

The origins of standard pronunciation in England and a comparison with France

Antonio Bertacca
University of Parma

Language is not merely a process parallel with culture, it is an integral part of it.

J.R. Firth

0. Introduction

It is a well-known fact that the Middle English period was one of large dialectal variation (Chaucer's *gret diversite*); neither strict rules nor even an accepted standard existed yet. Indeed, it was only with the fifteenth century that a written standard began to be recognized in England, and about 1450 the written language used in official, administrative and Court documents, largely based on the east Midland dialects, was the dominant one.

However, a spoken standard was still to come, even if with the acceptance of a particular dialect as the literary model quite inexorably its prestige rose also as a spoken type of speech since it was associated with the Court. Dialectal differences of course continued to exist and most speakers stuck to non-standard forms; even among upper-class speakers the standard language was far from being in general use. Yet a norm had been established and its written form was a very strong instrument for its spread; in the sixteenth century the language of the Court came to be accepted as the "best" English, and non-standard speech was often considered synonymous with simplicity and roughness.

The countless variants of Middle English or even Old English origin in the early Modern period (as shown, for instance, by Shakespeare), though in itself being an interesting phenomenon of linguistic richness and a great aid to writers, was also a topic for debate among the early grammarians (from the mid-sixteenth century), and eventually these variants became the object of codification.

Various levels of speech and overlapping developments – or, better, "switches" as, for instance, in the case of the merger of the reflexes of ME /e:/ and /ɛ:/, or in the previous adoption of the Scandinavian third person plural pronouns and possessives (ME *pei*, *peire*, *peim*, PresE *they*, *their*, *them*) – coexisted in Elizabethan English and even in later periods, and, as can only be expected, the linguists' attitude was often one of conservatism and strong resistance to change.

As a detailed examination of the available evidence clearly shows, the Middle and the early Modern English periods were characterized by the existence of a very large number of phonological variants (see, e.g., Dobson 1957, Cercignani 1981 and, for more specific aspects, Bertacca 1995), not all of which, however, have survived until today. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century grammarians generally tended to recommend the speech of the Court and of educated and learned men, or that of London and, at the most, of the Home Counties, including the pronunciation used in Oxford and Cambridge. But in spite of these claims and of the tendency of the upper and upper-middle classes to adopt a uniform style of speech, modern standard English has not always been consistent in its development, with the consequence that changes have not rarely affected individual words rather than whole classes of words.

In the seventeenth century standard or "correct" pronunciation was still used only by a minority, but in the last two centuries the upper and upper-middle classes have tended to use a uniform type of speech, above all under the influence and the prestige of the great public schools. This "public school English" is not exactly the same as the southeastern standard variety, but is no longer a regional type of speech and has become a class dialect used by its speakers independent of their area of origin. However, in the last few decades it has lost some of its prestige with the increasing loss of power of people who have attended public schools. RP is still prestigious, not only in Britain, but public schools no longer have a monopoly of "correct" speech; indeed "over the last quarter-century all the signs are that the covert prestige of working-class speech is acting as a more potent source of innovation than the overt prestige of advanced RP. Mainstream RP is now the subject of imminent invasion by trends spreading from working-class urban speech, particularly that of London" (Wells 1982: 106), and, what is more, "with the loosening of social stratification and the recent trend for people of working-class or lower-middle-class origins to set the fashion in many areas of life, it may be that RP is on the way out. By the end of the century everyone growing up in Britain may have some degree of local accent. Or, instead, some new non-localizable but more democratic standard may have arisen from the ashes of RP: if so, it seems likely to be based on popular London English" (1982: 118). Thus those changes which appear to be taking place in the standard language may actually be changes in *acceptance* or, in other words, pronunciations of different regional or social origins are likely to spread and eventually to affect RP itself, and therefore it seems quite reasonable to predict that the phonological level of English will again be subject to "switches" rather than to internal "developments".

0.1. Also in France grammatical studies (in a very broad sense) began in the Renaissance, above all owing to a desire of emancipation of French from Latin

and with a view to fix the language because of the great changes it had undergone in the previous centuries. Meigret (1550), for instance, contrasted "good" usage with "bad" usage since in his opinion the different styles and registers used in the spoken language were not all equally to be recommended. Just as in England, the type of speech to be imitated was that of the Court, an idea which would receive much more support in the seventeenth century; however, appeal was still made to Latin whenever the French word seemed obscure (e.g. *recouvrer* against *recupérer*). For centuries, poets had tried to imitate the speech of the Paris area, not so much for its particular prestige but rather because that was the political and religious centre of the country; yet, in the sixteenth century many writers (e.g. Rabelais, Ronsard and Montaigne) felt free to use regional words in their works thanks to the idea of individual freedom overtly supported by the Renaissance. This advancement of vulgar speech to literary usage resulted in the writers' greater freedom, but at the same time it would make the need for a new discipline to be felt later.

In phonology, in particular, Old and Middle French showed a consistent tendency to the simplification of consonant clusters (as, e.g., in *fête*, cf. It *fiesta*, Sp *fiesta*). Many unstressed /e/ were lost, which led to the creation of new clusters (as, e.g., in *acheter*), whose number increased also because of the adoption of many words from Latin (e.g., *obscur* < Lat *obscurus*). The preference for open syllables (typical of present-day French) was thwarted and /r/, which showed a clear tendency to be lost, was reintroduced. As in England, the conservative attitude of many grammarians went so far as to introduce etymological consonants (e.g., *adversaire*, *esplendir*, etc.; cf English *doubt*, *receipt*, etc.), but probably one of the most obvious instances of conservatism can be seen in the attitude to the evolution of the reflex of the OF diphthong /oi/, in the early sixteenth century realized as /wɛ/ but in vulgar or dialectal types of speech also as /ɛ/ (western dialects) or /wa/ (in the Paris area already about 1530). The last two were strongly opposed by grammarians, who found them unsuitable to educated people. Thus, until the late seventeenth century, /wɛ/ was considered the "correct" pronunciation, and /ɛ/, /wa/ were used only in vulgar types of speech. However, /wɛ/ later disappeared and the others came to be widely used. Quite typically, grammarians objected to spontaneous developments in pronunciation, which generally have their origins in popular and dialectal speech, as is shown by the sixteenth-century change /r/ > /s/ in the lower strata of speakers and therefore rejected by upper-class ones. Today the situation is one in which /r/ has generally been restored, with the exception of the pair *chaire* ~ *chaise*.

