The vocalic inventory of late Old Northumbrian

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Overview

Authorities in the field of diachronic phonology have established that the vocalic inventory of Old English contained short and long vowels, short and long diphthongs, and a number of digraphs. Their classification is, however, majorly based on the West-Saxon dialect, which is known to be markedly different in many aspects from the dialect my PhD project researches: late Old Northumbrian. This poster will therefore outline my treatment of vowels in Old Northumbrian.

1. Old English

Earliest form of English spoken in Britain from 7th c. to 1150's.

4 different dialectal variants:

➢ West-Saxon

➢ Mercian

➢ Kentish

➢ Northumbrian

Old English dialect regions (Crowley 1986: 100)

2. Old English Vowels

According to the authorities (Campbell 1959; Hogg 2011; Minkova 2014), the idealised vocalic system of Old English contained:

- **Short and long vowels**: <a, ā, æ, ǣ, e, ē, i, ī, y, ȳ, o, ō, u, ū>

	Short vowels				Long vowels			
	Front		Back		Front		Back	
	Unround	Round	Unround	Round	Unround	Round	Unround	Round
High	i	y		u	ī	ȳ		ū
Mid	e			o	ē			ō
Low	æ		a		ǣ		ā	

Table based on Hogg (2011) & Minkova (2014)

- **Short and long diphthongs**: <ea, ēa, eo, ēo, io, īo>

  ➢<ea, ēa>: mid front unrounded, possibly /æɑ, æɑ:/ or /æə, æə:/

  ➢<eo, ēo>: mid front rounded, possibly /eo, eo:/ or /eə, eə:/

  ➢<io, īo>: high front rounded, possibly /io, io:/ or /iə, iə:/

- **Vocalic digraphs <ea, eo, io>:** orthographically similar to short and long diphthongs, but a distinct category. They usually functioned as diacritics when preceded by palatal consonants. Egs: *secgean* 'say', *sceōfan* 'shove' and *giong* 'young'.

3. Difficulties, controversies and dialectal representation

The field of diachronic phonology faces the following challenges:

- Difficulty in reconstructing the phonological system of Old English since only written records exist.

- Difficulty in interpreting the phonological value of orthographic material.

- The reconstruction of the vocalic system of Old English is even more problematic than that of the consonantal system.

- The 'diagraph controversy': opposition of views in terms of the interpretation and values of vocalic digraphs.

However, the idealised phonological system of Old English is majorly reconstructed on the basis of the West-Saxon dialect.
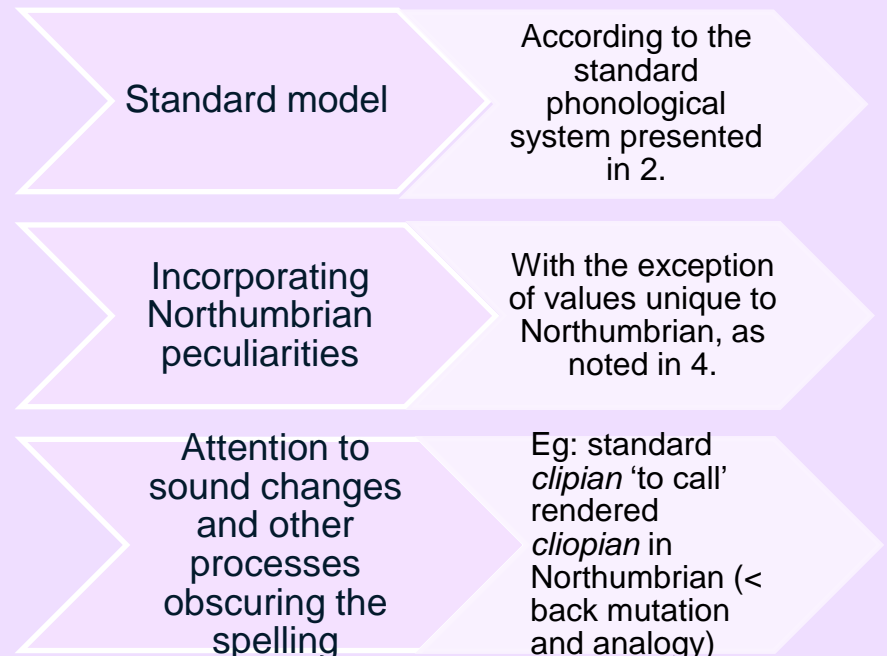
4. Northumbrian dialect

The Northumbrian dialect is in many respects notoriously different from the West-Saxon dialect, not only in terms of its **morphology** (see Cole 2014 for an overview), but also in terms of its **phonology**.

Recent studies on the phonological history of English have drawn from **Northumbrian sources**:

- Stenbrenden (2016) demonstrated that the values of certain **long vowels differed in Northumbrian**:

  ➢/ā/: more centralised articulation

  ➢/ǣ/: more raised articulation

  ➢/ēo/: more fronted and rounded articulation

- Cole (2019) convincingly argued that **Northumbrian spelling reflects changes in the phonology** more faithfully than West-Saxon.

5. Treatment of vowels in Northumbrian texts

My PhD project interprets and classifies vowels as follows:

Standard model	According to the standard phonological system presented in 2.
Incorporating Northumbrian peculiarities	With the exception of values unique to Northumbrian, as noted in 4.
Attention to sound changes and other processes obscuring the spelling	Eg: standard *clipian* 'to call' rendered *cliopian* in Northumbrian (< back mutation and analogy)

6. Questions & feedback

- Northumbrian orthography vs etymological vowel: how to interpret and classify vowels when they do not match what is etymologically expected? Eg: North. *loesian* 'to perish' for *losian*.

- Do irregular spellings have phonological implications? Could they represent dialectal or idiolectal variants?

References

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4. Hogg, R. M. (2011) *A Grammar of Old English, Volume 1: Phonology*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
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