

**THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPTS**

**EPISODE 141:
THE GREAT VOWEL SHIFT (Part 2)**

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EPISODE 142: THE GREAT VOWEL SHIFT - PART 2

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 142: The Great Vowel Shift (Part 2). In this episode, we’re going to continue our look at the Great Vowel Shift. And we’re going to do that by shifting our focus to the lower front part of the mouth. There are several vowel sounds produced in that part of the mouth, and they were all affected by the Great Vowel Shift. These developments are fascinating, and unfortunately, a bit complicated. We’ll begin with the specific changes associated with the vowel shift in the 1400s and 1500s, but the changes didn’t stop there. These vowels kept moving over the following centuries, well into the Modern English period. And as they continued to be raised, they eventually crashed into the other vowel sounds at the top of the mouth. The result was the merger of several different vowel sounds. So there’s a lot to keep track of in this episode, but these developments are very important to the development of Modern English.

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 is part two of our three-part look at the Great Vowel Shift, and my goal over the course of these three episodes is to walk you through the specific changes associated with the vowel shift. But I also want to expand the discussion and show you how these changes not only affected the way words were pronounced, but also the way they were spelled. A good understanding of the Great Vowel Shift actually helps to explain a lot of the craziness associated with English spelling, especially the way the vowels are spelled.

But before we delve into these vowel shifts and changes, let me make a quick note about the vowel sounds that I’m going to be discussing this episode. We’re going to continue our focus vowel sounds pronounced in the front part of the mouth – what linguists call the ‘front vowels.’ In descending order, from highest to lowest, they are /i:/, /e:/, /ɛ:/, /æ/ and /a:/ – and /a:/ is really a low central vowel. A couple of episodes back, I gave you a little mnemonic device to help you keep track of that vowel order. It was ‘Eat aged eggs at Ollie’s.’ The first sound in each of those words represents each of those front vowel sounds from highest to lowest. Last time, we focused on the two highest vowels /i:/ and /e:/, and this time, we’re going to shift our attention down to those lower vowels.

But as it turns out, we don’t really need to spend much time with the /æ/ vowel. That’s the vowel sound we hear in words like *hat* and *map*. We usually spell that sound with letter <A> today, so we sometimes call it the ‘short A’ sound. But that sound didn’t really play much of a role in the Great Vowel Shift. The Great Vowel Shift affected the long vowel sounds, and the /æ/ sound wasn’t commonly pronounced as a long vowel when the Great Vowel Shift got underway. So that vowel sound didn’t play much of role in what happened. In fact, a lot of discussions about the vowel shift tend to ignore that sound altogether. And that’s what I’m going to do here. Just to keep this discussion as simple as I can, I’m going to reduce those five front vowels down to four – /i:/, /e:/, /ɛ:/, and /a:/. Those are really the key vowel sounds that we need to focus on.

Now as it turns out, linguists call each of those four vowel sounds ‘cardinal vowels,’ and they often assign a specific number to each one. And those numbers are 1, 2, 3 and 4 in that same order. So that high /i:/ sound is sometimes called cardinal vowel number 1. And the next lowest vowel sound /e:/ is sometimes called cardinal vowel number 2. And so on. And the reason why I’m telling you all of that is because I’m going to adopt that same numbering system in this episode. As we go through this episode, there is going to be a lot to keep track of. Some vowels moved up one step to the next highest vowel sound, while others kept moving and ended up with an even higher vowel sound. So the vowels didn’t always limit their movement to just one step. In order to keep track of those changes, I think it will be helpful if I refer to a vowel with both its sound and its cardinal number. That way you can hear the sound and also visualize its position in the mouth relative to the other vowels. So if I say that the /a:/ sound moved up to the /e:/ sound, that might be hard to follow and visualize. But if I say that the /a:/ sound at position number 4 was raised up to the /e:/ sound at position number 2, then that will help you visualize that the change consisted of two steps.

So with that terminology in place, let’s return to the story of the Great Vowel Shift. Last time, we looked at what happened to those two highest front vowels /i:/ and /e:/ – cardinal vowel 1 and 2. We saw that those two vowels came to be pronounced differently in the transition from Middle to Modern English. The /i:/ vowel sound (vowel number 1) shifted inward and began its journey towards our modern diphthong /ai/, and the /e:/ vowel sound (cardinal vowel 2) followed along behind the first vowel and it occupied the open position that was left behind. So words with the /e:/ sound started to be pronounced as /i:/. Again, in terms of numbers, vowel 1 moved out of the way, and vowel 2 slid in behind it and filled the gap.

