



# Weak verbs

## Background and phonology

### Formation

Weak verbs represent a group of younger but very numerous Germanic verbs, mostly derived from other parts of speech or from strong verbs. Unlike their strong counterparts, which form their preterites and often their past participles by way of vowel gradation (*sing–sang–sung*), these verbs instead use a dental suffix to form their preterites and past participles (*walk–walked–walked*). In Old Norse, this suffix has the basic form *-ði*. Since the personal endings of the verb are added to this element, however, the *i* is often lost; furthermore, depending on the phonological context, the *ð* will occasionally show up as *d* or *t*.

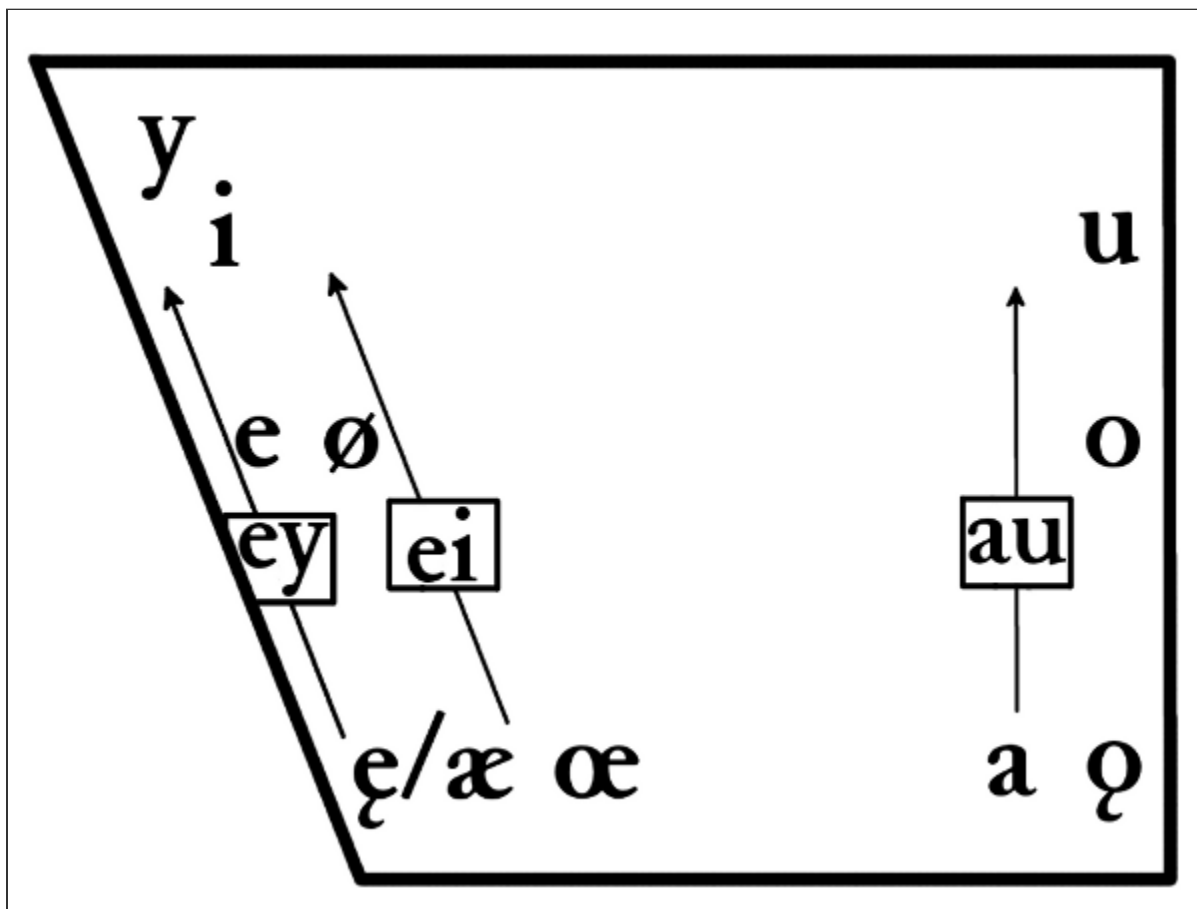
### Thematic vowels

If you have read my write-up on noun classes, or at least its first few paragraphs, you are familiar with the concept of the thematic vowel: a sound that historically separated root from inflectional ending, and that is different for each of the noun classes. Just as this variation in thematic vowels serves as the justification for the conventional system of noun classes, so also three different thematic vowels form the basis of the three weak verb classes. Class 1 is made up of *i/j*-stems, class 2 contains *a*-stems, and class 3 represents *i*-stems. Far from being merely a historical grouping, this thematic background has had profound phonological effects on the audible and visible forms of the Old Norse and Modern Icelandic weak verbs. Most importantly, the thematic vowel is still visible in many present-tense forms of all three classes. In addition, it has caused sound changes in various parts of the conjugation. To understand the development from thematic vowel to medieval pronunciation and orthography, we need to be familiar with a series of phonological phenomena, the most important of which is front mutation.

NB that there is no consistent numbering, or even categorisation, of the weak verb classes among grammarians. Noreen orders them by productivity and splits the *i/j*-stems into two (long and short stems), yielding 1) *a*-stems; 2) short *i/j*-stems; 3) long *i/j*-stems; 4) *i*-stems. Sweet and Hall likewise separate out long and short *i/j*-stems, but they furthermore understand *i*-stems as a subclass of the *a*-stems, yielding 1) short *i/j*-stems; 2a) *a*-stems; 2b) *i*-stems; 3) long *i/j*-stems. Valfells and Cathey number the classes in order of ascending difficulty: 1) *a*-stems; 2) *i*-stems; 3) *i/j*-stems; they group members of the *i*-stems with *i*-mutation in the present tense (see below) under the *i/j*-stems. Barnes combines *i*-stems and long *i/j*-stems into a single class 3; thus 1) short *i/j*-stems; 2) *a*-stems; 3) *i*-stems and long *i/j*-stems. The present numbering follows that traditionally used for Old English and adopted by Gordon.

