

# Short Verbs in Germanic Languages

## Tension between Reduction and Differentiation

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### Abstract

Extremely short verbs can be found in various Germanic languages and dialects; the stems of these verbs do not have a final consonant ((C-)C- $\bar{V}$ ), and they always have a monosyllabic infinitive and usually monosyllabic finite forms as well. Examples for these kinds of short verbs are Swiss German *hā* 'to have', *gō* 'to go', *gē* 'to give', *nē* 'to take' which correspond to the Swedish verbs *ha*, *gå*, *ge* and *ta*. The last example shows that such short verb formations also occur with verbs having (nearly) identical meanings but which do not share the same etymology. Apart from their shortness, these verbs are characterized by a high degree of irregularity, often even by suppletion, which sometimes develops contrary to regular sound laws. Furthermore they are among the most-used verbs and often tend towards grammaticalization.

The present paper compares the short verbs of seven Germanic languages; in addition, it describes their various ways of development and strategies of differentiation. Moreover, it examines the question of why some languages and dialects (e.g. Swiss German, Frisian, Swedish, Norwegian) have many short verbs while others (New High German, Icelandic, Faroese) only have few, the paper discusses the contribution of short verbs to questions concerning linguistic change and the morphological organization of languages.

### 0. Introduction

Certain Swiss German dialects are well known because of words made short due to many reductive sound changes like the apocope of final *-n* and *-e*, cliticizations, and so on. In addition to these regular reductions Swiss German (and other German) dialects exhibit a group of extremely short, monosyllabic verbs like *ha* 'to have', *gē* 'to give', *nē* 'to take', and *chō* 'to come' that developed in other ways. In Swiss German one says, for example, *er hetnes gnō* 'he took it away from them', but in New High German (NHG) *er hat es ihnen genommen* or Swiss German *i hanes gē* 'I gave it to them', which corresponds to NHG *ich habe es ihnen gegeben*. As can be seen, NHG doesn't have these short verbs. It is perhaps very surprising that they appear again in the very north of the Germanic language area, in Swedish and Norwegian; note for example Swedish *gå* 'to go', *stå* 'to stand', and *ge* 'to give'. If one compares them to the Swiss German forms, it must be noticed that they even have similar phonetic shapes: Swiss German *gō* - Swedish *gå* 'to go', *stō* - *stå* 'to stand',

*schlō* - *slå* 'to beat', *gē* - *ge* 'to give', etc. Furthermore there even are counterparts when Swiss German and Swedish short verbs derive from different (etymological) roots, as for instance Swiss German *nē* and Swedish *ta* 'to take', Swiss German *sȳ* and Swedish *va* 'to be'. Figure 1 shows corresponding pairs of short verbs (different stems are marked by underlining):

Figure 1: Equivalent short verbs in Swiss German and Swedish

	Swiss G.		Swedish
(1)	<u>sȳ</u>	'to be'	<u>va</u>
(2)	hā	'to have'	ha
(3)	gō	'to go'	gå
(4)	stō	'to stand'	stå
(5)	schlō	'to beat'	slå
(6)	<u>gē</u>	'to give'	ge
(7)	<u>nē</u>	'to take'	<u>ta</u>
(8)	<u>zie</u>	'to draw'	<u>dra</u>

## 1. Survey: Short Verbs in Germanic Languages

In Figure 2 the short verbs of seven Germanic languages and dialects (Swiss German) are listed. In order to understand the list, please note the following remarks (which refer only to verbs numbered (1) to (15):

- Only the bold printed verbs are short verbs. As a first impression it can be established that the the south (Swiss German) and the north (Swedish, Norwegian) have many short verbs, while there are many fewer in Icelandic and NHG.
- The underlining of verbs indicates that these verbs lack a short infinitive but do have short finite forms (NHG *hab-en* 'to have', but *du ha-st* 'you have', Swiss German *sāg-e* 'to say', but *du sai-sch* 'you say'). However, real short verbs should also have a short infinitive. Thus there exists no dichotomy between short and normal verbs but rather a variegation.
- We mark some verbs here with an exclamation-mark; one exclamation-mark means that the inflection of the verb is irregular; two exclamation-marks mean that the paradigm shows suppletion (NHG *gehen - ging - gegangen* 'to go - went - gone').

Figure 2:

