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# The History of the Anomalous Verb to be, from Old to Modern English

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This article aims to describe the intricate history of the verb to be, focusing on its abundant inflection irregularities, from Old to Modern English. As any other research on historical linguistics, this article's main goal is not only to point diachronic changes within the language, but also to explain how and why they happened, relying for such purpose on reputed theorists like Campbell (2013) and Bybee (2015), in addition to historical linguists whose works deal specifically with the development of the English language, such as Algeo (2010), Hogg & Fulk (2011), Ringe & Taylor (2014), among others. From a methodological point of view, this text displays each verbal tense on synoptic tables containing inflections from Old, Middle and Modern English, followed by several explanatory comments in order to clarify certain phonetic or morphologic phenomena. In short, one can say that the numerous irregularities found throughout the conjugation of the verb to be derive from the intermixing of two Old English verbs, *bēon* and *wesan*, which in turn were already irregular themselves.

*Keywords:* historical linguistics, old english, irregular verbs.

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**Keywords:** historical linguistics, old english, irregular verbs.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Why are there so many irregular verbs in English and in other languages around the world? Who or what made them so irregular? These are quite legitimate questions that many young or even adult students usually make themselves while struggling to memorize exhaustive lists of

irregular verbs. Although legitimate, this is the kind of question to which very few teachers from elementary or language schools could give a satisfactory answer, since it requires a more specific background on historical linguistics. At first glance, one could explain that these verbs are what they are simply because the languages evolved this way or, even worse, because grammarians and writers would have arbitrarily decided to impose it. However, the former explanation is no more than an oversimplified vision on the issue, whereas the latter is an obvious misconception about it, since irregular verbs were already in use centuries prior to the publication of William Bullokar's pioneer *Pamphlet for Grammar* (1586), regarded as the first English grammar ever (Auroux, 1992, p. 112).

Fortunately, modern-day students who are at least acquainted with the basics of linguistics have now access to a wide range of theoretical works on the historical branch of the discipline and on the history of the English language itself, giving them enough background to understand how and why languages change over the centuries. For such a purpose, two main theorists were chosen: Campbell (2013) and Bybee (2015), who bring us accessible overviews on the major issues of historical linguistics, with plenty of explanatory examples. But, in order to gather specific information on the development of the verb *to be* and certain grammatical features, the chosen authors were Algeo (2010), Hogg & Fulk (2011), Ringe & Taylor (2014), among others.

This article was divided in the following sections: 1) *Historical linguistics*, which summarizes the primary goals and theoretical principles of the discipline; 2) *Methodology*, which describes certain methodological obstacles and the steps taken during the research; 3) *The history of the verb to be*, which brings a diachronic analysis of

the referred verb, focusing on its anomalous conjugation in simple verbal tenses and moods, namely: indicative present, subjunctive present, indicative preterit, subjunctive preterit and imperative, in addition to its nonfinite forms. At last, the conclusions.

## II. HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS

Before diving into the intricate development of the verb *to be* and its anomalous inflections, from Old to Modern English, it is worth remembering the primary goals of historical linguistics. According to Campbell,

*Historical linguists study language change.* If you were to ask practicing historical linguists why they study change in language, they would give you lots of different reasons, but certainly included in their answers would be that it is fun, exciting and intellectually engaging, that it involves some of the hottest topics in linguistics and that it has important contributions to make to linguistic theory and to the understanding of human nature. There are many reasons why historical linguists feel this way about their field. For one, a grasp of the ways in which languages can change provides the student with a much better understanding of language in general, of how languages work, how their pieces fit together and in general what makes them tick. For another, historical linguistic methods have been looked to for models of rigour and excellence in other fields. Historical linguistic findings have been utilized to solve historical problems of concern to society which extend far beyond linguistics (see Chapter 16). Those dedicated to the humanistic study of individual languages would find their fields much impoverished without the richness provided by historical insights into the development of these languages—just imagine the study of any area of non-modern literature in French, German, Italian, Spanish or other languages without insights into how these languages have changed. A very important reason why historical linguists study language change and are excited about their field is because historical linguistics contributes

significantly to other sub-areas of linguistics and to linguistic theory (Campbell, 2013, p. 1-2, emphasis added).

