Are strong verbs really dying to fit in?

1. Some problematic cases for accounts of regularization

1: Mistaken identity: A regular verb is erroneously regarded as a continuation of an earlier strong verb.

Extreme case: At least 19 of the 79 cases of regularization alleged in Lieberman 2007 involve mistaken identity: e.g. cringe, slip, blend, prescribe, redden, rush, ...

Arguable cases, e.g.: to lake 'play' - usually regarded as continuation of OE strong lācan; but OED points out: "The word seems in ME. to have been re-adopted in the Scandinavian form. Its currency is almost entirely northern, no forms with o being known. The inflexion has been weak since the 13th c." ON leika was also strong, but ai diphthong in present does not fit well with any ME strong pattern.

2: Coalescence: An irregular verb and a homophonous or phonologically similar (usually derivationally related) regular verb come to be regarded by speakers as a single lexical item. (Many cases involve more than 2 verbs.) Regular inflection may prevail:

Some recognized cases:

to burn < OE strong brinnan/beornan/biernan + OE weak (caus.) baernan [+ ON weak breanna]
to bow < OE strong būgan + OE weak (caus.) biegan/bīgan
to cleave < OE strong clīfan + OE strong clēofan + OE weak clifian/cleofian
to dive < OE strong dūfan + OE weak (caus.) dūfan
to fare < OE strong fāran + OE weak fēran
to hele 'hide' < OE strong helan + OE weak helian
to hang < OE strong hōn + OE weak hangian + ON weak hengian
to melt < OE strong meltan + OE weak (caus.) meltan/miltan/myltan
to milk < OE strong melcan/meolcan + OE weak meolcian/mylcian
to spew < OE strong spīwan + OE weak spēowan/spīowan
to sup 'sip' < OE strong sūpan + OE suppan + OE weak supian
to swipe 'cease' < OE strong swīcan + OE weak swicitan
to walk < OE strong wealcian + OE weak wealcian
to wield < OE strong wealdan + OE weak wieldan
to weigh < OE strong wegan + OE weak wecgan

Arguable cases:
to bark < OE strong beorcian + OE weak borcian + ON weak berkja
to wall 'boil' < OE strong weallan + OE weak (caus.) wallan/wiellan/wellan

There are also numerous cases where irregular inflection prevails in coalescence:
to run < OE strong rinnen/iernan + OE weak (caus.) ārnan/earnan + ON strong rinnan + ON weak reanna
to wake < OE strong *wacan (or wećnan?) + OE weak wacnian
to sink < OE strong sīncan + OE weak (caus.) sëcan
to hang < OE strong hōn + OE weak hangian + ON weak hengian
to read < OE strong rēdan + OE weak (ge-)rēdan/redan
to lose < OE strong lēosan + OE weak losian + (?) denominal to loose

Coalescence can also occur between two or more irregular verbs:
to bid < OE biddan 'command' + bōtan 'offer'
Case 3: Double conversion: A new regular verb is coined through zero-derivation from a noun which is itself zero-derived from an irregular verb (Pinker et al.'s "regularization through derivation": e.g. "The batter flied/*flew out to center field."). The denominal verb may show considerable semantic overlap with the original verb from the beginning. Eventually, the denominal may completely take over:

to yelp: OE gielpan 'boast' -OE meaning last attested 1425; all attested strong forms are associated with this meaning; deverbal noun yelp last attested meaning 'boast' in 1400; new meaning "A cry characteristic of dogs and some other animals, resembling a bark but distinguished from it by being sharp and shrill." (OED) 1st attested 1500; corresponding meaning of verb 1st attested 1553.

Case 3b: Derivational reanalysis (may sometimes be difficult or impossible to distinguish from double conversion in practice): Speakers/learners reanalyze the direction of derivation between a basic verb and a deverbal noun, so that the take the verb to be denominal and thus assume that it is regular:

to braid < OE strong bregdan reanalyzed as denominal < braid (n.)?
to shape < OE scieppan/scyppan reanalyzed as denominal < shape (n.) [OED: "The verb has been influenced in sense-development by SHAPE n.1, of which it is apprehended as a derivative."]