## Short verbs in Germanic languages

Swiss G.	NHG	Dutch	Frisian	Swedish	Norwegian (Bokmål)	Icelandic	
		West Germanic <---		---> North Germanic			
regular in- fin. ending: -e	-en	-en	-e	-a	-e	-a	
(1) <b>sý</b>	<b>sein</b>	<b>zijn</b>	<b>wêze!!</b>	(1) <b>va/vara!!</b>	<b>være!!</b>	<b>vera!!</b>	'to be'
(2) <b>hā</b>	<b>haben!!</b>	<b>hebben!!</b>	<b>hawwe!!/ha</b>	(2) <b>ha ((hava!))</b>	<b>ha</b>	<b>hafa!</b>	'to have'
(3) <b>chō</b>	<b>kommen!</b>	<b>komen!</b>	<b>komme!</b>	(5) <b>komma!</b>	<b>komme!</b>	<b>koma!</b>	'to come'
(4) <b>gā/gō</b>	<b>gehen!!</b>	<b>gaan</b>	<b>gean</b>	(8) <b>gå</b>	<b>gå</b>	<b>ganga!</b>	'to go'
(5) <b>sāge!</b>	<b>sagen</b>	<b>zeggen!</b>	<b>sizze!</b>	(7) <b>sāga!</b>	<b>si</b>	<b>segja!</b>	'to say'
(6) <b>tue</b>	<b>tun</b>	<b>doen</b>	<b>dwaan</b>	--	--	--	
gerbe	gerben	--	--	(6) <b>gö/göra!!</b>	<b>gjøre!!</b>	<b>gera</b>	'to do'
(7) <b>gē</b>	geben	geven	<b>jaan</b>	(10) <b>ge</b>	<b>gi</b>	<b>gefa</b>	'to give'
(8) <b>nē</b>	nehmen!	nemen	<b>nimme!</b>	--	--	--	
	--	--	--	(9) <b>ta (taga)</b>	<b>ta</b>	<b>taka!</b>	'to take'
(9) <b>lā/lō</b>	lassen	laten	<b>litte!</b>	(13) <b>lāta</b>	<b>la</b>	<b>lāta</b>	'to let'
(10) <b>stā/stō</b>	stehen!!	<b>staan</b>	<b>stean</b>	(12) <b>stā</b>	<b>stā</b>	<b>standa!</b>	'to stand'
(11) <b>ksē</b>	sehen	<b>zien</b>	<b>sjen</b>	(11) <b>se</b>	<b>se</b>	<b>sjá</b>	'to see'
(12) <b>zie</b>	ziehen!!	tijgen/ trekken	<b>tsjen</b> 'to con- tinue'	--	--	--	
<b>trāge</b>	tragen	blijven	<b>bliuwe!</b>	(14) <b>dra (draga)</b>	<b>dra</b>	<b>draga!</b>	'to draw'
(13) <b>blībe</b>	bleiben			(4) <b>bli ((bliva))</b> passive, 'to become'	<b>bli</b> passive, 'to become'	<b>verða</b>	'to stay, 'to become'
(14) <b>afā/afō</b>	anfangen	aanvangen	fange	(3) <b>fā</b> 'to be allowed, to get'	<b>fā</b> 'to be al- lowed, to get'	<b>fá</b> 'to get'	'to catch, to get, 'to be allowed'
(15) <b>schlā/schlō</b>	schlagen	<b>slaan</b>	<b>slaan</b>	(15) <b>slå</b>	<b>slá</b>	<b>slá</b>	'to beat'
(a)	-	-	-	<b>så</b>	<b>så</b>	<b>sá</b>	'to sow'
(b)	-	-	-	<b>klå</b>	<b>klå</b>	<b>klá</b>	'to scratch'
(c)	-	-	-	<b>flå</b>	<b>flå</b>	<b>flá</b>	'to flay'
(d)	-	-	-	<b>nå, trå, strö, tro, bo</b>		<b>ná, þrá, strá, þvo,</b>	
...	-	-	-	<b>gro, gno, klä, fly ...</b>		<b>gá, gljá, ljá, þjá ...</b>	

It is in any case important that all short verbs show many so-called "strong" irregularities. Thus every bold printed verb should actually be followed by one or two exclamation-marks.

- The order of the numbered verbs follows the frequency dictionary (Ruoff 1991), which is based on spoken language in South Germany. The ordering by frequency in Dutch and Frisian is surely different. Since some short verbs in Swedish have other meanings than their counterparts in German, their frequency values are printed in front of them (according to Allén 1972). They are similar for Norwegian, but less so for Icelandic. It's important to note that, for example, Swedish *bli* [passive] and *få* 'to be allowed, to get' occur much more frequently than their NHG cognates *bleiben* 'to stay' or *fangen* 'to catch'.
- The list is composed of verbs which occur in at least one Germanic language as short verb forms (e.g. number 5 that only in Norwegian is reduced to *si* 'to say'). Of course there are many other frequent verbs which don't belong to the short verbs, such as the modal verbs.
- Above the verbs we list the ending of the infinitive in regular, long verbs which always forms a syllable. This syllable does not appear in the short verbs: these have either a different ending (for example *-n* in NHG and Frisian), or they don't have one at all (as in Swiss German). If the infinitive ending nevertheless seems to occur formally (graphically) behind a short verb, it is no ending but rather the second part of a diphthong (for example Swiss G. *tue-ø* (6) 'to do', *zie-ø* (12) 'to draw').
- In the lower part of Figure 2 there are verbs listed after lower-case letters. These are rarer verbs with special meanings which nevertheless form short verbs, but only in North Germanic. This is an important difference between the south and the north of the Germanic languages. The Nordic languages have each about 25 such short verbs which inflect regularly and whose shortness developed according to the sound laws. The shortness of the verbs (1) to (15) developed contrary to the governing sound laws.

## 2. Definition of short verbs

The term "short verb" is not well established. Therefore, it should be explained what the term exactly means: Short verbs always have a monosyllabic infinitive. In most of the cases they also have monosyllabic finite forms and a monosyllabic past participle. Although short forms first arise in the more frequent present tense (and here especially in the 3. person singular) and spread only later to the less frequent infinitive, I would like to define short verbs as only those whose infinitive is short.

As already mentioned, short verbs have special infinitival allomorphs. Moreover, the stem always ends with a long vowel or diphthong: (C-)C- $\bar{V}$  or (C-)C-D.

