
Vowel and Consonant Systems in English and German Languages

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Article information:

Manuscript received: 02 Oct 2025; **Accepted:** 02 Nov 2025; **Published:** 30 Dec 2025

Abstract: Historically, English and German are considered to have descended from the same language family, namely the West Germanic branch. From this family, not only English and German, but also languages such as Dutch, Afrikaans, Flemish, and others have developed. These languages are regarded as closely related, as they share similarities in their syntactic, morphological, and even phonological features.

This article analyzes the vocalic and consonantal systems of the English and German languages, along with their structure and pronunciation, are studied and analyzed.

Keys words: Pronunciation, vowel, consonant, letter, German language, contrast.

Introduction:

English and German originate from Proto-Germanic and trace back to a common West Germanic root. After the Romans left Britain (around 410 AD), the migration of Germanic tribes to Britain led to the divergence of Insular (English) and Continental (German) dialects.

Old English (c. 450–1150). Old English developed on the basis of the Germanic dialects brought by these migrating tribes. It was predominantly Germanic in nature, but due to contact with the Romans, it also incorporated a number of Latin loanwords.

Old German (Old High German):

West Germanic dialects developed on the European continent and gradually changed, especially under the influence of the High German Consonant Shift, which mainly affected the southern regions. During this period, the earliest written forms of German appeared, clearly distinguishing it from Old English.

Key Differences and Similarities:

English and German are not in a parent–child relationship; rather, they are related (“sister”) languages, both belonging to the West Germanic branch. English contains a large number of Romance (French/Latin) loanwords, whereas German has preserved more of its core Germanic vocabulary. Nevertheless, in the fields of science and scholarship, both languages have made extensive use of borrowings, particularly from Latin and Greek.

The German graphemic system consist of 26 basic letters, three umlauts (Ä, Ö, Ü), and the special ß (sharp S). The basic letters are categorized into vowels (A, E, I, O, U) and consonants (B, C, D, F ...).

Vowels										Diphthongs				
Short										er	ei/ai/ay	au	eu, äu	
	a	e	i	o	u	ä	ö	ü						
	[a]	[ɛ]	[ɪ]	[ɔ]	[ʊ]	[ɛ]	[œ]	[ʏ]	[ɐ]	[ai]	[au]	[ɔi]		
Long														
	a/aa/ah	e/ee/eh	i/ih/ie	o/oo/oh	u/uh	ä/äh	ö/öh	ü/üh						
	[a:]	[e:]	[i:]	[o:]	[u:]	[ɛ:]	[ø:]	[y:]						
Consonants														
	b	c	ch	ck	d	dt	dsch	f	g	h	j			
	[p/b]	[k/ts]	[ç/ʃ/k]	[k]	[t/d]	[t]	[dʒ]	[f]	[k/g]	[:/h]	[j/ʒ]			
	k	l	m	n	ng	p	pf	ph	qu	r				
	[k]	[l]	[m]	[n]	[ŋ]	[p]	[pf]	[f]	[kv]	[k/R/ʁ/Ø]				
	s	sch	ß (ss)	t	ts	tsch	v	w	y	z				
	[z/s/ʃ]	[ʃ]	[s]	[t]	[ts]	[tʃ]	[f/v]	[v]	[i/j/y]	[ts]				

In German, all nouns, names, and country names are written with capital letters, as are all words at the beginning of a sentence or after a period. Verbs, pronouns, and adjectives are usually written with lowercase letters.

In both English and German, every sound belongs to one of two main classes: vowels and consonants. Vowel sounds are characterized by the absence of obstruction to the airflow, variable muscular tension, and a relatively weak air stream.

Consonant sounds, on the other hand, are distinguished by the presence of articulatory obstruction in the airflow, concentration of muscular tension at the point of obstruction, and a stronger air stream. Additionally, the specific quality of a consonant depends on the activity of the vocal cords, the position of the soft palate, and the way the tongue or lips block the airflow to produce different types of noise.

English and German, both Germanic languages, have complex vowel/consonant systems with key differences: English has more varied vowels and diphthongs, while German features unique sounds like the uvular /ʁ/ and crucial final-obstruent devoicing (e.g., Rad sounds like "Raat"), plus umlauted vowels (ä, ö, ü). German vowels often contrast short/long (e.g., Mädchen vs. Käse), and its consonants have distinct features like the "ich-laut" vs. "ach-laut" (like in Bach), absent in English.

➤ Vowel Systems

English: Rich in both monophthongs (pure vowels) and diphthongs (gliding vowels), with tense/lax distinctions (e.g., beat /i:/ vs. bit /ɪ/).

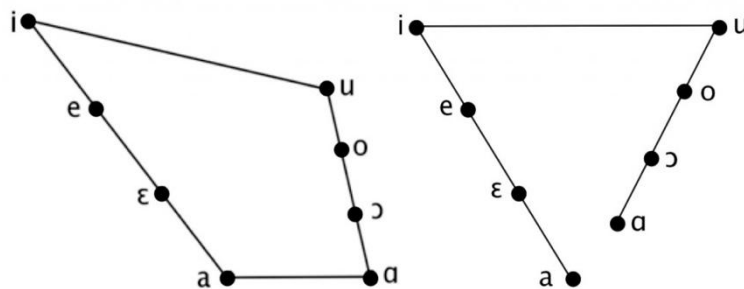
German: Also has many vowels, often distinguished by length (short vs. long), [a,e,i, o, u,] [a:, e:, i:, u:, o:,] plus umlauted vowels (Ä, Ö, Ü) and diphthongs. The basic vowels (a, e, i, o, u) have distinct long (e.g., Bahn, Liebe) and short forms, creating more vowel sounds than English's basic set. With regard to diphthongs, a wide range of them can also be identified, being again both short and long : ai/ai, ei/ei, au, oi, ou eu, .

