

The Indo-European Roots of the  
German Verb SEIN 'to be'<sup>\*</sup>  
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## 0. Introduction

The German verb SEIN 'to be' is morphologically irregular, as seen in the unpredictable differences between the following forms:

- (1) a. *ist, seid, sind* 'is, are'  
b. *bin, bist* 'am, (you-sg.) are'  
c. *war, gewesen*. 'was, been'

These differences constitute a case of **suppletion**, that is, the forms in (1a), (1b) and (1c) look different from each other because they are derived etymologically from different roots. Suppletion is not unique to the verb 'to be;' other verbs and even other grammatical categories may display suppletion as well, such as comparatives and pronouns. Some examples of suppletion in French and English are offered below:

- (2) a. *je vais, nous allons* Fr. 'I go, we go'  
b. *go, went*  
c. *good, better; bad, worse*  
d. *I, me*

In (2a), the French verb for 'to go' uses different roots to form the 1.sg. and 1.pl. forms of the present indicative, which is analogous to the distinction between the forms in (1a) and (1b) above. (2b) shows that the present and preterite stems for the English verb 'to go' show suppletion, as do the forms in (1b) and (1c) for the German verb 'to be.' (2c) shows suppletive comparatives in English, and finally, (2b) shows suppletion in the cases of the first person singular pronoun in English.<sup>1</sup>

Drawing upon the dictionaries of Pokorney (1959) and Rix et al. (2001), in the following section I present the Proto-Indo-European roots of the forms in (1), their presumed meanings, and the meanings of derivatives from these same roots in other branches of IE. In section 2, I outline briefly how these roots are believed to have become one paradigm in German. Finally, in section 3, I conclude with some thoughts about suppletion and about what the morphological history of the German verb *sein* suggests about its meaning.

## 1. Three Roots

The PIE roots of the forms in (1a), (1b) and (1c) are listed, respectively, in (3) below:

- (3) a. *\*h<sub>1</sub>es-* 'be, exist'  
b. *\*bhueh<sub>2</sub>-* 'become, grow, thrive'  
c. *\*h<sub>2</sub>ues-* 'stay, dwell' (Rix et al. 2001)

Let us examine each root in detail, citing cognates of each across the spectrum of Indo-European languages.

1.1 \**h<sub>1</sub>es-*

This root is reconstructed in PIE only in the present tense, that is, PIE probably did not have a perfect or an aorist form of this verb. Verbal reflexes of this root carry the meaning 'be' in Hittite, Indo-Iranian, Armenian, Greek, Latin, Celtic, Germanic, Lithuanian, Slavic, Albanian, in other words, in eleven of the twelve IE language families. These reflexes are listed below:

- (4) a. Hitt. *ēszī, asanzi* 'is, are'  
 b. Sk. *ásti, sánti* 'is, are'  
 c. Av. *astī, h(schwa)ṇti* 'is, are'  
 d. Arm. *em* 'am'  
 e. Gk. *estí, eisi* 'is, are'  
 f. Lt. *est, sunt* 'is, are'  
 g. OIr. *is, it* 'is, are'  
 h. Go. *ist, sind* 'is, are'  
 i. OLith. *esmì, ėsti* 'am, is'  
 j. OCS *jesmь, sotь* 'am, are'  
 k. Alb. *jam* 'am'

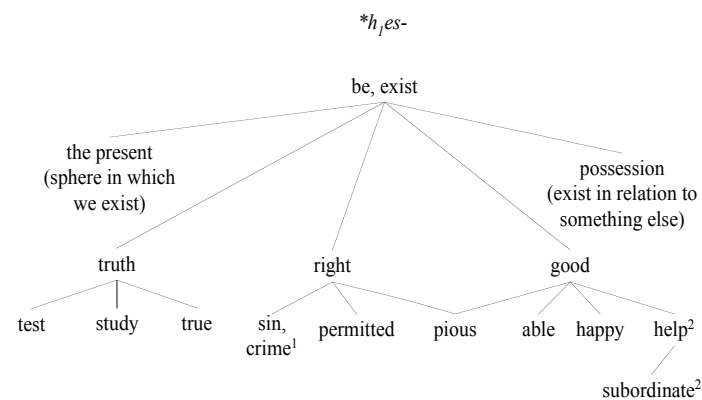
(Rix et al. 1998:214)