So what happened then? What happened when words pronounced with the /e:/ sound shifted up to /i:/ – when /tre:/ became *tree*, and /swe:t/ became *sweet*? Well, that movement allowed other vowel sounds to shift in and fill the gap that was left behind when the /e:/ sound moved up. But this is where the story starts to get a bit complicated because it wasn’t just one sound that shifted into that vacant position and came to be pronounced as /e:/. It was actually several different vowel sounds.

Unlike the orderly process that occurred when the higher front vowels shifted, the story of the lower front vowels is different. Those lower vowels shifted and kept moving. And they crashed into each other along the way. So here, we have several examples where different vowel sounds merged together. And that explains why we have so many different ways to spell some of these higher vowel sounds.

That explains why the highest /i:/ sound can be spelled with its traditional letter <I> as in *elite* and *police*, or with an <E> or <EE> as in *be* and *tree*, or with an <EA> as in *heat* or *speak*. Those spellings represent different sounds that merged together at the top of the mouth.

Similarly, this process also explains why the second highest front vowel /e:/ can also be spelled several different ways. It can be spelled with its traditional letter <E> as in *café* and *resume*, or with the letter <A> as in *tape* and *cake*, or with an <EA> as in *break* and *great*, or with an <AY> or <AI> as in *day* and *wait*, or with an <EY> or <EI> as in *they* and the number *eight*.

All those spellings may seem completely random today, but they actually reveal the phonetic history of those words. And they tell us that many different vowel sounds have merged together since the late Middle English period.

Some people compare these vowel changes to a game of musical chairs where a group of people move in a circle around a group of chairs, and try to grab a seat when the music stops. Well, if we think of the movement of these front vowels as a game of musical chairs, we had a situation where everybody initially moved over one seat, but then a couple of people got up and moved over one more seat and sat in the lap of the person beside them. So a couple of the players ended up sharing chairs with other players. And that's what happened with these lower front vowels during and after the Great Vowel Shift. They were initially raised up one step, but then they were raised for a second time and crashed into the vowels at the top of the mouth. That created a lot of confusion and a lot of vowel mergers.

Since this topic can be a dry and technical, I'm going to break the discussion down into three parts. That will allow us to deal with each of the specific vowel sounds that shifted through this process and shaped the language we have today.

[MUSIC BREAK]

Now I'm going to plow forward with the analogy of the Great Vowel Shift to a game of musical chairs gone wrong. We basically have four seats to keep track of. In other words, we have the four vowel sounds pronounced in the front part of the mouth that I described earlier – /i:/, /e:/, /ɛ:/, and /a:/.

We now know that the two highest sounds – vowel number 1 and number 2 – moved out of the way very early on, leaving the number 2 chair empty. In linguistic terms, that's the /e:/ sound. So the /e:/ sound was left vacant. Well in a game of musical chairs, the next player in line would move over to that vacant seat, and initially that's what happened here with the Great Vowel Shift. The next vowel sound underneath the /e:/ sound is the /ɛ:/ sound (cardinal vowel number 3). Remember 'eat aged eggs' in descending order. And that /ɛ:/ sound simply slid up and filled that vacant spot above it.

So Middle English /grɛ:t/ became Modern English *great*. And Middle English /brɛ:k/ became Modern English *break*. And Middle English /stɛ:k/ became Modern English *steak*. Once again, we see an orderly process at work. As each vowel sound shifted upward one step, the next lowest vowel moved up to fill the gap that was left behind. That's why this process is sometimes called a chain shift. A series of vowels moved together in unison. As we'll see in a moment, that orderly process was about to become very disorderly, but before we go there, let's focus on this /ɛ:/ sound that shifted up to /e:/ in the early stages of the Great Vowel Shift.

Again, this /ɛ:/ sound is Cardinal Vowel number 3, the sound that we hear today in words like *egg, bet, set, dress, wedge, neck, mess, head, ready*, and so on. So it's a very common vowel sound in Modern English, but there's something very important about the way that sound is used today. In Modern English, that /ɛ:/ sound is almost always pronounced short and quickly. In fact,

we normally refer to that sound as the ‘short E’ sound because it’s the short sound of letter E. And that’s why we use letter E to spell words like *egg*, *bet*, *set*, *dress*, and so on.

