

Ling 103: Language Structure and Verbal Art

The language of Bēowulf

Old English was the Germanic language spoken in southern Britain from about 500-1100 CE. English was brought to Britain by West Germanic peoples, probably from around the Frisian islands along the northern coast of what is now Holland.

(1) Vowels.

OE had both short and long vowels. The long vowels are marked with a *macron* (horizontal line over the vowel, e.g. **ā, ǣ, ō**)

Short vowels

i	[ɪ]	lim	limb
e	[ɛ]	bed	bed
æ	[æ]	æt	at
y	[y]	byre	youth
		like in German fünf or French pur	
		make [ɪ] and round your lips	
u	[ʊ]	hund	dog
o	[o]	folc	people
a	[a]	faran	to journey

Long vowels

ī	[i:]	līf	life
ē	[e:]	hē	he
ǣ	[æ:]	sǣ	sea
ȳ	[y:]	hȳd	hide n.
		like in French lu	
		make [i] and round your lips	
ū	[u:]	ūt	out
ō	[o:]	gōd	good
ā	[ɑ:]	stān	stone
			as in NE dawn

(2) Diphthongs

Whenever two vowels are adjacent in OE they combine into a single syllable nucleus creating a *diphthong*.

When **e** or **ē** is written as the first vowel of the diphthongs **ea**, **ēa** they are actually pronounced as if they were **æ** and **ǣ** respectively:

ea	[æə]	healp	help
ēa	[æ:ə]	fēa	few
eo	[εo]	eom	am
ēo	[e:o]	bēo	be
ie	[iə]	hiera	their
īe	[i:ə]	hīe	she
io	[iɔ]	liornung	learning
īo	[i:ɔ]	līode	people

(3) Consonants

- a. **p t b d m n l w** are as in NE, **x** is pronounced as [ks]
 b. **r** might have been trilled, but this is not known for sure
 c. **sc** is pronounced [ʃ]: **scip** [ʃip] ship
 d. **cg** is pronounced [ç]: **brycg** [bryç] bridge
 e. **c** was pronounced as either [k] or [tʃ], depending on the context.
 To aid in pronunciation a dot is sometimes written over the letter **ċ** to indicate that it represents [tʃ] and not [k].

[k]			[tʃ]		
caru	[karu]	care	īċ	[i:tʃ]	I
tacan	[takan]	take	ċild	[tʃild]	child
cyning	[kynɪŋg]	king	ċeaster	[tʃæstɛr]	town
hōc	[ho:k]	hook	swelċ	[swɛl:tʃ]	such

- f. Similarly, **g** was pronounced either as [g] or as [j].

The [j] pronunciation is sometimes indicated with an overdot: **ġ**

gān	[gɑ:n]	gone	ġīet	[ji:ət]	yet
slōg	[slo:g]	struck	dæg	[dæj]	day

- g. **h** was [h] at the beginning of a word.

Otherwise it was pronounced like German **ch** (a [x] sound after back vowels, [ç] after front vowels).

hand	[hand]	hand	niht	[niçt]	night
hūs	[hu:s]	house	feoh	[fɛox]	money, property

- h. The letter **þ** is called *thorn* and the letter **ð** is called *eth*.

They are used interchangeably in Old English spelling.

The letters **f þ ð s** are pronounced as [f θ ð s] *except* when they fall between [+voice] segments, when they are also [+voice]: [v ð ð z]

ofer	[over]	over	efne	[ɛvne]	even
hærfest	[hærvɛst]	harvest			
wīse	[wi:zə]	wise	hūsles	[hu:zlɛs]	of the Eucharist
ōþer	[o:ðɛr]	other	eorðe	[ɛorðɛ]	earth
hoðma	[hoðma]	darkness			

(6) Old English verse

- a. Every line consists of two *half-lines*. The end of a half-line always coincides with the end of a word, and *usually* the end of a phrase.

bát under béorge.	Béornas géarwe	
boat under sea-cliffs	warriors eagerly	211

- b. For the purposes of meter the following basic elements are required:

P = heavy syllable with primary word stress
 p = light syllable with primary word stress
 S = heavy syllable with secondary word stress
 s = light syllable with secondary word stress
 x = stressless syllable
 x* = one or more stressless syllables

- c. Resolution:

