

MIDDLE ENGLISH VERBS

Middle English was very much a transitional period and many changes which occurred at this time were later lost or obscured by changes in future periods.

In Middle English, as in Old and Modern English, the verb has just two tense-forms: present and past. The way in which the past tense is formed divides the regular verbs into two classes, weak and strong. The great majority of verbs are weak and their numbers steadily increased, since most newly formed or introduced verbs were weak; also there was a tendency for verbs that were strong in Old English to become weak in Middle English. Many of the commonest verbs, however, are strong. The distinction between two classes is that two weak verbs form their past tense and past participle with "a dental suffix", that is, an ending containing a *d* or *t* (e.g. in modern English *kill*, *laugh*, *learn*, *bend*), whereas strong verbs form their past tense and past participle by changing their stem vowel in accordance with an ancient rule that goes right back to the remote ancestor of English, the 'Indo-European mother-tongue'. Examples of strong verbs in modern English are *drive*, *sing*, *bear*, *choose*. However, a few verbs both have a dental suffix and change their stem vowel (e.g. in modern English *seek*, *buy*, *bring*, *think*); these are weak verbs, the change in their stem vowel not being ancient but having taken place in early Old English.

The verb has three moods: indicative, subjunctive and imperative. The distinction between indicative and subjunctive is that the subjunctive is a non-factual mood, used to express a doubt, hypothesis, conjecture, wish or the like. The imperative is used for orders and requests.

In the indicative mood, verbs may distinguish in form between the first, second and third persons of the singular, but all verbs have just one form throughout the plural (for *3e*, and *hi/þei*). The subjunctive has just one form throughout the singular, to which it adds *-n* throughout the plural.

There are two participles or adjectival forms of the verb: the present participle (in Modern English the '-ing participle'), and the past participle (used to form verb-tenses with 'have' and 'be', and also as an adjective).

The endings of the Present Tense are the same for weak and strong verbs, but there are considerable variations according to dialect. Differences may be illustrated by setting out the forms in the language of the *Ancrene Wisse* (early thirteenth century, South-West Midlands) side by side with those in the language of the *Garwain* manuscript (late fourteenth century, North-West Midlands), taking the verb *here(n)*, 'to hear' as the example:

		Ancrene Wisse			Gawain
<i>infinitive</i>		heren			here
<i>indicative</i>					
sg.	1	ich	here	I	here
	2	þu	herest	þou	heres
	3	he	hereð	he	heres
pl.		we, 3e, ha	hereð	we, 3e, þay	here(n), heres
<i>subjunctive</i>					
	sg.	ich, þu, he	here	I, þou, he	here
	pl.	we, 3e, ha	heren	we, 3e, þay	here(n)
<i>imperative</i>					
	sg.		her		her(e)
	pl.		hereð		heres
<i>present participle</i>					
			herinde		herande

Wherever it occurs, the *-en* ending is gradually lost, leaving *-e* or no ending. The result of this development, in some dialects, is that only the indicative second and third persons singular and the present participle have distinctive endings. In Northern texts the verb ending is generally lost when the plural pronoun immediately precedes the verb: *we tye*.

The dialectical variations, affecting chiefly the endings of the present indicative third person singular and the plural, and the present participle, are as follows:

Third person singular

- (i) *-es* is Northern and North Midland.
- (ii) *-eth* is Southern and South Midland (to the south of Cheshire, Derbyshire and Lincolnshire).

In Southern dialects the ending *-eth* is reduced to *-th*, which is assimilated into a stem ending in *d* or *t*, so that *he findeth* becomes *he fint*, 'he finds' (4, 239); similarly *fycht*, 'Tights' (6, 103), *last*, 'lasts', *sit*, 'sits', *slant*, 'stands' *went* (from *wenden* 'goes').

Plural

- (i) *-eth* is Southern and South-West Midland (to the south of Shropshire, Warwickshire, Cambridge and Norfolk).
- (ii) *-e(n)/-on* is North-West Midland, East Midland and from there spread to London.
- (iii) *-es* is Northern (Lancashire, Yorkshire, Lincolnshire and further north).

Present participle

- (i) *-ing* is the general Southern and Midland form (*Sir Orfeo*).
- (ii) *-and* is the Northern form, which is also found elsewhere, particularly around London (*Patience*, *Sir Orfeo*).
- (iii) *-inde* is found in the South-West Midlands (*The Owl and the Nightingale*, *Ancrene Wisse*).
- (iv) *-ende* is used in the East (*The Peterborough Chronicle*).

In many dialects the present participle, which is an adjective, is distinguishable from the verbal noun or gerund which ends in *-ing* in all dialects. Compare the dialects in *þe stif kyng hisselven / Talkkande*, (5, 107-8), with *Dere dyn upon day, daunsyng on ny3tes*, (5, 47), where *daunsyng* is a noun parallel to *dyn*.

