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# The English Verb System

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## **THE ENGLISH VERB SYSTEM**

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*by*

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## FOREWORD

The need for a new analysis of the English verb system may seem questionable, considering that every manual or textbook on English grammar devotes at least one chapter to the subject. Appropriate sections dealing extensively with English verb morphology can be found in Sweet's *A New English Grammar* (1892), Palmer's *A Grammar of Spoken English* (1930), Curme's *A Grammar of the English Language* (1935), Fries's *American English Grammar* (1942), and Jespersen's *A Modern English Grammar* (1942), to quote only a few of the more authoritative sources. Deliberately structural interpretations, exploiting the concepts and the techniques devised in recent decades by modern linguistics, essentially derive from Bernard Bloch's "English verb inflection" (1947, 1957); following Charles Hockett's study of the same title (1942), this study underlies a number of versions included in English-oriented treatises on general linguistics such as H. A. Gleason, Jr.'s *An Introduction to Descriptive Linguistics* (1955, 1961) and Archibald Hill's *Introduction to Linguistic Structures* (1958), or in structurally oriented textbooks on English such as those in Gleason's selected bibliography. This refers to verbal forms rather than verbal phrases, to simple rather than compound forms, which constitute the main object of the present analysis. For the latter, especially for the intricate problem of the auxiliaries, see Twaddell's *English Verb Auxiliaries* (1960); and for a binary interpretation of the whole system, see Jakobson's study in the *American Anthropologist* (1960).

It is hoped that, despite such an abundant treatment, the results brought forward in this monograph will justify an attempt prompted by our conviction that the resources of structural linguistics have not been fully exploited, and that more could be said on

one of the most thoroughly explored topics of English morphology. Essentially, the present analysis differs from its predecessors in that it distinguishes much more sharply between the various aspects of the system, the inflectional from the thematic and, for the latter, the vocalic or syllabic part of the contrastive segment from the consonantal or non-syllabic. First, each of these features is examined independently, with the ensuing classes established separately; then only, criteria are hierarchized and mutually subordinated, with the particular groupings combined in a general system of classes, subclasses, and sub-subclasses. Advantages of the hierarchical approach over those which prefer to coordinate thematic and inflectional characteristics (rather than subordinate the former to the latter) and treat the contrastive segments of stems as indivisible wholes (rather than distinguish their syllabic section from the non-syllabic) are both theoretical and practical, and affect both grammar and lexicon. Theoretically, it is a more logical procedure, which hierarchizes criteria to proceed from the more general features to the particular instead of placing the two on the same level; practically, the more discriminate approach reveals certain previously overlooked relations that hold between the thematic and the inflectional properties of verbal bases (see Section 5.0). As a result, a considerable simplification is achieved in the grammar, where the English verb system can be reduced to a fewer number of classes, and also to a fewer number of rules that govern the occurrence of their members; and in the lexicon, where economy is obtained in the morpholexical transcripts, i.e., in the number of symbols of formal class-membership necessary and sufficient to generate or construct any and all desired forms.

In outlining an analysis intended mainly for specialists, a detailed account of previous interpretations was felt unnecessary, especially since a closer examination reveals the more recent ones to be versions of Bernard Bloch's "English verb inflection", a study which, for economy's sake, was taken to represent the thoroughest and soundest alternative to the analysis advanced in this essay.

The analysis is divided into inflectional (see Section 2.0) and thematic (see Sections 3.0 and ff.), the latter further distinguishing the consonantal aspect (see Section 4.0) from the vocalic (see Section 5.0). At each step, relevant criteria are examined, classes established accordingly, memberships tabulated, and their inventories listed. Consequences of each analytic decision, both in the grammar and in the lexicon, are examined in the conclusions of each section. Finally, the two main classifications, inflectional and thematic, are combined in the general conclusions in which the English verb system is determined by subordinating the consonantal to the vocalic properties of the stems, and the thematic characteristics to the inflectional. Section 6.0 outlines the overall system of English verb classes and exhaustively lists their irregular membership, which it follows by an alphabetical inventory of the morpho-lexical transcripts of irregular English verb bases.

