

## MIDDLE ENGLISH *-ong>-ung* REVISITED\*

JACEK FISIĄK

*Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań*

The aim of the present paper is to examine in detail a minor problem in Middle English phonology. It is hoped, however, that the discussion will once again demonstrate that after decades of Middle English scholarship there is still considerable difference of opinion concerning both minor and major problems, and that there exists a constant need to reexamine the available solutions with the help of insights from recent developments in linguistics and philology. One such development, essential for the discussion of the Middle English change in question, is the ME dialect survey carried out in Edinburgh and Glasgow by Professors McIntosh and Samuels.

Professor Strang has rightly pointed out in her *History of English* that the monumental work of McIntosh and Samuels will force us to revise and rewrite much of the history of English. Nowhere else is this so obvious as in the area of reconstructed phonology, where a detailed study of localized MSS can contribute to a more precise picture of the geographical distribution of sounds (although this is not the aim of the present paper). Similar hopes I place in the complementary onomastic research carried out at Lund under the directorship of Dr. Kristensen. However, until final results of those investigations are available, one is obliged to use all other means to clarify and explain the phonological phenomena of Middle English.

The change which I propose to reexamine here, i.e. *-ong>-ung*, is a minor change in Middle English. As such it has so far received relatively little attention. Moreover, it has been treated as a marginal phenomenon and in isolation

---

\* This is a revised version of the paper presented at the Eleventh Triennial Conference of the International Association of University Professors of English in Aberdeen on 28th August 1980. In this place the author would like to express his appreciation to Professors M. L. Samuels, H. Weinstock, J. Gerritsen and F. Cassidy for their comments leading to the clarification of numerous points.

from other phonological developments of the period. Apart from handbooks, which devote to it from a few lines to half a page (the only notable exception being Horn and Lehnert 1954:532-4), the change was discussed independently briefly only by Hor<sup>1</sup> (1902:369-72) and Serjeantson (1931:450-2).

To summarize in short the opinions of earlier scholars, the change in question operated sporadically in certain areas of England some time during the Middle English period affecting a limited number of lexical items. The reflex of the process in Standard Modern English is the vowel [ʌ] which can be found in such words as *among*, *mongrel*, *-monger* and *mongcorn*. As can be seen from this sketchy summary, the results of the change, limited to four words in Standard Modern English, and the emphasis put on StE partially determined the treatment it received in standard handbooks.

Although there is basic agreement about the existence of the change, however, there is a lack of consensus concerning its mechanism, geographical outreach and chronology.

Horn (1902) assumes that ME  $o > u$  before *ng* [ŋg] as a result of the raising influence of [ŋ] which can also be observed, on an even larger scale, in the case of  $e > i$  (e.g. *English*). ME  $o > u$  is thus a parallel change to  $e > i$ . (Horn and Lehnert (1954:532) repeat this view, stating that "Die Hebung des *o* zu *u* ist ein Seitenstück zu der me. Hebung des *e* zu *i* vor *ŋg*"). This interpretation of the change has been followed by Jespersen (1909:84), who further expands the context assigning the raising force also to *m*, as well as by Jordan (1934/1974:51-2), J. and E. M. Wright (1928:67), Oakden (1930:17) and Prins (1974:23). Jordan, the Wrights and Prins assume the shortening of  $\bar{o} + ng$  before raising (i.e.  $\bar{o} > o > u$ ). Oakden posits the raising of both long and short vowels, i.e.  $\bar{o} > \bar{u}$ .

At this point we limit our discussion only to the presentation of different views on the subject. Comments as well as critiques will be offered later.

Luick (1914-21:475) assumes that *u* before *ng* is the result of the shortening of  $\bar{o}$ . His view is followed by Pinsker (1959:30), Berndt (1960:72) and Brunner (1960:228) who all interpret the rise of  $u + ng$  as a result of the following changes OE  $a > \bar{a} > ME \bar{o} > \bar{o} > u$ . In his later work Brunner (1963:16) reiterates his position pointing out that "it is not clear whether the spelling *u* for *o* before *ng* is to be explained as a change of *o* to *u* before a supported nasal or as the result of the shortening of  $\bar{o}$ " and thus recognizes that it is impossible to decide in favour of one or the other of the proposed solutions.

