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The Great Vowel Shift

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The Great Vowel Shift

An innovative Web site helps explain the development and significance of a complex linguistic phenomenon.

Say you want to ask someone to marry you. People all over the world do it every day. But what is the best way to do the asking?

Some people get down on one knee, communicating their sincerity. Some ask via the big screen at a baseball game, proclaiming their love to a crowd of thousands. But few, I think, would recommend that you type out a memo, addressed To Whom It May Concern, Re: Marriage, and mail it to your beloved in a number 10 envelope.

The medium you choose affects your message, and a medium that is good for one message, like a purchasing request, is not good for another, like a proposal.

Teaching is not all that different from proposing. It's about getting people to listen carefully to a message. Some ways of teaching are more effective than others, and often the best way depends on the information itself. Reading a textbook about open heart surgery is nice, but I would hope that my surgeon has watched a few operations before she cuts into me. Similarly, a sonnet can express in fourteen lines a complex message that pages and pages of prose could only hint at, and a small class discussion teaches more about how to read it than all the video-taped lectures in the world.

Several years ago, when I was teaching the history of the English language for the

first time, I came upon a topic that could not be taught effectively using the conventional medium. The topic was the Great Vowel Shift, which is a massive sound change in English that took place over a 400-year span, from approximately 1400 to 1800.

The Great Vowel Shift is extremely complicated, having taken place in several stages. It completely overhauled the vowel system in English, and studying it helps explain a lot of weird things about English. Why does the letter "a" represent three different sounds in the words "cat," "late," and "father"? Why doesn't the nursery rhyme "Polly, Put the Kettle On" rhyme?

Polly, put the kettle on.
Polly, put the kettle on.
Polly, put the kettle on.
We'll all have tea.

Sukey, take it off again.
Sukey, take it off again.
Sukey, take it off again.
They've all gone away.

The Great Vowel Shift explains all this and more, and so it's useful to reading teachers and for analyzing literature before 1800, as well as for cocktail party conversation. Most important, it's essential to understanding the history of the language.

In teaching the GVS, I found that as

long as I had students in the classroom with me, I could explain the sound change to them. I could make all the sounds and, even better, make *them* make all the sounds, so that they could feel the position of their mouths for each sound. For reinforcement, I could draw and erase pictures on the board, showing the changes with a diagram of the mouth while we made the sounds. At the end of the class period, the students would understand the GVS.

But when they went to study by themselves, with their notes and their textbooks, they were completely lost — and I couldn't blame them. The diagrams, covered with mysterious symbols, were mind-boggling, and without me to make the sounds and walk them through the steps, the explanations in the texts made no sense. A piece of paper is not the right medium to teach the Great Vowel Shift. Static diagrams and text cannot effectively explain a complicated sound change.

Ten years ago, if I were teaching the Great Vowel Shift, I would have despaired. Teaching the GVS requires a medium that is interactive, allowing the students to see and control a changing diagram, so that they can follow the changes step-by-step. Most important, the medium must have sound, so that a confused student can hear the sound changes and not have to try to decipher the symbols on the page.

Fortunately, I discovered my problem at the very end of the 20th century, when a new medium had just become available to me, a medium made for interaction and able to transmit sound and animation — the World Wide Web.

The Great Vowel Shift Web Site was created in response to this pedagogical need. I needed to teach something, and conventional ways of teaching it weren't working.

In the summer of 2000, I participated in the Faculty/Student Course Project Team Program, part of the Furman and Wofford Joint Andrew W. Mellon Project in Information Technology. With Andrea Bean, an English major who graduated in 2001, I created the Great Vowel Shift Web Site (www.furman.edu/~mmenzer/gvs) during the summer. Hayden Porter of the Furman computer science department and Geoff Mazeroff '01, a computer science student, developed the applet (which is just a mini-program) that runs the animation portion of the site, and I programmed the applet to produce the right sequence of images and sounds. Bill Rogers, my departmental colleague, helped me record the sounds on the site.

