Chapter 4 - Old English grammar

Noun and demonstrative pronoun inflections for gender, number and case

Nouns in OE were marked for **number** - *singular (sg)* or *plural (pl)* and **case** - *nominative (n), accusative (a), genitive (g), dative (d)* or *instrumental (i)*, and each noun had a grammatical **gender** *masculine, (masc), feminine (fem)* or *neuter (neut)*. In theory, we might expect ten different inflections for each combination of number and case categories - *n sg, n pl, a sg, a pl, g sg, g pl, d sg, d pl, i sg, i pl*. And because pronouns and adjectives agreed with nouns for gender as well as number and case, then they would need thirty inflections in all, if each set of categories were to have its own distinct inflection - *nom sg masc, nom sg fem, nom sg neut, acc sg masc* etc.

   In fact, this was not so. Some inflections served for more than one category, and not all nouns used the same inflections to mark the categories.

   There is no need to learn all the different inflections of the nouns before beginning to translate OE, provided that you know how to refer to an OE dictionary and grammar. OE nouns divide into sets, or **declensions**. Each declension contains those nouns which have the same inflections for the same functions. There are two important sets which grammarians called the **strong** and **weak** declensions, or alternatively the **general** and **-AN** declensions. Each divides into sub-categories according to gender, with some differences of inflection. There also nouns which do not easily fit into either the regular strong or weak declensions, so these are called **irregular**.

   One example of each declension is set out below in full to show all its inflections. The set of strong nouns has the demonstrative pronoun which in MnE is translated as either the definite article *the* or the demonstrative pronoun *that/those*, whichever is appropriate. The weak nouns have the demonstrative pronoun from which MnE *this/these* has derived.

1 - General, or strong masculine nouns

Example: se cyning, *the king/kings* or *that king/those kings*

	sg		**pl**	
n	se	cyning	þa	cyningas
a	þone	cyning	þa	cyningas
g	þæs	cyninges	þara	cyninga
d	þæm	cyninge	þæm	cyningum
i	þy	cyninge		

(þæm *was often written* þam)

You will see that the nominative and accusative forms are the same for both singular <cyning> and plural <cyningas> in this declension, so you cannot distinguish subject from object by inflection for case on the noun.

The word *cyning* occurs several time in the OE texts in a variety of spellings:

se	cing		*þam*	cyninge	
breohtric	cining		*heora*	cyng	
norþhymbra	cyning		*hiera*	kyning	
ðes	ciniges	tune	*huna*	ciningæ	
æþelstan	cyning		*eaduuard*	king	
Ælfred	cyning				
Ælfred	kyning				

Cyning had been reduced to the one-syllable *cing/king* (for some speakers at least) by the time the Chronicle was written down. The spelling <cyning> was conservative and probably no longer reflected pronunciation. Once spelling begins to become standardised, it does not change with pronunciation, which is always slowly changing.

Other strong masculine nouns in the OE texts:

Text word	base form	MnE			
aþas	aþ	*oath*	gislas	gisel	= *hostage*
æþeling	æþeling	= *prince, noble*	here	here	= *army, host*
æþelingas	æþeling		hrofe	hrof	*roof*
dæl	dæl	*deal, part*	munucum	munuc	*monk*
eorl	eorl	*earl*	scild	scild	*shield*
eorla	eorl		smiþas	smiþ	*smith*
eorlas	eorl		tune	tun	*yard, building*
fultomes	fultum	= *help*	wudum	wudu	*wood*
garum	gar	= *spear*			

2 - General/strong feminine nouns

Example: seo ecg, *the edge*, *that edge/those edges*

	sg		**pl**	
n	seo	ecg	þa	ecga
a	þa	ecge	þa	ecga
g	þære	ecge	þara	ecga
d/i	þære	ecge	þæm	ecgum

Other strong feminine nouns in the OE texts:

Text word	base form	MnE			
ar	ar	= *honour*	hergung	hergung	= *devastatioo*
cistum	cist	= *company*	mihte	miht	*might*
cysta	cyst	= *goodness*	nahtscipe	nahtscip	= *cowardice*
ecgum	ecg	*edge*	sæcce	sæcc	= *conflict*
ee	ig	= *island*	stowe	stow	= *place*
			þeodum	þeod	= *people*

3 - General/strong neuter nouns

Example: þæt word, *the word, that word/those words*

	sg		pl	
n	þæt	word	þa	word
a	þæt	word	þa	word
g	þæs	wordes	þara	worda
d/i	þæm/þy	worde	þæm	wordum