Nominalizations of this root include the following:

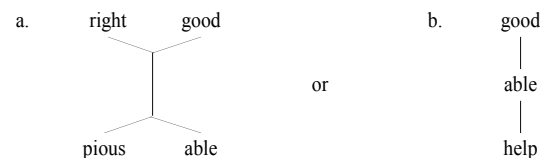
- (5) a. PGmc. \**sanþa-* > ON *sannr, saðr*, OHG *sand*, OS *sōð* 'true'  
 b. PGmc. \**sun(ð)jā-z* > Go. *sunja* 'truth' = Sk. *satyá-*, Av. *haiṛya-* 'true'  
 c. PGmc. \**sundī* : *sun(ð)jāz* > OHG *suntea*, OS *sundea*, Ofr. *sende*, OI *synd* 'sin, crime'  
 d. *to*-participle \**s-e-tó-*, Hes. *etadzō* 'I test,' *eteos*, *etumos* 'true,' *dsios* 'right, permitted, pious'

- e. Sk. *abhí-sti-* 'help,' Av. *aiwišti* 'study,' Sk. *úpa-stí-m.* 'subordinate,' perhaps Gk. *es-dzłós* 'able, good, happy'  
 (Pokorny 1959:341f.)

Thus we see nominalizations of the root for 'be' with meanings including 'true,' 'truth,' 'sin,' 'right,' 'permitted,' 'pious,' 'help,' 'study,' 'subordinate,' 'able,' 'good' and 'happy.' A verb derived from this root carries the meaning 'to test.' These meanings are associated with one another in a hierarchical system in the following diagram (6):



could also be:



1 See Watkins (1967).

2 These are prefixed forms.

(6) is intended to represent universal concept associations rather than specific historical semantic developments. Similarly, the diagram is not intended to prescribe necessary paths of semantic development, but rather to suggest one possibility of how meanings derived from the same root may be related.<sup>2</sup>

### 1.2 \*bhueh<sub>2</sub>-

This root is reconstructed in the present,<sup>3</sup> aorist and perfect, and possibly in desideratives. A small sample of verbs in the daughter languages derived from this root follow below:

- (7) a. Skt. *bhāvati* 'becomes, is'  
 b. Gk. *éfun* 'grew, became, came into being'  
 c. ON *byggva* 'build, dwell'  
 d. OIr. *-bí, -bíat* 'be characteristically'  
 e. Alb. *bīnj* 'conceive, sprout'  
 (Rix et al. 2001: 98)

Common to all of these meanings, except possibly for 'be,' is a sense of time. Pokorny lists dozens of derived forms from these verbs, whose meanings vary widely. These meanings are presented in (8) below, classified into three subtypes. The three subtypes "inceptive," "dynamic" and "post-dynamic" may be thought of as stages in time, which can be measured in terms of beginning, middle and end.

(8) \*bhueh<sub>2</sub>-  
 'become'

inceptive	dynamic	post-dynamic
come into being	grow	be (a being, existence, creation, state of affairs, tendency, nature, gender, character, kind, type, haughty, double-formed, doubting, uncertain)
sprout	expand	
sprout up	swell	
bring into being	build	be characteristically in a place
beget	(husbandman) <sup>4</sup>	dwelling—dwellings
conceive	take place	[there is a long list of these]
be conceived	happen	have been
sow	release	plentiful, numerous
plant (v.)	set free	well-thriving
nourishment	strengthen	health
light	adorn	fullness
origin	(adornment, amulet)	multitude
provide	thrive	abundance
future (adj.)	manner of living	excess
	care for (welfare, well-being)	riches
	make thrive	shoot (medicinal) herb
	cultivation	plant stem trunk
	(farmer, rustic, barley, crops, produce)	growth germ sprout
	life (forgetting, forgotten, ghost, apparition)	child ulcer
	way of life	people
	sleep in a cave	community and
	spend the night	

## inceptive

## dynamic

inhabit  
 populate  
 settle  
 set up house  
 repair  
 to farm  
 construct  
 housekeeping  
 stay here and  
 there for a little  
 while  
 activity, pastime  
 in a good mood  
 amusement  
 well-being  
 luck

