

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 ['bindɑn]>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 13th 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 **cē**pan > ME kee[e:]pen

OE **cē**pte > 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

100%

- [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 weʒ > wei
- æ + j > ai dæʒ > day
- a + y > au laʒu > lawe ['lauə]
- ā + y > ou āʒen > owen ['ouən]
- āh > au brāhte > braughte ['brauxtə]
- āw > ou cnāwan > knowen ['knouən]

Appearance of New Phonemes

- $\bar{a} > ɔ:$ $h\bar{a}m > home$ ['hɔ:mə]
- $\bar{o} > o:$ $t\bar{o}p > tooth$ [to:θ]
- $\bar{æ} > \varepsilon:$ $s\bar{æ} > sea$ [sɛ:]
- $\bar{e} > e:$ $m\bar{e}tan > meeten$ ['me:tən]
- $\bar{æ} > a$ $\bar{æ}fter > after$ ['aftər]

Short u and long ū remained unchanged in ME

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