

5 Actions and Events

Understanding the basic grammatical principles of a language is rather like putting a jigsaw puzzle together. Individually, the pieces do not make much sense; we can only apprehend the picture when the pieces are seen in combination. For that reason, it is sometimes frustrating to begin looking at the grammar of a language bit by bit – the bits make sense only when we see them in relation to each other. Our basic jigsaw of the grammar of Old English is very nearly complete. We have looked at some Old English texts and explored the vocabulary and grammar of the language without paying much attention to one of the most important types of word – the verb.

Verbs are those words that express actions and events. Today, the verb phrase can be made up of a single word, like ‘give’, or a group of words like ‘might have given’. Other types of phrase orbit around the verb phrase, performing different functions with respect to it. For example, noun phrases usually act as Subjects and Objects of the verb phrase, while prepositional phrases, as we have seen, tend to give extra information about time, place, manner and so on. As we have also seen, the normal sequence of these phrases can differ in Old English and English today:

<i>Verb</i>	<i>Subject</i>	<i>Object</i>	<i>Extra information</i>
āsende	hē	his engel Gabrihel	tō ānum mæden
sent	he	his angel Gabriel	to a maiden

Sequences of phrases such as the example above are known as *clauses*, and at the heart of each full clause, sitting like a pearl in an oyster, is the verb. The following sentence is made up of two clauses, and again the order of the phrases in Old English differs from that of English today:

Pā **tugon** Bēowulfes gefēran hire sweord // þæt hīe hira hlāford **were**den.

Then Beowulf's comrades **drew** their swords // so that they **might protect** their lord.

While current English tends to follow a pattern in which Subject is followed by a verb that in turn is followed by Object –

<i>Subject</i>	<i>Verb</i>	<i>Object</i>
Beowulf's comrades	drew	their swords

– in Old English the verb can be followed or preceded by Subject and Object together:

drew	Beowulf's comrades	their swords
Beowulf's comrades	their swords	drew

Of course, in Old English we can often recognise the Subject and Object by looking at their case (that is, whether the words are in the Nominative or Accusative form), rather than by looking at their position with respect to the verb.

What the form of the Old English verb tells us

The *form* of the verb in Old English is packed with information about:

- Who is performing the action (1st, 2nd or 3rd *person*, i.e. I/we, you, he/she/it/they)
- How many are performing the action (*number*: singular v. plural)
- When it is being performed (*tense*: past v. present and future)
- Whether the sentence expresses a fact or not (*mood*: indicative v. subjunctive)
- Whether the Subject of the verb is the agent or is affected by the action (*voice*: active v. passive)

Changing the form of a verb, then, changes the information it gives about person, number, tense, mood and voice. It is unsurprising that in both English today and Old English the verb has many forms.

However, whereas today's writers of English frequently use a wide range of the forms available, Old English writers tended to restrict their palette to simple present and past forms. We therefore have to do some more interpretative work when we encounter these verb forms. For example, in a passage we shall shortly encounter, about the life of St Columba, we find the sentence:

Sūþ-Peohtas wæron mycle ær gefullode.

A literal translation of this sentence would be 'The South Picts **were** baptised much earlier.' However, given the context of the sentence, and its use of the adverbial phrase *mycle ær* 'much earlier', we might venture the translation 'The South Picts **had been** baptised much earlier.' Our interpretation of the meaning of verb phrases therefore has to pay attention to the nuances of context and of any clues given by adverbs and prepositional phrases.

Let us consider some of the main forms that we will encounter in the reading passages.

Past v. present (and future)

In English today, we change the tense of some verbs by altering the vowel in the middle or end of the word (e.g. 'sing/sang'), while in most verbs we simply add *-ed* to the stem of the verb ('walk/walked'). The former are traditionally called *strong* verbs and the latter *weak* verbs. Over the history of English some verbs that were originally strong changed their form and became weak. A small group of verbs, in particular the verb *be*, are irregular and relatively unpredictable in form. The basic patterns in today's English are:

	Singular		Plural	
	<i>Present</i>	<i>Past</i>	<i>Present</i>	<i>Past</i>
<i>1st</i>	I draw	I drew	We draw	We drew
<i>2nd</i>	You draw	You drew	You draw	You drew
<i>3rd</i>	He draws	He drew	They draw	They drew
	She draws	She drew		
	It draws	It drew		

