

**THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPTS**

**EPISODE 56:
THE WEAK VERSUS THE STRONG**

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 56: The Weak vs The Strong. In this episode, we’re going to conclude our look at Old English grammar. And we’re going to do that by focusing on the traditional distinction between so-called strong verbs and weak verbs. And we’re going to examine why that distinction has become so muddled in Modern English. Now this may seem very technical, but it’s really not. It’s ultimately the reason why some English speakers say ‘dived’ and other speakers say ‘dove.’ And why some people say ‘dreamed’ and other people say ‘dreamt.’ And it’s why we say ‘hanged’ in certain situations, but ‘hung’ in other situations. So we’re going to try to figure out why those past tense forms are so variable in Modern English. And, as is often the case, the answer lies in the history of the language.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can always reach me directly at kevin@historyofenglishpodcast.com. And I am also on twitter at [englishhistpod](https://twitter.com/englishhistpod).

Now let’s turn to this episode about the history of English verbs. And really, this episode is about the history of the past tense forms of those verbs and why the past tense forms can vary so much within English.

When it comes to verbs, there are many different ways to classify them depending on their function and how they work within sentences, but the most basic and fundamental way to distinguish verbs is to look at how they change from present tense to past tense. As we’ve seen before, English doesn’t have a specific future tense form. We actually use the present tense form and add a word to it. So “I jump” becomes “I will jump.” And “I am jumping” becomes “I will be jumping.” But when it comes to past tense, we do have distinct verb forms. “I jump” becomes “I jumped.” “I sleep” becomes “I slept.” So today, we usually indicate past tense by adding a ‘D’ sound or a ‘T’ sound to the end of the verb. That’s an inflection, and it has survived over the centuries.

But note that some verbs don’t follow this general rule. *Sing-sang-sung. Freeze-froze-frozen. Steal-stole-stolen.* And so on. In these cases, the verb changes are based upon a vowel change in the middle and sometimes an ‘-EN’ ending for the past participle.

This is the basic distinction between so-called strong verbs and weak verbs which we looked at back in Episode 22 about Germanic grammar. All Germanic languages tend to work this way, though the distinction is more important in some languages than others. Those verbs like *sing-sang-sung* which have their own internal structure for changing tense are called strong verbs. They stand on their own. They have their own inherent rules. They don’t have to rely on that ‘-ED’ ending.

All of those other generic verbs which take a standard ‘-ED’ or ‘-T’ ending are called weak verbs. Today, most of our verbs fall into that category. And all new verbs come in as weak verbs with an ‘-ED’ ending. So the word *fax* came into English as a shortened version of the word

facsimile. And that produced the verb ‘to fax.’ And when *fax* came into English as a verb, its past tense form was made with an ‘-ED,’ and it became *faxed*. The same thing has happened with a word like *google*. It was originally a noun – a website – but it has also become a verb over time. So you might ‘google’ something if you want to find out more about it, but if you did it yesterday, you ‘googled’ it with an ‘-ED’ ending. So when new verbs come in, we just stick an ‘-ED’ on the end.

But if we were to go back in time to the original Indo-European period, we would find that things were completely different. At that point, all verbs were strong verbs. In other words, all verbs had an internal vowel change to distinguish present and past tenses like *sing-sang-sung* and *shake-shook-shaken*.

As we know, the original Indo-European language spread throughout Europe with the migration of the people who spoke that language. And in northern Europe, the original Proto-Germanic language emerged out of that original Indo-European language. Within that original Germanic language, the older, traditional verb system began to break down. Linguists are still not one hundred percent sure why, but for some reason, the Germanic speakers began to express past tense by sticking a ‘D’ or ‘T’ sound on the end of the verb. This type of ending is called a dental suffix. And as we’ve seen before, the ‘D’ sound and the ‘T’ sound are basically the same. The primary difference is that the ‘D’ sound is voiced with the vocal chords and the ‘T’ sound is voiceless. But other than that, the two sounds are produced the same way. And the Germanic speakers started to put those sounds on the end of verbs to indicate that something happened in the past. And of course, those sounds were the precursors of our modern ‘-ED’ ending.