To sum up, while until the fifteenth century phonological development was more or less free, since the sixteenth century upper-class speech has been under the strong influence of purists, and this has resulted in a much slower evolution

of the phonological level. As from the seventeenth century the need began to be felt for a uniform pronunciation all over the country, and today there is certainly more uniformity in France than, for instance, in Italy or Germany, where regional features are more tolerated. This uniformity is based on the the written language fixed in the seventeenth century and on the speech of Paris, from which regional or popular pronunciations have usually been banned.

Therefore, since the seventeenth century changes in phonology have been much rarer than before and the only ones which were accepted had appeared in the sixteenth century as, for instance, the dissimilative denasalization of nasal vowels before nasal consonants (e.g., *homme* = /*õm*/ > /*õm*/) or the change /*ll*/ > /*j*/, as in *fille*, typical of the Paris middle-class speakers, which took about two centuries to be eventually accepted. Since the eighteenth century, all efforts have aimed to "protect" the language against those who "corrupt" it, but while phonology and morphosyntax have been quite stable (possibly owing to the influence of the written language), lexis has undergone a considerable increase. However, some changes which had already been in progress for centuries were completed, whereas in other cases (e.g. the weakening assimilative fronting of /*k*/ and /*g*/ to /*t*/ and /*d*/ before the front vowels /*e*/ and /*i*/, as in *cinquième* > *cintième*) there was a strong opposition of the literary language and they did not affect standard French – with the only exception of *tabatière* for *tabaquière* from *tabac* – while some dialects accepted them. Only few changes have been successful, such as the reintroduction of previously lost etymological consonants, apparently to avoid homophony (e.g., *sens* = /*sã*/ > /*sãs*/), or the early nineteenth-century loss of the feminine ending *-e* in pronunciation, so that, e.g., *aimé* and *aimée*, until then distinguished in educated speech by a longer vowel in the latter, became homophones.

The finishing stroke to regional dialects came from the 1789 Revolution, which had a very important unifying role, since at the time speaking French meant feeling a patriot. This was accompanied by a considerable development in popular, general education, and school usually tends to be conservative in matters of language usage and of pronunciation in particular, as for instance in the case of the opposition to the loss of /*l*/ from *il* before consonants in rapid speech, as in *il boit* (= /*i*'bwa/) vs *il aime* (= /*il*'*ẽm*/), a situation which obtains still today, since the influence of education prevents cultivated speakers from dropping their /*l*'s before consonants.

0.2. Unlike England, France has never had anything like the so-called "public school" speech, that is to say the imposition of a particular type of speech of considerable social prestige over the other accents. English seems to be unique in having chosen as the accepted standard a type of pronunciation which has no geographical background rather than a particular regional accent. As in England,

also in France the speech of educated people has had and still has a special prestige, but it does not border on rigid and extreme purism as it has sometimes happened in England, where, for instance, until not long ago BBC announcers were required to use pure RP; but even more importantly, French standard pronunciation has been much more consistent in its development than standard pronunciation in England, which has a very large number of words whose evolution has been quite divergent from that of other words containing the same etymological phoneme. Nothing similar has happened in French, whose historical phonology has been much more uniform and words of the same class have developed together. At the same time the relationship between graphemes and phonetic realizations, as a rule largely unpredictable in English, is on the contrary almost always predictable in French. Of course it cannot be demonstrated whether the idiosyncrasies of English spelling and pronunciation are due to the lack of an English Academy like the French and Italian ones or rather to "the spirit of English liberty" mentioned by Johnson in the Preface to his *Dictionary*; however, in spite of the attempts of seventeenth- and particularly eighteenth-century scholars to "fix" the language, many changes in Modern English phonology seem "to have proceeded on a lexical item by lexical item, 'patchy' basis" (Jones 1989: 289) rather than on a more consistent phoneme by phoneme basis.

1. The Middle English phonological level

1.1. Short vowels:

ME /ʊ/ (presumably [ɪ]), as in *drink, mirror, sir*, etc., with variants with ME /e/, /ɔ/, /e:/, /i:/;

ME /e/ (presumably [e]), as in *bed, berry, fern*, etc., with variants with ME /a/, /ʌ/, /ɛ:/, /e:/, /aʊ/, /ʊ/;

ME /a/ (presumably [a]), as in *hat, marry, swan, grass*, etc., with variants with ME /o/, /e/, /aʊ/; in late Middle English its reflex had variants with /a:/;

ME /o/ (presumably [ɔ]), as in *ox, sorrow, off, horn, nor*, etc., with variants with ME /ʊ/, /a/, /ɔ:/, /oʊ/;

ME /ʊ/ (presumably [ʊ]), as in *cut, turret, burn, bur, pull*, etc., with variants with ME /ʌ/, /o/, /ɔ:/, /o:/, /u:/;

1.2. Long vowels:

ME /i:/ (presumably [i:]), as in *wide, dry, fire, iron, environ*, etc., with variants with ME /ʌ/;

