is another vowel sound that has changed a bit in the Modern English period. It is another vowel that has shifted from a pure vowel to a diphthong. In earlier periods of English, it was pronounced more like /o:/ as a pure simple vowel. But in the 1700s and 1800s, it also started to acquire a little glide at the end. In American English, it tends to be pronounced as /oʊ/ with a little /u:/ sound at the end. So you get /oh-oo/. Again, when it's pronounced very quickly, it can be difficult to hear, but it's there – /oh-oo/.

Interestingly, this diphthong sound has evolved a little bit differently in England in standard British English – also known as Received Pronunciation. There, the sound begins a little more forward in the center of the mouth and then moves to that /u:/ sound. It's a very subtle difference, but let me give you a couple of examples. Here's the word ***home***, first with a standard American accent and then with a British Received Pronunciation accent. [CLIP] Now let's listen to the word ***boat***, again first with a standard American accent and then with British Received Pronunciation. [CLIP]

So I hope you can hear that. It's a subtle difference, but it shows how the language is still evolving and how vowel sounds are never fully settled in English.

I should also note that there are some places in the British Isles where the /o:/ sound is still pronounced more in line with its original pronunciation as pure vowel, but the diphthong is the more common form in the standard English of Britain and America.

Now having discussed the /o:/ sound, we can move up one final step to the next highest vowel, which is actually the highest vowel sound that be pronounced in the back of the mouth. It is the /u:/ sound.

Here's how the IPA chart website renders the sound: /u:/.

Now this sound is generally associated with letter [U]. And we find the letter [U] in the spellings of words like ***rude***, and ***truth***, and ***blue***. But in English, it's just as common to find this sound represented by letter [O] – either a single [O] or a double [O]. That includes words like ***two***, ***do***, ***move***, ***food***, ***boot***, ***moon***, and so on. So what's going on there?

Well, you may be able to guess the answer by now. What we have are really two different sets of words – one that already had an /u:/ sound spelled with a letter [U] and another that had an /o:/ sound spelled with a either a single or double [O]. Remember the /o:/ sound was the sound we just looked at. It's adjacent to the /u:/ sound – just one step down. And during the Great Vowel Shift, those words that had that /o:/ sound shifted up one step to the /u:/ sound. And through that process, /fo:d/ became ***food***, and /mo:n/ became ***moon***, and so on. That's also why those words are spelled with a letter [O], even though they have a sound that's traditionally associated with letter [U]. Again, we'll explore these changes in a little more detail over the next couple of episodes.

Now one other quick note about this sound. So far, I've described it as the /u:/ ('oo') sound, but there is also a slight variation of this sound which is the 'yoo' sound. In fact, that's what we call letter U. Again, 'oo' versus 'yoo.' 'Yoo' has a little 'y' sound at the front. And in fact, the 'long U' sound is actually this 'yoo' sound. Of course, we have that 'yoo' sound in lots of words like ***beauty***, and ***few***, and ***view***, and ***mute***.

To further add to the confusion, there are some words that can be pronounced either way, depending on the speaker and depending on the accent of the speaker. So someone might purchase a ***new*** ('noo') car or a ***new*** ('nyoo') car. And they might listen to ***tunes*** ('toons') on the car radio or ***tunes*** ('tyoons') on the radio. In Britain, you're likely to hear the word D-U-T-Y pronounced as 'dyoo-ty,' whereas in American English, you would likely hear it pronounced as 'doo-dy,' which is actually the same pronunciation used for a slang term for excrement. So when an American says that he or she has a lot of 'doodies' at work, it can sometimes be met with giggles from the listener. But that unintentional pun doesn't really happen if someone from Britain refers to his or her 'dyoo-ties.'.

