Lecture № 11 Old English phonetics

1. Old English Vowel System (9th-10th c.)
2. West Germanic Gemination of Consonants
3. Velar Consonants in Early Old English. Growth of New Phonemes

OLD ENGLISH PHONETICS

OE is so far removed from Mod E that one may take it for an entirely different language; this is largely due to the peculiarities of its pronunciation.

The survey of OE phonetics deals with word accentuation, the systems of vowels and consonants and their origins. The OE sound system developed from the PG system. It underwent multiple changes in the pre-written periods of history, especially in Early OE. The diachronic description of phonetics in those early periods will show the specifically English tendencies of development and the immediate sources of the sounds in the age of writing.

# Word Stress

The system of word accentuation inherited from PG underwent no changes in Early OE.

In OE a syllable was made prominent by an increase in the force of articulation; in other words, a dynamic or a force stress was employed. In disyllabic and polysyllabic words the accent fell on the root-morpheme or on the first syllable. Word stress was fixed; it remained on the same syllable in different grammatical forms of the word and, as a rule, did not shift in word-building either. The forms of the Dat. case of the nouns *hlaforde* ['xla:vorde], *cyninge* ['kyninge] used in the text and the Nom. case of the same nouns: *hlaford* ['xla:vord], *cyning* ['kyning]. Polysyllabic words, especially compounds, may have had two stresses, chief and secondary, the chief stress being fixed on the first root-morpheme, e.g. the compound noun *Norðmonna* from the same extract, received the chief stress upon its first component and the secondary stress on the second component; the grammatical ending *-a* (Gen. pl) was unaccented. In words with prefixes the position of the stress varied: verb prefixes were unaccented, while in nouns and adjectives the stress was commonly thrown on to the prefix.

Cf: a'risan – arise v., 'toweard – toward adj., 'misdæd – misdeed n.

If the words were derived from the same root, word stress, together with other means, served to distinguish the noun from the verb, cf:

**Changes of Stressed Vowels in Early Old English**

Sound changes, particularly vowel changes, took place in English at every period of history.

The development of vowels in Early OE consisted of the modification of separate vowels, and also of the modification of entire sets of vowels.

It should be borne in mind that the mechanism of all phonetic changes strictly conforms with the general pattern. 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. Most frequently the change will involve both types of replacement, splitting and merging, so that we have to deal both with the rise of new phonemes and with the redistribution of new allophones among the existing phonemes. For the sake of brevity, the description of most changes below is restricted to the initial and final stages.

# Independent Changes. Development of Monophthongs

The PG short [a] and the long [a:], which had arisen in West and North Germanic, underwent similar alterations in Early OE they were fronted and, in the process of fronting, they split into several sounds.

The principal regular direction of the change - [a]>[æ] and [a:]>[æ:] – is often referred to as the fronting or palatalisation of [a, a:]. The other directions can be interpreted as positional deviations or restrictions to this trend: short [a] could change to [o]or [a] and long [a:] became [o:] before a nasal; the preservation (or, perhaps, the restoration) of the short [a ] was caused by a back vowel in the next syllable— see the examples in Table 1 (sometimes [a] occurs in other positions as well, e.g. OE *macian, land,* NE *make, land).*

*Table 1*

Splitting of [a] and [a:] in Early Old English

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Change illustrated | Examples |
| **PG OE** | **other OG languages** | **OE** | **NE** |
| a | æ | *Gt* ðata*O Icel* dagr | **ðæt**dæg | *that**day* |
| a | o | *Gt* mann(a) | mon | *man* |
|  |  | *O Icel* land | land | *land* |
|  | a | *Gt* magan | magan | *may* |
|  |  | *Gt* dagos | dagas | *days* |
| æ:a:o: | *OHG*dâr*OHG* slâfen*OHG* mâno | ðærslæpanmōna | *there**sleep**moon* |
|  | *OI cel* mánaðr | mōnað | *month* |

Development of Diphthongs

The PG diphthongs (or sequences of monophthongs) [ei, ai, iu, eu, au] — uderwent regular independent changes in Early OE; they took place in all phonetic conditions irrespective of environment. The diphthongs with i-glide were monophthongised into [i:] and [a:], respectively; the diphthongs in u-glide were reflected\_a&\_long\_\_diphthongs [io:], [eo:] and [au] >[ea:].