In all cases, optionally

P → p x	Here I'll write p-x
S → s x	Here I'll write s-x

At the end of a half-line, optionally

P x → p x	Here I'll write p! x
S x → s x	Here I'll write s! x

(7) Types of (half-) lines

<i>A-line</i>	<i>D-line type 1a</i>
P x* P x	P P S x
<i>Acephalous A-line</i>	<i>D-line type 1b</i>
x* P x	P x P S x
<i>B-line</i>	<i>D-line type 2a</i>
x* P x (x) P	P P x* S
<i>C-line</i>	<i>D-line type 2b</i>
x* P P x	P x P x S
	<i>E-line</i>
	P S x (x) P

féasceaft fúnden	hē þæs frófre ġebád	7
P x P x	x x P x x P	A/B
‘A foundling to start with he would flourish later on’		
gómban ġýldan:	þæt wæs góð cýning!	11
P x P x	x x P p! x	A/C
‘and begin to pay tribute. That was one good king!’		
léof lánd-frúma	lánge áhte	31
P P s! x	P x P x	D1a/A
‘and the chief they revered who had long ruled them’		
Wæs se grímma gæst	Gréndel háten	102
x x P x P	P x P x	B/A
mære méarc-stápa	sē þe mōras héold	103
P x P s! xx	x P x P	D1b/B
fén ond fæsten;	fíf[e]l-cýnnes éard	104
P x P x	P S x P	A/E
wón-sæli wér	wéardode hwíle	105
P S x P	P x x P x	E/A

‘Grendel was the name of this grim demon
haunting the marches, marauding round the heath
and the desolate fens; he had dwelt for a time
in misery among the banished monsters’

(8) *Promotion and Demotion.*

Under certain special circumstances secondary stresses count as primary, and primary stresses as secondary:

a. Promotion:

The first P in every half-line must be a primary word-stress. **S** (or **s x**) may substitute for the **second P** in each half-line.

If this happens, I'll write S+ or s+ to indicate a promoted S or s.

b. Demotion:

- i. When a **verb** is the first primary stress of a half-line, its stress is frequently ignored for the meter. In such cases I'll write (P).

m æg	Ælf-hères;	g eséah his món-drÿhten	2604
P	P s! x	x (P) x P S+ x	
= P	P S x	x x x P P x	D/C

'kinsmen of Ælfhere; he beheld his liege-lord'

- ii. When a **verb** is the last primary stress in a **D-type half-line** it normally counts as a secondary, not a primary stress. In such cases I'll write P-.

w órŋ gē-múnde	w órd óðer fānd	870
P x P x	P P x P-	
= P x P x	P P x S	A/D2a

'remembered in abundance derived a new speech'

e. *Alliteration*

- a. One or more Ps -- and almost always the first P -- of the first half-line must alliterate with the *first* P of the second half-line (called the ‘key’)
- b. The first and second P of the second half-line are *not* allowed to alliterate.

<u>b</u>át under <u>b</u>éorge.	<u>B</u>éornas <u>g</u>éarwe	211
P x x P x	P x P x	

<u>m</u>æg <u>Æ</u>lf-hères;	<u>g</u>eséah his <u>m</u>ón-drÿhten	2604
P P S x	x x x P S+ x	

- c. i. Vowel-initial words alliterate with each other.

<u>É</u>ormen-ríces	<u>g</u>ecēas <u>é</u>cne rād	1201
P x P x	x x P x P	A/B
‘of Eormenric	he chose eternal gain’	

- ii. *g/ġ* and *c/ċ* alliterate with each other even though they are pronounced differently
- iii. *sp*, *st*, *sc* each alliterate only with themselves

<u>g</u>úma <u>g</u>ílp-hlæden	<u>g</u>idda <u>g</u>e-mýndig	868
p-x P s! x	P x x P x	D1a/A
‘a man glory-laden	mindful of solemn words’	

(8) **Impossible lines**

$P x^* P$

$P x x P x x$ A-line with 'extra final x'

$x x P P x x$ C-line with 'extra final x'

$x x P x x P x$ B-line with extra final x

$x x P x P x$ similar

$x x P P$ C-line with no final x

$P P x x$ D-line with no S

$P P x$ similar

$x x P x x$ acephalous A-line with extra final x

$x x x P$ acephalous A-line without final x

$P x P x S x$ D-line with two instances of P x

A formula in Beowulf for introducing speeches:

[P (x)] **maþelode** [epithet]

Bēowulf maþelode, bearn Ecgþēowes
 Beowulf spoke son of Ecgthēowes

Bēowulf maþelode — on him byrne scān
 Bēowulf spoke the mail-shirt on him gleamed

Hrōþgār maþelode, helm Scyldinga
 Hrōthgār spoke protection of the Scyldings

Wiglāf maþelode Wēohstānes sunu
 Wiglāf spoke son of W.