M. Serjeantson (1931:451) advanced a third hypothesis, i.e. the series of changes OE  $a > \bar{a} > ME \bar{o} > \bar{o} > \bar{u} > u$  in some areas of England (cf. Oakden 1930).

<sup>1</sup> Horn and Lehnert (1954) is basically a restatement of Horn (1902) in terms of early Modern English.

In what follows we shall first return to the geographical distribution of the analyzed phonological change and to its chronology before discussing the feasibility of the proposed explanation of its mechanism.

According to the majority of scholars the change in question is a characteristic feature of the West Midland dialects of Middle English. Luick (1914-21:475-7) regards it as basically West Midland and perhaps on a very limited scale Southern. J. and E. M. Wright (1928:67) consider the change West Midland and its spread to other dialect areas in Modern English. Jordan (1934/1974:52) calls it "a characteristic of the WML". Brunner (1960:228) treats the change as chiefly NWMidland but also adds "dieser Entwicklung war aber auch im Osten (Norfolk, Suffolk) nicht unbekannt". Berndt (1960:72) is of the same opinion describing the development as "mundartlich beschränkte Hebung" primarily limited to Lancashire, Shropshire and Cheshire although not unknown in Norfolk and Suffolk.

Horn (1902:371) using Ellis' Modern English dialect material does not limit the change to the West Midland area but indicates the possibility of a wider distribution. In Horn and Lehnert (1954:532) it is explicitly stated that it occurred in the whole of England but especially in "Mittelland und Westen".

Oakden (1930:17) on the basis of rhymes and modern dialects, draws the southern boundary in the North Midlands through Cheshire, N. Staffordshire, N. Derby, Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire. This "northern" orientation has also been supported by Dobson (1957:585) who goes even further and claims that "ME evidence shows that it was more widespread in the North (e.g. rhymes in the *York plays*), and Wright (1905:432) shows ME  $\bar{u}$  in *along*, *among*, *song*, etc. in widespread Northern, Midland and Southern dialects".

Morsbach (1896:44, 88, 90, 125) argued for a large territory where the change may have taken place. His views are supported by the evidence from rhymes and spellings from the South as well as the East and West Midlands.

Similar is the position of Serjeantson in this respect, who says: "It seems hardly possible to limit the change to the North-West Midlands or even to the North Midlands, though it *may* have been more frequent in these areas. The evidence is very scanty in all districts. Probably the change took place sporadically in the East and South as well as in the North-West, and it was from one of these areas nearer London that the modern (*aman*), etc., came into Standard English".

There is no agreement among scholars about the chronology of the change in question. Its dating is far from simple, since some of the links in the posited chains of phonological developments on the way to *u* seem to be ad hoc and make any chronological interpretation doubtful.

The proponents of the  $(\bar{o} >) o > u$  development date the change of  $o > u$  vaguely as during the Middle English period (from 1100 to 1500?), e.g. the

Wrights (1928:67) and Horn and Lehnert (1954:532). Jordan is not explicit about its chronology and neither are Oakden and Prins.

Those of the scholars who assume that *u* is the result of the shortening of ME  $\bar{o}$  vary as to the interpretation of the earlier history of the change. They are in agreement, however, as regards the dating of  $\bar{o} > u$  and follow Luick (1914-21) who posits the end of the thirteenth and the fourteenth century. As regards the earlier history of  $\bar{o}$ , on the one hand, Luick (1914-21:357) derives  $\bar{o}$  from the lengthening of the "â-Laut" which soon after the lengthening (9th century) fell together with  $\bar{o}$  and in this form was preserved in the West Midlands and the bordering area of the South until the time of shortening. On the other hand Brunner, Berndt and Pinsker trace the origin of  $\bar{o}$  immediately to the raising of  $\bar{e}$ . The change of  $\bar{e} > \bar{o}$  is assigned by Pinsker (1959:30) to 10th-12th c. without any further explanation. No time or motivation for this development has been provided by either Berndt or Brunner.

