A LOGICAL ENGLISH VERB SYSTEM

Attila IMRE

Assoc. Prof., PhD, Sapientia University

Abstract: The grammar of each language is revised once in every twenty or thirty years, which should considered a natural process and one of the primary concerns of grammarians. Our aim is to reconsider the approach to the English verb system, which is the starting point of English grammars, taking into account grammars published by native (mostly British) and non-native (mostly Romanian and Hungarian) speakers, having in mind different priorities. We have already seen theoretical, practical or systematical descriptions of grammar, but this time we would like to offer a logical approach to English grammar, naturally, through the filter of a non-native speaker. The present article is the modified introductory part of an English grammar, to be published soon.

Keywords: English grammar, verbs, classification, form, function.

1. Introduction

Verbs are so common in language use that they hardly need any introduction. Yet we offer a definition, according to which they denote actions, activities, states, events, attitudes, processes, changes or existence. Being the second largest class of words (Carter & McCarthy, 2006, p. 301), their categorization may prove some difficulty detailed in the followings.

The starting point of studying English grammar may be the mapping of all verb types, enabling speakers to produce comprehensible utterances. Once we present all possible verb types, it may spare us a lot of subsequent explanations, and its real advantage lies in offering a logical view upon their possible combination to create tenses. Classifying verbs is important, as they express a multitude of grammatical categories, such as **person** (first, second, third) and **number** (singular, plural). Furthermore, in a syntactical approach, they express the predicate (Gălățeanu & Comișel, 1982, pp. 6–9), offering the following possible characteristics: **tense** (present, past, future), **aspect** (simple, continuous or progressive, perfect

BDD-V2016 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:21:29 UTC)

(simple), perfect continuous or progressive), **voice** (active, passive), and **mood** (finite: indicative, imperative, subjunctive; non-finite: infinitive, gerund, participle).

It is natural that verbs are divided into different categories, but the problem is that in the majority of cases it is not specified which part of grammar this is based on. For instance, within **lexicology**, according to their morphological structure, verbs may be classified as follows:

- One-word verbs, which may be simple (enjoy), derivative (discover), or compound (broadcast). Detailed verb formation possibilities may be found, for instance in Bădescu (1984, pp. 452–456);
- Multi-word (compound, complex) verbs, which may be phrasal verbs (come back – verb and adverbial particle), prepositional verbs (comment on – verb and preposition) and phrasal-prepositional verbs (put up with).

However, one may clearly see that this type of categorization involves **semantics** as well, because the combination of verbs with adverbs and prepositions leads to a variety of meanings (give up = abandon), which proves to be very difficult for non-native speakers. Although a verb may be used in different tenses, some of them are semantically restricted. For instance, static (also called stative or non-progressive) verbs such as snap, drop, know cannot be used in Continuous tenses, whereas dynamic (progressive) verbs can. Other verbs are called inchoative, referring to the start of an action (begin, start, or get, especially in parallel constructions). Bădescu even mentions impersonal (unipersonal) verbs (1984, pp. 448–449), such as drizzle, freeze, hail, lighten, rain, dew, sleet, snow, thunder, meseems, or methinks. Yet, we consider this type of categorization less central to grammar, as meaning(s) of words may be learnt effectively even without a thorough grammar knowledge.

The primary aim of this section is to categorize verbs from a morphosyntactic approach, which leads us to **formal** and **functional** classifications. These are important once we would like to produce sentences referring to the previously mentioned person, number and aspect in various tenses and moods.

2. Formal classification

Although there are grammars discussing five possible forms, we consider that four forms are suitable for studying purposes. Thus we have the following classification:

BDD-V2016 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:21:29 UTC)

1. the Infinitive[1] or Present Simple form (I.);
2. the Past Simple form (II.);
3. the Past Participle form (III.);
4. the -ing form.

The first type is considered the basic verb form, and there are two types of verbs depending on how the second and third form is constructed, discussed below. Although there are grammars presenting the third person singular form of verbs (play**s**, hire**s**) as a fifth possible form (e.g. Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1980; Budai, 1994), we do not consider it necessary.

2.1. Regular verbs

Within formal classification, we should start with regular verbs, which are easy to remember, as the second and third form heavily relies on the first (basic) form. These are obtained by adding an -ed (play, played, played) at the end of the first form, or in case the verb end in e, only a -d (hire, hired, hired). To the great relief on non-native speakers, all English verbs are regular ones, except for a few hundred irregular verbs discussed in the next section.