➤ Diphthongs and long Monophthongs

In German, double vowel sounds are frequently used. Two consecutive vowels are combined, such as ai, ie, ai, eu, and au. They are perceived and pronounced as a single sound. The double sounds "eu" and "au" are pronounced the same. Correct orthography is determined by examining the morphological root of the word. For example, the plural of "Haus" ("house") is "Hauser" ("houses"), and never "Heuser", even though they sound the same.

The double sounds "ai" and "ai" are also pronounced the same ("ay"). However, there are no spelling rules for this, so some words with ai (pronounced like ai).

Phoneticians in German describe vowel sounds using reference qualities or "cardinal" vowels, which map out the auditory vowel space. Daniel Jones systematized eight primary cardinal vowels. Traditionally, these vowels are represented in a quadrilateral diagram according to the approximate position of the tongue in the oral cavity, with the front of the mouth on the left. Jones's quadrilateral is also shown alongside a triangular arrangement that corresponds more closely to acoustic reality. The vowels are arranged starting with the first cardinal vowel i and continuing anticlockwise to the eighth vowel u.



➤ Consonant Systems

Similarities: Share many basic consonants (plosives, nasals, etc.).

Key German Consonants: Uvular /ʀ/: A back-of-throat 'r' sound, different from English's alveolar /ɹ/ (e.g., rot). Ich-Laut & Ach-Laut: Fricatives made with the tongue near the palate (ich) or the back of the mouth (ach), not found in English.

The letter “h” and the sounds “ch” and “sch”

In addition to double vowels, German has the letter combinations “sch” and “ch”, as well as a silent “h”, which is written but not pronounced.

Pronunciation of h:

h can be pronounced in two ways:

1. At the beginning of a word as a strong [h]:

- ✓ Hund (= dog)
- ✓ Haare (= hair)
- ✓ Haus (= house)

2. As a silent h, usually before consonants l, m, n, r, or before/after vowels. In this case, the preceding vowel is lengthened:

- ✓ fehlen (= to lack)
- ✓ nehmen (= to take)
- ✓ Zahn (= tooth)
- ✓ Lehrer (= teacher)
- ✓ sehen (= to see)
- ✓ gehen (= to go)
- ✓ Rehe (= deer)

Note: Words beginning with q, sch, sp, or t never have a silent h:

- ✓ Qual (= torment)
- ✓ Schal (= scarf)
- ✓ spät (= late)
- ✓ Tal (= valley)

Pronunciation of ch and sch

Correct pronunciation of -ch and -sch is important, as shown by:

- ✓ Kirche (= church)

✓ Kirsche (= cherry)

These words constitute a minimal pair, where a single phonemic shift alters the meaning, and can easily be confused if -ch or -sch are not pronounced correctly.

ch is pronounced in three ways:

1. After vowels a, o, u, au as a guttural [x]:

- ✓ Ach (= ah)
- ✓ Buch (= book)
- ✓ Loch (= hole)
- ✓ Fach (= subject/department)
- ✓ Dach (= roof)
- ✓ doch (= however, still)

2. After all other vowels, or after l, n, r, and in the ending -chen as a soft [ç]:

- ✓ ich (= I)
- ✓ Milch (= milk)
- ✓ Kirche (= church)
- ✓ manchmal (= sometimes)
- ✓ Mädchen (= girl)

3. Before a, o, u, l, r, s as [k]:

- ✓ Chaos (= chaos)
- ✓ Chor (= choir)
- ✓ sechs (= six)
- ✓ wachsen (= to grow)
- ✓ Fuchs (= fox)

sch is always pronounced as [ʃ]:

- ✓ Fisch (= fish)
- ✓ Kirsche (= cherry)
- ✓ Mensch (= person)
- ✓ falsch (= wrong)

Letter combinations St and Sp are realized as [ʃt] and [ʃp] in word-initial positions.

- ✓ Strafe (= fine)
- ✓ Stimme (= voice)
- ✓ steil (= steep)
- ✓ spät (= late)
- ✓ Spaß (= fun)
- ✓ Sport (= sport)

Note: In bisschen (= a little), the pronunciation is “ch”, not “sch”.

Key English Consonants: Interdental Fricatives: 'th' sounds (voiced /ð/ in this, unvoiced /θ/ in thin).

Phonological Processes: Final-Obstruent Devoicing (German): Voiced consonants become unvoiced at the end of words (e.g., Rad /ra:t/ sounds like Rat), a rule absent in English.

Key Takeaways for Learners: English learners struggle with German's umlauts, uvular 'r', and devoicing.

German learners often find English's tense/lax vowels, diphthongs, and 'th' sounds challenging.

Conclusion: German has a more consistent spelling-to-sound relationship than English, which has many silent letters and complex vowel rules.

Both languages developed from Proto-Germanic, but their vowel systems diverged significantly over time, with German retaining more phonetic distinctions in its vowels.

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