At first, one could ask why historical linguists put so much effort in studying not only the old stages of a language, but also its multiple changes over the centuries, even though no one is able to go back in time and have a casual conversation with an English speaker from 1000 years ago, for example. Apart from being exciting and intellectually engaging, as Campbell (2013, p. 1-2) points it out, the field provides its researchers and scholars in general with a deeper understanding of how languages actually work, demonstrating what can or cannot change within them. Furthermore, whoever intends to read texts from a distant past and dive into an old culture must learn at least the basic features of the old language in which they were originally written, even when the reader is dealing with previous stages of his own mother tongue – otherwise, great portions of his people's cultural heritage may start falling into oblivion. From the perspective of Modern English speakers, for instance, the so-called Old English would have to be learned as a foreign language, insofar as the severe diachronic changes that it underwent from the 11<sup>th</sup> century onwards rendered both varieties mutually unintelligible and almost unrecognizable. As Campbell (2013, p. 1-2) states at the beginning of the transcribed excerpt, historical linguists study language change, whose main aspects are described and exemplified in the following section.

### 2.1 The Main Aspects of Language Change

First and foremost, all natural and living languages change over time (Campbell, 2013, p. 2-3; Bybee, 2015, p. 1-2). Since every human society changes its own habits, beliefs, art and culture to a larger or smaller degree, it would be senseless to depict languages as hard monoliths, detached from their historical background and the cultural interchanges of their speakers. The only languages that are not susceptible to diachronic variation, at least in theory, are the artificial and



the dead ones, assuming they do not have native speakers<sup>1</sup>.

Moreover, the language change affects all linguistic levels: phonetic, morphologic, syntactic, semantic and lexical. At the phonetic level, sounds may be inserted, dropped or transformed, as it can be seen in the following adjective: *hlud* > *loud*. From Old to Middle English, the initial consonant [h] was dropped in a process called aphaeresis, by which *hlud* became *loud*, pronounced [lu:d] at the time, but spelled with -ou- due to the French orthography influence. By the 16<sup>th</sup> century, from Middle to Early Modern English, a wide complex of phonetic changes known as the Great Vowel Shift took place and eventually turned the old long vowel [u:] into a diphthong [aʊ], due to which the former pronunciation [lu:d] became the modern-day [laʊd]. Thus: *hlud* > *loud* [lu:d] > *loud* [laʊd] (Campbell, 2013, p. 20; Bybee, 2015, p. 52; Klein, 1966, p. 907). At the morphologic level, several diachronic phenomena may occur, such as the loss of grammatical gender that happened during Middle English. Until then, definite articles had masculine, feminine and neuter forms (*sē*, *sēo*, *þæt*), as follows: *sē cyning* (“the king”), *sēo cwēn* (“the queen”) and *þæt land* (“the land”)<sup>2</sup>. The modern article (*the*) came from the masculine nominative form *sē*, becoming *þe* (> *the*) by analogical influence from other case inflections beginning with thorn (*þ*) (Algeo, 2010, p.96-97). At the syntactic level, it is worth mentioning the lack of auxiliary verbs in yes-no questions back in Early Modern English, namely in Shakespeare’s plays, such as *Macbeth* (IV, i): *Saw you the weird sisters?*, instead of *Did you see the weird sisters?* (Campbell, 2013, p. 9). At the semantic level, words may take different meanings somewhat randomly, in a way that historical linguists cannot

indicate which items from the lexicon are more or less susceptible to undergo such kind of diachronic change. For example, the Old English noun *hund* could refer to any dog in the past, but its modern counterpart *hound* designates only the ones used for hunting. In other words, this noun has undergone a semantic narrowing, by which its previous and wider meaning became more restricted over time, whereas its German cognate *Hund* has retained the etymological sense of “dog” (Campbell, 2013, p. 223; Klein, 1966, p. 471). Last but not least, the lexical level is particularly sensitive to diachronic changes driven by historical and cultural issues. Within the Germanic family, for instance, English speakers started to borrow several words from French after the fateful Battle of Hastings, in 1066, which brought about the fall of the Saxon Dynasty and the subsequent ascension of the Norman kings, whose language had greater prestige among the nobles. From this point onwards, considerable portions of the English original lexicon were replaced by Romance-based items or survived alongside a Romance near-synonym, forming pairs like *go on* - *continue*, *dig up* - *excavate*, *make up* - *invent*, etc. (Campbell, 2013, p. 58; König, 1994, p. 562). On the other hand, Icelandic speakers have lived for many centuries in small and isolated communities in the North Atlantic Ocean, making almost no contact with European continental peoples. As a result, their language has undergone only a few changes, so that modern Icelanders are still able to read medieval sagas (Harbert, 2007, p. 23-24). These historical facts explain why English is receptive to foreign vocabulary, whereas Icelandic is firmly attached to its lexical origins.

