

Ablaut

Ablaut is the process of inner vowel changing, and although no longer productive, it is important for modern languages because many alternations, which happened due to ablaut, we learn today by heart (irregular Verbs and Nouns in English). Moreover, it is used in word-formation even in English today. Therefore, it is important part of Morphology and students of the same should know how this process influences words.

Ablaut is a German word and its root consists of *ab*, which means “off”, and *laut*, which means sound /lu:t/. It is the process of vowel change, also known as Vowel Gradation or Apophony. Ablaut is characteristic for Indo-European languages, and it was coined by a German philologist Jacob Grimm in 1819.

Ablaut is the regular vowel alternation in roots, stems or words which are etymologically or morphologically related¹. Such an alternation represents a change in grammatical function or category, but it can also be used in the process of word-formation. Although it is typical for Indo-European languages, it is noticeable in other language families, mostly in Semitic. This process of Vowel Gradation is no longer productive in English language, yet it was a central part of PIE morphology². It affected so-called “strong verbs” in English which mostly changed their inner vowels in Past Simple Tense and Past Participle:

e.g rise, rose, risen

sing, sang, sung

These verbs shouldn't be analysed individually, it is advisable to separate them into different classes. Then each class is to be marked with specific ablaut alternation, in order to learn and understand easier these vowel changes (e.g. *sing* with *sink*, and *choose* with *freeze*).

As it can be seen in the example *sing*, only inner vowel changed while *s-* and *-ng* stayed the same. It is a mistake to say that *s-ng* is the root, and Laurel J. Brinton³ warns against this presumption. He shows in Arabic examples *kataba* “wrote”, *katibu* “writing” that although *k-t-b* are the letters which do not change, they cannot be the root. Therefore the root in English isn't *sng*, yet *sing*. Depending on the inner vowel which is ablauted we have different forms of a word or a root which are called the grades. There are five different types of grades and they are named after the vowel which is used in each case:

¹ “**Clerks, wives and historians: essays on medieval English language and literature**”, by Winfried Rudolf, Thomas Honegger; International Academic Publishers, Bern 2007, Volume 8

² PIE stands for Proto-Indo-European language that is reconstructed and accepted by linguists

³ “**Historical linguistics 1999: selected papers from the 14th International Conference on Historical Linguistics, Vancouver, Volume 1999**”, by Laurel J. Brinton, John Benjamin's Pub Co (July 2001)

- 1) e-grade: *sed-ere* (lat. "sit", in English *i* from *e*)
- 2) o-grade: *sod* ("sat", in English *a* from *o*)
- 3) lengthened e-grade: *sēd-* ("seat" /*si:t/*)
- 4) lengthened o-grade: *sōt* ("soot" /*su:t/*)
- 5) zero-grade: *ni-sd-o* ("where the bird sits, nest")⁴

E-grade is also known as full grade, or the basic ablaut grade. Zero-grade is the case where no ablauting vowel appears. There are cases in which the process of ablaut occurs after a shift of stress, from the first syllable to later ones. Oswald J. L. Szemerényi⁵ gives examples from Sanskrit: *às-mi* "I am" in the third person plural becomes *s- ànti* "they are", also Latin word *genū* "knee" appears as *gnu* in Sanskrit. In these examples stress shift resulted in vowel disappearing, or zero-grade. Therefore, it can be concluded that zero grade most often occurs after the process of accent shift, but it stands in a word before the newly accented syllable. This weakening is also extended to long words making them short, and later the short ones may also disappear. In theory any ablaut grade can appear in any root, however this is not so in practice. Certain roots only appear in certain grade, as if they prefer one grade over another (e.g. *fūturus* (Lat.) "about to be")⁶.

Ablaut is purely morphological alternation of vowels within a word. It can also occur when deriving plural nouns from singular by simply changing an inner vowel of the singular form e.g. *woman-women*, *foot-feet*. There is also a Vowel Gradation change in noun cases in Proto-Indo-European languages. This can be seen in the Old Armenian language: nom.sg. *jern*, gen. dat. Loc. *jerin*, abl. *jeran-ē* "hand"⁷.

Beside the influence of ablaut in grammatical paradigms, it is also used in the process of word-formation. Here ablaut also occurs, especially in reduplication, this is called ablaut-reduplication or ablaut-motivated compounding. Here we reduplicate a base which is similar to the sound of a process we want to name, by alternating an internal vowel: *tick-tock*, *cling-clang*. Rhyme can be used also to reduplicate a word, in which case we do not change the internal vowel: *hum-drum*, *mumbo-jumbo*⁸.

All in all, ablaut is process which is no longer productive; however its influence can be seen in modern English, German and other Indo-European languages. We learn these rules by heart today, like

⁴ "Clerks, wives and historians: essays on medieval English language and literature", by Winfried Rudolf, Thomas Honegger; International Academic Publishers, Bern 2007, Volume 8

⁵ "Introduction to Indo-European linguistics" by Oswald J. L. Szemerényi, Oxford University Press, USA (June 10, 1999)

⁶ "Indo-European Language and Culture: An Introduction" by Benjamin W. Fortson, Wiley-Blackwell; 2 edition (September 1, 2009)

⁷ "An introduction to the Indo-European languages" By Philip Baldi, Southern Illinois University Press; 1st edition (April 1, 1983)

⁸ "Word and words of English, English Morphology from A-Z", Jelisaveta Milojevic, publisher: Papyrus 2000

irregular verbs or irregular plural of nouns, but this process is the base of all Indo-European languages. Therefore, it is even affecting the way we create neologisms and the knowledge of how these changes occur and how new words can be made are a part of modern English.

Book references:

- 1) "Clerks, wives and historians: essays on medieval English language and literature", By Winfried Rudolf and Thomas Honegger, International Academic Publishers, Bern 2007, volume 8
- 2) "Introduction to Indo-European linguistics", by Oswald J.L Szemerényi, Oxford University Press, USA, June 10th 1999
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- 7) "Morphology", by Francis Katamba and John Stonham, Palgrave Macmillan; 2nd edition (March 2, 2006)

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