The Great East Anglian Merger Mystery

Peter Trudgill
University of Lausanne

It is not at all unusual for linguists to work on their own dialects, and indeed there are obvious benefits to be gained from so doing. On the other hand, it is probably less usual for linguists to focus on their own speech in the context of work in historical linguistics. I should probably explain, therefore, that the focus in this paper is particularly narrowly on my own speech, since it seems probable that the phenomenon with which it deals is both historically and geographically very restricted. The suggestion is that, looking at the history of the English language as a whole, my own dialect is in one respect very much in a minority and rather peculiar.

1. THE MYSTERY

It is well known that Middle English had two pairs of vowels, one back rounded, the other front unrounded, consisting in each case of a monophthong and diphthong, which have become merged in Modern English. The two pairs of vowels, and the mergers they have undergone, are often represented in the literature as follows :

	ME		ModEng
home	ɔː		
		>	oʊ
grow	ɔu		

gate	ɛː			
		>		eɪ
day	ɛi			

/ɔː/ descended from OE /ɑː/ as in *home*. /ɔu/ descended from OE [o:w] as in *grow*, [oɣ] as in *bow*, and /ɑː/ before /l/ as in *old*. /ɛ:/ descended from lengthened OE /a/ as in *gate*. And /ɛi/ descended from OE /æj/ as in *day* as well as Old Norse /ai/ as in *they* and Mediaeval French /ai/ as in *plain*. There are obvious parallels between these two symmetrical mergers, both of them involving a low-mid monophthong and a rising diphthong with a low-mid first element, and the mergers are often described as resulting from the same process and as having occurred simultaneously. Strang writes, for example :

> Two old de-centring diphthongs [were] lost.... The present homophony between such words as ail/ale, hail/hale, originated in the early 17th century, when an earlier diphthong (in the words now spelt with ai) levelled and fell together with the antecedent of Present-day English /ei/. A similar coalescence affected the corresponding back diphthong and long vowel, resulting in the homophony of slow/sloe, grown/groan.
>
> (1970 : 113)

Given what we know about the nature of vowel systems, and the nature of change in vowel systems, no historical phonologist will find this symmetrical development in the least surprising. Equally unsurprising is the fact that some varieties of English in the British Isles have failed to undergo these mergers. A number of varieties in, for example, parts of Wales, Yorkshire and Scotland still preserve *ail* and *ale, slow* and *sloe* with distinct vowels (see Wells, 1982). What is surprising, however, is the situation which obtains in my own speech. In my dialect of English, *ail* and *ale* are homophonous, while *slow* and *sloe* are not. My form of English, that of a lower-middle-class person born in the city of Norwich in the 1940s, has undergone the /e:/-/ei/ merger but not the /o:/-/ou/ merger. I have *ail* and *ale* with /ei/ = [æi]; but *slow* with /ou/ = [ʌu]; and *sloe* with /u:/ = [ʊu]. The obvious question, given the tendency of phonological systems to maintain or move towards symmetry, is then : why is this ? What factors in my dialect have led it to stand

out from other dialects of English by behaving in this unusual non-symmetrical way and having one of the mergers but not the other ?

In what follows, I suggest a number of possible answers to this question. In view of the probability of multiple causation being involved in most linguistic changes, it is possible that all of them have played a role in promoting the one merger and inhibiting the other.

2. OVERCROWDING

One factor in particular may well have favoured and accelerated the merger of the front vowels in my dialect. Earlier stages of East Anglian English do preserve both pairs of vowels as distinct : this was and to a certain extent still is true of people (a) older than me; (b) more rural than me; and (c) more working-class than me. In these forms of East Anglian English, the *ail/ale* distinction is effected with /ei/ = [æi] versus /e:/ = [eː].

The vowel quality associated in these older varieties with items in the *ale* set provides us with one clue as to why the front merger may have been favoured over the back merger. Late 19th century and early 20th century East Anglian English seems to have acquired a perhaps undesirable plethora of lexical sets employing long mid-front vowels. There were :

(1) The /e:/ in *ale, name, gate, face* we have already been discussing.

(2) The /eə/, now /ɛ:/ in the lexical set of *here, near, idea*.

(3) The /eə/ or /ɛə/, now /ɛː/, in the lexical set of *hair, pear, there*. (Pairs such as *here, hair* are now homophonous in the modern English of Norwich, see Trudgill, 1974; Trudgill and Foxcroft 1978).

(4) The /ɛ:/ in the lexical set of words such as *bean, seat* which had Middle English long open e. There is some considerable evidence (see Kökeritz, 1932), especially from the fieldwork carried out by Guy Lowman in the 1930s (see Trudgill, 1974), that as late as the 1930s traditional East Anglian dialect pronunciations of *bean* etc. had this vowel. Certainly, even in the 1950s people were familiar with this pronunciation in a small number of words, such as *creature* /krɛ:tə/.

(5) The /ɛ:/ that arises from the smoothing (see Wells, 1982) of /i:/ plus /ə/: *seeing* /si:ən/ > /sɛ:n/ (Trudgill, 1974). In the modern

Norwich dialect this phonological process applies across both morpheme boundaries and word boundaries : *Can we see it ?* [kṇ wɪi sɛ:ʔ].