But in Middle English, this /ɛ:/ vowel sound could be pronounced as either a short vowel or a long vowel, so as either /ɛ/ or /ɛ:/. But since we don’t generally use that long sound today, what happened to it? Well, remember that the Great Vowel Shift only affected the long vowel sounds, not the short vowel sounds. So the short version of this sound remained in place and didn’t really change. It’s still there just like it was in Middle English. But the long version of the sound moved up from /ɛ:/ to /e:/ – from position 3 up to position 2. And when that /ɛ:/ sound shifted up to /e:/, that meant that the original long /ɛ:/ sound was no longer being used. As we’ll see a little later in the episode, some other vowel sounds did move into that vacant position for a while, but then they kept moving. And when all was said and done, that long /ɛ:/ sound was left vacant all the way up to today. And that’s why we have very few, if any, words that are pronounced with that long sound today in most standard dialects .

But if we were to go back to the time of Chaucer, we would have heard that long /ɛ:/ sound a lot. And it was typically spelled with letter <E> or <EE>. You may recall from the last episode that the same letter <E> or <EE> was also used to spell words that were pronounced with that slightly higher sound /e:/. Those two vowel sounds are cardinal vowels 2 and 3 – /e:/ and /ɛ:/, respectively. And again, they were often spelled the same way. That was probably because scribes just considered them to be slight variations of the same vowel sound. One was pronounced a little higher, and one was pronounced a little lower.

But in the 1400s and 1500s, scribes and printers started to represent this lower /ɛ:/ sound (vowel number 3) with the letter combination <EA>. It isn’t entirely clear why they chose <EA> for this sound, but it may have been because the vowel sound above it was traditionally spelled with an E, and the vowel sound below it (/a:/) was traditionally spelled with an A. So for this in-between sound, they just put those two letters together. Visually, that suggested a sound in between those other two sounds. And thanks to that innovation, it became common to spell this long /ɛ:/ sound with <EA>.

Now I noted a moment ago that this long /ɛ:/ sound shifted up to /e:/ during the 1400s and 1500s as part of the Great Vowel Shift. So it moved up one position from cardinal vowel 3 to cardinal 2. But that change didn’t apply to every word with this /ɛ:/ sound. There was actually a split. The vowel was raised in some of them as part of the Great Vowel Shift, but in others, the vowel did something a little different. It actually remained in the same position, but it was shortened. So it went from a long vowel to a short vowel in those words. So long /ɛ:/ became short /ɛ/. And those words continued to be spelled with the letters <EA>. That’s what happened with words like *breath*, *death*, *head*, *bread*, *dead*, *spread*, *deaf*, *sweat* and *threat*. Notice that all of those words are still spelled with <EA>, and notice that they all still have that /ɛ:/ sound, but the sound is pronounced short today. Again, that’s the same ‘short E’ sound that we have in words like *bed* and *set* and *pet*. So this so-called ‘short E’ sound can be spelled both ways today. We can use the simple letter E or the letter combination <EA>. We have the verb *bred* (‘b-r-e-d.’) – the past tense of *breed*, and we have the noun *bread* (‘b-r-e-a-d.’). Again, at one time, the length of those vowels would have been different – /brɛd/ and /brɛ:d/, respectively. But today, they both have the

same short vowel sound, even though they have different spellings which reflect their older pronunciations.

So again, in some of these words, the long /ɛ:/ sound was shortened and preserved. But in all the other words where the vowel continued to be pronounced long, the vowel shifted up during the Great Vowel Shift from /ɛ:/ to /e:/ – from vowel position 3 to 2. Again the Great Vowel Shift only affected the long vowel sounds. So Middle English /grɛ:t/ became Modern English *great*. And Middle English /brɛ:k/ became Modern English *break*. And Middle English /stɛ:k/ became Modern English *steak*. And that's why the <EA> spelling is still sometimes used for that /e:/ sound.

