

UNIT 2 CHANGES IN SOUNDS AND SPELLING

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

Change being an inevitable and intrinsic part of the life of a language, it can be studied under different headings - *sound, spelling, grammar, vocabulary, sentence and style*. In this unit we will deal with *changes in sound and spelling*. While these units will appear technical, please don't get intimidated by this. Our aim is show you the changes that have taken place in the making of modern English. You need to concentrate on the broad changes and not in the details. We have given you these details as examples.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In his famous *Dictionary of the English Language* published in 1775 Samuel Johnson noted that some of his admirers expected the dictionary to prevent the English language from changing. Though flattered by the idea, he realized that a language cannot be prevented from changing. He realized that English like all other languages is subject to constant growth and decay that characterize all forms of life. There is a no such thing as uniformity in language. How right Johnson was about the inevitability of change can be seen from some of Johnson's two-hundred-year-old definitions for words still in use:

<i>Whitewash</i>	:	<i>A wash to make the skin seem fair</i>
<i>Watching</i>	:	<i>Inability to sleep</i>
<i>Imp</i>	:	<i>A son, progeny</i>
<i>Commute</i>	:	<i>To exchange</i>
<i>Sophistication</i>	:	<i>Adulteration</i>
<i>Tremendous</i>	:	<i>Dreadful, terrible, horrible</i>

As Johnson might have said, language changes because it belongs to the people. People invent or discover new objects and processes and the need arises for new words. A desire for novelty begets flamboyant, extravagant use of language. Reluctance or inability to call a spade a 'spade' produces euphemisms in a language. Imitation of people socially or economically better placed causes changes in the linguistic habits of people.

Apart from these external (social) causes, internal linguistic factors also produce changes in language. Internal pressures, contradictions, excesses, need for uniformity and standardization require and cause changes in language. Language change proceeds through processes like *assimilation, rejection, invention, adaptation/modification, derivation, etc.*

The evolution of the word 'English' is very interesting and is in some ways symbolic of the development of the English language. The word is derived from the name of the Angles who along with the Jutes and Saxons founded settlements in England in the fifth and sixth centuries. Doubtless the Angles derived their name from the 'angle' or corner of the land that juts out into the Southern Baltic between the modern towns of Schleswig and Flensburg. In Latin and Germanic their name was 'Angli' which later became 'Engle' by a change of the stressed vowel. Before 1000 A.D. *Angelcynn* (Angle-race) was used to denote collectively the Germanic people in England, the Jutes, Saxons and Angles alike. After 1000 A.D. *England* (Land of the Angles) became popular.

The tripartite division of the inhabitants of England was reflected in the contemporary language scheme. In as much as the Jutes, Angles and Saxons probably understood one another, we should speak of four prevailing dialects rather than of three different languages - *Northumbrian* (spoken in and around Northumbria); *Kentish* (spoken by the Jutes of Kent); *West Saxon* (spoken in the south of the Thames) and *Mercian* (spoken from Thames to the Humber but exclusive of Wales). East Midland which was a descendent of old Mercion, being the language of the Courts, of the city of London and of the universities of Cambridge and Oxford soon gained prominence and by the thirteenth century had become the "received standard speech of England (R.P.)".

2.2 CHANGES IN ENGLISH SOUNDS

After this brief sketch of the history of the English language we proceed to the main topic of this unit. i.e. *changes in sound and spelling*. For understanding some of the technical terms you will need to read carefully Block 3. The overriding movement in both sound and spelling change has been a **movement towards simplicity**. There are today forty four sounds in the Queens English - twelve vowels, eight diphthongs and twenty three consonants all given in tabular form below according to the transcription of the International Phonetic Association (IPA):

Table 1: List of Vowels

1	2	3	4	5	6
[i:]	[ɪ]	[e]	[æ]	[a:]	[ɒ]
bead	bid	bed	bad	bard	body
[bi:d]	[bɪd]	[bɛd]	[bæd]	[ba:d]	[bɒdi]
7	8	9	10	11	12
[ɔ:]	[ʊ]	[u:]	[ʌ]	[ɜ:]	[ə]
board	bud	booed	bud	bird	cupboard
[bɔ:d]	[bʊd]	[bu:d]	[bʌd]	[bɜ:d]	[kʌbəd]

The nine diphthongs may be defined as gliding sounds produced by the tongue as it moves or glides from one vowel position in the direction of any other.

