

## 2.4 Consonant Clusters

The clustering patterns of Old English consonants correspond to those of Modern English consonants in so many ways as to make the historical identity of OE and MnE particularly apparent. By **consonant cluster** is meant a sequence of consonant phonemes within one syllable. There are some differences, nevertheless, as may be expected from the differences in the inventories of phonemes for the two stages of English, the differences in the incidence of allophones, and the differences in structural relations of the consonants within the two systems. See Richard M. Hogg, *A Grammar of Old English* (1992), vol. 1: Phonology, section 2.83.

A. In initial position no more than three consonants occur in sequence: /spr- str- skr-/. The cluster /sk-/, both by itself and in /skr-/, involved a palatal allophone of /k/ and had apparently come by the time of King Alfred to be pronounced [š] (equivalent to [ʃ]) as in Modern English *shoe*, *shred*; yet it continued in distribution to resemble clusters with /s-/ until early Middle English, when new [sk- skr-] clusters, in words borrowed first from Anglo-Danish and later from French, redefined the distribution of [š] and it in fact became a new phoneme /š/. In Old English it is regularly spelled **sc**. Thus **-sc-** is [š] in **huscword** ‘scornful speech,’ but it represents [s] + [k] when the consonants occur in separate morphemes, as in **hūscarl**, i.e., a compound **hūs-carl** ‘member of king’s bodyguard.’

/spr-/		/str-/		/skr-/	
<b>spræc</b>	language	<b>stræt</b>	street,	<b>scrīn</b>	chest, coffer
<b>springan</b>	(to) leap		highroad	<b>scrincan</b>	(to) shrink
<b>sprang</b>	(he) leapt	<b>strand</b>	seashore	<b>scranc</b>	(it) shrank
<b>sprungon</b>	(we) leapt	<b>strang</b>	strong	<b>scruncan</b>	(they) shrank
<b>sprengan</b>	(to) strew	<b>strēam</b>	stream	<b>scrīc</b>	shrike
<b>sprotā</b>	sprout, twig	<b>strēaw</b>	straw	<b>scrēad</b>	shred, scrap
<b>spryttan</b>	(to) sprout	<b>strīdan</b>	(to) stride	<b>scrift</b>	penance
<b>sprecan</b>	(to) speak	<b>strād</b>	(he) strode	<b>scrīfan</b>	(to) shrive,
<b>spricð</b>	(he) speaks	<b>stræl</b>	arrow		prescribe
<b>spræc</b>	(he) spoke	<b>strangian</b>	(to)	<b>scrūd</b>	clothing
<b>spræcon</b>	(we) spoke		strengthen	<b>scrȳdan</b>	(to) clothe
<b>sprædan</b>	(to) spread	<b>strið</b>	strife	<b>screpan</b>	(to) scrape
<b>sprecol</b>	talkative	<b>streccan</b>	(to) stretch	<b>scrēpan</b>	(to) become dry

B. Two-member initial clusters are displayed below. They are arranged so as to represent some of the principles of initial clustering; no single two-dimensional arrangement can imply all those principles. Only a few illustrations are given. Others can be supplied from the preceding lists.

/sp-/	spell	/st-/	/sk-/	scyrt
	spēd			
/pr-/		/tr-/	/kr-/	
/br-/		/dr-/	/gr-/	
/pl-/			/kl-/	
/bl-/			/gl-/	
/sl-/	/sm-/	/sn-/	/sw-/	
/hl-/	/hr-/	/hn-/	/hw-/	
/fl-/	/fr-/	/fn-/		
	/pr-/	/pw-/		
		/tw-/		
			/dw-/	
		/kn-/	/kw-/	
		/gn-/	gnæt	
			gnīdan	
/wl-/	/wr-/		gnidel	

C. Clustering patterns of consonants in final positions in syllables or words are fewer and simpler than in Modern English. They pose no problem in the learning of Old English, and are not illustrated here.

Any medial cluster will begin with the largest possible sequence permitted for an initial cluster.