1 Approaching the changes

1.1 The standard descriptions

It is widely acknowledged among historical linguists that between the ninth and the thirteenth centuries English stressed vowels underwent widespread quantity changes. The established way of describing these alterations is in terms of four distinct sound changes. The first of them, which has become known as Homorganic Lengthening (from now on HOL), seems to have made short vowels long, if they were followed by certain consonant groups (namely: mb, nd, ng, ld, rd, rs, rn, rd) – unless those groups were themselves followed by a consonant. It turned bindan into bindan, cild into cild, or climban into climban, to give a few examples. The second change is supposed to have made long vowels short, if they were followed by a group of two consonants. (Homorganic groups did not trigger the change, however; nor did groups that occurred at the beginning of words, such as: pl, pr, cl or tr.) This change, which is called Shortening before Consonant Clusters (SHOCC), is taken to have been behind such changes as that of kēpte into kepte, dūst into dust or fīsta into fīsta. By the third change, then, long vowels are supposed to have been shortened if they occurred in the antepenultimate syllables of wordforms: superne and erende are thus said to have replaced superne and erende, for example. This change is commonly called Trisyllabic Shortening (TRISH). The fourth process, finally, is believed to have lengthened short vowels, if no consonant followed them within the same syllable. It is said to have turned maken into māken, weven into wēven or hopen into hōpen and is known as Open Syllable Lengthening (OSL).

Ever since this type of account was first brought forth linguists have felt that it was not really adequate. In particular, it has been felt that the changes had more in common with each other than their description in terms of four independent rules makes explicit. After all, it was always the quantity of vowels that was altered and all changes seem to have occurred during the
2 Approaching the changes

period that can be regarded as the transition between Old and Middle English. This, it was assumed, had to be more than just coincidence.

Indicatively, it was the scholar who was mainly responsible for the description that has become the acknowledged standard who first attempted to overthrow it. He proposed the view that all the four changes were just reflections of a single underlying tendency, namely the adjustment of a vowel’s quantity to its prosodic environment.¹

Luick proposed two factors. The first was that English stressed syllables adjusted their size to the number of unstressed syllables with which they had to share the ‘space’ of one word: thus, if a syllable had a word of its own to inhabit, it would grow to fill it out completely; if it had a ‘roommate’, so to speak, it would have to watch its waistline more carefully, but could still afford to grow to a certain size; if it had to share a word with two or more syllables, however, it was not allowed to grow but, on the contrary, would even have to lose weight. The second factor was that the length of vowels depended – in a similar way – on the number of consonants that followed them within the same syllable: a vowel would tend to lengthening, unless there were one or more consonants squeezed between it and the beginning of the next syllable. Of course, Karl Luick did not express himself quite as metaphorically when he proposed his theory,² but in essence it was the same. Clearly, Luick’s proposal appears to be a very clever and elegant answer to our problem: each of the quantity changes can be derived from one of the two underlying principles: TRISH could be regarded as following from the first, while SHOCC, and OSL could be interpreted as effects of the second. Although HOL does not quite seem to fit (the neighbourhood of two consonants would suggest shortening), it can be argued – as did Luick – that the apparently biconsonantal clusters that caused it did in fact not weigh more than a single consonant.

1.2 Why unification has failed so far

In spite of its ingenuity, however, Luick’s attempt at unifying the description of English changes of vowel quantity did not make it into the handbooks.¹ The main reason for this was, I believe, that Luick’s ideas were incompatible with the linguistic theory he himself followed, namely that of the Neogrammarians. There, phonological change had to be handled by so-called sound laws that applied to sharply delimited classes of speech sounds and altered them under strictly defined phonological conditions. Hold this
theory, then, against the tendency that Luick proposed for unifying the description of English vowel quantity changes: first, the class of sounds that were affected was not homogeneous (it included both long and short vowels, second, it involved two types of change (lengthening and shortening), and third, there was no class under which the highly heterogeneous environments that triggered the quantity changes could possibly be subsumed. In other words, it simply could not be expressed in terms of such a single law. Within the Neogrammarians paradigm, therefore, the four changes that I described at the beginning were simply as far as one could get.

