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The Old English weak verbs

A diachronic and synchronic analysis

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To my wife, Ruth Francisca, and my mother, Margarete Stark, this book is dedicated.

Hannover
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D. S.

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INTRODUCTION

In the present study the system of the Old English (OE) weak verbs will be discussed. This includes a treatment of the diachronic, phonological development of the weak verbs from a Germanic (Gmc) to an early OE stage, and a synchronic analysis of the weak verb system as it presented itself at the beginning of the OE period. Weak verbs, although morphologically much more regular than the strong verbs, appear to be in a state of transition during the OE period. They no longer comprise four classes, as for instance the Gothic weak verbs, and they are still a long way from the two classes of Middle English (ME). In fact, class I with its three subclasses (exemplified by fremman, nerian, dēman) and two important subgroups (bycgan, sellan), class II with its basically uniform conjugational pattern (lufian), and the four verbs of class III (habban, libban, secgan, hycgan) present a varied and often inconclusive picture. Also, beginning in early OE times, the originally short-stem verbs fremman, nerian, show a remarkable tendency to transfer to class II and to re-form their stems and endings according to class II (fremman vs. fremian).

In recent years there have been several attempts to deal with the OE weak verbs from the point of view of generative phonology, the theoretical framework put forward most comprehensively by Noam Chomsky and Morris Halle in their The sound pattern of English (1968). Wagner (1969), Keyser (1975), Lass/Anderson (1975), and Kiparsky/O'Neil (1976) are the most notable examples. The generative model in its general outlines will also provide the theoretical basis in the present study, although, unlike in the papers quoted above, various positions will

be modified. The fundamental difference is that a distinction will be maintained throughout the paper between the recoverability of certain phonological processes and the productivity of the same processes in a synchronic grammar of OE. This will lead, in the diachronic part, to a detailed analysis of the historical processes which appear to have played a role in the development of the weak verbs and which can be recovered from OE or, occasionally, other Gmc. dialects. In the synchronic part, many such processes as West Gmc. gemination, breaking, i-umlaut, etc., will be shown to be no longer productive and therefore no longer part of the synchronic rule inventory of OE. A synchronic analysis of the OE weak verbs will be presented which is far more concrete than the treatments by Wagner, Keyser, Lass/Anderson, and Kiparsky/O'Neil. This is to say that, based on the transparency of the surface structure, underlying representations will become more concrete. At the same time, restructurings of underlying representations will occur more frequently than in standard generative phonology because it will no longer be a basic tenet of the theory that all morphological alternations must be accounted for by rule if these alternations can be recovered by the specialist. In other words, if we intend to write a grammar not of the structural constitution of the language (utilizing all the resources we have for explaining all the various elements in the language), but a grammar of an actual speaker of the language, we are bound to arrive at a more concrete description than those in standard generative phonology.

Chapter one contains a detailed survey of the data available on the OE weak verb system. The major characteristics, especially the function of the *j* formative which follows the verb stem, will be considered. Paradigms which are representative of all three classes will be discussed along with the variations that occur during the OE period. This will allow a comparison of the early OE verb forms with those of late OE. Similarly, the dialectal

forms often provide interesting insights into the development of a language. They are therefore included in chapter one.

In chapter two, phonological alternations and variations within attested OE and comparative evidence from other Gmc.dialects will help establish a set of major rules and proto-forms which reflect the historical (diachronic) development of the weak verbs from Gmc.to OE times. The weak verbs will be shown to undergo these diachronic rules and full derivations will be given for five representative forms of each paradigm. The last section of this chapter contains a discussion of phonological change and of the crucial difference between recoverability and productivity already alluded to above.

Chapter three will be concerned with a synchronic analysis of the OE weak verbs. Leading up to the synchronic derivations of the verbs, which will involve only three rules, is a treatment of the role of re-structuring in the present study and a discussion of the rules basic to this synchronic analysis, degemination and schwa-insertion. An important change, if compared to the diachronic derivations, involves the original j formative which has become part of the inflectional ending in OE und thus contributes to the phonetic similarity between class I nerian and class II lufian and ultimately to the transfer of class I to class II.

The transfer of class I weak verbs to class II is treated in chapter four. Reasons for this transfer can be found in the high degree of formal similarity between class I nerian (in later OE frequently nerigan, nerigean) and class II lufian, the regular and simple morphological structure of class II verbs, the overwhelmingly large number of class II verbs, and a general tendency to regularize verb stems and endings (cf. the two-class weak verb system of ME). Verbs of the fremman type transfer to class II as a result of analogy, which is discussed and defended as a viable concept in section 4. In general,

it is the goal of chapter four to show how the transfer from class I to class II supports the claim that the system underlying the classical OE weak verb paradigms had undergone considerable restructuring since its Proto-Gmc.stage.

