

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SOUND OF ENGLISH

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Languages are
organic

OVERVIEW OF THE PERIODS

Proto-Indo-European, Proto-Germanic, Old English, Middle English, Early Modern English, and Modern English

PROTO-INDO-EUROPEAN

5500 BC(?) - 3500 BC

PIE

[Soundcloud](#)

h_2 áuei h_1 iosmei h_2 ulh₁náh₂ né h_1 ést, só h_1 ékuoms
derkt. só g^w rh_xúm uog^hom ueg^hed; só mégh₂m_o
b^hórom; só d^hg^hémonmo h_2 óku b^hered. h_2 óuis
 h_1 ék^woib^hios ueuked: “d^hg^hémonmo spekioh₂
 h_1 ékuoms-k^we h_2 ágeti, kér moi ag^hnutor”. h_1 ékuos
tu ueukond: “klud^hí, h_2 ouei! tod spekiomes, nosmei
ag^hnutor kér: d^hg^hémo, potis, se h_2 áuies
 h_2 ulh₁náh₂ g^w hermom uestrom uept, h_2 áuib^hios tu
 h_2 ulh₁náh₂ né h_1 esti. tod kekluos h_2 óuis h_2 agrom
b^huged.

PROTO-GERMANIC

3500 BC-450 AD

PG



OLD ENGLISH

450 AD-1150 AD

OE

Consonants in Old English

	Labial	Dental	Alveolar	Post-alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Nasal	m		(n̥) n			(ŋ)	
Stop	p b		t d	tʃ (dʒ)		k (g)	
Fricative	f (v)	θ (ð)	s (z)	ʃ	(ç)	x ȝ	(h)
Approximant			(l̥) l		j	(w̥) w	
Trill			(r̥) r				

OE

Monophthongs in Old English

	Front		Back	
	unrounded	rounded	unrounded	rounded
Close	i i:	y y:		u u:
Mid	e e:	ø ø:		o o:
Open	æ æ:		ɑ ɑ:	

OE

Diphthongs in Old English

First element	Short (monomoraic)	Long (bimoraic)	Spelling (original)	Spelling (modern editions)
High	i _ː u	iːu	<i>io</i>	<i>io, īo</i>
Mid	e _ː o	eːo	<i>eo</i>	<i>eo, ēo</i>
Low	æ _ː a	æːa	<i>ea</i>	<i>ea, ēa</i>



OE

Hwæt. We Gardena in geardagum, þeodcyninga, þrym
gefrunon, hu ða æpelingas ellen fremedon. Oft Scyld
Scefing sceapena þreatum, monegum mægþum,
meodosetla ofteah, egsode eorlas. Syððan ærest wearð
feasceft funden, he þæs frofre gebad, weox under
wolcnum, weorðmyndum þah, oðþæt him æghwylc þara
ymb sittendra ofer hronrade hyran scolde, gomban
gyldan. þæt wæs god cyning. ðæm eafera wæs æfter
cenned, geong in geardum, þone god sende folce to
frofre; fyrenðearfe ongeat þe hie ær drugon aldorlease
lange hwile. Him þæs lif frea, wuldres wealdend,
woroldare forgeaf; Beowulf wæs breme blæd wide
sprang, Scyldes eafera Scedelandum in.

MIDDLE ENGLISH

1150 AD-1500 AD

ME

ċ [k]	> [tʃ]	(OE <i>cild</i> > ME <i>child</i>)
sc [sk]	> [ʃ]	(OE <i>fisc</i> > ME <i>fish</i>)
ġ [j]	> [j]	(OE <i>ēāge</i> > ME <i>eie</i> , ModE <i>eye</i>)
g [ɣ]	> w [w]	(OE <i>fugol</i> [fuyol] > ME <i>fuwel</i> , ModE <i>fowl</i>)
hl-	> l-	(OE <i>hlāford</i> > ME <i>lōrd</i> , ModE <i>lord</i>)
hr-	> r-	(OE <i>hræfn</i> > ME <i>raven</i>)
hn-	> n-	(OE <i>hnutu</i> > ME <i>nute</i> , ModE <i>nut</i>)
hw- [xw]	> wh- [hw]	(OE <i>hwæt</i> > ME <i>what</i>)

ME

Middle English vowels [hide]

		Monophthong		Diphthong	
		Short	Long	+ /j/	+ /w/
Close	Front	i → ɪ • y	i: • y:	—	iw
	Back	u → ʊ	u:	uj	—
Close-mid	Front	e → ɛ • ø	e: • ø:	ej → i:	ew → iw
	Back	o → ɔ	o:	oj → uj	ow → ɔw (early), u: (late) ¹
Mid		(ə)			
Open-mid	Front		ɛ: • æ:	ɛj	ɛw
	Back		ɔ:	ɔj	ɔw
Open		a	a:	æj → ɛj	ɔw

OE

Monophthongs in Old English

	Front		Back	
	unrounded	rounded	unrounded	rounded
Close	i i:	y y:		u u:
Mid	e e:	ø ø:		o o:
Open	æ æ:		ɑ ɑ:	

PIE

	length	front	back
Close-mid	short	*e	*o
	long	*e:	*o:



ME

SIPEN þe sege and þe assaut watz sesed at Troye, Þe borȝ brittened
and brent to brondeȝ and askez, Þe tulk þat þe trammes of tresoun þer
wroȝt Watz tried for his tricherie, þe trewest on erthe: Hit watz Ennias
þe athel, and his highe kynde, Þat sipen depreced prouinces, and
patrounes bicomme Welneȝe of al þe wele in þe west iles. Fro riche
Romulus to Rome ricchis hym swyþe, With gret bobbaunce þat burȝe
he biges vpon fyrst, And neuenes hit his aune nome, as hit now hat;
Tirius to Tuskan and teldes bigynnes, Langaberde in Lumbardie lyftes
vp homes, And fer ouer þe French flod Felix Brutus On mony bonkkes
ful brode Bretayn he settez wyth wyne, Where werre and wrake and
wonder Bi syþez hatz wont þerinne, And oft boþe blysse and blunder
Ful skete hatz skyfted synne.

EARLY MODERN ENGLISH

1500 AD-1800 AD

ME -> EMoE

Stages of the Great Vowel Shift

[i:] > [ii] > [ei] > [əi] > [ai]	(ca. 1400 – 1750)	(<i>time, sky</i>)
[u:] > [uu] > [eu] > [əu] > [au]	(ca. 1400 – 1750)	(<i>house, now</i>)
[e:] > [i:]	(ca. 1400 – 1500)	(<i>see, degree</i>)
[o:] > [u:]	(ca. 1400 – 1500)	(<i>do, goose</i>)
[ɛ:] > [e:] > [i:]	(ca. 1500 – 1700)	(<i>sea, lead</i>)
[ɔ:] > [o:] > [ou] > [əu]	(ca. 1650 – 1950)	(<i>stone, home</i>)
[ɑ:] > [æ:] > [ɛ:] > [e:] > [ei]	(ca. 1400 – 1800)	(<i>name, make</i>)

EMoE

Disappearance of [x]

Cough, enough, laugh, ...

EMoE

Assibilation of [tj],
[dj], [sj], and [zj]

Question, soldier, nation,
vision

EMoE

Disappearance of [b] from [-mb]

Climb, comb, dumb, ...

MODERN ENGLISH

1800 AD-Present

Sources

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