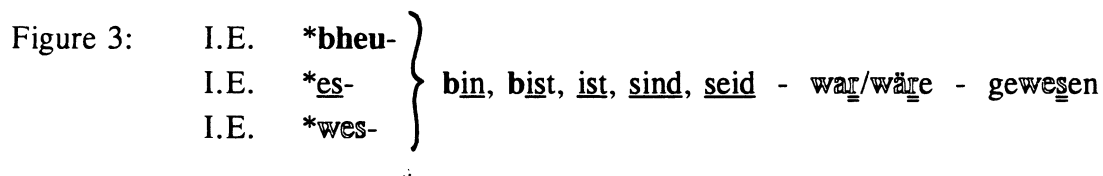
Short verbs generally belong to the central, active vocabulary; some are even grammaticalized. Their inflections contain a high degree of irregularity which makes them different from most of the other "normal" verbs.

### 3. Short verbs in West Germanic languages

#### 3.1 New High German and Dutch

We start with NHG, because it possesses only two short verbs, *sein* 'to be' and *tun* 'to do'. *Sein* and *tun* are usually treated among the so called anomalia because both contain a maximum of morphological irregularities.

*Sein* has strong suppletive structures. This is shown in the following figure, which indicates the Indo-European (I.E.) etymologies of its constituent elements :



Three different I.E. roots, each with ablaut variants, are used firstly for the distinction of person, secondly for the distinction of tense (preterite vs. perfect), and finally for the distinction of mood. Moreover, the *r/s*-change in the root (double underlined) is a reflex of Verner's Law which describes certain Germanic consonantal alternations based on I.E. stress placement.

NHG *tun* is the only verb which preserves traces of I.E. reduplication (taten), also a relict which has survived.

*Sein* and *tun* derive - together with *gehen* and *stehen* - from the I.E. athematic or *mi*-verbs. These verbs are already particularly short in I.E. because they lack a theme vowel between root and personal ending (and often lack a root final consonant, as well). The 1. pers. sg. ending is *-mi*; in Old High German (OHG) it is reduced to *-m*, and in Middle High German (MHG) to *-n*: I.E. \**es-mi* 'I am' > Germanic \**immi* > OHG *b-im* (with contamination) > MHG/NHG *b-in*. As the only verb, *bi-n* continues the old *mi*-ending until today.

NHG *gehen* and *stehen* derive from MHG *gēn* and *stēn*. Already in MHG they became bisyllabic (Paul 1987, §142), but they continue to lack a root consonant (*-h-* orthographically indicates length). Their irregularity consists of suppletive preterite and past participle forms: *gehen* [ge:ən] - *ging* - *gegangen*, *stehen* [ʃte:ən] - *stand* - *gestanden*. These longer forms belong to the OHG verbs *gangan* resp. *stantan*. It would be interesting to know the exact

relation between OHG *gān/gēn* and *gangan* and between *stān/stēn* and *stantan*. Possibly at least *stān* and *stantan* can be referred to a common I.E. root by which *stān* can be considered as a sort of short verb to *stantan* (but its vowel must then be analogically taken from *gān*). It can be said with certainty that these verbs show irregularities already present in I.E.

Dutch continues exactly these four *mi*-verbs as short verbs (*zijn* 'to be', *doen* 'to do', *gaan* 'to go', *staan* 'to stand') along with *zien* 'to see' and *slaan* 'to beat', whose shortness developed by regular reduction of intervocalic *-h-*. Their degree of synchronic irregularities corresponds approximately to the short verbs in NHG. Therefore they won't be treated here in detail.

### 3.2 Swiss German (Zürich)

Because of the large differences within Swiss German I will restrict my comments to the dialect of Zürich. Zürich German has 13 short verbs. We will consider three of them. Note that Swiss German has a uniform plural, synthetic subjunctives, and no preterite tense:

1.	infinitive:	<b>gā</b> 'to go'	past partic.:	<b>gange</b> 'gone'
	present ind.:	i <b>gā/gā-ne</b> de <b>gā-sch</b> er <b>gā-t</b> Pl. <b>gö-nd</b>	subjunctive:	i <b>göng/gieng</b> de <b>göng-isch/gieng-isch</b> er <b>göng/gieng</b> Pl. <b>göng-id/gieng-id</b>

(*Stā* 'to stand', *lā* 'to let', *schlā* 'to beat' and *afā* 'to start' inflect generally like *gā* 'to go')

2.	infinitive:	<b>tue</b> [tuə] 'to do'	past partic.:	<b>tā</b> 'done'
	present ind.:	i <b>tue/tue-ne</b> de <b>tue-sch</b> er <b>tue-t</b> Pl. <b>tüe-nd</b>	subjunctive:	i <b>tüeg</b> de <b>tüeg-isch</b> er <b>tüeg</b> Pl. <b>tüeg-id</b>

3.	infinitive:	<b>gē</b> [gɛ:] 'to give'	past partic.:	<b>gē</b> 'given'
	present ind.:	i <b>gīb-e</b> de <b>gī-sch</b> er <b>gī-t</b> Pl. <b>gä-nd</b>	subjunctive:	i <b>gäb/gäb-i</b> de <b>gäb-isch</b> er <b>gäb/gäb-i</b> Pl. <b>gäb-id</b>

