

Middle English Phonology

Phonological change did not take place because of the Norman Conquest. It was already underway in late OE and continued in ME. However, after the demise of the West Saxon standard, phonological changes become easier to detect through spelling.

Vowels

	OE	ME	Old English	Middle English
1.	/æ/	> /a/	þæt /æ/	that /a/ 'that'
2.	/æ:/ ¹	> /ɛ:/	sǣ /æ:/	sē ² /ɛ:/ 'sea'
3.	/y/	> /i/	synn /y/	sin /i/ 'sin'
4.	/y:/	> /i:/	hȳdan /y:/	hīden /i:/ 'hide'
5.	/εə/ ³	> /a/	hearm /εə/	harm /a/ 'harm'
6.	/εə:/	> /e:/	strēam /εə:/	strēme /e:/ 'stream'
7.	/eə/	> /ɛ/	heofon /eə/	heven /ɛ/ 'heaven'
8.	/eə:/	> /e:/	bēon /eə/	bēn /e:/ 'to be'
9.	/a:/	> /ɔ:/	bān /a:/	bōn /ɔ:/ 'bone'

Sound change (9) occurred after 1250 and only in the south of England. If we know a text is southern we can thus date it to before or after the mid thirteenth century by this criterion. We can also use this criterion for texts which we know were written after 1250 to determine whether they are northern or southern.

Exercise

Transcribe phonetically the OE words below; then indicate the 'stressed vowel change' by writing the number of the appropriate rule from the list of nine changes above. Transcribe phonetically the ME and MnE forms. Remember that unstressed OE vowels were reduced to /ə/ in ME. For MnE do not mark vowel length. The consonants for the most part remained unchanged.

¹ This is the /æ:/ that resulted from *i*-mutation of /a:/ in OE.

² In traditional notation a hook below a vowel indicates that the vowel is lax (open) and a dot indicates that the vowel is tense (close).

³ The pronunciations /εə(:)/ and /εə(:)/ for OE *ǣa* and *ǣo* represent slightly simplified approximations of the actual qualities of these vowels and do not give the best indication of why each vowel developed in the way it did. Most likely, the first elements of each of these diphthongs was different, although spelt the same, and this explains why they developed differently in early ME.

Old English	Stressed Vowel Change	Middle English	Modern English
hæþen		heþen	heathen
cræft		craft	craft
fȳr		fir	fir
healf		half	half
dēop		dep	deep
stān		ston	stone
stēap		stepe	steep
cyssan		kisse	kisse
seofon		seven	seven
glēo		gle	glee
dæl		del	deal
hāl		hol	whole

The above sound changes are changes of vowel quality. There were also changes of vowel quantity (length) with far-reaching consequences.

1. **Lengthening in late OE before the consonant clusters *ld*, *mb*, *nd*.** OE *cild* /tʃild/ > ME *child* /tʃi:ld/. Lengthening did not occur before three consonants, e.g. *children* /tʃildrən/.
2. **Shortening in early ME.**
 - a. Before double consonants and consonant clusters, except those that caused lengthening; e.g. OE *cēpte* /ke:ptə/ 'he kept' > ME *kepte* /kɛptə/.
 - b. In the first syllable of trisyllabic words. Thus OE *hālīȝdæȝ* /ha:līȝdæȝ/ 'holiday' > ME *halidai* /ha:lidi/.
3. **Lengthening of *a*, *e*, and *o* in open syllables in disyllabic words.** (Open syllables end in a vowel. In disyllabic words a single consonant between the vowels goes with the second syllable and leaves the first syllable open; two or more consonants make the syllable closed.) Thus OE *nama* /nama/ 'name' > ME *nāme* /na:mə/.