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Several readers ask why some people say *He rung me* rather than *He rang me*. The story is complex, but perfectly understandable. English verbs have three distinct parts: an infinitive (like *eat*), a past tense form (like *ate*) and a past participle (like *eaten*). All other forms can be deduced from these three. In most English verbs the past tense and the past participle are the same, and that is true for all the regular verbs (like *walk-walked-walked*) which make up the majority of all verbs, and many irregular verbs (like *feed-fed-fed*).

Other things being equal we expect the past tense and past participle to be the same, but other things are not always equal.

There are many patterns of irregular verb, and most of them are much less predictable. *Take* has *took* and *taken*, while *wake* has *woke* and *woken* and *bake* is regular. Because so many verbs are unpredictable in form, speakers vary in the forms they assign to a number of verbs.

Users of English are unsure whether



Singing and swinging

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knit and *strive* are regular or irregular; there are several verbs that are regular in American English but irregular in British English (verbs like *burn*, *learn*, *spoil*) and there are some verbs which have different forms in different styles or levels of formality.

For example, *come* is widespread as the past-tense form as well as the past

participle everywhere English is spoken, even if it rarely makes it into formal writing. Most people are uncertain what the past participle of *stride* is: *strided*, *strid*, *strode* and *stridden* all sound wrong.

Although *wing* is regular and *bring* is very irregular, most verbs that rhyme with *bring* (or even that sound sort of like it) fit into one of just two patterns. Verbs like *sing* have *sang* and *sung*; verbs like *swing* have *swung* and *swung*. The pattern differs only in the past tense. The

history of English shows a certain amount of variation between the two patterns in the same verb, and *shrink* can still be found in either pattern in standard English.

In the modern standard, verbs like *sing* are *begin*, *drink*, *ring*, *sing*, *sink*, *swim* and *run*. Verbs like *swing* are *cling*, *fling*, *sling*, *slink*, *stick*, *string*, *win*, *wring* and possibly, at least in (parts of) the US, *drag* and *sneak* – though these look rather less like *bring*.

There are two things to note about these lists. The first is that there are more verbs like *swing* than like *sing*. The second is that verbs like *swing* match the preference for having the past tense and the past participle the same.

Given the lack of predictability about these verbs in general, any way of making it desirable. When in doubt, the majority pattern (majority in that it covers more verbs and fits the more general pattern) is likely to win out. In colloquial English, the *sing-sang-sung* pattern has almost vanished and been replaced by the *swing-swung-swung* pattern.

In formal writing there are still two distinct patterns. But don't bet on them both persisting. It's only a matter of time before the spoken *He rung me* becomes the normal written form as well.

Laurie Bauer is the author of more than 20 books on language topics, and winner of the 2017 Royal Society of New Zealand's Humanities/Aronui medal.

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New faces, not a new direction

Views from around the world. These opinions are not necessarily shared by Stuff newspapers.

In Westminster it is often said that politics drives the timing of decisions. But last week's reshuffle by Boris Johnson is just the opposite: the timing is driving the politics.

The prime minister is eyeing an early election, which could come as soon as 2023. He wants his party to be energised by new faces before his party conference. Mr Johnson's changes are not ideological but about ministerial ambitions, accomplishments and personalities. The government he leads will have a new character rather than new direction.

Leaving the cabinet are ministers who were deemed inadequate, replaced by politicians who can point to being successful. The consensus is that

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Mr Johnson has tightened his grip. This seems unnecessary. His approval rating is waning but he remains way ahead of Labour's Sir Keir Starmer. He has a 80-seat majority in parliament.

He will ask the public to trust him. They might well, given a lacklustre Labour Party and a post-Covid recovery. Such conditions would allow him to claim he is dealing with the great problems of the day, even when he's not. He would, crucially, be able to root voters' judgments in emotion and intuition rather than facts and evidence. Such a scenario looks, unfortunately, plausible.

Britain would be worse off for the triumph of a politics where some of the people are fooled all of the time.