

# MIDDLE ENGLISH: CHANGES IN PHONETIC SYSTEM

## Word Stress

In OE stress as a rule was **on the 1-st** syllable of the word, rarely on the second syllable.

That is the prefix or the root were stressed but the suffixes and endings were unstressed. Word stress in OE was **fixed**. It didn't move in inflection and rarely in derivation.

In ME period the word stress acquired **greater positional freedom** and began to play a more important role in word derivation. These changes were connected with the assimilation of the loan words (especially from French).

When they first appeared in the English language they probably retained their **original stress** – on the ultimate syllable. This kind of stress couldn't be preserved for long.

The loan words were assimilated and the stress moved closer to the beginning of the word.

*M.E. vertu [vqr'tjH] □ NE virtue  
[ˈvWtSq]*

# Vowel Changes

## *Unstressed vowels:*

- became increasingly indistinct
- in OE there were 5 short vowels in an unstressed position [**e**, **i**, **a**, **o**, **ʊ**]

Late ME had only 2 vowels: **[ɔ]** and **[i]**

*OE fiscas – ME fishes* ['fɪʃɪz]

*OE rison – ME risen* ['rɪzən]

The occurrence of only two vowels [ɔ] and [i] in unstressed final syllables is an **important mark** of ME.



It distinguishes ME on the one hand from OE with its greater variety of unstressed vowels, and, on the other hand, from New English when ME final [q] was dropped.

The final [ɣ] disappeared in Late ME but it continued to be spelt as **e**. In the London dialect of Chaucer's time it **was unstable**. It could be easily missed out before the following initial vowel or when required by rhythm.

When the ending **e** survived only in spelling, it was understood as means of showing **the length** of the vowel in the preceding syllable and was added to the

words which did not have this  
ending before:

*OE stan – ME stoon, stone*

But **new unstressed** vowels appeared in borrowed words or developed from stressed ones, as a result of various changes:

e.g. vocalization of [r]

*writer* [er] □ [ɪ]

*actor* [or] □ [ʊ]

## **Stressed Vowels:**

Stressed vowels changed in quality and in quantity. Not a single OE monophthong or diphthong remained unchanged in the course of history.

## ***Quantitative Changes:***

In OE **quantity** was the main basis of correlation in the vowel system: **short** vowels were opposed to **long** ones.

Vowel length was an inherited feature as OE short vowels developed from PG short vowels. In late OE and Early ME vowel length began **to depend on phonetic condition.**



1. Short vowels were lengthened before **ld, nd, mb** unless followed by a third consonant (the 9-th c.)

*OE wild > ME wild [wJld]*

2. All other groups of two or more consonants made the preceding **long vowels short** (11-th c.)

*OE cepte > ME kepte ['keptq]*

3. Short vowels became long in open syllables (mainly [e], [a], [o]) (12-th – 13-th c.)

*OE open > ME open ['Lpqn]*

*OE namu > ME name ['nRmq]*

## *Qualitative Changes:*

1. OE [y], [y:] disappeared in ME merging with various sounds in different dialects:

In Kentish [e] [e:]

South-West, west Midlands [u] [H]

OE *fyllan* > ME  
*(to fill)*

→ Kentish *fellen*

→ West Midland and South western  
*fullen* 1. [fyllqn]  
2. [fullqn]

→ East Midland  
Northern  
*fillen*

2. OE [R] was narrowed to [L] (all long monophthongs became closer)

[R] > [L] in all the dialects except the Northern group

OE stan > ME  $\rightarrow$  *stoon, stone* ['stLn(q)]  
(*stone*)

Northern *stan(e)*

ME [L] must have been a more open  
vowel than long [o:] inherited from  
OE

3. OE short [x] > ME back [a]

e.g. *OE þxt* > *ME that* [a]

*OE earm* > *ME arm* [a]

*OE blacu* > *ME blak* [a]



# Diphthongs

One of the most important sound changes of the Early ME period was **the loss of OE diphthongs** and the **growth of new ones.**

# Diphthongs > monophthongs

OE diphthongs were contracted to monophthongs:

OE [eɑ] > ME [ɛ:]    *east* > *eest*  
(*east*)

OE [eɑ] > ME [a]    *earm* > *arm*  
(*arm*)

[eo]

[eo]

[io]

[io]

[e:] [e]

[ɨ] [ɪ]

*deop > deep [e:] (deep);*

*ceosan > chesen ['Ce:zqn]  
(choose)*

*heorte > herte (heart)*

- the vowel system **lost two sets** of diphthongs, long and short.
- a new set of diphthongs developed from some sequence of vowels and consonants due to the vocalization of OE **[j]** and **[g]**.

These sounds between and after vowels changed into [i] and [u] and formed diphthongs together with the preceding vowels:

*E.g. OE dxZ > ME day [daɪ]*

# **two sets of diphthongs**

These changes gave rise to two sets of diphthongs with **i – glides** and **u – glides**.

# *System of vowels in Late Middle English*

<b>Monophtongs</b>					<b>Diphthongs</b>				
<i>Short</i>	i	e	a	o	u	ei	ai	oi	au
<i>Long</i>	J	e:	F:	R L	o	H	au	ou	

# Evolution of Consonants

English consonants were far more stable than vowels.



The new type of consonants developed from OE palatal plosives [k', g', g'] and from [sk']. The three new phonemes were **[C]**, **[G]**, **[S]** (in writing - ch, tch, g, dg, sh, ssh, sch)

# Loss of Consonants

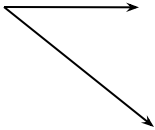
- In OE long consonants were opposed to short. In Late ME long consonants were shortened and the opposition through quantity was lost.

- Initial **h** was dropped before **r, l, n**.

*OE hrinZ > ME ring (ring)*

*OE hlaford > ME loverd (lord)*

- Before **w h** remained in the North where OE *hw* > *quh* or *qwh*.
- In the South **h** was dropped before **w**.

*OE hwxt* > *ME*  *North quhat*  
*South what*

- **V** was dropped before consonants:

*OE hxfde > ME had*