	Singular		Plural	
	<i>Present</i>	<i>Past</i>	<i>Present</i>	<i>Past</i>
<i>1st</i>	I protect	I protected	We protect	We protected
<i>2nd</i>	You protect	You protected	You protect	You protected
<i>3rd</i>	He protects	He protected	They protect	They protected
	She protects	She protected		
	It protects	It protected		

The present-day system has evolved from an older English system that is still recognisable, as we can see in the following strong verb *drīfan* ‘to drive’ and the common weak verb *habban* ‘to have’:

Strong verb: *drīfan* ‘to drive’

	Singular		Plural	
	<i>Present</i>	<i>Past</i>	<i>Present</i>	<i>Past</i>
<i>1st</i>	ic drīfe	ic drāf	wē drīfaþ	wē drifon
<i>2nd</i>	þū drīfst	þū drife	gē drīfaþ	gē drifon
<i>3rd</i>	hē drīfþ	hē drāf	hīe drīfaþ	hīe drifon
	hēo drīfþ	hēo drāf		
	hit drīfþ	hit drāf		

Weak verb: *habban* ‘to have’

	Singular		Plural	
	<i>Present</i>	<i>Past</i>	<i>Present</i>	<i>Past</i>
<i>1st</i>	ic hæbbe	ic hæfde	wē habbaþ	wē hæfdon
<i>2nd</i>	þū hæfst	þū hæfdest	gē habbaþ	gē hæfdon
<i>3rd</i>	hē hæfþ	hē hæfde	hīe habbaþ	hīe hæfdon
	hēo hæfþ	hēo hæfde		
	hit hæfþ	hit hæfde		

There are a few things to note about this table. The first is that the principle behind strong and weak verbs remains constant in English: strong verbs in Old English generally indicate past tense through a change in vowel, from *ic drīfe* ‘I drive’ to *ic drāf* ‘I drove’. In contrast, weak verbs in Old English generally indicate past tense through a *d*, whether in the singular *hē hæfde* ‘he had’ or in the plural *hīe hæfdon* ‘they had’. *Habben* is unusual in the interchange of *bb* and *f*; however, we include it here because it is one of the most common verbs that you will see.

Some grammatical signals remain fairly constant in both weak and strong verbs in Old English. Points to note in particular include:

- Third-person present singular forms with *hē*, *hēo* or *hit* often end in *-þ*.
- Second-person present singular forms with *þū* often end in *-st*.
- Present plural forms often end in *-aþ*.
- Past plural forms often end in *-on*.
- The infinitive form often ends in *-an*, e.g. *drīfan* ‘to drive’ and *habban* ‘to have’.

We shall shortly look at other forms of the verb, but these should be sufficient for the time being to distinguish between past and present actions. Bear in mind that most narratives you read will usually have Subjects in the third person (‘he/they’), and sometimes in the first-person singular (‘I’). Second-person subjects will be restricted mainly to direct speech in the narrative. Usually, too, the narratives will be in the past tense. Therefore, at first you should focus on familiarising yourself with third-person forms (singular and plural) and the first-person singular.

Reading practice

Let us look now at several passages that illustrate how texts in Old English convey past and present actions and events. We will focus this time mainly on the verb forms. The first passage is again adapted from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. The entry for 565 focuses on momentous religious events. For Scottish readers this date holds particular interest as it tells of the arrival of Saint Columba, during the reign of Æthelbert of Kent, to convert the dominant Scottish tribe, the Picts, to Christianity. The abbey that stands on the beautiful island of Iona (Illustration 11), where Columba established his base, has been rebuilt and is still in use today.

Look at the questions below and see if you can figure out the answers from the text before we look at it in greater detail.

- How long did Æthelbert reign in Kent?
- Who brought the ritual of baptism to England?
- Where are the Picts described as living?
- Who gave Columba the island of Iona?



11 St Columba's Bay, Iona

fēng succeeded to
fulluht baptism
gecierde converted
gelēafan faith, belief
gesealde gave

Ii Iona
mæsse-prēost priest
rīce kingdom
wuniaþ dwell

565 Hēr **fēng** Æþelbryht tō Cantwara rīce, and **hēold** þrēo and fiftig wintra. On his dagum **sende** Gregorius ūs fulluht, and Columba mæsse-prēost **cōm** to Peohtum and hīe **gecierde** to Crīstes gelēafan. Hīe **wuniaþ** be norþum mōrum. And hira cyning him **gesealde** þæt ig-land þe man **nemneþ** Ii.