Serjeantson, as has been pointed out above, derives *u* from ME  $\bar{e}$  positing the development  $\bar{e} > \bar{o}$  and additionally also  $\bar{o} > \bar{u} > u$ . All those processes have been neither justified ("it is generally believed...") nor given more precise chronology and have been described as having occurred during the ME period.

Having investigated all the available evidence, i.e. spellings, rhymes, place names, later developments of English phonology and modern dialects (both the Wrights' and Orton et al's surveys) we have come to the following conclusions:

1. *u* in *-ung* is the result of the shortening of  $\bar{o}$  as suggested by Luick, i.e. directly from LOE  $\bar{o}$  lengthened before *ng*.
2. This shortening is part of the vowel shortening before consonant clusters operating in Middle English at the close of the thirteenth and in the fourteenth century.
3. The process occurred in the West Midland area as well as the adjoining EM and Sth counties. From this area it must have spread to other places in a limited and varying number of lexical items. It was not a northern development. *u* and its further development  $\wedge$  appear on a large area of Southumbrian England nowadays. However, the evidence of  $\wedge$  is uncertain since it could have been introduced from Standard English and could have replaced *u* equally well as  $\bar{o}$  or *v* (cf.  $\wedge \sim v, \bar{o}$  in East Anglia and Essex).

The development of *u* directly from  $\bar{o}$  is not unusual. It has been attested throughout England and is parallel to the shortening of  $\bar{e} > i$ . The shortening of  $\bar{o} > u$  took place in Middle English both before certain consonant clusters (including *ng*) as well as in trisyllabic words (e.g. *munendas*) and in the unstressed position (e.g. *must(e)*). The change *-ong > -ung* is thus nothing else but part of the more general process of the shortening of vowels which operated on a different scale in different dialect areas and hence could have been found already in *Genesis* (1250/1325) but cannot be traced in Chaucer. Spread-

ing through lexical diffusion it affected certain lexical items earlier than others and in the different lexical items could have different geographical distribution, which is a phenomenon well known to dialectologists.

Several attempts have been made to explain the mechanism of this change (i.e. shortening) but none seems to be totally convincing. There is always something missing from actuation to implementation. Unfortunately lack of space does not allow us to go into details and discuss the shortening of long vowels in ME. Suffice it to say that neither phonetic nor phonemic interpretations provide anything more but speculations which do not hold when confronted with other languages exhibiting similar changes or other periods of the history of the same language. A more recent hypothesis which might be added to the existing ones is that of creolization advanced for Middle English in general by C.-J. Bailey and Maroldt (1977), P. Poussa (1982) and N. Z. Domingue (unpublished) but not with reference to this particular change of vowel shortening. The rate of phonological (also grammatical and lexical) change in Middle English and its different course from that of Old English seems to support this hypothesis. A disruption of relations between short and long vowels as a result of the development of long nuclei could have been the outcome of language contact resulting in creolization (cf.  $\bar{o} > u$  in Old Danish), as can be seen in other Creole situations (cf. numerous descriptions of Creoles).

The shortening of close vowels deserves further investigation particularly in relation to the MEOSL of short *i* and *u*, and the status of the lengthened ME reflexes in modern dialects (cf. Orton 1952 for  $\bar{e}$  but no parallel study of other vowels).

The hypothesis of the narrowing of  $\bar{o} > u$  as well as the posited change  $\bar{e} > \bar{o}$  and Serjeantson's  $\bar{e} > \bar{o} > \bar{u} > u$  is untenable on several grounds. Horn's argument is based on the parallelism of the development of back vowels with front vowels before [ng], i.e. if  $\bar{e} > i$  then  $\bar{o}$  has to change into *u*. The comparison of the development of back and front vowels never shows that their behaviour (see the dialectal developments of ME vowels in Modern English in context determined situations) has to be or is identical. Furthermore, the acceptance of  $\bar{o} > u$  ignores well attested changes in late Old English (vowel lengthening before homorganic consonants) and Middle English (vowel shortening before certain consonant groups) reflected in contemporary dialects.

