4
The Vowel Phonology

4.1 Palatal or front vowel segments

4.1.1 High front vowels
The main points for discussion in this area of the vowel phonology are: (1) to establish the phonetic nature of the high front palatal vowel space itself; (2) to ascertain the extent to which the English Vowel Shift has affected those words showing stressed vowels originating in Middle English [eː]; in particular, to assess whether there has been a true MEAT/MEET merger; and (3) to determine whether there exists some kind of tense/lax [i]/[i] contrast of the type found in modern Standard English between items such as beat, beet on the one hand, and bit, hit on the other. In particular, under (1) and (2) we shall try to assess whether we are dealing in beet/beat words with a non-merged, phonetic contrast something like [i]/[e], while we shall examine evidence which suggests that, for this period at least, there was no lax, centralized [i] vowel in the phonology for hit, bit words; rather the vowel space in such items was seen as ‘close’ to that in beet/beat, and may have been something like [i], as Wyld observes (1953: 207): ‘the long forms with [i] were far commoner during the first four centuries of the Modern period than at present. ‘Peety’ [pɪtɪ] for pity was occasionally heard until quite recently, and ‘leetle’ [lɪtəl] is still used facetiously in the sense of ‘very little’, while on the other hand, Ekwall (1975: 36 footnote) is uncompromising in claiming that ‘[i] must have been open [i] in Middle English and throughout the Modern English period’, so too Horn and Lehnert (1954: 128) and MacMahon (2001: 138). The problem is that there is little by way of incontrovertible evidence to suggest that some lowered/centralized and lax [i] segment existed in bit/hit words in this period, a problem arising, perhaps as much as anything else, from the inability of observers to ‘hear’ what might have been a very fine phonetic distinction at this time between such vowel segments, as well as from the difficulties commentators faced in finding a suitable description for such a segment.

The articulatory characteristics of high, front vowel sounds are set out in Brightland and Gildon (1711: 23) as:

The Palatine Vowels are form'd in the Palate, that is, by moderate Compression of the Breath betwixt the middle of the Palate and Tongue; that is, when the
Hollow of the Palate is made less by the raising of the Middle of the Tongue, than in the pronunciation of the Throat or Gutteral Sounds. These Sounds are of three Sorts, according to the lessening or enlarging of the said Hollow; which Difference may be produc’d two several Ways, either by contracting the Mouth or Lips, the Tongue remaining in the same Position; or by elevating the Middle of the Tongue higher to the fore-parts of the Palate, the Lips, or Mouth, remaining in the same State. This is done either Way, and it is the same thing if it were done both Ways.

Discussion of the phonetic values for high front vowels in the period are usually treated by commentators under their descriptions of the graphs e and i, a stratagem which leads both to confusion and difficulties of interpretation. In many respects, Jones’ (1701) descriptions of palatal vowel values, and the contexts in which they are to be found, are the most detailed (certainly as regards lexical distribution) and his marking of what are apparently two segments distinct in quality in this area of the phonology may be unique. Although all contemporary discussions of vowel length are to be treated with suspicion, that involving the long and short i sound can best be put aside at an early stage, since it is almost always the case that the description ‘long i’ refers to a diphthongal segment, whose value we shall discuss below. Jones’ A Spelling Alphabet lists, under his ‘easier and pleasanter sounds spoken, e and ee’. The former is pronounced ‘as in Girl’ ‘which [is] Sounded as e’, the latter ‘as in be, Shire, Women’ (‘sounded Weemen’) which are Sounded as ee’. Under his list of ‘simple sounds’, he includes the sounds of ee in see (or i in it; or y in Lydia) and i in bit, hit. On the face of it this could point to the existence of a [i]/[i] contrast in his contemporary phonology, but with what looks like a tense vowel in it and Lydia. Indeed, a contrast like this is again suggested in his first Note to his section on the sound (l), where he claims that ‘I has three Sounds, that of i in it, pit, &c. which is handled under ee; i in bit, fit, &c., i in fie, tie, &c. handled here’ (1701: 58), again suggesting what looks like a tense value for it, pit.

One of several problems with Jones’ Alphabetic Spelling Dialogue lies in its failure (although, as we shall see, there are some exceptions) to distinguish graphically the vowel values he intends in his lexical lists. For instance, under I, the reader is left to decide whether the graph in question is the diphthongal ‘long i’ or some monophthongal shape, since he does not set apart symbolically those items which might be thought to show [i], his i. While one might not hesitate to assign such a value to items he lists like: bit, hit, devil, England, yes (‘sounded is’), him (as in take ‘im’); his (as in stop ‘is’), biscuit and conduit, we can perhaps only assume that it is his failure to identify the ‘long i’ separately that causes him to list together under ‘when is the sound of i written ui?’ items such as biscuit, beguil, build, circuit, conduit, disguise, guide, guil. Likewise, he answers the question: ‘When is the Sound of i written ie? As When d or s is added to Words that end in y, as dy died, dies; try tried, tries; &c.’ and in ‘fiend, friend, griest, Priest, wield’. However, there is one instance where he uses diacritic marks in an attempt to distinguish a diphthongal from a monophthongal outcome. The sound of it, is clearly differentiated by Jones (1701: 62) as being either i or i, setting apart items such as victuals