Another remarkable aspect of language change is gradualness. In effect, the whole process is so slow and gradual, that it is barely noticeable from one generation to another, making non-specialized speakers possibly think of their own mother tongue as a static object, rather than a dynamical one. However, a quick look at older texts provides us with unquestionable empirical proofs of such dynamicity, whose changing pace can be increased or decreased depending on historical or

<sup>1</sup> Esperanto, regarded as the most successful artificial language in history, was created by a Polish doctor called Ludwik Zamenhof (1859-1917) in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and now has its own speaking communities around the world, where children can learn it from birth. As Esperanto spread across many countries, it consequently became susceptible to some variation.

<sup>2</sup> The words *sē*, *sēo*, *þæt* were originally demonstrative modifiers, so that the nominal phrase *sē cyning* could be interpreted as “the king” or “that king” depending on the context.

cultural circumstances, as previously mentioned about English and Icelandic.

Finally, the last aspect worth pointing out is that language change is not good or bad. Indeed, from a strictly scientific point of view, all languages maintain their semiotic potential, regardless of how deeply they may have changed and thus remain able to fulfill their speakers' communication purposes. In other words, no language in history has ever disappeared because of internal malfunctioning. Nevertheless, among ordinary people, regular changes are usually seen as mere grammar mistakes, caused by someone's illiteracy or low educational level. Even during the Golden Age of Comparative Linguistics in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, scholars like Jacob Grimm (1785-1863) depicted this changing process as a linguistic impoverishment or corruption, drawing on their aesthetic or personal preferences, rather than on scientific assumptions. In any case, languages do not get inherently poorer or richer; they simply change (Campbell, 2013, p. 2-3; Bybee, 2015, p. 10).

### III. METHODOLOGY

If, on the one hand, linguists from various branches are able to conduct their researches by collecting scientific data from interviews and recordings, on the other, historical linguists rely almost exclusively on written sources, since it would be impossible to interview a centuries-old speaker or to listen to audio records made before the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. That's why Lass (1997, p. 45) both briefly and metaphorically describes these methodological obstacles by stating that historical linguists must "hear the inaudible", while Labov (1982, p. 20) describes their task as "the art of making the best use of bad data".

Notwithstanding the usual "bad data" available for research, the authors consulted here have managed to collect from ancient texts much valuable information concerning the history of the verb *to be*, displaying its inflectional anomalies from Old to Modern English and its dialectal variations. Thus, this article's main goals are to organize these data in a didactic way and, more

importantly, to interpret them, since historical linguists must not only point out the language changes, but also try to explain how and why they happened. The next section brings synoptic tables containing the anomalous verb *to be* in simple tenses and nonfinite forms, after which there are some additional comments in order to clarify certain phonetic or morphologic phenomena.

### IV. THE HISTORY OF THE VERB *TO BE*, FROM OLD TO MODERN ENGLISH

When the oldest known English texts came to light by the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD, the verb *to be* had already a complex set of irregular inflections, due to its tricky Proto-Indo-European and Proto-Germanic origins. In effect, during this unrecorded past, two ancient verbs, *bēon* and *wesan*, intermixed and eventually formed a single anomalous conjugation. This intermixing process by which words from different lexical roots form a single inflection paradigm is known as suppletion, which has taken place in many languages around the world, mainly in nouns, adjectives and verbs with high using frequency and feeble roots, whose forms were partially replaced by other semantically related ones (Bybee, 2015, p. 109-112). It is no coincidence, for example, that the highly used comparative degree of "good" take a different stem in English, Portuguese and Russian: *good-better*, *bom-melhor* e *хороший-лучше* (transliterated: *khorośhiy-lútchshe*). Thus, in order to make the intricate history of this suppletive verb clearer, each of its simple verbal tenses is described in a separate sub-section.

#### 4.1 Indicative Present

Although *bēon* and *wesan* share a whole verbal paradigm, the former tends to express a gnomic present or a simple future (e.g. *Wyrd biþ ful aræd*, "Fate is fully inexorable"; *Īc bēo sē cyning*, "I will be the king"), whereas the latter tends to express an ordinary simple present (e.g. *Īc eom sē cyning*, "I am the king"). This subtle difference explains why Hogg & Fulk (2011, p. 309) reclassify the present tense of *bēon* as a consuetudinal or future tense, whose inflections became obsolete in English centuries later, but were partially maintained in German: *ich bin* ("I am"), *du bist*

(“you are”, 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular). Regardless of any classificatory issues, the table below displays both verbs conjugated in Old English (c. 449-1100) on

the lateral columns and their resulting diachronic forms in Modern English (1500-onwards) on the center:

