An optative origin for the West Germanic 2s preterite
Matthew Boutilier
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Although the Germanic preterite system largely continues the Indo-European perfect (Ringe 2006), the 2s form peculiar to West Germanic—e.g. OHG *riti*, OS *riđi*, OE *ride* 'you rode'—requires a different explanation. Various attempts have been made to trace the WGmc 2s preterite, which is characterized by the preterite plural stem with *-i, to some more archaic verb tense such as the Indo-European aorist (Prokosch 1939) or a hypothetical pluperfect (Kortlandt 1994). I argue that, on the basis of theoretical economy (Hock 1991), the most plausible account is that the anomalous form has a more recent origin in the Gmc preterite optative.

I justify an optative borrowing as a reaction to the phonological instability of the inherited perfect indicative in *-th$_2$e. Consecutive dental stops assibilated early in the prehistory of Germanic (cf. pre-PGmc */kái̯d.tis/ > OE *hǣs* 'command'), reshaping a form such as pre-PGmc */rái̯d^h.ta/ 'you rode' into *rais. Furthermore, Grimm's law must have yielded *-þ as the 2s suffix when the verbal stem did not end in an obstruent (whence Mercian *earþ* for West Saxon *eart* 'you are'). But whereas N and EGmc generalized 2s -*t* in response to these changes, I argue that in WGmc the preterite optative—in this case, PGmc *ridīz—provided an ideal substitute for the inherited 2s perfect that had become problematic.

Advocates of the 'syncretic' view—that the Gmc preterite, like the Latin perfect, combines elements from the PIE perfect *and* aorist tenses (Hirt 1931)—point out that OHG *riti*, etc., lack final -*s*, which differentiates the preterite optative in OHG and OS (Boutkan 1995). I show that, given an inevitable reordering of the output of Verner's law, this does not constitute a valid objection to an optative borrowing. My analysis explains how 2s preterite optative *ridīs alternated with *ridīz at an early stage of Gmc—exactly as present indicative *rīdisi (> OHG *rītis*) alternated with *rīdizi (> ON *ríðr*)—and avoids the restriction that PGmc lacked a word-final distinction between */-s/ and */-z/.

Thus, I not only establish a sound *motivation* for an optative borrowing into the 2s indicative (the phonologically chaotic state of the inherited 2s perfect), but also demonstrate how this account alone satisfies the preference for theoretical parsimony. To justify an origin in the PIE aorist, one must first of all assume everything that an optative origin requires—e.g. that the output of VL was substantially reorganized by analogy—and then admit a handful of additional premises (especially, a reason for a single aorist form to survive alongside a complete perfect paradigm), which from the perspective of my analysis are unnecessary.

Boutkan, Dirk (1995). *The Germanic 'Auslautgesetze.'* Atlanta: Rodopi B.V.
Hirt, Hermann (1931). *Handbuch des Urgermanischen. Teil I: Laut und Akzentlehre.* Winter: Heidelberg.
Hock, Hans Henrich (1991) *Principles of Historical Linguistics*. New York: de Gruyter.
Kortlandt, Frederik H. H. (1994). The Proto-Germanic pluperfect. In *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur Sprachwissenschaft* 55, p. 61–8.
Prokosch, Eduard (1939). *A Comparative Germanic Grammar*. Philadelphia: Linguistic Society of America.
Ringe, Don (2006). *From Proto-Indo-European to Proto-Germanic*. New York: Oxford University Press.