

Old English Basics: Course Handout

1. Phonology and spelling

Alphabet:



a æ b c d e f g h i k l m n o p r s(f) t u x y w(p) þ ð

- ⟨æ⟩ = a-e ligature, pronunciation just like the modern IPA symbol [æ]
- ⟨c⟩ = [k] near back vowels (*cann* ‘can’);
[tʃ] near front vowels (*circe* ‘church’)
- ⟨h⟩ = [h] word-initially;
[ç] near front vowels;
[χ] near back vowels (like German ⟨ch⟩)
- ⟨g⟩ = [g] word-initially
[j] near front vowels,
[ɣ]¹ intervocalically
- ⟨cg⟩ = [dʒ]
- ⟨sc⟩ = [ʃ] near front vowels (*scipu* ‘ship’), otherwise [sk]
- ⟨y⟩ = pronunciation like modern IPA symbol [y], German ⟨ü⟩
- ⟨þ⟩ = the old Germanic “thorn” rune, th sound
- ⟨ð⟩ = th sound
- ⟨ð/þ⟩ are used interchangeably, both can stand for either [ð] or [θ], like English ⟨th⟩
- ⟨p⟩ = old Germanic “wynn” rune, [w], usually rendered as ⟨w⟩ in modern editions.
- ⟨7⟩ = abbreviation for ‘and’ (often rendered “&” in modern editions)

Palatal spelling:

⟨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.

¹ A fricativized g sound,
= the voiced counterpart of a German ⟨ch⟩,
= like a non-‘rolled’ northern German ⟨r⟩ pronunciation,
= like the ⟨g⟩ in a northern German pronunciation of “*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:

⟨f⟩, ⟨s⟩, and ⟨ð/þ⟩ =

- voiced [v, z, ð] between other voiced sounds, especially between vowels
- elsewhere voiceless [f, s, θ], especially at beginning and end of words; cf. Mod.E. *leaf/leaves, house/houses* etc.

Consonant system

lab.	dent	alv	postalv	pal	vel	glot
p		t	tʃ		k	
b		d	dʒ		g	
v	ð	z		j~	ɣ	
f	θ	s	ʃ	ç~	~χ	~h
w		l r				
m		n				

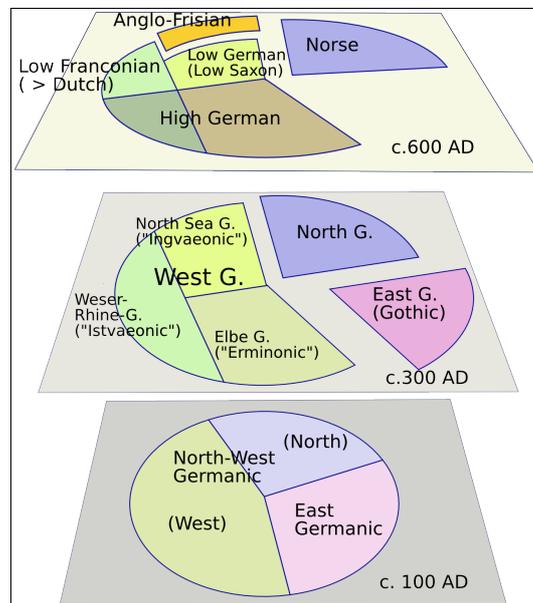
Vowel system:

long/short vowels	long / short diphthongs															
<table border="1"> <tr> <td>ī, i</td> <td>ȳ, y</td> <td>ū, u</td> </tr> <tr> <td>ē, e</td> <td></td> <td>ō, o</td> </tr> <tr> <td>æ, æ</td> <td></td> <td>ā, a</td> </tr> </table>	ī, i	ȳ, y	ū, u	ē, e		ō, o	æ, æ		ā, a	<table border="1"> <tr> <td>⟨ie⟩ [iə, īə], [iy, īy]?</td> <td>i →</td> </tr> <tr> <td>⟨eo⟩ [eə, ēā], [eo, ēo]?</td> <td>e →</td> </tr> <tr> <td>⟨ea⟩ [æə, æā], [æa, æā]?</td> <td>æ →</td> </tr> </table>	⟨ie⟩ [iə, īə], [iy, īy]?	i →	⟨eo⟩ [eə, ēā], [eo, ēo]?	e →	⟨ea⟩ [æə, æā], [æa, æā]?	æ →
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2. History

