

Old English Phonetic System

This period is estimated to be c. AD 475–900. This includes changes from the split between Old English and Old Frisian (c. AD 475) up through historic early West Saxon of AD 900

Vowel mutations

Breaking of front vowels

- > Most generally, before /x/, /w/, /r/ + consonant, /l/ + consonant (assumed to be velar [ɺ], [ɽ] in these circumstances), but exact conditioning factors vary from vowel to vowel
- > Initial result was a falling diphthong ending in /u/, but this was followed by diphthong height harmonization, producing short /æǫ/, /ɛǫ/, /iǫ/ from short /æ/, /ɛ/, /i/, long /æa/, /eo/, /iu/ from long /æ:/, /e:/, /i:/. (Written *ea*, *eo*, *io*, where length is not distinguished graphically.)
- > Result in some dialects, for example [Anglian](#) Result in some dialects, for example Anglian, was back vowels rather than diphthongs. [West Saxon](#) *ceald*; but Anglian *cald* > NE *cold*.

Shortening of Vowels

- > In two particular circumstances, vowels were shortened when falling immediately before either three consonances or the combination of two consonants and two additional syllables in the word. Thus, OE *gāst* > NE *ghost*, but OE *gāstlic* > NE *ghastly* ($\bar{a} > \check{a}/_CCC$) and OE *crīst* > NE *Christ*, but OE *crīstesmæsse* > NĒ *Christmas*
 - > Probably occurred in the seventh century as evidenced by eighth century Anglo-Saxon missionaries' translation into Old Low German, "Gospel" as *Gotspel*, lit. "God news" not expected **Guotspel*, "Good news" due to *gōdspell* > *gōdspell*.
- /iū/ and /iu/ were lowered to /ěǫ/ and /eo/ between 800 and 900 AD.
 - By the above changes, /au/ was fronted to /æu/ and then modified to /æa/ by diphthong height harmonization.

- > PG /draumaz/ > OE *dréam* "joy" (cf. NE *dream*, NHG *Traum*). PG /dauθuz/ > OE *déap* > NE *death* (Goth *dáuθus*, NHG *Tod*). PG /augo:/ > OE *éage* > NE *eye* (Goth *áugō*, NHG *Auge*).
- ⊙ /sk/ was palatalized to /ʃ/ in almost all circumstances. PG /skipaz/ > NE *ship* (cf. *skipper* < Dutch *schipper*, where no such change happened). PG /skurtjaz/ > OE *scyrte* > NE *shirt*, but > ON *skyrt* > NE *skirt*.
- ⊙ /k/, /γ/, /g/ were palatalized to /tʃ/, /j/, /dʒ/ in certain complex circumstances

- > This change, or something similar, also occurred in Old Frisian.
- ⊙ Back vowels were fronted when followed in the next syllable by /i/ or /j/, by i-mutation (c. 500 AD).
 - > i-mutation affected all the Germanic languages except for Gothic.
 - > i-mutation affected all the Germanic languages except for Gothic, although with a great deal of variation. It appears to have occurred earliest, and to be most pronounced, in the Schleswig-Holstein area (the home of the Anglo-Saxons), and from there to have spread north and south.

- > All short diphthongs were mutated to /i̥y̥/, all long diphthongs to /iy/. (This interpretation is controversial. These diphthongs are written *ie*, which is traditionally interpreted as short /i̥ɛ/, long /ie/.)
- > Late in Old English (c. AD 900), these new diphthongs were simplified to /ɥ/ and /y:/, respectively.
- > The conditioning factors were soon obscured (loss of /j/ whenever it had produced gemination, lowering of unstressed /i/), phonemicizing the new sounds.
- ◉ Loss of /j/ and /ij/ following a long syllable.

- > A similar change happened in the other West Germanic languages, although after the earliest records of those languages.
- > This did not affect the new /j/ formed from palatalisation of PG /ɣ/, suggesting that it was still a (palatal) fricative at the time of the change. I.e. PG /wro:ɣijanan/ > Early OE /wrø:ɟijjan/ > OE wrēġan (/wre:jan/).

- > Following this, PG /j/ occurred only word-initially and after /r/ (which was the only consonant that was not geminated by /j/ and hence retained a short syllable).
- More reductions in unstressed syllables:
 - > /o:/ became /a/.
 - > Germanic high vowel deletion eliminated /ɪ/ and /ʊ/ when following a heavy syllable.
- Palatal diphthongization: Initial palatal /j/, /tʃ/, /ʃ/ trigger spelling changes of *a* > *ea*, *e* > *ie*. It is disputed whether this represents an actual sound change or merely a spelling convention indicating the palatal nature of the preceding consonant (written *g*, *c*, *sc* were ambiguous in OE as to palatal /j/, /tʃ/, /ʃ/ and velar /g/ or /ɣ/, /k/, /sk/, respectively).