Now, the reason why we know that this change occurred during the Germanic period is because this past tense ending is found throughout the Germanic languages, but it doesn’t exist in other Indo-European languages. So this was definitely a Germanic development.

When Jacob Grimm was researching the history of the Germanic languages in the 1800s, he noted this distinction, and he actually used the terms ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ to describe the distinction. And those terms ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ have stuck through the years.

As I noted earlier, the basic idea was that verbs like *sing-sang-sung* change forms based upon their own internal structure. They have a specific vowel change, and they don’t have to rely upon anything else. So they are called ‘strong.’ But other verbs have to borrow that generic ‘D’ or ‘T’ ending from somewhere else. They’re not strong enough to stand on their own, so they are therefore ‘weak’ verbs. That was Grimm’s idea, and that’s where those terms come from.

For purposes of this episode, I am going to occasionally refer to the ‘weak’ verbs as the ‘weak ED’ verbs just to make it a little easier to keep track of which form is which. And I’ll generally refer them as the ‘weak ED’ verbs because they typically end in ‘ED’ in Modern English. In fact that ‘T’ ending appears to be gradually disappearing

We still use it in a word like *slept*. But *burnt* is increasingly being rendered as *burned*. *Smelt* is increasingly *smelled*. *Learnt* is *learned*. *Dwelt* is *dwelled*. *Spilt* is *spilled*. *Spoilt* is *spoiled*. And so on. So those ‘-T’ endings are gradually giving way to the more popular ‘-ED’ ending. However, those older ‘-T’ endings are still prominently found as adjectives. We still refer to ‘spilt milk’ and ‘burnt toast.’ But even in some of those cases, there may be some erosion going on. So just to be clear going forward, when I refer to ‘weak ED verbs,’ I am including these past tense verbs which end in ‘T’ as well.

So the original Germanic speakers developed this particular verb ending to indicate past tense. And it proved to be very popular. It was simpler than the old strong system. With the older Indo-European strong system, you had to keep track of all of those internal vowel changes like we still do with *sing-sang-sung*. But with that generic ‘-ED’ ending, you could just stick it on the end of a verb and you were good to go. It also made it easier to incorporate new verbs into the language. You could just add that generic ending to the new verb like we do today. So that ‘weak ED’ ending became increasingly popular. And over time, that ‘-ED’ ending began to replace the older strong forms.

By the time of the Old English period, English had a mix of both types of verbs. But there were a lot more strong verbs lingering around back then. In fact, Old English had about 300 strong verbs, which were mainly holdovers from the Indo-European language. And in case your curious, that’s about four times as many as we have today. And remember that the Old English vocabulary was very small compared to today. So in terms of percentages, Old English had lots more of those strong verbs.

In Old English, there were seven classes or categories of strong verbs. And the verbs within those respective categories behaved in a very predictable manner. That’s why they’re classified into these different groups. So for example, one class of verbs included the early version of words like *sing*, *sting*, *spring* and *swing*. And all of those verbs behaved the exact same way in Old English. But notice what happens to today, we have ‘*sing* and *sang*’ and ‘*spring* and *sprang*,’ but we have ‘*sting* and *stung*’ and ‘*swing* and *swung*.’ So what happened there?

Well, the answer has to do with the fact that things were more complicated in Old English. Today, we just have a simple present tense form *sing*, and a simple past tense form *sang*. And it’s always *sang*, no matter what the subject is. “I sang.” “You sang.” “She sang.” “We sang.” “They sang.” It’s always the same. But of course, in Old English, there were different forms for each person. So the past tense forms varied depending on whether it was being used in first person, second person or third person, and whether it was referring to the action of a single subject or a plural subject. So all of this should be familiar after the last few episodes.