We wish to thank Mrs. Lillian Shargel for devoted help in the preparation of the manuscript, and Professor Cornelis van Schooneveld for precious editorial advice.





## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>FOREWORD . . . . .</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1.0 INTRODUCTION . . . . .</b>	<b>13</b>
1.1 Data . . . . .	13
1.11 Thematically Regular and Irregular Verbs . .	13
1.12 Inflectionally Regular and Irregular Verbs .	14
1.13 Irregular Verbs . . . . .	14
1.131 Thematically Irregular verbs . . . .	14
1.132 Inflectionally Irregular verbs . . . .	14
1.133 Thematically-Inflectionally Irregular verbs . . . . .	15
1.14 Anomalous, Auxiliary, and Defective Verbs .	16
1.2 Categories and Concepts . . . . .	17
1.21 Suffixless Categories . . . . .	17
1.22 Morphemic Environment . . . . .	19
1.23 Complementary Distribution . . . . .	20
<b>2.0 THE INFLECTIONAL SYSTEM . . . . .</b>	<b>22</b>
2.1 Inflectional Morphs . . . . .	22
2.11 Infinitive . . . . .	22
2.12 Present 3 . . . . .	22
2.13 Preterit . . . . .	22
2.14 Participle . . . . .	22
2.15 Gerund . . . . .	23
2.2 Inflectional Morphemes . . . . .	23
2.21 Infinitive . . . . .	23
2.22 Present 3 . . . . .	23
2.23 Preterit . . . . .	24
2.24 Participle . . . . .	24

2.25	Gerund . . . . .	25
2.26	Inventory . . . . .	25
2.3	Inflectional Classes . . . . .	26
2.31	Inflectional Sets . . . . .	26
2.32	Infinitive . . . . .	26
2.33	Present 3 and Gerund . . . . .	27
2.34	Preterit and Participle . . . . .	27
2.35	Inflectional Classes . . . . .	28
2.36	Inventory . . . . .	30
2.4	The Inflectional System . . . . .	31
2.41	Classes and Types . . . . .	31
2.42	Strong, Weak, and Mixed Verbs . . . . .	32
2.43	Regular, Mixed, and Irregular Verbs . . . . .	33
2.5	Inflectional Conclusions . . . . .	35
2.51	Grammar . . . . .	35
2.52	Lexicon . . . . .	36
3.0	THE THEMATIC SYSTEM . . . . .	37
3.1	The Thematic Criteria . . . . .	37
3.11	Number of Alternants . . . . .	38
3.12	Shape of Alternants . . . . .	38
3.13	Selection of Alternants . . . . .	39
3.2	Thematic Analysis . . . . .	40
3.21	Inflectional and Thematic Classes . . . . .	40
3.22	Syllabic, Non-Syllabic, and Syllabic-Non-Syllabic Alternances . . . . .	41
3.23	Vocalic and Consonantal Alternances . . . . .	44
4.0	THE THEMATIC SYSTEM: CONSONANTAL ASPECT . . . . .	46
4.1	Consonantal Analysis . . . . .	46
4.11	Number of Alternants . . . . .	46
4.12	Shape of Alternants . . . . .	46
4.13	Selection of Alternants . . . . .	48
4.131	Syntagmatic relations . . . . .	49
4.132	Exceptions . . . . .	49
4.133	Selection rules . . . . .	50