## post-dynamic

accompanying  
 battalion  
 round world  
 world  
 place  
 earth  
 neighbor  
 storehouse  
 household  
 yard  
 building  
 pavillion  
 estate  
 household utensils  
 property  
 state/condition  
 position  
 wealth, good position  
 (cattle, livestock)  
 possessions  
 upright  
 profit  
 good  
 joy  
 sorrow  
 wise  
 smart  
 victory  
 wealth  
 blessing  
 good, steadfast  
 powerful  
 outstanding

Most significant about all of these meanings of derivatives of *\*bhueh<sub>2</sub>-* is that 'be' is among them (classified as "post-dynamic"), as is the related meaning 'have been.'

Some of the meanings placed in the "post-dynamic" column may fit just as well into the "inceptive" category, for example, 'earth,' 'yard,' and 'joy.' These nominalizations, being detached from the temporal trappings associated with verbs,<sup>5</sup> may appear on either end of the 'dynamic' spectrum. By shifting the temporal interpretation of these words between after and before a dynamic event (that is, by viewing them as either "post-dynamic" or "inceptive" concepts), the linear construct of time suggested above gives way to a cyclical one. Thus the meanings of derivatives of *\*bhueh<sub>2</sub>-*, when systematized into categories based on stages occurring in time, suggest that linear as well as cyclical conceptions of time underlie historical and comparative semantics.

The meanings of derivatives of *\*bhueh<sub>2</sub>-*, unlike those of *\*h<sub>1</sub>es-* above, are associated with an occurrence in time.

1.3 *\*h<sub>2</sub>ues-\***h<sub>2</sub>ues-* is reconstructed in the present, aorist, causative/iterative and tentatively in the desiderative (*Lexikon* 1998:261). The Gmc. preterite forms are descended from a newly created perfect, as an old perfect would have been impossible for a verb with stative meaning (262). Examples of reflexes of this root follow:

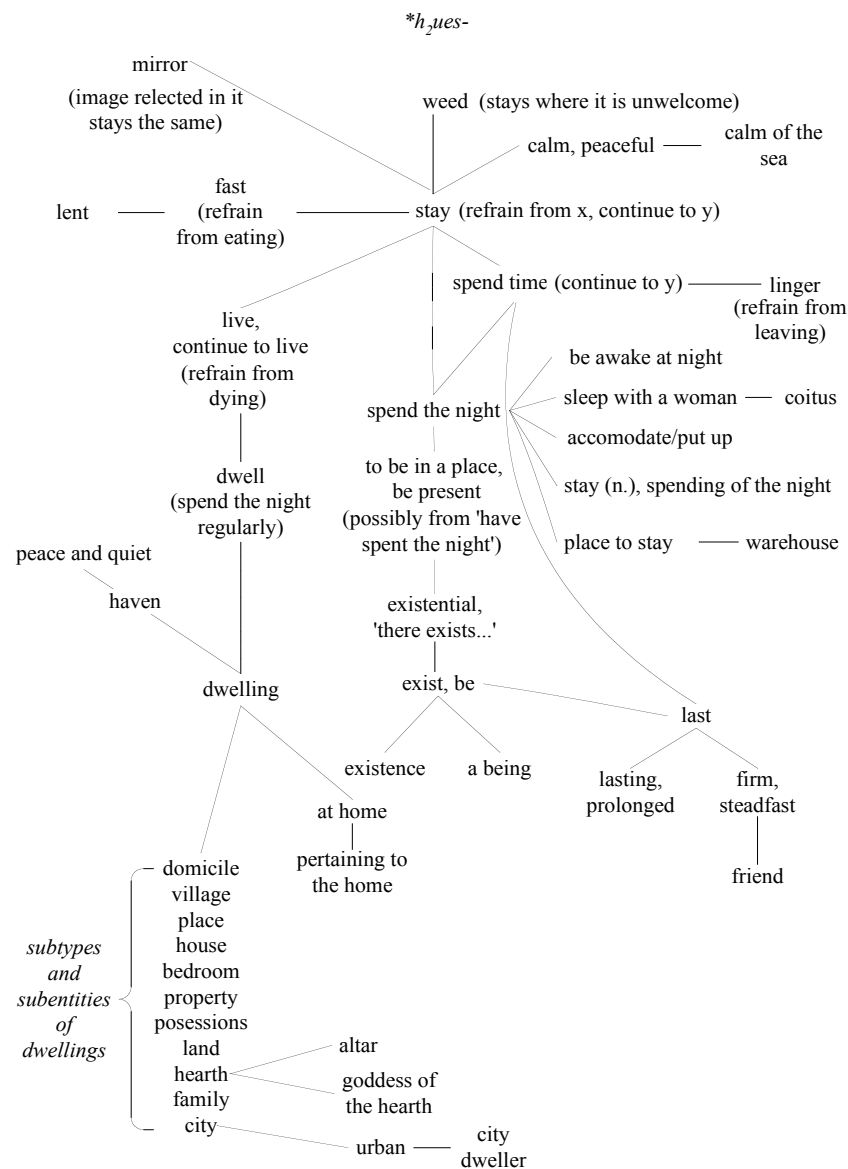
- (9) a. Sk. *vásati* 'spend the night, stay'

