

Strong and weak verb transformations in the history of English: Fluctuation between the tense markers of transitive and intransitive verb pairs

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The current understanding is that many strong verbs became weak verbs in the history of the English language by analogy. However, it remains to be elucidated whether any other factors could cause such a shift. To examine this question, here I focus on the fluctuation of the tense markers of transitive and intransitive verb pairs. Old English retains many weak *ja*-verbs which are derived from intransitive strong verbs as their transitive alternant. In other words, verbs in this period mark the distinction between transitive and intransitive morphological differences in the tense-marking of the two types: weak and strong. Based on the deverbative *ja*-verbs listed by Bammesberger (1965) and Ottosson (2013), there exist in Present-Day English only a few transitive and intransitive verb pairs, i.e., *fell/fall*, *lay/lie*, *raise/rise*, *set/sit*. On the other hand, there are a number of ambitransitive verbs, for example, those which conjugate according to a weak pattern such as *burn*, *drop*, *melt*, *starve*, and those which conjugate according to a strong pattern such as *shrink*, *sink*, *spring*. I investigate some of these verb pairs in this talk and point out that as the distinction between transitive and intransitive verbs gradually became less clear, their relationship became competitive and the weak type began to gain in strength. As a result of this, a fusion form whose conjugation combines features of both the strong and weak conjugations was induced. In addition, the weak pattern was applied to almost all new verbs, including loan words, and nouns employed as verbs, with the exception of a few new strong verbs. Over time, the majority of originally strong verbs shifted to the weak type, so that the total number of strong verbs was quite limited whereas the number of weak verbs was overwhelming. With this situation as a background, the weak type tended to be easily accepted when the tense markers of the transitive and intransitive verb pairs gradually became unsteady. These findings demonstrate that the indistinctness of the tense markers of transitive and intransitive verb pairs can take part in the shift of verbs. These results provide new insight into our understanding of the strong-weak transformation of English verbs.

REFERENCES

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