Indo-European

- Proto-Germanic
- Northwest Germanic (vs. East G.)
- West Germanic (vs. North G.)
- “North Sea Germanic” (“Ingvaëonic”)
 - Anglo-Frisian
 - Anglic, Saxon, Jutic



2.1. Consonants: From Indo-European (IE) to (West-)Germanic

2.1.1. Grimm's Law ("Germanic Consonant Shift")²

Three series of plosive consonants, shifts in manner of articulation:

- voiceless plosive > fricative
- voiced aspirate³ plosive > fricative
- voiced plosive > voiceless

IE > Germ	IE > Germ	IE > Germ
/p/ > /f/	/b ^h / > /β/ (later > [b/v])	b > p
/t/ > /θ/	/d ^h / > /ð/ (later > [d])	d > t
/k/ > /χ/	/g ^h / > /ȝ/ (later > [g])	g > k

2.1.2. Verner's Law

Voicing /f, θ, s, χ/ > /β, ð, z, ȝ/ 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:
r, l, m, n > ur, ul, um, un
plnos- > *fulnaz* (cf. Lat. *plenus*, Engl. *full*)
- WGerm. Gemination (consonant lengthening) before *j*
xaβ,jan > *haβ.βjan*, > OE *habban* 'have'
- [χ] in word initial position > [h] (also in German)

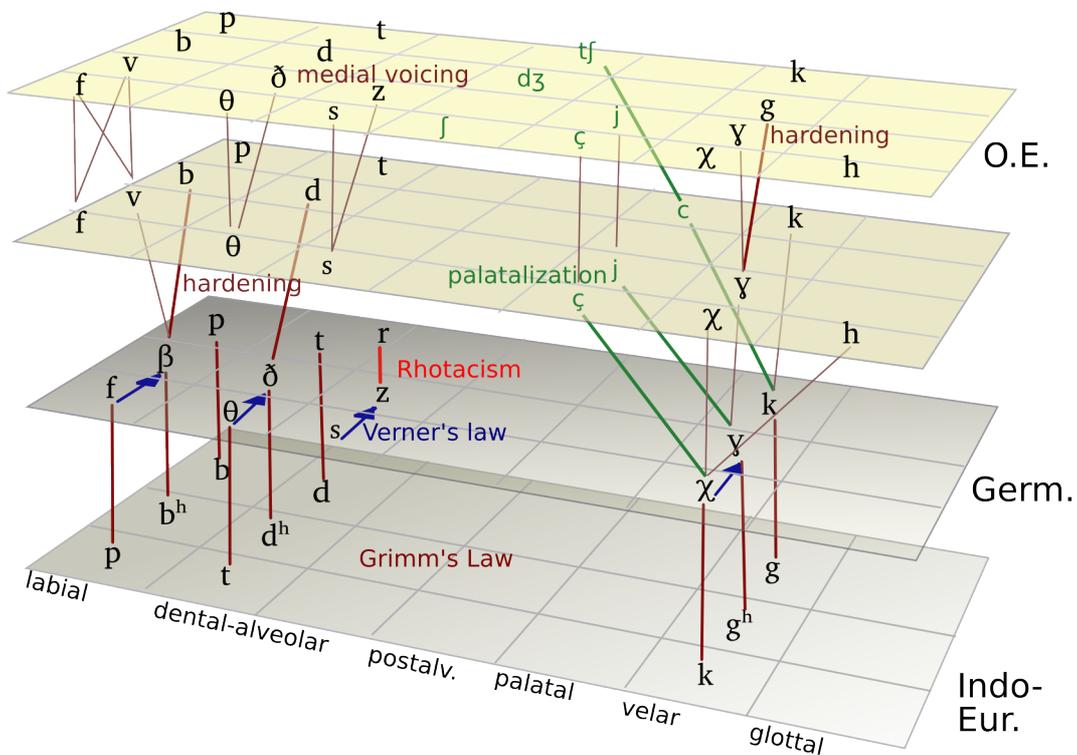
² Often called "First Consonant Shift" (*Erste Lautverschiebung*) from a German perspective. The *Zweite Lautverschiebung*, is the one that separates High German from Low German, e.g. *t* > *z* (*Tid* > *Zeit*), *p* > *pf* (*Appel* > *Apfel*)

