

An illustration of a stack of books. The top book has a red cover. Below it, several other books are visible with various colored covers (red, teal, brown). In the foreground, an open book with aged, yellowish pages is shown, slightly overlapping the stack. The background is a plain, light gray color.

GRAMMATICAL CATEGORIES OF OLD ENGLISH VERBS

Grammatical Categories of the finite forms of the OE Verb.

- The system of the OE verb was rather developed though less complicated than it is to-day. The main form-building means were synthetic: suffixation (endings), gradation (ablaut, vowel interchange) and suppletion (suppletive formations). Some of them could be combined.
- The forms of verbs could be **finite** (changeable in accordance with grammatical categories) and **non-finite**. Non-finite forms existing in OE are: the Verbal Noun, the Infinitive, Participle I and Participle II.

- The finite forms of the Verb had the categories of Person, Number, Tense and Mood.

The category of Person was based on the opposition of three persons: the first, the second and the third, which were grammatically marked only in the singular.

There were no person distinctions in the plural. There were two numbers – the singular and the plural. Dual pronouns took the plural forms of verbs.

lc	wrīte	wē	
pu	wrītes	zē	wrītað
hē	wrīteð	hīe	

- The category of Tense was represented only by two opposite members – the Present and the Past.

	Present	Past
Indicative	Ic wri̅te	Ic wrāt
Oblique	Ic wri̅te	Ic wri̅te

- There was no Future tense in OE, future events were expressed with the help of **a present tense verb + an adverb denoting future** or by a combination of a modal verb: **sculan** (shall) or **willan** (will) + **an infinitive**.
- *Ic lufize tō dæ3 oððe tō merzen.*
(I will fall in love today or tomorrow)
- *Wille ic aseczan mærum þeodne min ærende.*
(I want to tell the glorious prince my permission)

- There were three moods: Indicative, Imperative and Oblique.

Indicative	Imperative	Oblique
þu cepst	cēp	cēpe

- The Indicative Mood and the Imperative Mood were used in cases similar to those in which they are used now. But the Oblique Mood in OE differed greatly from the corresponding mood in PDE.

There was only one mood form in OE that was used both to express events that are thought as unreal and as problematic.

Morphological classification of verbs in OE.

- All the OE finite verbs can be subdivided into four groups according to the grammatical means with the help of which they built their basic forms: two major – strong and weak and two minor – preterite-present and anomalous (sometimes called suppletive).
- **Strong verbs** built their forms by means of vowel gradation and by adding certain inflections and suffixes. Among all the paradigmatic forms of strong verbs there are four basic forms: 1) the Infinitive 2) the Past singular 3) the Past Plural and 4) Participle II.

1 2 3 4
OE wītan – wrāt – writon – writen (to write)

1

2

3

4

OE **wrītan – wrāt – writon – writen (to write)**

- The forms are basic because they are at the basis of other (not basic) forms.
- **1)** The stem with the vowel which is used in the **Infinitive** is used also in the Present Indicative, the Present Subjunctive, the Imperative Mood and Participle I;
- **2)** the second stem is used to form the 1st and the 3rd persons singular of the Past Indicative;
- **3)** the stem of the third basic form helps to build the 2nd person singular and the plural of the Past Indicative and also the forms of the Past Subjunctive (Conjunctive);
- **4)** the stem of Participle II forms only itself.

- The four basic forms of every strong verb create a chain of four alternating vowels responsible for a specific form in the line. The OE alternation of vowels goes back to the original IE alternation which differentiated the forms of the verb. The scholars called it Ablaut (in German the word means “the interchange of sounds”). **Ablaut (Vowel gradation), an independent vowel interchange unconnected with any phonetic conditions: different vowels appear in the same environment, surrounded by the same sounds.** The IE Ablaut involved only vowels [e] and [o], which could be short or long. These vowels alternated with each other and also with the zero position.

- E.g. Ukr. нести – ноша Rus. беру – сбор – брал

- The question may arise why the so simple system of IE ablaut became so complicated in OE. The matter is that the vowels which took part in the ablaut (ablaut vowels) underwent different changes since the IE period, and it is even possible to determine the steps of them. Some changes of vowels took place in CG (such as CG Vowel shift, CG Fracture etc.); some other phonetic changes took place already in OE.

