



# 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 sometimes show up as *d* or *t*.

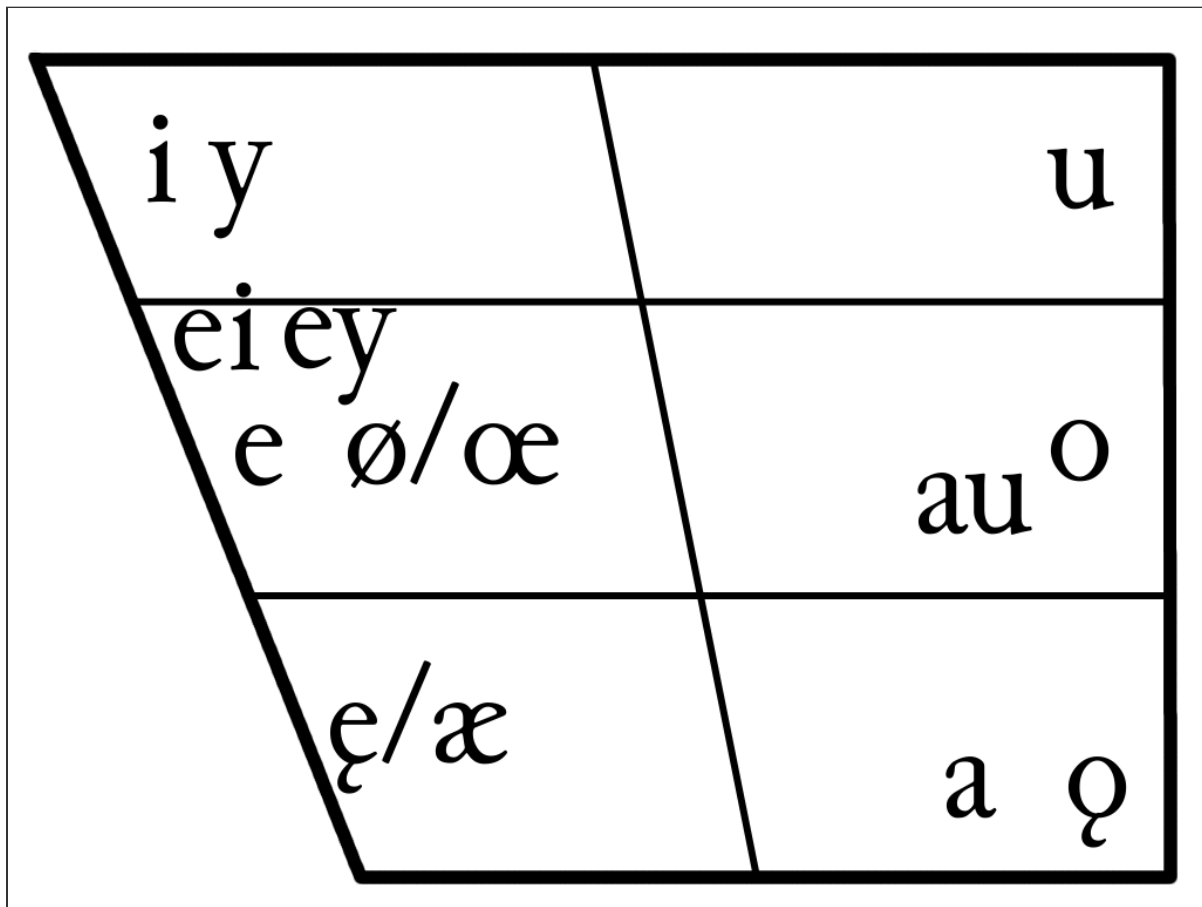
### Thematic vowels

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 categorization, 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 used in Gordon.

