



COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE VERB IN OLD ENGLISH AND MODERN ENGLISH

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Abstract: This study presents a comparative linguistic analysis of the verb system in Old English and Modern English. The research focuses on morphological, syntactic, and semantic changes that occurred in the evolution of the English verb from the early Germanic period to the present day. Using descriptive and comparative methods, the study explores verb conjugation, tense and aspect formation, auxiliary usage, and irregular forms. The findings show that while Old English verbs were characterized by rich inflection and strong morphological regularity, Modern English has moved toward analytical construction, relying on auxiliary verbs and word order rather than inflectional endings. The paper concludes that the simplification of verb morphology in Modern English reflects broader historical linguistic tendencies toward analytical grammar and syntactic stability.

Keywords: Old English, Modern English, verb system, morphology, syntax, linguistic change.

Introduction

Language is not a static entity; it evolves continuously under the influence of social, cultural, and linguistic factors. English, one of the most widespread languages in the world today, has undergone remarkable historical transformations since its early Germanic roots. Among the linguistic elements most affected by these changes is the verb system — the grammatical foundation that expresses time, mood, and aspect. The verbs of Old English (roughly 450–1150 AD) exhibited a highly synthetic structure. They used numerous inflectional endings to mark person, number, tense, and mood. Conversely, Modern English (1500 AD–present) demonstrates an analytical structure, depending largely on auxiliary verbs and fixed word order instead of inflections. Understanding the historical development of the English verb system not only reveals how grammar evolved but also illustrates the general movement from inflectional to analytical typology. This research, therefore, seeks to analyze the main grammatical, morphological, and syntactic



distinctions between Old English and Modern English verbs, emphasizing their implications for linguistic theory and modern English pedagogy.

Methodology

This research employs comparative, descriptive, and historical-linguistic methods. The primary sources include Old English texts such as *Beowulf*, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and Alfred's translations, which provide authentic examples of Old English verb morphology. Modern English data are drawn from contemporary literature, grammar textbooks, and corpora.

Each example was examined within its grammatical and semantic context to highlight structural and functional shifts. Comparative analysis was used to determine how inflectional patterns declined and how new grammatical devices replaced them in Modern English.

Results

Verb Classification and Conjugation: In Old English, verbs were divided into strong and weak categories. Strong verbs expressed tense through vowel gradation (ablaut):

singan – sang – sungon – sungen (“to sing”).

Weak verbs, on the other hand, used dental suffixes (-d/-t) to form the past:

lufian – lufode – lufod (“to love”).

Modern English retains only traces of this system. The distinction between strong and weak verbs remains partially visible in regular (worked, played) and irregular (sang, brought) verbs. However, many formerly strong verbs have become regularized (helpan → helped).

Tense and Aspect: Old English had only two morphological tenses — present and preterite (past) — but could express aspect and futurity through context or auxiliary constructions. For example:

Ic gā — “I go”

Ic ēode — “I went”

Modern English has developed progressive and perfect aspects, relying on auxiliary verbs (be, have) combined with participles:

I am going (progressive aspect)

I have gone (perfect aspect)

This change marks a fundamental shift from synthetic to analytic expression of grammatical meaning.

Mood and Modality: Old English used inflection to express mood distinctions, indicative, subjunctive, and imperative, with distinct endings:

ic hæbbe (I have – indicative)

gif ic hæbbe (if I have – subjunctive)



In Modern English, these moods are mostly expressed through auxiliaries or modal verbs: may, might, should, could, must. For instance:

If I were rich (subjunctive form preserved).

He may come tomorrow (modal expression).

The gradual disappearance of verbal inflections has led to the functional expansion of modal auxiliaries as primary carriers of mood and modality.

Syntactic Position and Word Order: In Old English, word order was relatively free, as grammatical relationships were marked morphologically. A sentence such as:

Se cyning geseah þone mann — “The king saw the man”

could also appear as: Þone mann geseah se cyning, without altering meaning.

In contrast, Modern English exhibits a fixed SVO order, where word position determines meaning:

The king saw the man ≠ The man saw the king.

This structural rigidity correlates with the decline of case inflections and reflects a syntactic rather than morphological system of grammar.

Discussion

The obtained results clearly demonstrate the transition from inflectional complexity to analytical simplicity in the English verb system. The Old English verb was morphologically rich, marking grammatical categories through endings and internal vowel changes. Over centuries, phonetic reduction, language contact, and simplification processes led to the erosion of inflectional endings and the rise of auxiliary constructions. Analytical development profoundly changed verb usage. Modern English expresses tense, aspect, and mood through multi-word combinations rather than single inflected forms. For instance, the Old English *hæfde gesungen* evolved into *had sung*, demonstrating morphological loss but syntactic gain.

Phonological erosion also played a major role. The loss of unstressed endings like *-an*, *-on*, *-e* caused paradigm leveling, making the language more dependent on word order. This structural simplification enhanced clarity but reduced morphological expressiveness. Modal verbs in Modern English expanded semantically to replace many Old English subjunctive forms, reflecting the language’s cognitive shift toward precision and logical expression. For example, *ic mote gān* (“I may go”) evolved into modern modal expressions such as *I might go* or *I am allowed to go*. Culturally, this grammatical evolution reflects the democratization and globalization of English. As it spread through colonization and education, simplicity became an advantage, making Modern English accessible and easily adaptable for learners.



From a pedagogical viewpoint, understanding the evolution of the verb system aids modern English teaching. It helps learners grasp why English lacks extensive inflections and relies instead on syntax and auxiliaries. In translation and historical linguistics, awareness of Old English morphology explains many irregularities and exceptions in Modern English verb forms (go – went, be – was/were, sing – sang).

Thus, the comparison reveals that while Old English verbs encoded meaning morphologically, Modern English verbs express the same meanings syntactically and periphrastically. The shift represents a larger typological transformation of English from a synthetic to an analytic language.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of Old and Modern English verbs demonstrates that the English language has undergone significant grammatical restructuring. Old English relied on inflection and vowel alternation to mark tense, person, and mood, whereas Modern English depends on auxiliary verbs and fixed syntax. This linguistic evolution illustrates the natural tendency of languages to simplify morphological systems over time. It also shows how communicative efficiency, contact with other languages, and phonological erosion collectively shaped English into the globally dominant, structurally flexible language it is today.

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