Table 2: List of Diphthongs

13	14	15	16
[ei] gate	[əʊ] bode	[ai] bide	[aʊ] bowed
[geɪt]	[bəʊd]	[baɪd]	[bəʊd]
17	18	19	20
[ɔɪ] boy	[ɪə] beard	[eə] bared	[ʊə] cured
[bɔɪ]	[bɪəd]	[beəd]	[kjʊəd]

Table 3 Classification of English Consonants

Place	Bilabial	Labio-dental	Dental	Alveolar	Post-alveolar	Palato-alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Manner	vl vd	vl vd	vl vd	vl vd	vl vd	vl vd	vl vd	vl vd	vl vd
Plosive				t d				k g	
Affricate						tʃ dʒ			
Nasal	m			n				ŋ	
Lateral				l					
Fricative/Spirant		f v	θ ð	s z				ʁ x	h
Fricationless continuant					r				
Semi-vowel	w						j	(w)	

2.2.1 Change in Consonant Sounds

Such is the position of English sounds as they exist today. But the present status has been reached after centuries of change and evolution. We can now proceed to the history of English sounds beginning with **consonants**, enquiring which have disappeared, which have changed, which are new and which remain the same. Old English had two consonants which no longer exist [X] and [ʁ], the voiced and voiceless velar spirants/fricatives. The first however linger in Scot dialects. Though it had started changing in Old English, it however managed to survive through the Middle English period. In the Modern English period it has either been lost or converted into some other sound. It was spelled *h* in Old English, but by the thirteenth century the new spelling became *gh*. [X] appears in Old English words like *leoht, bohte, ruh*; survives in Middle English as in Chaucer's *lighte, boughte, rough tough*, etc. But by the early Modern period it has either disappeared as in *light* and *bought* or has been changed to [ʃ] as in *rough* and *tough*. [ð] is illustrated in Old English words like *gamen* (game) and *græs* (grass) which later lost its spirant quality and became a stop in late Old English or early Middle English thereby changing to [g] and becoming identical with the regular Old English [g]. It has retained this value since.

So much for losses. Two other Old English consonants have also changed but not so drastically. The first of these is [r] which is produced by a simple flap of the tongue. This however is a reduction of a formerly trilled sound used by Chaucer and King Alfred.

The other sound that has changed is [j] which today is a palatal tongue glide but was spirant in Old English. Its spelling in Old English was *g* or *ge* or *gie*:

While two sounds have been lost, two altered, only one has been added [ʒ]. Though [dʒ] existed in Old English, [ʒ] did not become an independent phoneme until early Modern English and developed out of [zj] in such French loan words as *measure*, *usury*, *azure*.

With the exception of the five discussed above, the consonants of Old English have come down to Modern English virtually unchanged. We still have the voiced stops [b], [d], [g]; the voiceless stops [p], [t], [k]; the voiced spirants [v], [ʒ], [z]; the voiceless spirants [f], [θ], [s], [ʃ], [h]; the nasals [m], [n], [ŋ]; the lateral [l]; the glide [w]; the affricates [dʒ] and [tʃ]. Most of them were spelled in Old English as they are today with a few exceptions. For example, [ʃ] was spelled *sc* as in *fisc* (fish); *k* was rarely used, *c* was usually used for [k].

Though sounds from Old English have continued, their status was not in every case the same as it is now. Four of them that were not phonemes then are phonemes now. For example [ʒ] existed as part of the affricate combination [dʒ] and it was not until early Modern English that it gained full phonemic status. Similarly [v], [z], [ʒ] and [ŋ] were in Old English no more than variations of [f], [s], [θ], and [n], respectively.

Loss and gain occurred not only at the level of sounds but also words. For example, the simplification of initial consonant clusters happened as a result of which many a [h], [k] [w] and some [f] 's were dropped- eg *hlence*, (link), *hnutu* (nut), *hring* (ring) and *wlipsis* (lisp).

Consonants were not only lost and altered; occasionally they were also added- for example, the unetymological [r] in *bridegroom* and *cartridge* (from German *Bräutigam* and French *cartouche*, respectively); an additional *n* in *passenger* (from French *passager*) and *messenger* (from *messenger* in Caxton). Similarly [b], [d], [t] creep in whenever the phonetic environment is favourable- eg. *whilst*, *amidst*, *against*, *amongst*.