Swiss German continues all four *mi*-verbs as short verbs; two of them, *gā* 'to go' and *tue* 'to do', are listed above. The third one, *gē* 'to give', is a contracted verb. The main characteristics of short verbs in Zürich German are the following:

- The infinitive is always monosyllabic, usually the past participle as well (except for *gange* 'gone'), and the finite forms in the present tense. Only in the 1. pers. sg. are there competing bisyllabic variants (*i gā/i gāne* 'I go', *i tue/i tuene* 'I do', *i gibe* 'I give').
- The uniform plural normally has the ending *-ed* (*mer mach-ed* 'we make'), but the short verbs (and the modal verbs) have *-nd* (*mer gā-nd* 'we give'). Both endings developed from MHG *-ent*. Together with the modal verbs short verbs have special and shorter allomorphs.
- Moreover, short verbs differ from normal verbs by analogical umlaut(s) in the plural; they maintained a clear number distinction. Probably it is a morphological umlaut again in analogy to the modal verbs. Please note that *gā* has an *ā-ö*-alternation and *gē* an *i-ä*-alternation.  
All this leads to a very strong differentiation of the present tense paradigm. Information which usually is expressed in suffixes appears in the stem of the short verbs. The result is a fusion of information (which will be discussed later).
- The past participles of certain short verbs contain suppletive structures: *gā* 'to go' - *gange* 'gone', *stā* 'to stand' - *gstande* 'stood', *āfā* 'to begin' - *āgfange* 'begone', etc. In some dialects (e.g. Basel German) these three verbs form their 1. person sg. present by means of the (marked) suppletive form as well: Basel German *i gang* 'I go' (*de gōsch* 'you go', *er gōt* 'he goes'), *i stand* 'I stand', *i fang ā* 'I start' etc.).
- In the subjunctive there are many irregularities too. Here one can find vowels and stem final consonants that cannot be derived from any form in the indicative, e.g. *er gāt* 'he goes' - *er göng/gieng* 'he would go', *er tuet* 'he does' - *er tüeg* 'he would do', *er git* 'he gives' - *er gāb(i)* 'he would give'. Due to the loss of the preterite tense, the subjunctive lost its historical base. This led to a radical restructuring of the subjunctive; instead of new analytic forms, new synthetic forms are preferred. The subjunctive form of Zürich German *gā* 'to go', *göng/gieng* 'he would go' is based on a suppletive form. In the case of *tüeg* 'he would do' there is an additional *-g* (the origin of which is unknown) that is also present in *hā* 'to have' and *sÿ* 'to be': *er häig(i)* 'he would have', *er seig(i)* 'he would be'. In the case of *gē* 'to give' the relation between the subjunctive and the indicative is destroyed because of the shortening of the stem in the indicative; the subjunctive based on the historical form with *-b* (*er git* 'he gives' vs. *er gāb(i)* 'he would give'). The only correspondence

between the two moods is the word initial *g-*.

In the first case, the subjunctive is formed by suppletion, in the second case the subjunctive is isolated from the other forms by the presence of *-g-*, and in the third case the indicative is isolated by shortening. The result, however, is always the same: the creation of some suppletion in order to differentiate mood. And all these solutions show that the less frequent subjunctive is always expressed by longer forms and the more frequent indicative by shorter forms.

The 13 Swiss German short verbs have different origins and different ages. The oldest group is represented by the four so-called *mi-*verbs *sȳ* 'to be', *tue* 'to do', *gā* 'to go' and *stā* 'to stand'. This group is extended in MHG by the three strong and contracted verbs *vān* < *fāhen* 'to get', *lān* < *lāzen* 'to let', *slān* < *slāhen* 'to beat', and by the weak verb *hān* < *haben* 'to have'. These four new short verbs behave inflectionally like *gān* und *stān* and continue doing this in Swiss German - except *hā* 'to have' that left this group and went its own way.

This leads us to the second big group, namely the short verbs that arose by contraction (see Figure 4; at the extreme right the reduced segment is given; the numbers after the MHG long form indicate the ablaut class):

Figure 4: Contracted verbs in MHG

	Swiss G.	< MHG short form	< MHG long form	< OHG	Loss of	
(1)	(ā)fā	vān	vāhen (7)	fāhan	-h-	} regular contractions
(2)	schlā	slān	slāhen (6)	slāhan	-h-	
(3)	zie	zien	ziehen (2)	ziohan	-h-	
(4)	gsē	(ge)sēn	sehen (5)	sehan	-h-	
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(5)	lā	lān	lāzen (7)	lāzzan	-z-	} irregular contractions
(6)	hā	hān	haben (weak)	habēn	-b-	
(7)	gē	gēn/gen	geben (5)	geban	-b-	
(8)	nē	nen	nemen (4)	neman	-m-	
(9)	chō	kōn/kon	komen (4)	queman	-m-	

