

ENGLISH B - HL EXTENDED ESSAY

CATEGORY I

**TITLE: “The effect of sound changes in the English language on the
rhymes in Shakespeare’s works”**

Word Count: 3320

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“Language is a living thing. We can feel it changing. Parts of it become old: they drop off and are forgotten. New pieces bud out, spread into leaves, and become big branches, proliferating.” (Shilling) - Gilbert Highet

1.0 Background Information and Historical Development:

Language, as we know it, is the way us humans communicate and connect, without it, there would be no unity amongst society. It is much like a living being; in that it can be born, grow older, and eventually die, as Gilbert Highet stated. It is an organism formed by its speakers, never stable, perpetually changing as the people speaking it do too.

In accordance with language it can be said that literature is very special too. It is much like a fossil, in that the grammar, words, the thought of that person at that moment is conserved on that piece of paper. It is almost as if someone snapped a picture of that moment, and kept it for years after, one can almost gaze into the past with literature. This is to say that changes in language, are encoded and can be seen in literature as literary works are a solid fragment of that time. Not only can literature show us how a certain language has progressed, but also how the people speaking it have changed, this is also why I am passionate about reading, and analysing old pieces of literature; specifically, that of William Shakespeare.

One way of observing such changes in language and specifically phonetics, is looking at rhyme patterns in his certain literary works or poems. In his old pieces of literature, some rhymes do not work when read in the current version of English. This can provide us with solid clues as to how the phonetics of the English changed compared to the period in which they were written.

The works of William Shakespeare provide excellent evidence of developments in the English language, as he demonstrates immense talent in making words rhyme, and manipulate them to make them rhyme, making his works quite a clear source for observing such changes. This essay shall specifically focus on the phonetic changes that have happened throughout the 16th

and 17th century that can be observed through his works and literature. The research question of this essay is as follows; “To what extent have the phonetic changes throughout the 16th and 17th century affected rhymes in William Shakespeare’s works?”.

The research question shall be researched by identifying rhymes, and rhythm that do not work with the current pronunciation of modern English, but clearly were intended to rhyme or be melodic in early modern English or English in Shakespeare’s time. This will show us how these said words’ pronunciations have changed and can give us an idea of how and to what extent, in general sound changes have occurred. At the end of this research I aim to figure out a pattern in the sound changes. Furthermore, the rhythm shall also be investigated and researched, to figure out whether the stress on words have also changed over time.

In the end, the aim of this paper is to have a broader understanding of how the English language has developed, and will try to correlate it with the great vowel shift, a major change in pronunciation, specifically vowels, that has happened throughout the 16th century and influenced the vowels and sound in Modern English pronunciation and orthography, as most English words were standardized in the 16th century, during this shift, and made it differ from other Germanic languages pronunciation-wise. The hypothesis of this paper is that this vowel change is the main reason behind the divergence in certain rhyme patterns in William Shakespeare’s works not to be coherent anymore.

1.1 Vowel Shifts and the Great Vowel Shift:

Vowels are sounds produced by vibrating the vocal cords, and partially obstructing the vocal tract, but without causing any audible friction. The vowels in a language can be graphed by the usage of what is called a trapezium, in which the place of articulation of the vowels are represented. The vowel trapezium for British Received Pronunciation is given on the right-hand side.

Each dot represents a vowel that is in the English language, and the IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) letter of that dot is written next to it. The closer the vowel is to the top, the more closed the mouth needs to be to pronounce the vowel, and the closer it is to the right side, the more back the place of articulation is in the mouth. Being able to graph this will help visualise some of the changes that have occurred.

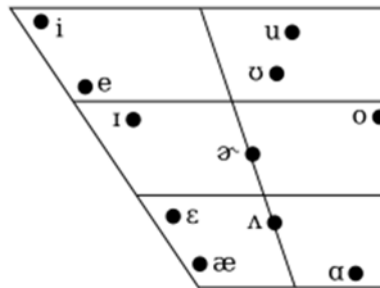


Figure 1: The articulation trapezoid (*The History of English*)

The great vowel shift, is a change that occurred in a relatively fast time in English starting from the 14th century and ending around the 17th century, it is a series of vowel changes, vowels that change or shift places of articulation, or places in the vowel trapezoid, that affected all vowels -but mostly the long vowels- in the English language. Such vowel shifts are inevitable, and have happened in many languages throughout the centuries. As time passes, people adapt to new lifestyles, and the way languages are spoken out changes along with it. A vowel might for example be shortened, as people start to pronounce it increasingly quickly making it lose its original vowel quality, like with the word “good,” centuries back, it had a long “o” sound, but as time passed, and people started pronouncing it increasingly quickly, the long vowel was reduced to a shorter one. Another factor may be the effort required to pronounce a certain word, for example the back vowels in a word may shift to front vowels, making them shift toward the right on the vowel trapezium, as the latter requires less effort to pronounce; such as the shift from /e:/ to /i:/ in the word “keen”.

