

RECONSIDERING THE HISTORY  
OF THE ENGLISH VERBAL SYSTEM<sup>1</sup>

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Synchronic variation and diachronic change are two manifestations of the same, underlying force that makes language such a successful and essential part of human existence. Any attempt at controlling, delaying, or preventing its operation is doomed to failure, as generations after generations of language purists and reformers have learnt at their own expense. Historical linguistics, the part of intellectual endeavour devoted to analysing and understanding the forces of language change, is not exempt from its influence, either. With the development of linguistic knowledge its major principles should be and are questioned, as new theories, textual advances, and interdisciplinary studies open new vistas on old problems. Assuming that any current paradigm, however intricate and attractive, accurately represents the linguistic reality it purports to model, is an act of enormous hubris and should raise immediate suspicions.

One such area is historical morphology of Old English. The organisation of inflectional paradigms as presented in scholarly publications of today virtually has not changed for the last two hundred years. Since its formulation in the nineteenth century, it has been accepted as accurately reflecting the internal organisation of Old English morphology. Only recently, have some scholars begun to question the premises on which much of the perception of the Old English inflectional system is based (cf. Kastovsky 1995; Lass 1997; Krygier 1998). In this paper one particular aspect of this problem, namely that of the categorisation of Old English strong verbs, will be discussed.

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If one looks at the standard textbooks of Old English, the strong verb system as presented there looks so neat and logical that it hardly seems in need of any refinement. In its most classical rendition, taken from Campbell's *Old English Grammar* (1959), the standard division into seven ablaut classes is presented as follows:

(1) Old English strong verb classes

Class 1:	<i>rīdan : rād : ridon : riden</i> 'ride'
Class 2:	<i>bēodan : bēad : budon : boden</i> 'command'
Class 3a:	<i>singan : sang : sungon : sungen</i> 'sing'
Class 3b:	<i>helpan : healp : hulpon : holpen</i> 'help'
Class 4:	<i>teran : tær : tæron : toren</i> 'tear'
Class 5:	<i>metan : mæt : mæton : meten</i> 'mete'
Class 6:	<i>faran : fōr : fōron : faren</i> 'fare'
Class 7a:	<i>hātan : hēt : hēton : hāten</i> 'command'
Class 7b:	<i>bēatan : bēot : bēoton : bēaten</i> 'beat'
Class 7c:	<i>feallan : fēoll : fēollon : feallen</i> 'fall'
Class 7d:	<i>blandan : blēnd : blēndon : blanden</i> 'mix'
Class 7e:	<i>lāetan : lēt : lēton : lāeten</i> 'let'
Class 7f:	<i>grōwan : grēow : grēowon : grōwen</i> 'grow'

(Campbell 1959: 307-320)

Every class is characterised by a specific ablaut or vowel gradation pattern, distinguishing separate forms for the present, past singular and plural, and the past participle. Class 7 is problematic, as in the Proto-Germanic period its members used reduplication as well as ablaut to construct past tense forms, and there are a number of subcategories to take into consideration here.

The problem with this categorisation is that it is not based on Old English, but on an earlier stage in the history of the language, namely Proto-Germanic. This is due to a number of reasons such as a general diachronic bias in historical linguistic studies or the need for a common framework for all older Germanic languages to facilitate comparative studies. However, it remains to be seen whether this model is at all applicable to Old English.

For in their search for God-given truths historical linguists tend to lose from their sight one basic premise, on which their research should be based – that the object of their study was once a living language, spoken in a real linguistic community. Therefore, rather than reflecting their assumptions about abstract properties of the language structure, any well-formed theory should attempt to re-create the synchronic competence of the native speaker. When applied to the issue of Old English strong verbs, this principle would require that any classification proposed be synchronically valid, i.e., correctly reconstruct the strong verb system from the point of view of an Anglo-Saxon speaker of the language.