Much of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, naturally, is concerned with the succession of kings, and here we are told that in 565 Æthelbert *fēng tō rīce* ‘took the kingdom’ or ‘succeeded to the kingdom’, which he held for 53 ‘winters’ or years. Gregory, who was then pope, as the chronicler assumes his readers will know, sent baptism to England (via missionaries), and in the same year Columba came to the Picts and

converted (*gecierde*) them. The chronicler tells us that the Picts live (*wuniaþ*) in the north moors, and that their king gave (*gesealde*) Columba the island called Iona (literally, ‘that one calls Iona’, *þe man nemneþ Ii*).

This brief extract has a good variety of verb forms in both past and present tenses. The present tenses can easily be identified by the plural *-aþ* and singular *-eþ* endings (*Hie wuniaþ* ‘they live’; *man nemneþ* ‘one calls’). Most of the other verbs are past tenses, and can be identified as such by the *d*: *hēold* ‘held’, *sende* ‘sent’, *gecierde* ‘converted’, *gesealde* ‘gave’. Only two verbs are left that do not fit the pattern, the strong verbs *fōn* ‘seize’, which has the past tense *fēng*, which here means ‘succeeded’, and *cuman* ‘come’, which has the past tense *cōm* ‘came’.

Further reading

Now follow the *Chronicle* entry further, and find out how Columba fared.

- What did Columba build on Iona?
- What role did he perform there for 32 years?
- How old was he when he passed away?
- Which Pictish tribes had been baptised long before Columba’s arrival?
- Who baptised them and where was he educated?
- In whose name is the abbey of Whithorn dedicated?
- Who rests at the abbey of Whithorn?

<i>bodade</i>	preached	<i>gelæred</i>	educated
<i>forþ-fērde</i>	died (literally, ‘travelled forth)	<i>getimbrode</i>	built
<i>fulwiht</i>	baptism	<i>mynster</i>	abbey
<i>gefullode</i>	baptised	<i>ierfe-weardas</i>	heirs
<i>gehālgod</i>	dedicated (i.e. ‘hallowed’)		

Ðær se Columba **getimbrode** mynster, and þær hē **wæs** abbod twā and þrītīg wintra, and þær **forþ-fērde** þā þā hē **wæs** seofon and hund-seofontig wintra. Ðā stōwe **habbaþ** nū gīet his ierfe-weardas. Sūþ-Peohatas **wæron** mycle ær **gefullode**. Him **bodade** fulwiht Ninia biscop, sē **wæs** on Rōme **gelæred**. His mynster is æt Hwīterne, on

Martines naman **gehālgod**. Pær hē **restep** mid manegum hālgum werum.

The chronicler here punctuates what is essentially a past-tense narrative with occasional references to the present that bring home to his readers the contemporary relevance of the historical events he describes. And so we learn that Columba built an abbey and that he was abbot there for 32 years, until he died at the age of 77 (*seofon and hund-seofontig*). The chronicler then switches to the present tense to say that even now his heirs have that place (*pā stōwe habbaþ*). The chronicler again shifts his focus to pre-Columban Scotland and tells us that the southern Picts were baptised long before (*wæron mycle ær gefullode*), by Ninian, who was educated (*wæs . . . gelæred*) in Rome. The chronicler returns to the present, as he tells us that Ninian's abbey, dedicated to St Martin, is in Whithorn – which is on the south-west coast of Scotland – and that the abbot rests there with many holy men.

These extracts together, then, illustrate a very common type of narrative in Old English: events in the past are recounted, with only occasional present-tense references if any. Here the narratives relate largely to the exploits of individuals – Æthelbert, Gregory, Columba and Ninian – so most of the verbs are in the singular past tense form, often identified by the *-de* ending.

Expressing the future

Old English – like English today – has only two tenses with which to express different points of time, usually present and past. Old English speakers and writers, like their present-day counterparts, therefore used the present tense to express future time as well as present time. It is important here to distinguish between *present tense*, which is the conventional name given by grammarians to a form of any verb, and *present time*, which is a non-linguistic, temporal phenomenon. Thus *present tense* can be used to refer to any number of points in time, both present and future. An example of present tense used to express future time can be found at the beginning of the story of Joshua and the siege of Jericho, which we looked at in Chapter 4.

