Internal vowel alternations in nominal and verbal forms according to the sign-oriented theory of the Columbia School

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Ablaut – internal vowel change – is commonly referred to as arbitrarily appearing in a limited number of "irregular" noun plurals (e.g. *goose–geese*, *mouse–mice*) and "irregular" past tense verb forms (e.g. *sing–sang*, *think–thought*) in Modern English. Historically, however, ablaut was a prevalent and productive process in Old English in both the nominal and the verbal systems. Following a sign-oriented analysis of language "[as a] system of systems composed of various sub-systems (revolving around the notion of the linguistic sign) which are organized internally and systematically related to each other and used by human beings to communicate" (Tobin 1990:47), we will postulate that the internal vowel change found in ablaut is a signal-*signifiant* that is connected to a meaning-*signifié* in the Saussurean sense of the linguistic sign. Beedham (2005:114) argues that "[a]ll linguistic forms must fit into the system somehow, and they all must have a meaning, it is simply a case of working out how they fit in and what the meaning is". We will describe the corresponding link between the phonological representation, that is, the signal and its meaning, following the predictions that: first, the nominal and verbal forms with the ablaut, are systematized phonologically, i.e. it is possible phonologically to distinguish between the formation of the plural form of the nouns and the verbal process from non-past to past within the system of ablaut; and second, that the nominal and verbal forms with the ablaut are motivated and systematized semantically so that differences in form imply differences in meaning. We will present the so-called "irregular" nouns and verbs of Modern English in groups selected according to the kind of ablaut found in their Old English forms. Following the data, we will see that ablaut is still fundamentally systematic in Modern English in spite of the historical changes of the language: i.e. the ablaut forms have basically preserved their phonological and semantic systematization. That is: (1) we can still phonologically distinguish between nominal versus verbal ablaut forms and (2) each ablaut pattern of internal vowel change may still reflect a fundamental common semantic denominator. Thus our study connects the form-phonology and the meaning-semantics of the phenomenon of ablaut as a system of linguistic signs in English.

Beedham, Christopher. 2005. *Language and Meaning*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: Benjamins.
Tobin, Yishai. 1990. *Semiotics and Linguistics*. London/New York: Longman.