History of English I
# Krista Vogelberg
Part 2

Pronunciation

How do we know how Old English was pronounced?

Obviously there are no recordings.

Largely guesswork but not totally.

Grounds for reconstruction of Old English/Anglo-Saxon pronunciation:

1) As all new written languages, Old English had predominantly phonetic spelling;
2) Comparison with **cognate langugages** (German, Scandinavian languages);
3) Comparison with Modern English (changes not arbitrary but follow sound laws; without a sound law there is no reason to believe the pronunciation has changed).

Anglo-Saxon manuscript: "Beowulf" beginning
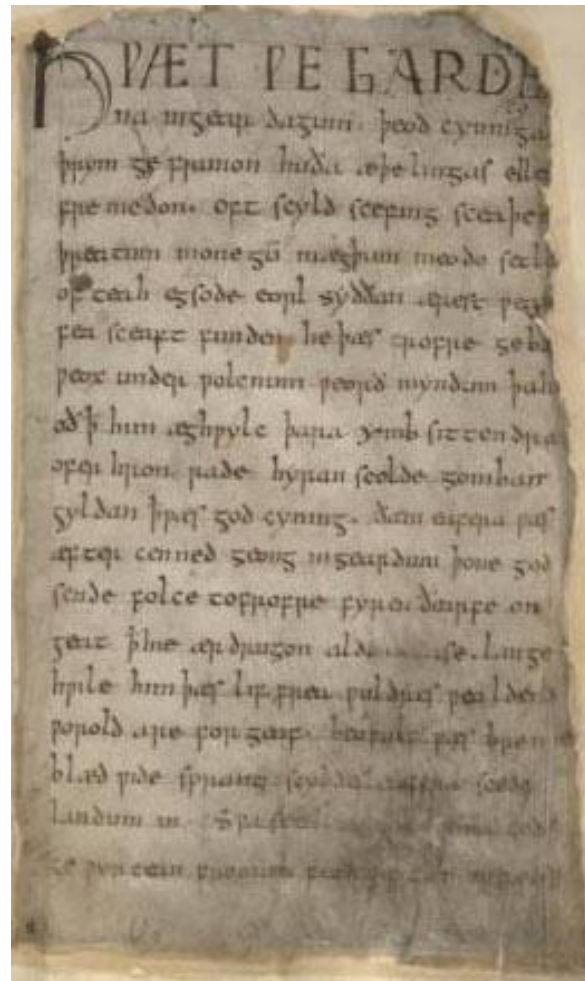
This is what the text might have sounded like

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LP2FyVbymTg

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4L7VTH8ii_8

Beowulf (lines 210 – 218)

Starting with line 210

Fyrst forð gewāt.   Flota wæs on ŷðum,
bāt under beorge.   Beornas gearwe
on stefn stigon;   strēamas wundon,
sund wið sande;   secgas bǽron
on bearm nacan   beorhte frǽtwe,

gūðsearo geatolīc;   guman ūt scufon,
weras on wilsīð,   wudu bundenne.
Gewāt þā ofer wægholm,   winde gefŷsed,
flota fāmiheals   fūgle gelicost,

For reading, check also the following link

http://www.beowulftranslations.net/beorefs/beowulf-audio-0194a-0224a-benslade.mp3

Peculiarities of Old English pronunciation and spelling

/f/ and /v/ were **allophones**, i.e. there was no **phonemic** difference between them:

no minimal pairs where /f/ and /v/ would make a difference in meaning

The letter f used for both. In a voiced environment the pronunciation voiced, ie /v/, in a voiceless environment – unvoiced, ie /f/. At the beginning of words: debatable.

By constrast, **vowel length** was phonemic:

man /man/ – human being, man

mān /ma :n/ - evil; witchcraft (cf Estonian

"manala", "mana", "manama")

In old manuscripts vowel length indicated by ´ (like a stress mark), in modern editions a strike over the vowel.

The scribes proceeded from the Latin alphabet. However, there were sounds in Old English that Latin did not have. Solutions had to be found.

/æ/ - the sound is between /a/ and /e/, so a **digraph** (Greek for "two + letter") was created: **æ** (A similar thing in French, the digraph **œ** still in use, e.g. œil – eye)

Old English had /ü/ like other Germanic languages today (e.g. German). (The sound was lost during the Middle English period). Latin had no such sound. y (a form of i) was used to indicate the sound. How do we know? Cf Old English "fyrst" and Modern German "Fürst", Estonian "vürst" (an old Low German loan).