Hierichō sēo burh **wæs** mid weallum **ymb-trymed** and fæste **belocen**. Drihten **cwæþ** þā tō Iōsue, 'Ic **dō** þās burh Hierichō on þīnum gewearde and þone cyning samod and þā strengstan weras þe **wuniaþ** in Hierichō.'

In Chapter 4, we translated these sentences like this:

Jericho the city **was surrounded** by walls and firmly **enclosed**. The Lord then **said** to Joshua, 'I **shall put** this city Jericho in your power and also the king and the strongest men who **live** in Jericho.'

Most of these verbs should not give many difficulties. The forms of *ymb-trymed* 'surrounded' and *belocen* 'enclosed' have different endings – but then so do modern forms like 'asked' and 'given'. The past tense of *cwæþan* 'to say' does not contain *-d* but it does change the middle vowel, like other irregular verbs such as 'sing' and 'sang', and, as noted in Chapter 2, it reminds us of the old-fashioned term, 'quoth'. The plural present-tense form *wuniaþ* 'live' is exactly what we now expect.

Any difficulty lies in understanding the simple word *dō*, the first-person singular, present-tense form of the verb *dōn*, which in Old English could mean 'do', 'act', 'make' or (as here) 'put'. Only the context of the verb in this passage suggests that the best translation into today's English is 'shall put'.

The word 'shall' in English today has an Old English ancestor in the verb *sculan* 'ought to, have to, must', just as present-day 'will' has an ancestor in *willan* 'wish to'. However, it was not until towards the end of the Old English period that *sculan* and *willan* began to mark future events or predictions as they do in English today. The present-tense form was much more widely used to indicate future in the earlier periods. The lesson to be learned from this example is that we often have to make intelligent guesses about the detailed meaning of individual verbs, based on what we understand of the overall meaning of any passage. Intelligent guesswork, as we shall later see, is also essential when the verb is missed out completely.

Duration

In most languages, verbs not only identify the point in time of an action (past, present or future), they can also indicate other mean-

ings; for example, using the verb ‘to be’ with another verb in a particular form can indicate *duration*, that is, there is the sense that the action is or was lasting a relatively long time. The form of the verb that expresses this concept is called the ‘present participle’ – in today’s English it ends in *-ing*, and in Old English it usually ends in *-ende*. Its use can be seen in the following sentence:

Ond hīe alle on þone cyning wāerun feohtende oþ-þæt hīe hine ofslægenne hæfdon.

And they all **were fighting** against the king until they had killed (‘slain’) him.

Two verbs ‘to be’

The verb ‘to be’ is a highly irregular verb in English today. It is actually derived from *two* Old English verbs, *wesan* and *bēon*, although in standard English the only remnant of the second form is the infinitive ‘to be’ itself, all the other forms descending from *wesan*. Even in Old English, *bēon* was only used in the present tense. It is worth stating here for reference what the different Old English forms of ‘to be’ are:

<i>to be</i>	<i>wesan</i>	<i>bēon</i>
I am	ic eom	ic bēo
you are	þū eart	þū bist
he is	hē is	hē biþ
she is	hēo is	hēo biþ
it is	hit is	hit biþ
we are	wē sindon	wē bēoþ
you are	gē sindon	gē bēoþ
they are	hīe sindon	hīe bēoþ
I was	ic wæs	
you were	þū wære	
he was	hē wæs	
she was	hēo wæs	
it was	hit wæs	
we were	wē wæron	
you were	gē wæron	
they were	hīe wæron	

It might seem odd that Old English had two verbs meaning much the same thing; however, even in varieties of regional English today, 'I be fighting' is not an impossible construction. Such expressions have an ancient pedigree. It is likely that in Old English *wesan* and *bēon* had slightly different meanings, the former referring to the present state while the latter was used to express 'timeless' facts, e.g.

<i>I am in the garden</i>	present state
<i>I be the king's huntsman</i>	fact

However, the two meanings, and the verbs used to express them, merged over time.

The use of *wesan* and *bēon* with present participles to indicate duration was less common in Old English than it is today, although it does occur, as in:

Ond hīe þā ymb þā gatufeohtende wāeron, of-þæt hīe þær-inne fulgon.

And they then around the gates **were fighting**, until they therein burst.

Since this is quite an unusual form in Old English, a more subtle translation into today's English might choose to stress the sense of duration that the Old English verb phrase probably conveyed, as in:

And then they **continued fighting** around the gates, until they burst in.