The reason however that English went through a much more major and extensive sound change compared some other Germanic languages such as Dutch or Norwegian, might be that England

in that time, was in the Elizabethan era, the so called golden age of England. This resulted in many different people and populations to be reshuffled, resulting in distinct cultures, and hence many different languages and dialects throughout all of Europe and the British Isles to come together, and this gradually changed how people would pronounce words, as different ways to pronounce words coexisted, but certain ways were more preferred, which resulted in the pronunciation of English to shift. This change however was probably not noticed by the people alive during those days, as it was very gradual and spread out over time. Adding to that the sound changes had been happening for a long time, so it might have been quite normal to people that there were multiple ways of pronouncing a word or there might have been certain trends of pronouncing words that people followed, however, the change in general was probably not noticeable, as it was so gradual and subtle to be observed in a single lifetime.

2.0 Sound changes in Shakespeare's works:

Shakespeare, being born around the time of the peak of this vowel shift (a time when many different standard pronunciations of words coexisted, and these sound changes were happening faster compared to other centuries), has definitely been affected by this vowel shift, and has written most of his works based on the pronunciation before some of the changes had occurred, which resulted in a lot of the rhymes he used not to work anymore. So certain words that used to rhyme in his time, do not do so currently. A brief outline of the changes that occurred from the 15th century to the present day can be seen in "Table 1" on the next page (pronunciations are written in the International Phonetic Alphabet), the words in the quotation marks represent how the sound would be expressed in modern English:

Table 1: Sound changes from the 15th century to the present (*The History of English*)

Example Word	Before the Great Vowel Shift	After the Great Vowel Shift
fate	/a:/ “barn”	/eɪ/
kite	/i:/ “lean”	/aɪ/
out	/u:/ “boon”	/aʊ/
beat	/ɛ:/ “fat”	/i:/
loot	/o:/ “loan”	/u:/
coat	/ɔ:/ “thought”	/oo/
keen	/e:/ “bend”	/i:/

2.1 Changes in the vowel sounds:

These series of sound changes can actively be seen in Shakespeare’s works, like this exert from his first sonnet:

*“From fairest creatures we desire increase,
That thereby beauty’s rose might never die,
But as the ripper should by time decease,
His tender heir might bear his memory”*

(Shakespeare, Shakespeare's sonnets No1, 1609)

The words of focus here are “die” and “memory” which were clearly meant to rhyme in this example, however they don’t. This can be explained by the Great Vowel Shift. When traced back using the table, the “*ie*” at the end of die was probably pronounced with a long /i:/, instead of /aɪ/ which it is now. This makes it sound identical to the end of memory which still is pronounced with an /i:/, thus the rhyme is restored. Here we can see a clear example of the great vowel shifts effect on the rhymes.

A similar case of this certain change is when Shakespeare rhymes “I” with “company” this is also a case of /i:/ changing in to /aɪ/ and proves that even words as common and essential as “I” also went through this change of sound. However, it must be noted that this change has only occurred in the long “i” sound, that is why words such as “bin” and “kin” which have short “i” sounds have retained their original pronunciation of the word and have only undergone miniscule changes during the Great Vowel Shift.

One faces another example of this problem in the last ten lines of Shakespeare’s last sonnet

*“The fairest votary took up that fire
Which many legions of true hearts had warmed;
And so the General of hot desire
Was, sleeping, by a virgin hand disarmed.
This brand she quenched in a cool well by,
Which from Love's fire took heat perpetual,
Growing a bath and healthful remedy,
For men diseased; but I, my mistress' thrall,
Came there for cure and this by that I prove,
Love's fire heats water, water cools not love.”*

(Shakespeare, Shakespeare's last sonnet (154), 1598)

Here it can be observed that four line-pairs fail to rhyme in present day English (British Received Pronunciation). This is to say that this is a reoccurring problem in Shakespeare’s sonnets. In total one can find around 18 cases where the word “love” is supposed to rhyme with “prove”, “move”, and so on. In total one can find 142 rhyme pairs that do not rhyme in the current pronunciation of BRP which make up around 13% of all the lines, and in all the sonnets one can find instances of this problem in 96 of them, which is to say that only a third of all the sonnets have perfect rhymes in modern day BRP.

Adding to this, English orthography wasn’t standardised when this sound change started, this is to say that there wasn’t any standard and set way of writing words, for example the word “might” is known to have been written with 52 different spellings in recorded history (Crystal, 2010). Everyone wrote words the way they saw fit and reasonable, resulting in many different

variations in how words were spelt, such as different opinions on the final e (*again* vs *againe*) and the use of y's and ie's (*busy* vs *busie*). The lack of education of the English folk and the inefficiency of the education system also made this problem worse, as it was difficult to teach a standardised spelling, even if the language were standardised. Efforts to standardise the orthography started as late as the 16th century, in the middle of the great vowel shift, which caused the incoherent orthographical nature of English that we know now. Back then for example the word "I" would have been pronounced with a simple (i:), so it would have made sense to write it with a single letter instead of "ai" which makes more sense in today's pronunciation of the word. This can further be proven with examples such as "should" not rhyming with a word such as "wood" in his works, as "should" in that time retained its "L" sound. This is to say that there have also been some consonants that have had sound changes or lost their phonologic value in some words, showing that the changes throughout the centuries occurred in both vowels and consonants.