If the sounds in PG were not diphthongs but sequences of two separate phonemes, the changes should be defined as phonologisation of vowel sequences. This will mean that these changes increased the number of vowel phonemes in the language. Moreover, they introduced new distinctive features into the vowel system by setting up vowels with diphthongal glides; henceforth, monophthongs were opposed to diphthongs.

All the changes described above were interconnected. Their independence has been interpreted in different ways.

The changes may have started with the fronting of [a] (that is the change of [a] to [æ]), which caused a similar development in the long vowels: [a:]>[æ:], and could also bring about the fronting of [a] in the biphonemic vowel sequence [a + u], which became [æa:], or more precisely [æ: :], with the second element weakened. This weakening as well as the monophthongisation of the sequences in [-i] may have been favoured by the heavy stress on the first sound.

According to other explanations the appearance of the long [a:] from the sequence [a+i] may have stimulated the fronting of long [a:], for this latter change helped to preserve the distinction between two phonemes; cf. OE *rod* (NE *road)* and OE ræd('advice') which had not fallen together because while [ai] became [a:] in *rad,* the original [a:] was narrowed to [æ:] in the word **ræd***.* In this case the fronting of [a:] to [æ:] caused a similar development in the set of short vowels: [a] > [æ], which reinforced the symmetrical pattern of the vowel system.

Another theory connects the transformation of the Early OE vowel system with the rise of nasalised long vowels out of short vowels before nasals and fricative consonants ([a, i, u] plus [m] or [n] plus [x, f, 0 or s]), and the subsequent growth of symmetrical oppositions in the sets of long and short vowels .

**Assimilative Vowel Changes: Breaking and Diphthongisation**

The tendency to assimilative vowel change, characteristic of later PG and of the OG languages, accounts for many modifications of vowels in Early OE. Under the influence of succeeding and preceding consonants some Early OE monophthongs developed into diphthongs. If a front vowel stood before a velar consonant there developed a short glide between them, as the organs of speech prepared themselves for the transition from one sound to the other. The glide, together with the original monophthong formed a diphthong.

The front vowels [i], [e] and the newly developed [æ], changed into diphthongs with a back glide when they stood before [h], before long (doubled) [ll] or [l] plus another consonant, and before [r] plus other consonants, e.g.: [e]>[eo] in OE *deorc,* NE *dark.* The change is known as breaking or fracture. Breaking is dated in Early OE, for in OE texts we find the process already completed: yet it must have taken place later than the vowel changes described above as the new vowel [æ], which appeared some time during the 5th c., could be subjected to breaking under the conditions described.

Breaking produced a new set of vowels in OE – the short diphthongs [ea] and [eo]; they could enter the system as counterparts of the long [ea:], [eo:], which had developed from PG prototypes.

Breaking was unevenly spread among the OE dialects: it was more characteristic of West Saxon than of the Anglian dialects (Mercian and Northumbrian); consequently, in many words, which contain a short diphthong in West Saxon, Anglian dialects have a short monophthong, cf. WS *tealde,* Mercian *talde* (NE *told).*

Diphthongisation of vowels could also be caused by preceding consonants: a glide arose after \* palatal consonants as a sort of transition to the succeeding vowel.

After the palatal consonants [k‘], [sk‘] and [j] short and long [e] and [æ] turned into diphthongs with a more front close vowel as their first element, e.g. Early *OE* *\**scæmu*>OE sceamu* (NE *shame).* In the resulting diphthong the initial [i] or [e] must have been unstressed but later the stress shifted to the first element, which turned into the nucleus of the diphthong, to conform with the structure of OE diphthongs (all of them were falling diphthongs). This process known as "diphthongisation after palatal consonants" occurred some time in the 6th c.