The assumption that Old English strong verbs preserved the categorisation pattern inherited from Proto-Germanic is counterintuitive to say the least. After all languages do change, and no sane historical linguist would suggest calling *name* or *tongue* a weak noun in Modern English just because they belonged to this category in an earlier stage of the development of the language. Moreover, this assumption is directly contradicted by the data. For if one reads the same discussion of the Old English strong verbal inflection in Campbell's *Old English Grammar* a little bit more carefully, one will see that the elegant picture from (1) has to be replaced by a far more messy one; below only the first three classes are shown due precisely to the enormous degree of variation:

(2) Old English strong verb classes 1-3, with subclasses

Class 1:	<i>rīdan : rād : ridon : riden</i> 'ride' <i>reopan : rāp : ripon : ripen</i> 'reap' <i>wrēon : wrāh : wrigon : wrigen</i> 'cover'
Class 2:	<i>bēodan : bēad : budon : boden</i> 'command' <i>brūcan : brēac : brucon : brocen</i> 'use' <i>flēon : flēah : flugon : flogen</i> 'flee'
Class 3a:	<i>singan : sang : sungon : sungen</i> 'sing' <i>birnan : barn : burnon : burnen</i> 'burn'
Class 3b:	<i>helpan : healp : hulpon : holpen</i> 'help' <i>weorpan : wearp : wurpon : worpen</i> 'throw' <i>murnan : mearn : murnon : mornen</i> 'mourn'
Class 3c:	6 isolated verbs with separate ablaut series: <i>feohtan</i> 'fight', <i>bregdan</i> 'brandish', <i>stregdan</i> 'strew', <i>berstan</i> 'burst', <i>þerscan</i> 'thresh', <i>frignan</i> 'ask'

Under closer scrutiny it is patently obvious that there is no uniformity in any of the three classes and that the Proto-Germanic categorisation of Old English strong verbs simply does not work. Among other things, it is not possible in the majority of cases to predict which class a given strong verb will belong to.

However, it seems that historical linguists in general feel no need for alternative classification, which is quite surprising in the face of the obvious inadequacies of the traditional model. The only attempt so far was made by Samuel R. Levin in 1964.

After stating the obvious truth that "the criteria for classification, which were perfectly appropriate for Pre-Germanic, are no longer functional in Old English" he went on to propose his own scheme, which was based solely on grades two and three, i.e., on the vowels of the preterite. The first three classes in his classification are provided below for comparison:

## (3) Old English strong verb classes 1-3 (after Levin 1964)

Class 1:	<i>bīdan</i> : <i>bād</i> : <i>bidon</i> : <i>biden</i> 'bide'
(ā : i)	<i>wrēon</i> : <i>wrāh</i> : <i>wrigon</i> : <i>wrigen</i> 'cover'
Class 2:	<i>bēodan</i> : <i>bēad</i> : <i>budon</i> : <i>boden</i> 'command'
(ēa : u)	<i>brūcan</i> : <i>brēac</i> : <i>brucon</i> : <i>brocen</i> 'use'
Class 3:	<i>bindan</i> : <i>band</i> : <i>bundon</i> : <i>bunden</i> 'bind'
(a : u)	<i>helpan</i> : <i>healp</i> : <i>hulpon</i> : <i>holpen</i> 'help'
	<i>weorpan</i> : <i>wearp</i> : <i>wurpon</i> : <i>worpen</i> 'throw'
	<i>spurnan</i> : <i>spearn</i> : <i>spurnon</i> : <i>spornen</i> 'spurn'
	<i>stregdan</i> : <i>strægd</i> : <i>strugdon</i> : <i>strogden</i> 'strew'

The main advantage of Levin's classification lies in splitting up Class 7, which is traditionally maintained as a distinct category for purely diachronic reasons. On the other hand, it is very difficult to imagine how an average Anglo-Saxon would correctly predict all four grades of each individual strong verb having only the two past vowels to work with. Taking the simplest example available, there are no cues in the *brēac* : *brucon* pattern that would indicate its infinitive to be any different from that of *bēad* : *budon*.

Levin's categorisation scheme, while commendable for its rejection of the traditional, Proto-Germanic bias, suffers from basically the same shortcoming as its predecessor. Namely, it explicitly assumes that ablaut series, full or partial, can serve as categorial markers for Old English verbs.

At this stage the following question must be asked: what did Anglo-Saxons use as linguistic cues when assigning a strong verb to a specific class? The two theories available so far would claim that it was either a complete ablaut series or, in a more truncated form, the vowel pairs of the two preterite grades.

There are strong reasons for believing that this was not the case. Or, more precisely, that Levin's theory is wrong, fair and simple, while the traditional approach is incorrectly interpreted. This particular order will be accepted in the following discussion.

