

Changes in the vowel inventory in the history of the English: Splits and mergers among the “o’s and a’s”

I. Early 1600’s SE England inventory of “o’s and a’s”

	ʌ <i>cut</i> <i>but</i> <i>rut</i>	ow <i>coat</i> <i>boat</i> <i>road</i>
		oh <i>caught</i> <i>bought</i> <i>wrought</i>
æ <i>cat</i> <i>father</i> <i>rat</i> <i>rather</i>		o <i>cot</i> <i>bother</i> <i>rot</i>

Note: This is the system of writing the vowel contrasts, or phonemes, that is used by Labov, Ash, and Boberg 2005. Beware: the symbols /o/ and /oh/ are not those used by the International Phonetic Alphabet.

So English started out without the vowel /ah/ that is now found in *father, ma, spa*. !!!

II. During the 1600’s in SE England /æ/ begins to *split* into /æ/ and /ah/.

This change first affects words like *father*, then moves on to words like *pass, after, path, half*. The /ah/ pronunciation of *father* is also found in all American dialects, but the /ah/ pronunciation of *pass, half*, etc. is not a feature of American dialects (except for some older speakers in Eastern New England). The change for *father* predated American settlement, but the change in the other words did not.

1600’s and 1700’s New England and Virginia (these dialects come from SE England).

	ʌ <i>cut</i> <i>but</i> <i>rut</i>	ow <i>coat</i> <i>boat</i> <i>road</i>
		oh <i>caught</i> <i>bought</i> <i>wrought</i>
æ <i>cat</i> <i>rat</i> <i>path</i> <i>half</i>	ah <i>father</i> <i>(rather)</i> <i>ma</i> <i>pa</i>	o <i>cot</i> <i>bother</i> <i>rot</i>

This vowel system of this period is what Labov calls the “initial state.” The Northern and Southern dialects developed out of this “initial state.” It’s close to current RP (Bother!).

III. Important differences in American dialects concern *mergers* that took place among the low back round vowels after the period of the “initial state” in the 1600’s and 1700’s:

A. The historic Inland North—western New England, upstate New York and the upper Midwest (dubbed “general American”)-- lost the contrast between the /ah/ vowel found in *father* and the “short o” vowel found in *bother, cot, hot, John, lock, collar*: the short /o/ vowel *merges* with the /ah/ vowel. In other words, a change has taken place so that the distinction between these vowels is now lost. Former short /o/ words are now pronounced like /ah/ words. There no longer is a short /o/ in the vowel inventory of the historic Inland North.

The historic Inland North (before the Northern Cities Shift)

	ʌ <i>cut</i> <i>but</i> <i>rut</i>	ow <i>coat</i> <i>boat</i> <i>road</i>
		oh <i>caught</i> <i>bought</i> <i>wrought</i>
æ <i>cat</i> <i>rat</i> <i>path</i> <i>half</i>	ah <i>father</i> <i>(rather)</i> <i>cot</i> <i>bother</i> <i>rot</i>	

Listen to the Bother recording

B. In the Western states a further merger of vowels has taken place. The /oh/ vowel has disappeared entirely. Words like *caught, bought, talk, dog, wrought, fog, caulk, hawk* are now pronounced with the /ah/ vowel:

Western United States

	ʌ <i>cut</i> <i>but</i> <i>rut</i>	ow <i>coat</i> <i>boat</i> <i>road</i>
æ <i>cat</i> <i>rat</i> <i>path</i> <i>half</i>	ah <i>father</i> <i>(rather)</i> <i>cot</i> <i>bother</i> <i>rot</i> <i>caught</i> <i>bought</i> <i>wrought</i>	

Listen to the Bother recording for Dayton and Dallas

This Western states vowel system developed from the vowel system seen in the Inland North chart above, where the contrast between *bother* and *father* was already lost.