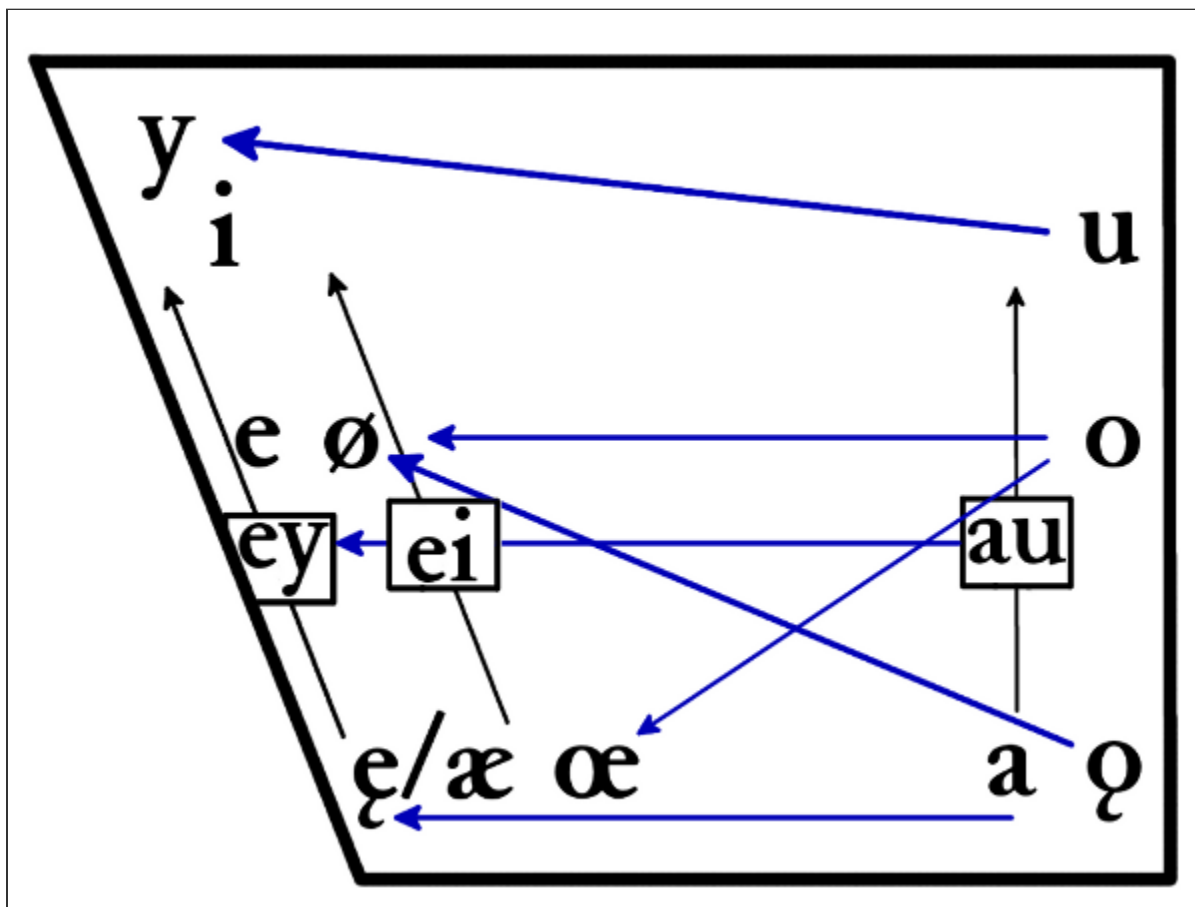
### Front mutation

Unlike Modern English, which has central vowels like those in *bird* and the second vowel of *pollen*, or Modern Icelandic, which has similarly neutral sounds in the first two vowels of *könnuðu*, early Norse (ninth to twelfth centuries) had an essentially binary distinction between front and back vowels:



The above image is a vowel chart or vowel diagram: constituting a schematic display of the mouth, it charts whether a sound is produced with the mouth wide open (low in the diagram) or fairly close (high in the diagram), as well as whether the raised part of the tongue is more towards the front of the organ (left side of the diagram) or towards the back (right-hand side). Although it is customary to use phonemic notation in vowel diagrams, I have chosen to use the graphemes of Old Norse in the above representation, i.e. the letters as they were written. All these sounds had long counterparts which I have left out to avoid chaos, but I have written in *æ* because it is the one long vowel whose spelling differs from its short counterpart beyond the addition of an acute accent. Remember: these letters represent reconstructed early Old Norse, not Modern Icelandic or even fourteenth-century Icelandic.

Front mutation (most commonly specified as *i*-mutation) is a sound change that took place at an early stage of the Old Norse language (c. 600–900) where an /i/ or /j/ in one syllable caused a back vowel in the preceding syllable to be fronted. Like labial mutation, this is an