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THE POWER OF LANGUAGE #2: DO YOU EVEN LIFT? THE STRONG VS. WEAK VERB DILEMMA

November 7, 2016 · by The Liberator Magazine · in Academic,
Current Staff, McKenzie Hohenberger.

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As we saw in the previous Power of Language article, “Just Bearing Around,” the ancestors of English are Latin and an early form of German called Proto-Germanic. Since our language came into its own in the fifth century, it has transformed dramatically. The first manuscripts written in English would be indecipherable to a native speaker.

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Think of our language as a dynamic character in the narrative of linguistics—it has lived and died many times in order to become the complex being it is today.

Part of this transformation includes a growing distinction between **strong** verbs and weak verbs. In order to track the changes in

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~~ "The Language Issue" ~~

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English verbs, we can compare Old English, the earliest version of the language, to the form of English spoken today.

In Modern English, the most telling sign of a **strong** verb is a vowel shift between the present, past, and participle forms. 'Drive' is an example of a **strong** verb. I **drive** today, I **drove** yesterday, and I buy a **driven** car (for a lower price!). Another example is 'wear.' I **wear** today, I **wore** yesterday, and I throw my **worn** T-shirt in the laundry hamper.

”

Where **strong** verbs take only three forms in Modern English, the same verbs had four different forms in Old English.

'Drive' had an infinitive form, a first and second preterite, and a perfect participle. These were **drifan**, **draf**, **drifon**, and **drifen**, respectively. The vowels in each form consistently shifted to create a new, fully integrated word.

Weak verbs, on the other hand, are the result of linguistic languor. These verbs do not boast the same integrated appearance as **strong** verbs. Often distinguished by the -ed suffixes at the end of their tails, weak verbs have only two real forms—the infinitive and the past. For example, take 'boil'. I **boil** the egg today, I **boiled** it yesterday, and I eat a **boiled** egg.

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Similarly, I **fear** the leader today, I **feared** him yesterday, and I despise the **feared** leader.

As the language evolved throughout the Middle English and Early Modern periods, it lost many **strong** verbs to these weak ones. The Old English verb for 'boil' is a great example. It was **seopan** in the infinitive, **seap** in the first preterite, **sudon** in the second preterite, and **soden** in the perfect participle. Old English was an entirely different character altogether.

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But if **strong** verbs indicate tense by shifting vowels, how do we distinguish

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between tenses while using a weak verb?

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In Modern English, we rely on word order and articles to guide weak verbs toward their destinations. For our purposes here, it will be easier to use a noun—let's go with an *egg*—as a tool for solving the mystery of the verb.

Placing '**boiled**' before '*egg*' with no articles in between indicates an adjectival use. The *egg* accompanied by such a verbal adjective could be the subject or object of its clause. Did I eat the **boiled egg**, or did the **boiled egg** fall from the stove? Both are viable options.

When the chef **boils** the *egg*, however, the article 'the' separates the *egg* from '**boiled**,' and it will almost always be a direct object. If an article stands between the verb and the noun, i.e. he changed the bulb, you landed the plane, etc., then the verb is being used in its active present or past tense forms.

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When English lost its **strong** verbs, it developed systems of articles and word order to compensate.

The conflict between **strong** and weak verbs is one of the reasons Modern English is difficult to learn as a second language. Rather than blaming our complex character for its inconsistencies, we should learn why and how these discrepancies have surfaced. In the case of **strong** and weak verbs, the answer is simple: the English of the twenty-first century is a lazy one.

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