But this is where our orderly game of musical chairs started to break down because even though this /ɛ:/ vowel sound shifted up one step from 3 to 2, it wasn't done shifting. For some reason, and it isn't entirely clear why, the vowel sound shifted up again a couple of centuries later from position 2 up to position 1. So the sound went from /ɛ:/ to /e:/ during the Great Vowel Shift, and then it went from /e:/ up to /i:/ in the 1600s and 1700s. Using our musical chairs analogy, this sound moved over and sat in the empty chair next to it for a while, but for some reason it wasn't happy with that chair, so it moved over again and sat in the lap of the next person over. So it moved two steps instead of one.

As a result, when these <EA> words took that second step up to the /i:/ sound (cardinal vowel number 1), these words crashed into and merged with the words that were already being pronounced with that same /i:/ sound. And that's why most of the words spelled with <EA> today are pronounced with that highest /i:/ sound in the first position. That includes words like *leaf*, *east*, *seat*, *read*, *heat*, *wreath*, *meal*, *speak*, *clean*, and so on. All of those were originally pronounced with /ɛ:/, that then shifted up to /e:/, and then shifted again up to /i:/.

That also explains why we have a lot of homonyms that share this sound. One version is spelled with <EE> and represents the first set of words to adopt that sound during the Great Vowel Shift. And the other version is spelled with <EA> and represents this second set of words that moved up into that position a couple of centuries after the Great Vowel Shift.

So we have homonyms like *meet* and *meat* ('m-e-e-t' and 'm-e-a-t'), and *week* and *weak* ('w-e-e-k' and 'w-e-a-k'), and *beet* and *beat* ('b-e-e-t' and 'b-e-a-t'), and *see* and *sea* ('s-e-e' and 's-e-a'), and *tee* and *tea* ('t-e-e' and 't-e-a'). These word pairs were once pronounced differently, but the vowels crashed together and merged through the process I just described.

So let me give you an example to illustrate how this process affected the pronunciation of words over time. Prior to the Great Vowel Shift, a period of seven days was called a /we:k/ using cardinal vowel 2. And the opposite of *strong* was /wɛ:k/ using cardinal vowel number 3. Geoffrey Chaucer lived before the vowel shift. So if Chaucer had been feeling sickly and frail for seven days, he might have said that he felt 'wɛ:k/ all we:k/.' He would have used the vowels in position 3 and 2. But then those two vowels each shifted up one step during the Great Vowel Shift to positions 2 and 1. And by the early 1600s, William Shakespeare would have used those newer pronunciations. He would have said that he felt 'we:k/ all *week*.' But then, shortly after

the death of Shakespeare, that lower vowel shifted up again from position 2 to 1, and that meant that those two distinct vowel sounds merged together. And as a result, today we would say that we felt ‘*weak* all *week*.’ The spellings are still distinct, but the sounds have merged. And if you followed that example, you can see hear how the vowels remained distinct even as they shifted around. That’s the way a chain shift works. But eventually, due to that later vowel change, the pronunciation of those words did actually crash together. And that’s how we ended up with those homonyms *week* and *weak*, *meet* and *meat*, *see* and *sea*, and so on.

Now I should note that the merger of those sounds occurred in southern England where standard English emerged, and from there, it spread to North America and most of the English-speaking world. But scholars who study regional accents will note that those sounds didn’t fully merge in some places, like in some parts of the north of England. They will note that some speakers still pronounce words like ‘m-e-e-t’ and ‘m-e-a-t’ with slightly different vowel sounds. To other speakers, the vowels may sound the same, but scholars do detect some slight differences in some speakers. But again, those regional differences have eroded over time and will probably continue to do so.

So just to summarize where we are so you can keep track of these changes, that lower long /ɛ:/ sound (cardinal vowel 3) came to be spelled <EA> in late Middle English. In some of those words, the vowel was shortened, as in *bread*, and *head*, and *sweat*. But in most of those words, the vowel remained long and was raised up to /e:/ during the Great Vowel Shift, and then a couple of centuries later, it shifted up again to /i:/. Thus, we went from /wɛ:k/ to /we:k/ to *weak* (‘w-e-a-k’). Again, the <EA> spelling in those words generally indicates that those words experienced that change.

