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

Old English (ca. 500-1100)

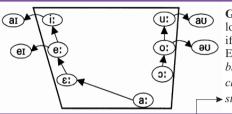
#### Middle English (ca. 1100-1500)

#### 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



Great Vowel Shift (also Tudor Vowel Shift), ca.1400-1700: long (and ONLY long!) ME vowels were raised; if they warm almost which they warm dishthen pixed.

\	if they were already high, they were diphthongized.				
,	Ex.:	ME		EModE	ModE
	blind	/i:/		/əi/	/aɪ/
	clean	/ε:/		/e:/	/i:/
>	stone	/ɔ:/		/o:/	/ວບ/

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

diphthongs

was **phonemic**,

e.g. /god/ ('God')

vs./go:d/('good')

length contrast also in

e.g. ban /ba:n/ > bon /bo:n/

subsequently levelled by analogy

# i y u u

# weakening of unstressed vowels

raising and rounding of /a:/ to /o:/,

(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 is pl. stanas/stana/stanum/stanas > stones

# changes in vowel quantity:

#### shortening:

- in <u>closed</u> syllables, e.g. soft
- **before CCC**, e.g. *godspel*
- in the antepenultimate syllable e.g. sutherne ('southern') vs. suth ('south')

#### lengthening:

- in <u>open</u> syllables, e.g. faran ('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

with some **fossilized exceptions**,
e.g. goose/geese, tooth/teeth, man/men, mouse/mice,

 $|U| > |\Lambda|$ , e.g. but, butter, cup, sun foul/filth, full/fill, long/length, old/elder (but not in all words, e.g. pull, put, bull)

- This **interacted** with other sound changes: (1) GVS yielded /o:/ > /u:/
- (2) /u:/ was shortened to /u/
- (3) depending on whether (2) took place very early, /u/ underwent the regular change to / $\Lambda$ /.

Ex. (1) food, mood

- (2) good, book
- (3) blood, flood

ME short /a/ splits into

/æ/ cat

and /p/ what

rounding of vowels after /w/

(a process of partial progressive assimilation which affected /a/ in particular),

e.g. swan, watch, war

environments (had already started in London English in the EModE period):

lengthening and lowering of /æ/ in certain

- 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* [fɑ:], *tower* [tɑ:]

postvocalic /r/ was lost in Standard British

æ:

monopthongization, new diphthongs emerging eventually

#### no silent consonants

e.g. knight [kniçt], writan

**double consonants (geminates)** 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 [wolf] vs. wulfas [wolvas]

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

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

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

**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

 $\rightarrow$  e.g. wolf [f] vs. wolves [v], house [s] vs. houses [z]