Neither can we accept the change  $\bar{e} > \bar{o}$ . There is no independent evidence which would allow us to posit it. It looks, thus, ad hoc and has been introduced only to help one to justify a given output of the change. The positing of the lengthening of  $\bar{a} + NG$  as the only development does not recognize the existence of allophony and hence the existence of  $\bar{o} + ng$  which was a contextually determined realization of the vowels rendered in writing as  $\langle a/o \rangle$  before *ng* in some dialects as opposed to the change  $\bar{a} > \bar{e}$  in other dialects (see ModE reflexes in today's dialects viz. *u* vs. *v*).

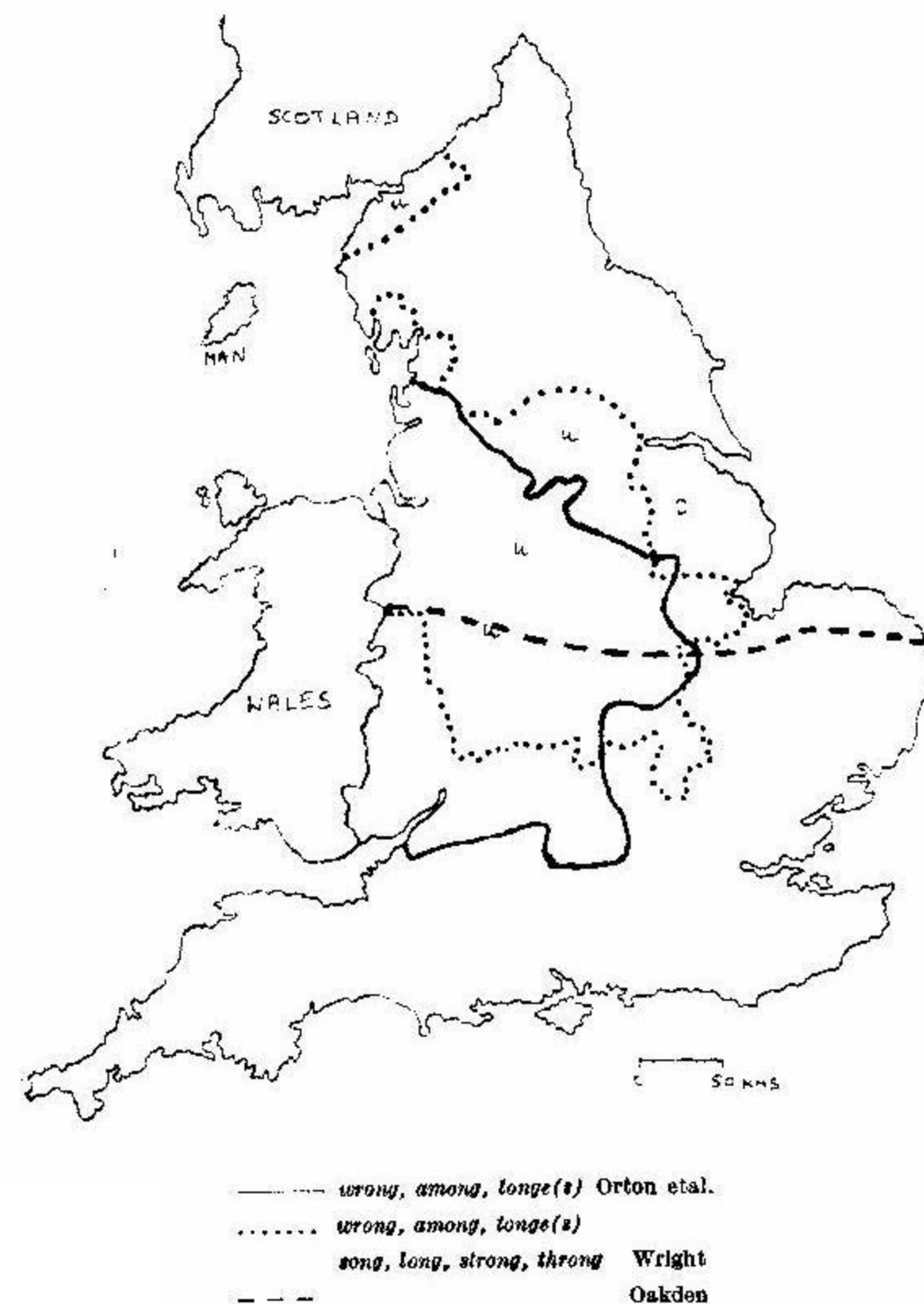
The change of  $\delta > \bar{u} > u$  proposed by Serjeantson is neither "generally accepted" nor realistic. It could be dismissed not only on the grounds of economy and simplicity but also on the basis of chronology.

