

Verb in OE

Grammatical categories of the Finite Verb

Verb in OE had four grammatical categories: number, person, tense and mood. Finite forms regularly distinguished between singular and plural. The category of Person was made up of three forms: the 1st, the 2nd and the 3rd. Unlike number, person distinctions were neutralised in many positions. The category of Mood was constituted by the Indicative, Imperative and Subjunctive. The category of Tense in OE consisted of two categorial forms: Present and Past. The tenses were formally distinguished by all the verbs in the Indicative and Subjunctive Moods, there being practically no instances of neutralisation of the tense opposition.

The use of the Subjunctive Mood in OE was in many respects different from its use in later ages. Subjunctive forms conveyed a very general meaning of unreality or supposition. In addition to its use in conditional sentences and other volitional, conjectural and hypothetical contexts, Subjunctive was common in other types of construction: in clauses of time, clauses of result and in clauses presenting reported speech.

The meanings of the tense forms were also very general, as compared with later ages and with present-day English. The forms of the Present were used to indicate present and future actions.

The Past tense was used in a most general sense to indicate various events in the past (including those which are nowadays expressed by the forms of the Past Continuous, Past Perfect, Present Perfect and other analytical forms).

The existence of the four grammatical categories described above is confirmed by consistent opposition of form and meaning. In addition to these categories we must mention two debatable categories: Aspect and Voice.

Until recently it was believed that in OE the category of aspect was expressed by the regular contrast of verbs with and without the prefix *ǣ-*; verbs with the prefix had a perfective meaning, while the same verbs without the prefix indicated a non-completed action, e. g. OE *feohtan* – *ǣfeohtan* ‘fight’ – ‘gain by fighting’, *lician* – *ǣlician* ‘like’ – ‘come to like’. In some recent explorations, however, it has been shown that the prefix *ǣ-* in OE can hardly be regarded as a marker of aspect, it could change the aspective meaning of the verb by making it perfective, but it could also change its lexical meaning, cf. OE *sitian* – *ǣsittan* ‘sit’ – ‘occupy’, *beran* – *ǣberan* ‘carry’ – ‘bear a child’. It has also been noticed that verbs without a prefix could sometimes have a perfective meaning. It follows that the prefix *ǣ-* should rather be regarded as an element of word-building, a derivational prefix of vague general meaning, though its ties with certain shades of aspective meaning are obvious.

The category of voice in OE is another debatable issue. In OE texts we find a few isolated relics of synthetic Mediopassive forms (which may have existed in PG and were well developed in Gothic). Cf. the old Mediopassive *in þa ea þe hatte Araxis* ‘The river that is called Arax. The passive meaning was frequently indicated with the help of Participle II of transitive verbs used as predicatives with the verbs *beon* (NE *be*) and *weorþan* ‘become’:

During the OE period these constructions were gradually transformed into the analytical forms of the Passive voice.

The OE verb is remarkable for its complicated morphological classification which determined the application of form-building means in various groups of verbs. The majority of OE verbs fell into two great divisions: the strong verbs and the weak verbs. Besides these two main groups there were a few verbs which could be put together as 'minor' groups. The main difference between the strong and weak verbs lay in the means of forming the principal forms of the verb. There were also a few other differences in the conjugations.

Strong verbs formed their stems by means of vowel gradation or ablaut and by adding certain suffixes; in some verbs vowel gradation was accompanied by consonant interchanges. The strong verbs had four forms: the Infinitive, Past singular, Past plural, Past Participle. The weak verbs derived their Past tense and Participle II from the Present tense stem with the help of the dental suffix *-ed* or *-d*, *-t*. Normally they did not change their root vowel, but in some verbs suffixation was accompanied by a vowel interchange. The main differences between the strong and the weak verbs can be seen in the following examples:

	Infinitive	Past Tense	Participle II
Strong verb	beran	bær, bæron	(3e)boren
Weak verb	locian	locode	(3e)locod

Morphological Classification of Old English Verbs

Strong	Weak	Minor groups
seven classes with different gradation / ablaut series	three classes with different stem-suffixes	preterite-presents

Strong Verbs

There were about three hundred strong verbs in OE. They were native words descending from PG with parallels in other OG languages; many of them had a high frequency of occurrence and were basic items of the vocabulary widely used in word derivation and word compounding.

The strong verbs in OE (as well as in other OG languages) are usually divided into seven classes.

Classes from 1 to 6 use vowel gradation which goes back to the IE ablaut-series modified in different phonetic conditions in accordance with PG and Early OE sound changes. Class 7 includes reduplicating verbs, which originally built their past forms by means of repeating the root-morpheme. Merged doubled root gave rise to a specific kind of root-vowel interchange.

As seen from the table the principal forms of all the strong verbs have the same endings irrespective of class: *-an* for the Infinitive, no ending in the Past sg stem, *-on* in the form of Past pl, *-en* for Participle II.