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

11

4.2	Consonantal Classification . . . . .	50
4.3	Consonantal Conclusions . . . . .	51
4.31	Grammar . . . . .	51
4.32	Lexicon . . . . .	51
5.0	THE THEMATIC SYSTEM: VOCALIC ASPECT . . . . .	53
5.1	Vocalic Analysis . . . . .	53
5.11	Number of Alternants . . . . .	53
5.12	Shape of Alternants . . . . .	54
5.121	First alternant included . . . . .	54
5.122	First alternant excluded . . . . .	55
5.123	Classes and subclasses . . . . .	57
5.13	Selection of Alternants . . . . .	58
5.131	The seven base groups . . . . .	59
5.132	Base groups 1, 4, 5, 6, and 7. . . . .	60
5.133	Base groups 2 and 3 . . . . .	62
5.134	Exceptions . . . . .	64
5.135	Selection rules . . . . .	65
5.136	Classes and subclasses . . . . .	65
5.2	Vocalic Classification . . . . .	66
5.3	Vocalic Conclusions . . . . .	68
5.31	Grammar . . . . .	68
5.32	Lexicon . . . . .	69
6.0	GENERAL CONCLUSIONS . . . . .	70
6.1	Grammar . . . . .	70
6.2	Lexicon . . . . .	75



## INTRODUCTION

This introduction justifies the data underlying our investigation and discusses some of the analytic principles which have guided their analysis and interpretation; it also defines some of the general concepts exploited, especially insofar as they differ from American usage.

### 1.1 DATA

Assuming that all but certain anomalous verb forms consist of a stem and an ending, English verbs can be classified into thematically Regular and thematically Irregular on the one hand, into inflectionally Regular and inflectionally Irregular on the other. Consequently, English verbs may be considered Irregular either on account of their stems, or on account of their endings, or on account of both.

#### 1.11 *Thematically Regular and Irregular Verbs*

Thematically *Regular* verbs are those which exhibit only one stem alternant in the various forms, i.e., whose stems display no variation in shape in the various categories. This is the case for a majority of English verbs, e.g., *praise*, *pass*, *show*, *put*, etc., which are not included in our corpus on account of their stems.

Thematically *Irregular* verbs are those which exhibit more than one stem alternant in the various forms, i.e., whose stems exhibit variations in shape in the various categories. There are 149 such verbs, e.g., *come*, *take*, *break*, *sing*, etc., which are included on account of their stems.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See 1.131 and 1.133.

### 1.12 *Inflectionally Regular and Irregular Verbs*

Inflectionally *Regular* verbs are those which exhibit the inflectional set -Ø, -S, -D, -D, -ing in the five representative categories,<sup>2</sup> or, more simply, the set -D, -D in the Preterit-Participle.<sup>3</sup> This is the case for a majority of English verbs, e.g., *wait, live, praise, say*, etc., which are not included in our corpus on account of their endings.

Inflectionally *Irregular* verbs are those which exhibit an inflectional set other than -Ø, -S, -D, -D, -ing in the five representative categories or, more simply, a set other than -D, -D in the Preterit-Participle. There are 182 such verbs, e.g., *pass, fall, put, show*, etc., all of which are included on account of their endings.<sup>4</sup>

### 1.13 *Irregular Verbs*

English Irregular verbs can be divided into three categories, as follows:

1.131 *Thematically Irregular verbs*. Verbs incorporated on account of their stems, i.e., which exhibit more than one shape in the various forms, but are inflectionally Regular, i.e., which exhibit the -D, -D set in the Preterit-Participle, are:

bid (bid), bid (bade), flee, have 'possess, etc.', hear, make, say, sell, shoe, stand, tell.

1.132 *Inflectionally Irregular verbs*. Verbs incorporated on account of their endings, i.e., which exhibit a set other than -D, -D in the Preterit-Participle, but are thematically Regular, i.e., which do not exhibit stem alternants, are:

beat (beat, beat), beat (beat, beaten), bet, bid, (bid, bidden), burn, burst, cast, cost, cut, dwell, fit, hew, hit, hurt, knit, learn, let, outbid, overbid, pen, prove, put, quit, rid, set, sew, shed, show, shut, slit, smell, sow, spell, spill, spit, split, spoil, spread, strew, sweat, thrust, underbid, wed, wet.

<sup>2</sup> See 1.2.

<sup>3</sup> See 2.34.