The chronology of the change  $\delta > u$  before  $\eta g$  has been given at the end of the thirteenth century and it appears non-controversial. The only problem is the rhyme *songe:tunge* in *The owl and the nightingale* (11.1071–2) from the first half of the thirteenth century. It was studied by Sundby (1950) who suggested that the rhyme may well represent a feature peculiar to *some southern dialect* which generalized the o-vowel before nasals, an explanation usually provided when we have problems with a sporadic formation but not at all convincing.

As regards the geographical distribution of  $u + \eta g$  in Middle English I have already summarized our position in more general terms, proposing on the basis of all available evidence combined (including the last two ModE dialect surveys) that the change, leading to the rise of *ung*, originally occurred in the West Midlands and the bordering Southern and East Midland counties. Below I shall try to justify this view as well as make the notion of bordering counties more precise. But first of all let us look at the opinions of others on the subject.

To start with we find no compelling evidence to locate the development in question exclusively in the West Midlands or the North-West Midlands (cf. Luick, Jordan, and their followers). The spellings  $\langle u \rangle$  and  $\langle ou \rangle$ <sup>2</sup> in literary and other texts as well as in place names and personal names appear in the East Midlands, Sth. East Midlands and the South, e.g. *amounger*, *wroung* in *Nrf. Gilds Ret.* (1389), *wroung*, *stroung*, *soung* in Bokenam's *Legends* from Suffolk (1447), *stroung* in *Palladius* (c. 1440); ModE *Leyuml* ( $\langle lung \rangle$ ) in YW (Smith 1956:15), and ME *le Lung* in *Cat. Anc. Deeds* IV, 338, A8635 from Hampshire (1216/72). Rhymes *songe:tunge* can be found in *The Owl and the Nightingale* l. 1071–2 (SW, 1250), *St. Editha* (c. 1450); *amonge:stronge:doung* (p. 107); *Louge:youge* (p. 130); *strongue:youge* (pp. 51, 149) in *Palladius* (SEM c. 1440); *stronge:tonge* Minot Poems (NEM, Poem 3, 1.20, 1425/1333); the same rhymes occur also in the *York plays* (Nth, 15th c.) as was pointed out by Dobson (1957:585). Modern English dialects according to Wright (1905) preserve the original u-vowel (the dotted line) as far Nth as Lancashire, SW Yorkshire, Nottingham, Sth Lincolnshire, in the east along the eastern border of Northampton and Bedfordshire and in the Sth and South-West along the southern border of Bedfordshire, Northamptonshire, Warwickshire, Worcester then dividing Shropshire into two parts more than half way up north and then turning to the west. The Orton et al. survey (1962–71, 1978) differs from that

\* The spelling  $\langle ou \rangle$  was used to render [u], e.g. *young*, *sounandai*, etc. (Fischer 1927) already in the 13th c.



MAP 1

of Wright showing the receding of the isogloss towards the South but still leaving within it over half of Lancashire, a small tip of Yorkshire, a narrow strip of Sth-W Lincolnshire then running approximately along the eastern border of Northampton and Oxfordshire subsequently turning sharply to the west dividing Berkshire into two parts and running along the northern tip of Wiltshire and the southern edge of Gloucestershire to the Bristol Channel. The difference between the surveys in the West Midland area may be due to several factors, one of them being the fieldwork and the qualifications of fieldworkers themselves. The isoglosses presented in *Map 1* have been drawn on the basis of the ModE words *wrong*, *among*, *tonges* (Wright provides information on *song*, *long*, *strong* and *throng*, which, however, did not contribute anything beyond the basic three lexical items mentioned above). The word *mongrel* has been omitted since it exhibits to a high degree the influence of Standard English and contains [ʌ] even in large areas of the North (by the way, it was not included in Wright survey, either). If we disregard the differences between the two dialect surveys, the evidence from modern dialects indicates that the development of  $\phi > u + ng$  must have affected the territory well beyond the West Midlands and must have included at some point Lancashire, part of Yorkshire, Lincolnshire, Nottingham, Rutland, Northampton, Bedford, parts of Berkshire and Wiltshire.

