

▪ **Breaking**

Very early in the prehistoric OE period the front vowels *æ*, *e*, and *i* were diphthongised when immediately followed by a velar or velarized consonant or consonant group. The contexts are

- 1) the voiceless velar fricative /x/ (spelled <h>)
 - 2) the velarized liquid [ɫ] when covered by a following consonant including itself
 - 3) the liquid /r/ when it was similarly covered (which was probably velarized)
 - 4) the labiovelar approximant /w/ (sometimes)
- The traditional name given to this process is **breaking**, (a calque from Grimm (1822) Brechung), or following Mayhew (1891) fracture. (For criticism of the term Breaking in Quirk and Wrenn (1957:§ 201).
 - **It is especially important to note that diphthongisation did not occur before the voiced velar fricative /ɣ/ f.e. wegās ‘ways’, dragan ‘drag’.**
 - Between the front vowels and these consonants there developed a transitional back glide (Hogg (1992) /u/ or /o/, Lass (1994) /u/). Breaking appears to be initially the insertion of [u] between a front vowel and the environments specified above. (back/ continuant – not stop or nasal) The environments are usually assumed to have been ‘back’, which would naturally prompt insertion of a ‘transition vowel’ of back quality as an assimilatory response. In the handbooks the term conflates two partly independent developments ‘glide insertion’ and the later change to the special type of diphthongs spelled <eo, ea>. This second process is not usually isolated as a separate development, and wasn’t given its name until Lass and Anderson (1975) where (DHH) **Diphthong Height Harmony** is postulated.

/æ/ Breaking → /æu/ DHH → æɑ spelling <ea>

/e/ Breaking → /eu/ DHH → eo spelling <eo>

/i/ Breaking → /iu/ → /eu/ (iu, eu merger) → DHH /eo/

- The result of all these changes is to set up a new group of short diphthongs and to cause the long diphthongs from Breaking to merge with the original Germanic ones.
- 1) /æ/ is the vowel most frequently broken (!!!). Before /x/ it is regular in all dialects: seah ‘he saw’, eahta ‘eight’ or with later loss of /x/ slēan ‘slay’.
The occurrence of /æ/ before l-groups is dialectally restricted. In these circumstances first fronting (= Anglo Frisian Brightening) of */a/ > /æ/ with later breaking to /ea/, giving e.g. ‘eald’ ‘old’ occurs in some dialects but in others first fronting fails because of the velar quality of the following consonant. It must be assumed that in those dialects where FF occurs to be followed by Br. the /l/ is insufficiently velarised to prevent fronting. In WS /ea/ spellings are normal and /a/ are extremely rare. In Angl. /a/ spellings are practically universal. That’s why we have WS eall, eald, sealde, tealde alongside Angl. all, ald, salde, talde.
Breaking before r-groups is regular in all dialect: bearn ‘child’, earm ‘arm’
 - 2) /æ:/ The only instances can be of WS /æ:/₁ and these parallel the examples for nonWS /e:/
Regular only before /x/. Typical WS examples are nēah ‘near’ ne:alecan ‘approach’ with the loss of /x/.
 - 3) short /e/ is regularly broken before /x/ feoh ‘cattle’ feohtan ‘fight’.. With later loss of /x/
Class VI se:on ‘see’ < seuhan < sehan.
regular before /rC/ eorðe, steorra, eorl,

More restricted before /lC/ most frequent when C= /x/. /l/ was sufficiently velarized to cause breaking only in /lx/, /lw/ i.e. when a velar follows e.g. eolh 'elk' geolwe 'yellow' The only exception is the sequence /self/ seolf, sometimes self.

Before /w/ regular: cneowe 'knee' dat.sg.

- 4) /e:/ doesn't appear in WS in the relevant contexts (it is replaced by long /æ:/)
- 5) /i/ The initial result of Breaking is /iu/ spelled <io> in early texts, later <oe> presumed to merge with <eo> from other sources, e.g. the breaking of /e/. Most frequent before /w/ niowul 'prostrate' and before /xC/ Peohtas
before /r/ little evidence, no breaking before /l/.
- 6) /i:/ as above initially to /iu/ <io> later merging with /eo/ lēoht 'light' </li:ht/. With the loss of /x/ wrēon 'wrap' <*/wriuhan/ <*/wri:xan/.

- The interpretation of the digraphs <ea, eo, io>, has long been the subject of much controversy in OE studies.
 - **traditional view:** as a result of Breaking OE developed a contrast between long and short diphthongs, which didn't occur in Gmc.
 - a) inconceivable that breaking would affect short and long vowels in different ways
 - b) arguments from IOE and ME. For example, ea when lengthened develops as ēa, eo and ēo develop as eME ō and ǫ contrasting with eME development of e and ē
 - c) diphthongizations triggered by the kinds of contexts relevant for breaking are common throughout the history of English
 - **opponents of the traditional view:**
 - a) it is unlikely that OE had a four-way contrast between short and long vowels and short and long diphthongs. (no such contrast in MnE, or Gmc) (but Icelandic, Afrikaans, some varieties of MnE)
 - b) the second element of digraphs was a diacritic indicating that the following consonant was phonemically back (under Irish influence but this assumption cannot be fully substantiated.
 - c) a digraph represents a retracted or velarized allophone of a front vowel