

MHG practice: Alternations key

These are very brief answers, to give you an idea of the direction you should or could have gone in. (A lot more can be said about each point.)

1. bringen ~ brâhte.

The nasal was lost and the vowel lengthening very early — Nasalschwund mit Ersatzdehnung. This happens in the preterit but not the present because of the presence of a *t* suffix. These are old and formed without the ‘connecting vowel’ we often have.

- *bringan would have had a preterit of *brang-to.
- When *s or *t followed any stop, the first stop became voiceless and then by Grimm’s Law became fricatives, so *branhto.
- In Early Germanic, nasals are lost before *x, lengthening the vowel, so (with o > a) *brâhta.

2. si darf_, ich sol_ vs. si nimet, ich nime

The *nemen* verb forms are the usual for the present, while the modals go back to preterit present forms, remnants of the old ‘stative verbs’ of IE. Those inflected in the present in ways that look like the preterit, in terms of suffixes and also often in stem vocalism. We can see this parallel even today, (*ich/er-sie-es soll_ and sang_, but ich singe*).

3. helfen ~ ich hilfe, nemen ~ nime

These are reflections of the effects of height harmony, with the high vowels of the OHG personal endings (raising by *nimu* in the first singular, etc.) having weakened by MHG, but leaving these indirect traces.

4. By MHG, most noun classes show some kind of singular ~ plural distinction, but a few have really limited inflectional forms, like masculines that simply contrast the nom.sg. with all other forms, like *fürste, mensche, garte* (Garten).

These are the old *n*-stems, which actually had a few pretty distinct forms in OHG (DAT.SG. hanen, ACC.SG. hanon, GEN.PL. hanôno, DAT.PL. hanôm, for ex.). The Laws of Finals have obliterated those differences, leaving *-en* throughout except NOM.SG.

As we’ll discuss soon (but haven’t yet, so you aren’t expected to know it!), in cases like *Garten*, even that form has taken on an *-n* by now.

5. Class III strong verbs usually have *e* in the infinitive (*helfen, sterben, swellen, smelzen*), but some have *i* (*dringen, gewinnen, stinken, vinden*).

Easy: e raises to i when it's followed by a nasal and another consonant. This splits class III into two types, often called IIIa (the nasals) and IIIb (the others).

6. MHG consonants have almost always changed dramatically since Germanic, let alone Indo-European or other IE languages, but yet we have a couple of sets of exceptions, like these:

- a. IE *spreg- > MHG *sprechen*, IE *stel- > MHG *stellen*

*s or other fricatives block shift of a following stop by both Grimm's Law and the Second Sound Shift, so that the same cluster survives to the present, where it remains unaspirated, probably reflecting the reason that these did not ever shift.

- b. Low German/Dutch *wâpen* ~ MHG *wâpen*

This of course has got to be a loanword. (We have the shifted form *Waffe* today, in the more general meaning, while the loan has a very narrow meaning.)

- c. Old French *prophécie* ~ MHG *prophezîe*

Loanword again and we know that it pretty recent – post-Second Sound Shift.

7. Central German *ûmbe* (and Modern Low German *öm*) vs. Upper German *umbe*

In southern dialects, often down to the present day, certain sound combinations blocked non-primary umlaut. This is only tendential, but NC often does this, and geminate velars (-kk-, -gg-, -hh-). (Don't forget that these are very different from the clusters that blocked primary umlaut!)

8. These two words not only look a lot alike, they even come from the same Germanic root: *schône* 'already' ~ *schæne* 'beautiful'.

The first one goes back to OHG *skôno* and the second to *skôni*. The second one gets umlaut, but both weaken and eventually lose their final vowels. (The *-o* is an old marker of adverbs.)

9. Sometimes, consonants change in different forms of the strong verbs:

- a. *dîhen*, *dech*, *gedigen* 'gedeihen'

- b. *lîden*, *leit*, *geliten*

Some Verner alternations remain down to the present (on a test, you'd want to say briefly what Verner alternations are), like *war* vs. *gewesen*. But the number has been dwindling since early Germanic.

10. mêt(e) ~ meist(e)

Old *ai (OHG ei) monophthongized before some consonants, including *r*.

11. The words for both ‘ear’ and ‘eye’ go back to Germanic words with *au*, but in MHG we find *ôre* and *ouge*.

Same story, different diphthong (*au, OHG ou), and somewhat different conditioning.

12. It seems like lots of MHG nouns ending in *-e* are feminine: *lêre*, *êre*, *sache*, *krône*, *vrâge*, *helle*, *klage*.

Well, of course they do: Everybody knows that these go back to old *ô* stems. Having that long vowel there meant that the laws of finals only eroded one mora, so that they kept a vowel, which eventually became a schwa.