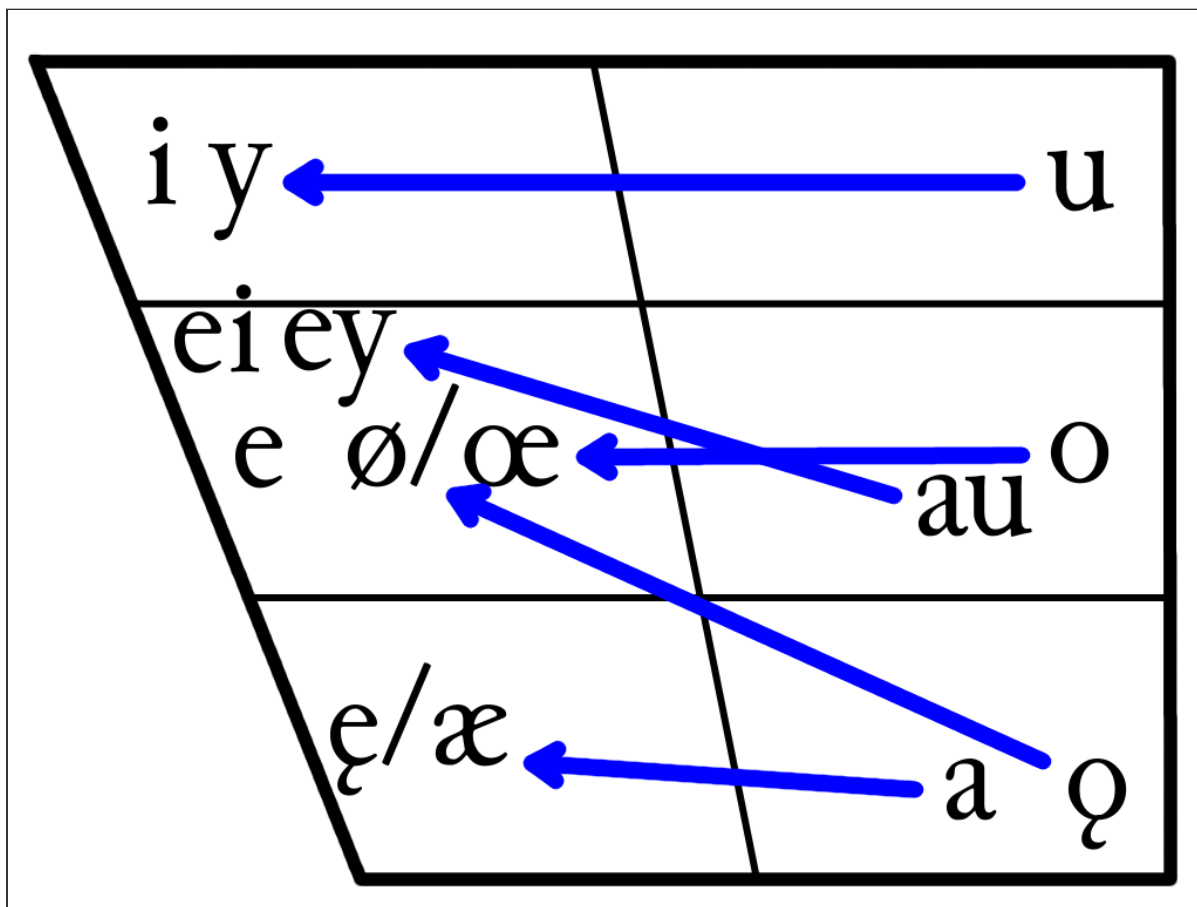
### Front mutation

Unlike Modern English, which has central vowels like those in *bird* and the second vowel of *pollen*, early Norse (ninth to twelfth centuries) by some definitions 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 and œ because they are the only vowels whose spelling (in the standard here represented) differs from their short counterparts 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 realization 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:



Class 1 weak verbs have *-i/j-* as their thematic vowel. That is, the stem was historically followed by precisely the sound that tended to bring a preceding vowel forward in articulation. Accordingly, front mutation is a prominent phenomenon in this class. By contrast, the class 2 thematic is a back vowel, which never causes front mutation, so class 2 is not affected by it at all. 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 this class is 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 *lif-* 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>2sg</i>	tel	<i>1pl</i>	teljum	<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>2sg</i>	telsk	<i>1pl</i>	teljumk	<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	1pl	vér heyrim
2sg	þú heyrir	2pl	ér heyrið	2sg	þú heyrir	2pl	ér heyrið
3sg	hann heyrir	3pl	þeir heyra	3sg	hann heyri	3pl	þeir heyri
<i>preterite indicative</i>				<i>preterite subjunctive</i>			
1sg	ek heyrða	1pl	vér heyrðum	1sg	ek heyrða	1pl	vér heyrðim
2sg	þú heyrðir	2pl	ér heyrðuð	2sg	þú heyrðir	2pl	ér heyrðið
3sg	hann heyrði	3pl	þeir heyrðu	3sg	hann heyrði	3pl	þeir heyrði
<i>past participle</i>		m.	heyrðr	f.	heyrð	n.	heyrtr
<i>imperative</i>		2sg	heyr	1pl	heyrum	2pl	heyrið

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

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 in present-tense forms 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. *heyrj* 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

kalla “call” (active voice)							
present indicative				present subjunctive			
1sg	ek kalla	1pl	vér kòllum	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
preterite indicative				preterite subjunctive			
1sg	ek kallaða	1pl	vér kòlluðum	1sg	ek kallaða	1pl	vér kallaðim
2sg	þú kallaðir	2pl	ér kòlluðuð	2sg	þú kallaðir	2pl	ér kallaðið
3sg	hann kallaði	3pl	þeir kòlluðu	3sg	hann kallaði	3pl	þeir kallaði
past participle		m.	kallaðr	f.	kòlluð	n.	kallat
imperative		2sg	kalla	1pl	kòllum	2pl	kallið

kallask “be called” (middle voice)							
present indicative				present subjunctive			
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
preterite indicative				preterite subjunctive			
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
past participle		m.		f.		n.	kallazk
imperative		2sg	kallask	1pl	kǫllumk	2pl	kallizk

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.

### 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 trúa	<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 trúa	<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>2sg</i>	trú		<i>1pl</i>	trúum	<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>2sg</i>	trúsk		<i>1pl</i>	trúumk	<i>2pl</i>	trúizk

<b>segja “say” (active voice)</b>							
<i>present indicative</i>				<i>present subjunctive</i>			
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
<i>preterite indicative</i>				<i>preterite subjunctive</i>			
1sg	ek sagða	1pl	vér soggðum	1sg	ek segða	1pl	vér segðim
2sg	þú sagðir	2pl	ér soggðuð	2sg	þú segðir	2pl	ér segðið
3sg	hann sagði	3pl	þeir soggðu	3sg	hann segði	3pl	þeir segði
<i>past participle</i>		<i>m.</i>	sagðr	<i>f.</i>	soggð	<i>n.</i>	sagt
<i>imperative</i>		2sg	seg	1pl	seggjum	2pl	segið

<b>segjask “be said” (middle voice)</b>							
<i>present indicative</i>				<i>present subjunctive</i>			
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
<i>preterite indicative</i>				<i>preterite subjunctive</i>			
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
<i>past participle</i>		<i>m.</i>		<i>f.</i>		<i>n.</i>	segjask
<i>imperative</i>		2sg	segsk	1pl	seggjumk	2pl	segizk

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 *telja* no thematic vowel is visible.