anticipatory process: because the speaker knows she will have to raise the tip of her tongue to pronounce the following /i/ or /j/, she began to position her tongue ahead of time, thereby altering the realisation of the preceding vowel. Generally, this meant that a given back vowel would be pronounced with the same qualities as before (e.g. close and rounded in the case of /u/), but with the front or tip rather than the back of the tongue raised (i.e. /y/ in the case of /u/). In the early Old Norse vowel system, this affected diphthongs as well as monophthongs:



Since class 1 weak verbs have *-i/j-* as their thematic vowel, front mutation is a prominent phenomenon in this class. Because the class 2 thematic is a back vowel, it is not at all affected by front mutation. The *i* of class 3 actually postdates the fronting process: for most of its members it had been *e* (i.e. /e/) in early Norse, and they are therefore generally exempt from front mutation. However, some verbs (which we may classify as "type b") have a different history and do display front mutation, so that they behave largely like long-stemmed members of class 1.

### ***i*-deletion**

*i*-deletion in the context of weak verbs is a straightforward law stating the following:

- The *i* in the dental suffix *-ði* is dropped before a following vowel (*spurði + um* → *spurðum*);
- The thematic vowel *i/j* (class 1) or *i* (class 3) is dropped before the dental suffix; thus the stem *lifi-* yields the preterites *lifði* (third person singular) and *lifðum* (first person plural).

