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English Verbs: Proof of Language Drift

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Anyone who has looked closely at a language, either by trying to learn a second language or merely by studying his or her own language in depth, finds that most languages are marked by many irregularities. These irregularities may be syntactic, semantic, phonetic, or morphological just to name a few. Most of these irregularities can be traced to sound changes at some point in the history of the language. Linguists have traced these changes in an attempt to discover some link between them. Edward Sapir believes that there is indeed a connection between these changes. "Language moves down time in a current of its own making. It has drift" (1921, p. 160). April McMahon explains Sapir's theory: "Sapir argues that . . . drift in a language is directional, and operates by the unconscious selection of variants which change the language in a particular, cumulative way" (1994, p. 138). Therefore, according to Sapir, the link between the changes of a language is that they constitute a one-way movement toward consistency, or uniformity. A language that achieves total uniformity is called a consistent language.

There are those who disagree with the idea of consistent languages. Niel Smith (1981) tells us that "it appears that no language is totally consistent." Peter Matthews (1982) also disagrees with the theory of consistent languages. In fact, he even disagrees with the idea that language change in inconsistent languages moves in one direction. He said that we should "think of a language in transition as like a drunk moving

unsteadily between two lamp-posts" (p. 9). Therefore, language change would be nothing more than random variation by its speakers. And yes, we can see much variation in language as we look from speaker to speaker. This does not mean, however, that each person's accent is part of linguistic drift. Sapir defines drift as "the unconscious selection on the part of its speakers of those individual variations that are cumulative in some special direction" (1921, p. 166). If we look at every individual variation of a language, the language may indeed resemble a drunk staggering between lamp-posts. However, Sapir is not trying to account for every slight alteration in a language. Language drift deals with those variations in language that bring about a systematic change over time. In this presentation, I propose to give proof of language drift by showing how English verbs have moved toward regularity according to the laws of analogy.

Old English Verbs

In Old English, there were two types of verbs. A. C. Baugh and T. Cable (1993) tell us that "a peculiar feature of the Germanic languages (of which English is a part) was the division of the verb into two great classes, the weak and the strong, often known in Modern English as regular and irregular" (p. 58). A pattern unique to Indo-European languages is the internal vowel change, *ablaut*, of strong (irregular) verbs. An example of this can be seen in the verb "to sing,"

conjugated “sing, sang, sung” (Williams, 1986, p. 260). In the weak (regular) verb, the far more numerous class, the tense change is made by the addition of the dental morpheme. The verb “to walk” is an example of a weak conjugation: “walk, walked” (Baugh & Cable, 1993, p. 58).

Analogical Extension

As the English language was spoken, a change occurred which greatly affected the Old English verbal system. We refer to this change as analogical extension, or “the generalisation of a morpheme or relation which already exists in the language into new situations or forms” (McMahon, 1994, p. 71). I will give a brief example by way of explanation. Normally, in English we make a noun plural by adding the morpheme /s/: house, houses; book, books. Therefore, it is not a mystery to us when we hear children say “foots.” We assume that they come up with this form by way of analogy. Kurylowicz, a Polish linguist who traced language change to analogy, explains the existence of analogical extension in morphological areas. “Those forms that are basic tend to influence others . . .” (as cited in Lehmann, 1992, p. 230). This idea is found in Kurylowicz’s second law of analogy: “analogical development should proceed from a basic or simple form to a derived form” (as cited in McMahon, 1994, p. 77).

Let’s look at analogical extension in the context of this presentation on English verbs. “Kurylowicz calls the present [tense] the founding form; a derived form like the present passive [and I might add here the preterite] he calls founded. A founded form might then be modified

in accordance with the founding form” (as cited in Lehmann, 1992, p. 230).

Therefore, according to Sapir’s idea of language drift—that all language change moves in a cumulative way—we would expect analogical extension to standardize the English verbs to one form. And according to Kurylowicz’s second law—that language favors moving from a basic to a derived form—we would expect that standardized form to be the weak or regular verb, in which conjugation there is an addition to the present tense in the form of a dental morpheme. Let’s see what really happened.

