

MORPHOPHONEMIC BEHAVIOUR OF THE PAST TENSE AND PAST PARTICIPLE MORPHEMES OF ENGLISH

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It can be observed that in the teaching of English grammar verbs are always in focus. The English pedagogue, while dealing with verbs, usually concentrates on the tenses and the verb forms. Subsequently the morphology of verbs is highlighted. The pedagogue is concerned mostly with verbs that undergo irregular morphological changes. The phonological part of the verb inflection, it seems, is not highlighted as intensely as the morphological is done. And hence, the morphophonemic behaviour of the verb inflections, it can be observed, has not been enough or duly emphasized in the teaching of English verb forms. This paper intends to bring the morphophonemic behaviour of the past tense and past participle forms of English verbs under focus.

It would be but natural to explain what morphophonemics is. Morphophonemics is the American terms for which the British use the term *Morphonology* and the Europeans refer to it as *Morphophonology*. According to H.A. Gleason, “morphophonemics is one of the most vexed technical terms in linguistics. In no two systems of linguistic theory, it is used in the same way.”¹ Hence it is necessary to adduce the observations of some of the eminent linguists on morphophonemics/morphophonology, which from one or the other way, rest on Panini’s notions of *sandhi*, ablaut root and morphemes.

For Charles Hockett, “Some morphemes appear in more than one phonemic shape, depending on phonemic or morphemic environment, the statement of such alternation is called morphophonemics.”² According to Bloch, “Morphophonemics is the study of the alternation between corresponding phonemes in alternant shapes of the same morpheme.”³

For Olga Akhmanova, morphophonology is “the science of correlating phonological and morphological sequences”⁴ and Dressler makes a basic claim “that morphonology is constituted by the interaction of phonology and morphology.”⁵ D. Thakur proffers a simplified view of morphophonemics, which is according to him, “the branch of linguistics which studies morphemes from the point of view of their phonological shapes.”⁶ The above definitions focus the close relationship of morphology and phonology in structuring the morphophonemics of a language. And to put it in the simple manner morphophonemics is the study of phonemic structure of morphemes. It studies the changes that morphemes undergo in certain positions.

However, “Morphophonemics, according to Hockett, is never so simple. ... is never trivial; any systematic description of any language must cover it.”⁷ Hence, it seems that while teaching English verbs and their forms reasonable reference be given to the morphophonemic behaviour of the verbs. Morphophonemic changes can be stated in terms of the following rules like 1. Suppletion, 2. Syncretism, 3. Assimilation, 4. Dissimilation, 5. Syncope, 6. Apocope, 7. Reduplication, 8. Metathesis, 9. Epenthesis, 10. Geminatio, 11. Degeminatio. The researcher does not elaborate the morphophonemic rules exhaustively here, as it is not the main concern of this paper. Rather this is an attempt to focus the morphophonemic behaviour of the past tense and past participle morphemes in English.

Normally, English verbs have five forms. By English verbs the researcher means the full verbs and the primary operator verbs. The INFINITIVE verb form is treated as the BASE form. The five forms are *Vo*, *Vs*, *Ved*, *Ving*, and *Ven*. And the morphophonemic changes in the verb become a matter of great concern with *Vs*, *Ved* and *Ven* forms. Out of these three, the morphophonemic behaviour of *Ved* (past tense) and *Ven* (past participle) requires a lot more attention.

Structurally, English verbs are broadly classified into two categories: 1. *Regular verbs* and 2. *Irregular verbs*. The regular verbs are those which change their forms in the way as most other verbs do. Their past tense and past participle forms are identical in that they are formed by adding *-ed* inflectional suffix to their BASE forms. However, this past tense morpheme (*-ed*) has three different realizations. The irregular verbs, on the other hand, change idiosyncratically or eccentrically. As they exhibit incredible variation in their past tense and past participle forms, there would be nothing wrong in terming them IDIOSYNCRATIC verbs.

This brings us to the necessity of focusing the morphophonemic realizations of the past tense and the past participle morphemes in both the regular and irregular verbs. In the regular verbs the past tense and the past participle morphemes are same. It is *-ed*. However, *-ed* has the following three realizations due to the phonological change in the environment that it occurs in.

1. If a verb ends in a voiceless sound other than /t/, the past tense and the past participle morphemes in that verb are realized as /t/. For instance;

walked : /wɒkt /

missed : /mɪst/

searched: /sɜ:tʃt/

hoped : /həʊpt/

2. If a verb ends in a voiced sound other than /d/, the past tense and the past participle morphemes in that verb are realized as /d/

pulled : /plɛɪd/ loved : /lʌvd /

cried : /kraɪd / judged : /dʒʌdʒd /

3. If a verb ends in /t/or /d/, the past tense or the past participle morphemes in that verb are realized as /ɪd/

hunted : /hʌntɪd/ decided : /dɪsaɪdɪd/

Thus, the *-ed* morpheme has three morphophonemic variations occurring in accordance with the changes in the phonological environment.