But, there were a handful of exceptions to the process I just described. For some reason, and again it isn’t entirely clear why, there were a few words that experienced the first shift, but got stuck there, and did not experience the second shift. In other words, they shifted from /ɛ:/ to /e:/ during the Great Vowel Shift, and they did not shift up again from /e:/ to /i:/. And I actually mentioned most of those exceptions earlier in the episode. They were the words *great*, *break*, *steak* and *yea* (‘y-e-a’). Again, they all have the <EA> spelling, and they all experienced that first sound shift. /grɛ:t/ became *great*. /brɛ:k/ became *break*. /stɛ:k/ became *steak*. /yɛ:/ became *yea*. But they didn’t move up to /i:/ when those other words shifted up. So *great* never became /gri:t/, and *break* never became /bri:k/, and so on. And that’s why we sometimes use that <EA> spelling for this other vowel sound /e:/. It mainly occurs in this small handful of words that got stuck in that middle vowel position and never moved up with the others.

Now you may be wondering why scholars are so sure that the vowels changed in the way I just described. Well, part of the answer is that writers during the 1600s and 1700s actually wrote about the pronunciation of words at the time, and that evidence allows scholars to trace these changes. The vowel sound in some of those <EA> words was still in flux at the time, and some writers commented about that pronunciation. For example, in the late 1700s, the great writer and dictionary-maker Samuel Johnson wrote that the word *great* was in flux between those highest two vowel sounds. He wrote that the word could be pronounced with either the lower /e:/ sound or the higher /i:/ sound. So his comment suggests that some speakers had raised that vowel sound

up from /gre:t/ to /gri:t/, but for some reason, that higher pronunciation never stuck. In the passage where he made that comment, he referenced the man who was considered to be the best speaker in the House of Lords – Lord Chesterfield – and the man who was considered to be the best speaker in the House of Commons – Sir William Yonge. They apparently disagreed on the proper pronunciation of the word. Johnson’s biographer attributes the following quote to Johnson:

“When I published the Plan for my Dictionary, Lord Chesterfield told me that the word ‘great’ should be pronounced so as to rhyme to ‘state;’ and Sir William Yonge sent me word that it should be pronounced as to rhyme to ‘seat,’ and that none but an Irishman would pronounce it ‘grait.’ Now here were two men of the highest rank, the one, the best speaker in the House of Lords, the other, the best speaker in the House of Commons, differing entirely.” [SOURCE: ‘A History of English Phonology,’ Charles Jones, p. 286]

So even as recently as the late 1700s, there was still some disagreement as to whether *great* should join all of those other words where the vowel had been raised up to /i:/, or whether it should retain its older /e:/ sound which it had acquired during the Great Vowel Shift. Of course, it was one of those small handful of words, along with *break*, *steak* and *yea*, that retained the older pronunciation.

One of the interesting things about that quote is that Johnson says “none but an Irishman would pronounce it ‘grait’.” So what was that all about? Well, in Ireland, almost all of these <EA> words retained that older /e:/ sound. They didn’t experience that second shift up to /i:/. So words like *heat*, *tea* and *leaf* were pronounced as /he:t/, /te:/ and /le:f/. And that’s why Johnson said that the pronunciation of ‘g-r-e-a-t’ as *great* sounded like an Irish pronunciation.

Now I should note that in most modern Irish accents, the vowel sound in those words has since shifted up to the /i:/ sound, but it is still possible to hear that older pronunciation in some places in Ireland, especially in some rural dialects. But I make that note about that older Irish pronunciation because there are several common Irish names that have that <EA> spelling, and are still pronounced with that older /e:/ sound. So these names are also exceptions where the <EA> spelling is still pronounced as /e:/. These Irish names include *Shea* (‘s-h-e-a’), *Beatty* (‘b-e-a-t-t-y’), *Yeats* (‘y-e-a-t-s’), *Seamus* (‘s-e-a-m-u-s’) and *Reagan* (r-e-a-g-a-n). There are probably a few others, but those are some of the most common ones. Since those names were common in Ireland, and since they were pronounced with that /e:/ sound in Ireland for many centuries after the Great Vowel Shift, they have tended to retain their older pronunciations.

Interestingly, if you are old enough to remember the Ronald Reagan administration back in the 1980s, you might remember that Donald Regan was his Treasury Secretary and then later Chief of Staff. It was very easy to confuse those two names – Ronald Reagan and Donald Regan. *Reagan* and *Regan* are actually variations of the same Irish surname. *Reagan* reflects an older, more traditional pronunciation with the vowel in position number 2 – like in *break* and *steak*, and *Regan* reflects a more modern pronunciation with the vowel shifted up to position number 1 – as in *seat* and *leaf*. The pronunciation of those two names reflects the evolution of this vowel sound over time.

