

What Icelandic, Faroese and Valais German have in common: Loss and retainment of the Germanic weak verb classes at the periphery of the Germanic language area

In the course of the formation of Proto-Germanic, a novel way of forming new verbs developed, the so called weak verbs. These weak verbs no longer made use of ablaut to form the past tense, but rather a dental suffix (which might (cf. Bammesberger 1986: 85–86; Ringe 2006: 167) or might not (cf. Hill 2010) have been derived from a verb PIE *dhē- 'do'). They originally consisted of four classes, each of which was characterized by a suffix: -jan- (I), -ō(ja)n- (II), -ē(ja)n- (III), -nan- (IV). Whereas classes I and II are richly attested in all Old Germanic languages, classes III and IV have been dramatically reduced. Class IV only survived in Gothic. Class III survived in all Old Germanic languages except Old Frisian; in Old Saxon, Old Low Franconian, Old English and Old Norse, however, only a handful of verbs still show class III inflection. In Old High German many verbs show double forms, i.e. verbs that inflect after class III or class II (cf. Marti Heinzele 2013).

An overt distinction of these weak verb classes was abandoned by almost all Germanic varieties still spoken today; only a small number varieties spoken at the periphery of Germanic speaking Europe, i.e. Icelandic, Faroese and Valais German / Walser German, seem to have fully retained marking of weak verb classes (cf. Dammel 2011, Henzen 1940; Hotzenköcherle et al. 1962–2003) – for the latter at least until the first half of the 20th century.

All three of the above-mentioned varieties show – intra- and/or interparadigmatic – analogical levelling to some extent (cf. Dammel 2011: 93–95). Especially for Valais German / Walser German the current situation is not entirely clear, due to the fact that the most recent data on this is from the Henzen (1929, 1940). He notes, that only the variety of Lötschentaler Valais German situated in Lötschental, an isolated side valley of an also isolated main valley (i.e. Valais) shows no levelling of the three Germanic weak verb classes, whereas other varieties of Valais German show some or complete levelling.

In order to assess the current situation (a desideratum explicitly stated in Dammel 2011: 142) on this matter, a pilot study with data elicited in 2013 has been conducted. In the study, pupils from Lötschental, aged from 15 to 20, produced forms that can distinctively be assigned to the corresponding Germanic weak verb classes I–III. The data suggests that the system described for Lötschentaler Valais German by Henzen (1940) and in the Swiss German Dialect Atlas (Hotzenköcherle et al. 1962–2003) is still productive, despite the fact that the main valley, and consequently also the Lötschental side valley, are much more accessible today and contact to other closely related varieties has grown.

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