Specific reference to time

Other combinations of verbs can specify nuances of time more subtly than we can with a blunt, two-fold distinction between past and present. In the previous section we looked at the following sentence:

Ond hīe alle on þone cyning wāerun feohtende of-þæt hīe hine ofslægenne hæfdon.

And they all were fighting against the king until they **had killed** him.

In English today, we find combinations made up of the verb ‘to have’ with what is called the ‘past participle’ of the verb, that is, words like ‘walked’, ‘given’ or ‘slain’. In these combinations, the meanings change depending on whether ‘have’ is in the present or past tense:

He **has** fought. *Present tense: ‘has’*
 He **had** fought. *Past tense: ‘had’*

Depending on the verb used and the context of its use, the present-tense form can have up to three meanings:

- Unspecified past time (e.g. ‘He has fought, and I’m not specifying when’)
- Recent past (e.g. ‘He has just fought, moments ago’)
- Past action extending into the present (e.g. ‘He has fought in these competitions for years, and still does’)

In its past tense form, the combination of words generally suggests an action that took place before another specified action, e.g.

He had fought Grendel before Grendel’s mother turned up.

The present-day English system, with its nuances, has developed from a similar but not identical Old English set of combinations with both *habban* and *bēon*:

Hē hæfþ gefeohten ‘He has fought’
 Hē biþ gecumen ‘He has come’ (literally, ‘He is come’)

When did Old English writers use *habban* and when did they use *bēon* in combination with past participles? There was a pattern: *habban* was used when the verb was naturally associated with an Object, whilst *bēon* was used when the verb was *not* naturally associated with an Object.

Hē hæfþ þone fēond gefeohten ‘He has fought **the enemy**’
 Hē biþ gecumen ‘He has come’

For the purposes of reading, it is sufficient to be aware that both *habban* and *bēon* can be used with the past participle to express these

subtle nuances of time. We also need to be aware that Old English writers do not always use these verbal combinations in exactly the way that we would today. That is, sometimes Old English writers use simple present-tense forms when we would expect a combination of words that expresses duration, or they might use a phrase with *habban + past participle* when today we would use a simple past form. So long as we are familiar with the basic forms and are sensitive to the possibility of variation, we should become confident in our interpretations of older texts.

First-person narratives

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, not surprisingly, is largely a third-person narrative, so we should expect to encounter mainly third-person forms in it. To illustrate a first-person narrative, where the speaker is an actor in his own story, let us look at a short extract from one of the poems we shall return to in full in Part II, *The Dream of the Rood*. This extraordinary, visionary work tells us about a dream in which the narrator encounters the cross ('the rood') on which Christ was crucified, and listens to its story. It allows us a tantalising glimpse of Anglo-Saxon attitudes to religion, also reflected in the number of carved or decorated crosses surviving from the medieval period (see Illustration 12).

In the following section, the narrative of the crucifixion is told from the perspective of the cross itself. The verbs are shown in bold; the forms shift from third to first person as the cross switches between telling of other people's actions and then expressing its own responses. Like other Anglo-Saxon poems, this is written in half-lines (each is usually referred to as line *a* and *b*), and in the following extract we have numbered them 1–11 for convenience, although they are actually lines 28–39 in the original text. The original δ has here also been replaced by the more familiar character β . Read through the extract, and identify the lines in which:

- the cross is made;
- the cross describes the approach of Christ;
- the cross explains its feelings about being used as the vehicle for Christ's execution.



12 MacLean's Cross, Iona

āhēawen cut down
āsetton set down
āstyred removed
beorg hill
bifian tremble
būgan bow down
eftstan hasten
elne mycle with great zeal
gēara iū very long ago
gefyllan fell, strike down
geman remember
genāman seized

genōge enough (i.e. many)
gestīgan climb
geworhton made ('wrought')
gȳta still, yet
hebban lift up
holtes of the forest
scēatas surfaces
sēlesta best
stefne root
wæfer-sȳne spectacle
wergas criminals

Þæt wæs gēara iū
 þæt ic wæs **āhēawen**
āstyred of stefne mīnum.
geworhton him þær tō wæfer-
 sȳne,

Bæron mē þær beornas on
 eaxlum,
Gefæstnodon mē þær fēondas
 genōge.

efstan elne mycle,
 Þær ic þā ne **dorste**
būgan oþþe **berstan**,
 eorþan scēatas.
 fēondas **gefyllan**,

(ic þæt gȳta **geman**)
 holtes on ende,
Genāman mē þær strange fēondas,
hēton mē heora wergas **hebban**.

oþ-þæt hīe mē on beorg **āsetton**. 5

Geseah ic þā Frean man-cynnes

þæt hē mē **wolde** on **gestīgan**.
 ofer Dryhtnes word
 þā ic **bifian geseah**
 Ealle ic **mihte** 10
 hwæpre ic fæste **stōd**.