- > Similar changes of $o > eo$, $u > eo$ are generally recognized to be merely a spelling convention. Hence WG /jung/ > OE *geong* /jung/ > NE "young"; if *geong* literally indicated an /ěǔ/ diphthong, the modern result would be **yeng*.
- > It is disputed whether there is Middle English evidence of the reality of this change in Old English.
- ◎ Initial /y/ became /g/ in late Old English.

- The development of vowels in OE consisted of the modification of separate vowels, and also of the modification of entire sets of vowels. The change begins with growing variation in pronunciation, which manifests itself in the appearance of numerous allophones: after the stage of increased variation, some allophones prevail over the others and a replacement takes place. It may result in the splitting of phonemes and their numerical growth, which fills in the “empty boxes” of the system or introduces new distinctive features. It may also lead to the merging of old phonemes, as their new prevailing allophones can fall together.

OLD ENGLISH CONSONANTS

p

pot

f

free

t

tea

θ

thing

s

see

ʃ

shoe

b

big

v

very

d

dog

ð

the

z

zoo

ʒ

vision

tʃ

cheese

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n

new

m

me

w

west

dʒ

judge

g

girl

r

ring

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sing

h

hot

j

yes

Identical to Modern English

- **b** [b], **p** [p], **d** [d], **t** [t], **l** [l], **m** [m], **k** [k] rare, **x** [ks] (uncommon), **w** [w]

OE digraphs--(most Modern English digraphs come into use in during Middle English)

cg [tʃ] *ecg* (edge), *secg* (sedge, weeds), *hrycg* (ridge)

sc [ʃ] *disc* (dish), *scinu* (shin), *sceld* (shield), *sciell* (shell), *scēap* (sheath), *fisc* (fish), *masc* (crushed grapes for winemaking), *sculdur* (shoulder), *flæsc* (flesh)

Fricatives and their allophones

- **f** [f] normally--gift (bride price), cræft (skill), cafstrian (to bridle), fugol (bird), stæf (staff)
[v] between voiced sounds--[v] is an allophone of [f]--lifer (liver), īfig (ivy), ābūfan (above), scofl (shovel), scafan (shave), hēafod (head), eorðnafola (asparagus), fēfer (fever), dēofol (devil).

[f] and [v] sometimes alternate in related word forms--wīf/wīfes [g]; wulf/wulfas [pl.] (wolf); stæf/stafas [pl.] (staff); lif/lifes [g] (life); hlāf/hlāfas [pl.] (loaf)

- s** [s] normally--mæst (mast), ostre (L. oyster), ceris (cherry), glæs (glass), fæsten (fasten)
[z] between voiced sounds--[z] is an allophone of [s]--nosu (nose), wēsa (drunkard) cursian (to curse).

[s] and [z] sometimes alternative in related word forms--hūs/hūses [g] (house), los/lose [d] (loss), lūs/lūses [g] (louse), wīs/wīsdom (wise, wisdom)

- ð, þ** [θ] normally--þæt (that), ðēof (thief), forð (out), mōnað (month), þy (thy)
[ð] between voiced sounds--ð is an allophone of θ--fæþm (embrace, fathom), wryþan (to writhe)

[θ] and [ð] sometimes alternate in related word forms-- pæð/pæðas (path[s]), bæð/baðian (bath/bathe), cwæð/cweðan (speech, to speak), soþ/soþlice (truth/truly).

- h** [h] initially--hilt, hnutu (nut), hālig (holy), hōf (hoof), hlæfdige (lady), hraca (throat, phlegm), hwæt (what),
[ç] after front vowels--riht (right), nīhsta (next), briht (bright), mihtig (mighty), pliht (plight)
[x] after back vowels---nēah (near), rūh (rough), fāh (foe), tōh (tough), nāhwær (nowhere), brōht (brought)

Stops and their allophones

◦ **c [k]** when contiguous sounds are back vowels--snaca (snake), nacod (naked), sūcan (to suck), bacan (to bake), fācen (deceit), cwacian (to tremble), cū (cow), munuc (monk), camb (comb), carr (stone, c.f. cairn), cūþ (known, c.f. uncouth)

or when contiguous sounds are mutated back vowels-- cēlan (to cool from Germ. *koljan), cietel (kettle fr. W. Germ. katel).

