

VERBING

The increasing mania for turning verbs into nouns

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Mothers and fathers used to bring up children: now they parent. Critics used to review plays: now they critique them. Athletes podium, executives flipchart, and everybody Googles. Watch out – you’ve been verbed.

The English language is in a constant state of flux. New words are formed and old ones fall into disuse. But no trend has been more obtrusive in recent years than the changing of nouns into verbs. ‘Trend’ itself (now used as a verb meaning ‘change or develop in a general direction’, as in ‘unemployment has been trending upwards’) is evidence of – sorry, *evidences* – this phenomenon.

It is found in all areas of life, though some are more productive than others. Financiers are never lacking in ingenuity: Investec recently forecast that ‘Better-balanced ranges should allow M&S to anniversary tougher comparisons’ – whatever that may mean. Politicians have supplied us with ‘to handbag’ (a tribute to Lady Thatcher) and ‘to doughnut’ – that is, to sit in a ring around a colleague making an announcement in the House of Commons so that it is not clear to television viewers that the chamber is practically deserted.

New technology is also fertile ground, partly because it is constantly seeking names for things which did not previously exist: we ‘text’ from our mobiles, ‘bookmark’ websites, ‘inbox’ our email contacts and ‘friend’ or ‘defriend’ our acquaintances on Facebook. ‘Blog’ had scarcely arrived as a noun before it was adopted as a verb, first intransitive and then transitive (an American friend boasts that he ‘blogged hand-wringers’ about a subject that upset him). Conversely, verbs such as ‘Twitter’ and ‘tweet’ have been transformed into nouns – though this process is far less common.

Sport is another ready source. ‘Rollerblade’, ‘skateboard’, ‘snowboard’ and ‘zorb’ have all graduated from names of equipment to actual activities.

Referees ‘red-card’ or ‘sin-bin’ errant players; racing drivers ‘pit’, golfers ‘par’ and coastal divers ‘tombstone’.

Verbing – ‘or denominalization’ as it is known to grammarians – is not new: Steven Pinker in his book *The Language Instinct* points out that ‘easy conversion of nouns to verbs has been part of English grammar for centuries; it is one of the processes that make English English.’ Elizabethan writers revelled in it (think of Shakespeare’s ‘Grace me no grace, nor uncle me no uncle’ in *Richard II*); the *Book of Common Prayer* includes a service ‘commonly called the Churching of Women’.

The difference today, says Robert Groves, one of the editors of the new *Collins Dictionary of the English Language*, is that ‘potential changes in our language are picked up and repeated faster than they would have been in the past, when print was the only mass communication medium, and fewer people were literate’. New usages can be trialled around the world – and with luck green-lighted – the moment they are visioned.

What makes these changes so easy is that English, unlike other Indo-European languages, uses very few inflections. The infinitive does not take a separate ending, so while in French the noun ‘action’ becomes the verb ‘actionner’, English can use the same form for both. In German (apart from ‘essen’ meaning ‘food’ or ‘eat’), such words are virtually unknown; in Arabic and Chinese they are not found at all.

Why, though, do the changes happen? ‘Looking for short cuts, especially if you have to say something over and over again, is a common motivator,’ says Robert Groves. So charity fund-raisers have invented the verb ‘to gift-aid’ rather than repeat ‘donate using gift aid’ all day long, while CIA agents looking for people to kidnap find ‘to rendition’ handier than ‘to subject to extraordinary rendition’.

Sometimes the results are ridiculous – notably when this process is applied to nouns which were formed from verbs in the first place. To say ‘Let’s conference’ instead of ‘Let’s confer’, ‘I’ll signature it’ instead of ‘I’ll sign it’, or ‘they statemented’ instead of ‘they stated’ makes the speaker seem either

ignorant or pretentious. (The late General Alexander Haig, whose bizarre military jargon became known as ‘Haigspeak’, was ridiculed for wanting ‘to caveat’ a proposal.) Using an elaborate verb when there is a far simpler alternative – such as ‘dialogue’ for ‘talk’ – has the same effect.

On the other hand, verbing can be very entertaining – especially when applied, with a touch of mischief, to a proper noun. A classic example is ‘Gerrymander’, dating back to 1812, when – under Governor Gerry of Massachusetts – political boundaries were redrawn so tortuously that one district acquired the shape of a salamander. In 2004 a smear campaign against John Kerry gave us the verb ‘to Swiftboat’, derived from the type of naval vessel Kerry had commanded in Vietnam. Nor should we forget ‘to Bobbitt’, the term coined when an irate Lorena Bobbitt took a knife to her husband’s penis.

Some lovers of the language deplore the whole business of verbing (Benjamin Franklin called it ‘awkward and abominable’); others see it as proof of a vibrant linguistic culture. Certain words cause particular irritation – among them ‘action’, ‘task’, ‘impact’, ‘effort’, ‘access’, ‘progress’ and ‘transition’. Often, though, the dictionary yields surprising precedents: ‘impact’ was used as a verb in the seventeenth century, and ‘task’ in the sixteenth. Other verbs have escaped linguistic ghettos (‘access’ was recognised by the OED over twenty years ago, but only as a computing term) or acquired new meanings: ‘reference’, originally meaning ‘supply with references’, is now used as an alternative to ‘refer to’.

Coinages that seem to bend over backwards invite derision: for example, ‘to boilerplate’ (automatically include) material in a document or ‘to demagogue’ a political subject (discuss it in a rabble-rousing manner). Locative verbs are particularly clumsy: ‘I’d like to showcase/front-stage/hothouse/workshop this.’ A few simply appear crass – none more so than ‘to incest’, meaning ‘to force into an incestuous relationship’.

Of course, not every coinage passes into general use, and we can hope that 'to incest' will quietly fade away. But as for trying to end verbing altogether, forget it. You'd simply be Canuting.