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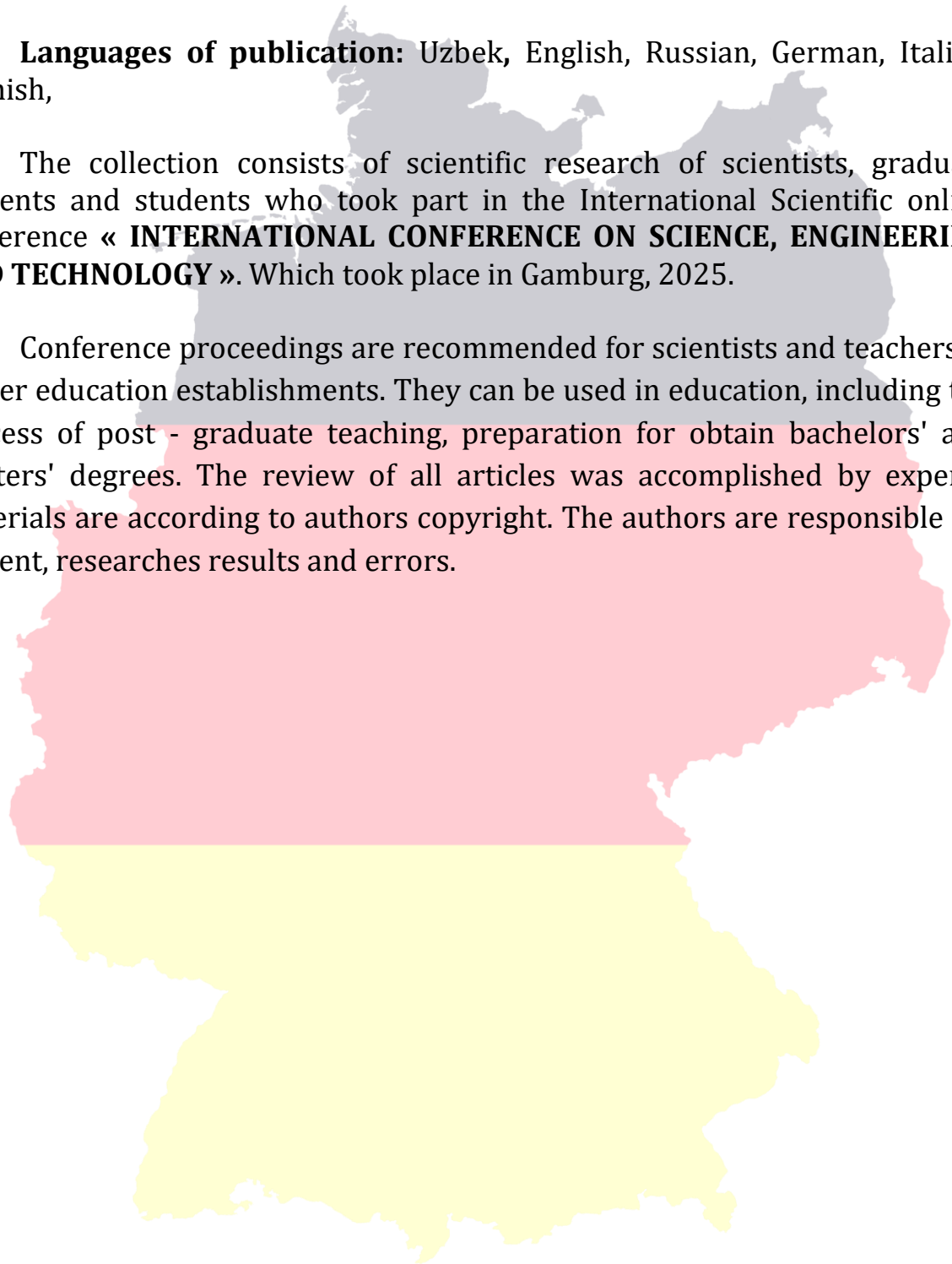


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THE VERB IN OLD ENGLISH

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Annotation: This article explores the structure, classification, and usage of verbs in Old English, the earliest recorded stage of the English language spoken between the 5th and 11th centuries. It discusses how Old English verbs were highly inflected and categorized mainly into strong and weak verbs, depending on the way they formed their past tense and past participle. The study highlights the importance of vowel gradation, or ablaut, in strong verbs and the use of dental suffixes in weak verbs. It also examines irregular and preterite-present verbs, which later developed into modern English modal verbs such as can, shall, and must. The paper emphasizes the role of verb endings in expressing grammatical categories such as person, number, tense, and mood. Special attention is given to the influence of Latin and Norse languages on the evolution of Old English verb forms. The article concludes that understanding Old English verbs helps linguists trace the historical development of English grammar and vocabulary. Overall, this research provides valuable insight into the linguistic features and transformation of the English verb system from its earliest forms to later Middle and Modern English stages.