C. In Eastern Massachusetts, an entirely different merger took place among the low vowels. The historic short /o/ and the historic /oh/ have merged together so that there is no longer any difference between these word pairs: *cot/caught*, *hock/hawk*, *rot/wrought*, *collar/caller*, *holler/ hauler*, *tock/talk*. The resulting vowel is must be assumed to be /oh/, because the vowel has the distribution of other vowels in the long vowel system.

Eastern Massachusetts

	ʌ <i>cut</i> <i>but</i> <i>rut</i>	ow <i>coat</i> <i>boat</i> <i>road</i>
		oh <i>cot</i> <i>bother</i> <i>rot</i> <i>caught</i> <i>bought</i> <i>wrought</i> <i>raw</i>
æ <i>cat</i> <i>rat</i> <i>path</i> <i>half</i>	ah <i>father</i> <i>(rather)</i>	

Ask for renderings from ENE of the Bother recording.

So in Eastern Massachusetts, the words *father* and *bother* have different vowels; there's /ah/ in the first and /oh/ in the second. And all the other historic /o/ and /oh/ words now have /oh/ as well.

Providence is reported **not** to show this vowel merger, and so it would have the vowel system of the Inland North. Is this true? And what about Central Massachusetts – the Worcester area?

Try out the Bother recording for other areas of E and Central Mass in class.

The history of the low vowels in American English:

*****Mergers reduce the number of contrasting low vowels in the dialects, and give rise to different patterns of contrasting words.*****

A. Four different vowels in the “Initial State” of early colonial speech

1600’s and 1700’s New England and Virginia (these dialects come from SE England).

		oh <i>caught</i> <i>bought</i> <i>wrought</i>
æ <i>cat</i> <i>rat</i> <i>path</i> <i>half</i>	ah <i>father</i> <i>(rather)</i> <i>ma</i> <i>pa</i>	o <i>cot</i> <i>bother</i> <i>rot</i>

This inventory of low vowels is close to current British RP—Received Pronunciation.

B. In all American dialects, the historic short /o/ of *cot* has been lost. It is merged with either the historic /oh/ of *caught* (as in Eastern New England), or with the historic /ah/ of *father*, as in the Inland North or the West.

Compare the following:

Initial State	/ah/	/o/	/oh/
historic /ah/ words	father ma spa		
historic short /o/ words		bother top rot hock cot	
historic /oh/ words			caught wrought hawk

Listen to the “Bother” sentence in British RP (Received Pronunciation)

EASTERN MASS	/ah/	/o/	/oh/
historic /ah/ words	father ma spa		
historic short /o/ words			bother top rot hock cot
historic /oh/ words			caught wrought hawk

Pronounce the “Bother” sentence

THE INLAND NORTH

	/ah/	/o/	/oh/
historic /ah/ words	father ma spa		
historic short /o/ words	bother top rot hock cot		
historic long /oh/ words			caught wrought hawk

Listen to the “Bother” sentence.

???What’s the situation in Central Massachusetts? Where is the isogloss for these mergers? Our survey will help us find out.

C. In the West, long low /oh/ has disappeared from the vowel inventory as well.

THE WEST (and Midland)

	/ah/	/o/	/oh/
historic /ah/ words	father ma spa		
historic short /o/ words	bother top rot hock cot		
historic long /oh/ words	caught wrought hawk		

Listen to “Bother” examples from Dayton, OH and Dallas, TX

B. In all American dialects, the historic short /o/ of *cot* has been lost. It is merged with either the historic /oh/ of *caught* (as in Eastern New England), or with the historic /ah/ of *father*, as in the Inland North or the West.

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Initial State	/ah/	/o/	/oh/
historic /ah/ words	father ma spa		
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historic /oh/ words			caught wrought hawk

Listen to the “Bother” sentence in British RP (Received Pronunciation)

EASTERN MASS

	/ah/	/o/	/oh/
historic /ah/ words	father ma spa		
historic short /o/ words		bother top rot hock cot	
historic /oh/ words			caught wrought hawk

Pronounce the “Bother” sentence

THE INLAND NORTH

	/ah/	/o/	/oh/
historic /ah/ words	father ma spa		
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