First-person forms include the present tense *ic geman* 'I remember' and the past-tense forms *Geseah ic* 'I saw', and *ic stōd* 'I stood'. Two verbs are followed by other verbs in their basic infinitive form, *ic ne dorste būgan oþþe berstan* 'I did not dare to bow or break', and *ic mihte gefyllan* 'I could have felled/struck down'. Third-person forms include *Genāman mē strange fēondas* 'strong foes took me' and *hē mē on beorg āsetton* 'they set me up on a hill'. Another verb followed by an infinitive is *hēton mē heora wergas hebban* 'commanded me to raise up their criminals'. Note again that Old English word order is often different from that of English today – although an unexpected word order is still a characteristic of poetic language.

The structure of this extract should now be clear: lines 1–6a tell that

the cross was hewed from the edge of a wood, and, intended as a spectacle, it was taken by strong enemies who commanded it to raise up their criminals. Men bore it on their shoulders, and set it up on a hill. Lines 6b and 7 tell of Christ approaching with great zeal to climb the cross. Lines 8–11 tell of the cross's inability to influence events: it did not dare to bow or break against the Lord's will, and when it saw the earth shake it could have felled many enemies, but it stood firm.

The unusual perspective taken by *The Dream of the Rood* is a powerful means of defamiliarising a tale that would be an integral part of the life of the poet and his listeners and readers. The image of the hero hastening to meet his death at the hands of his foes is at odds with that of a hero such as Beowulf, who defeats his foes in battle; in the cross's frustration at not being able to scatter Christ's enemies we can see the heroic values of military conquest set against the Christian ethos of self-sacrifice at God's command.

The next few sections of this chapter focus on some of the peculiarities of verb uses in Old English that you will notice in the reading passages in Part II of this book.

Verbs and plural Subjects

One characteristic feature of Old English that has not survived into the modern idiom is the tendency to split up plural Subjects that have the form 'X and Y', for example 'Beowulf and his comrades' or 'Cynewulf and the counsellors of the West Saxons'. In today's English such plurals are treated as compound Subjects, and they are followed by a plural verb; however, in Old English the Subject is often divided and a singular verb is used. The following two sentences illustrate this usage, and are translated literally:

Bēowulf onhielde his hēafod tō þāem bolstre, and his gefēran swā same.

Beowulf laid his head on the pillow, and his comrades likewise.

Cynewulf benam Sigebyrht his rīces ond West-Seaxna wiotan.

Cynewulf deprived Sigebyrht of his kingdom and the counsellors of the West Saxons.

When reading Old English texts, then, we have to be aware that noun phrases beginning *ond/and* that appear after the verb might actually be part of a plural Subject, and should be understood as ‘Beowulf and his comrades’ or ‘Cynewulf and the counsellors of the West Saxons’.

Asking questions

English today has different ways of forming questions. The word order depends on the kind of question asked and the verb chosen.

Questions that have the answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’

When the verb phrase includes *to be* or a modal auxiliary verb like *can, could, must, might, should* and so on, we reverse the order of the Subject and the first verb:

He is sick	>	Is he sick?
He is going	>	Is he going?
We can go	>	Can we go?
We should leave	>	Should we leave?

When we form yes/no questions with other verbs, we have to introduce the auxiliary verb ‘do’. This precedes the Subject, which in turn precedes the main verb:

I recognise you	>	Do you recognise me?
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Questions using ‘wh’ words: who(m), what, why and how

Questions that require a more informative answer than ‘yes’ or ‘no’ make use of a question word like ‘who’ or ‘what’. Then we more or less add the ‘wh’ word to the kind of question form used in yes/no questions:

Why is he sick?
Where is he going?
When can we go?
How should we leave?
Whom do you recognise?