Key words: Old English, strong verbs, weak verbs, ablaut, preterite-present verbs, grammar evolution.

Introduction: The study of the verb system in Old English holds great importance for understanding the historical development of the English language. Old English, spoken approximately between 450 and 1150 AD, represents the earliest stage of English and serves as the foundation for many grammatical, phonological, and lexical features that exist in Modern English today. The verb, as a central grammatical category, plays a crucial role in expressing action, time, mood, and aspect, and thus provides valuable insight into the structure and logic of early English communication. The verb system of Old English was far more complex and inflectional than that of Modern English, reflecting a stage when English was still closely related to other Germanic languages, such as Old High German and Old Norse. This complexity is especially visible in the rich set of verb endings, tense formations, and mood variations that characterized the language of Anglo-Saxon England [1,431].

In Old English, verbs were divided into several main groups, the most significant being strong and weak verbs. Strong verbs used internal vowel



changes, known as ablaut, to indicate tense and aspect, while weak verbs formed their past tense and past participles through the addition of dental suffixes such as -d or -t. This distinction was not only morphological but also historical, as it reflected a deep-rooted Indo-European linguistic system that English inherited from its earliest ancestors. Furthermore, Old English contained other categories of verbs, such as preterite-present verbs, anomalous verbs, and defective verbs, which added more diversity to the verb system and later influenced the development of auxiliary and modal verbs in Middle and Modern English [2,350].

The verb endings in Old English also carried essential grammatical information. Through inflection, verbs expressed person (first, second, third), number (singular and plural), tense (present and past), mood (indicative, subjunctive, imperative), and sometimes voice distinctions. These inflections allowed speakers to communicate complex ideas without relying heavily on word order, which in modern English has become a primary means of indicating grammatical relationships. For instance, in Old English, the sentence “Se cyning lufað þone cniht” (“The king loves the boy”) could be rearranged without losing meaning because the verb and noun endings clearly marked the grammatical roles of each word. This feature demonstrates how Old English was a synthetically structured language, where inflections carried more weight than syntax.

Another aspect worth noting is the phonological and orthographic variability of verbs in Old English manuscripts. Since the language was not yet standardized, the same verb could appear in slightly different forms depending on the dialect (West Saxon, Mercian, Northumbrian, or Kentish) or the scribe’s preferences. These variations help modern linguists trace regional linguistic patterns and understand the diffusion of language change across early medieval England. The dialectal differences also contributed to the eventual simplification of the English verb system after the Norman Conquest, when contact with Old Norse and Norman French accelerated the loss of inflectional endings [3,512].

The article also addresses the influence of external factors on the development of the Old English verb system. The Christianization of England in the 7th century introduced numerous Latin loanwords, some of which affected the verb lexicon. Meanwhile, Viking invasions and Norse settlements in the 9th and 10th centuries led to significant linguistic exchange, especially in the northern dialects. Old Norse verbs such as take, call, and want later replaced or coexisted with native Old English equivalents, demonstrating how language contact can reshape grammatical and lexical systems.

Understanding Old English verbs, therefore, is not only a matter of grammatical curiosity but also a key to uncovering broader historical and



cultural processes. The verb system serves as a linguistic fossil record that preserves evidence of phonetic change, morphological simplification, and syntactic reorganization over centuries. By studying Old English verbs, researchers can trace how complex inflectional systems gradually evolved into the more analytic structures of Modern English. This process reflects a general linguistic tendency toward simplification and reliance on auxiliary verbs and fixed word order.

In addition, examining Old English verbs contributes to a deeper understanding of how meaning and function interacted in early English texts. Poetic and religious writings such as *Beowulf* and *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* make rich use of verbal forms to express temporal relationships, modal nuances, and emotional intensity. The mastery of the verb system allowed Old English authors to convey subtle shades of meaning that might otherwise be lost in translation. Therefore, a detailed analysis of the Old English verb is essential not only for linguists but also for historians, philologists, and literary scholars who seek to interpret the cultural heritage of early England accurately. In summary, this introduction establishes the foundation for the detailed exploration of the Old English verb system. It emphasizes that verbs in Old English were central to the language's grammatical structure and expressive power. By analyzing their forms, classifications, and functions, we gain a clearer picture of how the English language evolved from its inflectional roots into the more streamlined form we know today. The following sections of this study will discuss the classification of verbs, their morphological characteristics, the rules governing tense and mood formation, and the historical processes that shaped their transition into Middle and Modern English [4,412].

