OLD ENGLISH VERBS CLASSIFICATION

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Abstract: This article analyzes the semantic structure of some motion verbs in the English language, on the basis of which specific semantic events of the verbs of movement are determined. The main attention is paid to certain structures and boundaries of verbs, that is, the semantic field of verbs belonging to this group, and the semantic classification of lexemes of this group of verbs to identify their common, unifying, differentiating semantics. From this article we can see what the meanings of the verbs used in Old English to this day had, and by attaching grammatical forms to these verbs, some verbs acquired additional meanings. Verbs used during the period of Old English have been studied in different directions and the scope of their meaning has been analyzed. In some cases it had different meanings in different contexts.

Keywords: Diachronic, typology, meaning, semantics, form, space, verbs of action, differentiation, path verbs.

Introduction

Old English, the earliest historical form of the English language spoken between the 5th and 12th centuries, is rich with complex grammatical structures, particularly in its verbal system. One of the most significant features of Old English is the classification of its verbs. Understanding how verbs were grouped and used in Old English provides valuable insight into the development of modern English and the broader Germanic language family.

Old English verbs are primarily categorized based on how they form their past tense. The classification is broadly divided into **strong verbs**, **weak verbs**, and a few smaller, irregular classes, including **preterite-present** and **anomalous verbs**. Each class follows specific morphological patterns and reflects historical phonological developments.

Materials and methods

Strong Verbs

Strong verbs form their past tense and past participle through **vowel gradation** (also known as ablaut), a system inherited from Proto-Indo-European. This internal change in the stem vowel is the key characteristic of strong verbs.

Old English strong verbs are divided into **seven classes**, each following a distinctive ablaut pattern:

Class	Present	Past Singular	Past Plural	Past Participle	Example (Modern English)
I	ī	ā	i	i	wrītan (to write)

II	ēo	ēa	u	o	bēodan (to offer)
III	i/e	a	u	o	drincan (to drink)
IV	e	æ	æ	o	beran (to bear)
V	e	æ	æ	e	sprecan (to speak)
VI	a	ō	ō	a	faran (to go)
VII	reduplication instead of ablaut	hātan (to call)			

Example: wrītan (Class I)
- Present: ic wrīte (I write)
- Past singular: ic wrāt (I wrote)
- Past plural: writon (we wrote)
- Past participle: gewriten (written)

Weak Verbs
Unlike strong verbs, **weak verbs** form their past tense by adding a dental suffix (-de, -te, -ede, etc.) to the stem, without changing the stem vowel. This is more similar to the way most modern English verbs form the past tense (e.g., talk → talked).

Classes of Weak Verbs There are **three main classes** of weak verbs:

- **Class I**: Generally formed with the suffix -de or -te. E.g., lufian (to love): lufode (loved)
- **Class II**: Typically ended in -ian in the present. E.g., macian (to make): macode (made)
- **Class III**: A small and irregular group. E.g., habban (to have): hæfde (had)

Weak verbs were far more numerous than strong verbs and became increasingly dominant in Middle and Modern English.

Preterite-Present Verbs
These verbs originally had strong past tenses that came to be used as their present tenses. A new weak past tense was then formed. Many of these verbs became **modal auxiliaries** in Modern English.

Examples:
- cunnan (to know, be able) → Modern can
- sculan (must, ought) → Modern shall
- magan (to be able) → Modern may
- motan (to be allowed) → Modern must

Anomalous and Suppletive Verbs
A few verbs do not fit neatly into the above categories and are termed **anomalous** or **suppletive**. They may combine forms from different roots.

Example: wesan / bēon (to be)

- Present: eom (I am), bēo (I am)

- Past: wæs, wǣron
- Past participle: geweorþen (become)

This verb shows a mix of forms from multiple PIE roots and is inherently irregular—much like its Modern English counterpart.

Conclusion

The Old English verbal system, with its rich array of morphological patterns, reveals a linguistic world far more inflected than modern English. The distinctions between strong and weak verbs, as well as the existence of preterite-present and anomalous forms, show how verbs conveyed subtle nuances of meaning and tense. Studying these classifications not only aids in understanding Old English literature and grammar but also offers a window into the historical development of English as a whole.

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