Breaking and diphthongisation are the main sources of short diphthongs in OE. They are of special interest to the historians of English, for OE short diphthongs have no parallels in other OG languages and constitute a specifically OE feature.

The status of short diphthongs in the OE vowel system has aroused much discussion and controversy. On the one hand, short diphthongs are always phonetically conditioned as the)' are found only in certain phonetic environments and appear as positional allophones of respective monophthongs (namely, of those vowels from which they have originated). On the other hand, however, they are similar in quality to the long diphthongs, and their phonemic status is supported by the symmetrical arrangement of the vowel system. Their very growth can be accounted for by the urge of the system to have all its empty positions filled. However, their phonemic status cannot be confirmed by the contrast of minimal pairs: [ea], [æ], [a] as well as [eo] and [e] occur only in complementary distribution, never in identical phonetic conditions to distinguish morphemes; they also occur as variants in different dialects. On these grounds it seems likely that short diphthongs, together with other vowels, make up sets of allophones representing certain phonemes: [a, æ, ea] and [e, eo]. Perhaps the rise of short diphthongs merely reveals a tendency to a symmetrical arrangement of diphthongs in the vowel system, which was never fully realised at the phonemic level.

# Palatal Mutation

The OE tendency to positional vowel change is most apparent in the process termed "mutation". Mutation is the change of one vowel to another through the influence of a vowel in the succeeding syllable.

This kind of change occurred in PG when [e] was raised to [i] and [u] could alternate with [o] under the influence of succeeding sounds.

In Early OE, mutations affected numerous vowels and brought about profound changes in the system and use of vowels.

The most important series of vowel mutations, shared in varying degrees by all OE languages (except Gothic), is known as "i-Umlaut" or "palatal mutation". Palatal mutation is the fronting and raising of vowels through the influence of [i] or [j] (the non-syllabic [i]) in the immediately following syllable. The vowel was fronted and made narrower so as to approach the articulation of [i]. Cf. OE *an* (NE *one)* with a back vowel in the root and OE ænig(NE *any)* derived from the same root with the root vowel mutated to a narrower and more front sound under the influence of [i] in the suffix: [a:]>[æ:].

Since the sounds [i] and [j] were common in suffixes and endings, palatal mutation was of very frequent occurrence. Practically all Early OE monophthongs, as well as diphthongs except the closest front vowels [e] and [i] were palatalised in these phonetic conditions.

Due to the reduction of final syllables the conditions, which caused palatal mutation, that is [i] or [j], had disappeared in most words by the age of writing; these sounds were weakened to [e] or were altogether lost (this is seen in all the examples above except ænig).

Of all the vowel changes described, palatal mutation was certainly the most comprehensive process, as it could affect most OE vowels, both long and short, diphthongs and monophthongs. It led to the appearance of new vowels and to numerous instances of merging and splitting of phonemes.

The labialised front vowels [y] and [y:] arose through palatal mutation from [u] and [u:], respectively, and turned into new phonemes, when the conditions that caused them had disappeared. Cf. *mus* and *mys* (from the earlier *\*mysi,* where [y:] was an allophone of [u:] before [i]). The diphthongs [ie, ie:] (which could also appear from diphthongisation after palatal consonants) were largely due to palatal mutation and became phonemic in the same way, though soon they were confused with [y, y:]. Other mutated vowels fell together with the existing phonemes, e.g. [oe] from [o] merged with [e, æ:], which arose through palatal mutation, merged with [æ:] from splitting.

Palatal mutation led to the growth of new vowel interchanges and to the increased variability of the root-morphemes: "owing to palatal mutation many related words and grammatical forms acquired new root-vowel interchanges. Cf., e.g. two related words: OE *gemot* n 'meeting' and OE *metan* (NE *meet),* a verb derived from the noun-stem with the help of the suffix -j- (its earlier form was *\*motjan; -j-* was then lost but the root acquired two variants: *mot'/met-).* Likewise we find variants of morphemes with an interchange of root-vowels in the grammatical forms *mus, mys* (NE *mouse, mice), boc, bec* (NE *book, books),* since the plural was originally built by adding -iz. (Traces of palatal mutation are preserved in many modern words and forms, e.g. *mouse — mice, foot—feet, tale* — *tell, blood— bleed;* despite later phonetic changes, the original cause of the inner change is t-umlaut or palatal mutation.)