Oakden when discussing the development in question writes this (1930:17): "... the evidence for the change in various districts is very small, since it is never recognized in spelling. There is, therefore, no place-name evidence and none to be gathered from prose texts; rhymes such as 'longe : tonge' are our most certain guides.<sup>3</sup> ... There is the evidence of modern dialects, from which we learn that the retraction is found in northern counties as far south as Ches., N. Staff., N. Derby, Notts and Lincs". According to Oakden (1930:17) the use of the phonological feature in a text may indicate an area north of a line drawn through N. Salop and the Wash (see the broken line, *Map 1*). But the evidence presented so far gives no support to Oakden's claims. Moreover there is additional evidence both from spelling, place-names, personal names as well as rhymes from the West Midland areas south of Oakden's line. Here are a few names *le Lungelone* (*Cat. Anc. Deeds* IV. 441, A9607 (1327)) and *Lungedon*, (*Cat. Anc. Deeds* IV. 290, A8320 (1442)) from Warwick, *le Lung*, (*Glos. Cartulary* III, 72, 77, 85 (13th.c.)).

In view of what has been said so far one wonders if we can accept Morsbach's (1896) and Serjeantson's (1931) assumption that "probably the change took place sporadically in the East and South as well as in the North". The answer to this question is not simple. One of the important issues seems to have

<sup>3</sup> Of those he refers in his work only to *Gaw. 24* (*stronge : tonge*) and *The poems of Laurence Minot, Poem 3* l.20 (MSS 1425 mid Lincolnshire [NE Midl.], original c. 1333-52).

escaped the attention of scholars who have dealt with our change so far, i.e. the possibility that it may have occurred in one area and then it could have spread elsewhere. It is true that the evidence is not very rich, but even so from what we have, an interesting pattern emerges. Chronologically the earliest instances of *u* come from the West Midlands (from 13th — 14th c., from Cheshire to Gloucester) and part of the South. The area which in LOE has generalized <o> before the nasals seems to basically agree with the area where the earliest instances of  $u < \phi$  can be found. Modern dialects point to the retreat of the isogloss in the course of history which is not unusual. The South-West Midlands shared several features with the phonology of the South-West in Middle English and the change under discussion could have been common for some time in the neighbouring counties. The instances from Lincolnshire, Yorkshire, Norfolk and Suffolk are late (15th c. or the very end of 14th c. at best) and those from the extreme east have not survived in modern dialects of East Anglia and bordering counties. It is not the influence of Standard English since modern dialects in the area have [o, u, a] and not [ʌ]<sup>4</sup> as e.g. in most of the South. What would seem to have occurred is this: first of all the change occurred in the West Midlands as well as in the northern part of Wiltshire and Berkshire, in parts of Northampton and Nottingham, in Leicester and Rutland and in South Lancashire. From there it moved northwards and eastwards. As is the case with phonetic innovations, they became weaker and disappear the further they occur from the innovating center (cf. Bartoli and Zabrocki for German dialects). At first the *ung* development moved in the directions pointed out above and was recorded in rhymes and spellings in the north and several of the areas of the Eastern part of the East Midlands (from the latter area it must have penetrated Standard English in more words at first than now, cf. Dryden's and Otway's rhymes), to begin retreating in the later years with no external or internal motivation to preserve it.

Thus, the review of the old philological evidence, the evidence from the dialects of Modern English and from onomastics have led us to believe that the change / $\phi ng$ / > / $ung$ / occurred in an area larger than heretofore accepted but not in the whole of England simultaneously. It started and spread. Its spread may have continued to the eastern border of the East Midlands and into the North until the end of the Middle English period and it affected particular items to a different degree, as can be observed in modern dialects.