(6) The /æ:/ that occurred in a small number of words with word-final Middle English /ɛi/, for example *say* /sæ:/ (see Kökeritz, 1932). These items now have /ei/.

(7)The /æ:/ that occurred in the lexical set of *laugh, bath, grass*, for example /læ:f/ (see Trudgill, 1974). In the modern dialect this latter lexical set now has the /a:/ that was formerly found only in the lexical set of *part, car* etc.

(8) The /æ:/ that arises from the smoothing (see Wells, 1982) of /ei/ plus /ə/: *playing* /plæiən/ > /plæ:n/ (Trudgill, 1974). In the modern Norwich dialect this phonological process applies across both morpheme boundaries and word boundaries : *Can we play it ?* [kṇ wɪi plæ:ʔ].

This degree of overcrowding in phonological space may well have favoured the early movement of words from the *ale, bane* set to the vowel /æi/ under the influence of neighbouring dialects of the counties nearer London, thereby reducing the number of vowel phonemes in this phonological area by one. No such pressures were present in the case of the back vowel, where the lexical set of *boat* had no near phonological neighbours.

3. THE RAISING OF /ɔ:/

One factor which may have disfavoured or inhibited the simultaneous merger of the back vowels is that explanations based on system symmetry simply may not be applicable in this case. The development of the modern English /ou/ vowel is generally described as having taken the form /ɔ:/ > /o:/ > /ou/, with many varieties undergoing further *diphthong shift* (Wells, 1982), also described as the *Southern Shift* (Labov, 1994 : 201), giving more open first elements. More conservative varieties, on the other hand, such as those in the north of England and Scotland, preserve earlier monophthongal pronunciations such as /ɔ:/ or /o:/. This is paralleled by the development of the modern vowel /ei/, which underwent the development /ɛ:/ > /e:/ > /eɪ/ . Once again, the same more conservative varieties preserve, in parallel, earlier monophthongal

stages, while the same more innovating varieties have undergone, also in parallel, lowering of the first element of the diphthong.

In northern East Anglia, on the other hand, /o:/, having raised from /ɔ:/, then developed, for whatever reason, into an even higher vowel. Thus in the lexical set of *boat* we find, as noted above, a close back rounded vowel approaching /u:/. Thus there is no. longer any phonetic symmetry to be found between the original mid-front monophthong of *gate* and the now high-back vowel of *boat*. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that the parallel developments found in other varieties of English have ceased to occur in my dialect.

4. SYSTEM SYMMETRY

A further explanation may perhaps be found by looking at the East Anglian rising diphthong system as a whole, concentrating in particular on the lexical sets of *boot* etc. and *boat* etc. In common with large numbers of other varieties of modern English, the raising of Middle English long close **o** from /o:/ to /u:/ has been followed by fronting to /ʉ:/ = [ʉʉ]. Given that the lexical sets of *boat* and *know*, as we have already discussed, have remained distinct, and that the vowel of *boat* has been raised to /u:/, this gives the vowel systems of speakers like myself a symmetry absent from the systems of most English speakers at this point. The rising diphthong system consists of four diphthongs rising to the high front unrounded position, and four rising to the high back or central rounded position. The system can be portrayed as follows :

bee	/iː/ = [ɪi]	boot	/ʉː/= [ʉʉ]
bay	/ei/ = [æi]	bout	/au/= [æʉ]
boy	/oi/= [ʊi]	boat	/uː/= [ʊu]
buy	/ai/ = [ʌi]	bowl	/ou/= [ʌu]

It is possible that a system with this degree of symmetry is more inclined to stability, and thus more likely to resist losing one element of the system (/u:/) as a result of a merger of the lexical sets of *boat, road* and *bowl, know*.

5. TRANSFER FROM /ʉ:/ TO /u:/ AND OTHER COMPLICATIONS

A further factor worthy of our consideration at this point in our treatment of the failure of the back-vowel merger is the following. The merger of the two front vowels seems to have been a relatively straightforward dialect contact process. The merger took place as the result of influence from neighbouring dialects and from RP, during the course of this century, by a process of *transfer* (see Trudgill and Foxcroft, 1978). That is, there was no phonetic merger of the two vowels as such. Rather, words were transferred individually from the one lexical set to the other i.e. from the lexical set of /e:/ to the lexical set of /ei/, until no words descended from Middle English long **a** were left in the set.

One reason why a similar development has not occurred in the case of the back rounded vowels may have been that, as a dialect contact process, it would have been a great deal more complicated. The reason for this is that the correspondences between East Anglian dialects and other dialects of English are far from straightforward at this point. In RP we find the following pattern of distribution of lexical items over vowels :

/ju:/	*beauty* etc.
/u:/	*rude, spoon, roof, room, soon, boot* etc.
/ou/	*boat, home, no, know* etc.
/ʊ/	*pull* etc.