However, while this explains why Luick did not manage to translate his ideas into a theory in his days, it begs the question why his ideas were not taken up when Neogrammarians became outdated. There are two reasons for that, it seems to me.

First, shortly after Luick’s hypothesis had been proposed most of the concepts on which it rested came to be questioned and re-interpreted radically during and after the structuralist revolution of linguistic theory. Soon none of them had the meaning it had had in Luick’s days anymore. In fact, some have been re-approached and redefined in so many different ways that today one cannot use them without making clear within the framework of which version of which theory one wants them to be understood.

The concept that has probably suffered most in this way is the syllable.4 Defining it has always been problematical, and most of the early definitions were so intuitive and ad hoc that for some time it was even thought best to eliminate the concept from phonological theory altogether.5 Although recently the syllable has been re-admitted to phonological descriptions, the ways in which the concept is approached differ markedly from the views held in Luick’s days.

The fates of other, apparently basic concepts have been similarly turbulent, although they were never really wiped off the terminological map. Thus, the concepts speech sound,6 (vowel) quantity7 or sound change8 have been redefined so often that Luick, or anybody who takes the terms to have their common-sense everyday meanings, would fail to understand what contemporary linguists are referring to when they use them.

I shall of course have to cope with this problem myself when I employ – rather than only mention – the terms. Meanwhile, just one point will be made: if one subtracts those concepts from Luick’s brilliant proposition, all that remains is the uncomfortable feeling that Luick might have hit upon
4  Approaching the changes

some truth and that we are unable today to decipher the symbols in which he encoded it. At the same time, deciphering Luick’s code, or trying to carry his approach over into a contemporary theoretical framework, would amount to at least as much work as tackling the problem from a new angle, altogether. Therefore, a new attempt to answer the question whether and how the four great changes of vowel quantity that occurred in the transitional period between Old and Middle English were related to each other, may as well start from scratch.

The second reason why I think that Luick’s proposal has never been successfully modernized might appear almost paradoxical after what has just been said. It lies in the fact that in spite of all theoretical innovation there are ways in which Neogrammarians ideas do govern contemporary linguistic thinking, after all. Since most post-structuralist linguistic theories were devised, in the first place, for synchronic purposes and since few survived for a long enough period without being either seriously modified or dismissed, those theories that have made it into historical linguistics have been few and those that have established themselves in this area of research even fewer. Consequently, many historical linguists have come to develop a suspicious attitude towards theoretical linguistics altogether and have focussed their energies on empirical work employing conceptual tools that are theory unspecific and compatible with linguistic common sense. Thus, diachronic correspondences between phonological entities are innocently described in terms of sound changes and recorded in terms of A became B rules. Intuitive and plausible as this approach might seem, however, it is often neglected that it is, in fact, theory laden and reflects straightforwardly the Neogrammarians ‘sound law’ approach, even though it has been stripped of its explicit theoretical status. Not figuring as a theoretical term, then, the concept tends to govern the way in which historical phonologists view their data very implicitly.

Concerning the changes of Early Middle English vowel quantity that I am investigating this means that the four sound changes that were devised in the days of Karl Luick are often regarded as the most intuitive way of organizing the data for further investigations. In fact, they are almost viewed as the pattern that the data seem to form by themselves. They are rarely interpreted as parts of a Neogrammieran theory and are therefore hardly ever questioned in principle. Taking the four sound changes for granted, however, means buying all the disadvantages of the Neogrammarian approach in a bag with the data. It follows, therefore, that a unified description of the changes of Middle English vowel quantity must
Looking beyond the established accounts: OSL deconstructed

necessarily turn out to be impossible for the same reasons as in Luick’s days. The only difference is that the impossibility will seem to lie in the ‘data’ themselves rather than in the theory.

To avoid this trap, I have therefore already tried to exercise great caution at the stage of problem definition. Instead of defining my task as trying to find the relation among four quantity changes that affected stressed vowels in Early Middle English, I have tried to find a more neutral format in which to view my data.