# Paradigms

## Class 1: *i/j*-stems

| <i>telja</i> "count" (active voice) |            |            |            |                              |            |            |            |
|-------------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|
| <i>present indicative</i>           |            |            |            | <i>present subjunctive</i>   |            |            |            |
| <i>1sg</i>                          | ek tel     | <i>1pl</i> | vér teljum | <i>1sg</i>                   | ek telja   | <i>1pl</i> | vér telim  |
| <i>2sg</i>                          | þú telr    | <i>2pl</i> | ér telið   | <i>2sg</i>                   | þú telir   | <i>2pl</i> | ér telið   |
| <i>3sg</i>                          | hann telr  | <i>3pl</i> | þeir telja | <i>3sg</i>                   | hann teli  | <i>3pl</i> | þeir teli  |
| <i>preterite indicative</i>         |            |            |            | <i>preterite subjunctive</i> |            |            |            |
| <i>1sg</i>                          | ek talða   | <i>1pl</i> | vér tölðum | <i>1sg</i>                   | ek telða   | <i>1pl</i> | vér telðim |
| <i>2sg</i>                          | þú talðir  | <i>2pl</i> | ér tölðuð  | <i>2sg</i>                   | þú telðir  | <i>2pl</i> | ér telðið  |
| <i>3sg</i>                          | hann talði | <i>3pl</i> | þeir tölðu | <i>3sg</i>                   | hann telði | <i>3pl</i> | þeir telði |
| <i>past participle</i>              | <i>m.</i>  | talðr      | <i>f.</i>  | tölð                         | <i>n.</i>  | talit      |            |
| <i>imperative</i>                   | <i>1pl</i> | teljum     | <i>2sg</i> | tel                          | <i>2pl</i> | telið      |            |

| <i>teljask</i> "be counted" (middle voice) |              |            |              |                              |              |            |              |
|--|--------------|------------|--------------|------------------------------|--------------|------------|--------------|
| <i>present indicative</i>                  |              |            |              | <i>present subjunctive</i>   |              |            |              |
| <i>1sg</i>                                 | ek teljumk   | <i>1pl</i> | vér teljumk  | <i>1sg</i>                   | ek teljumk   | <i>1pl</i> | vér telimk   |
| <i>2sg</i>                                 | þú telsk     | <i>2pl</i> | ér telizk    | <i>2sg</i>                   | þú telisk    | <i>2pl</i> | ér telizk    |
| <i>3sg</i>                                 | hann telsk   | <i>3pl</i> | þeir teljask | <i>3sg</i>                   | hann telisk  | <i>3pl</i> | þeir telisk  |
| <i>preterite indicative</i>                |              |            |              | <i>preterite subjunctive</i> |              |            |              |
| <i>1sg</i>                                 | ek tölðumk   | <i>1pl</i> | vér tölðumk  | <i>1sg</i>                   | ek telðumk   | <i>1pl</i> | vér telðimk  |
| <i>2sg</i>                                 | þú talðisk   | <i>2pl</i> | þú tölðuzk   | <i>2sg</i>                   | þú telðisk   | <i>2pl</i> | ér telðizk   |
| <i>3sg</i>                                 | hann talðisk | <i>3pl</i> | þeir tölðusk | <i>3sg</i>                   | hann telðisk | <i>3pl</i> | þeir telðisk |
| <i>past participle</i>                     | <i>m.</i>    |            | <i>f.</i>    |                              | <i>n.</i>    | talizk     |              |
| <i>imperative</i>                          | <i>1pl</i>   | teljumk    | <i>2sg</i>   | telsk                        | <i>2pl</i>   | telizk     |              |

| <i>heyra</i> "hear" (active voice) |             |     |                              |     |             |
|------------------------------------|-------------|-----|------------------------------|-----|-------------|
| <i>present indicative</i>          |             |     | <i>present subjunctive</i>   |     |             |
| 1sg                                | ek heyri    | 1pl | vér heyrum                   | 1sg | ek heyra    |
| 2sg                                | þú heyrir   | 2pl | ér heyrðið                   | 2sg | þú heyrir   |
| 3sg                                | hann heyrir | 3pl | þeir heyra                   | 3sg | hann heyri  |
| <i>preterite indicative</i>        |             |     | <i>preterite subjunctive</i> |     |             |
| 1sg                                | ek heyrða   | 1pl | vér heyrðum                  | 1sg | ek heyrða   |
| 2sg                                | þú heyrðir  | 2pl | ér heyrðuð                   | 2sg | þú heyrðir  |
| 3sg                                | hann heyrði | 3pl | þeir heyrðu                  | 3sg | hann heyrði |
| <i>past participle</i>             |             | m.  | heyrðr                       | f.  | heyrð       |
| <i>imperative</i>                  |             | 1pl | heyrum                       | 2sg | heyr        |