ME /e:/ (presumably [e:]), as in *queen, deer, fierce, weary*, etc., with variants with ME /ɛ:/ and /ʌ/;

ME /ɛ:/ (approximately [ɛ:]), as in *meat, bear*, etc., with variants with ME /e:/ and /e/;

ME /a:/ (in view of its later development, rather [a:] than [ɑ:] as claimed by some scholars), as in *name, care*, etc., with variants with ME /aʊ/ and /a/;

ME /ɔ:/ (approximately [ɔ:]), as in *woe, oar*, etc., with variants with ME /o:/ and /o/;

ME /o:/ (presumably [o:]), as in *do, good, flood, moor*, etc., with variants with ME /ʊ/ and /u:/;

ME /u:/ (presumably [u:]), as in *how, mouse, bower, dowry*, etc., with variants with ME /ʊ/.

1.3. Diphthongs:

ME /aɪ/ (= [æɪ], [ɛɪ], and [aɪ]), as in *say, pair, fairy*, etc., with variants with ME /ɛ:/;

ME /ɪʊ/ (< eME /ɪʊ/, as in *hue*, eME /eʊ/, as in *yew*, and OF /iü/, as in *due*), with variants with ME /ɪ/;

ME /eʊ/ (normally [ɛʊ]), as in *few, dew, ewer, pleurisy*, etc., with variants with ME /oʊ/;

ME /aʊ/ (approximately [aʊ]) as in *draw, call, dance, calm*, etc., with variants with ME /oʊ/;

ME /oʊ/ (presumably [ɔʊ]), as in *tow, old, four*, etc., with variants with ME /u:/.

1.4. Very detailed and exhaustive analyses of such widespread variation and of its origins can be found in the above-mentioned works of Dobson (1957) and Cercignani (1981). What can be done in this paper is simply to offer a very synthetic outline of the typology of the phonological processes which brought it about.

a) Lowering caused alternation between:

- i) ME /i/ and /e/, as in *lemon* (OF *limon*), *clever*, etc., rare in Standard English;
- ii) ME /ʊ/ and /o/ in certain types of ME speech (see Dobson 1957: § 97), as in *sung, tongue, young*, which, however, owing to the immediately following nasal /ŋ/, today have the more natural reflex of ME /ʊ/ (= RP /ʌ/);
- iii) ME /e/ followed by final and preconsonantal /r/, and /a/, which has definitively affected words like *harvest, clerk, heart, star, parson* (cf. *person*), etc.;
- iv) ME /o/ and /a/, in Standard English possibly only in *Gad* and *strap* (cf. *strop*).

b) Raising caused alternation between:

- i) ME /e/ and /u/, phonetically conditioned, as in *England, English, ink, hinge*, etc.;
- ii) ME /o/ and /u/, as in *among* and *monger* (which already had undergone raising of OE /a/ to eME /o/ in the West Midlands and Worcestershire; see Jordan 1968: §30);
- iii) ME /a/ and /o/, as in *on, from, bond* (cf. *band*), *comb*, etc. (cf. *man, rank*, etc.);
- iv) ME /ɔ:/ and /o:/ in words where a vulgar or dialectal isolative change, sometimes accepted also into educated London speech, caused raising of ME /ɔ:/ to /o:/, as in *boar, both, go*, etc. Present-day RP has the reflex of the raised vowel (i.e. RP /u:/) only where this change was conditioned by a preceding /w/, as in *two, who, whose, whom* (with loss of /w/), and *womb* (with retention of /w/) – cf. *woe* (with /ðv/ < ME /ɔ:/);
- v) ME /ɛ:/ and /e:/ in words with Gmc *e₁ – such as *leech, read, cheese*, or *fear, bier* (with RP /ɪð/ < ME /ɛ:/), while *where* and *there* have RP /eð/ (< ME /e:/).

c) Lengthening caused alternation between:

- i) ME /u/ and /e:/ in open syllables, which accounts for RP /i:/ form the latter phoneme in *evil, thief*, etc.; earlier lengthening of OE /i/ before a liquid or a nasal consonant followed by a homorganic voiced consonant resulted in OE /i:/, as in *child* (OE /i:/ < *cild*), whose plural clearly shows failure of the process when a third consonant followed the mentioned cluster;
- ii) ME /e/ and /ɛ:/ in open syllables, as in *heaven, seven, breast, press*, etc., which still fluctuated in early Modern English;
- iii) ME /e/ and /e:/ as a result of the variation between OE /e(o)/ and /e:(o)/, especially before the clusters /nd/ (as in *bend, send, wend, friend*, with RP /e/, and *fiend*, with RP /i:/) and /ld/ (as in *field, shield, yield*, etc., all with RP /i:/ – cf. *held*);
- iv) ME /a/ and /a:/ in open syllables, which however is "primarily a process of rounding and retraction" (Dobson 1957: 535) especially common before final and preconsonantal /r/, before /f, θ, s/, before preconsonantal /s/, and before a consonant cluster, in particular if the second phoneme is /r/. In this case, lengthening occurred at different times in different types of speech, and fluctuation was widespread in words like *father, rather, are*, etc.; as a rule RP has /ɑ:/, but there are instances of inconsistent behaviour: e.g., *draff* and *lass* (with /æ/), or *ass, Mass, lather* and *hasp* (still fluctuating between /ɑ:/ and /æ/), or, in the end, *father* with /ɑ:/, but *gather* with /æ/;
- v) ME /o/ and /ɔ:/ in open syllables in oblique forms, as in *broth, frost*, etc., with the reflexes of both vowels in early Modern English, or in French adoptions like *host, noble, sober* (with RP /ðv/) and *cost* (with RP /ɒ/), etc.;

vi) ME /ʊ/ and /o:/ in open syllables, which was widespread in early Modern English; however RP does not seem to have any undisputed instances of the reflex of the long vowel (see, e.g., Gimson 1974: § 7.18.4, and Cercignani 1981: § 52.1).