2.2. Irregular verbs

Irregular verbs make extensive use of the memory of non-native speakers, as their second and third form cannot be deduced or predicted from the first one. Sadly, they need a lot of time to be learnt, which cannot be avoided as many of them belong to the core English vocabulary:

The optimistic approach to irregular verbs is to remember that out of many thousands of English verbs only a few hundred ones are irregular, which can be further reduced based on their frequency. Still more than a hundred of them (with three distinctive forms completed with their meaning) remain, with different procedures to memorize them. The most common is to further categorise them by establishing patterns:

Pattern	**I.**	**II.**	**III.**

[1] There is no difference in the form of short or bare infinitive and Present Simple (e.g. go, except for the third person singular, completed with -s or -es), whereas to go is referred to as the long infinitive.

BDD-V2016 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:21:29 UTC)

I. = II. = III.	cut	cut	cut
II. = III., t	keep	kept	kept
II. = III., d	find	found	found
II. = III., ght	fight	fought	fought
II. = III., u	hang	hung	hung
I. = III.	come	came	come
I. = II.	beat	beat	beaten
all different	do	did	done
all different, en	rise	rose	risen
all different, e, wn	blow	blew	blown
all different, i, a, u	sing	sang	sung

Table 3. Patterns of irregular verbs

As the table shows, we can focus on sounding (sing, sang, sung), or we can observe the patterns according to which sometimes all three forms coincide (cut, cut, cut), or at least two of them (beat, beat, beaten; come, came, come; hang, hung, hung), but it may happen that there is no similarity whatsoever (do, did, done), and there are irregular verbs that do not fit into any pattern. Grammar books usually attach an appendix with a list of irregular verbs, and non-native authors also offer their translation in the target language, which makes the learning process easier.

When trying to learn them, our recommendation is to write them on cards with one side containing the three forms (and their possible variants and pronunciation), and the other one the translation. Their importance cannot be neglected, and the first stage of proper use of English – although a ‘memory game’ – is the thorough knowledge of frequent irregular verbs. The knowledge of the first form enables us a fluent communication, the second one makes it possible to express ourselves in past simple tense (a very frequent tense), whereas the third form is typically combined with one of the following verbs: be, am, are, is, was, were, being, have, has, had, having, leading us to the next classification type.

BDD-V2016 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:21:29 UTC)

3. Functional classification

Owing to the various terms circulating about verbs, it may prove difficult to offer a functional classification, but we try to give alternate names as well. At **syntactical** level, verbs can be categorized as 'full' verbs having predicative function (they can fully form the predicate alone), whereas others are non-predicative verbs in need of completion from the point of view of predication (e.g. Gălățeanu & Comișel, 1982, p. 7), having reduced lexical meanings and being referred to as copulas, auxiliaries, semi-auxiliaries, modals and semi-modals. Now it is clear that a predicate is identified based on its **lexical** meaning as well. According to their 'behaviour' in a sentence (for instance, how they are conjugated), they can be also classified as 'ordinary' or 'special' verbs.

We consider that in case verbs are discussed within morphology or syntax, their function is primary, resulting in the following categories:

1. **strong** (full, ordinary, primary) **verbs**: be (am, are, is, was, were)
2. **auxiliary** (special) **verbs**[2]: be (am, are, is, was, were), do (does, did), have (has, had), will;
3. **modal** (special, defective) **verbs**[3]: can, could, may, might, must, have to, shall, should, ought to, will, would, need, dare, used to;
4. **weak** (full, ordinary, primary) **verbs**: all the other verbs, which are not strong, auxiliary or modal verbs.

Although this categorization is somewhat different from other verb classifications (Quirk et al., 1980, pp. 63–83, 105, 109; Thomson & Martinet, 1986, p. 105, 109–152, 315–352; Budai, 1994, pp. 11–21; Bădescu, 1984, pp. 255–260, 383–456; Carter & McCarthy, 2006, p. 301, 308; Gălățeanu & Comișel, 1982, pp. 5–8; Pawlowska & Kempinski, 1996, p. 11, 105–106, 109–110, 113), we have described it previously (Imre, 2008, pp. 8–11) and it proved to be 'functional'.