To sum up the language has lost [ʁ] [X] (velars), two sounds have changed their quality considerably [r] and [j] the language has gained [ʒ]. But otherwise most consonants have remained unaffected.

2.2.2 Changes in the Vowel System

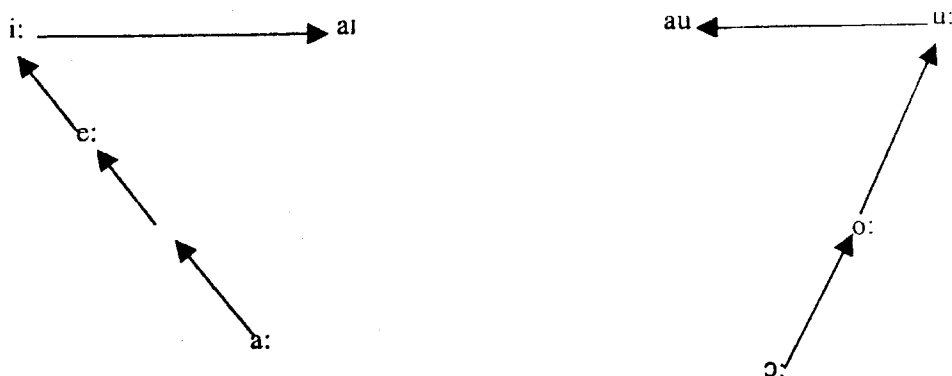
Most of the confusion prevalent in spellings today is due to incomplete adjustments following changes in the vowel system. In considering the changes in the vowel system in English during the Old and Middle English Period we notice that most vowels remained stable. It was only after the fourteenth century that English vowels underwent what Jespersen called "the great vowel shift". Most of the short vowels of Old English have passed over unchanged into Middle English. But short [æ] became [a] and *y* was unrounded to [i]. Thus Old English *craft* became *craft* in Middle English, *brycg* became *brigge*. The other short vowels *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, *u* remained - Old English *catte* > *cat*, *bedd* > *bed*, *folc* > *folk*, *full* > *ful*. Among the long vowels the most important change was that of *ā* to *ō* - *bān* to *bōn* (bone), *bāt* to *bōt* (boat). The long *y* developed in the same way as the short *y* - *bryd* > *bride* (bride), *fȳr* > *fir* (fire). The long *ǣ* represented two sounds in Old English *ē* and *ā* and remains as *e* in Middle English-- *stēpan* > *stēpen* (sleep), *clǣne* > *clēne* (clean). These two sounds have now become

identical (*sleep, clean*). The other long vowels of Old English passed unaltered into Middle English - *mēd* > *mēde* (meed); *flf* > *flf* (*five*); *bōc* > *bōk* (book).

Though the quality of Old English vowels did not change much passing into Middle English their quantity or length was altered considerably. Long vowels were shortened - *grēt* was shortened to *gretter*. Short vowels in open syllables were lengthened - *bacan* > *bāken* (bake); *etan* > *ēten* (eat).

All Middle English long vowels underwent extensive change in passing into Modern English, but the short vowels remained comparatively stable. The two most important changes in short vowels are those of [æ] and [ʊ]. In Old English *ǣ* had the quality of a brief [æ]. But by Shakespeare's day Chaucer's *ǣ* had become [æ] as in *cat, thank, have*. [ʊ] underwent a change called *unrounding*. In Chaucer it was like the [u] in *full*. But by the sixteenth century it had acquired the sound we today have in *but, cut, sun*. The [u] in turn had originated from the vowel [o:]. Thus the sound has passed through three stages, beginning with *tooth* [o:] ---> *foot* [u] ---> *but* [ʌ]. Another short vowel *o* has persisted with little or no change. Phonetically it was [ɔ] in Old English and is exemplified in words like *ox, fox, got, pot*.