OK, so I just traced out the history of the /ɛ:/ sound (cardinal vowel number 3). When that long vowel sound shifted upward, it left that long /ɛ:/ sound vacant down in position number 3. So now let's look at what happened to that vacant sound. We might assume that the vowel sound underneath it at position number 4 would have then moved up and filled the gap that was left behind. And that is indeed what happened. So that's the next major vowel change which we'll explore in the next part of the episode.

[MUSIC BREAK]

So far, over the course of these last two episodes, we've examined the movement of the three highest front vowels – /i:/, /e:/, and /ɛ:/. Those are cardinal vowels 1, 2 and 3. We now need to turn our attention to cardinal vowel number 4 – the /a:/ sound. This sound is the lowest vowel we've looked at so far. Technically speaking, it isn't really a front vowel. It's more of a low central vowel. And as I've noted before, there are actually a few different versions of the low /a:/ sound. Some are pronounced a little more forward, and some are pronounced a little more toward the back of the mouth. Those distinctions are important to scholars who study vowels in detail, and to actors and actresses who try to master a particular accent for a role. But those differences are not really important to a discussion about the Great Vowel Shift, so I'm not going to focus on them here.

As I've noted in earlier episodes, the /a:/ sound was traditionally spelled with letter <A>. And we still have words in English where the letter <A> represents that sound – words like *father*, and *what*, and *swan*, and *watch*. It's still the normal sound of letter <A> in continental Europe, so we also use the letter <A> for that /a:/ sound in some recent loanwords, like *waffle*, *taco*, *avocado*, *regatta*, *bazaar*, and some pronunciations of *pasta* and *garage*. So that's the traditional sound of letter <A>. But in Modern English, it's much more common to use the letter <A> for the /e:/ sound – in words like *age*, *late*, *trade*, *page*, *taste* and so on. That's the so-called 'long' sound of letter <A> today. And it's also why we call that letter 'A' – and not 'ah.'

So how did the letter <A> come to represent that /e:/ sound within English? Well, of course, the answer is the Great Vowel Shift. But notice that the original sound /a:/ is cardinal vowel number 4 in the bottom part of the mouth. But the modern sound /e:/ is cardinal vowel number 2 in the upper part of the mouth. So this sound didn't just move up one step, it actually moved up two steps. And in doing so, it mimicked and followed the vowel change that we looked at previously. There was an initial move during the Great Vowel Shift, and then there was a second move a couple of centuries later.

So let's look at how that vowel changed, and let's begin with the initial change that occurred during the Great Vowel Shift. Initially, the vowel was raised from /a:/ up one step to /ɛ:/, so from vowel position number 4 up to position number 3. This happened presumably to fill the gap that was left behind when the /ɛ:/ sound moved up as I described in the previous section. So this was the standard chain shift that we expect to see when we're looking at the Great Vowel Shift. To illustrate this change, let's consider the word *name*. In Middle English, it was pronounced /na:m/. But during the 1500s, the vowel shifted up one step and became /nɛ:m/. And

similarly, the word *take* began as /ta:k/, but again, during this first stage, the pronunciation shifted up to /tɛ:k/.

All of that is exactly what we would expect to happen during the Great Vowel Shift. The vowel above it moved up, and then this vowel shifted up to fill the gap that was left behind.

But as we saw in the prior section, that vowel above it kept moving. It shifted again a couple of centuries later. That vowel moved from position 3 to 2 to 1 – from /ɛ:/ to /e:/ to /i:/. Those were the words typically spelled <EA>. Well, this lower vowel moved right behind the higher vowel. It moved from position 4 to 3 to 2 – from /a:/ to /ɛ:/ to /e:/. Again, it tracked right behind the vowel above of it.

So /na:m/ was raised to /nɛ:m/ during the Great Vowel Shift, and then a couple of centuries later, it was raised again to *name*. And similarly, /ta:k/ moved up to /tɛ:k/ during the Great Vowel Shift, and then later, it moved up to *take*. And that's how Middle English /a:/ became Modern English /e:/. And that's also why the letter A is used for the /e:/ sound in English, whereas it tends to be used for its original /a:/ sound in other languages.