Not only can these changes be noticed in rhymes, but also in assonances can this change be noticed. Such as in the following extract, in which the underlined words echo each other

*"When wasteful war shall statues overturn,
And broils root out the work of masonry,
Nor Mars his sword, nor war's quick fire shall burn
The living record of your memory."*

(Shakespeare, Sonnet 55, 1609)

Here, the underlined words are meant to (The History of English)add an auditory quality to the lines, however they do not work in today's standard pronunciation. It can be observed that all these words are meant to have an /a/ like sound in order for this to work suggesting that the a in /wa:r/ has shifted in pronunciation to a more rounded /o/ sound. However, this sound change seems to be quite isolated, showing that some words have gone through specific sound changes without any real pattern or rule that is noticeable.

Shakespeare liked playing with words and rhymes and words that sound similar. For example, in one of his sonnets, the words “*loins*” and “*lines*” are used as a pun, and from context one can understand that these were supposed to be pronounced the same, providing even more insight into how words were meant to be pronounced back then (Shakespeare, Sonnet 136). We come across something similar in another sonnet in which “*over*” and “*hour*” are also used to make a similar pun, also suggesting that the pronunciation of these words was similar if not identical (Shakespeare, Sonnet 63).

2.2 Changes in rhythm and meter:

Shakespeare was very talented at making rhythm in his works, so much so that in some of his works such as the “The Taming of The Shrew,” he manages to make a specific rhythm for each character of the play, which adds a whole extra dimension to the characters. Adding to that, he used it to suggest the formality or informality of a certain scene in which a lack of rhythm corresponds to an increase in familiarity such as in act 5 of “The Taming of The Shrew” where as soon as the couple gets married and become close, the rhythm in their speech is not noticeable anymore. Such masterful usage of rhythm makes Shakespeare’s works a suitable candidate for rhythm analysis as his works have very consistent prose. When the meter of some sonnets is analysed, one can notice that the pronunciation for some words has had a change in stress. By looking at the rhythm in poems and comparing each line of the poem, one can reveal the fact that the stress on some words has shifted, as in Modern English the pronunciations of such words would have stress on a different part, resulting in the rhythm of the poem to be compromised. One interesting example of this, outside of his poems is actually on his grave, on which is written:

“Good friend for Jesus' sake forbear,

To dig the dust enclosed here”

(Shakespeare's Epitaph)

When these two lines, and the remaining lines are analysed, it can be seen that the stress in the word “enclosed” is on the last two words, and that at the end there used to be an extra syllable, suggesting that the word used to be pronounced as “*en/close/ed*.” In this case the effect of the GVS can also be observed on the word “here” where the /i/ sound that the first “e” makes in Modern English, used to be an /e/ sound in early Modern English; explaining why it would rhyme with forbear. It can be noticed that such shifts in stress have especially occurred in the past tense of verbs, where the last “-ed” has been shortened in the modern standard pronunciation of English and looking at the meter and observing where the meter would be off in British RP, gives us an idea of how and for which words such changes have occurred.

Shakespeare has written many magnificent sonnets and plays and is a genius in the way he makes use of words. His mastery of language and words made his works the perfect candidate for such an investigation as the way he plays with meanings and sounds of the words is very clever, and from that we can extract a lot of information on how everything was supposed to sound centuries ago, and observe the changes that happened in the English language.

Conclusion:

Looking at all this, one can clearly say that there have been major sound changes in the English language, and that Shakespeare’s works (specifically sonnets as researched in this paper), along with many other literary works of that era were enormously affected by the sound changes, especially the long vowels along with the stress of words, and linguistic changes that came with the passing of the centuries, which proves the hypothesis of this paper that it would have a major effect and affect a lot of the rhymes in his works. However, the pronunciations mentioned and discussed here, as explained, were not the only pronunciations words had back then as London in that time was a total melange of many people of different backgrounds and people who spoke different dialects of English. This is to say, that each poets’ or writers’ way

of pronunciation might have been slightly different, resulting in some inconsistency in the words that are meant to rhyme. In the past, this has been proven to cause some confusion, as with the word “*schedule*” with some (especially people from northern Britain) pronouncing it with an “*sk*” sound in the beginning, whereas others pronouncing it with a “*sh*” sound, resulting in two standard ways of pronouncing this word, and such was the case for many other words.

Literature is one of the most precious things a culture and language can have. It is one’s past, one’s history, with the writer’s own thoughts and mindset embedded in it. It is truly crucial in understanding how a society functions, their opinions, and their feelings. It can also be more technical, as shown in this paper, and provide some insight into how language itself functioned and sounded back when the piece of literature was written. In that aspect literature really is very much like a picture, a snapshot of that moment, with everything, be it technical, emotional, and societal aspects of the writer, and the writer’s environment buried in the words.

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