d) Shortening was responsible for variation between:

- i) ME /e:/ and /ʌ/, as in *be, been, he, me, she*, etc., in which ME /ʌ/ was due to shortening of ME /e:/ in originally weak forms and whose reflex is today used only in unstressed positions;
- ii) ME /ɔ:/ and /o/, as in *cloth, gone*, with the reflex of the latter phoneme in RP, against *both, loath*, with RP /ðʊ/ < ME /ɔ:/, or *anon* against *alone*, both compounded on *one*;
- iii) ME /ov/ and /o/, owing to the irregular shortening of the diphthong in trisyllabic words (e.g. *knowledge*), or before /θ/, as in *troth* (still varying between /ɒ/ and /ðʊ/ in RP), and before /f/ from earlier /x/, as in *cough* and *trough*, both still varying between /ɒ/ and /ɔ:/;
- iv) ME /o:/ and /u/, as in *mother, brother, other* (with RP /ʌ/ < ME /ʊ/ < ME /o:/ by shortening), which in early Modern English still showed the reflexes of both Middle English phonemes; words like *flood, blood* (with RP /ʌ/), *food, root* (with RP /u:/), and *good, foot* (with RP /ʊ/) still exhibited considerable fluctuation in early Modern English, and "in the later seventeenth century any one word may have [ʌ], [u:], or [ʊ]" (Dobson 1957: 508);
- v) ME /u:x/ and /ʊf/, owing to the early fifteenth century shortening of the former, so that words like *rough, tough, enough*, etc. (with RP /ʌ/) still fluctuated in early Modern English between the reflexes of the two Middle English phonemes. Present-day RP /skɪf/ (< ME /uf/) for *slough* 'cast skin' and /slɔ:v/ (< ME /u:h/) for *slough* 'miry ground' clearly show this variation, like French adoptions in Middle English times, since OF /u/ could be represented by both ME /u:/ and /ʊ/; consequently, words like *count, counter, scoundrel*, etc. have RP /ɔ:v/, whereas *journey, journal, nurse*, etc. have RP /ð:/, and *touch, trouble, dozen*, etc. have /ʌ/, the last two possibly because of the syllabic consonant in the second syllable;
- vi) ME /e:/ and /e/, as is shown by *Easter, beacon, reach*, etc., among the few words with the reflex of the former in RP owing to failure of the shortening process, and by *earth, breast, heard, heaven*, etc., where, on the contrary, the short variant has been accepted. Variation between these two phonemes was possible also in words which had ME /e:/ beside ME /a/, such as *says* and *said* (with RP /e/), while *again* and *against* still fluctuate between /e/ and /eɪ/ (< ME /a/) in RP.

1.5. Consonants

On the whole, in the transition from ME to eModE the consonantal inventory was certainly much more stable than the vocalic one.

1.5.1. As to the stops, present-day /p, b/, /t, d/, /k, g/ represent the same ME pairs with just a few differences in distribution, such as:

- a) insertion of an etymologizing <p> in *corpse* (with /p/ in pronunciation), *receipt*, <c> (= /k/ in pronunciation) in *perfect* (cf. *victuals* without /k/) or of a merely graphic in words like *debt* and *doubt*;
- b) loss of /b/ after /m/, as in *climb*, *dumb*, etc., which occurred about 1300;
- c) loss of /t/ in *fasten*, *listen*, etc., which has long been established in Standard English; a similar tendency to lose stops in heavy clusters is shown by PresE *handsome*, *mostly*, etc., where retention of /d, t/ is typical of careful speech;
- d) the opposite process (i.e. insertion of an inorganic stop after a nasal) is shown by words like *empty*, *glimpse*, *sound*, *ancient*, *pageant*, *slumber*, etc.

The most relevant changes were the loss of /k/ and /g/ from the initial clusters /kn/ and (rare) /gn/, as in *knit* and *gnaw*, initially typical of vulgar speech and accepted into educated speech only in the eighteenth century, and the assimilation of the sequences /tj, dj/ to /tʃ, dʒ/ respectively, as in *nature* and *soldier*, a change which was fully accepted only in the early eighteenth century and which of course increased the functional load of the original ME affricates /tʃ/ and /dʒ/ derived from the OE palatal stops /č/ and /ǰ/, as in *child* (OE *cild*) and *bridge* (OE *brycg*).

Final /tʃ/ has been voiced to /dʒ/ in unstressed syllables, as in *knowledge*, *cabbage*, etc.; but there is still fluctuation in *ostrich* (with rarer /dʒ/), *Greenwich* (with rarer /tʃ/), etc.

1.5.2. The ME fricative pairs /f, v/, /θ, ð/, /s, z/ were all derived from the OE voiceless phonemes when their voiced allophones were phonemized owing to the simplification of the long consonants /ff/, /θθ/ and /ss/ to /f/, /θ/ and /s/ (see Kurath 1956) and the consequent rise of a contrast between /f/ and /v/, as in *fine* and *vine*, /θ/ and /ð/, as in *bath* and *bathe*, /s/ and /z/, as in *mice* and *wise*.

In early Modern English there was still fluctuation between /s/ and /z/ in words like *is*, *was*, *his*, etc., in which RP /z/ derives from the weak forms; worth of notice is RP final /s/ in nouns or adjectives, but /z/ in the derived verbs (e.g. *house* and *to house*), but this distinction does not always obtain owing to analogical processes (e.g. in *price*, *sacrifice*, etc.).