Literature review: The study of Old English verbs has been a central topic in historical linguistics and English philology for more than a century. Scholars such as Henry Sweet (1892), A. Campbell (1959), and R. Quirk (1973) laid the groundwork for understanding the structure, morphology, and evolution of the Old English verbal system. Sweet's *A New English Grammar* provided one of the earliest systematic descriptions of Old English inflectional patterns, distinguishing strong, weak, and irregular verb classes based on their historical development from Proto-Germanic roots. Campbell's *Old English Grammar* offered a detailed morphological and phonological analysis, emphasizing how ablaut patterns and dental suffixation shaped the formation of tenses and participles [5,240].

Later linguistic research expanded these foundations by integrating comparative and theoretical perspectives. Mitchell and Robinson (2001) in *A Guide to Old English* presented a practical overview of verb paradigms, focusing on their use in literary and historical texts. Richard Hogg's *A*



Grammar of Old English (1992) provided a more generative interpretation, examining how verbal morphology reflected underlying syntactic rules. Furthermore, Lass (1994) explored diachronic linguistic processes, showing how phonetic reduction and analogy gradually simplified the verb system from Old to Middle English [6,368].

Recent studies by scholars such as Ringe (2017) and Denison (1993) have also examined the transition from synthetic to analytic structures, linking the morphological simplification of verbs to sociolinguistic and contact influences, particularly from Old Norse and Norman French. These works collectively highlight that the evolution of Old English verbs was shaped by both internal linguistic change and external historical events. The reviewed literature thus provides a theoretical and descriptive foundation for understanding the complex dynamics of verbal morphology in early English [7,484].

Methodology: The research on Old English verbs in this article is based on a historical-descriptive and comparative linguistic approach. The main objective of the methodology is to analyze the structure, classification, and development of Old English verbs through both qualitative and quantitative linguistic data. The study relies primarily on textual analysis of authentic Old English sources, including Beowulf, The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, The Homilies of Ælfric, and The Gospel of St. Matthew in Old English translation. These texts provide valuable examples of verb usage in different dialects and stylistic contexts, allowing the researcher to observe real patterns of verbal morphology and syntax.

The first stage of the methodology involves the collection and classification of verbs according to their morphological features. Verbs are grouped into strong, weak, preterite-present, and irregular categories. Each group is analyzed in terms of its stem formation, vowel gradation (ablaut), and tense-building mechanisms. The strong verbs are examined for their characteristic vowel alternations in different tense forms, while weak verbs are analyzed for their use of the dental suffix in past tense and participle formation. The study also records exceptional or irregular forms that deviate from the standard paradigms.

The second stage involves a comparative analysis between Old English and related Germanic languages, such as Old High German and Old Norse. This comparison helps to trace the historical development of specific verbal forms and to identify the influence of language contact on the Old English system. Phonological and morphological correspondences are examined to show how Proto-Germanic features evolved in English. The analysis is supported by existing linguistic theories and reference works, including grammars and etymological dictionaries.



Finally, the data are interpreted through a diachronic perspective to understand the gradual transformation of the verb system from the Old English period to Middle English. Statistical data on verb frequency and pattern regularity are used to illustrate the processes of analogy and simplification. The methodology thus combines traditional philological methods with modern linguistic analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Old English verbs functioned and evolved. Through this approach, the research seeks to connect linguistic description with broader historical and cultural developments in early medieval England.

Results: The findings of this research reveal that the Old English verb system was highly structured, systematic, and morphologically rich. Analysis of primary texts such as Beowulf and The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle shows that verbs in Old English were primarily divided into two major categories: strong and weak verbs, with several minor classes including preterite-present, anomalous, and defective verbs. Strong verbs, which formed their past tense through internal vowel change (ablaut), accounted for a significant portion of the verbal system. The study identified seven classes of strong verbs, each displaying distinct vowel alternations across the present, past singular, past plural, and past participle forms. This pattern demonstrates the systematic nature of Old English verbal morphology and its deep roots in Proto-Germanic linguistic traditions.

Weak verbs, by contrast, formed their past tense through the addition of a dental suffix (-d, -t, or -ed). They were more regular and gradually increased in number, indicating an early linguistic trend toward simplification and regularization. The research found that weak verbs became dominant in Middle English, suggesting that language users preferred simpler, more predictable patterns. Preterite-present verbs, such as *cunnan* (can) and *sculan* (shall), exhibited mixed features: they had strong-type past forms functioning as present tense and later evolved into modal verbs in Modern English.

The morphological analysis also revealed that Old English verbs marked person, number, tense, and mood through inflectional endings. The presence of distinct endings for singular and plural forms, as well as for different persons, reflects a high degree of morphological precision. For example, the verb *lufian* ("to love") had forms like *ic lufie* (I love), *þu lufast* (you love), and *he lufaþ* (he loves), showing clear grammatical distinctions. The study also confirmed that Old English had only two tenses present and past but relied on context and auxiliary verbs to express other temporal meanings.