Example: þæt scip, *the ship, that ship/those ships*

	sg		pl	
n	þæt	scip	þa	scipu
a	þæt	scip	þa	scipu
g	þæs	scipes	þara	scipa
d/i	þæm/þy	scipe	þæm	scipum

(nb some neuter nouns had no inflection for n & a plural)

Other strong neuter nouns in the OE texts:

Text word	*base form*	*MnE*	rice	rice	= *kingdom*
bearnum	bearn	*bairn, child*	þing	þing	*thing*
folces	folc	*folk, people*	wife	wif	*wife, woman*
fulwihte	fulwiht	= *baptism*	wiges	wig	= *battle*
geares	gear	*year*	word	word	*word*
londa	lond/land	*land*			
reaflac	reaflac	= *plunder*			

The set of **weak** nouns is sometimes called the -**AN declension** because the suffix <-an> functions as a marker for several cases. Most of the masculines have <-a>, and feminines <- e>, to mark the n sg case. There are only two neuter weak declension nouns. The following examples show the other demonstrative pronoun, meaning *this*, as determiner in the NP.

4 - -AN/weak masculine nouns

Example: þes guma, *this man/these men*

	sg		pl	
n	þes	guma	þas	guman
a	þisne	guman	þas	guman
g	þisses	guman	þissa	gumena
d	þissum	guman	þissum	gumum
i	þys	guman	þissum	gumum

Six out of the ten inflected forms have <-an>, and the case and number can only be identified by the form of the determiner pronoun. Some of the nouns of this declension in the OE texts include:

eastan *d sg*	from the east
fleman *a pl*	fugitives
on fruman *d sg*	in the beginning
se gerefa *n sg*	the reeve
mænig guma norþerna *n sg*	many a Northern man
þæs nama *n sg*	that man's name

5 - -AN/weak feminine nouns

Example: þeos cyrice, *this church/these churches* (eg godes cyrican

	sg		**pl**	
n	þeos	cyrice	þas	cyrican
a	þas	cyrican	þas	cyrican
g	þisse	cyrican	þissa	cyricena
d	þisse	cyrican	þissum	cyricum
i	þisse	cyrican	þissum	cyricum

There are relatively few feminine nouns of this declension in the OE texts, which include:

ofer eorðan *d.sg*	over, on the earth
foldan *a.sg*	the earth
seo næddre *n.sg*	the serpent
on þære seofoðan wiecan *d.sg*	in the seventh week

Notice that in the PrepP *on þære seofoþan wiecan,* the fact that the noun *wiecan* is in the dative case is made clear by the form of the demonstrative pronoun, *þære*, which agrees with the noun in gender and case. The accusative form would be *þa wiecan*. It is the form *seo* in *seo næddre* which tells us that *næddre* is feminine in gender.

6 - -AN/weak neuter nouns

Neither of the only two neuter weak nouns *eage* (*eye*) and *eare* (*ear*) occurs in the texts.

	sg		**pl**	
n	þis	eare	þas	earan
a	þis	eare	þas	earan
g	þisses	earan	þara	earena
d	þissum	earan	þissum	earum
i	þys	earan	þissum	earum

You can see that the inflections of the neuter declension are the same as the masculine, except for the neuter accusative singular. All neuter nouns, in fact, have identical nominative and accusative singular forms.

There are many nouns which are "irregular" in their patterns of inflection, and you would have to refer to an OE grammar to check in detail. Here are some common irregular nouns which occur in the OE texts:

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7 - Irregular masculine nouns

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These examples occur in the OE texts:

his broþor	Can mean *his brother* or *his brothers,* because the n.pl and a.pl forms are not inflected. The d.sg form for *to his brother* was *to his breþer.* The change of vowel is called **mutation**. The nouns for *mother* and *daughter, modor* and *dohtor* are similar.
þa menn	The n.pl and a.pl of *mann* was *menn,* which is still the plural form in MnE.
his sunu	The n.pl and a.pl of *sunu, (son)* is *suna.*

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8 - Irregular feminine nouns

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bec	The plural of *boc* (*book*) n.pl or a.pl, another mutated plural which has not survived into MnE, unlike *gos/ges, (goose/geese)* or *mus/mys, (mouse/mice).*
offan dohter	*Offa's daughter.* Like the masculine *broþor,* the d.sg for *Offa's daughter* would have been *offan dehter.*