In my own speech, the distribution of these same lexical items is as follows :

/ʉ:/	*beauty, rude, soon*
/u:/	*spoon, boot, boat, no* (adverbial)
/ou/	*know, no* (negative particle)
/ʊ/	*pull, home, roof, room*

The above, however, represents a considerable simplification of the actual situation in the dialect as a whole, especially when social and stylistic features are brought into consideration :
(a) Items such as *beauty, pure, new* etc. typically demonstrate *yod-dropping* (Wells, 1982), thus /bʉ:ti:/, /pɜ:/ etc., but alternative pronunciations with /j/ also occur.

(b) Items such as *spoon, afternoon* also have older pronunciations with /ʊ/.

(c) Items such as *boot, moon* typically have /u:/ in middle-class speech, but /ʉ:/ in working-class speech. There seems to have been a tendency here to transfer, particularly in middle-class speech, words such as *boot* from /ʉ:/ to the /u:/ which was already available in the lexical set of *boat*, probably under the influence of the back /u:/ of earlier RP.

(d) Items such as *school, fool*, with an /l/ following the vowel, typically have /u:/ in modern speech, but /ʉ:/ in more traditional varieties. In this case, that is, transfer has occurred also lower down the social scale. Thus some speakers, like me, have pairs such as *boot* and *boat*, and *fool* and *foal* as homophones; others have only pairs such as *fool* and *foal* as homophones; and others have, or at least had, no homophones in this area at all.

(e) *No* has two different pronunciations in the modern dialect depending on its grammatical function : *No, that's no good* /nou ðæs nu: gʊd/. Earlier forms of the dialect had both forms of the word as /nu:/.

(f) Words descended from Middle English long open o, except those ending in open syllables, underwent shortening to /ʊ/ in the traditional dialect. Different speakers of different ages and from different backgrounds variably retain different amounts of this shortening. In my own speech I employ the short vowel in a small set of words including *home, aerodrome,* but only in informal styles. Older and/or more working-class speakers in Norwich have /ʊ/ in a much larger set of words including notably *road, stone, coat, whole, bone* (see Trudgill, 1974).

(g) Words such as *proof, roof, hoof* most often have /ʊ/, but pronunciations with /ʉ:/ do occur.

(h) Words such as *room, broom* have /ʊ/ in areas to the south of Norwich, while local dialects to the north of the city tend to have /ʉ:/. In the city itself, distribution is according to social class (see Trudgill, 1986).

It should be apparent that this represents a considerable degree of complication for anyone wishing to change their East Anglian vowel system in the direction of RP or some other south of England variety. Indeed, hypercorrections are not infrequently heard, particularly in the lexical set of *boot*. Speakers changing local /u:/ to /ou/ in *boot* may also erroneously extend this correspondence giving,

say, *move* as /mouv/. It is quite possible that this complicated set of correspondences has had a delaying effect on the implementation of the merger in question.

Given the above factors favouring the front vowel merger and/or disfavouring the back vowel merger, we can claim that it is perhaps not surprising that the one has occurred and the other has not.

6. PROGNOSIS

One reason for concentrating in this perhaps overly egocentric way on my own variety of English is that it seems very probable that of all the millions of people who have been, are and will be native speakers of English, only a very few generations of speakers from a rather small geographical area of northern East Anglia may have had this particular characteristic. Nearly all other speakers would appear either to have had neither merger or both mergers. And it seems very likely, moreover, that the state of affairs currently obtaining in northern East Anglia may be rather temporary.

While speakers of my grandparents' generation had neither of the two mergers, at least in their youth, there is considerable evidence that it will not be very long before the back vowel merger does in fact take place in this part of the English-speaking world also. Trudgill and Foxcroft (1978) showed that the back vowel merger is gradually spreading northwards across East Anglia, in a clear pattern of geographical diffusion. The most likely scenario would be for the merger to have gone to completion within the next fifty years or so in the whole of East Anglia.

One conclusion we can draw from this is that the observation of linguistic changes from afar may often present us with a much tidier picture than observation from close up. In other words, the early 17th century mergers discussed by Strang and others as having occurred in parallel in central southern England and elsewhere may well themselves not have occurred exactly simultaneously. For us, looking at the results of the change from a distance of three or four hundred years, the symmetry of the patterning seems evident, and the parallels between the two mergers too close to be a coincidence. If, however, we had been able to follow the progress of the mergers as they actually happened, as we have been able to do to a certain extent

in modern East Anglia, the 17th century picture too might well have seemed a good deal more untidy, complicated and assymmetrical.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

KÖKERITZ, H. (1932) : *The phonology of the Suffolk dialect*, Uppsala : Uppsala University.

LABOV, W. (1994) : *Principles of linguistic change: internal factors*, Oxford : Blackwell.

STRANG, B. (1970) : *A history of English*, London : Methuen.

TRUDGILL, P. (1974) : *The social differentiation of English in Norwich*, Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.

— (1986). *Dialects in contact*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

TRUDGILL, P., FOXCROFT, T. (1978) : On the sociolinguistics of vocalic mergers : transfer and approximation in East Anglia, in P. Trudgill (ed.), *Sociolinguistic patterns in British English*, London : Edward Arnold, pp. 69-79.

WELLS, J. C. (1982) : *Accents of English*, Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.