Yet, this type of classification needs further remarks:

a) A verb in its third or -ing form (cf. formal classification) can be neither strong nor auxiliary. The proof is simple: once a verb appears in the third or -ing form, it means

[2] The previously mentioned copulas or semi-auxiliaries, though marginal (based on their changing meaning), belong to this category: appear, become, get, go, grow, look, remain, seem, stay, turn, etc.
[3] The previously mentioned semi-modals form a sub-category within this one.

BDD-V2016 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:21:29 UTC)

that it is preceded by another – typically auxiliary verb[4] (be, am, are, is, was, were, have, has), which takes over its function; hence we can talk about 'weakened' forms of been, being, done, doing, etc.

b) Whatever categories we establish, a certain fuzziness (cf. cognitive grammar) will be preserved. In our case, be may be strong or auxiliary, do and have may be auxiliary, modal and weak, will is the auxiliary for the future tenses, but in fact it is a modal verb.[5] The following examples show different functions of these verbs:

(1) Jane Doe **is** at home. (strong, translated)
(2) Jane Doe **is** singing a duet with John Doe. (auxiliary, not translated)
(3) Jane Doe **does** the household chores. (weak, translated)
(4) **Does** John Doe help her in the household? (auxiliary, not translated)
(5) How **do** you **do**? (first auxiliary, second weak)
(6) Jane Doe **has** two daughters. (strong)
(7) John Doe **has** met Jane Doe in secret. (auxiliary)
(8) John Doe **has to** marry Jane Doe. (modal, translated)

It is easy to observe that is stands alone in (1), thus a separate word will refer to is when translated. Is functions as an auxiliary in (2), being in the company of another verb; consequently, it only has grammatical function, not being translated with a separate word. Further details about these verb types are presented in the following sections.

3.1. The strong verb and Shakespeare

In our view, Shakespeare's most famous quote (To be or not to be) may be used as the starting point of the English verb system. Be is the only strong verb, although it has multiple forms (am, is are, was, were) in present tenses referring to different persons. Thus am, are, is can only be used in present tenses, and they should be treated as first forms (similarly to be), whereas was and were are the second forms used in Past Simple.

'Strong' verb (be, am, are, is, was, were) means that it is 'strong' enough to form the negative and interrogative forms of a sentence alone, without the help of an auxiliary. Sentences (9) – (12) below prove it:

[4] Although non-finite forms may also appear before them, such as having.
[5] Actually there are grammars, which call them modal-auxiliaries; yet, we consider it a misleading term.

BDD-V2016 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:21:29 UTC)

(9) Jane Doe **is** a professional singer.

(10) **Is** Jane Doe a professional singer?

(11) Jane Doe **is** not a professional singer.

(12) **Isn't** Jane Doe is a professional singer?

It is important to mention, that even if the list of irregular verbs contains the third form of be (been), this is to be considered neither strong, nor auxiliary. However, even be can lose its 'strong' property when it is combined with a modal verb, which takes over its grammatical 'strength':

(13) John **will be** happy to marry Jane.

(14) **Will** John **be** happy to marry Jane?

(15) John **won't be** happy to marry Jane.

(16) **Won't** John be happy to marry Jane?

Still, the basic meaning of be (existence) is preserved and may be translated as a separate word. Be may also function as an auxiliary verb, leading us to the next section.

3.2. Auxiliary verbs

Auxiliary verbs (auxiliaries, function verbs, helping verbs, primary auxiliaries, or principal auxiliaries) have either limited or no whatsoever notional content. Lacking an independent meaning (i.e. they have no translation as a separate word), they **help** other verbs (basically weak ones) to construct tenses (Simple, Continuous / Progressive, Perfect Simple, Perfect Continuous) in affirmative, negative, interrogative or interrogative-negative forms. They may also help constructing various expressions or stock phrases.

Auxiliary verbs, as tense-formers may be grouped around be (am, are, is, was, were), have (has, had[6]) and do (does, did).

(17) Jane Doe **was** seen with John Doe.

(18) **Wasn't** she seen with John Doe?

(19) I **have** had enough of this Jane and John Doe.

(20) I **don't** know why you **didn't** use John Smith instead of John Doe.

[6] Obviously, this is the second form, although its form coincides with the third one.