On the other hand, though limited in number (about 200)⁸, the irregular verbs in English deserve to be termed IDIOSYNCRATIC, as they exhibit extreme irregularity which can be better apprehended through the knowledge of the morphophonemic rules. The eccentricity of the English irregular verbs is realized mainly with reference to their past tense and past participle forms. Due to the unpredictable and indiscernible past tense and past participle forms the irregular English verbs are classified into the following types:

1. Verbs with all the three forms (base, past tense and past participle) identical:

e.g. bet bet bet
hurt hurt hurt
put put put

This kind of realization is apprehended as the instance of the *zero element* which is also used to explain the plural forms of the nouns like deer, sheep etc.

2. Verbs with the three forms different from one another:

e.g. go - went - gone
be - { was } - been
 { were }

In such cases the relationship between the verb forms cannot be explained in terms of a general rule of affixation, as they are from different roots. This is the instance of *suppletion*.

3. Verbs with identical past tense and past participle forms:

e.g. bring - brought - brought
sit - sat - sat

4. Verbs with identical base and past participle forms:

come - came - come
run - ran - run

The above categories can be considered as the instances of apocope and gemination and even syncope. D. Thakur has presented the above categories of the irregular verbs.

The following categories can be added to the existing one:

a) Verbs with double past tense and past participle forms:

e.g. light lit lit

| | | |
|------|---------|---------|
| | lighted | lighted |
| hang | hung | hung |
| | hanged | hanged |

b) Verbs with identical base and past tense forms:

e.g. beat beat beaten

c) Irregular verbs with both regular and irregular past tense and past participle forms:

The Oxford ALD has enlisted 28 irregular verbs that have double past- tense and past participle forms. Some are adduced below:

| | | |
|-------|---------|---------|
| fly | flew | flown |
| | flied | flied |
| knit | knit | knit |
| | knitted | knitted |
| learn | learnt | learnt |
| | learned | learned |
| speed | sped | sped |
| | speeded | speeded |

d) Irregular verbs with double past tense forms:

| | | |
|------|---------------------|-------|
| quit | { quit quitted } | quit |
| dive | { dived dove } | dived |
| sink | { sank sunk } | sunk |

e) Irregular verbs with double past participle forms:

| | | |
|-------|---------|-----------------|
| get | got | got/gotten |
| prove | proved | proved/proven |
| swell | swelled | swelled/swollen |

f) An irregular verb with triple past tense and past participle forms:

This unique is:

| | | |
|------|---------|---------|
| shit | shit | shit |
| | shat | shat |
| | shitted | shitted |

The national varieties of English especially British English and American English have added to the idiosyncrasy of the English irregular verbs. The past tense and the past participle forms of some

verbs differ due to the influence of these varieties. Surprisingly this difference, in some cases, is eccentric. For instance, the verb *dive* has regular verb like appearance in British English:

| | | |
|------|-------|-------------|
| dive | dived | dived (BrE) |
| dive | dove | dived (AmE) |

On the other hand, the verb *lean* has regular verb like structure in American English:

| | | |
|------|--------|--------------|
| lean | leaned | leaned (AmE) |
| | leant | leant (BrE) |

The above categories are the result of the classification of the irregular verbs with reference to their list provided in the New Advanced Learner's Dictionary. The dictionary records 281 irregular verbs except the primary operator verbs, *Be*, *Do* and *Have*. Out of these 281 verbs, 175 are free morphemes and the remaining 106 are derived through prefixation.

The newly added above categories, as the earlier ones by D. Thakur did, demonstrate the idiosyncratic structural (phonological and morphological) behaviour of the irregular verbs. The learners' questions, if any out of curiosity, regarding these salient features of English verbs would be responded by putting the questions under the conventionality and arbitrariness of a language.

The learners are made to learn by heart the past tense and past participle forms of the irregular verbs. This is rote learning. Sometimes, it is possible, the learners overgeneralize the rule of forming past tense and past participle forms of the regular verbs with the irregular verbs and the instances like the following occur:

| | | |
|-------|---------|---------|
| make | maked | maked |
| bring | bringed | bringed |

To conclude, morphophonemics which has its roots in the Sanskrit grammar of Pānini requires much more investigations. Luckily, the number of English irregular verbs is limited but they are not marginal. They should be offered much attention. However, morphophonemics is allotted meager space in the curricula on English language teaching. The rote learning of the forms of irregular verbs does not quench the curiosity of the English students. If the learners internalize the morphophonemic behaviour of the irregular verbs, they may naturally attain better fluency while speaking English. They may not make silly mistakes and would appear natural in their communication. Hence, the knowledge of the morphophonemic behaviour of the irregular verbs contribute significantly in the fluent communication on the part of speakers of English.

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