*Table 1:* The development of the indicative present

<i>bēon</i> (Old English)		Middle English	Modern English		Middle English		<i>wesan</i> (Old English)
<i>bēo, bīom</i>	>	<i>bē</i>	<i>am</i>	<	<i>am, æm, em</i>	<	<i>eom, eam</i>
<i>bist</i>	>	<i>bēs, bēst, beast</i>	<i>art</i>	<	<i>art*</i>	<	<i>eart**, ært, earþ, arþ</i>
<i>biþ, bið</i>	>	<i>bēs, bēþ, bēoþ, büþ, byeþ</i>	<i>is</i>	<	<i>is, ys</i>	<	<i>is</i>
<i>bēoþ, bēoð</i>	>	<i>bēoþ, bē(n), bēþ, büþ, byeþ</i>	<i>are</i>	<	<i>sinden, ār(e), arn</i>	<	<i>sind(on), sint earon*, aron*</i>
<i>bēoþ, bēoð</i>	>	<i>bēoþ, bē(n), bēþ, büþ, byeþ</i>	<i>are</i>	<	<i>sinden, ār(e), arn</i>	<	<i>sind(on), sint earon*, aron*</i>
<i>bēoþ, bēoð</i>	>	<i>bēoþ, bē(n), bēþ, büþ, byeþ</i>	<i>are</i>	<	<i>sinden, ār(e), arn</i>	<	<i>sind(on), sint earon*, aron*</i>

(cf. Hogg & Fulk, 2011, p. 309; Ringe & Taylor, 2014, p. 373; Mossé, 1952, p. 84)

\* The forms *ert* (2<sup>nd</sup> person singular), *es* (2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular) and *ēre* (plural) used in Northern dialects were borrowed from Old Norse, whose verb *vera* (“to be”) was a Germanic cognate of *wesan* (Wardale, p. 114, 1949).

\*\* The forms *eart* (> *art*) and *earon* (> *are*) came from a Proto-Indo-European root *\*er-* (“to arise”) (Algeo, 2010, p. 105).

Since there is no written record of ancestor languages like Proto-Indo-European and its Proto-Germanic branch, historical linguists have drawn on comparative evidences and internal reconstruction in order to trace the origins of each verbal form displayed on the table.

Firstly, the infinitive *bēon* (> *be*) and all inflections beginning with *b* are etymologically related to the hypothetical Proto-Indo-European root *\*bheu-* or *\*bhú* (“to be”, “to exist” or “to grow”), whence also came भवति (*bhávati*, “becomes”) in Sanskrit, φέειν (*phýein*, “to bring forth”) in Ancient Greek, *fuī* (“I have been”) in Latin, etc. The other infinitive, *wesan*, is related to a different root, *\*wes-* (“to remain” or “to dwell”), cognate of the Sanskrit verb वसति (*vásati*,

“dwells”) (Algeo, 2010, p. 105; Hogg & Fulk, 2011, p. 309-310; Klein, 1966, p. 156).

The forms *eom*, *is*, *sindon* and their variants are related to another root: *\*es-* or *\*hes-*, from whose reconstructed inflections *\*esmi* (“I am”), *\*esti* (“he is”) and *\*senti* (“they are”) also came their semantic counterparts अस्मि (*ásmi*), अस्ति (*ásti*) and सन्ति (*sánti*) in Sanskrit, in addition to *sum*, *est* and *sunt* in Latin, plus *\*immi*, *\*isti* and *\*sindi* in Proto-Germanic (Algeo, 2010, p. 105; Hogg & Fulk, 2011, p. 309-310; Klein, 1966, p. 156; Ringe & Taylor, 2014, p. 113). The 1<sup>st</sup> person singular *eom* turned into *eam* because of a probable analogy with *eart* and later into *æm* by monophthongization, thus: *eom* > *eam* > *æm* > *am*. The change from *sindon* to *sinden* was the result of major vowel leveling in unstressed syllables by the Middle English period, during which all former 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural endings became *-en* (Algeo, 2010, p. 124, 129; Ringe & Taylor, 2014, p. 373).

On the other hand, the 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular *eart* (> *art*) and the Anglian 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural *earon* (> *are*) have etymological ties with another Proto-Indo-European root: *\*er-*, which originally meant

“to arise”. In the transition from Old to Middle English, their short diphthong *ea* became *a* by monophthongization and, due to the vowel leveling mentioned above, *-on* turned into *-en*, whose final *-n* was later dropped. Roughly speaking: *earon* > *aren* > *are* (Algeo, 2010, p. 124, 129).

Lastly, it is worth noting that the original 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person plural inflections from Proto-Germanic (\**izum* and \**izud*) had long been replaced by their 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural counterpart (\**sindi* > *sind*) due to a morphologic leveling (Algeo, 2010, p. 105; Ringe & Taylor, 2014, p. 113).