BDD-V2016 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:21:29 UTC)

For logical reasons, we consider will as the auxiliary for the certain future tenses (Future Simple, Future Continuous, Future Perfect Simple and Future Perfect Continuous). Even if it mainly discussed as a modal verb, we can say that one of its modal functions is to express future reference. Our idea is supported functionally by the tenses below:

(21) I guess John **will** marry Jane. (Future Simple)

(22) This time next week John and Jane **will** be cooking dinner together. (Future Simple)

(23) By the time I retire John **will** have married Jane. (Future Perfect Simple)

(24) This time next year John **will** have been seeing Jane for 25 years. (Future Perfect Continuous)

In these sentences the interrogative and negative forms all are constructed with the help of will, supporting our idea. Although shall is the synonym of will for the first person singular or plural (I **shall** meet…), its use is rather limited nowadays[7]. Other so-called auxiliaries are much more limited, such as used to (having weak versions in interrogative and negative forms), or let in specific constructions, expressions and stock phrases (Live and let live. Let bygones be bygones. Let's not overreact the importance of 'let'.). According to Bădescu (1984, pp. 402–403), let is an equivalent of the subjunctive: Let X be equal to Y. Let it be us.

There are contracted forms for the affirmative (am: I'm; are: you're; is: it's; have: we've; had: he'd; will: they'll) and negative as well: ain't for am not, are not, is not, has not, have not, or isn't, aren't, haven't, hasn't, etc., drawing the conclusion that basically not is abbreviated: 'n' joins the previous word, 'o' is replaced by an apostrophe, which is followed by 't', thus reducing the number of syllables to be pronounced.

3.2.1. Auxiliary be

According to Quirk et al. (1980, p.68), Thomson & Martinet (1986, pp. 116–121) and Pawlowska & Kempinski (1996, p. 106), be has two auxiliary functions, one related to aspect (all Continuous / Progressive tenses), whereas it is also a passive auxiliary (Passive Voice).

[7] Similarly, some grammars include should and would among the tense-former auxiliaries (Future-in-the-Past tenses), but in our view it is not worth growing the number of auxiliaries and tenses. Thus – in our view –, Future-in-the-Past Simple, Continuous, etc. are not separate tenses, but can be deduced from either Reported Speech or sequence of tenses, discussed in forthcoming chapters.

BDD-V2016 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:21:29 UTC)

Bădescu (1984, p. 383) calls it copula, which establishes the link between the subject and the nominal predicate:

(25) Jane Doe **is** slicing tomatoes while John Doe **is** peeling onions. (Present Continuous)

(26) Tomatoes **are** being sliced and onions (**are** being) peeled by the Does. (Passive)

Certain expressions also contain this auxiliary: **Is** she come? The sun is set. They **were** gone. I **am** done to the world. (Bădescu, 1984, p. 391). Furthermore, be may mean have referring to age, form, colour, or size: How old **is** Jane? How tall **is** Jane? **Is** it the right time to marry John Doe? What shape **is** her head? Who **is** he? (referring to the person), What **is** he? (referring to her job). And we should not forget the be + adjective constructions either, where be is synonymous with feel: **be** happy, **be** afraid of, **be** right, etc.

There are certain **semi-auxiliaries** containing be, such as **be** apt to, **be** bound to, **be** liable to, **be** sure to, **be** certain to, **be** likely to, **be** unlikely to (Quirk et al., 1980, p. 80), be on the point of, be on the verge of, etc. Some of them have so special meanings that they are worth discussing separately, such as **be to** (future plan established earlier, unfulfilled past action, possibility, necessity, order, instruction, etc.) or **be about to** followed by an infinitive expressing immediate future. **Be going to** is usually contrasted with Future Simple, reflecting a multitude of meanings (near future, inevitability, weather forecast, etc.), thus, in our view, it functions in present day English as a separate tense, although even abbreviated in American English (gonna).

3.2.2. Auxiliary have

Have is a rather complex entry in any grammar, having weak (principal), auxiliary or modal functions (Bădescu, 1984, pp. 397–399). However, at this stage we only focus on its auxiliary functions, namely to form the Perfect tenses, certain Conditional tenses and the Causative type of Passive Voice (e.g. Thomson & Martinet, 1986, pp. 121–124), where somebody can cause something to happen / be done or make (force) somebody to do something in his/her place:

(27) Jane **has** thought a lot about John. (Present Perfect Simple)

(28) They **have** been planning the marriage for 25 years. (Present Perfect Continuous)

BDD-V2016 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:21:29 UTC)

(29) John and Jane **had** the reception rescheduled yesterday. (Passive, Causative[8])

(30) If John **had** married Jane, I wouldn't **have** written about them. (Perfect Conditional)

(31) **Had** John married Jane, you wouldn't have a story now. (emphasized Perfect Conditional)

(32) If it **hadn't** been for his shyness, John would **have** married Jane 25 years ago. (Perfect Conditional, special construction)[9]

One can easily observe that have is an auxiliary when it is followed by another (typically weak) verb, and all the above sentences, except for (31) are of this type. However the main clause of (31) has only one auxiliary (wouldn't) and one weak verb (lexical have, which is translated).

