

## Classification of Old English Verbs

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**Abstract:** This article explores the structure and characteristics of Old English verbs, highlighting their complexity and linguistic significance. Old English verbs were classified into strong, weak, and irregular categories, with strong verbs using vowel changes (ablaut) to mark tense, and weak verbs employing dental suffixes. They conjugated for person, number, tense, and mood, reflecting a highly inflected grammatical system. Unlike Modern English, which relies on auxiliary verbs for tense and mood, Old English verbs conveyed nuanced meanings through their inflections. Despite significant simplification over time, traces of Old English verbs persist in Modern English, particularly in irregular verbs and auxiliary constructions. Studying Old English verbs provides valuable insights into the historical evolution of the English language and its Germanic roots.

**Keywords:** Inflection, strong verbs, weak verbs, irregular verbs, conjugation, dental suffix, person, number, tense (present, past), mood (indicative, subjunctive, imperative), root vowel change, grammatical categories, verb endings, subordinate clauses, word order.



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### Introduction

Old English, the earliest recorded stage of the English language, was spoken and written in England from around 450 to 1150 CE. It represents a linguistic landscape vastly different from the Modern English we use today. Among its many intriguing features, the structure and usage of Old English verbs stand out as a rich area of study, reflecting a complex system of inflection and grammatical categories.

Old English verbs, much like those in modern German or Latin, were highly inflected. They conveyed grammatical information such as tense, mood, number, and person through changes in their endings, rather than relying on auxiliary verbs as in Modern English. This feature gave Old English a rich and expressive verb system that allowed for concise yet nuanced sentences.

### Main part

#### Verb Classes in Old English.

Old English verbs were categorized into **strong verbs**, **weak verbs**, and a few irregular forms.

1. **Strong Verbs.** Strong verbs formed their past tense and past participle through vowel changes in the root, a process called *ablaut*. This system survives in Modern English in verbs like *sing-sang-sung*.

**For example:**

➤ *drīfan* ("to drive") → *drāf* (past singular) → *drifon* (past plural) → *drifen* (past participle).

2. **Weak Verbs.** Weak verbs formed their past tense and past participle with the addition of a dental suffix (typically *-d* or *-t*). This is similar to the regular verb conjugation in Modern English. For example:

➤ *lufian* ("to love") → *lufode* (past singular/plural) → *lufod* (past participle).

3. **Irregular Verbs.** A small group of verbs, such as *beon* ("to be") and *willan* ("to want"), followed their unique conjugation patterns. These irregular verbs often had multiple forms used interchangeably, reflecting their frequent use and ancient origins.

### Grammatical Categories

Old English verbs conjugated for several grammatical distinctions:

- **Person and Number:** Verbs had distinct endings for first, second, and third person, and for singular and plural forms.
- **Tense:** Old English had two primary tenses—present and past. Other nuances of time were implied through context or auxiliary constructions.
- **Mood:** Three moods were recognized—indicative (stating facts), subjunctive (expressing doubt, wishes, or hypotheticals), and imperative (issuing commands).

For instance, the verb *cuman* ("to come") would be conjugated as follows (indicative mood):

- Present singular: *ic cume* (I come), *þu cymest* (you come), *he cymþ* (he/she/it comes)
- Past singular: *ic cōm* (I came), *þu cōme* (you came), *he cōm* (he/she/it came)

In Old English, the verb typically appeared at the end of the sentence in subordinate clauses, reflecting its Germanic origins. For example:

- Modern English: "I know that he is coming."
- Old English: "Ic wāt þæt hē cymþ."

In main clauses, word order was more flexible, but subject-verb-object was common.

While much of the complexity of Old English verbs has been simplified in Modern English, remnants remain. Irregular strong verbs like *sing*, *drink*, and *run* trace their roots back to Old English. Similarly, auxiliary constructions, which began developing in late Old English, form the backbone of Modern English tense and mood systems.

### Conclusion

Studying Old English verbs provides a window into the linguistic history and evolution of English. Their intricate system of conjugations and inflections showcases the depth and sophistication of this early form of the language. For linguists and language enthusiasts alike, Old English verbs serve as a testament to the dynamic nature of human communication.

### The list of used literature

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