Old English Basics: Course Handout

1. Phonology and spelling

Alphabet:

\[
\begin{array}{cccccccccccccccccccccccccccc}
\text{a} & \text{æ} & \text{b} & \text{c} & \text{d} & \text{e} & \text{f} & \text{g} & \text{h} & \text{i} & \text{k} & \text{l} & \text{m} & \text{n} & \text{o} & \text{p} & \text{r} & \text{s(f)} & \text{t} & \text{u} & \text{x} & \text{y} & \text{w(p)} & \text{þ} & \text{ð}
\end{array}
\]

\(\text{æ} = \) a-e ligature, pronunciation just like the modern IPA symbol [æ]

\(\text{c} = \) [k] near back vowels (\textit{cann} ‘can’);

\(\text{tʃ} = \) near front vowels (\textit{circe} ‘church’)

\(\text{h} = \) [h] word-initially;

\(\text{ç} = \) near front vowels;

\(\text{x} = \) near back vowels (like German \textit{ch})

\(\text{g} = \) [g] word-initially

\(\text{j} = \) near front vowels,

\(\text{y} = \) intervocalically

\(\text{cg} = \) [dʒ]

\(\text{sc} = \) [ʃ] near front vowels (\textit{scipu} ‘ship’), otherwise [sk]

\(\text{y} = \) pronunciation like modern IPA symbol [y], German \textit{ü}

\(\text{þ} = \) the old Germanic “thorn” rune, th sound

\(\text{ð} = \) th sound

\(\text{ð/þ} = \) are used interchangeably, both can stand for either [ð] or [θ], like English \textit{th}

\(\text{ƿ} = \) old Germanic “wynn” rune, [w], usually rendered as \textit{w} in modern editions.

\(\text{þ} = \) abbreviation for ‘and’ (often rendered “&” in modern editions)

\(\text{1} = \) A fricativized g sound,

\(\text{2} = \) the voiced counterpart of a German \textit{ch},

\(\text{3} = \) like a non-‘rolled’ northern German \textit{r} pronunciation,

\(\text{4} = \) like the \textit{g} in a northern German pronunciation of “\textit{Sagen’se mal}…”

Palatal spelling:

\(\text{c, g, sc} = \) are sometimes written with a dot above them in modern textbooks to indicate when they are pronounced “soft” (palatal), i.e. [tʃ, j, ʃ]. This is not original spelling but only a modern teaching aid.

\[\text{æ} = \] the voiced counterpart of a German \textit{ch},

\[\text{tʃ} = \] like a non-‘rolled’ northern German \textit{r} pronunciation,

\[\text{g} = \] like the \textit{g} in a northern German pronunciation of “\textit{Sagen’se mal}…”
Length marking:
Vowels are often written in modern grammars and textbooks with a macro above to indicate when they are pronounced long. This is not the original spelling.

Fricative rule:
\( \langle f \rangle, \langle s \rangle, \text{ and } \langle \delta/\theta \rangle = \)
- voiced \([v, z, \delta]\) between other voiced sounds, especially between vowels
- elsewhere voiceless \([f, s, \theta]\), especially at beginning and end of words; cf. Mod.E. leaf/leaves, house/houses etc.

Consonant system

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>lab.</th>
<th>dent</th>
<th>alv</th>
<th>postalv</th>
<th>pal</th>
<th>vel</th>
<th>glot</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>p</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>tj</td>
<td></td>
<td>k</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>d</td>
<td>dz</td>
<td></td>
<td>g</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v</td>
<td>ð</td>
<td>z</td>
<td></td>
<td>j~</td>
<td>ñ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f</td>
<td>θ</td>
<td>s</td>
<td></td>
<td>ç~</td>
<td>~h</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>w</td>
<td>l</td>
<td>r</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m</td>
<td>n</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Vowel system:
long/short vowels
- \( \bar{i}, i \)
- \( \bar{e}, e \)
- \( \bar{a}, æ \)

long / short diphthongs
- \( \bar{i}e \) \([ia, ïa], [iy, ïy]\)?
- \( \bar{e}o \) \([ea, ëa], [eo, ëo]\)?
- \( \bar{e}a \) \([æa, ãa], [æa, ãa]\)?

2. History

Indo-European
→ Proto-Germanic
→ Northwest Germanic (vs. East G.)
→ West Germanic (vs. North G.)
→ “North Sea Germanic” (“Ingvaæonic”)
  → Anglo-Frisian
  → Anglic, Saxon, Jutic
2.1. Consonants: From Indo-European (IE) to (West-)Germanic

2.1.1. Grimm’s Law (“Germanic Consonant Shift”)

Three series of plosive consonants, shifts in manner of articulation:
• voiceless plosive > fricative
• voiced aspirate\(^1\) plosive > fricative
• voiced plosive > voiceless

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IE &gt; Germ</th>
<th>IE &gt; Germ</th>
<th>IE &gt; Germ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/p/ &gt; /f/</td>
<td>/bʰ/ &gt; /β/ (later &gt; [b/v])</td>
<td>b &gt; p</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/t/ &gt; /θ/</td>
<td>/dʰ/ &gt; /ð/ (later &gt; [d])</td>
<td>d &gt; t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/k/ &gt; /χ/</td>
<td>/ɡʰ/ &gt; /ɣ/ (later &gt; [ɡ])</td>
<td>g &gt; k</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.1.2. Verner’s Law

Voicing /f, θ, s, χ/ > /β, ð, z, ɣ/ in the middle of a word, unless it is preceded by the stressed syllable.\(^4\)
Affects the sounds resulting from Grimm’s Law, plus /s/.