Furthermore, certain idiomatic expressions also derive from the auxiliary have: had better + bare infinitive (unreal past, offering advice, suggestion, idea how to do something). If the speaker is also involved, a synonymous expression may be formulated with let's:

(33) You'**d better** get accustomed to this type of sentences.

(34) We'**d better** switch to the next section. (= **Let's** switch to the next section.)

Two other expressions containing have are also worth considering: had rather and had sooner, which express a certain wish of the speaker towards himself/herself or towards somebody else:

(35) Author: I'**d rather** continue the story of Jane and John Doe. ('If you don't mind, I would like to …)

(36) Critic: I'**d rather** you didn't continue it.[10] ('If you don't mind, I wouldn't like you to…)

3.2.3. Auxiliary do

This auxiliary is extensively used, being a 'dummy' operator, in fact a periphrastic[11] auxiliary, which is the most neutral of all auxiliaries (Quirk et al., 1980, p. 68). It is the

[8] In these cases get is a synonym for have: 'get something done' or 'have something done' are interchangeable with minimal difference in meaning.
[9] Further details about Conditionals are usually presented in a separate chapter, and we also have to refrain from discussing the topic in details.
[10] It is worth observing the different grammatical approach reflected by examples (35) and (36). While (35) expresses a wish for the speaker, the infinitive is used. As (36) expresses a wish towards somebody else, Past Simple is needed.

BDD-V2016 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:21:29 UTC)

auxiliary for Present Simple (do, does), Past Simple (did) in interrogative, negative and negative-interrogative forms of weak verbs:

(37) Jane **doesn't** know that John loves her. (Present Simple, negative)

(38) **Did** John buy flowers to Jane yesterday? (Past Simple, interrogative)

(39) **Didn't** we have an agreement about the guests? (Past Simple, negative-interrogative)

Further uses of the auxiliary do (based on Quirk et al., 1980, p. 77; Bădescu, 1984, pp. 400–401 and Thomson & Martinet, 1986, pp. 126–127) are listed below:

- Question tags[12]:

(40) John loves Jane, **doesn't** he? You **don't** know it, **do** you?

- Comment tags[13]:

(41) Jane met John, did she?

- Additions to remarks:

(42) Jane likes the idea of marriage and John **does** too.

(43) Jane likes the idea of marriage and so **does** John.

(44) Jane and John like the idea of marriage. So **do** I!

(45) Jane enjoys vegetarian meals but John **doesn't**.

(46) Jane didn't see the news yesterday and neither **did** John.

(47) They don't want a large wedding reception. Nor **do** their mothers-in law.

(48) She didn't want to hurt their feelings. Neither **did** John.

- Short agreements and disagreements:

(49) John waits too much to pop the question. Yes, he **does.** No, he **doesn't.**

- Emphatic constructions:

(50) I **do** want to go to their wedding.

- Persuasive imperative expressions:

(51) **Do** come in!

- Replacing weak verbs to avoid repetition:

[11] Periphrastic refers to the combination of an auxiliary and a weak (did marry) instead of an inflected past (married).
[12] A question tag is a short additions to the end of sentences, typically asking for confirmation or agreement. Its sub-standard version is: …, really?
[13] Comment tags differ from question tags in the sense that affirmative statements take interrogative tags, whereas negative statements are used with negative tags.

BDD-V2016 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:21:29 UTC)

(52) Do you know about John and Jane Doe? I think everybody **does.**[14]

(53) Jane likes onion and garlic more than John **does.**

- Additions:

(54) Jane drives an SUV and so **does** John.

- Emphasized forms combined with inversion, triggered by negative words, half-negative words or words acting similarly to them:

(55) Never in my life **did** I see Jane Doe.

(56) Well **do** I remember that episode from Castle, when I heard about John Doe.

(57) Only after John kissed her **did** Jane faint.

Naturally, question tags, comment tags and additions to remarks can be constructed with the help of other auxiliaries and modal verbs, discussed in the following section.