This process also helps to explain why we have some words in English that are pronounced with both the older /a:/ sound and the modern /e:/ sound. Sometimes the difference varies by region, sometimes not.

Consider the common religious term *amen* (/a:men/) or *amen* (/e:men/). It was a word borrowed into English during the Old English period. It was originally /a:men/, but it went through the Great Vowel Shift, and became /e:men/. But it continued to be pronounced as (/a:men/) in many church services, hymns and other religious songs where the language tended to be a bit more conservative. So the old pronunciation as /a:men/ never completely disappeared. And today, both pronunciations can be found in English.

It also appears that some words experienced the vowel shift from /a:/ to /e:/, but then in some places, the vowel shifted back down to /a:/. Maybe the original pronunciation never completely disappeared, and it gradually regained favor. That may have been what happened with the word *vase* (/ve:s/) or *vase* (/va:z/). The word was borrowed from French in the 1500s, presumably as /va:s/. The vowel was eventually raised to /ve:s/, which is confirmed by its use in poetry where it was used to rhyme with words like *face*, *grace*, *chase* and *case*. That pronunciation was largely retained in American English, but in Britain, the vowel tended to shift back down to /a:/ so that /va:z/ became common there. That pronunciation also filtered into North America, and it can also be found in the US and Canada today. But for some reason, the vowel in that word has never completely settled down.

That reversion back to /a:/ has also occurred in some other words. For example, believe it or not, the word *armada* was once pronounced /ar-MAY-da/. It was borrowed from the Romance languages in the early 1500s, and it experienced the gradual shift from /ar-MAH-da/ to /ar-MAY-da/. That pronunciation was still listed as the accepted pronunciation in dictionaries as recently as the late 1800s. It was around that time that some dictionaries started to list /ar-MAH-da/ as an

alternate pronunciation. And by the mid-1900s, /ar-MAH-da/ had become the standard pronunciation again. So that's another word where the vowel reverted back to its original sound.

So does that process explain the differing pronunciations of *tomato* (/to-MAY-to/) and *tomato* (/to-MAH-to/)? Well, apparently not. I've actually come across differing explanations for the evolution of that word. The fruit itself is native to the Americas, and its name is ultimately derived from a Native American word. That word was borrowed into Spanish, and then passed into English in the late 1600s. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word came in too late to be affected by the Great Vowel Shift, so it was pronounced /to-MAH-to/ early on. But during the 1700s and early 1800s, the vowel began to shift upward to /e:/, mimicking the change that occurred earlier during the Great Vowel Shift. The pronunciation as /to-MAY-to/ is recorded alongside /to-MAH-to/ in dictionaries in both Britain and the United States. But over time, the older pronunciation as /to-MAH-to/ was largely retained in Britain, while the newer pronunciation as /to-MAY-to/ became more common in the US. But whichever way you pronounce it, we can see that there is a close historical connection between the /a:/ and /e:/ sounds in English.

Now when the /a:/ vowel shifted up to /e:/ in the 1600s and 1700s, it gave English a lot of new words pronounced with the /e:/ sound. Again, it gave us the modern long sound of letter A. But English also had that sound in that small handful of words spelled with <EA> – *great, steak, break* and *yea*. Those were the <EA> words that got stuck on that /e:/ sound when the other <EA> words shifted up to /i:/.

So for this /e:/ sound, we have that small group of words spelled with <EA> – *great, steak, break* and *yea*, and now we can add in this second group of words spelled with letter A – like *late, age, make, same*, and so on. That means that we now had two different ways of spelling that sound – <EA> and <A>.

And we're now ready to add in a third group of words with that same sound. These words crashed the party because they also experienced a vowel shift which caused them to be pronounced as /e:/. And these new additions gave English even more ways to spell and represent that sound in English. So in the last part of this episode, we'll explore this final development that affected the front vowels in standard English.

[MUSIC BREAK]

Now so far, we've examined the specific vowel changes that occurred in the front part of the mouth during the Great Vowel Shift. I've compared those changes to a game of musical chairs where each player moved to the next seat over or in the next seat up. But then, the bottom two players got up out of their seat and moved over again and sat in the lap of the player next to them. So that left two players with someone sitting in their lap. And again, that's what happened with these vowels. We now have two different sets of words sharing the high vowel sound /i:/, and two different sets of words sharing the slightly lower vowel sound /e:/.