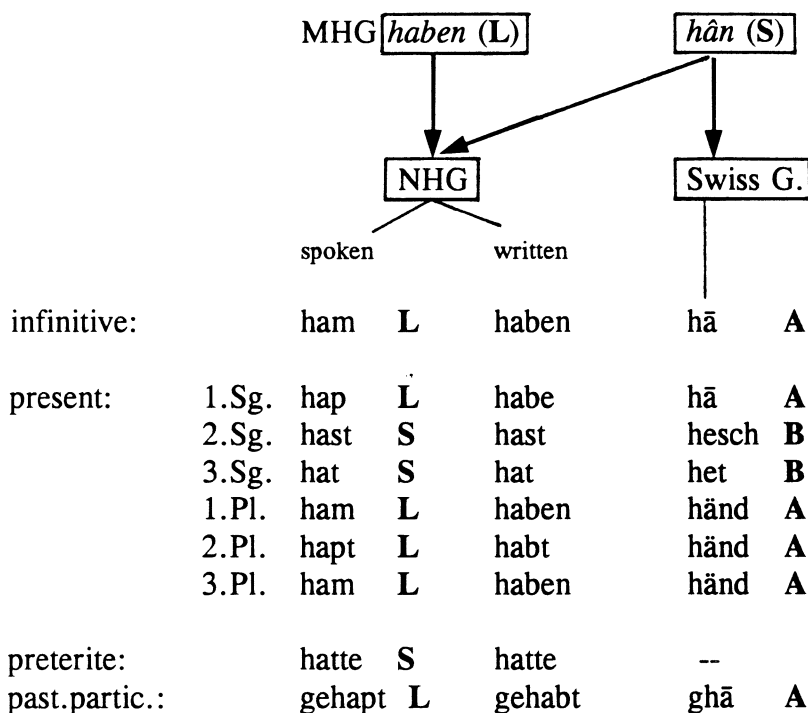
Intervocalic *-h-* was regularly lost in the first four verbs (above the line), but intervocalic *-b-*, *-m-* and *-z-* normally is preserved in the general vocabulary. Therefore verbs Nr. (5) to (9) must be particularly noted, because they eliminated considerable consonantal obstacles: not only voiced *-m-* and *-b-* but also voiceless *-z-* [s]. Nevertheless it must be considered that



the consonant loss is delimited phonologically: voiceless occlusives and consonant clusters do not disappear. This speaks against a purely morphologically conditioned contraction in analogy to the four *mi*-verbs.

Whereas in MHG short and long forms cooccurred, NHG always continues the long form, while Swiss German continues only the short form. In the case of *haben* 'to have' - the second most frequent verb overall and the only weak one among the short verbs - NHG mixed both paradigms in order to create suppletion (see Figure 5; "L" = MHG long form, "S" = MHG short form):

Figure 5: Paths to the irregular paradigms of NHG *haben* and Swiss German *hā* 'to have'



German orthography doesn't represent the monosyllabicity of German *haben*; therefore the spoken forms are added. Although Swiss German only continues the MHG short forms, it irregularized and at the same time differentiated its paradigm by umlauts contrary to sound laws, following the same pattern as NHG in the mixing of short and long forms (AABBAAAA). Thus the irregularities follow certain regularities.

Of particular interest are the last three verbs, the short verbs *gē* 'to give', *nē* 'to take', and *chō* 'to come'. They represent the youngest group of contracted verbs (late MHG), and the reduction of the stem final consonant hasn't yet been carried through completely, depending on the respective dialect (following Suter 1992 and Weber 1987) (Figure 6):

Figure 6: The youngest group of contracted verbs in Swiss German

	Basel	Zürich	Basel	Zürich	Basel	Zürich
infinitive:	gā gē		nā nē		kō chā/chō	
present:	gīb gibe		nimm nime		kumm chumme	
singular:	gisch gisch git git		nimmsch nimsch nimmt nint		kunnsch chunsch kunt chunt	
plural:	gänd gänd		nämme nänd		kemme chönd	
past.part.:	gā gē		gnō gnā		kō chā/chō	
subjunctive:	gāb gāb		nām nämm		kām chämm/-ö-	
imperative:	gīb! gib!		nimm! nimm!		kumm! chumm!	

The boxings show the respective stage of contraction. The dialect of Zürich has more completely contracted forms than does the dialect of Basel. Whereas the infinitive and the past participle always are fully contracted, the stem final consonant of the finite forms are partly retained (*i gibe* 'I give', *i kumm* 'I come'), partly already assimilated to the following sound (*er nint* 'he takes', *er kunt* 'he comes') and partly completely lost (*de gisch* 'you give', *er git* 'he gives', *mer gänd* 'we give'). This synchronic stage allows a good insight into the diachronic stages of the contraction (see also SDS III, 90-95, 100-103). Contraction seems to appear first in the most frequent form, the third person, and from there it spreads into the other positions of the paradigm.

Finally, the functional meaning of the short verbs should be briefly considered, because there are distinct reductions in the grammaticalized verbs. Historical auxiliaries are *hā* 'to have', *sȳ* 'to be' and *tue* 'to do' (to form the perfect and to form the periphrastic subjunctive). The verbs *gā/gō* 'to go', *chō* 'to come', *lā/lō* 'to let' and *āfā/āfō* 'to start, to begin' are on their way to become auxiliaries:

- (a) I gang go schaffe "I go go work" → 'I'm going to work'
- (b) I chum cho schaffe "I come come from work" → 'I'm coming from work'
- (c) Er lōt (lo) grüesse "He lets (let) greet" → 'He sends regards'
- (d) Er fōt ā (fo) schaffe "He starts (start) work" → 'He starts working'

These duplicate forms are the consequence of a strong desemanticization. The scope of the finite auxiliary must be semantically totally empty, so the auxiliary must be repeated as an infinitive in front of the full verb. Real proliferations can occur especially with *gō* 'to go' and *chō* 'to come': Zürich German *Gönd go e guete Platz goge sueche* "Go go a good place go-go to look for" → 'Look for e good place'. There are many other examples for grammaticalized short verbs which can't be treated here in detail.

