E-Content

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UNIT 2 CHANGES IN SOUNDS AND SPELLING

Structure

2.0 OBJECTIVES

Change being an inevitable and intrinsic part of the life of a language, it can be studied under different headings - *sound, spelling, grammar, vocabulary, sentence* and *style*. In this unit we will deal with *changes in sound and spelling*. While these units will appear technical, please don't get intimidated by this. Our aim is show you the changes that have taken place in the making of modern English. You need to concentrate on the broad changes and not in the details. We have given you these details as examples.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In his famous *Dictionary of the English Language* published in 1775 Samuel Johnson noted that some of his admirers expected the dictionary to prevent the English language from changing. Though flattered by the idea, he realized that a language cannot be prevented from changing. He realized that English like all other languages is subject to constant growth and decay that characterize all forms of life. There is a no such thing as uniformity in language. How right Johnson was about the inevitability of change can be seen from some of Johnson's two-hundred-year-old definitions for words still in use:

Whitewash	:	*A wash to make the skin seem fair*
Watching	:	*Inability to sleep*
Imp	:	*A son, progeny*
Commute	:	*To exchange*
Sophistication	:	*Adulteration*
Tremendous	:	*Dreadful, terrible, horrible*

As Johnson might have said, language changes because it belongs to the people. People invent or discover new objects and processes and the need arises for new words. A desire for novelty begets flamboyant, extravagant use of language. Reluctance or inability to call a spade a 'spade' produces euphemisms in a language. Imitation of people socially or economically better placed causes changes in the linguistic habits of people.

Apart from these external (social) causes, internal linguistic factors also produce changes in language. Internal pressures, contradictions, excesses, need for uniformity and standardization require and cause changes in language. Language change proceeds through processes like *assimilation, rejection, invention, adaptation/modification, derivation,* etc.

The evolution of the word 'English' is very interesting and is in some ways symbolic of the development of the English language. The word is derived from the name of the Angles who along with the Jutes and Saxons founded settlements in England in the fifth and sixth centuries. Doubtless the Angles derived their name from the 'angle' or corner of the land that juts out into the Southern Baltic between the modern towns of Schleswig and Flensburg. In Latin and Germanic their name was *'Angli'* which later became *'Engle'* by a change of the stressed vowel. Before 1000 A.D. *Angelcynn'* (Angle-race) was used to denote collectively the Germanic people in England, the Jutes, Saxons and Angles alike. After 1000 A.D. *England (*Land of the Angles) became popular.

The tripartitie division of the inhabitants of England was reflected in the contemporary language scheme. In as much as the Jutes, Angles and Saxons probably understood one another, we should speak of four prevailing dialects rather than of three different languages - *Northumbrian* (spoken in and around Northumbria); *Kentish* (spoken by the Jutes of Kent); *West Saxon* (spoken in the south of the Thames) and *Mercian* (spoken from Thames to the Humber but exclusive of Wales). East Midland which was a descendent of old Mercion, being the language of the Courts, of the city of London and of the universities of Cambridge and Oxford soon gained prominence and by the thirteenth century had become the "received standard speech of England (R.P.)".

2.2 CHANGES IN ENGLISH SOUNDS

After this brief sketch of the history of the English language we proceed to the main topic of this unit. i.e. *changes in sound and spelling*. For understanding some of the technical terms you will need to read carefully Block 3. The overriding movement in both sound and spelling change has been a **movement towards simplicity**. There are today forty four sounds in the Queens English - twelve vowels, eight diphthongs and twenty three consonants all given in tabular form below according to the transcription of the International Phonetic Association (IPA):

Table 1: List of Vowels

1	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*
[i:]	*[I]*	*[ɛ]*	*[æ]*	*[a:]*	*[ɒ]*
bead	*bid*	*bed*	*bad*	*bard*	*body*
[bi:d]	*[bɪd]*	*[bɛd]*	*[bæd]*	*[ba:d]*	*[bɒdi]*

7	*8*	*9*	*10*	*11*	*12*
[ɔ:]	*[ʊ]*	*[u:]*	*[ʌ]*	*[3:]*	*[ə]*
board	*bud*	*booed*	*bud*	*bird*	*cupboard*
[bɔ:d]	*[bʊd]*	*[bu:d]*	*[bʌd]*	*[b3:d]*	*[kʌbəd]*

The nine diphthongs may be defined as gliding sounds produced by the tongue as it moves or glides from one vowel position in the direction of any other.