In the end, there was inconsistent voicing of medial pretonic /s/, as in *resemble*, *observe*, *resolve*, against *research*, *assign*, *assist*.

Of the other fricative pair, ME /ʃ/ derives from IOE or eME /ʃ/ (< OE /s/ + /é/, as in *ship*, *fish*, etc.). In early Modern English, however, /ʃ/ was less common than in RP since the assimilation to /ʃ/ of the sequence /sj/, as in *sugar*, etc., had not yet been accepted. Early ModE /z/ derives from the assimilation of the sequence /zj/, as in *occasion*, etc., which was accepted only in the seventeenth century, "z/ being considered for a long time as a foreign sound" (Gimson 1974: 190).

The last fricative, i.e. ME /h/, goes back to OE /h/, realized as [h] before vowels, and as either [ç] or [x] in medial and postvocalic positions, as in *hliehhan* 'laugh', *heah* 'high', the latter being probably used also in the initial clusters /hn, hr, hl/, as in *hnecca* 'neck', *hring* 'ring', *hlāf* 'loaf'. In previous stages of the language the incidence of this phoneme was therefore much higher than today, and in early Modern English /h/ was still used in some types of speech in words where <gh> is now silent or is realized as [f]. Loss of /h/ from the initial clusters /hl, hn, hr/ became common in the twelfth century, to which belongs also loss from /hw/. Loss of /h/ before vowels, as in modern popular London speech, has existed for centuries and has usually been considered a vulgarism, while loss of /h/ in unstressed pronouns and auxiliary verbs occurs commonly also in RP, and according to Wyld it dates back to "at least as early as the thirteenth century" (1936: 295).

The change /x/ > /f/ occurred in late Middle English, at first in dialectal and vulgar speech, and was gradually accepted into Standard English in words like *laugh*, *cough*, etc., or in the final cluster /avxt/, as in *draught*, but usually not after ME /ov/, as in *bought*, etc. RP has accepted the change /xt/ > /ft/ in medial positions only in *laughter* (but it was common also in *daughter*) and, apart from *draught*, has /f/ only in final positions; /f/ was accepted into educated speech in the early seventeenth century in those words where it is now the rule (Dobson 1957: 947). On the whole, Wyld is right that "there is no assignable reason beyond the fortunes of apparently arbitrary selection from among the various types why we should say [slɔ̃tə] on the one hand, and [lāftə] on the other" (1936: 289).

After vowels, /ç/ and /x/ were vocalized in Middle English in some types of speech and the spirants (developed to /j/ and /w/ respectively) were absorbed by the preceding vowel; this process, at first typical of vulgar or dialectal (possibly eastern) speech, explains the present pronunciation of *night*, *bough*, etc.

1.5.3. Other relevant changes were:

- a) the fifteenth-century unvoicing of final /ð/ to /θ/ after the loss of final -e, as in *earth*, *birth*, *beneath*, etc.;
- b) /rð/ > /rd/ in words like *burden*, *murder*, etc.;

c) conversely, about 1400, post-vocalic /d/ changed to /ð/ before syllabic /r/ or /ðr/, as in *mother, father, brother, weather*, etc.

1.5.4. As to the nasals, RP /m/ and /n/ go back to OE /m/ (as in *man*) and /n/ (as in *nama*), or derive from the simplification of initial /kn, gn, hn/ (see § 1.5.1 d).

Worth of notice is the /n/ of the indefinite article affixed to a noun beginning with a vowel, as in *nickname* (< ME *ekename*), or the opposite transfer of initial /n/ of a noun to the preceding indefinite article, as in *apron* (< OF *naperon*). The process was very common in Middle English, but careful speech accepted only a few such cases from vulgar speech by the sixteenth century.

Early Modern English /ŋ/, as in *sing*, developed (by progressive assimilation) before velar /k/ and /g/ as an allophone of /n/ owing to a natural tendency which belongs to "all periods of the language" (Dobson 1957: 952). When /g/ was lost from the cluster /ŋg/ in vulgar speech in late Middle English, the velar nasal /ŋ/ acquired phonemic status owing to the consequent opposition between words like *ran* and *rang*, and was generally accepted in the seventeenth century. On the contrary, in the cluster /ŋk/ the stop has been retained and therefore in this phonetic context /ŋ/ could be still considered an allophone of /n/.

1.5.5. ME lateral /l/, as in *land* and *small*, goes back to OE /l/. Owing to the velar quality of /l/ (i.e. [ɫ]) in final and preconsonantal positions, a glide /ʌ/ developed between ME /a/ or /o/ (which therefore changed to /aʌ/ and /oʌ/) and the 'dark' allophone of /l/ followed by /k, m, f, v/, as in *walk, holm, calf, calve*, etc. Loss of /l/ is the rule in RP in these contexts, as well as before /n/ (as in *won't, Lincoln*, etc., where it is due to lack of stress). Before /t/, /l/ has been usually retained, as in *halt, malt*, etc., which varied in early Modern English, while in *fault* and *vault* /l/ has been reintroduced in both spelling and pronunciation.

