The basics of pronunciation of Old English

Handout

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Old English script used the six vowel symbols *a, e, i, o, u* and *y*, and a seventh one, *æ*, called 'ash'. All of these could represent both long and short vowels. The probable pronunciations represented by the symbols are shown in table below

Symbol	Pronunciation	Resembling the vowel of
a	[ɑ]	Southern English *bath*, but shorter
æ	[æ]	Southern English *hat*
e	[e]	French *elle*, German *Bett*
i	[i]	German *sie*, English *tree*, but shorter
o	[o]	German *wo*, French *chose*, but shorter
u	[u]	English *room*, but shorter
y	[y]	French *cru*, German *Hütte*
ā	[ɑː]	Southern English *bath*
ǣ	[æː]	Southern English *bad*
ē	[eː]	French *été* (lengthened), German *zehn*
ī	[iː]	German *sie*, English *tree*
ō	[oː]	German *wo*, French *chose*
ū	[uː]	English *room*
ȳ	[yː]	French *sûr*, German *führen*

All the symbols represent pure vowels, not diphthongs. To represent diphthongs, the Anglo-Saxons used digraphs (sequences of two symbols): *ea, eo, io* and *ie*.

As for consonants, the use of double consonants was different from the one we are used to. In Modern English spelling, we use double-consonant symbols in two-syllable words to show that the preceding vowel is short: the spellings written and copper are used for words pronounced /ˈrɪtn/ and /ˈkɒpə/ But in Old English this is not so: the fact that a single consonant symbol is used tells us nothing about the length of the preceding vowel. The Old English words for *'written'* and *'copper'* are *writen* and *copor*; these had short vowels, and were probably pronounced *[ˈwriten]* and *[ˈkopor]*. However, we do find OE spellings with doubled

consonants, like *assa 'ass', bucca 'hegoat'* and *cuppe 'cup'*. In such words the double-consonant symbol indicates that the consonant was in fact pronounced double or long, rather as in Modern Italian or Modern Swedish.

Old English script normally uses sixteen consonant symbols, which in modern editions are usually reproduced as *b, c, d, f, g, h, l, m, n, p, r, s, t, .,* . and *w*. Old English had no symbol *v*: the symbol f was used to represent both *[f]* and *[v]*. The reason is that, in Old English, *[f]* and *[v]* were members of the same phoneme: they were allophones. When this phoneme occurred within a word (that is, not initially or finally) before a voiced sound, and was not doubled, it was pronounced *[v]*; in all other positions it was pronounced *[f]*. So *[f]* was used in *fæder 'father', fīf 'five', 'hæft 'handle'* and *pyffan 'to puff'*, while *[v]* was used in *giefan 'to give', seofon 'seven', hræfn 'raven' and lifde 'he lived'*.

Task: What is the pronunciation of the following symbols used in OE?

- $\bar{æ}$ $\bar{e}$
- $æ$ $\bar{u}$
- o $\bar{a}$

Study Guide

1. How many vowel symbols are there in Old English? Name the vowels.
2. Explain how diphthongs were treated in OE. Give examples.
3. Compare Old English and Modern English with respect to double consonant treatment.
4. How many consonant were there in Old English?
5. Explain why there were no two distinct symbols for /f/ and /v/