³ According to modern phonetic interpretations: "breathy voiced" plosives

⁴ Mnemonic help: cf. independent parallel in Modern German:
Hannóyer[f], but *Hannoyeráner* [v]

Example words

IE	Germ	cognates for comparison
pātēr	faðer	cf. Lat. <i>pater</i> , Engl <i>father</i> , G. <i>Vater</i>
bhrāter	βrōðer > brōðer	cf. Lat. <i>frater</i> , Engl <i>brother</i> , G. <i>Bruder</i>
kmtóm	χunðan	cf. Lat. <i>centum</i> , Engl. <i>hundred</i>
b ^h eron	βeran > beran	cf. Lat. <i>fero</i> , Engl. <i>bear</i> , borne, G. <i>gebären</i>
d ^h eusa	ðeuzā > ðeura	cf. Engl. <i>deer</i> , G. <i>Tier</i>
dekm̄	teχun	cf. Lat. <i>decem</i> , Engl <i>ten</i> , G. <i>zehn</i>
tog-	θak-	cf. Lat. <i>toga</i> , G. <i>Decke</i>
karp-	χarβ-	cf. Lat. <i>carpo</i> , Engl. <i>harvest</i> , G. <i>Herbst</i>
kapt-	χaft-	cf. Lat. <i>captus</i> , G. <i>Haft</i>
p nos-	fulnaz	cf. Lat. <i>plenus</i> , E. <i>full</i>
g ^h ostis	γastiz	cf. Lat. <i>hostis</i> , G. <i>Gast</i>



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*)
- [gg] > [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*)
- [ȝ] > [j] (cf. *yellow/gelb*)
(later gets vocalised as part of new diphthongs in positions after vowels; cf. OE *dæg*=[dæj], German *Tag*; Mod.E. *day*.)

2.2.2. (Partial) hardening of β, ð, ȝ

“hardening” = change from fricatives [β, ð, ȝ] 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*)
- /ð/: always hardened to /d/ (also in German)
(Note: OE [ð] never comes from Germanic /ð/, but from Germanic /θ/, voiced at a later stage (see below). In some instances, however, [ð] > [d] was then changed back into [ð] at yet a later stage, in Middle English, e.g. OE *fæder* > Mod.E. *father*.)
- /ȝ/: partial hardening, similar to v/b above
plosive [g] in some positions, e.g. word initially
remains [ȝ] elsewhere, especially intervocalically
(applies only to those [ȝ] 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
(**seχan* > *sēon*, cf. Mod.E. *see*, G. *sehen*)

2.2.4. Other changes

- Loss of nasal before fricative (with compensatory vowel lengthening)

* <i>gans</i>	> <i>gōs</i>	cf. <i>Gans/goose</i>
* <i>tanθ</i>	> <i>tōþ</i>	cf. <i>Zahn/tooth</i>
* <i>finf</i>	> <i>fif</i>	cf. <i>f.nf/five</i>
* <i>munθ</i>	> <i>mūþ</i>	cf. <i>Mund/mouth</i>

2.2.5. For comparison: From WGermanic to German (“High German Consonant Shift”/“Zweite Lautverschiebung”)

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

Germanic	Word-initial	medial	Examples
p	pf	f	cf. <i>pipe/Pfeife</i>
t	(t)z	ß	cf. <i>white/weiß</i>
k	k (Swiss G.: kχ)	ch	cf. <i>cook/kochen</i>
ð > d	> t		cf. <i>ride/reiten</i>
θ	> d		cf. <i>brother/Bruder</i>

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/ (*g^hostis* > *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 *med^{h-}* > 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 /e:/ (also called ē₁) gets lowered > WGermanic /a:/ (then again fronted to /æ:/ in OE, see “brightening” below)