In Old English, the question form is similar but easier. In yes/no questions the order of Subject and verb is simply reversed; in *wh*-questions, the question word precedes the first or main verb, which then precedes the Subject:

Ic cann būtan nettum huntian	> Canst þū būtan nettum huntian?
	> Hū canst þū būtan nettum huntian?
I can hunt without nets.	> Can you hunt without nets? > How can you hunt without nets?
Ic gefō heorotas and haran.	> Gefehst þū heorotas and haran? > Hwelc wild-dēor gefehst þū ?
I catch stags and hares.	> Do you catch stags and hares? > Which wild animals do you catch ?

Reading practice

Look at the questions below and see if you can match them up to the appropriate answers.

<i>begietst</i>	obtain
<i>bileofan</i>	sustenance
<i>cīepst</i>	trade
<i>ceastre</i>	city
<i>ceaster-ware</i>	citizens
<i>feoh</i>	money
<i>rēwett</i>	rowing
<i>swā fela gefōn swā ic sellan mæge</i>	catch as many as I might sell
<i>scrūd</i>	clothes

Questions

1. Hwelcne cræft canst þū?
2. Hwæt begietst þū of þīnum cræfte?
3. Hwær cīepst þū þīne fiscas?
4. Hwā bygþ hīe?
5. For-hwȳ ne fiscast þū on sǣ?

Answers

- (a) On þære ceastre.
- (b) Ic eom fiscere.
- (c) Þā ceasterware. Ne mæg ic hira swā fela gefōn swā ic sellan mæge.
- (d) Hwīlum ic dō swā, ac seldon; for-þæm hit is mē micel rēwett tō þære sǣ.
- (e) Bīlofan ic me begiete and scrūd, and feoh.

The answers are revealed at the end of the chapter.

Negatives

We have already come across a number of negatives in the Old English texts we have read, for example in the previous activity:

Ne mæg ic hira swā fela gefōn swā ic sellan mæge.

I **cannot** catch as many as I might sell.

The negative is often formed as above by putting *ne* before the verb. There is also another word, *nā*, which can be translated as ‘not’. Both *ne* and *nā* can be used in the same sentence to stress the negative meaning:

Ne ielde Grendel **nā** lange.

Grendel did **not** delay long. (Literally, ‘Grendel didn’t delay not long’.)

The grammatical rule that forbids present-day speakers and writers of standard English from using double negatives (as in ‘I **can’t** get **no** satisfaction’) was popularised by eighteenth-century grammarians who were more concerned with mathematical logic than with how people actually used the language. Double – and even triple – negatives were common in speech and writing in earlier English, as they still are in other modern languages today.

Some common verbs, as you will have noticed, combine with *ne* to form a single negative word: *nīs* (*ne* + *is* ‘isn’t’), *nylle* (*ne* + *wille* ‘don’t wish’), and *nyste* (*ne* + *wiste* ‘don’t know’). This kind of combination

also occurs with the pronoun *nān* (*ne* + *ān* ‘none’).

Hīe *nyston* þæt *nān* *sweord* *ne* *mihte* þone *fēond* *grētan*.

They did not know that no sword could harm the enemy.

Commands

Commands in Old English are expressed using two verb forms, one for commanding an individual, the other for commanding a group. And so you might say:

Commanding one person

gā

ne hrīn

Commanding more than one

gāþ

ne hrīnaþ

go

don't touch

The plural command usually ends in *-þ*, like plural present-tense verbs. We saw an example in the reading passage in Chapter 4, when God commands Joshua and his men:

Farað *nū* *siex* *dagas* *ymb* þā *burh* . . .

Go now round the city for six days . . .

Impersonal events

A curious characteristic that English shares with some other languages is that certain kinds of action and even experience are expressed as if there is no animate Subject. In English today we can say things like:

It is raining

It seems that . . .

It appears that . . .

We often use these expressions to distance ourselves from the experience described; for example, we might say ‘It appears (to me) that you are wrong’ rather than ‘I believe you are wrong’.

In Old English there is a broader range of verbs that have imper-

sonal uses. This category includes other verbs of experience, such as ‘dream’, as we can see in the opening lines of the poem *The Dream of the Rood*:

Hwæt! Ic swefna cyst secgan wylle
hwæt **mē gemætte** tō midre nihte

Lo! I wish to tell the best of dreams
that **I dreamed** (lit. ‘it **dreamed to me**’) in the middle of the night . . .

The point to remember from this example is that when you come across some verbs in Old English, particularly those expressing mental events or perceptions, the noun phrase is often in the Dative case.