| <i>heyrask</i> "be heard" (middle voice) |               |     |                              |     |               |
|--|---------------|-----|------------------------------|-----|---------------|
| <i>present indicative</i>                |               |     | <i>present subjunctive</i>   |     |               |
| 1sg                                      | ek heyrumk    | 1pl | vér heyrumk                  | 1sg | ek heyrumk    |
| 2sg                                      | þú heyrisk    | 2pl | ér heyrizk                   | 2sg | þú heyrisk    |
| 3sg                                      | hann heyrisk  | 3pl | þeir heyrask                 | 3sg | hann heyrisk  |
| <i>preterite indicative</i>              |               |     | <i>preterite subjunctive</i> |     |               |
| 1sg                                      | ek heyrðumk   | 1pl | vér heyrðumk                 | 1sg | ek heyrðumk   |
| 2sg                                      | þú heyrðisk   | 2pl | þú heyrðuzk                  | 2sg | þú heyrðisk   |
| 3sg                                      | hann heyrðisk | 3pl | þeir heyrðusk                | 3sg | hann heyrðisk |
| <i>past participle</i>                   |               | m.  |                              | f.  | heyrzk        |
| <i>imperative</i>                        |               | 1pl | heyrumk                      | 2sg | heyrsk        |

The two paradigms *telja* "count" and *heyra* "hear" represent the two subtypes of class 1 weak verbs. The phonological difference between the two is that *telja* is short-stemmed while *heyra* is based on a long stem. As noted in my explanation of the noun classes, a short stem is one whose root syllable has either a short monophthong vowel followed by no more than one consonant or a long vowel or diphthong followed by no consonant at all; any other combination is long. Short stems of class 1 show the effects of front mutation everywhere except in the preterite indicative and the past participle: the present form *telr* (from the short stem *tel-i/j-*) becomes *talði* in the preterite, *taliðr* in the participle. In all short stems of this type, the remainder of the paradigm, including the preterite subjunctive, has a front vowel. In addition, the thematic vowel in these verbs shows up as *-j-* before a back vowel (i.e. in *teljum(k)* and *telja(sk)*). *Heyra* (*heyr-i/j-*) represents the long stems, which have front mutation throughout the paradigm, including the preterite indicative. In the long

stems, the thematic vowel never surfaces as *-j-*; instead, it shows up as *-i-* across the present tense system except where displaced by a following vowel (thus cf. *heyri* and *tel*, *heyrir* and *telr*).

Both subtypes of class 1 are common, the long stems being especially numerous. Although these verbs must have front vowels in their stems, they do not have a monopoly on them; the other classes likewise have verbs with this property.

## Class 2: a-stems

| <i>kalla</i> "call" (active voice) |              |     |              |                              |              |     |              |
|------------------------------------|--------------|-----|--------------|------------------------------|--------------|-----|--------------|
| <i>present indicative</i>          |              |     |              | <i>present subjunctive</i>   |              |     |              |
| 1sg                                | ek kalla     | 1pl | vér kǫllum   | 1sg                          | ek kalla     | 1pl | vér kallim   |
| 2sg                                | þú kallar    | 2pl | ér kallið    | 2sg                          | þú kallir    | 2pl | ér kallið    |
| 3sg                                | hann kallar  | 3pl | þeir kalla   | 3sg                          | hann kalli   | 3pl | þeir kalli   |
| <i>preterite indicative</i>        |              |     |              | <i>preterite subjunctive</i> |              |     |              |
| 1sg                                | ek kallaða   | 1pl | vér kǫlluðum | 1sg                          | ek kallaða   | 1pl | vér kallaðim |
| 2sg                                | þú kallaðir  | 2pl | ér kǫlluðuð  | 2sg                          | þú kallaðir  | 2pl | ér kallaðið  |
| 3sg                                | hann kallaði | 3pl | þeir kǫlluðu | 3sg                          | hann kallaði | 3pl | þeir kallaði |
| <i>past participle</i>             |              | m.  | kallaðr      | f.                           | kǫlluð       | n.  | kallat       |
| <i>imperative</i>                  |              | 1pl | kǫllum       | 2sg                          | kalla        | 2pl | kallið       |

The *a*-stems are the most numerous class, and the most straightforward. Their stem vowel is not given to front mutation, but a stem vowel *a* will show labial mutation (*kalla* → *kǫllum*). Characteristic of this class is that the thematic vowel *-a-* is visible across the paradigm except where affected by labial mutation or dropped in favour of a following vowel.