It will be interesting to see to what extent the existing surveys of Middle English dialects mentioned at the beginning of the present paper will modify our assumptions and those of our predecessors when their final products are available. But this remains to be seen.

<sup>4</sup> The picture has been slightly simplified.

What has been discussed above is only one minor change. There are many more phonological changes which require re-examination and often reinterpretation in the light of more recent developments and in a wide context of other changes, not in separation. The aim of the present paper was to stress the need for reinterpretation and re-examination which in the end will lead to a better understanding of the history of the English language.

## REFERENCES

- Bailey, C.—J. and K. Maroldt. 1975. "The French lineage of English". In Meisel, J.M. (ed.). 1977. 21—53.
- Berndt, R. 1960. *Einführung in das Studium des Mittelenglischen*. Halle/S.: Niemeyer.
- Brunner, K. 1960—62. *Die englische Sprache*. 2 vols. Tübingen: Niemeyer.
- Brunner, K. 1963. *An outline of Middle English*. Translated by G. Johnston. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Dobson, E. I. 1957. *English pronunciation*. 2 vols. Oxford: The Clarendon Press.
- Domingue, Z. N. Unpublished. "Another Creole: Middle English".
- Eilers, F. 1907. *Die Dehnung vor dehnenden Konsonantenverbindungen im Mittelenglischen*. Halle/S.: Niemeyer.
- Fischer, E. 1927. *Der Lautbestand des südmittelenglischen Octavian...* Heidelberg: Winter.
- Horn, W. 1902. "Zur neuenglischen Lautlehre". *Englische Studien* 30. 369—75.
- Horn, W. und Lehnert, M., 1954. *Laut und Leben, englische Lautgeschichte in der neueren Zeit (1400—1950)*. 2 vols. Berlin: Verlag der Wissenschaften.
- Jespersen, O. 1909. *A Modern English grammar on historical principles*. Vol. 1. Copenhagen: Munksgaard.
- Jordan, R. 1974 (1934). *Handbook of Middle English grammar*. Translated and revised by E. J. Crook. The Hague: Mouton.
- Kolb, E. et al. 1979. *Atlas of English sounds*. Bern: Francke Verlag.
- Luick, K. 1914—21. *Historische Grammatik der englischen Sprache*. Stuttgart: Tauchnitz.
- Meisel, J. M. (ed.). 1977. *Langues en contact—pidgins—creoles—languages in contact*. Tübingen: Narr.
- Morsbach, I. 1896. *Mittelenglische Grammatik*. Halle/S.: Niemeyer.
- Oakden, J. P. 1968 (1930). *Alliterative poetry in Middle English*. Vol. 1. Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books.
- Orton, H. 1952. "The isolative treatment in living North-Midland dialects of OE e lengthened in Middle English". *Leeds studies in English* 7/8. 97—128.
- Orton, H. et al. 1962—71. *Survey of English dialects*. 4 vols. Leeds: Arnold.
- Orton, H. et al. 1978. *The linguistic atlas of England*. London: Croom Helm.
- Pinsker, H. E. 1959. *Historische englische Grammatik*. München: Hueber.
- Poussa, P. 1982. "The evolution of early Standard English: the creolization hypothesis". *SAP* 14. 69—85.
- Prins, A. A. 1974. *A history of English phonemes from Indo-European to Present-day English*. Leiden: University Press.
- Schultz, E. 1891. *Die Sprache der "English Gilds" aus dem Jahre 1389. Ein Beitrag zur Dialektkunde von Norfolk*. Hildesheim: Gerstenberg.
- Serjeantson, M. S. 1931. "Middle English -ong>-ung". *RES* 7. 450—2.
- Smith, A. H. 1970 (1956). *English place-name elements*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Sundby, B. 1950. *The dialect and provenance of the Middle English poem "The owl and the nightingale", a linguistic study*. Lund: Gleerup.
- Strang, B. M. M. 1970. *A history of English*. London: Methuen.
- Wright, J. 1905. *The English dialect grammar*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Wright, J. and E. M. Wright. 1928. *An elementary Middle English grammar*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Zabrocki, L. 1963. *Wspólnoty komunikatywne w genezie i rozwoju języka niemieckiego*. Wrocław: Ossolineum.