In first person singular, the form was just like today. “I sang” was “ic sang,” which later became *sang*. And the same form was used for third person singular. So “he sang” was “he sang” (/hay sahnɡ/) – later “he sang.” But the form changed in second person singular. “You sang” was “þu sunge.” And the plural forms were *sungon*. So “we sang” was “we sungon.” So as we go through those various forms of the verb *sing* in Old English, we have the past tense form *sang* (/sahnɡ/) – or *sang* (/saynɡ/). And we have the past tense form *sunge*, and we have the plural past

tense form *sungon*. So within those various forms we can find the original versions of our modern *sing-sang-sung*. But they were used in very specific situations back then.

But after the Norman Conquest, English began to lose all of those specific inflectional endings. They were all reduced to just one past tense form. And every verb needed a specific past tense form. So English speakers had to choose between those various past tense forms and pick one out. And this process wasn't by committee. It just happened naturally over time as people tended to favor one particular verb form over the others. In the case of *sing*, they selected the first person and third person singular forms *sang* (/sahng/), which was later pronounced *sang* (/sayng/). And the same thing happened with *spring*, which acquired the past tense form *sprang*.

But in the case of *sting* and *swing*, the plural form was selected as the past tense form. So the past tense of *sting* became *stung*. And the past tense of *swing* became *swung*. Now all of this starts to get complicated, but that's kind of the whole point. The old, somewhat orderly, verb system of Old English was breaking down in Middle English. The newer forms which emerged did so in a somewhat random manner. Strong verbs which had once resembled each other in Old English were now starting to have completely different forms in Middle English. And that change was partly because English was simplifying all of the those endings and just picking random endings for each strong verb. This process helps to explain why the strong verb forms sometimes seem illogical in Modern English.

Another verb in this same class of Old English strong verbs was the original version of the verb 'to shrink.' In Old English, it was conjugated and it behaved exactly like those other verbs – *sing*, *spring*, *sting*, *swing*. And just as *sing* became *sang*, and *spring* became *sprang*, the simple past tense of *shrink* became *shrank*. But tell that to Hollywood which had a big hit with 'Honey I shrunk the kids.' *Shrunk* is traditionally reserved for the past participle, as in 'Honey I HAVE shrunk the kids.' But today, it can sometimes be found beside *shrank* as a simple past tense form. So these past tense forms continue to evolve within Modern English. But the key is that this evolution is not a new aspect of English. It has been going on for about a thousand years.

So forget trying to make any sense out of these various forms today. There really isn't much sense to be had. The forms evolved in a somewhat random manner over the centuries. And they continue to evolve.

Now this is only the beginning of the confusion. The fact is that history has not been kind to those 300 or so strong verbs from the Old English period. They have been battered and beaten and broken down over the centuries. As we know, a very large percentage of the words in Old English have simply disappeared from the language. And that high rate of attrition took care of a lot of those Old English strong verbs. Of the 300 or so strong verbs in Old English, about half of them completely disappeared from the language – gone forever. So that left about 150 which still survive in some form in Modern English.

But the popularity of that 'weak ED' verb form was so great that about half of those 150 strong verbs have been converted into 'weak ED' verbs over the centuries. In other words, they lost their older, internal vowel changes, and today they just use the standard '-ED' ending. So they

were broken down over the centuries. And this is consistent with the general desire of English speakers to use fixed word forms. We don't really like having to change the form of the word.

So over the centuries, words like *climb*, *glide*, *shove*, *chew* and *burn* all evolved from strong verbs into 'weak ED' verbs. At one time, they had their own internal vowel changes to indicate past tense. But today, we say *climbed*, *glided*, *shoved*, *chewed* and *burned*. They have all become weak because they use that '-ED' ending today.