- b. Gk. *iaúō* 'spend the night'
  - c. TochB subj. *ws(.)i-* 'stay, dwell'
  - d. Arm. *goy* 'is, exists'
  - e. Hitt. *huiszi* 'live, continue to live'
  - f. Lat. *Vesta* (goddess of the hearth)
- (Lexikon 2001:293; Pokorny

1959:1171)

In the following chart of the associations in the meanings of the derivatives of *\*h<sub>2</sub>ues-*, I take 'stay' as the focal meaning because of its generality and because it could indeed have been an "original" (or at least very early) meaning.<sup>6</sup>

(10), on following page



The meaning ‘exist’ crops up again, this time as ‘being in a place due to having spent the night there.’ This perfect meaning very likely played a role in allowing the perfect of *\*h<sub>2</sub>ues-* to become the preterite of *\*h<sub>1</sub>es-* in PGmc. Recall that the Go. forms are descended from the perfect. There are overlaps between the meanings associated with *\*bhueh<sub>2</sub>-* and *\*h<sub>2</sub>ues-*, particularly in the area of dwelling. All three charts include the meaning ‘be, exist,’ albeit slightly different varieties thereof. The common thread among derivatives of *\*h<sub>1</sub>es-* is a sense of being without relation to time, while the derivatives of *\*bhueh<sub>2</sub>-* suggest a kind of being that occurs within either a linear or cyclical notion of time. Finally, the derivatives of *\*h<sub>2</sub>ues-* include meanings that imply a duration of time.

## 2. How three roots form one paradigm

### 2.1 From PIE to Proto-Germanic (PGmc): *\*h<sub>1</sub>es-* + *\*h<sub>2</sub>ues-*

As in German, the Gothic and Old Norse preterite forms of ‘be’ derive from *\*h<sub>2</sub>ues-*:

- (11) a. Go sg. *was, wast, was* 3.pl. *wēsun*  
b. ON *var, vart, var, várum, váruð, váru*

Therefore, the suppletion of *\*h<sub>2</sub>ues-* and *\*h<sub>1</sub>es-* is commonly believed to have been a PGmc development. For phonological reasons why this may have happened, see Lühr (1981). Assuming that *\*h<sub>1</sub>es-* was a *prasens tantum* and that *\*h<sub>2</sub>ues-* was an *aorist tantum* (see Tanaka 1999), it is plausible that the two verbs “found each

other” in PGmc as the preterite tense was forming from the PIE aorist and perfect. In other words, the PGmc version of *\*h<sub>1</sub>es-* was a present looking for a past, while the opposite was true for PGmc reflex of *\*h<sub>2</sub>ues-*. The details of this development invite further research, including how the formation of the paradigm of ‘be’ in Germanic relates to the development of the Germanic strong verbs in general.