If one were to assume that Anglo-Saxons classified strong verbs on the basis of the preterite vowels, this would be tantamount to claiming that in the verbal flexion the preterite is more basic than the present. The erroneity of this claim, barring in a few exceptional cases, is obvious. The primacy of the present and the derived nature of the past is one of the universal tendencies of morphological organisation of Indo-European languages. In Old and Middle English it manifests itself in two processes – the shift to the strong paradigm in the case of some weak verbs, and changes in class affiliation for some strong verbs.

The best study of the process of acquiring strong preterites by originally weak verbs is Welna (1997). It contains a useful discussion of weak and foreign verbs which throughout the history of English developed strong forms. Below is the summary of Welna's findings; small caps denote verbs of foreign origin:

## (4) Original weak verbs with analogical strong forms (Welna 1997)

<i>believe</i> , <i>bereave</i> , <i>sneak</i> , <i>wreath</i> ; <i>REEVE</i>
<i>bring</i> , <i>hang</i> , <i>ring</i> , <i>string</i> , <i>think</i> ; <i>DING</i> , <i>FLING</i> , <i>SLING</i>
<i>chide</i> , <i>dive</i> , <i>hide</i> , <i>light</i> ; <i>RIVE</i> , <i>SHRIVE</i> , <i>STRIVE</i> , <i>THRIVE</i>
<i>knit</i> , <i>slit</i> , <i>spit</i> , <i>stick</i> ; <i>DIG</i> , <i>HIT</i> , <i>RID</i> , <i>SKIN</i> , <i>SPLIT</i>
<i>put</i> , <i>set</i>
<i>quake</i> , <i>stave</i> ; <i>ENGRAVE</i> , <i>PAVE</i> , <i>TAKE</i>
<i>saw</i> , <i>sew</i> , <i>show</i> , <i>snow</i> , <i>strew</i>
<i>wear</i>
<i>prove</i>

It is quite clear that there is nothing haphazard about the selection of verbs that could undergo this restructuring. With the exception of few etymologically unclear formations, all these verbs share one important feature – their present forms are similar to those characteristic of a (sub-)class of original strong verbs. This alone should confirm the claim that in Old English categorisation of verbs into strong and weak was based on the phonetic shape of the present and not on the vowels of the preterite.

The other piece of evidence to be adduced in favour of the primacy of the present in the Old English verbal paradigm concerns class shift in Old English.

## (5) Old English strong verbs with shifted class assignment

Original Class 1 > Class 2: <i>tēon</i> , <i>peon</i> , <i>wrēon</i>
Original Class 2 > Class 7f: <i>cnēodan</i> , <i>snēowan</i>
Original Class 3c > Class 1: <i>frignan</i>
Original Class 5 > Class 4: <i>brecan</i> , <i>cnedan</i> , <i>drepan</i> , <i>hlecan</i>
Original Class 6 > Class 7d: <i>waxan</i>
Original Class 7d > Class 3a: <i>fōn</i> , <i>hōn</i>

(Campbell 1959: 307-320)

Once again, the crucial factor determining both the possible inputs and the targets for this process is the phonetic shape of the present form. Of particular interest here is the third of the six instances. *Frignan* was originally a Class 3c verb, however, in late West Saxon a phonetic process led to the loss of the postvocalic [j] and the lengthening of the preceding vowel, yielding *frīnan*. Only after this form became available did analogical Class 1 strong preterites, on the pattern of, e.g., *rīdan* occur; the same can also be observed in the case of such originally weak verbs as, e.g., *rīnan*, earlier *rignan*.

The traditional account, with its emphasis on ablaut vowels, is equally misguided. As originally, i.e., in Proto-Germanic, vowels had nothing to do with the categorisation, which was done on the basis of the stem consonants. Thus, e.g., Classes 1-3 would have the stem structures as given under (6):

## (6) Proto-Germanic strong verb classes 1-3 stem structure

Class 1 (PGmc): -iO

Class 2 (PGmc): -uO

Class 3 (PGmc): -SO

where O stands for an obstruent and S for a sonorant, on which structure the identical four-grade vowel pattern e : o : - : - would be superimposed, yielding such strong verb forms as those under (10):

(7) Proto-Germanic strong verb classes 1-3<sup>2</sup>Class 1 (PGmc) \*reið- : raið- : rið- : rið- (OE *rīdan*)Class 2 (PGmc) \*beuð- : bauð- : buð- : buð- (OE *bēodan*)Class 3 (PGmc) \*seng- : sang- : sung- : sung- (OE *singan*)\*help- : halp- : hulp- : hulp- (OE *helpan*)

There one could talk of morphological transparency of the present stem which unequivocally identified a verb as strong and belonging to a specific class. However, on the way from Proto-Germanic to Old English various phonetic changes obscured the stem structure to such a degree, that predicting class membership from the present stem was no longer possible.