- **PIE [o] – [o:]**

- **PG [a] – [o:]** OE *faran* – *fōr* (to go)

- Thus strong verbs may be called “ablaut verbs”, the verbs which have the alternation of vowels in the stems. The ablaut lines vary and it is the kind of ablaut series which made it possible to distribute all strong verbs into 7 classes. The first five classes in PIE are based on the ablaut “chains” which are characterized by qualitative ablaut ([e] – [o] – [-] – [-]), in the sixth class the original gradation was purely quantitative ([o] – [o:] – [o:] – [o]), but in PG it changed into a quantitative-qualitative series ([a] – [o:] – [o:] – [a]). The seventh class is based on the reduplication of the root – the verbs built their past tense by repeating the root
- Goth. **haitan – haihait – haihaitun – haitans (to call)**
- In OE we have only the relicts of this process: the roots in the past tense stems had been contracted and appeared as a single syllable with a long vowel
- OE **hatan – hēt (heht) – hēton (hehton) – hāten (to call)**

The strong verbs in OE are divided into 7 classes acc. to the ablaut line

1	wrītan snīpan	wrāt snāp	writon snidon	writen sniden	to write to cut
2	bēodan cēosan	bēad cēas	budon curon	boden coren	to chose to offer
3	findan drincan	fand dranc	fundon druncon	funden druncen	to find to drink
4	beran	bær	bæron	boren	to bear
5	cweðan	cwæp	cwædon	cweden	to say
6	scacan	scōc	scōcon	scacen	to shake
7	hatan	hēt	hēton	hāten	to call

- Some forms of verbs belonging to different classes, if they had a fricative in the root, had in their forms the interchange of consonants under Verner's Law (**voicing of fricatives**):

- *cēosan* - *cēas* – *cu***r***on* – *co***r***en* (to choose, Class II);
- *sniðan* – *snā***p** – *snid***on** – *snid***e***n* (to cut, Class I);
- *cweðan* – *cwæ***p** – *cwæ***d***on* – *cwed***e***n* (to say, Class V);

in case of **-s** the latter changed into **-r** (due to rhotacism). These changes are often called “grammatical” Verner's Law.

- **Weak verbs.** Whereas strong verbs used ablaut (vowel interchange) as a means of differentiation among the basic forms, weak verbs used for that purpose suffixation. Weak verbs formed their Past and Participle II by means of the dental suffix **-d-** or **-t-**. This way of building grammatical forms is considered to be a purely Germanic phenomenon. It is found only in Germanic languages.
- The origin of the dental suffix is a disputable question. Some scholars trace it back to the Past tense of the verb **dōn**. Some consider that it originated from the suffix of Participle II.
- Weak verbs are considered to have only three basic forms.

E.g. **lōcian – lōcode – lōcod (to look)**

OE weak verbs are subdivided into 3 classes depending on

- the kind of ending in the Infinitive;
- the sonority of the suffix;
- the sounds preceding the suffix.

In **Class I** the Infinitive ended in **-an** or **-ian** (after *r*); the Past tense had **-ede** / **-de** / **-te** at the end; Participle II had **-ed** / **-d** / **-t**: *dōmian* - *dēmde* - *dēmed* (to judge). Final **-d** changed into **-t** after a voiceless consonant: *cēpan* - *cēpte* - *cēpt*

Regular weak verbs (Class I)

Infinitive	Past	PII
temman (to tame)	temede	temed
styrian (to stir)	styrede	styred
dēman (to deem)	dēmde	dēmed
cēpan (to keep)	cēpte	cēpt

The verbs of Class I could be regular and irregular.

The Infinitive of the irregular verbs had mutated root-vowel, while in the Past tense and in Participle II the vowel remained unchanged. Thus they had different vowels in the root of the 1st form as against the 2nd and the 3rd: *sellan* – *sealde* – *seald* (to give). The vowel interchange was caused by *-j* in the stem in accordance with assimilative i-Umlaut. Ablaut, in its turn, is not assimilative, but spontaneous and independent.

Goth. *saljan* OE**saljan* > *sellan* (to give) – i-Umlaut

salida OE**salde* > *sealde* (gave) – OE Breaking

The verbs of **Class II** had the suffix **-oja** in the infinitive; the root vowel was the same in all the three forms. The absence of mutation is due to the fact that **-i-** (from **-oja-**) appeared at the time when the process of i-mutation was already over. The suffix gave the vowel **-o-** in the Past tense and in the Infinitive. The paradigm is the most regular: the three basis forms had the endings **-ian** **-ode** **-od**:

mac**ian** – mac**ode** – mac**od** (to make);

luf**ian** – luf**ode** – luf**od** (to love);

hop**ian** – hop**ode** – hop**od** (to hope);

The verbs of **Class III** had the suffix **-ai-**, which is no longer found in OE. This class is not numerous and has a tendency to disintegration:

some of the verbs pass into the 1st or the 2nd class. The most frequent verbs in this class are:

habban – *hæfde* – *hæfd* (to have);

libban – *lifde* – *lifd* (to live);

sec3(e)an – *sæ3de* – *sæ3d* (to say).

The verbs have doubled consonant in the Infinitive and the mutation of the root vowel caused by **-i / -j-** in the suffix and the endings of the forms: **-an / -de / -d**.



**THANK YOU FOR YOUR
ATTENTION!**