

# The double paradigm of Old English ‘be’

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Old English (OE), like present-day English, had morphological past and non-past (present) tenses, with the present tense being used for reference to the future.

The verb ‘be’ in OE was a hybrid descended from three separate roots: the ‘*b*-root’ (infinitive *beon*), the ‘*s*-root’, and the ‘*w*-root’ (infinitive *wesan*). The *w*-root provided the past tense, and both the *b*-root and the *s*-root provided full present tense paradigms. So, uniquely in OE and indeed in the history of English, there were two concurrent present tense forms of the same verb.

These two paradigms were not used in free variation. The *s*-forms are in the clear majority, and the minority *b*-forms are treated as marked. All accounts agree that there was a preference for *b*-forms in future contexts; however, they were not restricted to future use and various explanations have been suggested for their occurrence elsewhere, all involving aspectual features. These include invariable facts (Campbell 1959); generic statements (Kilpiö 1993); and iterativity (Campbell 1959, Kilpiö 1993); whereas the *s*-forms are said to be preferred for present states, (Campbell 1959); the timeless present (Kilpiö 1993); and eternal situations (Traugott 1992) – the latter apparently *contra* Campbell’s “invariable facts”.

Recent analyses have concentrated on the occurrence of the two forms in contexts where the tense and/or aspect is identifiable from the presence of appropriate temporal adverbials, and from certain sentence constructions which have a likelihood of expressing a particular aspect, such as iterativity. The results are therefore based on a sample which left many tokens unanalysed – i.e. those which did not co-occur with such features. I have found no recent published work based on a comprehensive analysis of every instance in a specific corpus or body of texts.

In this talk I will review the different explanations of the distribution of the two forms, and present the results so far of my research, which is based on every token of the present indicative of OE ‘be’ in texts which are translations or continuous glosses of a Latin original. The presence of a clearly identifiable future tense in Latin facilitates the identification of future reference. This in turn will also lead to the quantification of the non-future occurrences of the *b*-forms, and enable some analysis of the contexts involved.

## References

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