Combined factors: Some alleged regularizations probably involve combinations of two or more of the above factors:
Mistaken identity + double conversion (?): to ban < OE strong bannan 'summon' AND/OR < ON weak banna 'prohibit, curse' AND/OR denominal < OE deverbal (ge-)ban/ON bann 'edict, prohibition, curse'

2. Fates of 293 OE strong verbs:

70 are unattested after OE

32 disappeared from the language sometime between the 13th and the 18th c. with no sign of regularization
65 are still (more or less) entirely strong today
5 show various degrees of strong-weak variation in both the past and participle (swell, shear, heave, tread, crow)
8 are regularized in the past but still have strong participles (no vowel change + -en) that are still regarded as current alongside the regularized ones (sow, hew, gnaw, lade, shave, wax 'grow', grave, mow)
6 have become irregular weak verbs w/ -t/-d suffix + vowel change (creep, flee, sleep, sweep, weep, leap)
1 has irregular -t suffix with no vowel change (burn)
3 are -t/-d-final stems with vowel shortening in the past and participle (shoot, read, slide)
5 are t/-d-final stems with no change in the past or participle (shit, bid, burst, let, shed)
23 (at least) have coalesced with an originally weak verb, with a regular verb as outcome (ban, bark, teld 'cover', bow, cleave 'adhere', cleave 'separate', dive, fare, frainen (MED) 'ask', grip 'grasp', hele 'hide', melt, milk, shräpen (MED) 'scrape', spew, sup 'sip', svewe '(put to) sleep', swike 'cease', walk, wield, wall 'boil', weigh, wharve 'turn, go')
1 verb for which it is unclear to me from the available evidence exactly what has happened to them in terms of regularization (swink 'toil')

That leaves 74 verbs which have undergone (more or less) complete regularization since OE, of which 57 are still in the language today and 17 were lost after regularization.

3. Chronology of regularization of English strong verbs:
(These numbers include surviving verbs that are completely or largely regularized today and lost verbs that were completely or largely regularized before they fell out of use):

7 verbs already had weak forms in OE; 2 of these (mourn, dwine 'dwindle') may have been fully regularized by the end of OE; in
the other cases (swelt 'die', sty 'ascend', rine 'touch', reek, dread), 
there is little sign of further substantial regularization until the 
(late) 14th c. or later. An 8th verb, heave, also has weak forms in 
OE, but is still not fully regularized today!

1 verb: sike/siche 'sigh' has both irregular (sihte, 1225) and regular 
(stikede, 1225) weak forms occurring alongside the strong past 
(seac, 1230) in the early 13th c. The more common development 
in earlier ME is to the sihte type.

2 verbs (flow and dree 'endure, suffer, do penance') have weak forms 
starting in the early 13th c.; the strong past of flow disappears 
quickly while the partic. lasts longer; the strong forms of dree last 
occurs in the late 14th c. [But note: MED regards this verb as a 
coalescence of the OE strong verb and ON weak (OI) drýgja.]

2 verbs (climb and grave 'dig') have weak forms starting in the late 
13th c. (1275). The regularization process continues for centuries 
in both cases.

(Cf. Baugh and Cable 2002:163: "In the thirteenth century the [strong 
> weak] trend becomes clear in the written literature. Such verbs 
as bow, brew, burn, climb, flee, flow, help, mourn, row, step, 
walk, weep were then undergoing change.")

51 verbs appear in weak past and/or participle forms for the first time 
between 1300 and 1400; all but a few first occur in the last 3 
decades of the century. In some cases, there are no past or 
participle attestations at all between OE and the appearance of 
these weak forms, but in many other cases strong forms do occur 
until shortly before and overlapping with the new weak forms. 
Most appear to complete their regularization by the mid 15th c. at 
the latest.

10 verbs appear in weak forms for the first time in the the first half of 
the 15th century

1 verb (lade) first appears in a weak form in the second half of the 
15th century (1481).

6 verbs first appear in weak forms in the 16th century.

1 regularized verb (glide) first shows up weak in the 17th century 
(1632).

