The Great Vowel Shift

FROM EARLY MODERN ENGLISH TO MODERN TIMES ENGLISH
The Modern English word *werewolf* is a compound word made up of *wer* and *wolf*. The second part of the word is obviously recognizable to any English speaker. The first part, however, is likely unknown by most. *Wer* was the common word for man in Old English. It comes from the same root PIE word as *Vir* which was man in Classical Latin.

*Vir* appears in Modern English words such as *virtue*, *virility* and *triumvirate*.

*Wer* (believe it or not) also appears in the word *world*. *World* is another compound word. *Wer* (man) + *ald* (age). Hence, etymologically speaking at least, *world* is the age of man.
The Great Vowel Shift - Background

- Unprecedented in the sense that no similar series of changes is known to have occurred in any other language.
- Affected all long vowels (i.e. ɛ a ɔ o u).
- Exact causes and development still a topic of research interest and debate amongst scholars.
- Started somewhere in the late 14th century and ended somewhere in the 17th century (dates vary depending on source).
- Considering that English spelling had become standardized before its completion, GVS is largely responsible for many of the peculiarities in Modern English spelling.
As much as GVS has been studied it is surprising that experts have yet to reach a definitive conclusion on the nature of the shifts.

**Drag chains**- One sound moves from its original place in the phonemic inventory thus leaving a gap which is later filled by a different sound.

**Push chains**- One sound encroaches in the territory of another sound which in turn is forced to move to avoid merging with the invading sound.

Due to the chaotic nature of the English vocalic system at the time it is likely we will never know how the changes began. There was dialectal variation, inconsistencies in writing systems and there is a limited amount of available data.
Proposed potential causes of GVS

- Mass immigration to South England as a result of the Black Death?
- Language contact?
- Sociopolitical factors? Namely, England wanting to separate itself from the Roman Church?
Language change is always inevitably seen as language decay. GVS did not escape the acrimony of certain English speakers at the time.

John Hart, the most notable critic of the ongoing changes, sought to reform the spelling system to better fit the pronunciation.

His plan clearly failed since changes were still incomplete. His writings are a great source of GVS in a transitional phase.
How do we know?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hart's symbol</th>
<th>Traditional spelling</th>
<th>Phonetic value</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ɔ</td>
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<td>ə</td>
<td>e</td>
<td>/ɛ/ (modern /iə/)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ə</td>
<td>o, a</td>
<td>/oʊ/ (modern /oʊ/)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ʊ</td>
<td>oo, u</td>
<td>/u:/</td>
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</tbody>
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Long vowels

- **PG**- Pre Great Vowel Shift  **IS**- Intermediary Stage  **ME**- Modern English

1. **PG** [iː] > **IS** [əj] > **ME** [aj]  
   Time, bite

2. **PG** [eː] > **IS** [iː] > **ME** [iː]  
   Meet, beet,

3. **PG** [aː] > **IS** [ɛ] > **ME** [æj]  
   Name, Made

4. **PG** [oː] > **IS** [u] > **ME** [u]  
   Do, Boot

5. **PG** [uː] > **IS** [əʊ] > **ME** [au]  
   House, Mouth

6. **PG** [ɛ] > **IS** [e] > **ME** [i]  
   Speak, meat

7. **PG** [ɔ] > **IS** [o] > **ME** [ou]  
   Boat, Goat

What general pattern do these changes show?

Provide two examples of each change. Include the pronunciation for each stage. Model- **time** **PG** [tɪ:mə] > **IS** [təjm] > **ME** [tæjm]
Diphthong

- PG [æj] > IS [e] > ME [ej] May, day
Irregularities

1. Original [ɛ:] becomes [i] in the majority of cases. Most words spelled with ea underwent the change from [ɛ] to [e] and finally [i]. Reason and Speak are examples of this shift.

A. Swear, bear, wear (yet fear and dear)
B. Great, break, steak (yet bleak and streak)
C. Dead, read, head (read and lead)

Question- How can we explain the inconsistent development of this sound?
Irregularities

- [o] results in [u] normally. The spelling oo contains many words that underwent this exact change. Soon, moon and doom are good examples.

- Nevertheless, in words like book, foot and good do not demonstrate the same sound change.

- According to the text, words such as two, come, to do, some and good were pronounced with [u] in Hart’s writings. How do we explain their modern pronunciation?
Practice

Transcribe the words below with a partner. Include the original, intermediary and modern pronunciations.

1. Good wife  2. White house
5. Make food  6. Break nose
7. Mouth speak  8. Meet me
9. Lame life  10. Stone road
11. Find beer.  12. Seen goat
13. Proud count  14. Seek meal
1. Determine the modern pronunciation of the vowels written in bold.

- feat, he, receive, key, believe, people, sleet, Caesar, happy, amoeba

2. Determine the modern pronunciation of the vowels written in bold

- Too, foot, reward, flew, shoe, oeuvre, rough, through

3. You are given the task of modifying English orthography. Would you make it simpler so it makes more sense? How? Or, would you keep it the same to make non-natives suffer?