### 2.2 From PGmc to West Germanic (WGmc): *\*h<sub>1</sub>es-* + *\*h<sub>2</sub>ues-* + *\*bhueh<sub>2</sub>-*

Unlike Gothic and Old Norse, Old High German (OHG) shows forms from *\*bhueh<sub>2</sub>-* in the first and second person forms of the present indicative:

- (12) *bim/bin, bist/bis, ist, birum/birumēs/birun, birut, sint*

Old English (OE), on the other hand, preserves two complete paradigms for ‘be’ in the present tense, one derived from *\*h<sub>1</sub>es-* and the other derived from *\*bhueh<sub>2</sub>-*:

- (13) a. *eom, eart, is, pl. sind/sint/sindon*  
b. *bēo, bist, bið, pl. bēoð*

The data in (12) and (13), when compared with the present indicative forms of ‘be’ in Go and ON in (14) below, suggest that the presence of reflexes of *\*bhueh<sub>2</sub>-* within the present paradigm of a verb ‘be’ is a WGmc development:<sup>7</sup>

- (14) a. Go *im, is, ist, sijum, sijub, sind*  
b. ON *em, ert, er, erum, eruð, eru*

Note the lack of any forms with an initial *b-* in the North- and East-branches of Gmc. Reflexes of *\*bhueh<sub>2-</sub>* do survive, however, in a verb meaning ‘dwell’ or ‘build.’

(15) ON *byggva* ‘dwell, build’

A derivative of *\*bhueh<sub>2-</sub>* meaning ‘to be’ can be found only in WGmc, and, as seen in (12) and (13), it appears in the paradigm of ‘be’ in different ways in OHG and OE.

### 2.3 From WGmc to German: the present indicative

While the *\*bhueh<sub>2-</sub>* reflexes have disappeared from the present indicative in Modern Standard English, German preserves them in the 1.sg. and 2.sg forms *bin* and *bist*, respectively. Yet the OHG forms cannot be derived from *\*bhueh<sub>2-</sub>* alone, but rather suggest that the *\*bhueh<sub>2-</sub>* forms merged with the *\*h<sub>1</sub>es-* forms. One account of how this might have happened appears in Lühr (1984). For discussion, see Pollack (2004).

## 3. What does it all mean?

### 3.1 Theories of Suppletion

3.1.1 *Suppletion is natural.* According to theories of naturalness and markedness (see Wurzel 1990, Bittner 1988), there exists within the grammar of a language a “suppletion domain” (*Suppletionsdomäne*), in which suppletive forms belong (e.g., the German verbs *sein*, *haben*, *werden*, *gehen*, *stehen*, *tun*, see Bittner 1988:423).

Rather than being declined or conjugated according to the rules of a pattern or class, as are most nouns and verbs in a given language, an element of the suppletion domain forms its paradigm individually, according to its own unique pattern. Therefore, suppletive forms are “natural” and “unmarked,” because they belong to the “suppletion domain.” (In other words, *sein* is one of a class of misfits.) Markedness theory accounts for the leveling of suppletive paradigms by redrawing the lines between the suppletion and non-suppletion domains, which I will demonstrate with a comparison of the development of the German and English preterites of ‘be’: In German, which inflects the preterite (sg. *er sagte*, pl. *sie sagten*), the distinction between the sg. *was* and the pl. *waren* was “marked,” that is, different from what one might otherwise expect. So, while the present tense of *sein* is within the suppletion domain of German, at a certain point in time, the preterite of *sein* transferred out of German’s suppletion domain. Once out of the suppletion domain, the markedness of the German preterite became apparent, and the paradigm was ultimately leveled (that is, *was* became *war* to match the plural stem *waren*). In English, on the other hand, the preterite is not inflected (*she said*, *they said*), and the preterite of ‘be’ has remained in the suppletion domain. While the concept of marked and unmarked forms provides a useful tool to describe some of the ways that verb forms change over time, markedness theory, as described here, has so far not addressed why a particular word might enter the suppletion domain in the first place.