CHAPTER ONE: THE DATA

1. The Germanic verb system

The Germanic verb system differs sharply from that of the other branches of Indo-European. It differs with respect to both conjugational complexity and the categories to which these conjugations refer. For example, the Romance languages, while sharing with Germanic a temporally-oriented system, typically have forms for expressing, both in the indicative and the subjunctive moods, a variety of tenses (e.g., present, simple past, continuous past, future, etc.). On the other hand, the Slavic languages, while sharing with Germanic a basically binary conjugational system, make a primary distinction between completed and non-completed action rather than the past and non-past temporal distinction made in Germanic.

In trying to reconstruct the history of the verb forms in the individual older Germanic dialects, scholars sometimes assume that we know more about the Proto-Indo-European verb system than is actually the case. But Prokosch, for example, warns (1938: 145): "It would be wrong to ascribe to Indo-European the complicated tense system of Sanskrit, Greek, or Latin. A good deal of this is secondary innovation." Moreover, even in those cases where we can confidently assign a given category to Proto-Indo-European, it is not necessarily to be assumed that there has been a regular and deducible development to the daughter languages. Quoting Prokosch again (148): "The present system of the Gmc. verb has been greatly standardized." This is one reason why we will pay very little attention to Indo-European here. Another, and far more important, reason is that Indo-European lacked that

feature which is most characteristic of the Germanic verb system. This is the division of verbs into two major classes--the so called 'strong' verbs and 'weak' verbs--according to the way in which the past tense is marked. Every Germanic grammar (e.g., Prokosch 1938, Krahe/Meid 1969) and indeed every grammar dealing with an older Germanic dialect (e.g., Wright 1910, Braune/Eggers 1975, Campbell 1959, Brunner 1965) present seven classes of verbs whose past systems are defined by a stem vowel (or vowels) different from that of the present tense, often with accompanying consonant changes resulting from the application of Verner's Law. These 'strong' verb classes represent what Germanic has retained of the original Indo-European system.

The 'weak' verbs, on the other hand, with their so-called 'dental preterite', are a Germanic innovation. Originally, there seem to have been four classes, the fourth class surviving intact only in Gothic. Prokosch (1938: 193) lists the four classes as follows:

- I. Stem in ja/ji/i, Gothic nasjan, sōkjan
- II. Stem in ō, Gothic salbōn
- III. Stem in ai, ē, Gothic haban (pret. habaida),
OHG habēn
- IV. Stem in nō, Gothic fullnan (pret. fullnōda)

The following table illustrates the weak classes in the older Germanic dialects:

	<u>class I</u>	<u>class II</u>	<u>class III</u>	<u>class IV</u>
	present			
Go	nasjan	salbōn	haban	fullnan
ON	telja	kalla	hafa	-
OE	nerian	lufian	habban	-
OS	fremmian	salbo(ia)n	hebbian	-
OHG	fremmen	salbōn	habēn	-
	past sing			
Go	nasida	salbōda	habaida	fullnōda
ON	talðā	kallaðā	hafði	-
OE	nerede	lufode	hæfde	-
OS	fremida	salboda	habða	-
OHG	frumita	salbōta	habēta	-

2. The Old English verb system

2.1 Major characteristics

2.1.1 Strong and weak verbs

Old English maintains the distinction between strong and weak verbs. There are seven classes of strong verbs, which form their past tense with vowel variation (ablaut) in the stem, and three classes of weak verbs, which form their past tense with a stop segment usually considered dental (or alveolar) and which follows the actual stem. The stem of the weak verbs is commonly unchanged throughout the verb paradigm but several notable exceptions exist (e.g., brengan, brōhte, (ge)brōht; byncan, pūhte, (ge)pūht, wyrcean, worhte, (ge)worht, etc.).

The strong verb classes were no longer productive during the OE period and fluctuations in class membership are making themselves felt because of the extremely high productivity of the weak verbs, which, in fact, has been retained into Modern English, where newly formed verbs will always form their past tenses on the weak verb pattern. In OE, strong verbs occasionally have weak past tenses. slæpan 'to sleep', a class VII verb, has (Campbell: 320) the form slēpte in the Vespasian Psalter, the Mercian Rushworth Gospels and in Bede. In the Lindisfarne Gospels and the Durham Ritual slēpde is found. The Lindisfarne Gospels also contain a past tense plural -slēpedon. Perhaps more surprising are several strong verbs which have weak present tenses that follow class I weak verbs. Among those verbs are biddan 'to ask', sittan 'to sit', licgan 'to lie', picgan 'to partake', fricgan 'to ask', hebban 'to raise', swerian 'to swear', and sceppan 'to injure'. The present tense of biddan, for example, is just like the paradigmatic model for class I weak verbs given below, fremman: 1sg bidde, 2sg bitst, 3sg bit(t), pl. biddaþ. Remarkably, picgan, besides its strong past peah, pægon and its weak present, also has a weak past tense and past participle pigde, pigede, piged.