

Verbs and Nouns

Okay. I admit it. I am TOTALLY fixated on words. I'm a word nerd.

I write every day. Writing is my meditation. And what I write are words.

While most often I am working on some project, like my book on how art and archaeology are represented in comics, or my book about the eyes one sees on the public and commercial art in my adopted hometown of Oviedo, Spain, I occasionally digress into silly topics like homophonic or palindromic phrases, heteronyms or eponyms, or Tom Swifties. (And this "Verbs and Nouns" fits into that silly topic category.)

Recently, when I was in Copenhagen to see my son who had a stopover there on his way back to the States, my eyes lit up when we were on one of the local trains in that city's marvelous public transportation system and I saw a monitor labeled "Tracks tracks." I nudged my son, "Look at that!" My dear son, who is well aware of my proclivity for fixating on words, humored me: "Yes, Dad. Track can be both a verb and a noun!" We spent a few minutes thinking about words that are both verbs and nouns, and we noted that words derived from tools or technology are particularly prone to have this verb/noun duality, like "hammer" or "rake" or "shovel" or that "track".

The impetus for my writing this "Verbs and Nouns" came when I was reading about the 19 June, 2025, explosion of a SpaceX test rocket. The SpaceX authorities put out a message: "Our Starbase team is actively working to safe the test site and the immediate surrounding area in conjunction with local officials." "To safe the test site?" I asked myself. I had never heard of "safe" as a verb! "What adjective will next be used as a verb? Will I be expected to "happy" my home?" A little research, however, cured me of my ignorance, and, while there seems to be some obsolete uses of "safe" as a verb, including in Shakespeare, the verb "safe" as in "to make safe" or "disarm" is now a standard military term for clearing an area of ordinances.

And when I began to seriously look at the topic of verb and noun pairs, I realized that many other verbs can also be nouns: "act", "answer", "bend", "bet", "blow", "break", "build", "burn", "catch", "cost", "cut", . . . and the list goes on.¹

¹ In writing this piece I looked for a list of English verbs, and have used the "English Common Verbs List" compiled by Nicolás Novoa G. for the Instituto San Andrés. (Novoa G. gives the Spanish translation for the 201 irregular and regular verbs in his list, something quite useful for me as my Spanish is still quite atrocious even after living here for eight years.) Of course I have also made use of the resources available online, especially the Online Etymology Dictionary.

In fact, almost every verb can also be a noun. This is a process known as grammatical conversion, or derivation or functional shift, a word formation process where a word changes its grammatical category (part of speech) without any change in its form or pronunciation.

What is more interesting are those verbs that do not grammatically convert into nouns.

[To be sure, all verbs have a corresponding noun formed by the gerund of the verb, like “bring/bringing”, “choose/choosing”, “do/doing”, etc. etc. Other verbs can have nouns formed by adding a “-tion” or a “-ment” to the end, like “penetrate/penetration” or “pay/payment”.]

Being an archaeologist, I am an inveterate typologist, so of course I have grouped these verbs that do not convert into nouns into the following categories:

Action Verbs

Many of the verbs that do not have equivalent nouns involve actions, where the action described by the verb is only expressed by the gerund of the verb, like that “bring/bringing”, “choose/choosing”, “do/doing”.

Here is a list of some of these action verbs that do not convert into nouns:

become	begin	bring	choose	come
do	drown	eat	forget	forgive
get	give	grow	have	hear
know	learn	lend	let	lose
put	see	sell	send	sew
shut	sing	speak	spend	understand

Verbs with Quasi-Cognate Nouns

There are several verb/noun conversions where the connection between the verb and the noun is only tangential, at best. Here is a list of some of those:

bear	beat	dig	draw	fly
hide	greet	keep	lay	leave
make	mean	meet	prick	punch
punt	set	shoot	sink	spell
wake				

The verb “bear” comes from an Old English word meaning “to carry, bring; bring forth, give birth to, produce; to endure without resistance; to support, hold up”; the name of the ursine animal “bear” comes from a Proto-Germanic word that literally means “the brown one”, reflecting a hunter’s taboo for using the real name of a prey. The verb “beat” comes from an Old English word for “to inflict blows on, strike repeatedly”, and so the noun “beat”, as in a musical beat, is clearly related to the hitting of a drum; the noun “beat”, as in the regular route travelled by a policeman or a mailman, seems to come from the stomping of feet on the ground. The noun “dig”, as in an archaeological excavation, of course makes sense because that is what archaeologists do, “dig”; similarly a “dig”, as in a verbal insult, makes sense because the insult is meant to get under someone’s skin. The verb “draw” comes from an Old English word meaning “to pull”, so the noun “draw” as in an attraction or a lottery or a shallow body of water makes sense; a “draw” as in a tie in a game probably comes from “withdraw”. As a noun, a “fly” can be an insect (or an imitation of that insect used in fishing) or a baseball hit into the outfield, both of which are clearly related to the verb “to fly”; similarly, the “fly” of a tent or the covering of a zipper on a pair of pants describes a piece of fabric that “flies” out. (The Afro-American slang “fly”, as in stylish, attractive, or impressive, appeared over two centuries ago, and was made popular with the 1972 movie *Super Fly*). The verb “hide” has a slightly different Old English etymological origin than the noun “hide”, though ducking under an animal skin is a good way to conceal yourself! As a verb, “keep” derives from an Old English word meaning “to seize or to seek after”, and so the noun “keep”, as in the most defensible part of a castle, “keeps” invaders out. The verb “lay”, as in to cause to lie or rest, has a perfectly good corresponding noun, as in “the lay of the land”, but the US slang of the verb “lay”, as in “to have sex with”, and its equivalent noun, as in “a good lay”, only began in the 20th century; a “lay”, as in a short song, comes from an Old French word of Celtic origins; “lay”, as an adjective referring to the non-clerical, comes from an ancient Greek word meaning “of the people”. The noun “make”, as in the make of a car, refers to the manufacturer and not to the action of the verb “make”. The verb “mean”, the noun “mean”, and the adjective “mean” all have separate etymologies. The noun “meet”, as in a track meet, is only tangentially related to the verb. (Similarly, “greet” is almost never used as a noun, but we now have a “meet and greet”, a noun that combines the two verbs.) The verb “prick” originally comes from the noun “prick”, an Old English term for a sharp object; the obscene use of “prick” for a penis seems to have originated with Shakespeare: in *Romeo and Juliet* (Act 1, Scene 4), a brokenhearted Romeo complains “Is love a tender

