

## D. LANGUAGE LINEAGE

## THE GREAT VOWEL SHIFT

Language is a living, changing thing. If people of the same language are separated into different areas for several generations, each group will develop a distinct regional variation, or dialect, of the language. If they are separated long enough without interchange, their dialects will become so dissimilar that they are actually separate languages. Then the different groups can no longer understand each other at all.

The printing press in the Middle Ages brought increased communication that helped to arrest or reverse the divergence of English. Printed literature preserved the written form of many words. But it did not preserve spoken sounds. During the 1600s and 1700s, a gradual shift took place in the pronunciation of English vowels, and especially of the long vowels.

A word such as *bone* continued to be written with *o* even though the spoken sound changed. Today the *o* in that word represents /ō/ to us, but it spelled /ā/ in Old English. The letter *i* in *bite* says /i/ to us; but in Old English it stood for /ē/, as it still does in Spanish and some other languages. In 1550, an Englishman's reading of the sentence "We will bide at the stone house" would have sounded like "Way will beed at the stane hoos."

This gradual change of long vowel sounds has been named The Great Vowel Shift. Sounds on the tongues of Englishmen changed, but they did not adjust their spelling to match their speech, because their words were set in black and white by the printing press. Our present letter-sound correspondence seems right to us because that is how we learned it, but it is actually a shift from the original English letter-sound correspondence.

## Exercises

- What causes the development of different dialects within a language?
- When does a dialect become a new language?
- What helped to unify the dialects of Middle English?
- What happened in English speech after spelling was stabilized by the printing press?
- Choose the probable Old English pronunciation for these words. Write the number of your choice.
 

a. meat	(1) /mēt/	(2) /māt/
b. fly	(1) /flē/	(2) /flō/
c. wait	(1) /wīt/	(2) /wāt/
d. blow	(1) /blō/	(2) /blū/