Here are the complete sets of the two demonstrative pronouns:

	the / that			*this*		
	m	**f**	**n**	**m**	**f**	**n**
n sg	se	seo	þæt	þes	þeos	þis
a sg	þone	þa	þæt	þisne	þas	þis
g sg	þæs	þære	þæs	þisses	þisse	þisses
d sg	þæm	þære	þæm	þissum	þisse	þissum
i sg	þy	þære	þy	þys	þisse	þys

	common	**common**
n pl	þa	þas
a pl	þa	þas
g pl	þara	þissa
d/i pl	þæm	þissum

Personal pronouns

Most of the noun inflections of OE have been levelled or regularised in MnE, but we retain some of the inflections from OE in our use of the personal pronouns. They enable us to refer to ourselves as speaker or writer (**1st person**), our listener or reader (**2nd person**), or others (**3rd person**).

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1st person

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	singular		plural	
n	ic	(*I*)	we	(*we*)
a	me	(*me*)	us	(*us*)
g	min	(*my*)	ure	(*our*)
d/i	me	(*to me*)	us	(*to us*)

2nd person

n	þu	(*thou*)	ge	(*ye*)
a	þe	(*thee*)	eow	(*you*)
g	þin	(*thy*)	eower	(*your*)
d/i	þe	(*to thee*)	eow	(*to you*)

3rd person
masculine

n	he	(*he*)	hi/hie	(*they*)
a	hine	(*him*)	hi/hie	(*them*)
g	his	(*his*)	hira	(*their*)
d/i	him	(*to him*)	him	(*to them*)

feminine

n	heo	(*she*)	hi/hie	(*they*)
a	hi/hie	(*her*)	hi/hie	(*they*)
g	hire	(*her*)	hira	(*their*)
d/i	hire	(*to her*)	him	(*ti them*)

neuter

n	hit	(*it*)	hi/hie	(*they*)
a	hit	(*it*)	hi/hie	(*they*)
g	his	(*its*)	hira	(*their*)
d/i	him	(*to it*)	him	(*to them*)

There were also **dual** 1st and 2nd person OE pronouns, meaning *we two* and *you two*, but they were not commonly used by the late OE period:

	1st person dual	2nd person dul
n	wit	git
a	unc	inc
g	uncer	incer
d	unc	inc

The spelling of some of the pronouns varied. You will find *hiene* (acc masc sg) and *hyne* for *hine*, *biere* (gen fem sg) for *hire*, and *heom* (dat pl) for *him*:

(he) þær gefeaht wiþ alne þone here 7 **hiene** gefliemde
*he there fought against all the host & **it** put to flight*

ealle þing wæron geworhte þurh **hyne**
*all things were made by **him***

se dæl se **hiere** behinon wæs
*the part that **of it** (ie of the shire) behind was*

> **heom** fultomes bædon
> *(they)* **from them** *troops asked for*

There were changes in the forms of personal pronouns between the OE and MnE periods. Some OE pronouns were replaced by others, and some changed in form and pronunciation. The OE 3rd person plural pronouns beginning with <h> - *hi, hira, him* - were replaced by the pronouns *they, their, them,* derived from the ON pronouns *þeir, þeirra, þeim* during the ME period.

You can see something of the process by which the MnE personal pronoun system has evolved from the OE system in the texts in later chapters of *from Old English to Standard English*.

Adjectives

In OE adjectives were also inflected for number, gender and case to agree with the nouns they modified. But there were two different declensions, which depended upon how the adjective was used. The same words **strong** and **weak,** or alternatively **indefinite** and **definite,** are used to label the two kinds.

If the adjective stood alone, either in a clause or NP, then the **strong** or **indefinite** declension was used,

> wæs se mann **eald**
> *the man was* **old**

> **eald** inwidda
> **old** *deceitful (man)*

> ge **geonge** ge **ealde**
> *both* **young** *and* **old** *(men)*

> Godes hus syndan to clæne berypte **ealdra** gerihta
> *God's houses are completely robbed of* **old** *rights*

> **eald** enta geweorc
> **old** *work of giants*

> Hi willaþ eow to gafole garas syllan, **ættrynne** ord and **ealde** swurd
> *They intend to give you spears as tribute,* **deadly** *points and* **old** *swords*

But if the adjective followed a determiner pronoun in a NP, the **weak** or **definite** declension was used,

> þær wearþ Sidroc eorl ofslægen **se ealda,** ond Sidroc eorl **se gioncga**
> *there Sidroc* **the old** *earl was slain, and Sidroc* **the young** *earl*

> þa **ealdan** fæderas
> **the old** *fathers (= the patriarchs)*

> **seo ealde** æ
> **the old** *law*

Because the adjective came between pronoun and noun, and the pronoun was inflected, there was less need for the adjective to mark agreement with its noun as clearly as when it stood alone.