From the fifteenth century onwards the vowel system of English underwent a great change, called by Jespersen *the great vowel shift*. All the long vowels came to be pronounced with a greater elevation of the tongue and closing of the mouth, so that those that could be raised were raised and those that could not without becoming consonants became *diphthongs*. The change may be visualized by in the following diagram:



Each vowel has shifted to the position of articulation of the vowel above it. The highest in each series unable to go higher has become diphthongs. Jespersen has however argued that this general upward shift could not have happened until the way was clear for it. In other words it started with the diphthongization of [i:] and [u:]. The effects of this shift can be seen in a comparison of pronunciation and spelling from Chaucer and Shakespeare to the present day:

Chaucer's Spelling	Chaucer's Pronunciation	Shakespeare's Pronunciation	Modern Pronunciation	Modern Spelling
lyf	li:f	Leif	laif	life
deed	de:d	di:d	di:d	deed
deel	dɛ:l	de:l	di:l	deal
name	na:mɛ	nɛ:m	neim	name
hoom	hu:m	ho:m	həum	home
mone	mo:n	mu:n	mu:n	moon
hous	hu:s	hous	həus	house

Thus by the sixteenth century long vowels had acquired approximately their present day pronunciation.

Another loss to note is the decay of the inflectional *-e*. With this loss many Middle English words which were two syllabled became one syllabled. We pronounced *ride*, *rides*, *have*, *stone* as monosyllables, while in Middle English they were two-syllabled. Chaucer for example rhymed *Rome* with *to me* [*ro:m - to: mæ*]. Inflectional *-e* was unquestionably pronounced in Middle English which we no longer pronounce, as in *love*, *have*, *bones*, *write*, *Rome*. It was lost in the transition from Middle English to Modern English.

Mainly due to the simplification of the sound system the tiresome diacritical marks put before, after, below and on top of letters and widely used in Old English to guide pronunciation also died out.

2.3 CHANGES IN SPELLING

The Great Vowel shift and the change in the English sound system brings us directly to our next topic of study i.e. English spelling. Spelling had become fixed in a general way before the shift and did not change when the long vowels changed. Hence, English spelling became largely unphonetic.

Before we proceed into the history of English spelling, a brief discussion about the English alphabet would not be out of place. It emerged from the pictograms or ideograms of ancient Egypt by the process of phonetisation or association of sounds with symbols. Around 1500 B.C. the ideograms were modified to form the North Semitic Syllabary. This particular syllabary developed into the consonantal alphabet of the Phoenicians. The Greeks learnt the new alphabet from the Phoenicians and in turn passed it on to the Romans which was in due course transmitted to Britain. The Runic alphabet of twenty four letters was a special adaptation of Greek and Latin, and was used by the Anglo-Saxons before their conversion to Christianity after which however they adopted the Latin alphabet in its British form.

In Anglo-Saxon England Germanic runes were used in inscriptions and Latin in manuscripts. After the Norman Conquest French fashions inherited directly from Latin gradually prevailed over these runes. Since however, Latin did not have the sounds [θ] and [ʃ] and therefore no characters to spell them, Old English retained in the newly adopted Latin alphabet the runic þ and later [ç] was developed for the same use. But here comes one of the first failures of English orthography, for their being two sounds and two symbols it would have been sensible to attach one value to each symbol. Yet this was never clearly done. Thus þ and ç were used interchangeably for [θ] and [ʃ]. The converse divergence (by which one symbol represented several sounds) was also found. The letter c had two distinct pronunciations, as in Modern English *came* and *ch* as in *choose*. In late Old English *k* was sometimes used for *c*. The French influence created further confusion in English spellings. New letters *j* and *q* were given wide use; new phonetic values were attached to old symbols or old symbols were used in new combinations, for example *c* was written for *s*, *o* for *u*, *ou* for *u*. Also from French came *v* (about 1200) and *z* (about 1300) to spell sounds which existed in Old English but for which there had been no, separate characters.

Nevertheless, there was a greater correlation between sound and letter in Old English than there is in Modern English today. For example there were no silent consonants in Old English, and hence all four consonants were pronounced in *cniht* (boy) instead

of two in Modern English *knight*. Again Old English double consonants (except perhaps when they occurred at the end of a word) were pronounced long. Double consonants are pronounced long in Modern English only in a few compound words like *book-case*, or consecutive words without pause between them eg. *ill-luck*.

The change in spelling convention was one of the most noticeable features of the transition from Old to Middle English and was mainly due to the influence of French. For example [ff] was voiced to [v] when it occurred between voiced sounds in Old English, but the spelling *f* continued to represent medial [v] as well as initial and final [ff] until the Middle English period when the voiced sound [v] began to be spelt *u* or *v*. The tendency then was to use *v* initially and *u* medially whether the sound was a vowel or a consonant.

