

# MIDDLE ENGLISH PHONETICS



# ***ME Phonetics***

**In the ME period a great change affected the system of vowel phonemes.**

**OE had both short and long phonemes, and each of these could occur in any phonetic environment, that is, they were absolutely independent phonemic units.**

**The ME vowel system was basically different. While in OE quantity (length/shortness) was a distinctive phonemic feature, in ME quantity becomes a merely phonetic peculiarity of a vowel sound.**

# *Levelling of Unstressed Vowels*

All unstressed vowels in ME were as a rule weakened and reduced. As compared to OE which distinguished 5 short vowels in unstressed position (a, o, u, i, e), Late ME had only 2 vowels in unaccented syllables (безударные слоги): [ɪ/ə].

E.g. the OE infinitive suffix –an was reduced to –en  
bindan ['bindan] > binden ['bindən].

The final [ə] disappeared in Late ME, though it continued to be spelt as –e, and was understood as a means of showing the length of the vowel in the preceding syllable and was added to words which didn't have this ending before.

E.g. OE stān > ME stone ['stɔ:n(ə)]

## *Changes of Stressed Vowels*

Vowels in ME changed both in quality and quantity.

*Quantitative changes:*

\***Lengthening.** In the 13<sup>th</sup> c. short vowels were lengthened in open syllables. It affected the vowels **a, o, e.**

OE nama ['nama] > ME name ['na:mə]

OE open ['open] > ME open ['ɔ:pən]

OE sprekan ['sprekan] > ME speken ['spe:kən]

## *Quantitative Changes. Lengthening*

The narrow vowels **i**, **u** remained as a rule unaffected by this change. In a few words, however, the narrow sounds were also lengthened in open syllables and later they were widened. **i > e:**, **u > o:**

**wikes > we[e:]kes > wee[e:]kes > weeks**

**dures > do[o:]res > doo[o:]res > doors**

## ***Quantitative Changes. Shortening***

**A long vowel before two consonants is shortened, but it remained long in other environment.**

OE **cēpan** > ME **kee[e:]pen**

OE **cēpte** > ME **ke[e]pte**

**A long vowel is also shortened before one consonant in some three-syllable words.**

OE **hāliȝdæȝ** ['ha:lijdaj] > ME **haliday** ['halidaj]

# *Qualitative Changes*

**These include:**

- **Loss of OE diphthongs and growth of new monophthongs;**
- **Growth of new diphthongs;**
- **Appearance of new phonemes.**

# *Loss of OE Diphthongs and Growth of New Monophthongs*

- Towards the end of the OE period some of the OE diphthongs became monophthongs.
- ēā > ε:            ēāst > east [ε:st]
- ēō > e:            dēōp > deep [de:p]
- ie > i:            liehtan > lighten [li:x'tən]
- ie > e            hierde > herd [herd]
- ea > a            eald > ald
- eo > e            heorte > herte



## *Growth of New Diphthongs*

- [j, y] in ME became vowels, they changed into [i, u] and formed diphthongs together with the preceding vowel. These new diphthongs had i and u as the second element, so they were ***diphthongs with i-glide and u-glide.***
- e+j > ei                      weȝ > wei
- æ + j > ai                      dæȝ > day
- a + y > au                      laȝu > lawe ['lauə]
- ā + y > ou                      āȝen > owen ['ouən]
- āh > au                      brāhte > braughte ['brauxtə]
- āw > ou                      cnāwan > knowen ['knouən]

# Appearance of New Phonemes

- $\bar{a} > ɔ:$             hām > home ['hɔ:mə]
- $\bar{o} > o:$                 tōp > tooth [to:θ]
- $\bar{æ} > \varepsilon:$             sǣ > sea [sɛ:]
- $\bar{e} > e:$                 mētan > meeten ['me:tən]
- $\bar{æ} > a$                 æfter > after ['aftər]

**Short u and long ū** remained unchanged in ME

- OE sunu > sone ['sunə] 'son'
- OE hū > how [hu:]