2.1.3. Rhotacism

All /z/ > /r/. Affects the /z/ resulting from Verner’s Law. Characteristic of West Germanic.

2.1.4. Other changes

• Insertion of [u] with syllabic liquids and nasals:
  ṛ, ɹ, m̩ > ur, ul, um, un
  pl̩nos- > fulnaz (cf. Lat. plenus, Engl. full)
• WGerman. Gemination (consonant lengthening) before j
  xaβ.jan > haβ.βjan, > OE habban ‘have’
• [χ] in word initial position > [h] (also in German)

\(^2\) Often called “First Consonant Shift” (Erste Lautverschiebung) from a German perspective. The Zweite Lautverschiebung, is the one that separates High German from Low German, e.g. t > z (Tid > Zeit), p > pf (Appel > Apfel)

\(^3\) According to modern phonetic interpretations: “breathy voiced” plosives

\(^4\) Mnemonic help: cf. independent parallel in Modern German:
  Hannöver[ɪ], but Hannöverän[ɛ]r [v]
### Example words

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IE</th>
<th>Germ</th>
<th>cognates for comparison</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>pater</td>
<td>faðer</td>
<td>cf. Lat. pater, Engl father, G. Vater</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bræðer</td>
<td>brōðer &gt; brōðer</td>
<td>cf. Lat. frater, Engl brother, G. Bruder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hundan</td>
<td>ðeura &gt; ðeura</td>
<td>cf. Engl. deer, G. Tier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beran</td>
<td>beran &gt; beran</td>
<td>cf. Lat. fero, Engl. bear, borne, G. gebären</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>centum</td>
<td>centum</td>
<td>cf. Lat. centum, Engl. hundred</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brother</td>
<td>brother</td>
<td>cf. Lat. frater, Engl. brother, G. Bruder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connie</td>
<td>Conn</td>
<td>cf. Lat. conn, Engl. conn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hundred</td>
<td>hundred</td>
<td>cf. Lat. centum, Engl. hundred</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roter</td>
<td>Rot</td>
<td>cf. Lat. rot, Engl. rot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tier</td>
<td>Tier</td>
<td>cf. Lat. tier, Engl. tier</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 2.2. Consonants: From West-Germanic to Old English

#### 2.2.1. Palatalization

In the neighbourhood of front vowels, velar consonants become palatal
• [k] > [c] > [tʃ] (cf. church/Kirche; chin/Kinn)
• [ɡɡ] > [dʒ] (spelled ‹cg›; cf. OE. mycg, Mod.E. midge, G. Mücke)
• [χ] > [ç] (like German ach/ich alternation)
• [sk] > [ʃ] (spelled ‹sc›; cf. OE. scip, Mod.E. ship, G. Schiff)
• [ɣ] > [j]  (cf. yellow/gelb)
  (later gets vocalised as part of new diphthongs in positions after vowels; cf. OE day= [dæj], German Tag; Mod.E. day.)

2.2.2. (Partial) hardening of β, δ, γ

“hardening” = change from fricatives [β, δ, γ] into plosives [b, d, g]

• /β/: partial hardening; split into /v/ and /b/
  /b/ at beginning of words and in geminated (lengthened) groups
  /v/ medially
  (cf. Greek hypèr, Engl. over, G. ,ber; Engl. harvest, G. Herbst)

• /δ/: always hardened to /d/ (also in German)
  (Note: OE [δ] never comes from Germanic /θ/, but from Germanic /ð/, voiced at a later stage (see below). In some instances, however, [δ] > [d] was then changed back into [ð] at yet a later stage, in Middle English, e.g. OE fæder > Mod.E. father.)