3.3. Modal verbs - introduction

Modal verbs are referred to as modals, modal auxiliaries, anomalous finites, special finites, mood-formers (Bădescu, 1984, p. 383), and in our opinion, they are so problematic that they are worth discussing in a separate chapter, but only after the strong, auxiliary and weak verbs are very clear in all the possible tenses in active and passive, direct speech and reported speech, as well as conditional sentences.

The major problem with them is that they are 'special' indeed, forming a separate category of verbs, whose meaning can be only derived from the context, which is at least the length of an entire clause or sentence, if not a paragraph. A typical word in any language has a particular meaning. Even if words may have multiple meanings, they do not break a basic rule a word usually stand for another word, whereas in the case of modals (e.g. English – Hungarian translations) we can have three cases:

a. Word for word: **can** – **tud** ('capable to');
b. Word for affix (suffix): She **can** help. – Segít**het**. (-het is a Hungarian suffix of possibility);
c. Word for 'nothing', when the polite meaning of the modal verb of an analytical language (English or Romanian) may disappear during translation:

(58) 1. **Can** you help me?

2. Mă **poți** ajuta? / Mă ajuți? (Romanian)

[14] In Syntax this feature is discussed within substitution.

BDD-V2016 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:21:29 UTC)

3. **Tudsz** segíteni? / Segítesz? (Hungarian)

Now it is obvious why modals need to be discussed separately. Their list may vary, but the majority of grammars agree that can, could, may, might, must, shall, should, will, would are 'central' modals, have to and ought to are somewhat different as they are followed by to, whereas need, dare and used to[15] are 'peripheral', 'marginal' or semi-modals, as, for instance dare and need can be weak verbs as well.

As it is beyond the possibilities of one single article to discuss modals in detail (cf. that there are entire books only focusing on modal verbs, e.g. Palmer, 1990 or Greere & Zdrenghea, 2000), certain features of them should be mentioned, which complete their nature presented above.

Palmer (1990, p. 4) describes seven distinctive features of modals, accepting that not all of them satisfy all the criteria:

I. Inversion with the subject;
II. Negative form with n't;
III. 'Code';
IV. Emphatic affirmation;
V. No -s form of the third person singular (they are not inflected, except for have to, need, dare);
VI. No non-finite forms (they have no infinitive, participle or gerund forms);
VII. No co-occurrence (that is, two modal cannot follow each other in a verb phrase.)

In our view, central modals are stronger than all the other verbs, signalled by the fact that whenever there is a string of verbs and one of them is a modal, it is always first. The longest string of verbs in English is four, as there are no Perfect Continuous Passive Constructions:

(59) Jane **could have been waiting** for John to pop the question for a long time.

[15] Some grammars do not even consider used to a modal verb.

BDD-V2016 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:21:29 UTC)

A further proof is the combination of modal and strong verbs, exemplified in sentences (13) – (16), where the modal takes over the grammatical function of forming the interrogative and negative (Palmer's first and second criteria), having a special meaning, which is also translated. This leads us to a further problem, namely that modals are usually discussed in a dualistic approach. First they are presented one by one in details, then various concepts expressed by modals are highlighted (degrees of politeness, concession, reproach, possibility or impossibility, etc.) with proper modal verbs in context.

At this stage we would like to highlight a grievous mistake of dictionary or grammar book compilers who include modals in the list of irregular verbs. In our view, the list of irregular verbs, without exception, contains the infinitive or Present Simple in the first column, the Past Simple form in the second column, whereas the third column is used in perfect tenses, being the past participle. Consequently, it is totally wrong to add modal verbs to this list, as could is not always the past form of can, and can does not always refer to the present, as the sentences below demonstrate:

(60) **Could** you be a bit more specific about the John Doe you saw? (present request)

(61) You **can't** have seen the Jane Doe I saw. (past impossibility)

Modal verbs cannot have continuous (-ing) forms, although they may appear in continuous tenses:

(62) John, you **must** be joking now.

(63) Jane **can't** have been joking when she expressed her wish about the wedding.

Similarly to the previously discussed auxiliaries, modals can appear in short answers, agreements and disagreements, additions, etc., so the term modal-auxiliary is justified, even if combines two separate categories. We believe, this is due to the fact that modals can have the majority, if not all the grammatical functions expressed by auxiliaries.