Active and passive voice

English today has two ways of expressing very nearly the same thing, for example:

Ninian **baptised** the Picts. *Active voice*
The Picts **were baptised** by Ninian. *Passive voice*

The availability of these two options allows English speakers today to manage the ‘flow’ of information in the sentence – we can decide, for example, whether to put the agent of any action at the start of the sentence or at its climax. In the case of the passive, we can even delete the agent altogether: ‘The Picts were baptised.’

Old English writers used passive forms of the verb frequently. The passive in Old English is formed in an identical way to that in today’s English:

Peohtas wāeron gefullode. The Picts **were baptised**.

Another kind of Old English grammatical construction is also usually translated as a passive form in today’s English, that is the verb with the impersonal use of ‘man’, meaning ‘one’:

. . . *þe man nemneþ Ii.*

While this kind of phrase might literally be translated as ‘that man/one calls Iona’, translators conventionally render it as a passive, ‘which is called Iona’.

Expressing factual and non-factual events

The Old English verb had a grammatical form that has barely survived into English today. Compare the following forms:

- | | | |
|----|-----------------|-------------------|
| 1. | <i>hē gieƿ</i> | <i>hīe gēaf</i> |
| 2. | <i>hē geaf</i> | <i>hīe gēafon</i> |
| 3. | <i>hē giefe</i> | <i>hīe giefen</i> |

In the first line, the verbs express facts in the present tense: ‘he gives’ and ‘they give’. In the second line, the verbs express facts in the past tense: ‘he gave’ and ‘they gave’. In the third line, however, the form of the verb shows that we are no longer in the world of facts – these forms express ‘non-factual’ events or states, such as hypotheses, desires or possibilities that in present-day English would normally be expressed using other verbs, for example ‘he/they *would* give, *wish* to give, *could* give’ and so on. The precise meaning of this verb form depends on the context in which the verb is found, but it always has a generally ‘non-factual’ sense.

The form of the verb shown in line three is known as the *subjunctive*, and it only survives in today’s English in expressions like ‘If I **were** to help you’ or ‘Lord **help** us!’ where again the meaning suggests a hypothesis, a desire or even a prayer. The subjunctive form of the verb in Old English is also used in indirect speech, where in English today we would again use a verb like ‘would’; for example, ‘She said that she would return.’

Though the subjunctive form of the verb has largely been replaced by alternative grammatical resources in English today, other languages such as French and German still make use of it. In Old English, the subjunctive is used to express various hypothetical meanings, including doubt, desire, condition and intended result, as well as to signal indirect speech. The main thing to look for is an *-e* ending showing the singular, and an *-en* ending showing the plural (although this is sometimes abbreviated to *-n* in verbs ending in vowels, like *dō* which has the subjunctive *dōn*). When you spot these

endings, then you need to ask yourself if a hypothetical meaning is required.

Some of the examples seen earlier in this chapter include subjunctive uses of the verb:

Ne mæg ic hira swā fela gefōn swā ic sellan mæge.

I **cannot catch** as many as I **might sell**.

Here the difference between *mæg* and *mæge* signals a shift in meaning from the fact that the hunter *cannot* catch the quantity that he (hypothetically) *might* sell. Whereas in English today we capture this shift in meaning by using different auxiliary verbs, Old English writers simply changed the form of the verb *mæg(e)*. Another example of a shift from fact to hypothesis occurs in the sentence:

þā **tugon** Bēowulfes gefēran hire sweord þæt hīe hira hlāford **wereden**.

Then Beowulf's comrades **drew** their swords so that they **might protect** their lord.

The first verb in this sentence (*tugon*) is a simple past plural form ('drew') which indicates a fact, something that has happened in the past, while the second verb (*wereden*) is a plural subjunctive, indicating that the act of protecting their lord is something that still exists only in the realm of possibility. As in the previous example, in English today we tend to express this notion through the use of an auxiliary verb like 'might'.

Pause for thought

This chapter concludes our introduction to the basic grammar of Old English. We have covered the essentials, from noun phrases that express people and things, through prepositional phrases expressing place, time, manner and reason, to verbs expressing actions and events – past, present and future, factual and hypothetical.

You now have the essential tools to begin to read more extended Old English texts. Before we launch into these, however, we shall

pause to consider how Old English verse works (Chapter 6) and how different people in different periods have tackled Old English translation (Chapter 7).

Answers

Answers to matching exercise: 1b, 2e, 3a, 4c, 5d.