These OE examples from prose and poetry only illustrate some of the adjective forms. The complete set of strong and weak adjective inflections can be illustrated using the word *eald*:

Strong, or indefinite adjective forms

Singular

	masculine	feminine	neuter
n	eald	eald	eald
a	ealdne	ealde	eald
g	ealdes	ealdre	ealdes
d	ealdum	ealdre	ealdum

Plural

	masculine	feminine	neuter
n	ealde	ealda/ealde	eald
a	ealde	ealda/ealde	eald
g	ealdra	ealdra	ealdra
d	ealdum	ealdum	ealdum

Weak, or definite adjective forms

Singular

	masculine	feminine	neuter
n	ealda	ealde	ealde
a	ealdan	ealde	ealdan
g	ealdan	ealdan	ealdan
d	ealdan	ealdan	ealdan

Plural

	masculine	feminine	neuter
n	ealdan	ealdan	ealdan
a	ealdan	ealdan	ealdan
g	ealdra *or* ealdena	ealdra *or* ealdena	ealdra *or* ealdena
d	ealdum	ealdum	ealdum

Notice how the inflections of strong adjectives are similar to those of the demonstrative pronoun *se/seo/þæt*, and the inflections of weak adjectives to those of weak nouns (but not exactly the same).

Use the lists of adjective, noun and pronoun inflections to identify the gender, number and case of the nouns in the OE phrases and clauses quoted in this section.

Why is it sometimes not possible to do this with certainty?

Repeat your attempt with the following phrases taken from the OE texts:

> þær læg secg mænig ... **werig** wiges **sæd**
> *there lay warrior many ... **weary (of)** war **sated***

> on **midne** winter
> *in **mid** winter*

> ofer **brad** brimu
> *over **broad** sea*

> **welmonige godcunde** lareowas
> ***many religious** teachers*

Verbs in Old English

Just as most of the OE inflections for nouns have gone, so we now have fewer forms of verb than in OE.

Regular verbs in Modern English

MnE regular verbs, for example the verb *walk*, have four forms:

   (i)   the **base** form *walk*,
   (ii)   the **3rd person singular, present tense** form *walks*, ie **base form + -s**: *he/she/it walks,*
   (iii) the **past tense**: *I/we/you/they walked*, and the **past participle** form *she has walked*, ie **base form + -ed,**
   (iv) the **present participle** form *walking*.

Irregular verbs in MnE

Most verbs are regular, but a sizeable set of common verbs are **irregular** in a number of different ways. For example:

base form	3 p sg present tense	past tense	past participle	present participle	
hit	hits	hit	hit	hitting	(3 forms)
come	comes	came	come	coming	(4 forms)
write	writes	wrote	written	writing	(5 forms)

Notice that we form the past tense of *come* and *write* by changing the vowel, not by adding the <-ed>suffix, and the past participle of *write* takes <-en> as suffix, not <-ed>. The present participle is always marked with <-ing>

Strong and weak verbs in OE

These different ways of marking verbs derive from OE. Our irregular verbs resemble a much larger set of OE **strong verbs,** and our regular verbs are like OE **weak verbs**.

   Strong verbs were marked by up to three changes of vowel in the stem of the verb (its main stressed syllable), and also by an <-en> suffix for the past participle. The OE strong verb *helpan, to help* is one example of a number which later became weak and are now regular MnE verbs:

ic	healp		*I*	helped
he heo hit	healp		*he she it*	helped
þu	hulpe		*you (sg)*	helped
we ge hie	hulpon		*we you they*	helped

Weak verbs were marked for past tense and past participle by a **dental suffix,** that is, a suffix which contained the dental consonant [tʰ or [dʰ, for example *-de, -don, -ed, -te, -ton*. MnE <-ed> derives from the variety of OE dental suffixes.