The verb *melt* also followed this path. It was once a strong verb – *melte-mealt-molten*. But again, it lost those forms over time, and today it just takes a standard '-ED' ending in past tense. So *melt* and *melted*. But notice that its original past participle was *molten*. And that word still survives as an adjective as in 'molten lava.'

Another strong verb which became weak was *help*. I actually remember my grandfather saying "He holp me" instead of "He helped me." He was born and raised in a very rural part of eastern North Carolina. And as a child, I always assumed that it was just some word he made up, or some obscure word used by people where he grew up. But it wasn't. It was actually the Middle English past tense form of *help*. It was another one of those strong verbs which gradually lost its internal vowel change. So what was once *help* and *holp* became *help* and *helped*. But as this example shows, some of those older forms still linger in a few regional dialects.

Another strong verb which had a very similar history was the verb 'to snow.' Believe it or not, at one time, the past tense of *snow* was *snew* in many parts of the British Isles. So you might say, "It *snew* yesterday." Eventually, *snew* was replaced with *snowed*, but *snew* lingered on in some dialects of northern England until the past couple of centuries.

So those Old English strong verbs were having a hard time in Middle English and early Modern English. The consistent, orderly past tense forms of Old English were breaking down and becoming much more random. And many of those Old English verbs were disappearing along with a lot of other Old English words. And many of those words which survived lost their old strong forms and just adopted a standard '-ED' ending.

So let's try to put some numbers on all of that. I said that there were once about 300 strong verbs in Old English. About half of them died out altogether. So that left about 150. Of those 150 or so strong verbs, about 80 evolved into weak verbs using the process I just described. That leaves about 70 strong verbs which have survived into Modern English. They include most of our modern strong verbs. *Sing-sang-sung*. *Spring-sprang-sprung*. *Freeze-froze-frozen*. And so on. And it includes verbs like *write*, *ride*, *bite*, *shine*, *drive*, *drink*, *fly*, *shoot*, *lose*, *shake*, *begin* and a few dozen others.

And if we were to leave the story there, Modern English would actually make sense. Whenever we would come across a strong verb like *sing-sang-sung*, we could just assume that it was one of those handful of verbs from Old English which has survived with its original strong form. But alas, English is not so easy or so simple. The fact is that English speakers were not done working their magic on those old verbs. Over the centuries, those old weak and strong distinctions have

started to break down even further. And this process has created a lot of confusion in Modern English.

This confusion is what gives us *dived* and *dove*, and *strived* and *strove*, and *hanged* and *hung*. And it also gives us the problems we have with *lie* and *lay*, and *set* and *sit*. So let's examine what happened. As is so often the case, what happened was linguistic confusion. People didn't know the history of the verbs. They didn't know if a verb was historically strong or weak. So sometimes, speakers began to mix up the various forms. And this type of confusion has happened in several different ways over the centuries. So let's try to break it down a little bit.

One thing that happened in the Middle English period is several 'weak ED' verbs actually became strong verbs. So let me say that again because we wouldn't necessarily expect that to happen. We wouldn't expect a perfectly normal verb with a simple '-ED' ending to suddenly start having complex vowel changes in the middle. We expect verbs to become simpler over time, not more complex. Yet in some cases, verbs did go from weak to strong.

Take a word like *dig*. At one time, the past tense was actually *digged*. We only acquired the word *dug* in the 1500s. Around the same time, words like *spit* and *stick* also acquired their modern past tense forms – *spat* and *stuck*. Prior to then, the past tense of *spit* was *spitted*. And the past tense of *stick* was *sticked*.

Another example of this is the verb 'to ring.' *Ring* was once a weak verb. The past tense was *ringed*. But today, it is *ring-rang-rung*. And notice it takes the same form as *sing* – *sing-sang-sung*. And that's really the important point here. Sometimes when words sound alike, we get confused as to the proper form.

