Introduction to English Linguistics

11: Middle English

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Inflectional Levelling

Old English	Middle English
hȳran	hēren
wē hȳraþ	wē hēren
þæt wē hȳren	þat wē hēren
þā dagas	þē daies
þāra daga	of þē daies
þām dagum	in þē daies

Nouns

Masc	OE sg	ME sg	OE pl	ME pl
Nom	stān	stōn(e)	stānas	stōnes
Acc	stān	stōn(e)	stānas	stōnes
Gen	stānes	stōnes	stāna	stōnes
Dat	stāne	stōn(e)	stānum	stōnes

Gender

<div align="center">OE grammatical gender → ME natural gender</div>

▶ OE demonstrative *se*, *sēo*, *þæt* > ME article *þe* / *the*
▶ Largely grammatical OE *hē*, *hēo*, *hit* > largely natural ME *he*, *she*, *it*

OE	þæs mægdnes mod
ME	þe maidens erand
ME	In to boure he was ladde,
	þe maiden for to se;
	he fond hir liggeand on hir bedde.

Verbs

Present Indicative

Person	OE sg	ME sg	OE pl	ME pl
1	secge	seie	secgað	seien
2	sægst	seiest	secgað	seien
3	segð	seieth	secgað	seien

Present Subjunctive

(grows more limited in functionality in Middle English)

Person	OE sg	ME sg	OE pl	ME pl
1	secge	seie	secgen	seien
2	secge	seie	secgen	seien
3	secge	seie	secgen	seien

Word Order

OE	Se þēow	sēceð	þone cyning
	Se þēow	þone cyning	sēceð
	Sēceð	se þēow	þone cyning
	Þone cyning	sēceð	se þēow
	? Sēceð	þone cyning	se þēow

ME	Þē þeu	sēcþ	þē cyng
	~~Þē þeu~~	~~þē cyng~~	~~sēcþ~~
Þenne	sēcþ	þē þeu	þē cyng
Þat	þē þeu	þē cyng	sēcþ
	~~Þē cyng~~	~~sēcþ~~	~~þē þeu~~

Orthography (1/2)

- ▶ <o> for <u> to circumvent minim confusion: *lufu > love*
- ▶ <ou, ow> for /uː/: *flour*
- ▶ <e> for /ǣ/: *bem*
- ▶ <ea> for /æ/
- ▶ <o, ue, u> for /ø/
- ▶ <y> for /i/ (following the unrounding of /y/): *kyn*, *kyng*
- ▶ <u> for /y/ in dialects where that sound survived and in loans: *nature*
- ▶ <ay, ey, oy> for /ai, ei, oi/
- ▶ <aw, ew, ow> for /au, eu, ou/

- ► \<uu, vv, w> for \<ƿ> /w/: *water*
- ► \<qu> for \<cƿ>: *quene*
- ► \<ch> for \<c> /tʃ/: *chirche*
- ► \<v> for voiced \<f>: *heven*
- ► \<ȝ> for /j/ (OE used \<ȝ> or \<g>) and sometimes for word-final /ts/
- ► \<ȝ> for /x/, leaving \<h> for /h/: *lauȝter*
- ► \<wh> for \<hw> (but \<qu> in the north): *who*, *what*, *where*, *why*
- ► \<sch>, later \<sh> for \<sc> /ʃ/: *scip / schip > ship*
- ► \<ð> disappears in c13; \<th> introduced as an alternative for \<þ>: *the*

Vowel Quality

- /ɑ:/ > /ɔ:/ <o, oo>: *hām > hom(e)*, *stān > ston(e)*
- /y/ > /i/: *cynn > kin*; *cyning > kyng > king*
- /æ/, /ɑ/ > /a/ <a>: *fætt > fat*; *cat* /kɑt/ > /kat/
- /æa/ <ea> > /æ/: *bēam* /beam/ > *bem* /bæm/, *eahta* /eaxta/ > *eighte* /æxtə/
- /eo/ > /ø/: /ˈheovon/ > /ˈhøvən/

Diphthongization

All OE diphthongs having thus been monophthongized, new diphthongs emerged:

Breaking

- ▶ /i/ was inserted between front vowel + /h/ [ç] (*fehtan* > *feiʒten*);
- ▶ /u/ was inserted between back vowel and /h/ [x] (*dohtor* > *douʒter*).

Vocalization

- ▶ Postvocalic /g/ [ɣ] and /w/ became /u/ (*boga* > *bowe*);
- ▶ postvocalic /j/ became /i/ (*weg* > *wei*).

yielding

- ▶ early ME: /ei, ai, au, ɛu, eu, iu, ɔu/
- ▶ late ME: /ai, au, ɛu, iu, ɔu/

Vowel Quantity

Vowel length comes to anticipate the coda:

► Homorganic lengthening: A sonorant /l m n ŋ r w j/ followed by a stop produced in (almost) the same location caused lengthening of the preceding vowel: *climban* > *clīmben*, *gold* > *gōld*;

► Shortening before other consonant clusters: initially (late OE period) before three consonants only; later (ME) even before two: *gōdspell* > *godspell*; *cēpte* > *cepte*;

► Trisyllabic shortening: initially (late OE) before two consonants, later (ME) even before one: *blētsian* > *bletsian* "bless"; *sūþerne* > *suþerne*.

► Middle English Open Syllable Lengthening, c13–14: *bacan* > *bākan* > *bake*; *takan* > *tāken* > *take*; *befer* > *bēver* > *beaver*

Standardizing Institutions

Chancery

- ► Produced official documents for the Crown
- ► Established shortly before the Norman Conquest
- ► Came to use English over French/Latin in the first half of the 15th century ("1430")

Exchequer

- ► Royal tax office (including a tax court)
- ► Established c. 1100

These institutions came to use a Central Midlands dialect:
such, *which*, *gaf*, *theyre* rather than e.g. *swiche*, *wich*, *yaf*, *hir*.
They sent documents out across the nation, establishing a national written standard.

The Printing Press and Movable Type

Figure: Movable-Type Press (CC-BY-SA Kristian Bjornard)