> Here are some of the verbs which occur in the OE texts. The infinitive of each verb is also given. The infinitive of almost every OE verb has the suffix <-an> or <-ian>.
>
> Verbs marked with an asterisk (*) are in a "corrected" form, so that their suffixes correspond to those you would find in an OE grammar. The original irregular spellings are evidence that the vowels of OE suffixes were no longer clearly differentiated in speech, and were probably pronounced [ə].
>
> Identify what you think are the strong and weak verbs, from the evidence just given.

nb:

(i)   If the stem of a verb already ends with a dental consonant, eg *bind-an (to bind)*, *send-an (to send)*, then only the evidence of the stem <u>vowel</u> may mark it as strong or weak. The different vowels [a] and [u] in *ic band (I bound)* and *we bundon (we bound)* are evidence that *bindan* is a strong verb. The unchanged vowel [e] in *ic sende (I sent)* and *we sendon (we sent)* suggests that *sendan* is a weak verb.

(ii)   Some weak verbs do have a change of vowel in the past tense, eg *bycgan (to buy), ic bohte (I bought)*, but the suffix <-te> marks it as weak. The past tense vowel is the result of a different kind of sound change.

verb in text	infinitive	meaning			
gehwerfde	gehwyrfan	*(he) converted*	adræfdon	adræfan	*(they) drove*
læg	licgan	*(he) lay*	becomon*	becuman	*(they) came*
rad	ridan	*(he) rode*	bædon	biddan	*(they) asked*
onstealde	onstellan	*(he) established*	fyrdedon	fyrdian	*(they) fought*
teode	teohhian	*(he) determined*	legdon*	lecgan	*(they) laid*
stod	standan	*(it) stood*	sohton*	secan	*(they) sought*

In MnE, the <-s> suffix for *he/she/it walks* is the only inflection which marks **agreement** with the subject noun or pronoun. In OE, however, verbs were conjugated with different suffixes for **person** and **number,** and also for **mood**. In a statement of fact, the **indicative mood** was used. To express

something which was a wish, or a possibility, the **subjunctive mood** was used.

   In MnE, the subjunctive has almost disappeared, except in uses like *I wish I **were** there* (not *I was*), or *God **save** the Queen* (not *saves*), and its meaning is often expressed by modal verbs like *may* and *would*.

(The uses of the subjunctive in OE were more complex than this, but all the simplified explanations in this book should be filled out by reference to more detailed grammars or textbooks on Old English.)

Weak verb inflections

Compare the simple conjugation of MnE regular verbs with that of an OE weak verb, *læran, to teach*, with its variety of suffixes

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Present tense

	indicative mood		subjunctive mood	
1 sg	*ic*	lære	*ic*	lære
2 sg	*þu*	lærest/lærst	*þu*	lære
3 sg	*he heo hit*	læreþ/lærþ	*he heo hit*	lære
pl	*we ge hie*	læraþ	*we ge hie*	læren

Past tense

1 sg	*ic*	lærde	*ic*	lærde
2 sg	*þu*	lærdest	*þu*	lærde
3 sg	*he heo hit*	lærde	*he heo hit*	lærde
pl	*we ge hie*	lærdon	*we ge hie*	lærden

present participle	lærende
past participle	gelærden

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   (past participles were usually marked by the prefix <ge-> as well as a suffix)

OE weak verbs fall into three classes, depending upon small differences in their conjugation, but these are not described here.

Strong verb inflections

The conjugation of strong verbs was similar, but not identical to that of weak verbs, for example the strong verb *ridan, to ride.*

nb:
(i)   There are "irregularities" in this verb, eg *þu ritst*, not *ridest*. This is typical of any living language, which only exists in the forms which speakers use. Can you suggest why the form *ritst* should have evolved?
(ii)   This verb demonstrates the meaningful difference between long and short vowels in OE. The vowels of Modern English *ride* [raɪd] and *ridden* [rɪdən] differ because the OE present tense vowel spelled <i> was long – [riːd] - and pronounced like MnE *read*, while the vowel spelt <i> in the past tense and past participle was short – [rɪdən]. Later sound changes in long vowels led to our present-day pronunciation.

Present tense

	indicative mood		subjunctive mood	
1 sg	ic	ride [riːdə]	ic	ride [riːdə]
2 sg	þu	ritst [riːtst]	þu	ride [riːd]
3 sg	he heo hit	rit/ritt [riːt]	he heo hit	ride [riːdə]
pl	we ge hie	ridaþ [riːdəθ]	we ge hie	riden [riːdən]

Past tense

1 sg	ic	rad [rɑːd]	ic	ride [rɪdə]
2 sg	þu	ride [rɪdə]	þu	ride [rɪdə]
3 sg	he heo hit	rad [rɑːd]	he heo hit	ride [rɪdə]
pl	we ge hie	ridon [rɪdən]	we ge hie	riden [rɪdən]

present participle	ridende [riːdəndə]
past participle	geriden [jərɪdən]

Here is another clear illustration of one of the most noticeable differences between MnE and OE grammar - the loss of the complex OE system of inflections to mark meaning.