In the following section, then, I will analyse representative handbook accounts of OSL and try to reveal what theory-specific assumptions about sound changes are implicit in them.

1.3  Looking beyond the established accounts: OSL deconstructed

Established handbooks normally describe OSL as following: ‘In the first half of the 13th cent. – in the North already in the 12th cent. – a, e, o (vowels without high tongue position) in open accented syllables of disyllabic words were lengthened to /aː/, /ɛː/, /ɔː/’ (Jordan and Crook 1974: 47); or ‘ME short vowels, of whatever origin, were lengthened in open syllables of disyllabic forms during the thirteenth century’ (Wright 1928); or ‘In disyllables, if the accented syllable was open, the short vowels a, e, o lengthened into ā, ē, ō’ (Mossé 1952: 17).

The entities and processes which these descriptions hypothesize suggest that there existed in the thirteenth century some entities A, E and O, and that they changed their shape and were made longer. Although the process through which the change was effected is not given any definition, formulations such as ‘lengthened’ or ‘were lengthened’ suggest something uniform and simple instead of a complex interplay of different types of events. If one considers the types of events that might be concealed in the idea of sounds changing through processes, however, one will perceive a more complex picture.

The configuration of phenomena which the concept might refer to could be viewed in the following way, for example. Suppose that at some point in time before the thirteenth century, there existed a community of people who spoke (Middle) English with each other. Sometimes they would use words such as maken ‘make’, hopen ‘hope’ or bede ‘bead’. Using the words implied, of course, that they should be pronounced so that listeners could judge, from the sounds they heard, which words (or rather: meanings) were
6 Approaching the changes

intended. It is, of course, difficult to say exactly what conditions had to be
met in order for a pronunciation of maken ‘make’, hopen ‘hope’ or bede
‘bead’ to be successful. But one can safely make a couple of general
assumptions: speakers of Middle English were quite ordinary human beings.
They would, when communicating, perform sequences of articulatory
gestures, and, by the performance of these gestures, they would produce
strings of sounds that could then be clearly identified as the intended
linguistic signs. When they wanted to say bede, for instance, they would
direct their articulatory organs to perform a gesture (among others) that
caused the sound corresponding to the (e) to come out as something like an
[e], or rather, as something that could be interpreted as an /e/. The
performance of this gesture fulfilled the function of guaranteeing that
listeners would really understand that bede ‘bead’, rather than bidde ‘bid’,
bede ‘announce’ or something else was meant. Naturally, speakers could
choose how exactly they would produce this /e/-like sound, but they could
not afford to deviate too far from a certain prototype (Lüdtke (1980a: 12)
calls that prototype ‘ideale[s] artikulatorische[s] target’). If they did, they
would be misunderstood. If, for example, they failed to raise their tongues
to a certain height while articulating the vowel in the middle of bede, they
would produce a string of sounds that others might interpret as badde ‘bad’.
If, alternatively, they pushed them upwards a bit too much, their utterance
might have been received as bidde ‘beg, command’. And if they blundered
completely by pulling their tongues backwards while simultaneously raising
them (and unwittingly rounding their lips, maybe), some listeners might
have understood budde ‘bad’. Also, they might have been tempted to make
the intended /e/-like sound last just a little too long. Then, some listeners
might have thought that they wanted to say bëde ‘bid, announce (1st sg. ind.
pres.)’, instead of bede. Thus, to avoid such misunderstandings, speakers of
Middle English (just like all speakers of natural languages) had to make
sure that the sounds they produced had enough distinctive quality to
guarantee that they would not be interpreted as some different sound. Thus,
the /e/-like vowel sound produced in the articulation of bede had to have a
sufficient amount of /e/-ness, or in other words: it had to have enough of
those features that distinguish it from /ɪ/, /æ/, /ʊ/, /ɛ/ and so on. It had to be
pronounced with the tongue in a distinctly front position of distinctly
middle height and had to be maintained for a distinctly short span of time.
In terms of contemporary phonological notation, the /e/ of bede had to be:
Looking beyond the established accounts: OSL deconstructed