The dating, mechanism and causes of palatal mutation have been a matter of research and discussion over the last hundred years.

Palatal mutation in OE had already been completed by the time of the earliest written records; it must have taken place during the 7th c., though later than all the Early OE changes described above. This relative dating is confirmed by the fact that vowels resulting from other changes could be subjected to palatal mutation, e. g. OE *ieldra* (NE *elder)* had developed from *\*ealdira* by palatal mutation which occurred when the diphthong [ea] had already been formed from [æ] by breaking (in its turn [æ] was the result of the fronting of Germanic [a]). The successive stages of the change can be shown as follows: fronting - breaking - palatal mutation [a] > [æ] *>* [ea] > [ie] The generally accepted phonetic explanation of palatal mutation is that the sounds [i] or [j] palatalised the preceding consonant, and that this consonant, in its turn, fronted and raised the root-vowel. This "mechanistic" theory is based on the assumed workings of the speech organs.. An alternative explanation, sometimes called "psychological" or "mentalistic", is that the speaker unconsciously anticipates the [i] and [j] in pronouncing the root-syllable – and through anticipation adds an. i-glide to the root-vowel. The process is thus subdivided into several stages, e.g. *\*domjan >\*doimjan >\*doemjan>\*deman* (NE *deem).* It has been found that some OE spellings appear to support both these theories, e.g. OE *secgan* has a palatalised consonant [gg‘] shown by the digraph cg; *Coinwulf,* a name in BEOWULF, occurring beside another spelling *Cenwulf,* shows the stage [oi:] in the transition from PG [o:] to OE [oe:], and [e:]: OE *cen* 'bold'. The diphthongoids resulting from palatal mutation developed in conformity with the general tendency of the vowel system: in Early OE diphthongal glides were used as relevant phonemic distinctive features. In later OE the diphthongs showed the first signs of contraction (or monophthongisation) as other distinctive features began to predominate: labialisation and vowel length. (The merging of [ie, ie:] and [y, y:] mentioned above, can also be regarded as an instance of monophthongisation of diphthongs.)

# Changes of Unstressed Vowels in Early Old English

All the changes described above affected accented vowels. The development of vowels in unstressed syllables, final syllables in particular, was basically different. Whereas in stressed position the number of vowels had grown (as compared with the PG system), due to the appearance of new qualitative differences, the number of vowels distinguished in unstressed position had been reduced. In unaccented syllables, especially final, long vowels were shortened, and thus the opposition of vowels – long to short – was neutralised. Cf. OE *nama* (NE *name)* to the earlier *\*namon.* It must also be mentioned that some short vowels in final unaccented syllables were dropped. After long syllables, that is syllables containing a long vowel, or a short vowel followed by more than one consonant, the vowels [i] and [u] were lost. Cf. the following pairs, which illustrate the retention of [u] and [i] after a short syllable, and their loss after a long one: OE *scipu* and *sceap* (NE *ships, sheep,* pl from *\*skeapu);* OE *werian*—*demon* (NE *wear, deem;* cf. Gt *domjan).*

**Old English Vowel System (9th-10th c.)**

The vowels shown in parentheses were unstable and soon fused with resembling sounds: [a] with [a] or [o], [ie, ie:] with [y, y:].

The vowels are arranged in two lines in accordance with the chief phonemic opposition: they were contrasted through quantity as long to short and were further distinguished within these sets through qualitative differences as monophthongs and diphthongs, open and close, front and back, labialised and non-labialised. Cf. some minimal pairs showing the phonemic opposition of short and long vowels:

OE dæl — dæl (NE *dale,* 'part') is — īs (NE is, *ice))* col — cōl (NE *coal, cool).*

The following examples confirm the phonemic relevance of some qualitative differences:

OE ræd — rād — rēad (NE 'advice', *road, red)*, sē — sēo 'that' Masc. and Fern. mā — mē (NE

*more, me)*

The OE vowel system displayed an obvious tendency towards a symmetrical, balanced arrangement since almost every long vowel had a corresponding short counterpart. However, it was not quite symmetrical: the existence of the nasalised [a] in the set of short vowels and the debatable phonemic status of short diphthongs appear to break the balance.