1.5.6. ME /r/ as in *read*, etc., derives from OE /r/ (which has been lost in final and preconsonantal positions) and from the OE initial clusters /hr/, as in *hring*, simplified to /r/ in early Middle English, and /wr/, as in *writan* 'write', simplified to /r/ in early Modern English. In fact, because of its phonetic vowel-like quality very similar to /ə/, which was the result of a remarkable change in the realization of this phoneme from a presumably linguo-alveolar roll (= [r]), typical of earlier periods, to a post-alveolar continuant (= [ɹ]), a glide (= /ə/) developed between certain diphthongs and long high vowels and a following final and preconsonantal /r/ in early Modern English. Then, in these positions /r/ was vocalized to /ə/, which eventually merged with the glide, as in *hair, near, poor*, etc. Also after short vowels, final and preconsonantal /r/ was vocalized to /ə/, and

then either assimilated to the glide which had developed from ME /t, e, v/ (i.e., /ðt/ > /ðð/ > /ð:/) or absorbed by /ɑ:/ and /ɔ:/ < ME /a/ and /o/. Conversely, intervocalic /t/ has been retained in RP, as in *merry, mirror, furrow*, etc., but while there is no /ð/ after the reflexes of the Middle English short vowels, the glide developed after the reflexes of long vowels and diphthongs, as in *hairy, Mary, showery*, etc. Therefore the change from /t/ to /ð/ is a natural (weakening) process of assimilation.

1.5.7. As to the semivowels, ME palatal /j/, as in *yellow*, etc., goes back to OE /j/, itself derived from a palatalized form of /g/. Owing to shift of stress, also the ME diphthongs /tʌ, eʌ/ are the source of RP /j/ in the sequence /ju:/, as in *new, dew*, etc. In general, in early Modern English the distribution was much the same as that now current in RP, with little fluctuation in a few words, but Shakespeare seems to have exploited two different types of speech, one which had not yet been affected by the change /tʌ/ > /ju:/, and the other which already showed /ju:/ (see Cercignani 1981: § 125). PresE /j/ derives also from the loss of the syllabic value of prevocalic /l/ in unaccented positions in French adoptions, as in *opinion, familiar*, etc. (For the assimilation of the sequences /tj, dj, sj, zj/ see §§ 1.5.1 d and 1.5.2.)

The ME labio-velar semivowel /w/, as in *wash*, goes back to OE /w/, and its incidence was increased by the adoption of words with ONF /w-/ (= ModFr /g-/), e.g. *war, ward*, but it was also considerably reduced by the sixteenth-century loss of /w/ in the initial cluster /wr/, as in *write*, retained by educated speakers until the seventeenth century, or by Middle English loss between a consonant and a back vowel, as in *thwōng > thōng* 'thong', *sword, sworn, two, quoth, who*, etc., in some of which there has been fluctuation between retention and loss of /w/ since early Modern English.

The opposite tendency to insert a glide /w/ before the long back vowels /o:/ and /ɔ:/ (i.e., to over-labialize the first part of the vowel) began about 1400 and was geographically widespread. From the late sixteenth century there was a strong reaction against these pronunciations, considered vulgar or dialectal, but they were not completely eliminated from educated speech (possibly because they responded to a natural phonetic process). Thus the originally vulgar and dialectal /wɔn/ > /wɔn/ made its way into careful speech about 1700 and ousted normal /o:n/ < /ɔ:n/ (OE *ān*) in *one* and *once*, but not in *alone, only*, etc. Its eventual adoption "was certainly aided by the usefulness of a distinction in pronunciation between *one* and *own*", from which "extension to *once* would naturally follow" (Dobson 1957: 994); since *alone, only*, etc. are not liable to similar confusion, they have the reflex of the seventeenth-century educated pronunciation. Dobson may be right, but we cannot dismiss the possibility of

just another instance of what Jones (1989: *passim*) correctly labels as "patchy" application of phonological processes in English.

The incidence of ModE /w/ was altered also by the simplification of the initial cluster /hw/ (< OE /xw/ as in *hwael* 'whale') – which began in the twelfth century in the south and southeast Midlands and particularly in vulgar London speech – either to /w/ or, by assimilation, to the labio-velar spirant /ɱ/. Older /hw/ and newer /ɱ/ seem to have coexisted, probably as diaphonic variants, though /hw/ was favoured in early Modern English. However, both of them were the rule in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century educated speech, /w/ being considered a vulgarity until the mid-eighteenth century (Dobson 1957: §414).

2. Conclusions

This (necessarily synthetic) examination of the ME phonological level can now be used to try to draw some conclusions on the salient characteristics of phonological development in English and on some aspects of linguistic theory.

2.1. It is self-evident that present-day Standard English has a considerable number of pronunciations of vulgar or dialectal origin (generally eastern), as in the following few examples:

- a) rounding of the reflex of ME /a/ after /w/, as in *want*, in itself a natural process (see also § 2.3.h), is of eastern origin;
- b) lowering of the reflex of ME /o/ to /a/, which was operative in careful speech in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, was of eastern origin and inconsistently seems to have been accepted only in *Gad* and *strap*;
- c) ModE /ɑ:/ < ME /er/, as in *star*, *arrant*, *yard*, *parson* (beside the differentiated *person*), etc., is clearly of vulgar origin;
- d) the new realizations /æ/ for ME /a/, and /ɒ/ for ME /o/ were vulgar or dialectal in the sixteenth century, but have regularly been accepted into Standard English;
- e) the lowering influence of /r/ on the preceding vowels, possibly due to relevant changes in the articulation of this consonant which have made it phonetically vowel-like, was common in the late fourteenth century in vulgar types of London speech;
- f) /hw/ > /w/, as in *where*, *what*, *when*, etc., was current in vulgar London speech from the twelfth century onwards;
- g) the monophthongization of the reflex of ME /aʊ/ to /a:/ in late Middle English, as in *danger*, *change*, etc., is of lower-class origin;
- h) lowering of ME /ʊ/ to /e/, as in *lemon*, etc. – fluctuation between the reflexes of ME /ʊ/ and /e/ was still widespread in early Modern English – was of

eastern origin and, through vulgar London speech, was occasionally accepted also into educated English.