So once again, we're dealing with linguistic confusion. It appears that some of those 'weak ED' verbs resembled strong verbs like *sing* and *ring*. And in the confusion of the Middle English period, people started to mix up verbs which sounded alike. Remember, Modern English grammar books didn't really exist yet. So sometimes it wasn't clear if a verb was a strong verb or a weak verb. And so these forms started to get mixed together.

So let's consider verbs like *tear*, *swear*, and *bear*, as in 'bearing a child.' All of these verbs are strong verbs, and they were strong verbs in Old English as well. We have *tear-tore-torn*. And *swear-swore-sworn*. And *bear-bore-born*. But then we have a verb like *wear* – W-E-A-R. In Old English, it was a weak verb. It took an '-ED' ending. The past tense was *wered*. But it appears that English speakers assumed that since the past tense of *tear* was *tore*, and *swear* was *swore*, and *bear* was *bore*, then the past tense of *wear* must be *wore*. And in the process, past tense *wered* became *wore*. And as a result, the verb *wear* went from being a weak verb to a strong verb. It actually became more complex and irregular – *wear-wore-worn*.

Another example of this can be found in the word *dive*. It was once a weak verb. The past tense was *dived*. English dialects in the British Isles have generally retained that older form *dived*. But in the United States, early English speakers apparently thought that *dive* was analogous to words like *weave*. The past tense of *weave* was *wove*, so the past tense of *dive* became *dove*. And that

is still the primary past tense form in American English. So in this example, two forms were created – *dived* and *dove* – and both have survived, but they have become separated by region.

And this is really the key to all of that confusion with these verbs. At some point, multiple forms of the verb co-existed. And over time, English speakers settled on one form over the other. And that was why some strong verbs became weak and some weak verbs became strong.

So again, at some point a strong verb like *help* had two different past tense forms as speakers became confused over the proper forms. So *holp* and *helped* both existed in the language. But English speakers settled on *helped*. So a strong verb became weak.

But we also saw that that process worked the other way. A weak verb like *wear* had a past tense form – *wered*. But then it acquired a new past tense form – *wore* – through linguistic confusion. Again, both forms co-existed for a while, but English speakers eventually settled on *wore*. And using that same process, a weak verb like *ringed* became *rung*. So those went the other way – from weak to strong.

And in some cases like *dive*, both past tense forms survived. The UK tends to use *dived* and the US tends to use *dove*. But the key to all of this is the fact that multiple forms of the verb existed side-by-side for a while. And those multiple forms came about due to confusion over what the proper form was.

The verb *sneak* is an interesting case because it has sort of gone back and forth over the centuries. It existed in Old English as a strong verb, but it wasn't well documented during that period. And it is also rarely documented in Middle English. But it reappeared in early Modern English. And when it popped back up during early Modern English, it came back as a weak verb with an '-ED' ending. Its past tense form was *sneaked*. But in the 1800s, American English began to develop the word *snuck* as a past tense form, thereby converting it back to a strong verb. It appears that *sneak* was confused with verbs like *stick* and *stuck*, and *strike* and *struck*. So the past tense of *sneak* became *snuck*. And *snuck* has even spread to British English. Today both *sneaked* and *snuck* are used, so it has become somewhat of a hybrid. But again, we tend to find that one form is more common in certain regions.

The big point here that English speakers sometimes struggle to determine what the correct past tense should be. And very often multiple forms exist, even though one is usually considered standard and acceptable. But this issue isn't new. It's not something that has just started to occur. It's actually been lingering in English for many centuries. And it has sometimes created multiple past tense forms which we still have to choose from.

Consider the verb *hang*. It has two past tense forms in Modern English – *hanged* and *hung*. Both are acceptable words, and we have to choose between them. But English has worked out an interesting rule for this word. A person is *hanged*, but a thing or object is *hung*. This weird little rule is a good example of how English has tried to sort out these multiple forms.

