

THE STRONG VS. THE WEAK

M. H. GREENBLATT
Princeton, New Jersey

In the English language, verbs are divided into two groups: the strong and the weak. Weak verbs are those which simply add the letters ED onto the basic verb in order to form the other principal parts; an example is the verb WALK, WALKED, WALKED. A strong verb is one which changes its spelling in order to form the three principal parts; an example is the verb SING, SANG, SUNG.

In some cases, the spelling of strong verbs can be changed so severely that the various parts appear to be different words. The verb BE has some of the most unusual principal parts of any verb in the English language: AM, WAS, BEEN.

A good example of a strong verb is the one used in Samuel F. B. Morse's famous line, "What hath God wrought?" It is sometimes fun to ask people what is the present form of the verb wrought. Few know that it is actually the past tense of the verb work. In the poem "Idylls of the King" Tennyson uses the verb holp as the past tense of the verb help. In "Hamlet" the verb crew refers to what a cock did.

Often people will make up the past tenses of verbs in a strong form for humorous effect. For example, I have heard the phrase I snoze as the past tense of the verb snooze. In the field of electronics, there is a device known as an oscilloscope which is useful for observing recurrent waveforms. Normally, the oscillations inside are synchronized with the waveforms to be observed. Among electronic engineers, it is common to refer to these oscillators as being in synch. One day, an engineer wanted to say that two waveforms can be synched together; but since the mind objects to such a coinage, he simply referred to the fact that these two waveforms were sunk in.

After his days as a baseball pitcher were over, Dizzy Dean began a new career as a baseball announcer. Unfortunately, his command of the English language was less than Oxfordian. A generation of baseball fans still remember the strong verbs he coined some thirty years ago:

"The pitcher wound up and he flang the ball at the batter. The batter swang and missed. The pitcher flang the ball again and this time the batter connected. He hit a high fly right to the center fielder. The center fielder was all set to catch the ball, but at the last minute his eyes were blound by the sun and he dropped it."