From Strong to Weak Conjugation

Thanks to the research of Marcin Krygier, we have a list of 367 known strong verbs in Old English (A.D. 449–1100). Krygier traces their existence through the end of Middle English (A.D. 1100–1500). At that point, only 208 remain in the English language. In 1774, only 161 of those 208 strong verbs remained, according to the book *Grammatical Institutes* written by John Ash. Today, only 96 verbs retain the strong, or irregular, conjugation. John Algeo and Thomas Pyles (1993) explain the disintegration of strong verbs in this way: “Throughout the history of English, the strong verbs—always a minority—have fought a losing battle, having either joined the ranks of the weak verbs or been lost altogether” (p. 194). Further research is needed to find exactly how many strong verbs changed to weak verbs and how many dropped out of the language. But J. M. Williams (1986) tells us that at least “80 originally strong OE irregular ablaut verbs

Table 1. Old English Strong Verbs to Middle English Weak Verbs

Old English Strong Conjugation		Middle English Weak Conjugation
Present	Preterite	Preterite
gripan (gripe)	grap	gegrippde
hebban (heave)	hof	hefde
icgan (consume)	ean	ygde
steppan (step)	stop	gesteped
breotan (bruise)	breat	abreotte

Table 2. Middle English Strong Verbs to Early Modern English Weak (Regular) Verbs

Middle English Strong Conjugation		Early Modern English Weak Conjugation	
Present	Preterite	Present	Preterite
scufan	sceaf	shove	shoved
sheran	shaer	shear	sheared
mawan	meow	mow	mowed
meltan	mealt	melt	melted
hlichhan	hlog	laugh	laughed

Table 3. Early Modern English Strong (Irregular) Verbs to Modern English Weak (Regular)

Middle English Strong Conjugation		Modern English Regular Conjugation	
Present	Preterite	Present	Preterite
spell	spelt	spell	spelled
help	healp	help	helped
work	wrought	work	worked
crow	crew	crow	crowed
thrive	throve	thrive	thrived

have become weak" (p. 260). We will look at some examples of strong verbs changing to weak forms. While looking at the following tables, it is important to remember that a strong conjugation is one with only an internal vowel change. A weak conjugation, though it may contain a change in the vowel, is marked at the end by a dental morpheme.

Table 1 lists a few of the 61 Old English strong verbs that changed to weak verbs during Middle English. It is important to note that these changes came about by analogical extension. For example, in Old English, the weak verb "habban" had the preterite form "haefde." The verb "hebban" in Table 1 followed "habban" by analogy and adopted the preterite form "hefde" in Middle English. We also find similarities between the

strong verb "icgan" and the weak verb "hycgan." After analogical extension in Middle English, "icgan" formed the preterite "ygde" to match the preterite of "hycgan": "hogde."

Table 2 presents a few examples of strong verbs that remained strong through Old and Middle English, but changed during Early Modern English. I wish to provide some examples of analogical extension in these verbs. The strong verb "sheran" is similar to the weak verb "laeran." The latter verb has the preterite conjugation "laerde." It can be supposed that analogy was used to create the preterite form of "sheran." We know the preterite form of this verb, "sheared." Another example is in the verb "scufan." The Modern English form of the verb is "shove." The verb "love" forms a minimal pair with "shove." Therefore, it can be

assumed that the weak preterite form of “shove” came from analogy to “love.”