and before consonants--clif (cliff), cniht (knight), crisp (curly), clæne (pure), cnedan (knead),

[č] when contiguous sounds are front vowels--ceorl (free man), cīdan (to quarrel), pic (pitch), brēc (breeches), micel (much) bēce (beech), ceris (cherry), cēosan (to choose)

g [g] when initial before a consonant, initial before a back vowel--gnæt (gnat), grund (ground), græg (gray), gnorn (fierce), gnagan (to gnaw), grædig (greedy), grāpian (touch, handle), grimm (fierce, cruel), glōm (twilight), guma (man), gād (goad), gāt (goat), gold, gōma (inside of mouth or throat), gafol (tribute, rent), gōs (goose), gōd (good),

before mutations of a back vowel--gylden (gold from Germ. *guldin gift bride price)

and after [n]--singan, (to sing), hungor (hunger), gingra (younger), langung (longing), þing (thing)

[y] before and after front vowels (palatalized)--īg (island), bodig (body), dryge (dry), segel (sail), æghwær (every/anywhere), gearn (yarn), giest (yeast), giccan (itch), hunig (honey), hefig (heavy), fæger (beautiful)

Note: Since your textbook uses the symbol [y] instead of the more standard IPA symbol [j] for this sound, I will also use [y].

[y] after back vowels or a consonant (except n)--swōgan (to resound), sagu (saying), sagu (saw), folgian (to follow), plōg (plow), swelgan (to swallow), dragan (to draw), boga (bow [bo] and [baw]), cūgle (monk's cow), fugol (bird), togian (to drag), dagung (dawn), dāg (dough)

Nasals

- **n** [n] normally--sand (sand), næfre (never), nēah (near), onberan (to carry off, plunder)

[ŋ] before [k] and [g]--sangan (to sing), wincian (to blink, wink), swangor (sluggish)

Doubling of consonants indicates length

- **cc** [č:] after front vowels--feccan (fetch), bicce (female dog), fricca (herald, crier)
 - [k:] after back vowels--coccel (cockle, tare), locc (lock of hair), racca (part of a ship's rigging; c.f. raca [rake])
 - gg** [g:] after back vowels--frogga (frog)
 - ðð** [θ:] even between voiced sounds--moððe (moth), siþþan (afterwards)
 - ss** [s:] even between voiced sounds--cyssan (to kiss), Wissigotan (Visigoths)
- Other doubled consonants have expected pronunciation--sittan, sellan,

Spelling	Sound	Spelling	Sound	Spelling	Sound
b	[b]	h	[h], [x], [ç] ²	s	[s], [z]
c,k	[k]	l	[l]	t	[t]
c ³	[č]	m	[m]	þ, ð	[θ], [ð]
d	[d]	n	[n], [ŋ]	w	[w]
f	[f], [v]	p	[p]	sc	[ʃ]
g	[g], [ʁ] ²	r	[r]	cg	[ç]
g ³	[y]				

²To pronounce [x] and [ç] you may find one or more of the following techniques helpful: (1) Start to make the sound [k], but stop before the back of the tongue actually touches the roof of the mouth, and breathe out strongly; or make a [k] with light contact between the tongue and the roof of the mouth, and with the tongue still in that position, breathe out strongly, or (2) make an [š] sound, and while you are making it, force your tongue as far back in the mouth as it will go, the result being [x]; or (3) make the [hj] sound as in *hew* forcefully so that the [h] and [j] blend into a single sound, which will be [ç]. Palatal [ç] and velar [x] differ from each other much as do the [k] sounds of *keen* and *corn*. Children sometimes use repeated [x]'s.

Old English Consonants		LABIAL	DENTAL			PALATOVELAR	
			interdental	alveolar	alveolar-palatal	palatal	velar
Stops and Affricates	voiceless	p	t		č		k
	voiced	b	d		ǰ		g, ȝ
Fricatives		f, v	θ, ð	s, z	š, ž	ç	x, h
Nasals		m		n			ŋ
Liquids	lateral			l			
	retroflex or trill			r			
Semivowels						y	w

- In general, Old English phonetics suffered great changes during the whole period from the 5th to the 11th century. Anglo-Saxons did not live in isolation from the world - they contacted with Germanic tribes in France, with Vikings from Scandinavia, with Celtic tribes in Britain, and all these contacts could not but influence the language's pronunciation somehow. Besides, the internal development of the English language after languages of Angles, Saxons and Jutes were unified, was rather fast, and sometimes it took only half a century to change some form of the language or replace it with another one. That is why we cannot regard the Old English language as the state: it was the constant movement.