A new /e:/ 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 > /a:/ (see above)
- New diphthong WGerm /iu/, from various sources
- Remaining diphthongs /iu, eu, au/ > back-gliding diphthongs /iy, eo, æɑ/ (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 > /ǣ, ȝo, ȝa/ (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 **sax*; 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

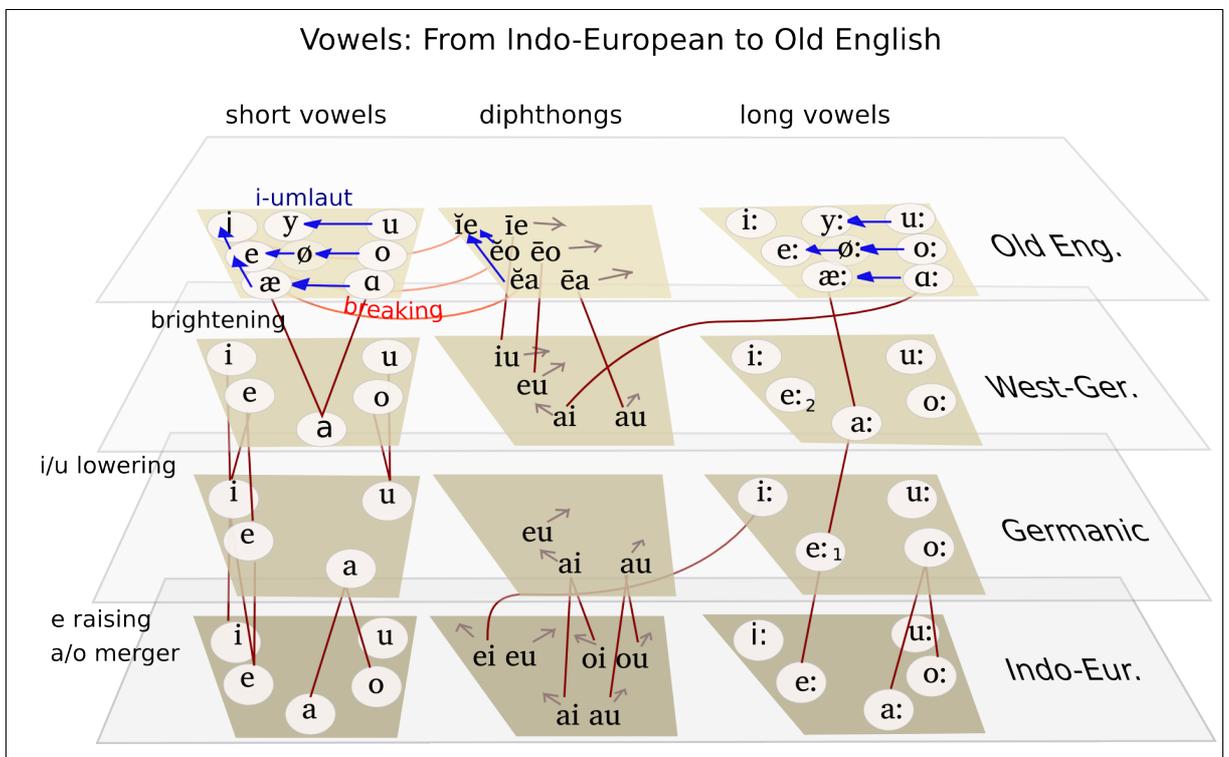
- fronted first to [ø, y] (like German ⟨ö, ü⟩),
- then unrounded:
first [ø] > [e],
then [y] > [i]
(“classical” OE still has /y/ but not /ø/.)

Resulting sound correspondences:

normal	mutated
ɑ(:)	> æ
æ	> e
e	> i
o(:)	> ø > e
u(:)	> y (> i)
ea	> ie (> i/y)
eo	> ie (> i/y)

Examples:

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



Germ. *alθ, comp. *alθir- > OE. *eald/ieldra* > Mod.E. *old/elder* (cf. G. *alt/älter*)

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