In Southern dialects, including the South-West Midlands, some verbs have infinitives in *-i(e)n* or *-i(e)*; e.g. *makien*, *likin*, *luvie*. These descend from Old English Class two weak verbs, ending *-ian*. These verbs retain the *-i* in all parts of the present except the second and third persons singular of the indicative and the imperative singular. Hence in *Ancrene Wisse*, *makien*, infinitive (7, 3), *makeð*, third person singular (7, 46), *makeð*, plural (7, 4); in *Piers Plowman*, the infinitives *reedy*, *weed* (3, 66), and *gladyen*, 'gladden' (3, 126). Some French and Scandinavian loans were conjugated according to this pattern: e.g. *servið* 'they serve' (7, 14), *proferi* (infinitive), 'offer' (4, 434).

In some dialects the verb in the Past Tense has distinctions in form for the indicative and subjunctive in the singular, though the subjunctive plural is always the same as the indicative plural. The third person singular of the indicative has the same form as the first person singular.

In the south and South-West Midlands the past participle has the prefix *-i* or *-y*, derived from Old English *ge-*, unless there is some other prefix already present: so *isi3en*, 'come', *ybuld*, 'built' (2, 1); but *bi-growe*, 'overgrown' (2, 27); already has the prefix *bi-*.

Weak Verbs form their Past Tense by adding -ed(e), -d(e) or -t(e), and their past participle by adding -ed, -d or -t; thus *heren*, 'to hear' past tense *herde*, Past Participle *iherd*; *luvien*, 'to love', past tense 'luvede', past participle *iluvert*; *slepen*, 'to sleep', past tense *slepte*.

The past tense of *heren*, 'to hear', in the language of the Ancrene Wisse:

Indicative		
sg. 1	ich	herde
2	þu	herdest
3	we, 3e, ha	herden
Subjunctive		
sg.	ich, þu, he	herde
pl.	we, 3e, ha	herden
past participle		iherd

With the loss of *-en* and then of *-e*, the past tense is often unchanged throughout except for the *-est* of the second person singular of the indicative. In the North and the North Midlands the second person singular ends *-es/-ez*, as in *sendez*, (1, 415), or has *-e* or no ending so that there is one form throughout the past; e.g. second person singular *pou me herde* (1, 306), past participle (with 'unhistorical' *-e*) *I haf herde* (5, 26).

A few common verbs historically classed as weak not only add *-t(e)* in the past tense but also modify the stem itself. Most have survived into Modern English. Examples taken from the Garwain poems are:

Indicative	pa. and pp.
bryng, 'bring'	bro3t
seche, 'seek'	so3t
þenk, 'think'	þo3t
þynk, 'seem'	þu3t
worch, 'work'	wro3t

Strong Verbs form their past tense by changing the stem vowel. In early texts a verb may exhibit as many as four different stem vowels: one in the infinitive and present tense, a second in the first and third persons singular of the past tense indicative, a third in the other forms of the past tense, and a fourth in the past participle. For example, in the language of the Ancrene Wisse, *scheoten*, 'to shoot':

inf.	pa. I and 3sg.	pa. pl.	pp.
scheoten	scheat	schuten	Ischoten

Gradually the two vowels of the past tense are reduced to one, sometimes settling on the stem vowel of the singular, sometimes on that of the plural; but this took quite unsystematically, leaving doublet forms even in the same text: e.g. in *Gawain* there are the past tense plural forms *ran* and *runnen*. (Compare *sunk* and *sank* as alternative past tense forms in Modern English.) The past tense of *driven*, 'to drive', in the language of the Ancrene Wisse.

Indicative		
sg. 1	ich	draf
2	þu	drive
3	he	draf
	we, 3e, ha	driven
Subjunctive		
sg.	ich, þu, he	drive
pl.	we, 3e, ha	driven
past participle		idriuen

The forms of the first and third persons singular are identical in the indicative, and the form of the plural is that of the second person singular with the addition of *-n*. In the subjunctive the singular and plural forms are the same as the second person singular and the plural of the indicative respectively. These observations apply to all regular strong verbs.

In the same 'class' as *driven* – that is to say, with the same series of vowel changes – are *riden*, *writen*, *biden*, 'to wait', *risen* and others. In this class, the vowel of the infinitive stem is long, [i:], while the vowel of the past tense plural and past participle is short, [i]; compare with Modern English *drive-driven*, *ride-ridden*, etc.

In Old English seven classes of strong verbs may be distinguished. But during the Middle English period they began to be affected by so many dialectal changes and alterations by analogy with other verbs that it is no longer helpful to classify strong verbs in this way.

The results of this research show an example of the language change through different periods of time and can illustrate the mentioned phenomenon in lectures and workshops on History of the English Language Course.

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