(1) 
\[
\begin{align*}
+\text{back} \\
+\text{front} \\
-\text{high} \\
-\text{low} \\
-\text{long}
\end{align*}
\]

Then, at some point after the thirteenth century, the situation seems to have altered: there was still a community of speakers of (Middle) English, albeit composed of different members; they still would sometimes intend to mean ‘make’, ‘hope’ or ‘bead’, and they would then use words similar to those which their predecessors had used about a hundred years earlier; but in the articulation of those words they would perform different actions to make sure that they were understood properly: particularly, when it came to the articulation of the vowels in maken, hopen or bede, they would try to maintain the gestures producing them for a distinctly long period, rather than for a distinctly short one. In other words, they would aim at an articulatory target that was different from the one their ancestors had aimed at. To put it formally, the vowels in words such as maken, hopen or bede would have the feature [+long] rather than [−long].

In this view, then, the concept of sound change – or the concepts behind such expressions as ‘(were) lengthened’ – refers to the following phenomenon: at one time one group of people pronounce certain words of their language in one particular way, while other people at a different time use similar words to convey similar meanings but pronounce them in a different way. A change can be said to have occurred whenever in a language a certain role is played by one articulatory target at one time, and by a different target at another time. Finally, this view can be broken up to yield the following more specific interpretations of ‘sound change’. In the first, it stands for the mere fact that the latter target can be regarded as the functional equivalent and thus the temporal successor of the former. In the second interpretation, which is much stronger, ‘sound change’ stands for all the factors that caused the functional correspondence between the two elements.

In the case of OSL, which could formally be represented as

(2) 
\[ [−\text{long}] \rightarrow [+\text{long}] / \{ \text{in vowels of stressed open penults} \}, \]

the ‘change’ (represented by the arrow) may either stand for the observation that the feature [+long] came to play the role of the feature [−long] under the mentioned conditions or for the factors that might have
8 **Approaching the changes**

been behind this. In both readings, OSL is a cover term for a large set of interrelated events. It represents a high-level abstraction and is definitely not a good starting point for an investigation that tries to be neutral with regard to theory.

1.4 **The data problem**

One must go back to square one, in other words, and start with the data that caused Luick and his colleagues to establish OSL and the other changes in the first place. But which data? The obvious choice would be to compare the situations before and after the events which made up the four ‘quantity changes’. The starting points of an investigation would thus be the phonological systems of English as spoken before and after the period in which HOL, TRISH, OSL and SHOCC are supposed to have occurred. Specifically speaking, one would compare the phonological shapes – and particularly the quantities of stressed vowels – of corresponding lexemes and wordforms. This way, one would study the correspondences normally expressed by the four quantity changes rather than the ‘changes’ themselves. In a second step, then, one would try and reconstruct the nature and the effects of the processes which could have brought the correspondences about. Whether a picture of four sound changes would emerge at all from that could obviously not be known beforehand.

The question is, however, exactly which language systems one should compare. As will be shown, this problem is again closely related to the interpretation given to the notion ‘sound change’. Taken as it is, my interpretation of sound change is so global as to potentially cover more than one type of situation. In particular, it is vague with regard to both the size and the nature of the speech communities that are related, and with regard to the spatio-temporal distance between the corresponding situations. For a diachronic comparison, it therefore allows one to choose from several geographical dialects and different historical stages of English.11

Take OSL again: in system (1) (I shall call it pre-OSL English) the penultimate vowels in words such as the following were pronounced so that they would come out as distinctly short. They had the feature [−long].