4. Chronology of irregularization in English:

4 originally weak or new verbs show their first strong forms between 
1200 and 1300 (show, ring, strive < OF, and ding 'deal heavy 
bows, knock' < ON weak verb) [thrive, rive and simplex get are 
also new strong verbs in 13th c. English but were already strong 
in ON, as was take, attested in English since 1100]

3 more verbs develop strong forms in the 14th c. (wear, quake, fling 
(< ON weak verb)) [The denominial verb snow also shows strong 
forms from the 14th c.; strong forms of claw in the sense 
'scratch gently so as to soothe' may also date from this century]

1 verb, saw, develops strong forms in the 15th c., with the strong 
participle swn still in widespread use today.

6 originally weak verbs show their 1st strong forms in the 16th c. 
(dig, string, stick, hide, chide, strew); the strong participle proven 
also makes its 1st appearance. [The OED and the MED disagree 
on the date of the first strong participles of sew.]

2 verbs 1st develop strong forms in the 18th century, denominial stave 
'break up (a cask) into staves' and reeve - 'pass (a rope) through a 
hole, ring, or block'.

2 more, dive and sneak, start their irregularization in the 19th century.

5. Conventional wisdom and some alternatives

Conventional wisdom: Analogical change shows a pervasive 
tendency toward regularization - ironing out of anomalies and 
subregularities in favor of dominant patterns.

Alternative hypothesis: 1) In the absence of major extra-
morphological forces (e.g. new contact situations, relevant sound 
changes), analogical change in an inflectional system is sporadic 
and shows no particular directional tendency. 2) Disruptions 
brought on by extra-morphological forces can have many 
outcomes, one of which is large-scale, relatively rapid 
regularization. 

Fallacies associated with the conventional wisdom:

1) Analogical change is closely related to the forms produced by
children in relatively early stages of acquisition (cf. Bybee and Slobin 1982).
2) Directionality of analogical change is one (direct/straightforward) manifestation of productivity.

6. Proportional and non-proportional analogy in regularization

Conventional wisdom: regularization and irregularization are "proportional" analogical processes. They involve creation of new inflected forms based on analogical models to replace the old form when learners fail to acquire the old form (which plays no role in the change).

Alternative hypothesis: large-scale regularization, in particular, often involves a crucial non-proportional component: it occurs when the saliency of the difference between the regular and irregular inflected forms is diminished to the point where learners hearing the irregular forms can easily mistake them for regular forms.

7. The extra-morphological forces behind the great English verb regularization.

Some preliminary suggestions: As syncope and apocope gradually spread (especially "stylistically" from fast speech to all but the most careful speech), the saliency of the difference between originally bi- or trisyllabic weak past forms and monosyllabic strong past (singular) forms was dramatically diminished. Frequent simplification of final consonant clusters was surely an additional factor (e.g. -pt, -dð), as were coarticulation effects that reduced the perceptual salience of stem-vowel differences (cf. e-α variation before rC).

Mixed forms (e.g. holped) occur for a number of verbs in the early stages of regularization (as do present forms with past stem vowels). Learners reanalyzed ("hypercorrectively" in the Ohalian sense) the suffixless past tense forms that they were hearing as having an underlying weak suffix that was deleted in casual speech.

8. Regularization and stem-final consonants:

OE strong verb with stem-final p: 25
Number lost: 13
Number now irregular weak: 5 (weep, sleep, sweep, creep, leap)
Number now regular: 7
Number still strong: 0

OE strong verbs with stem-final ð/ð: 10
Number lost: 7
Number now regular: 3 (writhe, seethe, bequeath)
Number still strong: 0

OE strong verbs with stem-final lC/rC (other than ll): 30
Number lost: 10
Number now irregular weak (no change): 1 (burst)
Number now regular: 18
Number still strong: 1 (hold)

OE strong verbs with stem-final NC (including nn and mm): 34
Number lost: 13
Number now regular: 1 (climb)
Number still strong: 20

References:
Carroll, Ryan, Rangnar Svare and Joseph Salmons. 2008. Not so fast there: Quantifying the evolutionary dynamics of German verbs. ms.
Hare, Mary and Jeffrey L. Elman. 1995. Learning and Morphological Change. Cognition 56.61-98.