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Verbing_and_Nouning

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2 Verbing and Nouning

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7 Synonyms

8 Denominalization and nominalization; Zero
 9 conversion

10 Definition

11 To verb a noun is to create something of the verbal
 12 category from a nominal; to noun a verb is to do
 13 the reverse.

14 Introduction

15 Verbing and nouning are ways to introduce neol-
 16 ogisms. The process, also called **denomina-**
 17 **lization** and **nominalization**, respectively, can
 18 be achieved by **compounding**, e.g., forming the
 19 verbs “to back up” or “to pig out” by combining a
 20 noun with some other term. It can also be achieved
 21 by **morphological derivation**, especially via
 22 affixation. In the noun → verb direction, the
 23 English “incentivize” and “declutter” are verbs
 24 which are derived morphologically from the

nouns “incentive” and “clutter,” respectively. By 25
 the same token, the French “brosser” (to brush) 26
 comes from the noun “brosse” (brush), just as the 27
 Spanish “cepillar” comes from “cepillo.” Going in 28
 the verb → noun direction, in English, “suckage” 29
 and “singing” are nouns which derived from verbs 30
 by means of adding suffixes. Similarly, in 31
 Dagaare, a language from Ghana and Burkina 32
 Faso, the nominal “zoobu” (the act of running) is 33
 derived morphologically from the verb “zo” 34
 (to run); “gaabo” (departure) is derived from 35
 “gaa” (to go), while “waabo” (arrival) is derived 36
 from “wa” (to come), all by adding the appropriate 37
 suffix. 38

Why Are Verbing and Nouning Important for Language Evolution?

A subvariety of verbing and nouning, one of spe- 41
 cial interest when it comes to language evolution, 42
 is **conversion**, also known as **zero derivation**. 43
 Here, there is a “functional shift” without any 44
 change in surface form. All of the following 45
 arose via verbing of the zero-derivation type: “to 46
 google,” “to parent,” “to medal,” “to access,” “to 47
 trend,” “to bookmark,” “to email,” “to friend,” “to 48
 beer,” “to conference,” “to impact,” “to door,” “to 49
 showcase,” “to host,” “to input,” and “to blog.” 50
 And the nouns in “The new *hire* made a big *ask*, 51
 but it was an epic *fail*” all derived from verbs, but 52
 without compounding or the addition of 53
 affixes – that is, all arose through zero-derivation 54

nouning. To come at the point another way, the hallmark of a noun-based verb, birthed by this particular method, is that speakers apply regular inflection directly to the bare form: in English, one adds “-ed” for the past and perfect form and “-ing” for the progressive and the gerund. (Notice, e.g., that the past tense of “to grandstand” is “grandstanded,” deriving immediately from the corresponding noun. As Prasada and Pinker (1993: 46) point out, it is not “grandstood.”) Similarly, in the verb → noun direction, one simply adds a determiner (such as the definite or indefinite articles “the” or “a”), a plural marker, or an adjective to the tenseless verbal form: “several good reads” and “a big get.” It is this latter zero-derivation subvariety which is most typically called “verbing and nouning.”

Verbing of the zero-derivation kind, i.e., without modification of the surface form, is especially a feature of languages which are not highly inflected. Thus English, whose verbal morphology is comparatively impoverished, allows it quite freely. In contrast, to create a new verb from a noun in French or Spanish, say, the new form must end in one of the three possible verbal paradigms (whether “-re,” “-ir,” or “-er” in French or “-ar,” “-er,” and “-ir” in Spanish). Hence their neologistic verbs will (almost invariably) have a different surface form than the source nouns, for instance, colloquial spoken French has “googler” and “texter,” rather than just “google” and “texte,” and Spanish has “googlear.”

Are Prescriptive Grammarians Right to Be So Hostile to Verbing and Nouning?

The evolution of a language, especially in a free and rapid way, typically raises prescriptive hackles. Verbing and nouning of this zero-derivation sort is no exception. Pundits and bloggers complain that the usages are just business speak and technobabble. They find the coinages pointless. (Why use “epic fail” instead of the existing “failure”? And who needs “to impact”?) They may even accuse ordinary speakers of a grammatical gaffe: the untutored are confusedly

using nouns as verbs and vice versa! Linguists, in contrast, tend to be skeptical about such complaints. The process is not novel and is not tied exclusively to business speak or technology. The substantives in “a long *run*,” “a refreshing *swim*,” and “a pleasant *drive*” all started life as verbs, but are now wholly uncontroversial as nouns. The verbs in “to *stomach* his complaints,” “to *finger* a suspect,” “to *head* a committee,” and “to *elbow* a player” all arose through zero derivation from names of body parts; the verbs “to boycott,” “to lynch,” and “to gerrymander” all came from proper names of notorious figures, and “to ski,” “to bicycle,” and “to skate” all began life as names of sporting gear. (Pinker (1995) estimates that fully one fifth of English verbs arose through “verbing,” specifically via conversion. See also Clark and Clark (1979) and Luu (2016).) As Zwicky notes, moreover, the neologisms typically do not mean exactly what preexisting alternatives do, because of changes to connotations, to associated imagery, and to **register** (e.g., the level of formality or technicality of the word). Finally, these are not grammatically paradoxical cases of, say, nouns being conjugated and verbs taking plural endings. They are cases of new nouns/verbs being created – cases, that is, not of perverse misuse of the existing tongue, but of the language itself evolving.

Conclusion

In sum, verbing and nouning are linguistic processes for creating neologisms of a particular sort. The subvariety of greatest interest, characteristic of languages like English with quite simple verbal morphology, involves taking an old lexical item belonging to one word class and creating a new one – whether noun → verb or verb → noun – without changing the surface form. The process, known as conversion or zero derivation, leads to especially fast and efficient evolution of the language, with new coinages emerging and spreading seamlessly (particularly when certain pragmatic constraints are met (see Kaminski 2010; Luu 2016). While some prescriptive writers disparage this particular kind of

145 language change, linguists find their reasons
146 unpersuasive.

147 Cross-References

- 148 ▶ Grammaticalization Theory
- 149 ▶ Language
- 150 ▶ Linguistic Evolution

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Uncorrected Proof