But there was one more set of words that was about to crash the party – or crash the game of musical chairs. This set of words was a new player in the game, and it just came in and sat in a seat already occupied by two other players. These words had a completely different vowel sound at one time, but now the vowel in these words shifted to the /e:/ sound. That’s our cardinal vowel number 2.

We’ve already seen that this sound was used in those words spelled with <A> like *name* and *take*, and in that handful of words spelled with <EA> like *great* and *steak*. And now, a completely different set of words adopted that same sound. These were words that were normally spelled with <AI> or <AY> or <EI> or <EY>.

As those spellings suggest, these words didn’t have a pure vowel sound. They had a diphthong – two different vowels pushed together. And despite the various spellings, they were all probably pronounced something like /æi/.

We’ve actually examined this sound – and these words – before. A few episodes back, we looked at the poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and I noted that the name *Gawain* has several different pronunciations in Modern English. But in late Middle English, it is thought that the <AI> spelling generally represented this /æi/ sound.

In that episode, I noted that Old English had the spellings <AI> and <EI>. It is thought that the <AI> spelling represented the /ai/ sound, and the <EI> spelling represented the /ei/ sound. But by the time of Chaucer, words with those distinct spellings were routinely being rhymed with each other. So it is thought that the two vowel sounds merged and met in the middle – as something like /æi/. Also, by that time, the old sound differences between letters I and Y had largely disappeared. So <AI> and <AY> and <EI> and <EY> were all being used to represent this same sound – /æi/.

But then, in the 1500s and 1600s, at the very end of the main phase of the Great Vowel Shift, this separate group of words started to be pronounced differently. The vowel sound fell in line right behind the vowel sound that we looked at in the previous section. So just as /a:/ moved up to /ɛ:/ and then to /e:/, these other words also came to be pronounced /ɛ:/ and then /e:/. So the vowels in these separate sets of words merged together. And that’s how these words spelled either <AY> or <AI>, or <EY> or <EI>, came to be pronounced with the /e:/ sound. That includes <AY> words like *day* and *way*, and <AI> words like *wait* and *faith*, and <EY> words like *they* and *obey*, and <EI> words like *weigh* (‘w-e-i-g-h’) and the number *eight*.

All of those words acquired the same vowel sound as those words spelled with letter <A> like *name* and *make* and *case*. And also the same vowel sound as that handful of words spelled with <EA> like *great* and *steak*. All of those words now shared the same /e:/ sound.

This process created a lot of new homonyms in English – words that sounded alike – like *tale* and *tail* (‘t-a-l-e’ and ‘t-a-i-l’), and *vane* and *vain* (‘v-a-n-e’ and ‘v-a-i-n’), and *wave* and *waive* (‘w-a-v-e’ and ‘w-a-i-v-e’), and *made* and *maid* (‘m-a-d-e’ and ‘m-a-i-d’).

So between those developments where all of those words acquired the same /e:/ sound, and the developments we looked at earlier where two separate sets of words acquired the /i:/ sound, we ended up with this log jam in the upper front part of the mouth in Modern English. We have lots of words sharing the same two vowel sounds today. Or in terms of musical chairs, we have a lot of people sitting in each other's laps in the same two chairs.

And I think that's the important thing to take from this episode. What began as a somewhat orderly chain shift in the 1400s and 1500s eventually turned into a bottleneck as the lower vowel sounds kept moving and crashed into each other in the top part of the mouth.

And that explains why we have so many different words today that share these two highest front vowels – /i:/ and /e:/. Those words are spelled in a variety of different ways, and those spellings help us to trace the phonetic history of those words.

Of course, we should keep in mind that a particular spelling doesn't necessarily prove anything. These general rules don't apply to every word. Spellings were still variable until the 1600s and 1700s, and some words acquired new spellings over time. But it is also true that our modern spellings aren't as random as they might seem. They generally reflect the way words were pronounced before the Great Vowel Shift. So those spellings contain a lot of hidden information.

Next time, we'll conclude our look at the Great Vowel Shift by moving our focus to the back vowels. As we'll see, there were some parallels between the developments in the back of the mouth and those in the front of the mouth, but there were also some important differences. So we'll trace out those changes, and once again, we'll explore how those changes impacted the way those words are spelled today.

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