In making the site, I tried to think about the needs of the people who would be visiting it. I envisioned students like my own, undergraduates who were studying the Great Vowel Shift as part of a course on the history of the language or perhaps in a Chaucer class, where they were learning to read the original Middle English.

The center of the site is the See and Hear page, which has the interactive animation and sound that I first envisioned. It features the standard diagram used by linguists to describe vowel sounds — a vowel trapezoid — but the diagram moves in response to clicks on buttons, and the correct sounds play for each part of the change. A visitor can see and hear a particular step of the GVS or, instead, see and hear all the changes to a particular sound over the 400-year period. Each button can be clicked over and over, allowing people to proceed at their own pace.

We also included a section on the GVS and literature, with a page each for Chaucer, Shakespeare and later writers, including Pope, Dryden, Swift, and the anonymous author of "Polly, Put the Kettle On." This section offers examples of how linguistics

helps us understand literature and vice versa. The Shakespeare page focuses on puns, one in particular unsuitable for a family audience, that only make sense if you understand the Great Vowel Shift. The Chaucer page focuses on the first ten lines of the *Canterbury Tales*, explaining how the Middle English would have sounded and describing what happened to those sounds over time. All the pages contain sound files, so the visitor can hear the examples instead of just reading about them.

For more advanced learners, we have a section that allows the reader to follow a dialogue over time, repeated in 100-year intervals, with the changes represented in the sound files and in transcriptions. The dialogue is connected to an explanation of how each vowel involved in the shift changed, again with audio examples. We also include a bibliography to lead a student to more information, and a brief textbook-like page with one of those static diagrams, which make a lot more sense after you've learned the GVS and can serve to jog the memory of a person who already understands what it represents.

I designed this site for students at Furman. But the Web is free and available, and I'm pleased that people all over the world are discovering it. As of July 29, in less than two years, the site had received 24,375 hits.

My colleagues teaching at other institutions tell me they use it in their classes. The major Chaucer sites, including The Geoffrey Chaucer Page at Harvard and the Chaucer MetaPage at the University of North Carolina, link to the Great Vowel Shift site, as do many sites relating to linguistics or history of the language.

Occasionally I get news of people using the site in far away places. Students in England studying for their A-level exams write me fan e-mail. A colleague from Furman met a professor in Belgium who uses it in his classes, and an instructor at the University of Turku in Finland recommends my site to her students. Closer to home, the Carolina Association of Medieval Studies recommends the site to instructors of medieval studies.

One unexpected result of creating the site is that people have found ways to use

it that never occurred to me while we were putting it together. For example, ChoralNet links to it as a source to help singers correctly pronounce medieval English lyrics. Most interesting, a fourth-grade teacher in Canada wrote me soon after I created the site to tell me that she uses it to teach her students with learning disabilities. One of the reasons that learning to read English is so difficult is because our spelling system was standardized in the midst of the Great Vowel Shift. She has found it helpful for some of her students to learn about the GVS, which gives them a historical explanation as to why a letter is sometimes pronounced one way and sometimes another. Recently, I went to talk to teachers at Camperdown Academy, a Greenville school for students with learning disabilities. I was fascinated by the ways that what I do and what they do connect.

The GVS site has taken on a life of its own and reaches far more people than I imagined. After being featured last December on South Carolina Public Radio in an interview that was picked up by National Public Radio nationwide, I have been getting even more e-mails, from all over.

I developed the site because I needed the multimedia capabilities of the Web to get my message to my students. But I don't think every topic requires a Web site. Many Web pages are useless because they try to teach things that could be better taught in some other medium. It's silly to try to teach open-heart surgery or sonnet reading on the Web; we have good ways of teaching these topics already.

At Furman, we do a great job teaching our students face-to-face, using well-organized discussions, clear lectures, carefully designed labs and good books. I see the Web, and the Internet as a whole, not as a replacement for all those ways of teaching, but as a supplement, a way of helping us do things that we can't do well now. The Great Vowel Shift Web Site allows me to teach the topic in the way it needs to be taught, so that my students can learn it. 🍷

The author, who holds a Ph.D. from the University of Texas, has taught English at Furman since 1996.

www.furman.edu/~mmenzer/gvs