So let's examine what happened with that word. In Old English, there were two different forms of the word – *hon* and *hangian*. But there was a subtle difference in the way these forms were used. One version referred to the act of hanging something, and the key there is hanging 'something.' It had to have an object. Something had to be hung. Today, we call that a transitive verb because there has to be an object in the sentence. So you're doing something 'to' something.

The other form of the word just referred to the state of something being suspended in air. So it just referred to something hanging around. When you used that form of the verb, there was no object. So we call that verb an intransitive verb. So if I say, "I hang the picture," that's the first form because it has an object – a picture. I am doing something 'to' something. So the action transfers over the object. Thus it is transitive. But if I say, "The picture hangs there," that's the second version. I am not doing anything to the picture. The picture hangs. It's very Zen. It just is what it is. So it's intransitive. And keep that distinction in the back of your mind, because it is going to be very important in a minute.

So there was there a difference in the way those two original forms of the word *hang* were used. One used an object and one didn't. But in past tense, one version was weak and one was strong. So *hangian* became *hanged*. And *hon* became *hung*. So *hon* and *hangian* had similar meanings in Old English, but they were very distinct.

But in Middle English, the two separate forms of the word became confused, and they started to blend together. The two separate present tense forms merged into the single word *hang*. But the past tense forms remained distinct. So that left English with the past tense forms *hanged* and *hung*. And this is the same scenario which we saw before. We have an environment where English speakers had to choose the correct past tense form. And as we've seen, English speakers tended to prefer the simpler 'ED' form. So the 'weak ED' form won out. And *hanged* became the standard past tense form for a while.

But then, in early Modern English, *hung* reappeared. It's unclear if *hung* had been lingering around in the background since Old English or if it had died out and speakers just re-invented it. As we saw earlier, *sing-sang-sung* gave us *ring-rang-rung*. And some linguists think that same scenario influenced the word *hang* as well. Just as we had *sang* and *sung*, and *rang* and *rung*, some linguists think English speakers created – or re-created – *hang* and *hung*. Whatever its origin was, the word *hung* became very popular in Modern English. And it largely replaced the older form *hanged*. And *hung* is still the default rule in most cases in Modern English. "The picture hung on the wall." "The stockings were hung by the chimney with care."

But there was one group of people who didn't go along with that change from *hanged* to *hung*. And that group was the lawyers. Of course. You see, the law tends to be very conservative when it comes to legal terminology and legalese. And hanging was a common punishment in the law. So whenever you referred to a person being found guilty of a capital crime, they *hanged*, not *hung*. *Hanged* was the older, traditional term used in Middle English. And that was the proper legal term.

Over the years, English coped with this discrepancy by making a new rule. Whenever we refer to a person, we use the word *hanged*. Whenever we refer to an object, we use the word *hung*. So a person is *hanged* for committing a crime, but a picture is *hung* on the wall.

So notice what happened. The difference between *hanged* and *hung* once referred to whether or not there was an object in the sentence. So at one time, I might have said “I hanged the stockings” because *stockings* is an object, but I would say “The stockings hung there” since there is not an object in that sentence. And that’s still the way Modern German works. The German version of the word *hang* behaves the way I just described. It varies depending on whether there is an object or not. But English developed this completely arbitrary rule which says we use one form for a person and the other form for everything else.

But, even though English did that with *hanged* and *hung*, it didn’t do that with words like *lie* and *lay*, and *set* and *sit*, and *rise* and *raise*. All of those pairs behave just like *hang* once behaved. One version is transitive – meaning that it requires an object when it’s used, and one version is intransitive – meaning that it doesn’t take an object. So *lay*, *set* and *raise* are transitive. You use them when you are doing something ‘to’ something. “I lay down the law.” “I set the plates on the table.” “I raise the flag.” The other forms are intransitive. They just exist. They’re not doing anything to anything. “I lie down.” “I sit down.” “I rise up.” The verb relates back to the subject – me. It doesn’t relate to anything else. So it’s intransitive. And if you can remember that distinction, you’ll never again confuse *lie* and *lay*, and *set* and *sit*, and *rise* and *raise*.