All the vowels listed in the table could occur in stressed position. In unstressed syllables we find only five monophthongs, and even these five vowels could not be used for phonemic contrast:

i – ænig (NE *any)*

e – stāne, Dat. sg of stān as opposed to

a – stānaGen. pl of the same noun (NE *stone)*

o – bæron *—* Past pl Ind (of *beran* as opposed to bæren*. Subj.* (NE *bear)*

*u — talu* (NE *tale),* Nom. sg as opposed to *tale* in other cases

The examples show that [e] was not contrasted to [i], and [o] was not contrasted to [u]. The system of phonemes appearing in unstressed syllables consists of three units: e/i a o/u

# Consonant Changes in Pre-Written Periods

On the whole, consonants were historically more stable than vowels, though certain changes took place in all historical periods.

It may seem hat being a typical OG language OE ought to contain all the consonants that arose in PG under Grimm's and Verner's Law. Yet it appears that very few noise consonants in OE correspond to the same sounds in PG; for in the intervening period most consonants underwent diverse changes: qualitative and quantitative, independent and positional.

Some of the consonant changes dated in pre-written periods are referred to as "West Germanic" (WG) as they are shared by all the languages of the WG subgroup; WG changes may have taken place at the transitional stage from PG to Early OE prior to the Germanic settlement of Britain.

# Treatment of Fricatives. Hardening. Rhotacism. Voicing and Devoicing

After the changes under Grimm's Law and Verner's Law PG had the following two sets of fricative consonants-voiceless [f, 0, x, s] and voiced [v, ð, *y*, z].

In WG and in Early OE the difference between the two groups was supported by new features. PG voiced fricatives tended to be hardened to corresponding plosives while voiceless fricatives, being contrasted to them primarily as fricatives to plosives, developed new voiced allophones.

The PG voiced [ð] (due to Verner's Law or to the third act of the shift) was always hardened to [d] in OE and other WG languages, cf., for instance, *Gt goþs, godai* [ð],OIcel *goðr* and OE god (NE *good),* The two other fricatives, [v] and [*y*]were hardened to [b] and [g] initially and after nasals, otherwise they remained fricatives.

PG [z] underwent a phonetic modification through the stage of [ж] into [r] and thus became a sonorant, which ultimately merged with the older IE [r]. Cf. Gt. *wasjan, 0* Icel *verja* and OE *werian* (NE *wear).* This process, termed *rhotacism,* is characteristic not only of WG but also of NG.

In the meantime or somewhat later the PG set of voiceless fricatives [f, 0, x, s] and also those of the voiced fricatives which had not turned into plosives, that is, [v] and *[y],* were subjected to a new process of voicing and devoicing. In Early OE they became or remained voiced mtervocally and between vowels, sonorants and voiced consonants; they remained or became voiceless in other environments, namely, initially, finally and next to other voiceless consonants Cf. Gt *qiþian, qaþi* with *[0]* in both forms, and OE *cweðan [ð]* between vowels and **cwæð**[0] at the end of the word (NE arch, *quoth* 'say').

The mutually exclusive phonetic conditions for voiced and voiceless fricatives prove that in OE they were not phonemes, but allophones.

# West Germanic Gemination of Consonants

In all WG languages, at an early stage of their independent history, most consonants were lengthened after a short vowel before [j]. This process is known as WG "gemination" or "doubling" of consonants, as the resulting long consonants are indicated by means of double letters, e.g.: *\*fuljan > OE fyllan (NE fill); \** sætjanOE > *settan* (NE *set),* cf. Gt *satjan.*

During the process, or some time later, [j] was lost, so that the long consonants ceased to be phonetically conditioned. When the long and short consonants began to occur in identical phonetic conditions, namely between vowels, their distinction became phonemic.