4.2 Subjunctive Present

Unlike Modern English, the subjunctive mood was used in a wider range of sentences, expressing wishes or commands and forming numerous types of subordinate clauses. For example: *God ūs helpe* (“God help us”); *Ne hēo hundas cēpe* (“She shall not keep dogs”); *Sume men cweðað þæt hit sȳ feaxede steorra* (“Some men say that it [a comet] be a long-haired star”). It could also be seen in constructions where it is still in use today: *swelce hē tam wære* (“as if he were tame”) (Algeo, 2010, p. 102, 106-107). The Old English subjunctive mood had only two verbal forms: one of them for singular and the other for plural<sup>3</sup>. See the table below:

Table 2: The development of the subjunctive present

<i>bēon</i> (Old English)		Middle English		Modern English	Middle English		<i>wesan</i> (Old English)
<i>bēo</i>	>	<i>bēo, bē, bō</i>	>	<i>be</i>	<i>sī, sie</i>	<	<i>sȳ, sie</i>
<i>bēo</i>	>	<i>bēo, bē, bō</i>	>	<i>be</i>	<i>sī, sie</i>	<	<i>sȳ, sie</i>
<i>bēo</i>	>	<i>bēo, bē, bō</i>	>	<i>be</i>	<i>sī, sie</i>	<	<i>sȳ, sie</i>
<i>bēon</i>	>	<i>bēon, bē(n), bōn</i>	>	<i>be</i>	<i>sien</i>	<	<i>sȳn, sien</i>
<i>bēon</i>	>	<i>bēon, bē(n), bōn</i>	>	<i>be</i>	<i>sien</i>	<	<i>sȳn, sien</i>
<i>bēon</i>	>	<i>bēon, bē(n), bōn</i>	>	<i>be</i>	<i>sien</i>	<	<i>sȳn, sien</i>

(cf. Hogg & Fulk, 2011, p. 309; Mossé, 1952, p. 84)

Although both Proto-Indo-European roots, \**bheu* and \**es*, are easily detectable on each inflection displayed above (e.g. *bēo* / *sȳ*), there was not a clear semantic distinction between them due to the inherent sense of contingency or consuetude of the subjunctive mood (Hogg & Fulk, 2011, p. 310). In any case, the forms deriving from \**bheu* have eventually driven out those deriving from \**es*, which were less likely to express permanent states or qualities in general.

During the course, a few phonetic changes occurred. By the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the long diphthong *ēo* turned into *ē* by monophthongization, changing *bēo* into *bē*, pronounced [be:]. Afterwards, by the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the already mentioned Great Vowel Shift took place, raising the long high-mid vowel [e:] into [i:], then: [be:] > [bi:]. Finally, after the dropping of the plural

ending *-n* between Middle and Modern English, all subjunctive present forms became indistinguishable from then on (Algeo, 2010, p. 124; Bybee, 2015, p. 52).

4.3 Indicative preterit

The Proto-Indo-European verb based on the root \**es-* or \**hes-* (“to be”) had neither a known infinitive nor perfect tenses, leaving a blank to be filled by suppletion in multiple descendant languages (Hogg & Fulk 2011, p. 310). Thus, from a hypothetical root \**wes-* (“to remain”, “to dwell”) emerged the old verb *wesan*, whose former

<sup>3</sup> As mentioned here, there were only two subjunctive forms: singular (e.g. *iċ helpe*, *þu helpe*, *he helpe*) and plural (e.g. *we helpen*, *ge helpen*, *hi helpen*). The indicative mood had in turn more verbal endings: *iċ helpe*, *þu hilpst*, *he hilpþ*, *we helpað*, *ge helpað*, *hi helpað*.



present tense inflections were dropped out when it came to fulfill such blank, changing its meaning accordingly. The verb *bēon* in turn had no preterit

tenses since its main purpose was to express the gnomic present or the future. It explains why there are many blank spaces on the table below:

*Table 3:* The development of the indicative preterit

<i>bēon</i> (Old English)	Middle English	Modern English		Middle English		<i>wesan</i> (Old English)
∅	∅	<i>was</i>	<	<i>was, wes</i>	<	<i>wæs</i>
∅	∅	<i>wast*</i>	<	<i>was, wes, wōre, wēre, wast* wēore</i>	<	<i>wære</i>
∅	∅	<i>was</i>	<	<i>was, wes</i>	<	<i>wæs</i>
∅	∅	<i>were</i>	<	<i>wēr, wār, wēre(n), wōren wēore</i>	<	<i>wæron</i>
∅	∅	<i>were</i>	<	<i>wēr, wār, wēre(n), wōren wēore</i>	<	<i>wæron</i>
∅	∅	<i>were</i>	<	<i>wēr, wār, wēre(n), wōren wēore</i>	<	<i>wæron</i>

(cf. Hogg & Fulk, 2011, p. 309; Mossé, 1952, p. 84)

\**Wast* was created by analogical influence from *art* (2<sup>nd</sup> person singular, indicative present).