And again, *hang* once worked the same way. But the distinctions got lost when the two original present tense words – *hon* and *hangian* – collapsed into the single word *hang*. And that appears to have triggered some of the later confusion.

So that raises an interesting question – or maybe I should say that an interesting question arises. If words like *raise* and *rise* and *lay* and *lie* remained similar but distinct words, why did Old English *hon* and *hangian* collapse into a single word *hang*? Well, it might have something to do with the Vikings. As we’ve seen before, hanging was a common punishment for Viking raiders. You might remember that King Alfred hanged every survivor of a Viking ship which ran aground in Wessex. And the Vikings had their own version of the word *hang*. And it’s believed that their Norse version of the word blended with the English version in the north. And as those English and Norse versions blended together, the two different English versions may have also blended together.

And this raises another big question. What happened when English speakers in the north encountered those Vikings and all of their Norse verbs? Did those verbs come in as strong verbs or weak verbs? Well, as a general rule, when English speakers borrow verbs from other languages, they almost always come in as weak verbs. English speakers just take the foreign verb and stick an ‘ED’ on the end. That’s mainly what English did when the Normans arrived, and it’s what we still do today.

But when the Vikings arrived, the situation was a little different. The Vikings brought their own version of Germanic verbs. And being a Germanic language, some of their verbs were strong and some were weak. And since English and Norse were so similar at the time, English tended to retain the Norse form of the verb.

For weak verbs, this was easy. English just borrowed the Norse verb and continued to use an ‘-ED’ or ‘-T’ ending like the Vikings did. This included Norse verbs like *crawl*, *call*, *cast* and *clip*. It also included verbs like *droop* and *gape*. And we get a sense of the Viking influence in borrowed weak verbs like *lift*, *raise*, *stagger* and *want*. And we get a sense of how the two groups communicated with each other in the borrowed word *blather*. It’s a Norse word, and it’s still weak today just like it was when the Vikings used it. So today, we say *blathered*, just like we say *crawled*, *called*, *clipped*, *drooped*, *gaped*, and so on.

But what about those Norse verbs which were strong – which had their own internal vowel changes? Well for those, English tended to maintain the strong form used by the Vikings. So over the past few episodes, I’ve mentioned the word *give* a lot. It’s the Norse version of the English word which was *giefan* (/yee-ah-van/). So English borrowed the Norse verb with its ‘G’ sound at the beginning, but it retained the strong verb form which was used in both languages. And today we have *give-gave-given*.

The word *get* follows the same general pattern. It was an old Germanic word, but English had actually lost the basic root word. However, it did use the root with prefixes. So Old English had the words *beget* and *forget*. And this was also the case in Dutch and Frisian. They didn’t use that stem by itself either. So that root was apparently lost in the lowlands of northern Europe before the Anglo-Saxons headed to Britain. But when the Vikings arrived, they re-introduced that original Germanic root word *get*. And for the first time, English began to use that word by itself as a free-standing verb. *Get* was a strong verb, and English retained that verb as a strong verb.

Today, we have it as *get*, *got*, *gotten*. And this is one of those cases where American English has actually retained an older form of the verb, while UK English has changed the verb form. American English still uses the older past participle *gotten*, as in “You have gotten very old.” But for the most part, English dialects in the UK tend to just use *got* today.

So we’ve seen that *give* and *get* came from the Vikings, and they remained strong verbs with specific vowel changes to distinguish present and past tense. Another verb along the same lines was *take*. Again, that’s an incredibly common English verb. But it didn’t exist in the language before the Vikings. And maybe it’s appropriate that *take* came from those early Viking raiders.