Table 3 is easier to read than the others, because we recognize all the words in it. These are not all the verbs that changed from Early Modern English to Modern English, but these are representations of the many verbs that underwent this shift. There is an interesting example of analogy in this table. The verb “crow” retained a strong conjugation throughout Old, Middle, and Early Modern English. However, in Modern English it finally changed to a weak, or regular, verb. In Table 1 we see part of the weak verb paradigm that influenced it. The Old English verb “mawan” (Table 2) became the Modern English verb “mow.” This verb changed to a weak verb because of its analogy to the verb “vow.” Although they are pronounced differently, their similar spelling produced the analogy. Other originally strong verbs that became weak because of analogy to “vow” are “bow”—pronounced with the same vowel as “vow”—and “sow,” which has a pronunciation similar to “mow.” In Table 3, the verb “crow” fits into this data set. Through this verb we can see that sometimes analogical extension is a slow process.

Present-Day Change

We can accept the previous data as proof that many English verbs have indeed changed from strong to weak conjugations. However, many people doubt that the present-day irregular verbs will continue to drift in that direction. I would direct these people to the following quote by Sapir (1921):

As we look about us and observe current usage, it is not likely to occur to us that our language has a “slope,” that the changes of the next few centuries are in a sense prefigured in certain obscure tendencies of the present and that these changes, when consummated, will be seen to be but continuations of changes that have already been effected. We feel rather that our language is practically a fixed system and that what slight changes are destined to take place in it are as likely to move in one direction as another. The feeling is fallacious. Our very uncertainty as to the impending details of change makes the eventual consistency of drift all the more impressive. (P. 166)

This means that English, even as it is written in this paper, is in a state of transition. We survey the English language of the past and find patterns of change that have led to the current use of our language. And future generations will analyze the English of our day to chart the changes that will have led to its usage in their day.

The individual variation that exists today gives us an example of the “slope” that Sapir talked about. For example, it is not uncommon to hear a child say: “I drew a picture” or “My sister gived me a piece of candy.” Similar errors are made by non-native English speakers. And yes, native, adult speakers too make these errors. At the Miss American Fork pageant, the reigning Miss Utah presented a scholarship to the contestant who “selled the most tickets.” These people are simply using the laws of analogy in their everyday speech. This slight alteration in the “correct” English gives us the individual variation from which we can make “unconscious selection” to move language in a cumulative direction (Sapir, 1921, p. 166).

Conclusion: Future Analogical Extension in English Verbs

Although it is hard to observe change as it happens around us, by observing the past, we can predict certain changes for the future. Let’s apply this to the English verbs. We find in the Old, Middle, and Early Modern English the change of strong to weak verbs according to Kurylowicz’s second law of analogy. Because this change has been going on over such a long period of time (almost 1500 years), we can assume that this process will not simply stop. I predict that the English irregular verbs will keep moving towards the regular conjugation, further proving the existence of language drift as proposed by Sapir.

I would like to propose two possibilities of verbs that will be affected by such analogical extension. Let’s start with the irregular verb “to drive.” This verb forms a minimal pair with both “strive” and “thrive.” The preterite tense of the latter verbs is formed by adding the dental morpheme. This is a typical regular form. My research has lead me to believe that analogical extension will one day yield the preterite form “drived” for the verb “drive.”

Another minimal pair that provides us with an example of possible analogical extension in the future is “know” and “sow.” Similar verbs are the verbs “mow” and “crow” that have already

been mentioned. Just as it took time for “crow” to accept the change to a weak verb, it may take much more time for the same change to occur in “know.” It would not be surprising to me if the analogical extension already begun in this set of words continues until we hear the word “knewed.” These proposed changes may seem farfetched and may sound incorrect to the well-educated ear. However, Sapir tell us that “in the long run, any new feature of the drift becomes part and parcel of the common, accepted speech, but for a long time may exist as a mere tendency in the speech of a few, perhaps a despised few” (1921, p. 166). This may be the case with English verbs. Regular conjugations to irregular verbs may, at first, be seen as an illustration of an uneducated or “despised” person.

I can predict that English irregular verbs will continue to drift towards regularity, and a more inflexible speaker may predict that our language will remain in a fixed state as far as verbs are concerned. However, the linguist must be patient and slow to judge, because what the future holds for English verbs, only time will tell.

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