2.2. Inconsistence in the acceptance of changes is so obvious that scholars have spoken of some developments as "chance" or "patchy" application of phonological processes, as in these few RP instances:

- a) *father* and *clasp* have /ɑ:/, but *lather*, *Mass*, *asp*, *hasp*, etc. vary between /ɑ:/ and /æ/;
- b) *again* and *against* have both /e/ and /æ/, *either* and *neither* have both /a/ and /i:/;
- c) voicing of final /t/ to /ð/ has been accepted in *knowledge*; *ostrich*, *Greenwich*, etc. still vary, and some words (e.g. *Ipswich*) have preserved /t/;
- d) there is fluctuation between /ju:/ and /u:/ in *suit*, *lute*, *enthusiasm*, etc. with the latter phoneme showing a tendency to prevail;
- e) *clerk*, *heart*, *starve*, *carve*, etc. have RP /ɑ:/ < ME /ar/ < /er/, but *earl*, *earth*, *swerve*, etc. have not been affected by this change and have /ð:/;
- f) in *woman*, original /u/ was rounded and retracted to ME /ʊ/ after /w/, but in the plur. *women* the change has not operated;
- g) /w/ developed before ME /ɔ:/ has been accepted in *one*, *once*, but not in *only* and *alone*.

2.3. Of course natural processes have operated also in English, as in the following few examples:

- a) retention of /ʊ/ in labial contexts, as in *pull*, *bush*, *wood*, etc.;
- b) the lowering influence of eModE /r/ was due to the low position of the tongue when producing it and inevitably led to the insertion of /ð/ especially after high vowels and diphthongs;
- c) raising of ME /ɔ:/ to /o:/, as in *womb*, etc., is of course due to the labial quality of the preceding /w/;
- d) insertion of inorganic /p/ between /m/ and a following voiceless consonant, as in *empty* (OE *āem[e]tig*) and *glimpse* (OE **glimsian*), or of /d/ between /n/ and /r/, as in *thunder* (OE *pūnr-*), or of /b/ between /m/ and /l/, as in *thimble* (OE *pym[e]l*);
- e) unvoicing of final consonants, which seems to be a general tendency of many languages, has operated also in English, though less extensively than elsewhere; the most remarkable consequence is the change /ð/ > /θ/, as in *smooth*, *beneath*, *both*, etc.;
- f) loss of consonants in several phonetic contexts, due to articulatory difficulties, as, e.g., /d/ in *handsome*, /w/ and /k/ in the initial clusters /wr/ and /kn/, or /x/ in the initial clusters /xn, xr, xl/;

- g) insertion of /ʊ/ before [ɪ] in words like *fall, walk*, etc.;
- h) assimilation, i.e. conditioned phonetic realization of phonemes owing to the neighbouring context, as in ME /wa/ > RP /wɒ/, as in *swan, quantity, want*, etc., except when ME /a/ was followed by /g, k, ŋ/, as in *wag, wax, twang*. As claimed by Jespersen (1909: § 10.95), /æ/ in *swam* is of course due to morphological analogy with the verbs of the same class. Other instances are RP /ɪ/ < ME /e/, as in *England, English, ink, wing*, etc., or RP /ʌ/ < ME /ʊ/ by raising of ME /o/ followed by /ŋ/, as in *among, monger*, etc.

On the whole, it seems possible to conclude that the history of English phonology more than the regular development of a phonological level into another has shown the progressive acceptance into Standard English of pronunciations of vulgar or dialectal origin, initially often labelled as "barbarous", "offensive", "disgusting", etc., so that, instead of a strictly linguistic evolution, there have been successive "switches" from one type of speech to another; the same seems to apply to contemporary English as Wells' remark quoted above clearly points out.

2.4. As has repeatedly been stressed (see, e.g., Samuels 1972, Labov 1994, etc.) internal factors cannot easily and successfully be separated from social factors; in particular "linguistic change is not a change in individual habits, but rather the diffusion of new individual forms into the wider community, and the adoptions of these forms as new and binding conventions" (Labov 1994: 47, n. 4). In England for over two centuries competing sounds have been associated with the social values characteristic of the speakers using them, and, as we have seen above, the development of Modern English phonology has apparently been strongly characterized by "changes from below", which appear first in vernacular speech and which as a rule represent the operation of internal linguistic factors brought about by natural processes (e.g. easier articulation, etc.). As Dobson (1957) has unquestionably demonstrated, the basic model for sound change in early Modern English (as it is generally) was a "generational" one and, as can only be expected, phonetic change diverging from the written standard and generally originating in colloquial and popular speech took a long time to be generally accepted; consequently, different realizations coexisted for long periods and not rarely the selection has been word by word. The situation can therefore be represented like this

$$A > \left\{ \begin{array}{c} A \\ B \end{array} \right\} > B$$

and shows once again that "The background of all language change is variability and heterogeneity" (Nevalainen *et al.* 1996: 15), or, more precisely, that "Not all

