CONVERTIBLE ENGLISH

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Because modern English has shed most of the flexional endings that distinguish grammatical functions, many of our words possess the lively ability to rail-jump from one part of speech to another without any basic change in form. This happy facility, variously called conversion or function shift, endows our vocabulary with vitality, power, and a prolific source of new words.

Without being fully aware of it, many of us cut our punning eye teeth on riddles that are built on function shift:

- What has four wheels and flies?
  A garbage truck.
- What makes the Tower of Pisa lean?
  It never eats.
- Why did Silly Billy blush when he opened the refrigerator?
  He saw the salad dressing.
- Why didn't Silly Billy complete his cross-country trip?
  Every time he saw a "Clean Rest Rooms" sign, he went in and cleaned them.
- Have you ever seen a home run, a ski jump, and a salad bowl?

Even standard sentences can bounce a reader back and forth from one meaning to another:

- Time flies life an arrow. Fruit flies like a banana.
- The detective looked hard.
- Pam hated visiting relatives.
- I know you like the palm of my hand.
- Headline: RAIN CLOUDS WELCOME AT AIRPORT
- I know a man with a feebly growing down upon his chin.

The most common variety of function shift is the transfer of a word established as a noun into a verb. As is the case with babies learning to speak, so it is with the history of language. First comes a concept; then comes an action. Consider the names we give to parts of the body. Almost any of these, without much ado or ceremony, can convert to a verb. We *head* a committee, *eye* a job opportunity, *face* a problem, *shoulder* a load, *elbow* our way through a crowd, *foot* a bill, or *toe* the line—without any modification in the form of each word. Here are forty anatonyms, as they are called—verbalized body parts:

arm	face	hip	palm
back	finger	jaw	rib
belly	fist	knee	scalp
body	flesh	kneecap	shoulder
bone	foot	knuckle	skin
brain	gum	lip	stomach
breast	gut	mouth	thumb
chin	hand	muscle	toe
elbow	head	neck	tongue
eye	heel	nose	wrist

Similarly, we can *chicken* out, *clam* up, *ram* a car, and *wolf* our food. From a menagerie of animal names, we can exhibit at least fifty such noun-into-verb specimens:

ape	chicken	ferret	horse	rook
badger	clam	fish	hound	skunk
birdie	cow	flounder	louse	snake
bird dog	crab	fox	monkey	snipe
bitch	crane	frog	parrot	sponge
buck	crow	goose	pig	squirrel
buffalo	dog	grouse	pony	toad
bug	duck	gull	quail	weasel
bull	eagle	hawk	ram	wolf
carp	fawn	hog	rat	worm

An especially intriguing category of noun-into-verb conversion, sometimes known as Phyfe's Rule, involves a shift of stress from the front of the noun to the back of the verb, often accompanied by a change in the sound of a vowel.

The person who wrote the following ad apparently hadn't mastered the subtleties of this pattern: "Unmarried women wanted to pick fruit and produce at night."

Similarly, on the side of my recycling bin is emblazoned:

<div align="center">

City of San Diego
Environmental Services
Refuse Collection

</div>

What a waste of recyclables!

Most, but not all, of these words consist of two syllables and two Latin word parts. Gaze upon a phalanx of a hundred of them:

abstract	convert	import	object	pervert
addict	convict	indent	offprint	present

address	decrease	incline	offset	proceed(s)
admit	defect	increase	overdraft	process
affect	digest	indent	overdraw	progress
combat	discard	implant	overdrive	project
combine	discharge	insert	overhang	protest
commune	disconnect	insult	overhaul	segment
compact	discount	intercept	overlap	survey
compound	discourse	interrupt	overlay	suspect
compress	dislike	intrigue	overload	torment
conduct	dismount	invite	overlook	transform
confine(s)	dispatch	miscount	override	transplant
conflict	escort	misdeal	overrule	transport
conscript	excerpt	mishit	overrun	traverse
consort	exploit	mismatch	overstock	update
construct	export	misplay	overthrow	upgrade
consult	extract	misprint	overuse	uplift
contest	ferment	misquote	perfume	upload
contrast	impact	misuse	permit	upset

Adding icing to the pro-verbal cake, here are thirty *re-* words that also fit the trochaic (DA-dum)-iambic (da-DUM) noun-verb pattern:

rebel	record	rehash	repeat	reset
rebound	recount	reject	replay	retake
rebuy	redo	relapse	reprint	retard
recall	refill	relay	reraise	revote
recap	refund	reload	rerun	rewind
recoil	refuse	remake	research	rewrite

In some three-syllable words, the stress shifts from the front of the noun to the middle, but not the end, of the verb, as in *attribute* and *influence*, while a number of adjective-verb and adjective-noun switches evince a shift of stress and/or a change in vowel sound, as in *–ate* words such as *approximate, articulate, deliberate, elaborate, incarnate,* and *intimate,* as well as the likes of *absent, invalid, minute,* and *perfect.* Finally, if you speak "Southernese," you probably can add examples to the lists immediately preceding with the likes of the nouns POlice and DISplay.