3.4. Weak verbs

BDD-V2016 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:21:29 UTC)

Although the majority of grammars start with weak[16] verbs capable of being the predicate of a sentence, for the sake of the definition we positioned it last within the functional classification.

According to our definition, weak verbs are those ones, which are not strong, auxiliary or modal. Thus, except for about 30, all the English verbs are weak verbs, the name stemming from the fact that they are 'weak' to form their negative and interrogative forms, helped by auxiliaries or modals in these cases:

(64) John Doe **loves** Jane. (affirmative)

(65) Jane **cannot love** anyone else either. (negative)

(66) **Have** you ever loved a woman? (interrogative)

(67) **Won't** you understand that it is not over yet? (interrogative-negative)

Nr.	FUNCTION	VERBS
1	**STRONG**	**be,** am, are, is, was, were
2	**AUXILIARY**	**be,** am, are, is, was, were, **have**, has, had, **do**, does, did, **will** (let)
	semi-auxiliary	be to, be about to, be due to, be going to, had better, had rather, had sooner,
3	**MODAL**	**can, could, may, might, must, have to, shall, should, ought to, will, would**
	semi-modal	need, dare, (used to)
4	**WEAK**	all the other verbs

Table 4. Functional classification of verbs

4. Conclusions

It is obvious that a unified classification system for English verbs is not possible, due to the multiple levels of grammar within which they are discussed. Occasionally, Syntax, Morphology, or Semantics can be hardly separated, and it may prove difficult to think of an auxiliary verbs irrespective of its context.

[16] Alternate names are: principal, full, notion, lexical, content, ordinary or finite verbs.

BDD-V2016 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:21:29 UTC)

Once we accept that clearly distinguished categories do not exist, we will understand the seemingly double instances of the "same" verbs (How **do** you **do**? I **have had** enough of this grammar introduction.). Fuzzy categories are all around us, and English grammar is not an exception either. Table 3 below tries to offer a summarizing view of the English verb system, which nevertheless misses certain grammatical categories, such as Phonetics or Pragmatics, which are beyond our quest:

The English Verb System											
Lexicology		**Morphosyntax**		**Syntax**						**Semantics**	
one-word verb		form		sentence/clause						static	*drop*
simple	*marry*	regular	*marry*	finite (verb) predicate	tense	*marries*	transitive	*marry*		dynamic	*grow*
derivative	*return*	irregular	*weep*		person		ditransitive	*buy*		inchoative	*start*
compound	*broadcast*				number		intransitive	*go*		impersonal	*hail*
multi-word verb		function			mood		(in)transitive	*run*			
phrasal	*come back*	strong	*be*	non-finite (verbal) non-predicate	infinitive	*to marry*					
prepositional	*comment on*	auxiliary	*do*		gerund	*marrying*					
phrasal-prepositional	*put up with*	modal	*must*		participle	*marrying*					
		weak	*marry*								
(differences between similar forms also based on Semantics)											

Table 5. The English Verb System

Now, having described the first building blocks of a comprehensible utterance in English, we are prepared for a real challenge, the English tense system, trying every non-native speaker's patience and energy. However interesting this might be, the combination of verbs and other words surpasses the possibilities of the present article.

REFERENCES:

Bădescu, A. L. (1984). Gramatica limbii engleze. București: Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică.

Budai, L. (1994). English Grammar - Theory and Practice. Budapest: Nemzeti Tankönyvkiadó.

Carter, R., & McCarthy, M. (2006). Cambridge Grammar of English: A Comprehensive Guide. Cambridge England ; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Gălățeanu, G., & Comișel, E. (1982). Gramatica limbii engleze pentru uz școlar. Bucureşti: Editura Didactică și Pedagogică.

BDD-V2016 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:21:29 UTC)

Greere, A. L., & Zdrenghea, M. M. (2000). A Guide to the Use of English Modals and Modal Expressions. Cluj-Napoca: Clusium.

Imre, A. (2008). Logikus angol nyelvtan. București: Editura Didactică și Pedagogică.

Palmer, F. R. (1990). Modality and the English Modals. London and New York: Longman.

Pawlowska, B., & Kempinski, Z. (1996). Teste de limba engleză. Bucureşti: Teora.

Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G., & Svartvik, J. (1980). Grammar of Contemporary English. Longman.

Thomson, A. J., & Martinet, A. V. (1986). A Practical English Grammar (4th ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

BDD-V2016 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:21:29 UTC)