variability and heterogeneity in language structure involves change; but all change involves variability and heterogeneity" (Weinreich *et al.* 1968: 188). Inevitably a question has to be asked: "Where does this variability and heterogeneity come from?" A reasonable answer is that all linguistic levels (even if not always regularly) depend more or less on both internal and extralinguistic factors. The fact is that much linguistic research still concentrates on the description of changes and excludes *a priori* any concern for their causes, though of course not all linguistic changes are the result of extralinguistic factors, and even when they are it is not always easy or possible to determine how and to what extent the extrasystemic component is responsible for them. Just to take an example, the "diphthong shift" (Wells 1982: I, § 3.4.2 and II, § 4.2.4) doubtless shows that while there are no internal constraints on, for instance, /e/ to have its tonic element lowered to /a/, or on /o/ to have its tonic element raised to /o/ (see, e.g., Cockney /a/ in *name* and /o/ in *boy*), as a matter of fact this is prevented in RP by socio- and ethnolectal factors which belong to both the level of the individual and to that of the group and which, as is well-known, are easily shifting, not rarely quite unpredictably. It is beyond question that similar considerations apply also to older periods in the history of English; as Dobson wrote, "Nothing is more false than to regard modern Standard English as a uniform dialect developing solely in accordance with its own sound-laws" (1969: 425); on the contrary, "a historical phonology of Modern English must be much more complex than is commonly realized; it has to trace various levels of speech, and make allowance for periods – sometimes long periods – of overlapping development" (Dobson 1969: 427). In view of the coexistence of a large number of variants in the early Modern period, "the relative uniformity and the stability of the educated language was clearly not a matter of chance" (Dobson 1969: 427), and the elimination of some of those variants "must inevitably, and quite properly, have been a conscious and indeed often arbitrary process" (Dobson 1969: 427). It seems therefore unacceptable to maintain that "we must consider language to be ontologically independent of (any particular generation of) speakers" (Lass 1981: 270) and that "change ... is not something that speakers do, but something that *happens* to the semiotic systems they use" (Lass 1981: 271-2; emphasis mine), since, in Martinet's words, "a language changes because it functions" (1981: 303), and "functioning and changing are, in fact, one and the same phenomenon" (1981: 305); in other words, change and use are inextricably intertwined (despite Lass' idea that language change is opposed to use: 1981: 272) and this implicitly means that change *is* something that speakers do. Change is therefore not at all "purely arbitrary ... meaningless and non-functional" (Lass 1981: 266), because like the verb "happens" above, it seems to me to evoke something accidental, totally

transcendent which language "is heir to"; but of course this does not seem to be the case.

If "in change ... there are no 'purposes' except those of the language itself" (Lass 1981: 272), for instance how is /t/ in Engl *stream* (< IE **sreu-*) to be explained? Or given Gr *άνήρ*, how can we explain a form like *άνδρός* (< **άνρός*)? If considered from a purely formal point of view, the latter looks very much like a sheer, wholly unjustified complication of the morphological paradigm whose "purpose" (or cause) would be, both synchronically and diachronically, without any logical explanation. Even if the consequence is the addition of articulatory gestures in the spoken chain, this epenthetic process has an obvious articulatory teleology, and, as Wurzel has written, changes in morphology are "mainly due to phonological changes controlled by phonological and not morphological naturalness" (69).

I would like to conclude, therefore, that language is a semiotic system used for communication and cognition in a speech community in historically determined contexts and situations, which are responsible for changes in the system, or, in other words, "it is the uses of language that, over tens of thousands of generations, have shaped the system. Language has evolved to satisfy human needs; and the way it is organized is functional with respect to these needs – it is not arbitrary" (Halliday 1985: xiii).

References

- Bertacca A., 1995, *Il Great Vowel Shift. Dalla fenomenologia dei dati ai modelli di interpretazione*, Il Calamo, Roma.
- Cercignani F., 1981, *Shakespeare's Works and Elizabethan Pronunciation*, O.U.P., Oxford.
- Dobson E.J., 1957, *English Pronunciation 1500-1700*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Dobson E.J., 1969, "Early Modern Standard English", in R. Lass. Holt (ed.), *Approaches to English Historical Linguistics*, Rinehart and Winston, New York, pp. 419-439.
- Gil A., 1621, *Logonomia Anglica*, London.
- Gimson A.C., 1974, *An Introduction to the Pronunciation of English*, Edward Arnold, London.
- Halliday M.A.K., 1985, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, Edward Arnold, London.
- Jespersen O., 1909, *A Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles*, Part I, Carl Winter, Heidelberg.
- Jones C., 1989, *A History of English Phonology*, Longman, London.
- Jordan R., 1968, *Handbuch der mitttelenglischen Grammatik*, Carl Winter, Heidelberg.

- Kurath H., 1956, "The Loss of Long Consonants and the Rise of Voiced Fricatives in Middle English", in *Language*, 32, pp. 435-445.
- Labov W., 1994, *Principles of Linguistic Change. Internal factors*, Blackwell, Oxford/Cambridge (MA).
- Lass R., 1981, "Explaining Sound Change: The Future of an Illusion", in W.U. Dressler, O.E. Pfeiffer and J.R. Rennison (eds), *Phonologica 1980*, Institut für Sprachwissenschaft, Innsbruck, pp. 257-273.
- Martinet A., 1981, "Function and Communicative Relevancy", in W.U. Dressler, O.E. Pfeiffer and J.R. Rennison (eds), *Phonologica 1980*, Institut für Sprachwissenschaft, Innsbruck, pp. 303-305.
- Meigret L., 1550, *Le traité de la grammaire française*, F.J. Hausmann (éd.), Gunter Narr Verlag, Tübingen (1980).
- Nevalainen T. and Raumolin-Brunberg H. (eds), 1996, *Sociolinguistics and Language History*, Rodopi, Amsterdam/Atlanta.
- Samuels M.L., 1972, *Linguistic Evolution*, C.U.P., Cambridge.
- Weinreich U., Labov W. and Herzog M.I., 1968, "Empirical Foundations for a Theory of Language Change", in W.P. Lehmann and Y. Malkiel (eds), *Directions for Historical Linguistics*, University of Texas Press, Austin, pp. 95-189.
- Wells J.C., 1982, *Accents of English*, C.U.P., Cambridge.
- Wurzel W.U., 1987, "System-dependent morphological naturalness in inflection", in *Leitmotifs in Natural Morphology*, Benjamins, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, pp. 59-96.
- Wyld H.C., 1936, *A History of Modern Colloquial English*, Blackwell, Oxford.