| <i>kallask</i> "be called" (middle voice) |                |     |                |                              |                |     |                |
|---|----------------|-----|----------------|------------------------------|----------------|-----|----------------|
| <i>present indicative</i>                 |                |     |                | <i>present subjunctive</i>   |                |     |                |
| 1sg                                       | ek kǫllumk     | 1pl | vér kǫllumk    | 1sg                          | ek kǫllumk     | 1pl | vér kallimk    |
| 2sg                                       | þú kallask     | 2pl | ér kallizk     | 2sg                          | þú kallisk     | 2pl | ér kallizk     |
| 3sg                                       | hann kallask   | 3pl | þeir kallask   | 3sg                          | hann kallisk   | 3pl | þeir kallisk   |
| <i>preterite indicative</i>               |                |     |                | <i>preterite subjunctive</i> |                |     |                |
| 1sg                                       | ek kǫlluðumk   | 1pl | vér kǫlluðumk  | 1sg                          | ek kǫlluðumk   | 1pl | vér kallaðimk  |
| 2sg                                       | þú kallaðisk   | 2pl | þú kǫlluðuzk   | 2sg                          | þú kallaðisk   | 2pl | ér kallaðizk   |
| 3sg                                       | hann kallaðisk | 3pl | þeir kǫlluðusk | 3sg                          | hann kallaðisk | 3pl | þeir kallaðisk |
| <i>past participle</i>                    |                | m.  |                | f.                           |                | n.  | kallazk        |
| <i>imperative</i>                         |                | 1pl | kǫllumk        | 2sg                          | kallask        | 2pl | kallizk        |

### Class 3: *i*-stems

| <i>trúa</i> "believe" (active voice) |            |            |            |                              |            |            |            |
|--------------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|
| <i>present indicative</i>            |            |            |            | <i>present subjunctive</i>   |            |            |            |
| <i>1sg</i>                           | ek trúi    | <i>1pl</i> | vér trúum  | <i>1sg</i>                   | ek trúi    | <i>1pl</i> | vér trúim  |
| <i>2sg</i>                           | þú trúir   | <i>2pl</i> | ér trúið   | <i>2sg</i>                   | þú trúir   | <i>2pl</i> | ér trúið   |
| <i>3sg</i>                           | hann trúir | <i>3pl</i> | þeir trúá  | <i>3sg</i>                   | hann trúi  | <i>3pl</i> | þeir trúi  |
| <i>preterite indicative</i>          |            |            |            | <i>preterite subjunctive</i> |            |            |            |
| <i>1sg</i>                           | ek trúða   | <i>1pl</i> | vér trúðum | <i>1sg</i>                   | ek trýða   | <i>1pl</i> | vér trýðum |
| <i>2sg</i>                           | þú trúðir  | <i>2pl</i> | ér trúðuð  | <i>2sg</i>                   | þú trýðir  | <i>2pl</i> | ér trýðið  |
| <i>3sg</i>                           | hann trúði | <i>3pl</i> | þeir trúðu | <i>3sg</i>                   | hann trýði | <i>3pl</i> | þeir trýði |
| <i>past participle</i>               | <i>m.</i>  | trúaðr     | <i>f.</i>  | trúað                        | <i>n.</i>  | trúat      |            |
| <i>imperative</i>                    | <i>1pl</i> | trúum      | <i>2sg</i> | trú                          | <i>2pl</i> | trúið      |            |

| <i>trúask</i> "be believed" (middle voice) |              |            |              |                              |              |            |              |
|--|--------------|------------|--------------|------------------------------|--------------|------------|--------------|
| <i>present indicative</i>                  |              |            |              | <i>present subjunctive</i>   |              |            |              |
| <i>1sg</i>                                 | ek trúumk    | <i>1pl</i> | vér trúumk   | <i>1sg</i>                   | ek trúumk    | <i>1pl</i> | vér trúimk   |
| <i>2sg</i>                                 | þú trúisk    | <i>2pl</i> | ér trúizk    | <i>2sg</i>                   | þú trúisk    | <i>2pl</i> | ér trúizk    |
| <i>3sg</i>                                 | hann trúisk  | <i>3pl</i> | þeir trúask  | <i>3sg</i>                   | hann trúisk  | <i>3pl</i> | þeir trúisk  |
| <i>preterite indicative</i>                |              |            |              | <i>preterite subjunctive</i> |              |            |              |
| <i>1sg</i>                                 | ek trúðumk   | <i>1pl</i> | vér trúðumk  | <i>1sg</i>                   | ek trýðumk   | <i>1pl</i> | vér trýðimk  |
| <i>2sg</i>                                 | þú trúðisk   | <i>2pl</i> | þú trúðuzk   | <i>2sg</i>                   | þú trýðisk   | <i>2pl</i> | ér trýðizk   |
| <i>3sg</i>                                 | hann trúðisk | <i>3pl</i> | þeir trúðusk | <i>3sg</i>                   | hann trýðisk | <i>3pl</i> | þeir trýðisk |
| <i>past participle</i>                     | <i>m.</i>    |            | <i>f.</i>    |                              | <i>n.</i>    | trúizk     |              |
| <i>imperative</i>                          | <i>1pl</i>   | trúumk     | <i>2sg</i>   | trúask                       | <i>2pl</i>   | trúizk     |              |

| segja "say" (active voice) |            |     |            |                       |            |     |            |
|----------------------------|------------|-----|------------|-----------------------|------------|-----|------------|
| present indicative         |            |     |            | present subjunctive   |            |     |            |
| 1sg                        | ek segi    | 1pl | vér segjum | 1sg                   | ek segja   | 1pl | vér segim  |
| 2sg                        | þú segir   | 2pl | ér segið   | 2sg                   | þú segir   | 2pl | ér segið   |
| 3sg                        | hann segir | 3pl | þeir segja | 3sg                   | hann segi  | 3pl | þeir segi  |
| preterite indicative       |            |     |            | preterite subjunctive |            |     |            |
| 1sg                        | ek sagða   | 1pl | vér sögðum | 1sg                   | ek segða   | 1pl | vér segðim |
| 2sg                        | þú sagðir  | 2pl | ér sögðuð  | 2sg                   | þú segðir  | 2pl | ér segðið  |
| 3sg                        | hann sagði | 3pl | þeir sögðu | 3sg                   | hann segði | 3pl | þeir segði |
| past participle            |            | m.  | sagður     | f.                    | sögð       | n.  | sagt       |
| imperative                 |            | 1pl | seggjum    | 2sg                   | seg        | 2pl | segið      |

| segjask "be said" (middle voice) |              |     |              |                       |              |     |              |
|----------------------------------|--------------|-----|--------------|-----------------------|--------------|-----|--------------|
| present indicative               |              |     |              | present subjunctive   |              |     |              |
| 1sg                              | ek segjumk   | 1pl | vér segjumk  | 1sg                   | ek segjumk   | 1pl | vér segimk   |
| 2sg                              | þú segisk    | 2pl | ér segizk    | 2sg                   | þú segisk    | 2pl | ér segizk    |
| 3sg                              | hann segisk  | 3pl | þeir segjask | 3sg                   | hann segisk  | 3pl | þeir segisk  |
| preterite indicative             |              |     |              | preterite subjunctive |              |     |              |
| 1sg                              | ek segðumk   | 1pl | vér segðumk  | 1sg                   | ek segðumk   | 1pl | vér segðimk  |
| 2sg                              | þú segðisk   | 2pl | ér segðisk   | 2sg                   | þú segðisk   | 2pl | ér segðizk   |
| 3sg                              | hann segðisk | 3pl | þeir segðusk | 3sg                   | hann segðisk | 3pl | þeir segðisk |
| past participle                  |              | m.  |              | f.                    |              | n.  | segjask      |
| imperative                       |              | 1pl | seggjumk     | 2sg                   | segjask      | 2pl | segizk       |

*telja* no thematic vowel is visible.

Class 3 has the thematic *-i-*, which is visible almost everywhere in the present tense system. This class is altogether small, but what members it has are mostly like *trúa*. The characteristics of this subtype (a) are that

- only its preterite subjunctive is given to front mutation: *trúða* → *trýða*;
- thematic *-i-* in the present tense disappears where displaced by a following vowel in the personal ending;
- there is a tendency towards a second person singular imperative consisting of root + *i*.

By contrast, subtype (b), represented by *segja*, has

- front mutation everywhere except in the preterite indicative (*segi* → *sagða*);
- the thematic *-i-* showing up as *j* before an *a* or *u* in the present indicative, but as *i* everywhere else in the present tense;
- a second person singular imperative consisting of the root alone.

In other words, type (b) differs from the short stems of class 1 (*telja*) only in the appearance of the thematic vowel *i* in the present tense where in