

淡江大學九十二學年度碩士班甄試入學招生考試試題

系別：英文學系 (B 組)

科目：英文(含英語語言學議題)

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共 3 頁

本試題共 P. 1 頁

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Directions: Read the following article on the irregular verbs by S. Pinker (highlighted words are annotated at the end) and do the following:

- a) For each paragraph (1-8), explain in your own words the main points made by the author. 40%
- b) Discuss the author's writing style through analyzing elements such as tone and style, rhetorical patterns, appeals, audiences and purposes (use examples whenever necessary). 30%
- c) Write a brief personal response to the article (about 120-150 words). 30%

The Irregular Verbs

Steven Pinker

I like the irregular verbs of English, all 180 of them, because of what they tell us about the history of the language and the human minds that have perpetuated it.

(1) The irregulars are defiantly quirky. Thousands of verbs monotonously take the -ed suffix for their past tense forms, but ring mutates to rang, not ringed, catch becomes caught, hit doesn't do anything, and go is replaced by an entirely different word, went (a usurping of the old past tense of to wend, which itself once followed the pattern we see in send-sent and bend-bent). No wonder irregular verbs are banned in "rationally designed" languages like Esperanto and Orwell's Newspeak -- and why recently a woman in search of a nonconformist soul-mate wrote a personal ad that began, "Are you an irregular verb?"

(2) Since irregulars are unpredictable, people can't derive them on the fly as they talk, but have to have memorized them beforehand one by one, just like simple un conjugated words, which are also unpredictable. (The word duck does not look like a duck, walk like a duck, or quack like a duck.) Indeed, the irregulars are all good, basic, English words: Anglo-Saxon monosyllables. (The seeming exceptions are just monosyllables disguised by a prefix: became is be- + came; understood is under- + stood; forgot is for- + got).

(3) There are tantalizing patterns among the irregulars: ring-rang, sing-sang, spring-sprang, drink-drank, shrink-shrank, sink-sank, stink-stank; blow-blew grow-grew, know-knew, throw-threw, draw-drew, fly-flew, slay-slew; swear-swore, wear-wore, bear-bore, tear-tore. But they still resist being captured by a rule. Next to sing-sang we find not cling-clang but cling-clung, not think-thank but think-thought, not blink-blank but blink-blinked. In between blow-blew and grow-grew sits glow-glowed. Wear-wore may inspire swear-swore, but tear-tore does not inspire stare-store. This chaos is a legacy of the Indo-Europeans, the remarkable prehistoric tribe whose language took over most of Europe and southwestern Asia. Their language formed tenses using rules that regularly replaced one vowel with another. But as pronunciation habits changed in their descendant tribes, the rules became opaque to children and eventually died; the irregular past tense forms are their fossils. So every time we use an irregular verb, we are continuing a game of Broken Telephone that has gone on for more than five thousand years.

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(4) I especially like the way that irregular verbs graciously relinquish their past tense forms in special circumstances, giving rise to a set of quirks that have puzzled language mavens for decades but which follow an elegant principle that every speaker of the language -- every jock, every 4-year-old -- tacitly knows. In baseball, one says that a slugger has flied out; no mere mortal has ever "flown out" to center field. When the designated goon on a hockey team is sent to the penalty box for nearly decapitating the opposing team's finesse player, he has high-sticked, not high-stuck. Ross Perot has grandstanded, but he has never grandstood, and the Serbs have ringed Sarajevo with artillery, but have never rung it. What these suddenly-regular verbs have in common is that they are based on nouns: to hit a fly that gets caught, to clobber with a high stick, to play to the grandstand, to form a ring around. These are verbs with noun roots, and a noun cannot have an irregular past tense connected to it because a noun cannot have a past tense at all -- what would it mean for a hockey stick to have a past tense? So the irregular form is sealed off and the regular "add -ed" rule fills the vacuum. One of the wonderful features about this law is that it belies the accusations of self-appointed guardians of the language that modern speakers are slowly eroding the noun-verb distinction by cavalierly turning nouns into verbs (to parent, to input, to impact, and so on). Verbing nouns makes the language more sophisticated, not less so: people use different kinds of past tense forms for plain old verbs and verbs based on nouns, so they must be keeping track of the difference between the two.

(5) Do irregular verbs have a future? At first glance, the prospects do not seem good. Old English had more than twice as many irregular verbs as we do today. As some of the verbs became less common, like cleave-clove, abide-abode, and geld-gelt, children failed to memorize their irregular forms and applied the -ed rule instead (just as today children are apt to say winded and speaked). The irregular forms were doomed for these children's children and for all subsequent generations (though some of the dead irregulars have left souvenirs among the English adjectives, like cloven, cleft, shod, gilt, and pent).

(6) Not only is the irregular class losing members by emigration, it is not gaining new ones by immigration. When new verbs enter English via onomatopoeia (to ding, to ping), borrowings from other languages (deride and succumb from Latin), and conversions from nouns (fly out), the regular rule has first dibs on them. The language ends up with dinged, pinged, derided, succumbed, and flied out, not dang, pang, derode, succame, or flew out.

(7) But many of the irregulars can sleep securely, for they have two things on their side. One is their sheer frequency in the language. The ten commonest verbs in English (be, have, do, say, make, go, take, come, see, and get) are all irregular, and about 70% of the time we use a verb, it is an irregular verb. And children have a wondrous capacity for memorizing words; they pick up a new one every two hours, accumulating 60,000 by high school. Eighty irregulars are common enough that children use them before they learn to read, and I predict they will stay in the language indefinitely.

(8) And there is one small opportunity for growth. Irregulars have to be memorized, but human memory distills out any pattern it can find in the memorized items. People occasionally apply a

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pattern to a new verb in an attempt to be cool, funny, or distinctive. Dizzy Dean slood into second base; a Boston eatery once sold T-shirts that read "I got schrod at Legal Seafood," and many people occasionally report that they snoze, squoze, shat, or have tookeen something. Could such forms ever catch on and become standard? Perhaps. A century ago, some creative speaker must have been impressed by the pattern in stick-stuck and strike-struck, and that is how our youngest irregular, snuck, sneaked in.

Glossary:

- nonconformist:** One who does not conform to, or refuses to be bound by, accepted beliefs, customs, or practices.
- unconjugated:** not inflected
- fly:** n. a ball that is batted up into the air (=fly ball); v. to bat a fly ball.
- slugger:** a batter who hits many extra-base hits.
- goon:** A thug hired to intimidate or harm opponents.
- decapitate** To cut off the head of; to behead.
- finesse:** 1. refinement and delicacy of performance, execution, or artisanship. 2. skillful, subtle handling of a situation; tactful, diplomatic maneuvering.
- grandstand:** n. 1. a roofed stand for spectators at a stadium or racetrack; 2. the spectators or audience at an event. v. to perform ostentatiously so as to impress an audience.
- artillery:** Large-caliber weapons, such as cannon, howitzers, and missile launchers, that are operated by crews.
- belie:** To picture falsely; misrepresent
- cavalier:** supercilious; haughty; disdainful; curt; brusque
- onomatopoeia:** The formation of words in imitation of sounds
- dibs:** A claim; rights: *I have dibs on that last piece of pie.*