In Old English texts we come across several

- runic letters
- modified Latin letters.

Both used to denote sounds that Old English had and Latin did not.

Thorn-letter (runic) and edh-letter (modified Latin **d**) for the /ɵ/ sound (close to **t** and **d)** used indiscriminately for both the voiceless and the voiced variant.

Thorn, or **þorn** (Þ, þ), is a letter in the Anglo-Saxon and Icelandic alphabets. It was also used in medieval Scandinavia, but was later replaced with the digraph *th.* The letter originated from a rune in the Elder Fuþark, called *thorn* in the Anglo-Saxon and *thorn* or *thurs* ("Thor", "giant") in the Scandinavian rune poems, its reconstructed Proto-Germanic name being **Thurisaz.*

It has the sound of either a voiceless dental fricative, like *th* as in the English word *thick*, or a voiced dental fricative, like *th* as in the English word *the*. (In Modern Icelandic the usage is restricted to the former. The voiced form is represented with the letter **eth (Ð, ð),** though eth can be unvoiced, depending on its position within a sentence).

Thorn
(Runic)

Thorn
(Old English)

Not all runic letters reproduced in modern
editions for typographical reasons: e.g.
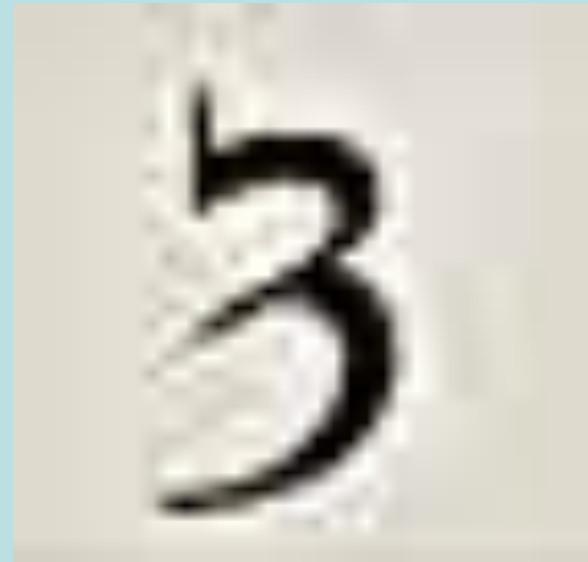wynn-letter for /w/
(see p. 13 in Introduction...)

Þþ

Yogh-letter (cf yoke – Estonian "ike") – modified Latin g.

Probably stood for several sounds starting with /j/ up to /g/.

Prefix **ge** – probably

- not stressed
- yokh-letter stood for /j/.

Reasons for surmising this:

1. The prefix is still there in German (Past Participle, e.g. gehen, ging. **ge**gangen). It is **not stressed** in German.

2. The prefix was lost during the Middle English times (geholpan – holpen), it is easier to drop unstressed syllables.

3. The middle version was /i/ (spelt in Middle English as y): y-ronne (run Past participle). More logical that /je/ turns into /i/ than that /ge/ turns into /i/. Modern English still had the obsolete form "yclept" – so-called.

C stood for /k/, except when there was a dot on it – then it stood for /kj/ which later turned into /tS/ in the Southern part of Britain, but not in the Northern part.

Cf ċiriċe – church, but in Scottish English (i.e. Northern English) Auld Kirk, Free Kirk (German Kirche, Est. kirik – Low German loanword).

Cg – probably /kjkj/ which later turned into /dž/.

/r/ - trilled, rolled, again preserved in Scottish English.

/r/ was still rolled in Shakespeare's time

("When that war like Harry ...")

h – pronounced in three ways:

- At the beginning of a word/syllable – like in Present-Day English, e.g. hus - /hu:s/ (house)
- At the end of a syllable after a front vowel (/e/,/i/, /æ/) – like the present-day German **ich-Laut.**
- At the end of a syllable after a consonant or a back vowel (/a/, /u/, /o/) - like the present-day German **ach-Laut**. Ach-Laut has survived in Scottish English (which is more archaic!), e.g. loch (in Received Pronunciation ends in /k/)

A vowel between /a/ and /o/ (before m and n). Swedish uses a special letter - å, Old English: a and o interchangeably (**and/ond**).