• /γ/: partial hardening, similar to v/b above
  plosive [ɡ] in some positions, e.g. word initially remains [γ] elsewhere, especially intervocalically
  (applies only to those [γ] that didn’t previously get palatalised to [j], see above)

2.2.3. Medial voicing and related changes

• /f, θ, s/ get voiced to [v, ð, z] in medial, intervocalic position
• Conversely, [v] gets de-voiced to [f] in word-final position
  (cf. modern alternation wife/wives; house/houses etc.)
• /χ/ gets not just voiced but lost completely in intervocalic position
  (*sexan > sēon, cf. Mod.E. see, G. sehen)

2.2.4. Other changes

• Loss of nasal before fricative (with compensatory vowel lengthening)
  *gans > gōs  cf. Gans/goose
  *tanθ > tōþ  cf. Zahn/tooth
  *finf > fīf  cf. fünf/five
  *munθ > mūþ  cf. Mund/mouth
2.2.5. For comparison: From WGerm. to German (“High German Consonant Shift”/“Zweite Lautverschiebung”)

- \(p, t, k\) change to affricates/fricatives (depending on position)
- \(\beta, \gamma\) always get hardened \(> b, g\)
- \(ð, \theta\) get hardened one step further than in English (\([ð] > [d] > [t]\); then \([\theta] > [d]\))

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Germanic</th>
<th>Word-initial</th>
<th>medial</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(p)</td>
<td>pf</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>cf. pipe/Pfeife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(t)</td>
<td>(t)z</td>
<td>(\beta)</td>
<td>cf. white/weiß</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(k)</td>
<td>k (Swiss G.: kχ)</td>
<td>ch</td>
<td>cf. cook/kochen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ð=d)</td>
<td>&gt;t</td>
<td></td>
<td>cf. ride/reiten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(\theta)</td>
<td>&gt;d</td>
<td></td>
<td>cf. brother/Bruder</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.3. Vowels: From Indo-European to Germanic

2.3.1. A/o mergers

- Long /a:, o:/ merge into /o:/ (\(mātēr > mōðer\))
- Short /a, o/ merge into /a/ (\(gʰostis > gast\), cf. Lat. hostis)
  (including mergers of /ai, oi/ > /ai/; /au, ou/ > /au/)

2.3.2. Heightening of short /e/ > /i/:

- before nasal + consonant
- before following i, j
  IE wentos > E. wind (cf. Lat. ventus)
  IE medʰ- > E. mid (cf. Lat. medius)
- diphthong /ei/ monophthongised > /i/:

2.3.3. Lowering of short /i/ > /e/ and /u/ > /o/:

Conversely to the above:
- /i, u/ are lowered to /e, o/ before low or mid vowels (a, e, o) in the next syllable.
  e.g. IE wiros > Germ. weras (cf. Lat. vir 'man', Engl. were-wolf 'man-wolf')

2.3.4. Long ē lowering

Original long /eː/ (also called ē,) gets lowered > WGerm /aː/ (then again fronted to /æː/ in OE, see “brightening” below)
A new /eː/ sound emerges in its place (ē₂), from various different sources
2.3.5. Brightening

Long and short /a:/ both get fronted (“brightened”) to /æ:/
• Long /a:/ > /æ:/
• A new, back /ɑ:/ emerges side by side with it, from monophthongization of /ai/ (Germanic *haim-, OE hām, Mod.E. home; cf. Germ. Heim)
• Short /a/ > /æ/ in most cases
• But some /a/ become back /ɑ/, depending on surrounding sounds (hence, alternating forms in the same word: dæg vs. dagas)

2.3.6. Restructuring of diphthongs

• Germanic /ai/ monophthongises > /ɑ:/ (see above)
• New diphthong W Germ /iu/, from various sources
• Remaining diphthongs /iu, eu, au/ > back-gliding diphthongs /iy, eo, æa/ (corresponds to the three front vowels /i, e, æ/ with a backwards glide each), spelled ‹ie, eo, ea› in OE.
• These “normal” diphthongs together have the length of long vowels (like diphthongs normally do). In addition, a set of new “short” diphthongs emerges, through “breaking” (see below)

2.3.7. Breaking

Short /i, e, æ/ get diphthongised > /ĭe, ĕo, ĕa/ (new short diphthongs) in some environment, mainly before certain back consonant clusters:
• before /l/ and another consonant (Germ. *alθ-; OE eald; Mod.E. old; G. alt)
• before /r/ and another consonant (Germ. *arm-; OE earm; G. Arm)
• before /χ/ (Germ *saχ; OE seah; Mod.E. saw; G. sah)

2.3.8. I-Umlaut (i-Mutation)

Vowels are
• fronted and/or raised one step
• if the following syllable contains an [i] or [j] = partial assimilation to following sound (“anticipatory assimilation”)
Note: [o] and [u] are
• fronted first to [ø, y] (like German ‹ö, ü›),
• then unrounded:
  first [ø] > [e],
  then [y] > [i]
(“classical” OE still has /y/ but not /ø/.)

Resulting sound correspondences:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>normal</th>
<th>mutated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a(ː)</td>
<td>æ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>æ</td>
<td>e</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o(ː)</td>
<td>ø &gt; e</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>u(ː)</td>
<td>y (-&gt; i)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ea</td>
<td>ie (-&gt;i/y)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eo</td>
<td>ie (-&gt;i/y)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Examples:**

Germ. *mūs, pl. *mūsi > OE. mūs/mūs > Mod.E. mouse/mice (cf. G. Maus/Mäuse)


Germ. *muggi > OE. mycg > Mod.E. midge (cf. G. Mcke)