Strong Verbs in Old English

Principal forms Classes N.	Infinitive	Past Singular	Past Plural	Partici- ple II	NE
N	wrītan	wrāt	writon	writen	<i>Write</i>
2	(a) cēosan (b) būzan	cēas bēaȝ	curon buȝon	coren boȝen	<i>Choose</i> <i>Bow</i>
3	(a) findan (b) helpan (c) feohtan	fand healp feagt	fundon hulpon fuhton	funden holpen fohten	<i>Find</i> <i>help</i> <i>Fight</i>
4	beran	bær	bæron	boren	<i>Bear</i>
5	(a) cweþan (b) sittan	cwæþ sæt	cwæþon sæton	cweþen seten	<i>say (obs. quothe)</i> <i>sit</i>
6	scacan	scōc	scōcon	scacen	<i>shake</i>
7	(a) hātan (b) ȝrōwan	hēt (heht) ȝrēow	hēton (hehton) ȝrēowon	hāten ȝrōwen	'call', 'name' <i>grow</i>

Weak Verbs

The number of weak verbs in OE by far exceeded that of Strong verbs. In fact, all the verbs, with the exception of the strong verbs and the minor groups (which make a total of about 315-320 units) were weak. Their number was constantly growing since all new verbs derived from other stems were conjugated weak. Among the weak verbs there were many derivatives of OE noun and adjective stems and also derivatives of strong verbs built from one of their stems (usually the second stem — Past sg), e.g.

OE talu n
OE full adj

tellan v
fyllan v

(NE tale, tell)
(NE full, fill)

Weak verbs formed their Past and Participle II by means of the dental suffix *-d-* or *-t-* (a specifically Germanic trait). In OE the weak verbs are subdivided into three classes differing in the ending of the Infinitive, the sonority of the suffix, and the sounds preceding the suffix. The principal forms of the verbs in the three classes are given in the Table below, with several subclasses in Class I.

The main differences between the classes were as follows: in Class I the Infinitive ended in *-an*, seldom *-ian*; the Past form had *-de*, *-ede* or *-te*; Participle II was marked by *-d*, *-ed* or *-t*. Some verbs of Class I had a double consonant in the Infinitive (Subclass b), others had a vowel interchange in the root, used together with suffixation.

Class II had no subdivisions. In Class II the Infinitive ended in *-ian* and the Past tense stem and Participle II had [o] before the dental suffix. This was the most numerous and regular of all the classes.

The verbs of Class III had an Infinitive in *-an* and no vowel before the dental suffix; it included only four verbs with a full conjugation and a few isolated forms of other verbs. Genetically, the division into classes goes back to the differences between the derivational stem-suffixes used to build the verbs or the nominal stems from which they were derived.

Weak Verbs in Old English

Principal forms		Infinitive	Past Tense	Participle II ¹	NE
Classes					
I		<i>-an, -ian</i>	<i>-de, -ede, -te</i>	<i>-ed, -d, -t</i>	
	(a) styrian (b) temman (c) dēman (d) cēpan (e) tellan (f) Þyncan		styrede temede dēnde cēpte tealde Þuhte	Styred temed dēmed cēped teald Þuht	<i>stir</i> <i>tame</i> <i>deem</i> <i>keep</i> <i>tell</i> <i>think</i>
II		<i>-ian</i>	<i>-ode</i>	<i>-od</i>	
	lōcian		lōcode	lōcod	<i>look</i>
III		<i>-an</i>	<i>-de</i>	<i>-d</i>	
	libban habban		lifde hæfde	lifd hæfd	<i>live</i> <i>have</i>

Minor Groups of Verbs

The most important group of these verbs were the so-called 'preterite-presents' or 'past-present' verbs. Originally the Present tense forms of these verbs were Past tense forms. Later these forms acquired a present meaning but preserved many formal features of the Past tense. Most of these verbs had new Past Tense forms built with the help of the dental suffix. Some of them also acquired the forms of the verbals: Participles and Infinitives; most verbs did not have a full paradigm and were in this sense 'defective'.

The conjugation of OE preterite-presents is shown in the Table below.

The verbs were inflected in the Present like the Past tense of strong verbs: the forms of the 1st and 3rd p. sg were identical and had no ending – yet, unlike strong verbs, they had the same root-vowel in all the persons; the pl had a different grade of ablaut similarly with strong verbs (which had two distinct stems for the Past: sg and pl). In the Past the preterite-presents were inflected like weak verbs. The new Infinitives *sculan*, *cunnan* were derived from the pl form. The interchanges of root-vowels in the sg and pl of the Present tense of preterite-present verbs can be traced to the same gradation series as were used in the strong verbs. Before the shift of meaning and time-reference the would-be preterite-presents were strong verbs. The prototype of *can* may be referred to Class 3; the prototype of *sculan* – to Class 4, etc.

In OE there were twelve preterite-present verbs. Six of them have survived in Mod E: *owe*, *ought*, *can*, *dare*, *shall*, *may*, *must*. Most of the preterite-presents did not indicate actions, but expressed a kind of attitude to an action denoted by another verb, an Infinitive which followed the preterite-present. In other words, they were used like modal verbs, and eventually developed into modern modal verbs. In OE some of them could also be used as notional verbs.

Conjugation of Preterite-Presents in Old English

Infinitive	cunnan (NE <i>can</i>)	sculan (NE <i>shall, should</i>)
Present tense		
Indicative		
Singular 1st	cann	sceal(I)
2nd	canst	scealt
3rd	cann	sceal(I)
Plural	cunnon	sculon
Subjunctive		
Singular	cunne	scule, scyle
Plural	cunnen	sculen, scylen
Participle I	—	—
Past tense		
Indicative		
Singular 1st	cūðe	sceolde
2nd	cūðest	sceoldest
3rd	cūðe	sceolde
Plural	cūðon	sceoldon
Subjunctive		
Singular	cūðe	sceolde
Plural	cūðen	sceolden
Participle II	cunnen	