According to Verner's Law<sup>4</sup>, the Proto-Germanic voiceless fricative consonant \*[s] underwent a sonorization process when surrounded by voiced sounds, which then turned it into a voiced fricative \*[z] in West Germanic. Later, this resultant \*[z] underwent another sound change called rhotacism, turning now into the Old English approximant [r], present in *wære* and *wæron*. Predictably, the original [s] remained intact in *wæs* because it was not surrounded by other voiced vowels or consonants, preventing sonorization and rhotacism (Algeo, 2010, p. 73-75).

From the Late Old English onwards, other sound changes took place. First, the short [æ] turned into [a] in most dialects, as it can be seen in *wæs* > *was*, whereas the long [æ:] turned into [ɛ:] or [a:], bringing forth *wēre(n)* in the East Midlands and *wār* in the North (Brunner, 1970, p. 13; Mossé, 1952, p. 84). Unlike these, the forms *wōren* and *wēore*, found in the West Midlands

and in the South, may not have come from *wæron* directly, but perhaps from an Old English variant of it, since a vowel change such as *ā* > *ēo* would be hard to explain. Inasmuch as the final -*n* was already weakening during Middle English, it was unsurprisingly dropped: *wæron* > *wēren* > *were*. The standard pronunciation [wɜr] is more recent, but it still has plenty of variations across English-speaking countries.

Lastly, the 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular inflection *wast* is not a diachronic product based on regular phonetic changes undergone by *wære*, which resulted in *wēre*, but rather an analogical creation based on the indicative present form *art*, which brings a typical final -*t* (Algeo, 2010, p. 177).

#### 4.4 Subjunctive Preterit

As mentioned before, the subjunctive mood was used in a wider range of sentences, namely in subordinate clauses, including the ones where it is still in use today: *swilce hē wære* ("as if he were"). Similarly to the present tense of the same mood, the subjunctive preterit only distinguishes singular and plural; the former with -*e* and the latter with -*en*:

<sup>4</sup> Karl Adolph Verner (1846-1896), a renowned Danish linguist.

Table 4: The development of the subjunctive preterit

<i>bēon</i> (Old English)	Middle English	Modern English		Middle English		<i>wesan</i> (Old English)
∅	∅	<i>were</i>	<	<i>wār(e), wōre, wēre</i>	<	<i>wære</i>
∅	∅	<i>wert*</i>		<i>wār(e), wōre, wēre</i>	<	<i>wære</i>
∅	∅	<i>were</i>	<	<i>wār(e), wōre, wēre</i>	<	<i>wære</i>
∅	∅	<i>were</i>	<	<i>wār(e), wōre(n) wēre(n)</i>	<	<i>wāren</i>
∅	∅	<i>were</i>	<	<i>wār(e), wōre(n) wēre(n)</i>	<	<i>wāren</i>
∅	∅	<i>were</i>	<	<i>wār(e), wōre(n) wēre(n)</i>	<	<i>wāren</i>

(cf. Hogg & Fulk, 2011, p. 309; Mossé, 1952, p. 84)

\**Wert* was created by analogical influence from *art* (2<sup>nd</sup> person singular, indicative present).

Sentences like *swilce hē wære* (“as if he were”) demonstrate that the modern-day inflection *were* (< *wære*) is one of the few recognizable remnants of the Old English subjunctive preterit. In fact, it is no more than a pale remnant of this verbal tense and mood, whose current forms are almost identical to the indicative ones. The original voiceless consonant \*[s] from the Proto-Indo-European root *\*wes-* was turned into a voiced \*[z] by sonorization and later into an approximant [r] by rhotacism (Algeo, 2010, p. 73-75).

Centuries later, the long diphthong [æ:] became [ɛ:] in the East Midlands dialects and [a:] in the Northern ones, resulting in *wēre* and *wār* (Brunner, 1970, p. 13; Mossé, 1952, p. 84), but their West Midland’s variant *wōre*, with a long stressed *ō*, could not be satisfactorily explained

based on this regular vowel change from Old to Middle English, as mentioned. In the plural, the final *-n* was predictably dropped: *wāren* > *wēren* > *were*.

