

Summary of Sound Changes up to c.1000 CE

Grimm's Law / The First Germanic Consonant Shift

Sometime BCE, the following changes took place in Proto-Germanic in contrast with the other Indo-European languages:

- Aspirated voiced stops lost their aspiration: /b^h, d^h, g^h/ > /b, d, g/;
- Non-aspirated voiced stops lost their voicing: /b, d, g/ > /p, t, k/;
- Voiceless stops became fricatives: /p, t, k/ > /f, θ, x/.

Examples: Latin *piscis*, *edere*, *ager* ≐ PDE *fish*, *eat*, *acre*.

Verner's Law

A modification of Grimm's Law stating that voiceless consonants did **not** by default become fricatives but gained voicing; they did, however, become voiceless fricatives if immediately preceded by Indo-European word stress.

Examples: Lat.*pater* ≐ OE *fæder* but Lat.*frater* ≐ OE *brōþor*

High German Consonant Shift

A series of changes that took place in High German in contrast with the other Germanic languages between the fourth and ninth centuries CE:

- voiceless plosives following vowels became long fricatives: /p, t, k/ > /ff, ss, xx/;
- voiceless plosives initially, after /lmnr/, or when geminated became /pf, ts, kx/;
- voiced plosives sometimes lost their voicing: /b, d, g/ > /p, t, k/.

Examples: PDE *ape*, *eat*, *make*, *pepper*, *two* ≐ Germ. *Affe*, *essen*, *machen*, *Pfeffer*, *zwei*.

Front Mutation or *i/j*-Mutation

In the prehistoric or early stages of all Germanic languages except Gothic, back vowels were fronted and front vowels were raised if the next syllable contained an

/i/ or /j/. The /i/ or /j/ was often lost at a later stage, so that one has to know the history of the word or word class to understand its form. This explains many of the “irregular” plurals in PDE: *mice*, *geese*, *men*, etc.

/u/ > /y/: **mūsiz* > **mȳsiz* > *mȳs* “mice”

/o/ > /e/: **fōtiz* > **fētiz* > *fēt* “feet”

/a/ > /æ/: **brannjan* > *bærnan* “burn”

/a/ + nasal > /e/: **manniz* > **menniz* > *menn* “men”

/æ/ > /e/: **læggjan* > *lecgan* “lay”

/e/ > /i/: **regnjan* > *rignan* “rain (verb)”; cf. *regn* (noun)

Breaking, Back Mutation, and Retraction

Breaking is whenever a monophthong (static vowel) develops into a diphthong (gliding vowel). If this happens under the influence of a back vowel in the following syllable, it is also an instance of **back mutation**; if it is caused by a following consonant or consonant cluster /l/ + cons., /r/ + cons., /x/ (often represented by <h>), or /w/, we simply refer to it as breaking. In Old English, the developments concerned are short /æ/ > /æa/ <ea>; short /e/ > /eo/; and short /i/ > /io/ (later likewise spelled <eo>).

In Anglian especially, the same conditions could lead to **retraction** instead, in which these same front vowels became /a, o, u/ rather than breaking.

Examples:

hefen > *heofon* “heaven” (breaking, back mutation)

ahta > *eahta* “eight” (breaking under the influence of /x/)

æll > *all* “all” (retraction under the influence of /l/ plus a second consonant, here again /l/)