

# English Honours; U.G.-I, Paper-01

## Characteristics of Early Modern English

### **Instability**

During the time period of 1500 to 1800, the English language was in a state of constant flux. The Classical Renaissance occurred during this time and English-speakers were in greater contact with non-English speakers, so that they adopted previously foreign words and phrases. Authors such as William Shakespeare took advantage of this instability to create new vocabulary and word play. Some of the words and phrases created during this time have become a part of the English language that is spoken today while others have disappeared entirely.

### **The Great Vowel Shift**

Within this time period, “The Great Vowel Shift” occurred, resulting in shorter vowel sounds. For example, the vowels in the words “mite,” “meet,” and “mate” started sounding less like the vowels in the words, “thief,” “fete,” and “palm” so that the words became pronounced phonetically. Diphthongs, or two vowels combined to make one sound, also replaced many long vowels. For example, the vowel “i” which had previously been used to spell out the “ee” sound, was now replaced and spelled as “ee.” In addition, vowel sounds that had been distinct from one another began to sound identical. For example, “may” and “main” though spelled differently, began to make the same vowel sounds. Another example is “dew” and “due.” Furthermore, some short vowel sounds were replaced with diphthongs. For example, the short vowel “u” was replaced with “ou” and “oo” in words like “double” and “blood.” The short vowel “e” was replaced with “ea” in words such as “bread” and the metal, “lead.”

### **Silencing of the Consonants**

During the Great Vowel Shift, some consonant (non-vowel) letters became silent. Examples include the “k” in “knight” and the letters “b” and “g” placed at the ends of certain words such as in “lamb” and “hang.” The letter “t” also became silent in words such as “thistle” and “listen” and the combination of “gh” in words such as “light” and “night” were no longer pronounced.

### **Letter Variations**

The ways in which letters were used during this time also vary with the Standard English used today. For example, the letters “u” and “v” were interchangeable, with “v” appearing only as the first letter of a word and “u” everywhere else. Whereas the letter “i” had been used for the letter “j,” before this period, the uppercase letter, “J” began being used as the consonant sound. The letter “e” was also much more commonly placed at the ends of words though it was silent. Because of this, “cross” was often spelled “crosse.” In addition, the letter “y” often replaced the letter “i.” For example, the word “faith” was spelled as “fayth.” The letter “c” was also used for words that today use the “tion” ending. “Creation” was spelled “creacyon.” The spelling of some words were intentionally changed to conform to their supposed Latin spellings. “Anker” became “anchor” and “doute” became “doubt.”

## Grammar

In terms of grammar, much stayed the same from the previous period of Middle English. By the end of this period, “you” became more common than the previously used “thou” for one person and “ye” for multiple persons in Old English. “You” took on both the subject and object functions of the word so that distinctions between the three forms were no longer used. Adjectives lost their endings except for the comparative and superlative forms. “It” and “who” began being used as the neuter and relative pronoun forms. The third person singular verb forms added an “es” to their endings rather than “eth.” For example, “goeth” became “goes.” Along with this verb trend, many strong verbs became weak verbs. In addition, suffix endings, which denoted a word’s function (known as inflectional endings), began to disappear.

## Contractions

The contraction of “will” into I’ll, she’ll, and we’ll was one of the earliest and most common contractions, occurring in works by Chaucer right before the Early Modern English time period. Shakespeare used contractions as well such as it’s for “it is.” The contractions, we’re, they’re and there’s are also found in his writing. The author Christopher Marlowe, a contemporary of Shakespeare, also used contractions for words such as I’d and he’d as well as who’s, I’m, you’re and what’s. Other contractions that became commonly used during this time period included can’t, don’t, mayn’t, and we’ve. Some of these contractions have lasted and exist in the English language today while others have been replaced by other variations. For example, “thou art” was contracted into “thou’rt and “he is” to ha’s. “It” was also often contracted to ‘tis. All of these contractions are no longer used today.

## Elisions

The process of elision creates the silencing of a sound or syllable when speaking. This was also a characteristic of Early Modern English. For example, “them” became spelled as ‘em in certain texts. Other examples include ‘o which was used for “of” and ‘i used for “in.” Sometimes these elisions were also used with th’ so that a text would read ‘i th’ for “in the.”

## Standardization

Despite the instability of the Early Modern English period, the invention of the printing press in 1440 by Johannes Gutenberg also had a great impact on the period of Early Modern English. This process brought greater stability to the English language and created a standardization of English used by the printers of London. Discrepancies between the spelling and pronunciation of words was still common during this period up until around 1630, when written and spoken English began to reflect one another more closely.

## Conclusion:

In studying the Shakespearean era and the Early modern English period of the English language, it is interesting to view the evolution of language. Characteristics have come and gone as English-speakers adopt and discard certain words, phrases and grammar concepts through the ages. It is important to share this concept with students as we study language today, so that students can come to know language as a living organism which is never fixed but always growing and evolving. Through understanding this, students are able to understand how their own reading, writing and speaking skills contribute to the evolution of language today.