

# The Most Important Phonetic Developments in the History of the English Language

## Old English (ca. 500-1100)

## Middle English (ca. 1100-1500)

## Early Modern English (ca. 1500-1750)

## Modern English (from ca. 1750)

### in pre-OE:

- inherited Germanic /au/ > /e:a/ e.g. *laufen/leap, Baum/beam, Traum/dream*
- inherited Germanic /ei/ > /a:/ e.g. *Geiß/gat, Bein/ban, Stein/stan*

**umlaut/i-mutation**  
(ca. 7<sup>th</sup> century):  
If a stressed syllable was followed by an unstressed syllable containing [i] or [j], the vowel of the stressed syllable was **fronted** or **raised**. Resulting rounded vowels were unrounded in late OE.

**vowel length** was **phonemic**, e.g. /god/ ('God') vs. /go:d/ ('good')

**length contrast** also in **diphthongs**

**no silent consonants**  
e.g. *knicht* [kniçt], *writan*

**double consonants (geminate)** were pronounced (held longer), e.g. *wille* ('I will') vs. *wile* ('he will')

**voiced and voiceless fricatives** are **allophones** in complementary distribution (voiced between voiced sounds), e.g. *wulf* [wulf] vs. *wulfas* [wulfvas]

**Great Vowel Shift** (also **Tudor Vowel Shift**), ca. 1400-1700:  
long (and ONLY long!) ME vowels were raised; if they were already high, they were diphthongized.  
Ex.:  
ME                  EModE                  ModE  
*blind*              /i:/                  /əi/                  /aɪ/  
*clean*              /e:/                  /e:/                  /i:/  
*stone*              /ɔ:/                  /o:/                  /əʊ/

**raising and rounding of /a:/ to /ɔ:/**, e.g. *ban* /ba:n/ > *bon* /bɔ:n/

subsequently levelled by analogy

**weakening of unstressed vowels** (eventually leading to the loss of inflectional endings except for the salient forms ending in -s), e.g. sg. *stan/stanes/stane/stan* > *stone/stone's* pl. *stanas/stana/stanum/stanas* > *stones*

**changes in vowel quantity:**  
**shortening:**  
- **in closed syllables**, e.g. *soft*  
- **before CCC**, e.g. *godspel*  
- **in the antepenultimate syllable** e.g. *sutherne* ('southern') vs. *suth* ('south')

**lengthening:**  
- **in open syllables**, e.g. *furan* ('to journey')  
- **before the lengthening groups -mb, -nd, -ld, -rd** (but NOT if a 3rd consonant followed) e.g. *cild* vs. *children*

**Word stress system** got more complicated due to the **influence of French**

/ʊ/ > /ʌ/, e.g. *but, butter, cup, sun* (but not in all words, e.g. *pull, put, bull*)  
**This interacted** with other sound changes:  
(1) GVS yielded /ɔ:/ > /u:/  
(2) /u:/ was shortened to /ʊ/  
(3) depending on whether (2) took place very early, /ʊ/ underwent the regular change to /ʌ/.  
Ex. (1) *food, mood*  
(2) *good, book*  
(3) *blood, flood*

**ME short /a/ splits** into /æ/ *cat* and /ɒ/ *what*

monophthongization, new diphthongs emerging eventually

with some **fossilized exceptions**, e.g. *goose/geese, tooth/teeth, man/men, mouse/mice, foul/filth, full/fill, long/length, old/elder*

**rounding of vowels after /w/** (a process of partial progressive assimilation which affected /a/ in particular), e.g. *swan, watch, war*

**lengthening and lowering of /æ/ in certain environments** (had already started in London English in the EModE period):  
- before voiceless fricatives, e.g. *path, half, after*  
- before /n/ + /s, t/, e.g. *aunt, dance, plant*  
- before syllable-final /r/ (see below), e.g. *far, cart*

In present-day Standard British English, there is a trend towards **diphthong smoothing** again, e.g. *fire* [fa:], *tower* [ta:]

**loss of the phoneme /x/**, resulting in a **lengthening** of the preceding vowel, e.g. *knicht*

simplification of double consonants: the resulting short consonant was always **voiceless**, the vowel before the geminate was **shortened**, e.g. OE *cysan* > ME *kisse* [kis]

**voiced and voiceless fricatives gain phonemic status**, e.g. *to believe* [v] vs. *believe* [f]

**word-initial /k/ and /g/ were lost before nasals**, e.g. *knee, gnat*

**/wr/ was simplified to /r/**, e.g. *write, wronge*  
**/b/ and /g/ were lost after nasals at the end of words**, e.g. *climbe, tongue*

**postvocalic /r/ was lost in Standard British English**, resulting in one of the following changes in the preceding vowel:  
- lengthening, e.g. *arm, bark, card, horse, storm*  
- change in quality, e.g. *herb, curse*  
- diphthongization, e.g. *here, pear, poor*

traces persist in some ModE plurals

e.g. *wolf* [f] vs. *wolves* [v], *house* [s] vs. *houses* [z]