

## THE RISE OF THE NEW DIPHTHONGS IN MIDDLE ENGLISH

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It is generally assumed that the biphonemic combinations consisting of stressed vowels and vocalized spirants gradually turned into monophonemic diphthongs in the course of the change of the opposition of quantity into that of contact (Vachek, 1959).

Another version of this phonological phenomenon can be given. The point is that the rise of the new ME diphthongs can be regarded not as a gradual process but a qualitative leap. All the existing biphonemic combinations turned into monophonemes just after the loss of the final unstressed /e/, the forms in question thus having ceased to be divisible into syllables and morphemes. At the first stage of this change the initial elements of the diphthongs could be phonetically identified with the isolated vowels they had descended from.

At this time length and degree of aperture ceased being relevant because of the decay of the opposition of quantity. In connection with it all members of the vowel system (including the new diphthongs) underwent the corresponding changes but since the diphthongs were now functionally independent phonemes, the results of these changes in the diphthongs were unlike those in the isolated vowels.

Reference

Vachek, J. (1959): "Notes on the Quantitative Correlation of Vowels in the Phonematic Development of English", Mélanges F. Mossé in memoriam, Paris, 444-456.