

## 2. Old Icelandic

### 1. Phonology

#### 1.1 Vowels

The position of the tongue and the lips determines the sound of the vowel. Each vowel can thus be described in terms of three characteristics:

- (1) *tongue height*
- (2) *tongue frontness/backness*
- (3) *lip rounding*.

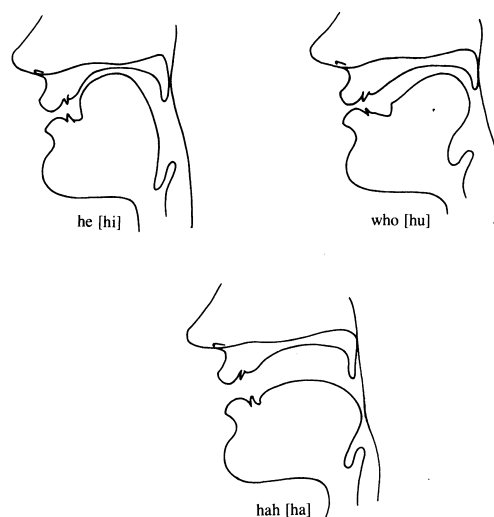


Fig. 3.1: Position of the tongue in producing the vowels in Eng. *he*, *who*, and *hah* (from Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams 2007, 237).

**Umlaut** (or *mutation*, Icel. *hljóðvarp*) is a change whereby the quality of a vowel is changed by the influence of a different vowel in the following syllable. Umlaut can therefore be regarded as a case of distant assimilation. Three major types of umlaut are distinguished, **a-umlaut**, **i-umlaut**, and **u-umlaut**, named after the vowel that caused it. Frequently, however, the vowel that caused the umlaut is no longer present in Old Icelandic, since in Proto-Norse short unaccented, non-nasal vowels were syncopated in the period from around 600 to around 800 AD.

## 1.2 The Proto-Norse vowel system

In Proto-Norse, before the umlaut period (in the 4th and 5th century AD), the vowel system consisted of five qualitatively different vowels (phonemes):

	FRONT		BACK	
	UNROUND	ROUND	UNROUND	ROUND
HIGH	i			u
MID	e			o
LOW			a	

Table 3.3: The five vowel units of Proto-Norse.

These were found **short** or **long** and **nasal** and **non-nasal**. In addition there were three diphthongs: *ai*, *au*, and *iu*.

By the time of the earliest attested stage of Old Icelandic, the vowel system had undergone radical changes, due to umlaut which had given rise to four new vowels or phonemes: *y*, *ø*, *ɛ*, *ɹ*.

## 1.3 a-umlaut

**a-umlaut** (also referred to as *a*-mutation) is the **lowering effect** that the vowel *a* had on vowels in preceeding syllables:

	FRONT		BACK	
	UNROUND	ROUND	UNROUND	ROUND
HIGH	↓ i			u ↓
MID	e			o
LOW			a	

Table 3.4: The lowering effect of *a*-umlaut.

The high vowels *i* and *u* were lowered by the influence of the low *a*. This can be characterized as partial assimilation in tongue height. Frequently the *a* that caused the umlaut was later lost by **syncope**. Examples:

*i* > *e* PGmc. \**wiraz* (cf. Lat. *vir*) > PrN \**werar* > OIcel. *verr* ‘man’

*u* > *o* PGmc. \**hurna* > PrN *horna* > OIcel. *horn* ‘horn’

## 1.4 i/j-umlaut

**i/j-umlaut** (also called *front mutation*) is the **fronting effect** *i* or *j* had on vowels in the preceding syllable. This sometimes resulted in a new unit (phoneme) in the vowel system, indicated by the shaded areas in *Table 3.5*.

	SHORT VOWELS				LONG VOWELS			
	FRONT		BACK		FRONT		BACK	
	UNROUND	ROUND	UNROUND	ROUND	UNROUND	ROUND	UNROUND	ROUND
HIGH	i	y		← u	í	ý		← ú
MID	e	ø		← o	é	ø		← ó
LOW	ɛ		← a		æ		← á	

*Table 3.5:* The fronting effect of *i*-umlaut.