3.1.2 *Suppletion is primal.* Suppletion appears to occur in a limited number of grammatical categories across the languages of the world, such as comparatives, cardinal numbers, and pronouns. Of all of the pronouns in English, for example, the first person shows the starkest contrast between subjective and objective case. According to Markey, this is no accident. He describes “suppletion in the copula” as “an iconic index of the fundamental contrast of *ego* vs. ‘other’” (Markey 1985:63). In general, the more “opaque” the historical derivation, the more basic, or primal, the morpho-syntactic category, and the more likely to be a candidate for suppletion. Locative copulae in creole languages tend to be the most etymologically opaque of all of the various copulae. Markey sees a connection between the opacity of the derivation of the locative copula and the primal nature of the locative itself, which is learned by speakers at a very early age, that is, before they learn “grammar,” and has to do with self vs. other (perhaps something like ‘I am here in my space and you are not’, see Markey 1985). This explanation is meant to account for irregularity in the present tense of ‘be’ only; for irregularity in tense stems (e.g., *is/was*, *ist/war*), Markey turns to “atomistic events” (1985:56), in other words, to historical explanation. Wurzel (1990) combines historical and synchronic considerations in his account of the present tense of *sein* in Modern Standard German: *ist* is from *\*és-ti* and *sind* is from *\*s-ênti*, which in the proto-language represented a “regular relationship” (1990:88). *Ist* and *sind* preserve old phonological rules, which have not acquiesced to the morphological rules of the present day language, because *sein* is within the suppletion domain. The “mixed” forms that do persist, that is, *bin* and *bist*,

are singular forms, which may be considered more primal than plural forms. Thus, combining Markey’s and Wurzel’s lines of thought, we have an account of why OHG 1.pl. and 2.pl. forms *birum* and *birut* might have been replaced by *sind* and *seid* but not the singular forms *bin* and *bist*. But what might have attracted reflexes of *\*bhueh2-* and *\*h1es-* to each other? Why do we see this suppletion in WGmc but not in Go or ON? While there are principles behind the forms that we observe, the development of a copula in a particular language such as German maintains its own idiosyncrasies.

### 3.2 Historical Accounts

The idea that *\*h1es-* and *\*h2ues-* once stood in aspectual contrast durative/punctual and later came to represent present/anterior is appealing and deserves further research (see Tanaka 1999, 2002). In particular, the role that the perfect forms played in the development of the ‘be’ paradigm in Gmc needs to be elaborated, given that the Gmc forms from *\*h2ues-*, are derived from a newly created perfect, and not from the (presumably) earlier aorist (Rix et al. 2001). While perhaps tempting, I see no need to posit an “original” or “pre-meaning” for ‘be’ (e.g., ‘sit’ or ‘occupy a place’). As shown in (4) above, reflexes of *\*h1es-* across the spectrum of Indo-European languages mean ‘be.’ If, instead of trying to look back at what *\*h1es-* might have meant before it meant ‘be,’ we look ahead toward what has happened paradigmatically to *\*h1es-*, we observe that ‘to be’ in German is related historically to the meanings ‘stay,’ ‘dwell’ and ‘build.’ In other words, to be is to create a home.

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\* I would like to thank my fellow panel members and small but lively audience at PAC 31 for a stimulating discussion. Furthermore, I am indebted to Craig Melchert in Chapel Hill for information and expert commentary. All remaining errors are mine.

<sup>1</sup> Suppletion is by now a centuries-old subject of study that continues to be discussed today. For recent ideas about suppletion in French and English verbs, see Boyé and Hofherr (2005). For a study of suppletion and theories of naturalness, see Bittner (1988) and Wurzel (1990). For a general discussion see Markey (1985) and the references there.

<sup>2</sup> That said, the presence of a verb 'be' derived from \**h<sub>1</sub>es-* in all twelve IE language families leads one to assume with a good deal of comfort that the root meant 'be' in PIE, likely before it assumed the derived forms and meanings listed in (5).

<sup>3</sup> Although these are unlikely to be "old" (C. Melchert, p.c., see also Tanaka 1999.)

<sup>4</sup> Words in parentheses are related either by meaning association or historically to the preceding word.

<sup>5</sup> Some nominalizations seem to retain their temporal semantics, however, such as 'cultivation,' 'pastime' and 'luck,' hence their position in the "dynamic" column.

<sup>6</sup> See also Strunk (1999).

<sup>7</sup> Equally logically possible, and indeed suggested in Tanaka (2002), is the idea that the \**bhueh<sub>2</sub>-* disappeared from 'to be' in NGmc and WGmc.