So why do we have these two slightly different pronunciations of this sound? Well, again, the answer lies in the history of the language. Most of these words that are always or sometimes pronounced with the 'yoo' sound had that 'yoo' sound in early Modern English. Those words had that sound from earlier periods of English or had acquired it through a separate vowel shift around that time. Those words were very often spelled with a letter U – either a single [U] or [EU]. Sometimes [EW] was used since [U]'s and [W]'s were still sometimes interchangeable. That's why most of those words are spelled today with either a [U] as in ***duty***, or an [EU] as in ***feud***, or an [EW] as in ***new*** and ***view***. And it's also why we call the letter [U] 'yoo' and not 'oo.' That was just the common pronunciation at the time. But then in the 1700s, the little 'y' sound started to be dropped in a lot of those words, and it left English with a random mixture of /yoo/ and /oo/ pronunciations among those words. And today, all of those words exist side-by-side with that other group of 'oo' words that I mentioned earlier which are spelled with either a single

or double [O]. Remember that those words shifted up from the /o:/ (‘oh’) vowel sound during the Great Vowel Shift, which is why they have that ‘O’ spelling. So the net result is a mixture of spellings and two slightly different pronunciations, but the spellings do provide some general clues about the original pronunciations of those words. Again, we see this recurring theme of words with different sounds and spellings merging together at some point in the Modern English period. And that has left us with different ways of spellings and representing the same or similar sounds.

Now the ‘oo’ sound and the ‘yoo’ sound are classified as ‘long’ vowel sounds. But letter [U] also has two different ‘short’ sounds as well. The first and more traditional ‘short U’ sound appears to be a literal short version of the long /oo/ sound that we just looked at. It’s the /ʊ/ sound in words like ***put***, ***pull***, ***full***, ***bush***, ***good***, ***look***, and ***wool***. And notice again that these words can be spelled with either a letter [U] or a double [O]. And there are a few other spellings as well. The double [O] is actually the most common spelling for this sound, and most of those words actually represent a shortening of the long ‘oo’ sound in the 1600s. So generally speaking, the words that use the [U] spelling tend to be words that had that ‘short U’ sound before the 1600s when those words were typically spelled with a [U]. And words that have the double [O] spelling tend to be words that acquired that sound in the 1600s or later when the sound shortened from /u:/ to /ʊ/. That’s what happened with words like ***look*** and ***good***. Their history takes them from /lo:k/ to /lu:k/, and then shortened from /lu:k/ to ***look***. And from /go:d/ to /gu:d/ and then shortened from /gu:d/ to ***good***. And that’s why words like that are still spelled with double [O]’s.

Around the same time that the vowel sound was becoming short in those words, some words that already had that sound shifted and acquired a new sound. That was the /ʌ/ sound in words like ***mud***, and ***cup*** and ***strut*** and ***much***. And that’s the other ‘short U’ sound. But this change didn’t really happen in northern England, so even today many of those words are still pronounced the older way in northern England. So whereas someone from the south of England or most of the rest of the English-speaking world would say ***cup***, you might hear people in northern England say ‘coop.’ Again that northern pronunciation is just the original ‘short U’ sound that was preserved there, but changed in other words elsewhere.

So all of that leaves the letter [U] with two ‘long’ sounds – ‘oo’ as in ***soon*** and ‘yoo’ as in ***feud*** – and two separate ‘short’ sounds – /ʊ/ as in ***look*** and /ʌ/ as in ***cup***. That points to a lot of instability in this highest vowel sound pronounced in the back of the mouth.

So now we’ve covered most of the pure vowel sounds used in Modern English. We’ve traveled around the perimeter of the open cavity of the mouth where those vowel sounds are formed. Earlier, I gave you a little sentence to help you remember the order of those sounds and the relationship between them. So let’s extend that mnemonic to include those final few vowels – /ɔ:/, /o:/ and /u:/. Our previous version was ‘Eat Aged Eggs At Ollie’s.’ Now we can extend it to “Eat Aged Eggs At Ollie’s Awesome, Old, Uber.’ (There aren’t a lot of words in English that begin with the ‘oo’ sound.) So that sentence will take you through most of the pure vowel sounds used in English – /i:/ (Eat), /ei/ (Aged), /ɛ/ (Eggs), /æ/ (At), /ɑ:/ (Ollie’s), /ɔ:/ (Awesome), /o:/ (Old), /u:/ (Uber). As we’ll see over the course of the next couple of episodes, that order is kind of important because vowels sounds tend to shift to the sound next to it, so

understanding the relative positions of the sounds helps to see how the vowels shifted during the Great Vowel Shift.