During the Middle English period some Old English letters passed out of use. But *e* and *eo* remained even though their sounds had become monophthongs. Old English *e* became [ɛ:] in Middle English and was used to represent [ɛ:] of any origin example- *eat* (Old English *ētan*) and *deal* (*dæl*), *leap* (hlēapan). The *eo* is less frequently found in French loan words like *people*.

Another Old English letter which remained in use long after its pronunciation had changed was *y*. In Middle English it became unrounded to [i]. Hence in Middle English *y* is often used as a spelling to represent [i] whether long or short, as in *myhte* (might), *wys* (wise). Later an attempt was made to restrict *y* to express long [i:] and keep *i* for the short vowel.

In the spelling of consonants Middle English showed great advance in that various sounds represented in Old English by a single letter were more accurately distinguished-- for example the various sounds represented by Old English *ȝ* (*g*). A modified [j] was introduced as in *ȝer* (*year* in Modern and later Middle English and *gear* in Old English). In latter Middle English, as in Modern English this sound is spelt *y*. Old English *cȝ* had by Middle English times become [dʒ] and was written *gg* in early Middle English and later *dg* as in *brugge* (bridge). From about the middle of the twelfth century the various sound represented by Old English *c* began to be distinguished. *Ch* was used to represent [tʃ] which still remains today in *choose*. The spelling *k* was used before front vowels. We thus find *cyning*, *kyning* and *king* (Modern English). In Middle English the use of *k* to represent [k] before front vowels became more widespread and the distinction between *k* and *c* continues even today as in *knee*, *king*, *keen*. Before the consonant *l* and *r* and the back vowels, *c* was used to represent *k* as in *climb*, *creep*, *come*. Old English [kw] spelt *cw* in Old English became *qu* in Middle English under French influence *queen* (Old English *cwen*) and Old English *sc* became *sh*.

There have been few striking innovations in spelling since Middle English. While mostly the tendency has been towards a restriction of choice, uniformity and standardization, some alternative spellings of words have been accepted: *flour* - *flower*, *metal-mettle*. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had a stabilizing influence on English spelling--the omission of the final *-e* in many words, the use of *j* and *v* as consonants and *i* and *u* as vowels, the use of *e* to represent the Middle English [ɛ:] and *o* for Middle English [ɔ:]. During the sixteenth century it became customary to use *ee* and *oo* only for sounds developed from Middle English [e:] and [o:] and this is the practice even today, example *keen*, *see*; *cool*, *doom*. The spelling *ie* was also used for Middle English [e:] partly as a result of French influence - example *field*, *priest*. Another way of indicating vowel length was by the addition of a final *-e*. When this final *-e* was lost in pronunciation it became a mere spelling device and was added to such words as *here* where it had no etymological justification. There remained much uncertainty in the addition or omission of the

final *-e* and it often depended upon circumstance or the whim of the printer. The early seventeenth century saw the establishment of *i* initially and medially and *y* finally. Thus we have *beautiful* beside *beauty*, *cried* beside *cry*. There are however some exceptions--in *dying* to avoid a double *i*, and *is* also used as the final letter of the first element of a compound word- *shyness*, *ladyship*. The use of double consonants was simplified in pronunciation, although they remained in spelling till the present day due to the tendency of spelling to lag behind pronunciation as in *sell*, *inn*, *quell*, *kiss*. The doubling of consonants is a common way to indicate that the preceding vowel is short and that the consonant is followed by a vowel-*slipped*, *stirred*, *robbing*.

Spelling remained till late Middle English largely a field where the individual might display whatever eccentricity s/he pleased. Spelling was neither phonetic nor fixed, and the situation was made worse by the handling of the Norman scribes who tried to use a language they knew only imperfectly and carried over habits from French into the new language.

The problem of bringing about greater uniformity in English spellings was widely recognised in the sixteenth century. From 1200 onwards repeated attempts had been made to rectify the situation on phonetic lines – Orm in 1200, Thomas Smith in 1568, John Hart in 1569, William Bullokar in 1580, Richard Mulcaster's *Elementarie* in 1582. Attempts to reform English spellings on grounds of etymology were also made, according to which words were made to conform to Latin or Greek analogies. But the zeal for etymology soon misfired. While there was some justification in respelling *dette*, *det* to *debt* (from Latin *debitum*) or *doubte*, *dout* to *doubt* (from *dubitum*) even this does not serve to justify the *s* of *island* (from Old English *igland* and not Latin *insula*) or the *g* in *foreign* and *sovereign*. Etymology took English spelling still farther away from pronunciation.