### 3.3 Frisian

Like the Swiss German the Frisian short verbs are also affected by the tension between reduction and differentiation. Reduction on the one hand and differentiation on the other are hardly compatible. If a word reduces its aural substance, it diminishes its possibilities of differentiation. In order to accomodate both aims - shortness and distinction - at the same time, the short verb paradigms have to make use of many irregularities and even suppletion.

A good example for reduction and distinction is the Frisian short verb *jaan* 'to give' that developed from Germanic *\*geban* > Old Frisian *ieva* > *iân* to Modern Frisian *jaan*. Frisian *dwaan* 'to do' as well developed in irregular ways. This leads to a drifting apart of both infinitives and their respective finite forms. Frisian normally shows homonymy between the infinitive of a verb and its plural forms in the present tense - except for the short verbs, e.g. *dwaan* [infinitive] ('to do') vs. *dogge* [plural] ('we/you/they do'). The present tense paradigm drifted apart by analogies to other irregular short verbs (e.g. *tsjen* 'to continue', *sjen* 'to see'). The result are suppletive structures (see the following paradigm of *dwaan* 'to do'):

infinitive:     **dwaan** 'to do'

present:	ik doch	preterite:	ik die
	do dochst		do diest
	hy docht		hy die
	Pl: <b>dogge</b>		Pl: diene(n)

Analogies between different short verb paradigms occur frequently, and they mostly always simultaneously create shorter forms (unlike ordinary analogy). Such a systematization occurred in the preterite forms of five Frisian short verbs which all have the uniform ablaut vowel *-ie-*. These are the four *mi*-verbs (*dwaan* 'to do', *wêze* 'to be' (the finite forms in the present tense), *gean* 'to go', *stean* 'to stand') and *ha(wwe)* 'to have'. This unified ablaut vowel relieves on the one hand the competence and on the other hand the performance, as

well, by being extremely short. The only differences consist of the different initial sounds:

	infinitive		preterite sing. - plural	past participle
(1)	dwaan	'to do'	die - diene(n)	dien
(2)	wêze	'to be'	wie - wiene(n)	west
(3)	hawwe	'to have'	hie - hiene(n)	hân
(4)	gean	'to go'	gie - giene(n)(gong/gyng)	gien/gongen
(5)	stean	'to stand'	stie - stiene(n)	stien

#### 4. Short verbs in North Germanic languages

##### 4.1 Swedish and Norwegian

In the north of the Germanic language area we find circumstances we know from the south: Swedish and Norwegian are rich in short verbs like Swiss German. Norwegian has even more short verbs than Swedish, and parallel long forms don't exist there like in (written) Swedish (Norw. *ta* 'to take', but Swed. *ta* and *taga*). This is shown in Figure 2: the slash means frequent, the parentheses seldom cooccurrence of the older long form. Differences between Swedish and Norwegian are the short verbs *va* 'to be' and *gö* 'to do' in Swedish, whereas Norwegian exhibits *si* 'to say' and *la* 'to let'.

In addition, the North Germanic languages show - in contrast to West Germanic - completely regular, weak short verbs which are attached here at the bottom of Figure 2 (with alphabetic designation). All these weak short verbs inflect in the following way (here I refer only to Swedish):

	infinitive	preterite	supine (for past participle)
Swedish	<i>klå</i> 'to scratch'	<i>klådde</i> 'scrached'	<i>klått</i> 'scrached'

The shortness of these verbs is old and developed in accordance to sound laws; they are not very frequent and, as can be seen, they have very special meanings. However, the short verbs indicated by numbers (in Figure 2) are morphologically very differentiated and partly irregularly shortened. The only two shortened weak verbs are (Swed.) *ha* 'to have' and *gö(ra)* 'to do'. Whereas strong verbs differentiate their paradigms by ablaut, these two weak verbs had to create distinctions:

Swedish      *ha* 'to have' - *hade* - *haft*  
                  *gö(ra)* [jœ:ra] 'to do' - *gjorde* [ju:d̥ə] - *gjort* [jut̥]

Swedish *ha* mixes - as in NHG - short and long forms, whereas Swed. *gö(ra)* created vowel change by irregular developments; in both cases suppletion arose.

The old *mi*-verb *to do* is missing completely in the North Germanic languages; the distinctions in the paradigm of the corresponding short verb *gö* is a very noticeable result, if one considers the relatively short time for this development - compared to the very old *mi*-verbs (*va(ra)* 'to be', *gå* 'to go', *stå* 'to stand').