thing? It is too rough,/ Too rude, too boisterous, and it pricks like thorn.” to which his friend Mercutio replies, with obvious sexual innuendo, “If love be rough with you, be rough with love;/ Prick love for pricking, and you beat love down.” The verb “punch” similarly comes from a noun, derived from an Old French word for a “pointed tool, piercing weapon”; the noun “punch” as in a bowl of spiced drink, comes from a Hindi word for “five”—the number of ingredients in the drink; the noun in “pleased as punch” comes from the 17th-century puppet show Punch and Judy. The noun “punt”, as in the river pontoons one sees in Oxford, comes from a Latin word for a flat-bottomed boat; the football verb “punt” seems to come from the action of propelling a punt; the gambling term “punt” derives from a Spanish word for “point”. The noun “set”, as in a theater, makes sense as it refers to the stage furniture “set” on the stage; the noun “set” meaning a “collection of matching things”, as in a group of volumes or a part of a tennis match, seems to come from a Middle English word for a religious sect. The verb “shoot” comes from an Old English word for “to dart forth, go swiftly and suddenly”, and there is a rarely used noun conversion in a “shoot” as an occasion when a group of people hunt and shoot game for sport; more common is the noun in “a photo shoot”; the noun “shoot” for a plant sprout seems to come from how quickly a seed can spring up. The verb “sink” comes from an Old English word for “become submerged, go under, subside”; the noun “sink” began in the early 15th century to refer to a cesspool or a pit for reception of wastewater or sewage. The verb “spell”, as in to say or write letters, comes from an early 14th-century Anglo-French word; the verb “spell”, as in to do a turn of work for someone else, comes from a Middle English term; the noun “spell”, as in a magical incantation, comes from an Old English word for a story in prose as opposed to verse, and was originally used to describe a doctrine or a sermon before it became associated with what witches cast. The verb “wake”, i.e. to get up in the morning, comes from an Old English term and is related to the ritual of a “wake”, staying up all night with a deceased before burial; the noun “wake”, as in the track left by a moving ship, comes from an Old Norse term for a hole in the ice.

Heteronymic Verbs/Nouns

Another set of verb/noun combinations are heteronyms, which are words that are spelled the same but have different pronunciations and meanings. (And, yes, technically these are not grammatical conversions because the verb is pronounced differently from the noun.)

As I noted in the silly “Guess the Heteronyms” I posted on my website in 2022:

Years ago my father noted that many English heteronyms are words formed with a Latin-based prefix, and that when used as a verb the accent is on the last syllable and when used as a noun or adjective the accent is on the penultimate or antepenultimate syllable—e.g. “présents présents”.

Other examples of heteronymic verbs/nouns formed from Latin prefixes include: “afféct/áffect”, “combíne/cómbine”, “conflíct/cónflict”, “constrúct/cónstruct”, “contráct/cóntract”, “convíct/cónvict”, “deféct/défect”, “desért/désert”, “discárd díscard”, “expórt/éxport”, “impórt/ímport”, “intérn/íntern”, “invíte/ínvite”, “procéss/prócess”, “perféct/pérfect”, “recórd/récord”, and “refúse/réfuse”.

Verbs with Neologism-Nouns

Language is, of course, a dynamic thing, so it is not surprising that new grammatical conversions keep appearing. Some come from new technologies: for instance, the acronym “DM”, from “direct message” in social media, quickly transformed from a noun into a verb, as in “please DM me”. Other conversions occur when a common verb is transform into a noun, as in “I have an ask to make”, or “let’s have a sit before we go on”, or “Teach, I have question to ask”, or “the poker player has a tell”.

I know that this discussion of verb/noun grammatical conversions doesn’t come close to being exhaustive, and I am sure that my readers, exhausted though they undoubtedly are by the ramblings of this word nerd, can think of many more.

[The word-processing program I use keeps track of how many words are in my document. It says that this “Verbs and Nouns” has 2,075 words. Oops, now that is 2,080; oops again, now that is 2,086; now it’s 2,089 . . .]