

The Basics Of Conjugation

Let's start simply: a verb is a word which indicates action or state of being. Everyone ought to know that. Look at some of the different forms of a simple verb in English, the verb "to see":

GROUP I	GROUP II	GROUP III
I sing.	I sang.	I have sung.
I do sing.		It was sung.
I am singing.		It will be sung.
I will sing.		I will have sung.
I should be singing.		
I would sing.		
Sing.		
I want to sing.		

And so on; there are several left out. Look at the first group for now. You can detect something interesting going on here. You have a basic form of the verb -- "sing" -- and it's undergoing changes. One kind of change is that different words are put before it, another is the "-ing" suffix attached to the end, and another is the addition of a suffix "-s" when you want to say "he/she/it sings".

You can see that the verb "to sing" has a basic form, which is being modified slightly to show that the verb is being used in a different way. This modification of a verb to show different aspects or conditions of the action is called "conjugation" (kahn juh GAY chion), and a verb is said to "conjugate" (KAHN juh gate) when it's modified to exhibit these different conditions. A verb, therefore, has a basic form or set of forms, which then conjugate in order to change the way its meaning is to be understood in a particular context. These basic forms contain the core meaning of the verb, but the way the action is being applied and the circumstances under which the action is changing.

Now look at the second group -- it's really a group of one. Here you have an entirely different form: "sang". How do you know that it's a part of the verb "to sing?" From your experience with English, of course. This form of the verb is an entirely different stem, yet it's still just a variation of the basic verb "to sing". So a verb can change its form entirely and still be a part of the same family of meaning. So also with the third group. "Sung" is another stem of the basic verb "to sing", and your native English sense tells you it's merely a variation of a verb you already know: "to sing". Again, we can put all kinds of words in front to conjugate it, but with this stem, no changes actually affect the stem itself. There's no such form as "singing", for example.

Now let's try an experiment. Suppose you're not an English speaker and you come across the word "sang" while you're reading something. You don't know what it is, so you try to look it up in the dictionary just as it is: "sang". Unless you have a very unusual dictionary you won't find it. Why not? Because "sang" is a variation of a more basic form. In the same way, would you expect to find an entry in a dictionary for the word "stones?" Of course not, because "stones" is just the plural form of "stone", a form you can easily deduce from the basic form "stone", if you know the rules of English grammar. So before you can use a dictionary, you already have to know something about the language. And that's entirely understandable. How big would a dictionary have to be to list all the possible varieties of every word in the language? Consequently, before you look up a word in a dictionary, you must first reduce it to a form under which the dictionary will list it, and that often takes patience and some mental effort.

Let's go back to the verb "to sing". It has three different stems in its conjugation -- "sing, sang, sung" -- and to use the verb intelligently you must know them all and you must know the rules governing their use. We call these forms, the "principal parts" of the verb. You'll notice in English the way these principal parts are conjugated is by piling up all kinds of words in front of them. These words change the aspect of the action. To sum up, to use any verb fully, you must know two things:



1. all the principal parts of the verb
2. the rules governing the conjugation of English verbs.

This is also true of Old English verbs.

Old English Verbs: The Basics

As you may have guessed, Old English verbs have different rules governing the way they conjugate. For the most part Old English verbs conjugate by attaching endings to the stems themselves, without all the separate helping words put in front of the stem as in Modern English to tell you how to understand the action. So for a Old English verb, you must learn two things: (1) the stems, and (2) how the stems are modified at their ends to show different conditions under which the action is occurring. Let's look at Modern English again. Here is the conjugation of the verb "to see" in the present tense.

SINGULAR	PLURAL
I sing	we sing
you sing	you sing
he, she, it, sings	they sing

With the exception of the form "sings", the differences among these forms is made by the preceding word. In this instance, the change is in the person who is performing the action. Now look at the Old English translation for the verb English verb "to sing" with these modifications.

	OLD ENGLISH	ENGLISH
1st	singe	I sing
2nd	singest	you sing
3rd	singep	he/she/it sings
1st	singap	we sing
2nd	singap	you sing
3rd	singap	they sing

As I told you before, Old English conjugates its verbs by attaching endings to the root of the verb itself, and here you can see it happening. The common feature of the verb "to sing" in Old English is the stem *sing-* and to show changes in person and number, Old English adds a suffix. These suffixes are called the "personal endings", because they indicate the person and the number of the conjugated form of the verb. Notice that there is only *one* Plural form, so let's set these personal endings out:

1st person	-e	=	I
2nd person	-est	=	you (singular)
3rd person	-ep	=	he, she, it
plural	-ap	=	we, you (plural), they

Now try your hand at conjugating some other Old English verbs. The verb meaning "to wait for" in Old English has the stem *bid-*; the verb meaning "to hear" in Old English has the stem *hier-*; and the verb meaning "to drink" in Old English has the stem *drinc-*. Translate the following into Old English.

we drink	drincap
they sing	_____
she hears	_____

you (pl.) drink _____
 they wait for _____
 you (sg.) drink _____
 I hear _____
 we sing _____

Strong and Weak Verbs

You now know the single most important characteristic of Old English verbs: they conjugate by adding suffixes to a stem. You also now know the most common kind of suffix: the personal endings. Next you need to know something more about the stems. When we looked at Modern English verbs, I discussed the verb "to sing". This has three different stems -- "sing, sang, sung" -- which differ by a change of vowel in the stem. In a similar way we say "drive, drove, driven". Now consider the verb "to live", this does not follow this pattern: we say "live, lived, lived" rather than "live, love, liven". These two types of verb are known as **strong** verbs (like "to sing") and **weak** verbs (like "to live").

This distinction in Modern English is inherited from Old English which has exactly the same split. In fact nearly all the strong verbs in Modern English are survivals from Old English rather than loanwords.

However, in Old English, there is a further split. Strong verbs are split into seven classes, and Weak verbs into three. In addition to these there is a group of four "anomalous" verbs "will", "do", "go", and "be". For the present that is all I'm going to say about these classes, but we'll return to them in hideous detail in later chapters. For now, all we need to know is how to find a verb in a dictionary.

The Infinitive

Verb forms which specify no person -- 1st, 2nd, or 3rd -- we call "infinite" or "infinitive", which means, literally, "without boundary". That is to say, the form is not bounded by or limited to a certain person. Theoretically, there are many verb forms which are "infinite", but in common usage the word "infinitive" is generally limited to forms which are translated into English as "to x" (where "x" is the meaning of the verb). To form the infinitive, a "-an" suffix is added to the stem.

sing	+	an	=	singan	(to sing)
hier	+	an	=	hieran	(to hear)

In a similar way to a Modern English dictionary, an Old English dictionary will list verbs according to their infinitive form. This isn't so obvious in Modern English where the 1st person singular is nearly always the same as the infinitive, however consider the verb "to be". So, if you are trying to find out how to translate *singap*, then: first you must find the stem (*sing-*); then the infinitive (*singan*). This is the form that you will find listed in the dictionary.

Weak Verbs

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