If the old Proto-Germanic categorisation is no longer applicable, one is left with two solutions. One, which everyone so far seems to have no objection to, is to simply ignore facts and continue using the old approach. The other, which will be defended in this paper, is to accept that Old English did not have a strong verb system at all, and no classification is possible as there is nothing to be classified.<sup>3</sup>

In keeping with this alternative approach, one could distinguish three stages in the history of English strong verbs:

- (a) Proto-Germanic: fully working strong verb system, categorised on the basis of the consonantal structure of the stem;
- (b) Old English: collapse of the Proto-Germanic system, attempts at rearrangement of the existing linguistic material into new categories, taking as the criterion the vocalic structure of the stem;

<sup>2</sup> This account is radically simplified, however, it should illustrate adequately the main principle of strong verb class assignment in Proto-Germanic.

<sup>3</sup> A similar approach to irregular verbs in Modern English has recently been proposed by Pinker (1999). While basically correct, his account is flawed by numerous factual errors and has little scholarly value for the history of irregular verbs.

- (c) Middle English and later: the emergence of the new system, in which only a few distinctive strong classes survive, characterised by unambiguous stem vocalism.

In Proto-Germanic strong verbs constituted a separate verbal category, divided into classes on the basis of the consonantal structure of the stem. On the way to Old English this old criterion became unusable because of phonetic change. Consequently, in Old English ablaut information had to be stored lexically for every individual strong verb. At the same time, the tendency to re-arrange the existing linguistic material became operational. This focused on the vocalic structure of the present form and led to the emergence of “gravity centres”, groups of verbs with similar structure, which began attracting others and forming kernels of new classes. This process continued into Middle English and beyond, ultimately leading to the development of the “irregular verb system” of Present-Day English.

If one assumes that this scheme is correct, one should be able to retrodict subsequent developments that should take place as the result of this systemic collapse. The three processes which would be expected to become active as soon as the Proto-Germanic classification scheme becomes unworkable are those given below.

- (a) original and new strong verbs would be attracted by the new “gravity centres” in the paradigm, leading to the development of new strong verb classes; this would be primarily motivated by the phonetic similarity of the present form;
- (b) original strong verbs which could not find new “gravity centres” to attach to would undergo regularisation into the weak paradigm; and
- (c) frequent original strong verbs without new “gravity centres” would become isolated and fossilised as exceptions and irregularities.

Not surprisingly, this is exactly what happened in Middle English and afterwards. If one looks at Modern English, the surviving strong verbs are those characterised by an unambiguous shape of their present forms, and, which is equally important, those having a distinct numerical advantage over others from the very beginning. These are – using traditional Old English terminology for clarity’s sake:

OE Class 1: *ride, rise, write*OE Class 3a: *bind, sing, swim*OE Class 4: *bear, tear*OE Class 7d: *grow, know, mow*

The majority of verbs belonging to other (sub-)classes were regularised on the analogy of the weak paradigm. This process begins already in Old English, where as many as 20% of attested strong verbs have at least occasional weak forms, and peaks in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. Those verbs that avoid this fate and are members of the new classes, are usually either marked phonetically (e.g., *choose*) or very frequent (e.g., *sit*).

Of particular interest is the fact that studies attempting to identify factors responsible for this collapse of what they view as a system of strong verbal flexion, failed to find any. The reason for this failure is clear – there was no strong verb system at all in Old English, so those factors have to be sought elsewhere, without recourse to the internal organisation of the verbal paradigm in the traditional approach.

There are a number of advantages of the model outlined in this paper. Firstly, it is more adequate descriptively than the traditional categorisation, as it does not postulate the existence of categories there is little evidence for in Old English. Secondly, it offers a classification – or the absence of it – that would be easily handled by the native speaker, and which provides explanation for restructuring processes observable already in Old English. And finally, it places processes that affected strong verbs both before and after the Old English period in a wider perspective, allowing their history to be viewed as a constant battle between chaos and order, in which as the old system collapses, a new one rises from its smouldering ruins, salvaging from the wreckage everything that can be salvaged and rejecting everything that cannot.

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