Northern England and the Great Vowel Shift: A dialect geographical approach

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The defining change in the transition from Middle English (ME) to Early Modern English, the Great (English) Vowel Shift (GVS) is by now a well-studied phenomenon. However, decades of theoretical debate have failed to produce a consensus on the phonological mechanism underlying the shift. This paper demonstrates how the tools of dialect geography may be brought to bear on historical data, showing how dialectal differences in the outcomes of the GVS may inform our understanding of the shift itself. In doing so, I offer an alternative explanation for the type of dialect data that has been cited as evidence for a lack of unity in the GVS.

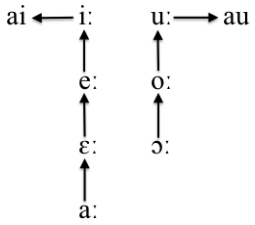

Figure 1: The Great Vowel Shift
(Jespersen 1909, in Lass 1976)

As displayed in Figure 1, the GVS affected the ME long vowel system. Most past work has claimed that it proceeded as a unitary change with a coherent internal structure (Luick 1896, Jespersen 1909, Lass 1976), but some have called attention to irregularities in dialect data in order to challenge these theories (notably Stockwell and Minkova's 1988 "dialect problem"). I argue that the apparent inconsistencies in the Northern English dialect outcomes of the GVS result from the piecemeal linguistic diffusion of the shift to the North, and as such, do not pose serious problems for a unitary model of the shift. In this argument I follow Dinkin (to appear), who draws on Labov's (2007) characterization of the differing roles of transmission and diffusion in language change in order to explain how the structural relationships in unitary changes can break down in diffusion to other speech communities. Dinkin uses data from the Northern Cities Shift, a change ongoing in the large northern cities in the United States, to observe the irregular effects of diffusion in real time.

I use updated mapping techniques to illuminate the distribution of the existing dialect data (drawn from Kolb's 1966 *Phonological Atlas of the Northern Region*), mapping entire vowel classes rather than individual words (Figure 2 below). These methods afford a more comprehensive view of the vowel system, as well as closer scrutiny of the patterns of diffusion, including previously obscured nesting effects of the variants. Using both detailed maps and summary tables to illustrate the dependency relationships (or lack thereof) between the parts of the GVS, I show that despite the lack of uniformity in the outcomes across the region, pieces of the shift are clearly in evidence in the North. For example, the shifts from /e:/ to /i:/ and /i:/ to /ai/ occurred fairly uniformly across much of the North, but the same is not true of the back vowel changes. Furthermore, distance and geographical boundaries prove useful in predicting how advanced and coherent the GVS is in any given location. By applying arguments from recent sociolinguistic studies to historical data, this research presents evidence that arguments against the unity of the GVS that rely upon dialect differences are ill-founded.

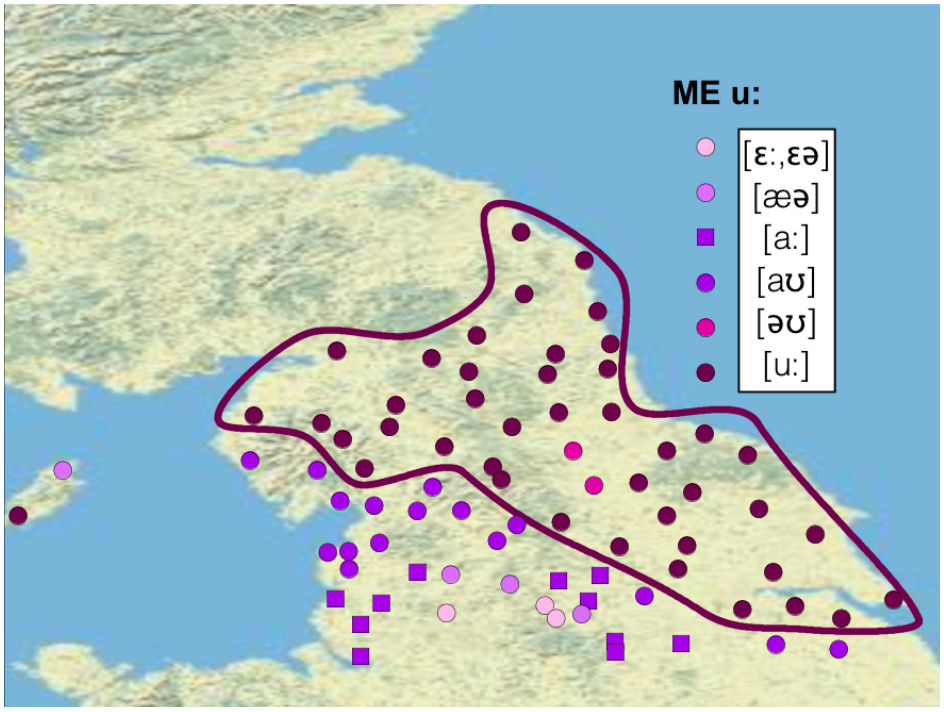

Figure 2: Most common reflexes of ME u:, based on five words from Kolb (1966)

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