At last, the 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular form *wert* is no more than an analogical creation based on the indicative present *art*, which brings a typical final *-t*.

#### 4.5 Imperative

During the Old English period, there was not a clear semantic distinction between imperative inflections derived from the Proto-Indo-European root *\*bheu-* and those deriving from *\*(h)es-*, because the sense of contingency or consuetude is somewhat inherent to this verbal mood, thus “it is not surprising that the reflexes of *\*bhew(H)-* have entirely supplanted those of *\*Hes-* in these categories” (Hogg & Fulk, 2011, p. 310), as demonstrated below:

Table 5: The development of the imperative mood

<i>bēon</i> (Old English)	Middle English		Modern English		Middle English		<i>wesan</i> (Old English)
<i>bēo</i> (sing.)	<i>bē, bēo, bō</i>	>	<i>be</i>		∅	<	<i>wes</i> (sing.)
<i>bēoð</i> (pl.)	<i>bēs, bēþ, bēoþ</i>	>	<i>be</i>		∅	<	<i>wesað</i> (pl.)

(cf. Hogg & Fulk, 2011, p. 309; Mossé, 1952, p. 84)

As usual, the long diphthong *ēo* turned into a long *ē* by monophthongization in Middle English, but

this resulting long vowel [e:] was later raised into [i:] due to the Great Vowel Shift occurred by the



16<sup>th</sup> century, in Early Modern English. Therefore: *bēo* > *bē* > *be* [bi:]. In the plural form *bēoð*, the final *ð* had been long devoiced into *þ*, which later turned into [s] by assibilation. However, unlike the modern 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular inflections from the indicative present (e.g. *makes*, *does*, *dies*, *is*, etc.), the resulting final sibilant [s] was dropped, making both imperative forms visually indistinguishable (Algeo, 2010, p. 176-177). Roughly speaking: *bēoð* > *bēoþ* > *bēþ* > *bēs* > *be* [bi:].

#### 4.6 Nonfinite Forms

The same remark previously made about the subjunctive and imperative moods can also be made about the four nonfinite forms in Old

English, namely: the simple infinitive (*bēon* / *wesan*), the inflected infinite (*to bēonne*), the present participle (*bēonde* / *wesende*) and the past participle (*gebēon*). In effect, as the sense of contingency and consuetude is inherent to them all, the Proto-Indo-European root *\*bheu-* was the one to prevail, preventing nonfinite forms based on the root *\*wes-* from thriving in English (Hogg & Fulk, 2011, p. 310). It is worth noting that the so-called inflected infinitives were remnants of an earlier past in which they were declined as nouns and used as the modern gerund: *Is blīðe tō helpenne* (i.e. “It is joyful to help” or “Helping is joyful”) (Algeo, 2010, p. 102). See the table below:

Table 6: The development of the nonfinite forms

<i>bēon</i> (Old English)		Middle English		Modern English	Middle English		<i>wesan</i> (Old English)
<i>bēon</i>	>	<i>bē, bēn, bēon, bōn, bō, bi, bīe</i>	>	<i>be</i>	∅	<	<i>wesan</i>
<i>to bēonne</i>	>	<i>to bēonne</i>		∅	∅		∅
<i>bēonde</i>	>	<i>bēand(e), bēing, bēyng</i>	>	<i>being</i>	∅	<	<i>wesende</i>
<i>gebēon</i>	>	<i>bēn, ybēn, ibē</i>	>	<i>been</i>	∅		∅

(cf. Hogg & Fulk, 2011, p. 309; Mossé, 1952, p. 84)

The simple infinitive underwent the regular monophthongization from *bēon* to *bēn*, whose final -n was later dropped and whose stressed vowel [e:] was later raised into a long [i:] due to the Great Vowel Shift, in Early Modern English: *bēon* > *bēn* > *bē* > *be* [bi:]. Since the simple and the inflected infinitive were formally similar (*bēon* / *bēonne*) and were somewhat interchangeable in medieval times, the latter was understandably absorbed, disappearing as a recognizable grammar feature (Algeo, 2010, p. 102-103, 124; Bybee, 2015, p. 52).

The present participle in turn was a verbal adjective, much like its modern counterpart. According to Brunner (1970, p. 72), it had three dialectal endings back in Middle English: *-inde* in the South, *-ende* in the Midlands plus *-and* in the North. From Southwestern Britain emerged the form *-inge*, later *-ing*, most likely as a result of an analogical leveling with the deverbal noun-forming suffixes *-ing(e)* and *-ung(e)*, rendering

the present participle and the modern gerund formally identical. In short: *bēonde* > *beend(e)* > *being(e)* > *being* [ˈbiŋ].