(3) a. *aken* ‘ache’, *aker* ‘acre’, *akern* ‘acorn’, *ale* ‘ale’, *ape* ‘ape’, *bacon* ‘bacon’, *baken* ‘bake’, *bale* ‘bale’, ...
   ....*waken* ‘wake’, *wale* ‘wale’, *wanien* ‘wane’, *war* ‘ware’, *waven* ‘wave’, *whal* ‘whale’;
The data problem


   cheoke ‘choke’, cloke ‘cloak’, ...
   prote ‘throat’

d. wicu ‘week’, yfel ‘evil’

e. duru ‘door’

Then, in system (2) (post-OSL English), the counterparts of those words had the feature [+long]. In other words, they were intended to come out as distinctly long. Now, the question is, which systems pre-OSL English and post-OSL English are supposed to represent.

At first sight it would seems that one should take as ‘pre-OSL English’ the last stage of English in which speakers intended the stressed vowels of words such as those in (3) to be [−long]. Analogically, ‘post-OSL English’ would be defined as the first stage of English in which they were intended to be [+long]. After all, it seems obvious that the events which amounted to the lengthening must have taken place in the transitional period between the two systems. The shorter this period is, the greater are our chances of pinning those events down. In addition, this sort of approach has been common in historical linguistics for about a century, and still underlies most contemporary studies.

However, such an approach runs into the following difficulties. First, just like any conceivable natural language, English has at no point in time been anything like a uniform system. It has always been characterized by regional, social, personal, situational and probably other sorts of variation. The transition between pre-OSL English and post-OSL English will therefore have been smooth at best, with no clear boundaries to be found. It can be safely assumed that for a long period speakers who pronounced the words in (3) with their stressed vowels as [+long] would coexist with others, who had a [−long] vowel in those words. Furthermore, there will probably have been many speakers who used both pronunciations alternatively, their choice depending on such factors as speech, register, etc.\textsuperscript{12}

Second, it cannot be told with any reasonable certainty how pre- or post-OSL phonologies were distributed at any point of time earlier than maybe the twentieth century. This is due both to the near impossibility of reconstructing historical pronunciations and, in particular, to the difficulties
10 Approaching the changes

encountered when it comes to vowel quantity. There, spelling evidence is so
inconclusive that hardly more than an approximate reconstruction is
possible even on the phonemic level. As far as OSL is concerned, the only
thing that can be said at all from the evidence that we have (spelling,
métrical poetry, comparative reconstruction) is that at some stage before the
thirteenth century the words in (3) were normally intended to be
pronounced as [-long], and that at some later stage the [+long] pronunciation had become common. Although one knows that the post-OSL pronunciation first spread among speakers in the north of England, it is not
known when it first turned up, nor when it started to be used more generally
than the pre-OSL pronunciation.

Evidently, one cannot expect to find either an immediate pre-OSL stage
of English, or a post-OSL one. What data, then, is one to choose? An interest-
ing and daring suggestion was made by Minkova (1982). In a study of the
question why some parts of the English vocabulary reflected OSL, while
others did not, she compared Late Old English to Modern English. In other
words, she held two language systems against each other that are separated
by more than eight (!) centuries.

This approach seems counterintuitive at first and Minkova herself was
aware that it was not unproblematic. What she regarded as the greatest
drawback of studying long-term instead of short-term correspondences was
that both Middle English dialectal detail and variation in general were
ignored (cf. 1982: 40f.), and that therefore ‘only a bird’s eye view of ... succes-
sive stages of the language, treated as homogeneous within their
respective time spans’ (Minkova 1982: 41) could be gained.

However, reconstructions of Middle English dialectal detail are
notoriously unreliable with regard to vowel quantity anyway. Ignoring them
is therefore hardly worse than basing one’s investigations on them.
Furthermore, intermediate stages between Late Old English and Modern
English are not attested very well either. It would at least be extremely
difficult and maybe impossible to say how pre- and post-OSL
pronunciations were distributed over the varieties of English at any point of
time between the thirteenth and the twentieth centuries. It was this
difficulty, it seems, that motivated Minkova to turn to Modern English for
evidence, because she observes that ‘so far, details about the development
of the forms within Middle English have not been productive in providing
an answer to the puzzle [of OSL]’ (Minkova 1982: 41). Therefore, her
decision to ignore what cannot be reliably reconstructed was the most
reasonable step that could possibly have been taken.