Also the diphthongs *au* > *ey*, *iu* > *y*. — The back vowels get fronted due to the influence of the front *i*. Examples:

<i>a</i> > <i>ɛ</i> (> <i>e</i> )	PrN <i>-gastir</i> > OIcel. <i>gestr</i> ‘guest’; Go. <i>katils</i> : OIcel. <i>ketill</i> ‘kettle’; Go. <i>batists</i> : OIcel. <i>beztr</i> ‘best’
<i>á</i> > <i>æ</i> (= <i>ɛ</i> )	inf. <i>láta</i> ‘let’ : 2sg. PrN <i>*lātir</i> > OIcel. <i>lætr</i> ; OIcel. <i>mágr</i> ‘kinsman’ : <i>mægð</i> ‘kinship’; <i>kátr</i> ‘cheerful’ : <i>kæti</i> ‘cheer’
<i>e</i> > <i>i</i>	PrN <i>*wenir</i> (cf. Lat. <i>venus</i> ) > OIcel. <i>vinr</i> ‘friend’
<i>o</i> > <i>ø</i>	inf. <i>sofa</i> ‘sleep’ : 2sg. PrN <i>*sofir</i> > OIcel. <i>søfr</i>
<i>ó</i> > <i>ø</i> (= <i>æ</i> )	inf. <i>blóta</i> ‘worship’ : 2sg. PrN <i>*blōtir</i> > OIcel. <i>bløtr</i> ; OIcel. <i>fróðr</i> ‘wise’ : <i>fróði</i> ‘wisdom’
<i>u</i> > <i>y</i>	OIcel. <i>þungr</i> ‘heavy’ : <i>þyngð</i> ‘weight’; <i>fullr</i> ‘full’ : <i>fylli</i> ‘fulness’
<i>ú</i> > <i>y</i>	nom. sg. <i>mús</i> ‘mouse’ : nom. plur. PrN <i>*mūsir</i> > OIcel. <i>mýss</i>
<i>au</i> > <i>ey</i>	inf. <i>hlaupa</i> ‘run’ : 2sg. PrN <i>*hlaupir</i> > OIcel. <i>hleypr</i>
<i>iu</i> > <i>y</i>	inf. <i>fljúga</i> ‘fly’ : 2sg. PrN. <i>*fliugir</i> > OIcel. <i>flýgr</i>

The same effect was caused by the semivowel *j* (consonantal *i*):

<i>a</i> > <i>ɛ</i> (> <i>e</i> )	PrN <i>*waljan</i> > OIcel. <i>velja</i> ‘choose’
<i>au</i> > <i>ey</i>	PrN nom. plur. <i>*maujōr</i> > OIcel. <i>meyjar</i> ‘maidens’

## 1.5 u/w-umlaut

*u/w*-umlaut (or labial mutation) is the **rounding effect** *u* or *w* had on vowels in the preceding syllable. This sometimes resulted in a new unit (phoneme) in the vowel system, shown in the shaded areas in *Table 3.6*. These new vowels were sometimes identical to the new phonemes created by *i*-umlaut (see above).

	SHORT VOWELS				LONG VOWELS			
	FRONT		BACK		FRONT		BACK	
	UNROUND	ROUND	UNROUND	ROUND	UNROUND	ROUND	UNROUND	ROUND
HIGH	i →	y		u	í →	ý		ú
MID	e →	ø		o	é →	ø		ó
LOW	ε		a →	ɔ	æ		á →	ǫ

*Table 3.6:* The rounding effect of *u*-umlaut.

Also the diphthong *ei* > *ey*. — Unround vowels become round due to the influence of the round *u*. Examples:

<i>a</i> > <i>ɔ</i>	PrN <i>*magur</i> (Go. <i>magus</i> ) > OIcel. <i>mǫgr</i> ‘son’ nom./acc. sing. <i>barn</i> ‘child’ : nom./acc. plur. <i>*barnu</i> > OIcel. <i>børn</i> nom./acc. sing. <i>land</i> ‘land’ : nom./acc. plur. <i>*landu</i> > OIcel. <i>lǫnd</i>
<i>á</i> > <i>ǫ</i>	nom./acc. sing. <i>ráð</i> ‘advice’ : nom./acc. plur. <i>*ráðu</i> > fisl. <i>rǫð</i> (> <i>ráð</i> )
<i>e</i> > <i>ø</i>	PrN <i>*freður</i> > OIcel. ( <i>Hall</i> ) <i>frøðr</i>

The same effect was caused by the semivowel *w* (consonantal *u*):

<i>a</i> > <i>ɔ</i>	PrN <i>*haggwan</i> > OIcel. <i>hoggva</i> ‘hew’
<i>e</i> > <i>ø</i>	PrN <i>*sekkwan</i> > OIcel. <i>søkkva</i> ‘sink’
<i>i</i> > <i>y</i>	Go. <i>siggwan</i> ‘sing’, PrN <i>*singwan</i> : OIcel. <i>syngva</i>