

Old English Vowel System

OE vowel system consisted of six monophthongs: **a, e, i, o, u, y**, two ligatures: **æ, œ** and four diphthongs: **ea** [æa], **eo, io, ie**.

The system of OE vowels, shown below, represents the system in the 9th and 10th c. The sounds are indicated with the help of OE letters serving as transcription symbols; length is shown by a line above the vowel.

The vowels are arranged in accordance with the chief phonemic opposition: they were contrasted through quantity as long to short and were further distinguished within these sets through qualitative differences as monophthongs and diphthongs, front and back, labialised and non-labialised. The vowel system of OE can be represented in the following way:

Palatal, front

	non-labialised	labialised
high	i ī	y ȳ
middle	e ē	œ ōe
low	æ ǣ	- -

Velar, back

	non-labialized	labialized
high	- -	u ū
middle	- -	o ō
low	a ā	- -

Diphthongs:

Short: **ie, io, eo, ea** [æa]

Long: **īe, īo, ēo, ēa** [āa]

The OE vowel system displayed an obvious tendency towards a symmetrical, balanced arrangement since almost every long vowel had a corresponding short counterpart.

Old English Consonants

Manner of articulation		Labial, labioden- tal	dental	palatal	velar
Noise conso- nants	Plosives	voiceless p p: voiced b b:	t t: d d:	k' k': g' g':	k k: g g:
	Fricatives	voiceless f f: voiced v	θ θ: s s: ð z		h h: ɣ
Sonorants		m m: w	n n: r 1	j	(ŋ)

The table above shows the system of OE consonants in the 9th and 10th c.

The system consisted of several correlated sets of consonants. All the consonants fell into noise consonants and sonorants. The noise consonants were subdivided into plosives and fricatives; plosives were further differentiated as voiced and voiceless, the difference being phonemic. The fricative consonants were also subdivided into voiced and voiceless.

The most universal distinctive feature in the consonant system was the difference in length. During the entire OE period long consonants are believed to have been opposed to short ones on a phonemic level; they were mostly distinguished in intervocal position. Single and geminated (long) consonants are found in identical phonetic conditions.

Word Stress

Stress in Proto Germanic (PG) was **force or expiratory stress**, also called **dynamic and breath stress**. In early PG word stress was free and movable, but in later PG it's position in a word became fixed. The stress was now fixed on the first syllable, which was usually the root of the word, or the prefix.

The system of word accentuation inherited from PG underwent no changes in Early OE. In OE a syllable was made prominent by an increase in the force of articulation; in other words, a dynamic or a force stress was employed. In disyllabic and polysyllabic words the accent fell on the root-morpheme or on the first syllable. Word stress was fixed; it remained on the same syllable in different grammatical forms of the word and, as a rule, did not shift in word-building either.

Polysyllabic words, especially compounds, may have had two stresses, chief and secondary, the chief stress being fixed on the first root-morpheme, e.g. the compound noun *Norðmanna*, received the chief stress upon its first component and the secondary stress on the second component; the grammatical ending *-a* (Gen. pl) was unaccented. In words with prefixes the position of the stress varied: verb prefixes were unaccented, while in nouns and adjectives the stress was commonly thrown on to the prefix. Cf.:

ā-'risan, mis-'faran — *v* (NE *arise, 'go astray'*)
tō-weard, 'or-eald — *adj* (NE *toward, 'very old'*);
'mis-dæd, 'uð- ʒenʒ — *n* (NE *misdeed, 'escape'*).

If the words were derived from the same root, word stress, together with other means, served to distinguish the noun from the verb, cf.:

'and-swaru n — *and-'swarian v* (NE *answer, answer*)
'on-zin n — *on-'zinnan v* (NE *beginning, begin*)
'forwyrd n — *for-'weorðan v* ('*destruction, 'perish'*)