All other short verbs are strong or irregular. They make distinctions by their inherited ablaut, and this is coupled with shortness:

Figure 7:      Base forms of the strong/irregular short verbs in Swedish (spoken Swedish after the slash)

	infinitive	preterite	supine	ablaut class
(1)	<i>va(ra)</i>	<i>var</i>	<i>varit</i>	5
(2)	<i>gå</i>	<i>gick</i>	<u><i>gått</i></u>	7
(3)	<i>få</i>	<i>fick</i>	<u><i>fått</i></u>	7
(4)	<i>stå</i>	<i>stod</i>	<u><i>stått</i></u>	6
(5)	<i>slå</i>	<i>slog</i>	<i>slagit</i> / <u><i>slått</i></u>	6
(6)	<i>ta</i>	<i>tog</i>	<i>tagit</i> / <u><i>tatt</i></u>	6
(7)	<i>dra</i>	<i>drog</i>	<i>dragit</i> / <u><i>dratt</i></u>	6
(8)	<i>ge</i>	<i>gav</i>	<i>givit</i> / <u><i>gett</i></u>	5
(9)	<i>se</i>	<i>såg</i>	<i>sett</i>	5
(10)	<i>bli</i>	<i>blev</i>	<i>blivit</i> / <u><i>blitt</i></u>	1

As can be seen, some analogies to weak forms and at the same time shorter forms are entering or already have entered the supine (that corresponds to the past participle of other Germanic languages); these forms are underlined in Figure 7. It is very striking that all these short verbs belong to the ablaut classes 5 to 7 and 1 (*bli*). Exactly these ablaut classes have identical vowels in the first and in the fourth ablaut form. This possibly furthered the formation of weak past participles, because already before the ablaut vowel was the same; altogether this led to more shortness without needing to lose distinctions.

As in Swiss German, stem consonants disappeared in Swedish which normally are kept:

Swedish	irregularly lost consonant:
va < vara	-r-
gö < göra	-r-
ha < hava	-v-
bli < bliva	-v-
ge < giva	-v-
ta < taga	-g-
dra < draga	-g-
(Norw. la < late)	(-t-)

Many short verbs in Swedish (and Norwegian) tend to grammaticalizations as well. Except *ha* 'to have' and *va(ra)* 'to be', *få* 'to get, to be allowed' must be particularly noticed as an expression of modality. *Bli* got the meaning of 'to become', but also serves to periphrase the passive voice. The very interesting grammaticalization phenomena can't be treated here in detail; it is however obvious that the very common, unspecific meanings of short verbs lead to further desemantization, grammaticalization and auxiliarization.

#### 4.2 Icelandic and Faroese

Icelandic evinces a minimum of frequent short verbs and contrasts clearly with the continental Scandinavian languages. The three verbs *sjá*, *fá* and *slá* developed - as in the other languages as well - by the regular loss of intervocalic *-h-*. Only *sjá* contains a small peculiarity: it underwent breaking and shift of accent by regular phonological processes.

Faroese shows even extremer conditions. It abolished all short verbs which all got the regular infinitive ending *-a*: *síggja* (with sharpening) 'to see', *fáa* 'to get', *sláa* 'to beat', *sáa* 'to sow', *tváa* 'to wash' usw.

### 5. Paucity versus abundance of short verbs

It is questionable why some languages develop many short verbs - as in Swiss German, Frisian, Swedish, and Norwegian - and others don't - as with NHG, Icelandic, and Faroese.

NHG had good conditions to form them because they were very common in MHG, but in contrast with Swiss German NHG in most of the cases recreated new long forms.

The key to this problem is the morphological complexity of a language. Swiss German altogether has fewer strong verbs than does NHG, and by the abolishing of the preterite it lost the second ablaut form (which always showed a different vowel than was present in the present stem). Furthermore, it simplified the inflection by adopting uniform plural endings. Possibly, therefore, Swiss German can afford more morphological irregularity than NHG in developing a special verb class, the short verbs.

A similar situation holds for the North Germanic languages. The continental Scandinavian languages do not have a synthetic subjunctive and - even more important - no differentiated personal endings. On the other hand, these languages developed a maximum of short verbs. Icelandic as an extremely conservative language is characterized by two synthetic subjunctives and full personal inflection. In addition, it displays an extremely high degree of allomorphy and irregularity. It perhaps therefore lacks irregular short verbs. Similar conservatism holds for NHG that has full personal inflection, two synthetic subjunctives, three ablaut grades (present, preterite, past participle) and in total 41 ablaut classes (Kern/Zutt 1977).

There can be further factors like different standardizations in the different languages, but they can't be very influential, because Faroese gave up all short verbs without undergoing radical standardization.

