

# The past is another language when we think about it

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Have you ever wondered why the past tense of 'I go' is 'I went'? OK, so you haven't – but I bet plenty of people studying English as a foreign language have, because it causes them problems.

The normal way to make past-tense verb forms in English is to add -ed to the basic form of the verb: want, wanted.

Went is not even remotely normal.

Even with irregular verbs, such as ring, you can see a connection between ring, rang and rung.

But there's nothing obvious about go and went – a nice illustration of how languages are not necessarily particularly logical systems.

They have to have regularity, or infants would not be able to learn them, but they can tolerate a certain amount of irregularity of this kind.

The illogical go/went situation came about because the modern verb was originally two separate words.

Went used to be the past tense of wend, and only came to function as the past tense of go in about 1500. Wend then had to acquire a new past-tense form wended, as in "he wended his way".

We can see the same pattern with the adjective good.



■ This man decided to go for a walk. He went to Great Yarmouth. But, asks Peter Trudgill, why is it went and not goed?

If we say nice, nicer, nicest, why on earth don't we say good, gooder, goodest? We can ask the same question for all the Germanic languages: Norwegian god, bedre, best, Dutch has goed, beter, best, German gut, besser, best – the pattern must have been present in our parent Germanic language.

So although it's obvious that we're again dealing with two originally different words here, the peculiarity is so ancient that we don't know what the words were.

When it comes to the adjective bad, we know a little bit more, though we don't actually know where bad came from – it appears to be a word peculiar to English.

Mediaeval English speakers said bad, badder, baddest; but gradually speakers started instead to use worse, worst – and this is actually an old Germanic word: in Danish worst is værst.

When unrelated forms are used as different versions of a single word like this, linguistic scientists call it suppletion.

You can see the same thing happening with the noun person.

We say one person, and while it's possible to say two persons, the normal plural is people, so we usually say two people.

A good question at this point would be: why? Why do languages have suppletion?

As I say, that's a good question.