Also, before I conclude, I should mention that there is one other pure vowel sound that is very common in Modern English, but I haven't mentioned it so far. And that's because it's not located around the perimeter of the oral cavity. It's actually located right in the center of the mouth. It the sound /ə/ like the initial sound in ***about*** and ***allow***, and the final sound in ***China*** and ***sofa***. It's a sound that has become increasingly common in English over the centuries. And linguists have a special name for it. They call it the schwa.

I like to think of the schwa as the black hole of English vowel sounds. It sits right there in the middle of the mouth, and it sucks other vowel sounds towards it. In astronomy, a black hole is a massive dense star at the center of a solar system that collapses in on itself, and it has such a strong gravitational pull that it sucks in every thing around it – even light. That's why it's a 'black' hole. Well, the schwa seems to have it own gravitational pull at the center of our mouths. If speakers aren't really precise in the way they pronounce their vowels, it's easy to just use this generic /ə/ sound in the middle of the mouth. That's what happened with most of those specific inflectional endings used in Old English – the endings that were pronounced with sounds like 'ah,' and 'ay,' and 'oo,' and 'as,' and 'um,' and so on. In late Old English and early Middle English, people started to reduce all of those various specific endings down to a somewhat generic /ə/ ending. The gravitational pull of the schwa reduced all those various endings pronounced in various parts of the mouth down one simple /ə/ sound pronounced in the center. That /ə/ sound was spelled with a letter [E]. And since that generic /ə/ didn't really serve any grammatical function anymore, that sound at the end of those words was eventually dropped in Middle English. That left English with a lot of silent [E]'s at the end of many words. That silent [E] is like the faint signal emanating from a collapsed star. It's a remnant of the schwa sound that replaced all of those various inflectional endings. And in fact, the linguistic symbol for this /ə/ sound is an upside lowercase [E].

By the way, the same type of thing happened again in the early Modern English period from the late 1400s through the 1600s. Think about words spelled with [IR] like ***bird***, ***dirt***, ***girl*** and ***firm***. Now think about words spelled with [UR] like ***burn***, ***fur***, ***hurt***, and ***curve***. Same vowel sound. Now think about words spelled with [ER] like ***nerve***, ***serve***, ***her***, and ***verse***. Again, the same vowel sound. Now thing about words spelled with [OR] like ***word***, and ***work*** and ***world***. Once again, the same vowel sound. No matter how you spell it, you end up with the same sound in most standard English dialects. And that vowel sound is the schwa – the /ə/ sound. And that's because all of the various vowel sounds that once existed before the 'R' were reduced down to a generic /ə/ sound in early Modern English. In that environment, the schwa extended its gravitational pull again, and all of the differing pronunciations became /er/. So we need to add this central vowel called schwa to our collection of English vowel sounds.

So we've now covered the primary vowel sounds used in Modern English. There are some other common vowel sounds that I didn't discuss like the /ai/ sound in ***bite***, and the /au/ sound in ***house***, and the /oy/ sound in ***boy***. There was a reason why I didn't discuss those here. None of those are pure vowel sounds. Believe it or not, those are all combinations of vowel sounds. So

they're diphthongs. They're formed by putting together two different vowel sounds that we covered in this episode. Again, we'll look at the formation of those diphthongs over the course of next couple of episodes.

Now I realize that that was a lot of information. But no one ever said this was going to be an easy topic. I wouldn't expect you to remember everything I covered in this episode. The main point was to introduce you to the basic vowel sounds used in English, and to get you thinking about vowels in terms of sounds and not letters. The disconnect between vowel sounds and vowel letters makes this especially challenging in English. But again, that disconnection is largely the result of the sound changes associated with the Great Vowel Shift.

So next time, we'll turn our attention to those specific changes. In order to do this, we're going to break the discussion into two parts. Even though the Great Vowel Shift impacted all of the long vowel sounds in English, there were actually two separate parallel developments. One series of shifts affected the front vowels, and a separate series of shifts affected the back vowels. So I'm going to break the discussion into two parts. Next time, we'll focus on what happened to the front vowels. And then, in the following episode, we'll focus on the back vowels. And hopefully, when we're done, English pronunciation and spelling will make a lot more sense.

So until next time, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast..