

ORIGIN AND CHANGES OF OLD ENGLISH VOWEL PHONEMES

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Abstract: *This article highlights the origins and changes of Old English vowels over the period of time and gives further examples for every change. It is required to be aware of the history and emergence of vowel phonemes for EFL learners.*

Key words: *vowels, monophthongs, diphthongs, breaking, palatal mutation.*

The Old English period took place from the Anglo-Saxon migration around 450 CE to the beginning of the Norman rule of England. The Old English language was influenced by most of the political and cultural events of this period, and the vocalic changes analyzed below were mainly affected by the following languages: Latin, Old Norse, and French.

Old English vowels

There were the following vowel phonemes in Old English:

Monophthongs

a æ e i o u y

ā á ē ī ō ū ý

diphthongs

ea eo

ēa ēo

As we see in Old English there existed an exact parallelism between long vowels and the corresponding short vowels. Not only monophthongs but even diphthongs found their counterparts which differed from them not only in quality but also in quantity. Thus we may say that in the system of vowels both the quality and the quantity of the vowel was phonemic. All the diphthongs were falling diphthongs with the first element stronger than the second, the second element being more open than the first.

Examples:

Monophthongs

ā – a: stān – dagas

á - æ: dæd – dæg

ō – o: gōd – god

(god) (good)

diphthongs

ēo – eo: cēosan – heorte

(choose) (heart)

ēa – ea: cēas – eald

(chose) (old)

Origin of Old English vowel phonemes

All Old English vowel phonemes can be traced back to Common Germanic vowel phonemes. Old English monophthongs are, as a rule, a further development of some Common Germanic monophthongs. For example:

Old English	from Common Germanic
[æ]	[a]
Dæz	dag
[i]	[i]
bindan	bindan
[o]	[u]
coren	cusan, etc.

Some Old English monophthongs developed from Common Germanic diphthongs:

Old English	from Common Germanic (<i>Gothic</i>)
[ā]	[ai]
rās	rais

Old English long diphthongs are a result of some further development of Common Germanic diphthongs, though in the course of history *the quality* of the diphthong may have undergone a change:

Old English	from Common Germanic (<i>Gothic</i>)
cēosan (<i>choose</i>)	kiusan
cēas (<i>chose</i>)	kaus

Old English short diphthongs originated from monophthongs:

Old English	from Common Germanic
eald (old)	*ald
heorte (heart)	*herte

Changes in Old English vowel phonemes

That took place in the prehistoric period of the development of the English language and which explain the difference between Old English and Common Germanic vowels of two types: assimilative changes and independent (non-assimilative) changes.

Independent changes do not depend upon the environment in which the given sound was found. They cannot be explained but they are merely stated.

Common Germanic		Old English
ai	>	ā
a	>	æ, etc.

Assimilative changes are explained by the phonetic position of the sound in the word and the change can and must be explained. Among the many phonetic assimilative changes which took place in the prehistoric period of the development of the English language and which account for the discrepancy between the Old English and the Common Germanic vowel system the most important are breaking and palatal mutation.

Breaking

The process of breaking took place in the 6th century. It affected two vowels – [æ] and [e] when they were followed by the consonants [r], [i], [h] generally followed by another consonant.

The resulting vowel was a diphthong (hence the name “breaking” – a monophthong “was broken” into a diphthong), consequently the process may be summed up as diphthongization of short vowels [æ] and [e] before certain consonant clusters. For example:

æ > ea before r + consonant	ærm > earm (arm)
l + consonant	æld > eald (old)
h + consonant	æhta > eahta (eight)
h final	sæh > seah (saw)
e > ea before r + consonant	herte > heorte (heart)
lc + consonant	melcan > meolcan (milk)
lh + consonant	selh > seolh (sael)
h final	feh > feoh (cattle)

Palatal mutation

The qualitative change of Old English vowels that experts call palatal mutation, or I – mutation, occurred somewhere during the 6th – 7th centuries. The process affected Germanic words where a vowel in a stressed syllable was immediately followed by the sound [i] or [j] in the next syllable. Almost all vowels, both diphthongs and monophthongs, in the context described above became further forward and higher, or more palatal and more narrow, with the exception of [e] and [i] which could go no further. This may be described as a kind of vowel harmony – a natural process affecting many modern languages: the vowels mutate, the change being caused by their partial assimilation to the following vowel (or semi-vowel).

Monophthongs

a > e	strangiþu > strengþu (<i>strength</i>)
æ > ea	tælian > tellan (<i>to tell</i>)
ā > æ	hālian > hælæn (<i>to heal</i>)
o > e	ofstian > efstan (<i>to hurry</i>)
o > ē	domain > dēman (<i>to deem</i>)
u > y	fullian > fyllan (<i>to fill</i>)
ū > y	cūþian > cyþan (<i>to announce</i>)

As a result of palatal mutation new phonemes entered the vowel system in Old English – the vowel phoneme [y] and the vowel phoneme [ɥ], the result of the mutation of [u] and [ū], respectively.

Ea > ie	ealdira > ieldra (<i>elder</i>)
ēa > īe	zelēafian > zelīefian (<i>to believe</i>)
eo > ie	afeorrian > afierran (<i>to remove</i>)
ēo > īe	zetrēowi > zetrīewe (<i>true</i>)

Effect of palatal mutation upon grammar and word-stock

Though palatal mutation was a phonetic process it left traces in Old English grammar and word-stock. *Grammar*: as a result of the process of palatal mutation there appeared vowel gradation in the system of the declension of nouns (root-stem declension). In the system of adjectives we have vowel gradation in the degrees of comparison, in the system of verbs vowel gradation is found in Old English irregular weak verbs. *Word-stock*: Palatal mutation resulted in vowel interchange as a word building means.

Adjective

Ful (full)

Noun

Verb

fyllan (fill)

Verb

Dom (doom)

Verb

Sittan (sit)

dēman (deem)

Verb

settan (set)

In conclusion, the origin of vowel sound goes back years in Old English period. Over the years, vowels undergone some changes, they were grouped into monophthongs and diphthongs. In the process of speech, some of them were fully pronounced and some of them were pronounced as schwa sounds. Old English vowels have a great impact on emerging and developing other sound in the next periods.

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