The change did not affect the sonorant [r], e.g. OE *werian (NE wear);* nor did it operate if the consonant was preceded by a long vowel, e. g. OE *demon, metan* (NE *deem, meet) —* the earlier forms of these words contained [j], which had caused palatal mutation but had not led to the lengthening of consonants (the reconstruction of pre-written forms *\*motjan* and *\*domjan* is confirmed by OS *motion* and Gt *domjan).*

**Velar Consonants in Early Old English. Growth of New Phonemes**

In Early OE velar consonants split into two distinct sets of sounds, which eventually led to the growth of new phonemes.

The velar consonants [k, g, x, *y*] were palatalised before a front vowel, and sometimes also after a front vowel, unless followed by a back vowel. Thus in OE *cild* (NE *child)* the velar consonant [k] was softened to [k'] as it stood before the front vowel [i]: [\*kild]>[k'ild]; similarly [k] became [k'] in OE **spræc**(NE *speech)* after a front vowel but not in OE *sprecan* ("NE *speak)* where [k] was followed by the back vowel [a]. In the absence of these phonetic conditions the consonants did not change, with the result that lingual consonants split into two sets, palatal and velar. The difference between them became phonemic when, a short time later, velar and palatal consonants began to occur in similar phonetic conditions; cf. *OE cild* [k'ild], *ciest* [k'iest] (NE *child, chest)* with palatal [k'] and *ceald, cepan* (NE *cold, keep)* with hard, velar [k] — both before front vowels.

Though the difference between velar and palatal consonants was not shown in the spellings of the OE period, the two sets were undoubtedly differentiated since a very early date. In the course of time the phonetic difference between them grew and towards the end of the period the palatal consonants developed into sibilants and affricates: [k']>[tſ], [g']>[dz]; in ME texts they were indicated by means of special digraphs and letter sequences.

The date of the palatalisation can be fixed with considerable precision in relation to other Early OE sound changes. It must have taken place after the appearance of [æ, æ:] (referred to the 5th c.) but prior to palatal mutation (late 6th or 7th c.); for [æ, æ:] could bring about the palatalisation of consonants (recall OE **spræc***,* NE *speech),* while the front vowels which arose by palatal mutation could not. In OE *cepan.* (from *\*kopjan)* and OE *cyning* (with [e:] and [y] through palatal mutation) the consonant [k] was not softened, which is confirmed by their modern descendants, *keep* and *king.* The front vowels [y] and [e:] in these and similar words must have appeared only when the splitting of velar consonants was well under way. Yet it is their appearance that transformed the two sets of positional allophones into phonemes, for a velar and a palatal consonant could now occur before a front vowel, that is, in identical phonetic conditions: cf. OE *cyning* and *cyse* (NE *king, cheese).*

# Loss of Consonants in Some Positions

Comparison with other OG languages, especially Gothic and O Icel, has revealed certain instances of the loss of consonants in WG and Early OE.

Nasal sonorants were regularly lost before fricative consonants; in the process the preceding vowel was probably nasalised and lengthened. Cf.:

*Gt fimf,* 0 Icel *fim*, *OHG fimf — OE fif (NE five)*

Gt *uns,* OHG *uns* — OE ūs (NE us)

Fricative consonants could be dropped between vowels and before some plosive consonants; these losses were accompanied by a compensatory lengthening of the preceding vowel or the fusion of the preceding and succeeding vowel into a diphthong, cf. OE *sēon,* which corresponds to Gt *saihwan,* OE *slēan* (NE *slay),* Gt *slahan,* G. *schlagen,* OE **sægde**and **sæde**(NE *said).*

We should also mention the loss of semi-vowels and consonants in unstressed final syllables, [j] was regularly dropped in suffixes after producing various changes in the root: palatal mutation of vowels, lengthening of consonants after short vowels. The loss of [w] is seen in some case forms of nouns: Norn, *treo,* Dat. *treowe* (NE *tree);*

Nom. sæ, Dat. **sæwe**(NE *sea),* cf. Gt *triwa, saiws.*