Wulfgār maþelode þæt wæs Wendla lēod
 Wulfgār spoke he was a tribesman of the Vandals

weard maþelode þær on wicge sæt
 the watchman spoke where he sat on his steed

Beowulf 864-882

Hwīlum héabo-rôfe x x p-x P x <i>Sometimes the battle-brave</i>	hléapan léton P x P x <i>let run,</i>	C/A
on-ge-flit fāran x x P p! x <i>go in rivalry,</i>	féalwe méaras P x P x <i>fallow horses,</i>	865 C/A
ðær him föld-wègas x x P p! x <i>where to them the earthways</i>	fægere þúhton, p-x x P x <i>seemed fair</i>	C/A
cýstum cūðe. P x P x <i>known for excellence.</i>	Hwīlum cýninges þégn x x p-x x P <i>Sometimes a king's retainer</i>	A/B
gúma gīlp-hlæden, p-x P s! x <i>a man glory-laden,</i>	gídda ge-mýndig P x x P x <i>mindful of solemn words,</i>	D1a/A
se ðe _éal-fēla x x P p! x <i>he who very many</i>	_eald-ge-sègena P x s+-x x <i>ancient traditions</i>	C/A
wórn ge-múnde, P x P x <i>remembered in abundance,</i>	wórd óðer fānd P P x S <i>devised a new speech</i>	A/D2a
sóðe ge-búnden: P x x P x <i>truthfully composed:</i>	sécg éft on-gàn P P x S <i>the man again began</i>	A/D2a
síð Béo-wulfes P P S x <i>the adventure of Beowulf</i>	snýttrum stýrian P x p-x x <i>skilfully to recite,</i>	D1a/A
ond on spéd wrécan x x P p! x <i>and with success to pursue</i>	spél ge-ráde P x P x <i>the tale readily</i>	C/A

wórdum wríxlan <i>to vary the words;</i>	wél-hwylc̅ ge-cwæð <i>he told each thing</i>
þæt hē fram Síge-mundes <i>that he heard tell</i>	sécgan hýrde <i>about Sigemund's</i>
éllen-dædum <i>glorious deeds,</i>	úncūþes féla <i>many a thing unknown,</i>
Wæł-singes gewín <i>the strife of Wæł's son,</i>	wíde síðas <i>expeditions afar,</i>
þāra þe gúmena béarn <i>of which the sons of men</i>	ǵearwe ne wíston, <i>knew not at all,</i>
fǣhðe ond fýrena — <i>battles and murders —</i>	būton Fítela mid híne, <i>only Fitela with him,</i>
þonne hē swúlces hwæt <i>whenever he wished to say</i>	sécgan wólde <i>anything about such a matter,</i>
é.àm his néfan — <i>uncle to his nephew —</i>	swā hīe á wæron <i>so they always were</i>
æt níða ge-hwám <i>in each of the battles</i>	nýd-ǵe-stèallan <i>comrades in crisis</i>

Practice Problem for Wednesday 5 November

- A. Be prepared to pronounce lines 864-882 (above) in Old English
1. Assign weight values {P, p, S, s, x} to the syllables in these lines
 2. Identify the type of each half line {A, B, C, D, E}
 3. Underline the alliterating syllables
- B. Try to find some instances of formulas in the poem to discuss in class.

Dating Beowulf

The date of composition for *Beowulf* is not known for certain and remains a point of debate among scholars to this day.

A variety of types of evidence can be used to date the composition of the poem.

Traditional considerations:

manuscript

content of the poem

loanwords in the poem

names of places and people

spelling conventions in the manuscript

Evidence from meter:

Some lines are unmetrical *as written in the manuscript*, but can be read metrically if we *undo* certain changes in pronunciation which took place in the middle to late OE period.

Evidence from syntactic change:

The order of words changed from Old English to Middle English. This change occurred over several hundred years during which there was *syntactic variation* — both word orders were possible. We can detect approximately how old a text is by examining the **rates of variation** — what percentage of clauses have the old word order versus the new word order.

Traditional considerations

A. Manuscript ca.1000

2 scribes. Handwriting typical of late 10th or early 11th cent. Same scribes copied prose pieces and the poem *Judith*. Conclusion: neither was the author of **B**.