Furthermore, the comparative analysis demonstrated that contact with Old Norse played an essential role in reshaping the Old English verb system. Some verb forms and endings were simplified or replaced under Norse influence, which eventually contributed to the loss of many inflectional



endings in Middle English. Overall, the results highlight how phonological change, analogy, and language contact collectively transformed the highly inflected Old English verb system into a more analytic and simplified structure over time.

Discussion: The analysis of Old English verbs provides significant insight into both linguistic structure and historical language change. The findings confirm that the Old English verb system was more complex and inflectional compared to later stages of English, reflecting the synthetic nature of early Germanic languages. This complexity allowed speakers to convey grammatical meaning primarily through endings rather than through word order, which became more fixed only in Middle and Modern English. The discussion emphasizes that the division between strong and weak verbs illustrates two contrasting morphological strategies: ablaut-based tense formation and suffix-based tense formation. These two systems coexisted for centuries but gradually shifted toward the simpler weak verb pattern as the language evolved.

The results suggest that the decline of the strong verb system was driven by both internal and external factors. Internally, analogy a process in which irregular forms are replaced by regular patterns played a major role in simplifying verb paradigms. Speakers began to apply the productive weak verb pattern to new and old verbs alike, leading to the gradual disappearance of many strong verb forms. Externally, language contact with Old Norse and Norman French accelerated this simplification process. The influx of new vocabulary and bilingual communication likely encouraged morphological reduction and the rise of auxiliary constructions, which eventually gave English its modern tense and aspect system.

Another important point raised in this discussion is the role of preterite-present verbs. These verbs illustrate a transitional stage between the older inflectional system and the later analytic structure. Originally strong verbs with past forms used as present tense, they later developed into modal verbs can, shall, must, and others that became central to expressing modality in Modern English. This transformation shows how functional reanalysis can create new grammatical categories, a process common in language evolution.

The discussion also considers the cultural and textual evidence supporting these linguistic developments. The use of verbs in Old English poetry and prose reveals that verbal inflections carried stylistic and rhythmic value, contributing to the artistry of works such as Beowulf. Over time, however, as inflections weakened and syntax gained importance, English transitioned toward greater grammatical transparency.

Conclusion: The study of Old English verbs reveals the deep historical roots of the English language and provides a comprehensive understanding of



how grammatical systems evolve over time. Through the analysis of their structure, classification, and usage, it becomes clear that the Old English verb system was highly organized and inflectional, reflecting a stage in linguistic history when meaning was largely conveyed through morphology rather than syntax. The verbs of Old English were divided into several classes, most notably strong, weak, and preterite-present verbs, each demonstrating distinct morphological strategies for tense and aspect formation. This complex yet logical system illustrates how early English speakers used inflectional endings to express grammatical categories such as person, number, tense, and mood with precision.

The comparison between strong and weak verbs highlights the gradual simplification process that English underwent during its evolution. Strong verbs, with their internal vowel changes (ablaut), represented an older and less productive system inherited from Proto-Germanic. Weak verbs, on the other hand, used a simpler and more regular method adding a dental suffix to form their past tense and past participles. The research shows that over time, weak verbs became dominant, reflecting a natural linguistic tendency toward regularization and economy of expression. This shift marks a crucial turning point in the history of English morphology, as it set the foundation for the largely regular verb system of Modern English.

The study also emphasizes the important role of language contact and cultural interaction in shaping the Old English verb system. The influence of Old Norse during the Viking Age and later of Norman French after the 11th century contributed to the erosion of inflectional endings and the development of new grammatical constructions. The contact with Old Norse, in particular, led to the borrowing of new verbs and the simplification of conjugational patterns, especially in northern dialects. These historical interactions not only enriched the English lexicon but also accelerated structural changes that pushed English from a synthetic toward an analytic linguistic type.

Moreover, the research underlines the importance of preterite-present verbs as transitional forms between Old and Modern English. These verbs, which originally functioned as past-tense forms but later took on present-tense meanings, eventually became the modal verbs that are essential in today's English grammar. Their development demonstrates how language naturally adapts and repurposes existing structures to meet communicative needs a process known as grammaticalization. This insight into the historical transformation of modals sheds light on the continuity between ancient and modern forms of expression.

In conclusion, the study of Old English verbs is essential not only for historical linguistics but also for understanding the evolution of grammatical



thought in the English-speaking world. It reveals how the interplay of phonological change, morphological simplification, and sociolinguistic influence produced the streamlined, flexible verb system that characterizes English today. By tracing the journey from the richly inflected forms of *lufian* and *drīfan* to the simplified modern verbs *love* and *drive*, we can see how English evolved through adaptation and contact while preserving traces of its ancient Germanic roots. Ultimately, the Old English verb system stands as a linguistic bridge connecting the past to the present an enduring testament to the dynamic, ever-changing nature of human language.

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