Classes of OE strong verbs

OE strong verbs fall into seven "classes", each class marked by the same (or very similar) series of vowel changes. Such a series is called **vowel gradation.** Here is an example of each class, using verbs in the OE texts (except for Class 2, no examples of which occur):

	infinitive		past singular	past plural	past participle
Class 1	drifan [iː]	*to drive*	draf [ɑː]	drifon [ɪ]	drifen [ɪ]
Class 2	lucan [uː]	*to lock*	leac [æːə]	lucon [ʊ]	lucen [ʊ]
Class 3	winnan [ɪ]	*to fight*	wann [ɑ]	wunnon [ʊ]	wunnen [ʊ]
Class 4	cuman [u]	*to come*	com [ɔː]	comon [ɔː]	cumen [ʊ]
Class 5	cweþan [e]	*to say*	cwæþ [æ]	cwædon [æː]	cweden [e]
Class 6	faran [ɑ]	*to go*	for [ɔː]	foron [ɔː]	faren [ɑ]
Class 7	healdan [æə]	*to hold*	heold [eːə]	heoldon [eːə]	healden [æɜ]

Irregular verbs in OE

"Irregular" forms usually belong to common words. They are used so frequently that their irregularities seem not to be noticed.

The verb *be*

The verb *to be* in MnE is the most irregular of all. It is the only verb with eight different forms - *be, am, is, are, was, were, been, being,* and non-standard uses of *be* are clear markers of regional dialects - *I were asking, they was running, we'm going* etc. In OE, it was even more irregular, having two infinitives *beon* and *wesan,* which derived from two separate earlier verbs, and alternative forms in the present tenses of both moods.

Present tense

	indicative mood			subjunctive mood		
1 sg	*ic*	eom	beo	*ic*	sy	beo
2 sg	*þu*	eart	bist	*þu*	sy	beo
3 sg	*he heo hit*	is	biþ	*he heo hit*	sy	beo
pl	*we ge hie*	sindon	beoþ	*we ge hie*	syn	beon

Past tense

	indicative mood			subjunctive mood	
1 sg	*ic*	wæs		*ic*	wære
2.sg	*þu*	wære		*þu*	wære
3 sg	*he heo hit*	wæs		*he heo hit*	wære
pl	*we ge hie*	wæron		*we ge hie*	wæren

present participle   wesende *or* beonde
past participle   gebeon

The origins of the modal verbs in MnE

The **modal verbs** in MnE, *can/could, may/might, shall/should, will/would, must, ought to*, are all used as **auxiliary verbs** in verb phrases, never as main verbs. They are used to express ideas of possibility, probability, necessity, permission and so on, rather than facts. We no longer think of *could, might, should* and *would* as the past tenses of *can, may, shall* and *will*, though this was their original function. They now differ in meaning rather than tense.

   This modal function was developing in OE, but they were also used as main verbs. Sometimes you can translate them literally into their MnE modal equivalents, but not always.

   The forms of these verbs can all be looked up in an OE grammar. Like MnE modal verbs, they had a wide variety of related meanings. Their infinitives and some of their meanings in OE were:

cunnan = to know, to be able to
eg   ic þa stowe ne **can** = *I don't **know** the place*
          dydon swa hie **cuþon** = *they acted as they **were able***

magan = to be able to, can
eg   hwæþere þu **meaht** me singan = *nevertheless you **can** sing to me*

sculan = to have to, to be obliged to, ought
eg   hwæt **sceal** ic ma secgean fram sancte iohanne?
          = *what more **do I have to** say about St John?*

          his scipu **sceoldon** cuman ongean, ac hi ne mihton
          = *his ships **ought to have** come back again, but they were unable to*

willan = to wish, to will
eg   hwænne þu **wille** to me   (literally *when you **will** to me)*
          = *when you come to me*

          þa hi to scipan woldon (literally *when they **wished** to their ships)*
          = *when they were making for their ships*

There are a number of other irregular verbs in OE. Some of them are still part of the language:

eg don, *to do*; gan, *to go;* habban, *to have*; libban, *to live;* secgan, *to say.*

Others, however, have not survived into MnE:

eg hycgan, *to think;* þurfan, *to need*; witan, *to know*