

THE SOUNDS OF OLD ENGLISH

2.0 How the Sounds Are Known

Evidence for what Old English speech sounded like is essentially the collection of writings that have survived from the Anglo-Saxon period of English history, all of them set down in an alphabetical system for recording linguistic messages.

An alphabetical system of writing represents only certain speech *sounds*, and only indirectly therefore can it record forms that have meanings (words, suffixes, and such), or sentence patterns, or meanings. Such a system serves to provide a graphic analog of the distinctive sounds in an utterance of any kind, as those sounds occur sequentially—a string of symbols ('letters') representing a succession of sounds. The purpose of the writing is to make a copy (of sorts) of what has been said which can be kept or carried, because it does not disappear as speech does as soon as the saying is done. The kinds of sounds to come along as it were in a row—one, then another, then another—are the so-called segmental units, that is, the vowels and consonants.

For this continuous component of Old English phonology evidence is more than ample. It requires interpretation, nonetheless, because the writing system was worked out by people who spoke Old English, not Modern English (or any other modern language), and because they were adapting a system that had been worked out for another language. As everyone knows who has learned another European language, the sounds of one language differ from those of another, on the one hand; and on the other, the roman alphabet—even with addition of umlaut, cedilla, circumflex, or other diacritical marks—represents sounds differently from one language to the next: *r* stands for quite different sounds in English, German, French, Spanish. Even so, adaptation of the same alphabet to the writing of many languages in the European past, and within the span of only a few centuries, has preserved a useful context for interpreting the evidence in Anglo-Saxon writings for the speech sounds they represented.

The most important part of this context is the fact that the roman system was the one used for writing Latin, the principal international language of western Europe in the Middle Ages. It was also a relatively stable language during this period, for being a language learned almost exclusively in schools, hence as a second language, and being usable only in communities (such as

monasteries) where it was spoken only among persons for whom it was a second language; it was thus much less exposed to the social factors that cause language change than were the vernaculars. The nature of Christianity, which fostered and spread this system of writing, was another conservative factor, in that it included the requirement of keeping accurately the written texts on which its doctrines and traditions were based. Not least important is that Latin has been in use continuously down to the present day. All these factors make Latin a relatively fixed point of reference for interpreting the sounds underlying the early written records of the languages written in the same alphabet—and usually written by persons who learned their writing system with Latin. There are in fact a number of texts in Old English written by persons who were expert in Latin. Some manuscripts contain both Latin and English copied by the same person. There are even several copies of a grammar of Latin written in Old English.

Interpreting the written evidence is essentially a problem in understanding the 'fit' of the roman alphabet to the sound system of Old English. That fit was made very intelligently by the Anglo-Saxons, even if it is not perfect by any means. The simple letters they used for vowels (a e i o u y) were too few to represent the separate vowels of the language, and little was done to make up for this lack beyond adding æ. The most glaring deficiency was in the distinction between short and long vowels. The system worked well enough for those who knew the language, just as the modern system seems to work well enough despite the potential for confusion caused by such ambiguous spellings as *wind* and *wound*, *axes* and *fertile* (and there seems to be little interest in eliminating the multiplicity of ways to spell a single sound). Modern English has inherited a mixture of ways devised later to keep long and short vowels apart in writing, such as doubling vowel letters (but only *ee* and *oo* are still used) to represent long vowels, spelling a final *-e* after a single consonant (*fate*, *note*, *bite*) to signify length of the preceding vowel, or doubling following consonants to signify the preceding vowel is short (*letter-later*, *litter-liter*, *winner*, *simmer*, *silly*), but these were devised sometime later than the Old English period. Otherwise, the vowels of the language, along with the diphthongs, were spelled adequately with single symbols or double symbols (*ea*, *ie*, etc.).

The fit of the alphabet for the consonants was a bit better, with **p b t d m n l r h** transferring without problem. English sounds now spelled **th** (*ether*, *either*, *thigh*, *thy*) did not occur in Latin and new spellings had to be devised; that problem had more than one easy solution. Less successful was the use of **g** to represent three different sounds, **c** to represent two, and so on. It is in the instances of letters standing for more than one sound that it becomes

important to add diacritical marks in grammars, dictionaries, and instructional materials—distinguishing **a** from **ā**, **c** from **ċ**, and the like.

If the essential evidence for what the sounds were is the spelling of Old English texts, then how is it we can know that some letters represented two or even three different sounds, or that two letters sometimes represented one distinctive unit rather than two? The answer lies in the wider context of the written records. And the principal part of that context is the continuous record of the writing of English from Anglo-Saxon times to the present. If **god** unquestionably means 'good' at one time, 'god' at another, if **æl** means 'awl' and also 'eel,' if **ham** means 'ham' except when it means 'home,' we have modern English word-pairs differing only in the single vowel in each; and when the history of English vowels is reconstructed, it becomes apparent that there must have been pairs of words in Old English, too, that differed in pronunciation by only their root vowel, even when they are spelled the same way. (A number of examples occur in the illustrative lists to follow.) It is this kind of evidence multiplied many times over that establishes the fact that there were two sounds spelled **a**, two spelled **o**, and so on. In a still larger context, the continuous records of other languages—especially the Germanic languages—confirm and refine the picture of the sounds and spellings of the Anglo-Saxons.

Even if alphabetic writing had been adapted to represent consistently and completely the distinctive vowel and consonant sounds of a language, it would not represent other aspects of the phonology of that language—word accent, pitch variation, or whatever that language utilized. Additional symbols can be combined with letters to record these other features—an accent mark for stressed syllable, a question mark for rising pitch—but they belong to separate systems of notation because these other elements of the sound system are separate from the segmental elements (the consonants and vowels). The fact is, of course, that most linguistic messages can be decoded from an alphabetic record alone; all that is lost is speed, occasionally clarity of structure, and of course nuances conveyed by 'tone of voice.' At the time when the system of writing Latin was adapted to the writing of English, 'punctuation' was not a regular or consistent element of the graphic analog of speech acts. Whether a sentence asked for a yes-or-no answer or made a matter-of-fact statement was not signaled by any marking at or near its end. The end of an introductory clause was not distinguished from the end of a final clause. No markings showed that an interruptive element—such as this one between dashes—was not an integral part of the main sentence. Even the interruption of a string of contiguous letters by a blank space was not a regularized element of writing, as it now is, to separate words (as opposed, say, to marking only major pause points for colloquial

effect, *Yer inna helluvarness*).

In sum, there is very good evidence for reconstructing the phonology of Old English segmental units (vowels and consonants), in terms not only of the letter-and-sound correspondences, but in terms of patterns in which they occurred in that language, as well. The elements of accent, pitch modulation, and timing are not as well documented, though some of their characteristics can be reconstructed. For these last elements there is no reason (at least at the outset) not to use accent, pitch, and timing of Modern English in reading aloud from the written records of Old English.