Table 2: List of Diphthongs

13	*14*	*15*	*16*
[ei]	*[əʊ]*	*[ɑi]*	*[aʊ]*
gate	*bode*	*bide*	*bowed*
[geit]	*[bəʊd]*	*[bɑid]]*	*[bɑʊd]*
17	*18*	*19*	*20*
[ɔɪ]	*[ɪə]*	*[ɛə]*	*[ʊə]*
boy	*beard*	*bared*	*cured*
[bɔɪ]	*[bɪəd]*	*[bɛəd]*	*[kjʊəd]*

Table 3 Classification of English Consonants

Place	Bilabial	Labio-, dental	Dental	Alveo-lar	Post-alveolar	Palato-alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Manner	vl vd	vl vd	vl vd	vl vd	vl vd	vl vd	vl vd	vl vd	vl vd
Plosive				t d				k g	
Affri-cate						tʒ dʒ			
Nasal	m			n				ŋ	
Lateral				l					
Frica-tive/ Spirant		f v	θ ð	s z				ɣ x	h
Fric-tion-less conti-nuant					r				
Semi-vowel	w						j	(w)	

2.2.1 Change in Consonant Sounds

Such is the position of English sounds as they exist today. But the present status has been reached after centuries of change and evolution. We can now proceed to the history of English sounds beginning with **consonants**, enquiring which have disappeared, which have changed, which are new and which remain the same. Old English had two consonants which no longer exist [X] and [ɣ], the voiced and voiceless velar spirants/fricatives. The first however linger in Scot dialects. Though it had started changing in Old English, it however managed to survive through the Middle English period. In the Modern English period it has either been lost or converted into some other sound. It was spelled *h* in Old English, but by the thirteenth century the new spelling became *gh*. *[X]* appears in Old English words like *leoht, bohte, ruh;* survives in Middle English as in Chaucer's *lighte, boughte, rough tough,* etc. But by the early Modern period it has either disappeared as in *light* and *bought* or has been changed to *[f]* as in *rough* and *tough*. [ɣ] is illustrated in Old English words like *gamen* (game) and *græs* (grass) which later lost its spirant quality and became a stop in late Old English or early Middle English thereby changing to *[g]* and becoming identical with the regular Old English *[g]*. It has retained this value since.

So much for losses. Two other Old English consonants have also changed but not so drastically. The first of these is *[r]* which is produced by a simple flap of the tongue. This however is a reduction of a formerly trilled sound used by Chaucer and King Alfred.

The other sound that has changed is *[j]* which today is a palatal tongue glide but was spirant in Old English. Its spelling in Old English was *g* or *ge* or *gie*.

While two sounds have been lost, two altered, only one has been added [ʒ]. Though [dʒ] existed in Old English, [ʒ] did not became an independent phoneme until early Modern English and developed out of *[zj]* in such French loan words as *measure, usury, azure*.

With the exception of the five discussed above, the consonants of Old English have come down to Modern English virtually unchanged. We still have the voiced stops *[b], [d], [g];* the voiceless stops *[p], [t], [k];* the voiced spirants [*v], [ð], [z];* the voiceless spirants *[f], [θ], [s], [ʃ], [h];* the nasals *[m], [n], [ŋ];* the lateral *[l];* the glide *[w];* the affricates *[d]* and *[t]*. Most of them were spelled in Old English as they are today with a few exceptions. For example, [ʃ] was spelled *sc* as in *fisc* (fish); *k* was rarely used, *c* was usually used for *[k]*.

Though sounds from Old English have continued, their status was not in every case the same as it is now. Four of them that were not phonemes then are phonemes now. For example [ʒ] existed as part of the affricate combination [dʒ] and it was not until early Modern English that it gained full phonemic status. Similarly *[v], [z] [ð]* and *[ŋ]* were in Old English no more than variations of *[f], [s], [θ], and [n],* respectively.

Loss and gain occurred not only at the level of sounds but also words. For example, the simplification of initial consonants clusters happened as a result of which many a *[h], [k] [w]* and some *[f] 's* were dropped- eg *hlence*, (link), *hnutu* (nut), *hring* (ring) and *wlisps* (lisp).

Consonants were not only lost and altered; occasionally they were also added- for example, the unetymological *[r]* in *bridegroom* and *cartridge* (from German *Bräutigam* and French *cartouche,* respectively); an additional *n* in *passenger* (from French *passager*) and *messenger* (from messager in Caxton). Similarly *[b], [d], [t]* creep in whenever the phonetic environment is favourable- eg. *whilst, amidst, against, amongst.*

To sum up the language has lost *[ð] [X]* (velars), two sounds have changed their quality considerably [r] and [j] the language has gained [ʒ]. But otherwise most consonants have remained unaffected.

2.2.2 Changes in the Vowel System

Most of the confusion prevalent in spellings today is due to incomplete adjustments following changes in the vowel system. In considering the changes in the vowel system in English during the Old and Middle English Period we notice that most vowels remained stable. It was only after the fourteenth century that English vowels underwent what Jespersen called *"the great vowel shift"*. Most of the *short vowels* of Old English have passed over unchanged into Middle English. But short *[æ]* became *[a]* and *y* was unrounded to *[i]*. Thus Old English *craft* became *craft* in Middle English, *brycg* became *brigge*. The other short vowels *a, e, i, o, u* remained - Old English *catte>cat, bedd>bed, folc>folk, full>ful*. Among the long vowels the most important change was that of *ā* to *ō - bān to bōn* (bone), *bāt to bōt* (boat). The long *y* developed in the same way as the short *y- brȳd>bride* (bride), *fȳr>fir* (fire). The long *æ* represented two sounds in Old English *ē* and *ā* and remains as *e* in Middle English-- *stepan>slēpen* (sleep), *clæne>clēne* (clean). These two sounds have now become