In the following centuries names like Dr. Johnson, Noah Webster, G.B. Shaw, Dean Howells, Andrew Carnegie and even Theodore Roosevelt were associated with attempts to reform English spellings. Alongside them institutions like the American Philological Association and the English Philological Society set up their respective Spelling Reform Associations. In 1930 a Swedish philologist R.E. Zachrisson proposed a respelled English called *Anglie* which received influential support and was widely endorsed. Lincoln's Gettysburg speech in *Anglie* would run thus:

"Forskor and seven yeezr agoe our faadherz braut forth on this kontinent a nue naeshon, konseevd in liberti, and dedikated to the propozishon that aul men ar kreueid equal..."

Prof. Zachrisson's death and World War II put an end to its promotion.

It is the striking incompatibility between the native and Latin elements of English which presents the greatest obstacle to those reformers who want to adopt the principle of one symbol for one sound. If the native element is retained much of the Latin and French elements become unrecognisable. If we take *seed* as the norm, then *cede* and *recede* must become *seed* and *reseed*. If we take *mesh* as the norm then both *cession* and *session* must become *seshon*. If on the contrary *fuse* and *muse* are kept, then *news* will be *nuse* and *hues* will be *hews*. The differences in American and British spellings also need to be reconciled.

In the above sections we have been examining the effects of sound on spelling. But in order to get a more comprehensive picture the influence of spelling upon sounds needs to be studied. Since the Education Act of 1870 in England the influences of spelling upon sound has been constant and considerable. How many people today

discriminate between *salve* (as in *sooth*), *halve* and *valve*? Most people today rhyme *clerk* with *dark*, *Rome* with *home* but not with *doom* or *dome*. Many people now pronounce the *t* in *often* though not in *soften*. Simeon Potter in *Our Language* asserts that of all the influences affecting English today, that of spelling upon sound is probably the strongest.

To sum up, the contact between spelling and pronunciation today has largely been lost and it is this unphonetic spelling which has been canonized and preserved. But as Henry Bradley said it is far more important to the ordinary person that a written word should quickly and surely suggest its meaning than that it should accurately express its sound.

2.4 LET US SUM UP

We have shown the changes that have taken place in English in relation to sounds and spelling. There are technical terms used in the unit. We do not want you to be frightened by them or learn them by heart. We merely wish you to be acquainted with these terms. They were necessary in showing you the development of the language.

2.5 KEY WORDS

- diphthong:** a single vowel which changes its quality during its pronunciation, such as /ei/ of day and [dɔɪ] of die.
- assimilation:** any phonetic or phonological process in which a particular sound becomes more similar to some other nearby sound.
- derivation:** the process of obtaining words from other words by adding affixes, as when prehistory and historical are derived from history.
- vowel:** in phonetics, a speech sound whose production involves no significant obstruction of the airstream, such as [I], [ú] or [ə].
- the great vowel shift:** a dramatic series of changes in the pronunciation of the long vowel of English which took place mainly during the 15th and 16th centuries.
- diacritical:** a mark written above, below, next to, or on top of a letter or character to indicate something about its pronunciation.
- pictogram:** A written symbol which is intended to be a recognizable picture of what it means. Pictograms were used in some very early writing systems, in which, for example, the word for 'moon' was represented by a drawing of the moon. Such pictograms rapidly gave way to more abstract and convenient modes of representation. Pictograms are not part of any established writing system today, though it is still just about possible to pick out the pictographic ancestry of some Chinese characters.

runic alphabet: a distinctive alphabet used by Germanic peoples in the northwestern region (including Britain) from about the third century A.D. The alphabet was based on the Roman alphabet, but its letter or runes are mostly different in shape.

etymology: the origin and history of a particular word

2.6 READING LIST

Baugh, A.C. and Cable, T. 1951 **The history of the English Language**. London: Routledge.

Leith, D. 1983. **A social history of English**. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

2.7 QUESTIONS

- 1) Why is the word 'English' in some way symbolic of the development of the English language.
- 2) Mention 2 changes in consonants sounds and 2 in vowel sounds in the evolution of Old English to Modern English.
- 3) What are the factors which influenced English spelling through the ages? Give two examples.