Phonotactic rules

In every language some sequences of sounds are permitted, others not. For instance, Present-Day British English never has /h/ or /r/ at the end of a syllable (American English has a kind of /r/ at the end of a syllable), whereas Old and Middle English had. Old English also had, for instance /kn/ at the beginning of words ("kniht" and "niht" were not pronounced in the same way!), etc. Cf also "ste**fn**" in the text.

For a long time, Estonian did not "permit" consonant clusters at the beginning of a word, hence, loanwords lost them (cf. German Strand > Estonian rand), later loans (German Glas > Estonian klaas) already retained them (this will become relevant later in the course as we compare Old English and Middle English words and the corresponding loans in Estonian).

Phonotactic rules account for the so-called **"empty" words** – could be in the particular language, sound like words of the language but just by chance so not have a meaning. Perfect example in Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky".

JABBERWOCKY
Lewis Carroll

(from *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, 1872)

First stanza:

"`Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
      Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
    All mimsy were the borogoves,
      And the mome raths outgrabe".

The words **sound** like English words (unlike, for instance, something like **prsotr** – totally invented by me, or **vzglyad (взгляд)**: Russian for "look" – example by Whorter). In "Through the Looking-Glass", Humpty-Dumpty, who hears the poem, gives his own meanings to most of the words.
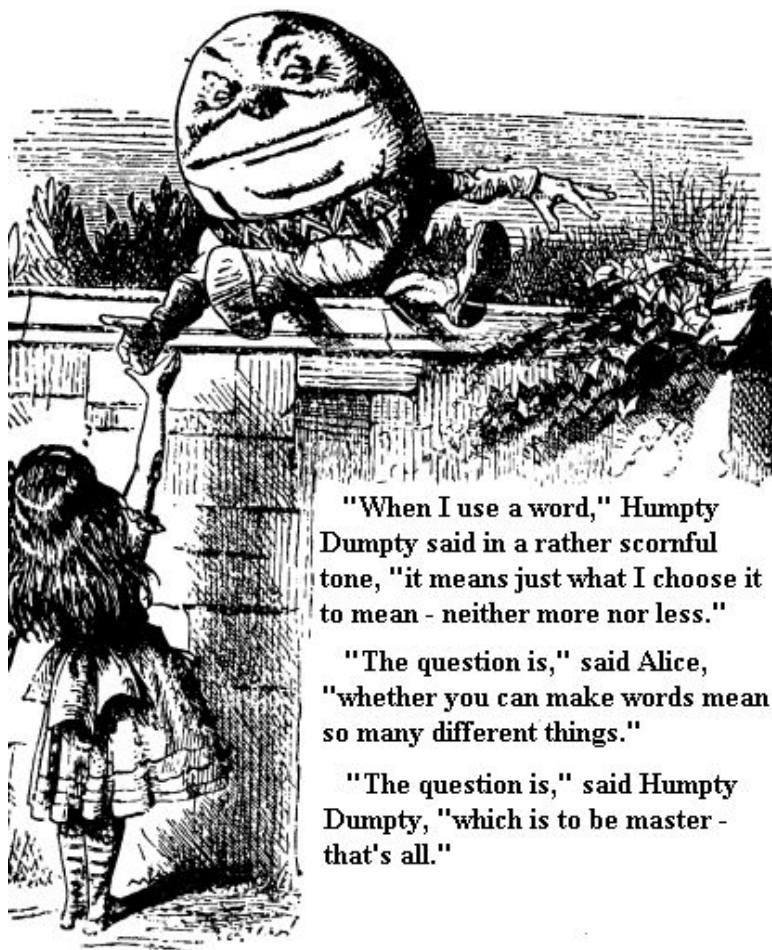
"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master - that's all."

(Illustrations to Alice in Wonderland by John Tenniel)

Borrowing easier if the word to be borrowed corresponds to the phonotactic rules of the borrowing language.

Cf code-switching in online games. Counterstrike: "mine *šoorti*", "ta on *longis*" but "ta on keskel", "mine keskele"

šoot and *long* correspond to Present-Day Estonian phonotactic rules (cf, e.g., *šanss* and *koot, rong,* etc), *middel/middle* does not – still too difficult to pronounce).

(The example taken from the essay by Aare Undo, explanation mine).