Late 10th century is the *terminus ad quem* (date before which) for the composition of **B**.

B. Content.

i. Action is in Denmark and Southern Sweden.

Why is this for an English poem? Perhaps:

- a. Poem composed to flatter Danish rulers of England, incl. C(a)nute (ruled 1016-1035).
- b. Poem composed by English author in Danelaw after the Danish invasion of 865.
- c. Poem composed in East Anglia prior to late 8th cent., when the rulers there were related to Swedish rulers.
- d. Poem is very early and reflects 'golden age' prior to migration of English to Britain.

ii. Warrior ethos of pagan Germans → early date?

Men are loyal, courageous, aggressive, and strong.

Women are domestic, graceful and kind.

The king leads only a *small* warrior-band with shallow social hierarchy. Blood-feuds.

But parts of the ethos remained intact **all during** OE period.

iii. Christianity → late date?

References to Christian beliefs. Old Testament references, well-integrated into poem. Sin and morality. Criticism and anxiety over pagan sacrifices and rites.

Conclusion: Composition by a Christian after conversion of English began in early 7th cent. Possibility (ic) above ruled out since East Anglian rulers of the time were pagans.

iv. Grendel story → conflicting evidence

'Bear's Son': Germanic folk tale, parallels Grendel story.

Grendel probably a water-monster in OE folk belief.

OE **grund** > NE **ground**

English place names with **Grendel-**:

Grendelsmere the grendel's pool

Grindelsbec the grendel's brook

Gryndelssyle the grendel's swamp

C. Loanwords

1. Words from contact with the Roman army

camp ‘battle’ < *kamp < Lat. **campus** ‘field’ > ‘battlefield’

cempa ‘warrior’ < *kampījo < LL. **campiō** (acc.) < **campiōnem**

draca ‘dragon’ < *drakō < Lat. **dracō** ‘python, dragon’

(Used as battle-standard by late Roman soldiers)

mīl ‘mile’ < *mīliju < L **mīlia** (passuum) ‘miles, a thousand paces’

seġn ‘banner’ < *seġn < L **signum** ‘sign; legionary standard’

2. Words probably acquired through trade

ancor ‘anchor’ < *ankr < L **ancora**

candel ‘luminary, light, candle’ < L **candēla**

ċeap ‘price, merchandise, trade’/ **ġeċċeapian** ‘to trade’ <

kaup/*(ga)kaupōjan < L **caupō** ‘small tradesman, innkeeper’

disc ‘dish, plate’ < *disk < L **discus** ‘discus > flat plate’

orc ‘pitcher’ < L **orca** ‘pot’

wīn wine’ < *wīn < L. **vīnum** (NB. L **v** still pronounced as [w]

cf. later borrowings L **versus** > OE **fers**)

3. Words relating to Roman towns and engineering

træf ‘building’ < *trab < L **trabs** ‘beam’

stræt ‘paved road, street’ < *strātu < L (via) **strāta** ‘straight road’

weall ‘wall’ < L **vallum** ‘earthen rampart’

wīċ ‘settlement’ < *wīk < L **vīcus** ‘village’

4. Other loanwords

dēofol ‘devil’ < L **diabolus**. Not Proto-West-Germanic.

Either borrowed into Germanic languages individually or spread from one to another

ġigant ‘giant’ < L **gigās**, acc. **gigantem**

orc ‘hell’ < L **orcus**

Apparently a borrowing from pagan Latin.

Not the Christian hell **īfernus**.

scrīfan ‘to decree’ < *skrīban < L **scribere** ‘to write’.

5. Old Norse loanwords: **None**.

Poems written in OE after first Danish invasion usually have some. Suggests composition before 880.

D. Names.

Scandinavian names, but OE in form, and do not reflect contemporary Old Norse pronunciation.

Old English	Old Norse
Hrōðgar	Hrōarr
Hrōðulf	Hrōlfr (9th cent. runes rulufR, rhuulfR)
Ōhthere	Ōttarr
Onela	Āli
Scedenīg	Skāney (reborrowed into OE Scōneġ)

Is composition early based on the name evidence?

E. Spelling

Ms. contains many instances of letter **d** written for **ð**.

This was a scribal practice which was discontinued starting around 740 and was completely gone by the 9th cent.

Thus, the original ms. of **B** was probably from the 7th or 8th cent.