<sup>4</sup> See 1.132 and 1.133.

bare, beget, begin, bend, bereave, besiege, bid (bade, bidden),  
bide, bind, bite (bit bit), bite (bit, bitten), bleed, blow, break,  
breed, bring, build, buy, catch, choose, cleave (cleft, cleft),  
cleave (clove, cloven), cling, come, creep, crow, deal, dig, dive,  
do, draw, dream, drink, drive, eat, fall, feed, feel, fight, find,  
fling, fly, forbid, forget, forsake, freeze, get (got, got), get (got,  
gotten), gird, give, grind, grow, hang, heave, hide (hid, hid),  
hide (hid, hidden), hold, keep, kneel, know, lead, lean, leap,  
leave, lend, lie, light, lose, mean, meet, plead, read, rend, ride,  
ring, rise, run, see, seek, send, shake, shear, shine, shoot, shrink  
(shrunk, shrunk), shrink (shrunk, shrunken), shrink (shrank,  
shrunk), shrink (shrank, shrunken), shrive, sing, sink, sit, slay,  
sleep, slide, sling, slink, smite, speak, speed, spend, spin, spit,  
spring (sprung, sprung), spring (sprang, sprung), stave, steal,  
stick, sting, stink (stunk, stunk), stink (stank, stunk), stride  
(strode, strode), stride (strode, stridden), strike, string, strive,  
swear, sweep, swell, swim, take, teach, tear, think, thrive, throw,  
tread (trod, trod), tread (trod, trodden), wake (woke, woke),  
wake (woke, woken), wear, weave, weep, win, wind, wreak,  
wring, write.

There are 11 thematically Irregular verbs, 44 inflectionally Irregular, and 138 thematically-inflectionally Irregular, giving a total of 193 Irregular verbs. All others, exhibiting only one stem in the various forms and the set -D, -D in the Preterit-Participle, are considered Regulars.

The total of 193 Irregular verbs is obtained by adding 6 "pre-fixed" forms, i.e., *beget*, *forbid*, *forget*, *outbid*, *overbid*, and *underbid*, to the 201 entries listed by Bernard Bloch,<sup>5</sup> and by subtracting 14 anomalous, auxiliary, and defective entries, *be*, *better*, *can*, *dare*,

<sup>5</sup> Article originally published in *Language*, XXIII (1947), pp. 399-418; and reprinted in *Readings in Linguistics*, ed. by Martin Joos (Washington, D.C., 1957), pp. 243-54.



*go, have* 'be obliged', *may, might, must, need, ought, shall, used, and will*, to be treated separately.

#### 1.14 *Anomalous, Auxiliary, and Defective Verbs*

Traditionally designated as "anomalous", "auxiliary", and "defective", members of Bloch's G, H, I, and J classes<sup>6</sup> are such that to treat them on the same footing as the Irregulars proper would be uneconomical and misleading: as many as four classes are necessary to accommodate as few as 13 verbs, which would blur the main outlines of the English verb system.

The structural properties which justify separate treatment of anomalous, auxiliary, and defective verbs are:

- (1) Reduced membership: class J, one member, *be*; class G, three members, *dare, have* 'be obliged', *need*; class H, three members, *can, shall, will*; and class I, six members, *better, may, might, must, ought, used*, in contrast to the average membership of Irregular classes, which is considerably higher;
- (2) Much higher than average frequency of occurrence for such anomalous verbs as *can, shall, will, may, must, and be*, in contrast to the considerably lower frequency of the non-anomalous, including irregulars;
- (3) Dystrophic paradigms, e.g., only one suffix (H) or two (G), or hypertrophic, e.g., six suffixes (J), in contrast to the regular four or five;
- (4) Special types of stem alternance, e.g., *can, shall, will, and be*, in contrast to the Irregulars, whose alternants differ according to certain established patterns;
- (5) Special syntactic function, generally auxiliary, in contrast to the non-anomalous verbs, including Irregulars;
- (6) Special accentual status of auxiliaries, generally atonic, in contrast to the non-anomalous, usually stressed.

<sup>6</sup> In addition to the 13 members of these classes, we include the verb *go* in the Irregular category, on account of its stem as well as its ending. Cf. footnote 14 in Section 2.