Unlike other Germanic languages, the Old English participial prefix *ge-* was already weakening insofar as its plosive consonant [g] was getting semivocalized into [j] before front vowels such as [e] and [i] (Algeo, 2010, p. 88) – that’s why it is often spelled *ȝ*, with a dot above: *ȝecumen* > *ycomen* > *come*; *ȝedōn* > *ydon* > *done*; *ȝedruncen* > *ydrunken* > *drunk*. Indeed, the table 6 confirms that it was initially reduced from *ȝe* to a feeble *y* and eventually dropped within the Middle English period: *ȝebēon* > *ybēn* > *bēn* > *been* [bɪn]. In German, on the other hand, the same prefix remained quite vivid as it can be seen in these cognate past participles: *gekommen* (“come”), *getan* (“done”), *getrunken* (“drunk”). At last, it should be noted that *been* preserved the typical strong participle ending (-en), found in verbs such as *seen*, *beaten*, *given*, *stolen*, etc.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

The numerous irregularities found throughout the conjugation of the verb *to be* can be explained by a single major reason: they are the result of a gradual intermixing between two Old English verbs, *bēon* and *wesan*, driven by a process known as suppletion (Bybee, 2015, p. 109-112). On top of that, *wesan* was itself the result of a prior intermixing between three different Proto-Indo-European verbal roots (\**wes-*, \**es-*, \**er-*), due to which the verb *to be* became by far the most irregular one in English.

In the indicative present, *bēon* and *wesan* were used for slightly different purposes: the former to express a gnomic present or a simple future (e.g. *Wyrd biþ ful aræd*, “Fate is fully inexorable”; *Īc bēo sē cyning*, “I will be the king”), the latter to express an ordinary simple present (e.g. *Īc eom sē cyning*, “I am the king”). From Middle English onwards, the inflections deriving from *bēon* slowly became to disappear, so that the ones deriving from *wesan* eventually prevailed:

1<sup>st</sup> person singular: *eom* > *eam* > *æm* > *am*;  
 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular: *eart* > *art*;  
 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular: *is* > *is*;  
 Plural: *earon* > *aren* > *are*.

In the subjunctive present, *bēon* and *wesan* were again competing against each other, but this time the former was the one to prevail. In Old English, it had only two inflected forms, one of them for singular and the other for plural, but these became formally identical centuries later, as soon as the plural ending *-n* was dropped:

Singular: *bēo* > *bē* > *be* [bi:];  
 Plural: *bēon* > *bēn* > *bē* > *be* [bi:].

In the indicative preterit, there were no inflections deriving from *bēon*, clearing the way for those deriving from *wesan* to evolve unopposed:

1<sup>st</sup> person singular: *wæs* > *was*  
 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular: *wart* (analogical creation);  
 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular: *wæs* > *was*;  
 Plural: *wæron* > *wēren* > *were* [wər].

In the subjunctive preterit, likewise, there were no inflections deriving from *bēon*, thus:

1<sup>st</sup> person singular: *wære* > *wēre* > *were* [wər];  
 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular: *wert* (analogical creation);  
 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular: *wære* > *wēre* > *were* [wər];  
 Plural: *wæren* > *wēren* > *were* [wər].

In the imperative mood, *bēon* and *wesan* forms were competing against each other in Old English, but those deriving from *wesan* could barely endure until the Middle English period. Therefore:

Singular: *bēo* > *bē* > *be* [bi:];  
 Plural: *bēoð* > *bēoþ* > *bēþ* > *bēs* > *be* [bi:].

Last but not least, all current nonfinite forms derived from *bēon*. As previously mentioned, the old inflected infinite (*to bēonne*) was absorbed by the simple infinite (*bēon*) due to formal and syntactic similarities between them, whereas the old present participle (*bēonde*) became formally identical to the gerund due to an analogical leveling occurred in Middle English. During the same period, the past participle lost its old Germanic prefix (*ge-*). Therefore:

Infinitive: *bēon* > *bēn* > *bē* > *be* [bi:];  
 Present participle: *bēonde* > *beend(e)* > *being(e)* > *being* [ˈbiŋ];  
 Past participle: *gebēon* > *ybēn* > *bēn* > *been* [bi:n].

Far from being arbitrary creations introduced by grammarians or writers, these remarkable irregularities are, in fact, the result of a gradual and spontaneous process of language change, whose nuances date back to the ancient Proto-Indo-European and stretch until Modern English, obliging historical linguists to operate with hypothetical reconstructions and “bad data” along the way.

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