Prior to the Vikings, the Anglo-Saxons used the word *niman* to mean ‘take.’ *Niman* actually lingers on in the adjective *nimble*. Old English used the word *naemel* to refer to the process of grasping something – in other words ‘to snatch or take something very quickly.’ So it had a sense of ‘taking something,’ but it also had a sense of ‘quickness.’ But over time, *nimble* lost its sense of ‘taking,’ and today it just has that sense of quickness.

But again, the original verb in Old English was *niman*, and it just meant ‘to take.’ But when the Vikings arrived, they brought their word *tacan* to Northern England. It isn’t actually attested in English writing until the very end of the Anglo-Saxon period. And once again, as with most Norse borrowings, it appeared first in the north and gradually spread south. And it quickly pushed out the native word *niman*. By the 1500s, the word *niman* had largely disappeared.

But once again, as *take* came into English, it retained its strong form from Old Norse. The Old Norse forms were *taka*, *tok* and *tekinn*. Today, we have them as *take*, *took*, *taken*. So the Modern English conjugation comes almost directly from Old Norse.

Other Norse strong verbs which remained strong were *sling* and *fling*. Today, we have them as *sling* and *slung*, and *fling* and *flung*. So as a general rule, English borrowed strong Norse verbs as strong verbs. Of course, there were a few exceptions. Words like *die* and *leak* were borrowed, and they were strong verbs in Old Norse. But they came into English as weak verbs with an ‘-ED’ ending. Today we have them as *died* and *leaked*.

Another strong verb which came in weak was *drag*. I noted in an earlier episode that *drag* is cognate with the native English word *draw*. Both derive from a common Proto-Germanic word which meant ‘to pull.’ And that word was originally a strong verb in the earlier Germanic language. The Anglo-Saxons developed the word *draw* from that original root word. And *draw* is still strong in Modern English. We have it as *draw*, *drew*, *drawn*. But the Norse version was *drag*. And when it came in, it came in as a weak verb – *drag* and *dragged*. But, some modern dialects – especially in the United States – use the word *drug* as a past tense form. And that form *drug* is also attested in a few sources in Middle English and early Modern English. But *dragged* has always been the more common usage. So you are supposed to say, “You look like something the cat dragged in.” But sometimes people say, “You look like something the cat drug in.” So this is another example of these forms continue to evolve within Modern English.

So despite occasional exceptions like *dragged* and *died* and *leaked*, the major point here is that Old English and Old Norse were close enough in structure that English could borrow Norse verbs in their original forms and tenses. And that is generally what happened. And that fact is very significant.

When those Norse strong forms were borrowed into English, it was the last time English did that on a large scale. When the Norman French arrived a short time later, most their French verbs came in as weak verbs. English just added an ‘ED’ to the end of them. And English has been doing that ever since.

So we’ve seen a general evolution of verbs from strong verbs to weak verbs over time. Today, we prefer fixed word forms, and we tend to use that fixed verb form and stick that ‘ED’ on the end. But those strong forms still linger in the language, and they still create linguistic confusion. We still struggle with the correct form – *dived* or *dove* – *dragged* or *drug*. Or how about the strong verb *slay*? The past tense should be *slew*, but *slayed* is increasingly common.

So we still have a lot of confusion with those forms, and if history is a guide, that confusion will likely continue as long as English tries to retain these old Germanic distinctions.

And with that, I'm going to conclude this second part of our look at the Old English verbs. And I'm also going to conclude this look at the history of Old English grammar. We'll explore some more grammar when we get to Middle English, and certainly when we get to Modern English. But for now, we need to move on with the story of English.

Next time, we'll look at events in the last half of the tenth century. With a fully unified Anglo-Saxon kingdom, there was an extended period of peace and prosperity. That period of peace also allowed for a massive monastic revival. And that meant there was a renewal of writing. In fact, most of surviving Old English literature comes from this last great period of Old English writing. But it also meant there was a new phase of Latin borrowings.

So next time, we'll explore what happened to the English language after the unification of England in the late tenth century.

So until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.