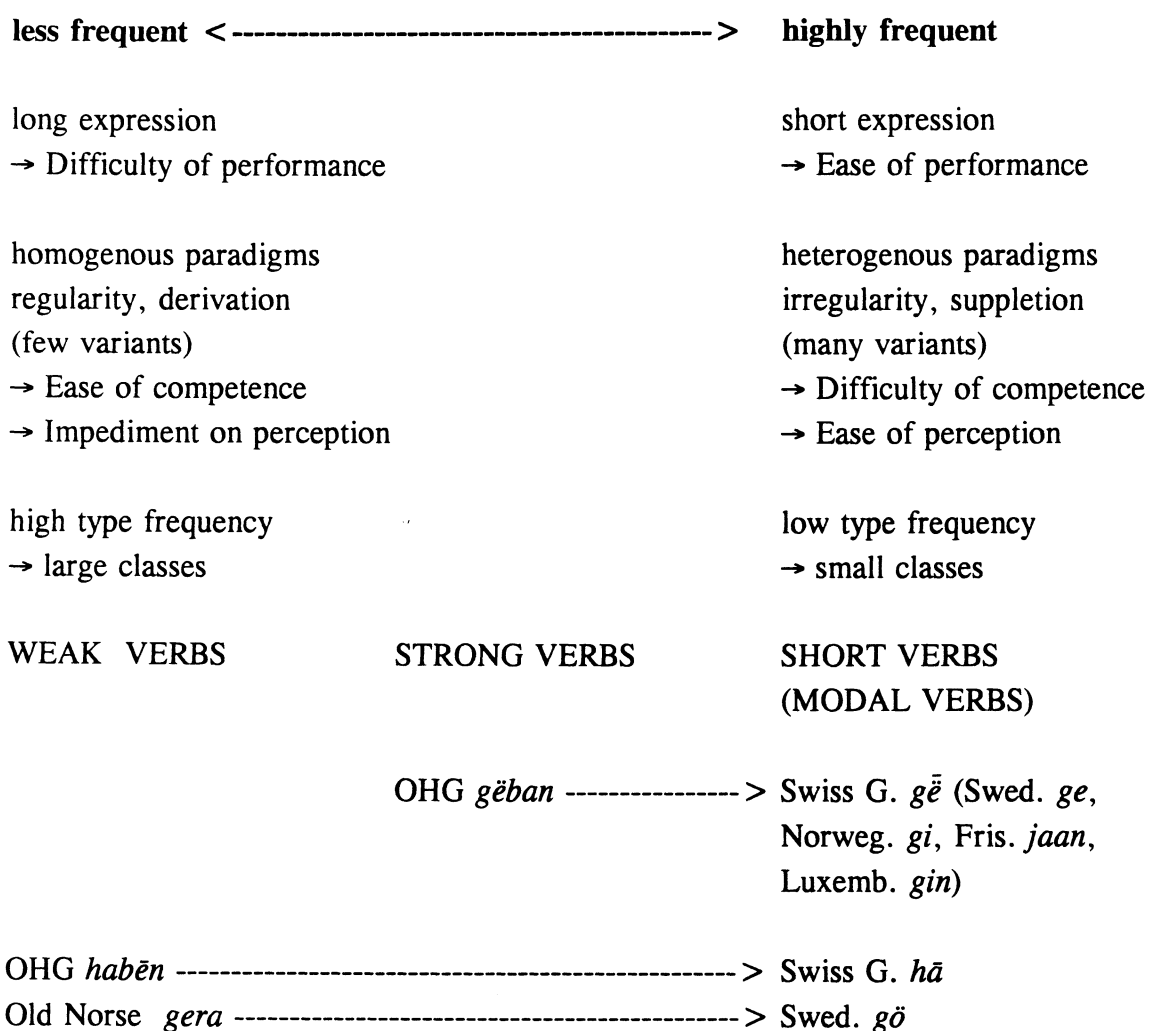
## **6. The conflict between shortness and differentiation**

The common fate of short verbs is that they always are treated at the very end of chapters and books or that they disappear in footnotes. This shadowy existence isn't justified at all, because short verbs show the principles of the morphological organization of our languages. After all, all short verbs belong to the most frequently used verbs.

In the Germanic languages the short verbs comprise small classes, compared to the strong or even the weak verbs. The modal verbs form a small class too, but they are semantically connected. This doesn't hold for short verbs; they share at most a very common, unspecific meaning but, on the other hand, have a very high degree of token frequency. High frequency is also the cause of their shortness and of their irregularities. Works on language economy (Ronneberger-Sibold 1980, Werner 1987 and 1989, Fenk-Oczlon 1990 and 1991, Bybee 1985) have showed that there are many short, condensed forms in high frequent domains of a language. At the same time these conditions lead to a high degree of irregularity or to distinctions which can be stored in the brain as a whole and need not be put together by rules. Only less frequent words (like, for example, weak verbs) follow the second principle. With high frequency irregularities, even including suppletion, are of high functional use and are not only "tolerated". This explains that allomorphy is not only conserved but also "sought", as demonstrated by the short verbs. Perhaps the best example is the second most frequent verb 'to have' that originally belonged to the regular weak verbs

but left this class and acquired shortness and many distinctions through different irregular developments - and all this within a rather short time: In NHG and Swedish 'have' mixed its short and long forms into one paradigm, and in Swiss German it adopted umlauts that usually only modal and strong verbs show. The extremely high frequency of 'to have' is connected with the rise of the periphrastic present and past perfect.

Figure 8: Token frequencies and the consequences to the verb system



In Figure 8 the short verbs appear at the right side of the scale. Nearly all short verbs derive from strong verbs of different ablaut classes; this means that they already had a certain amount of distinctions. They became short verbs only by phonological reductions, and sometimes by further differentiation (shown by 'to give' in Figure 7). The OHG weak verb *habēn* and Old Norse *gera* had to go the longest way in order to reach shortness and distinctions, as in Swiss German *hā*, NHG *haben* and Swedish *göra*.



I think it is worth examining the short verbs. By comparing different Germanic languages we discover that nearly all Germanic languages developed short verbs and that they occur extremely frequently. Short verbs form a small class, but they resist elimination. On the contrary, they are very stable, and in some languages their group becomes larger. Furthermore, the comparison showed that certain verbs attract irregularities and even suppletion, and at the same time they are very short. In order to maintain their forms different, irregularities are allowed to play an important role, because they become functional. Therefore, irregularities cannot be viewed as "linguistic accidents" that must be removed by analogical change.

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