

Seeing is Believing

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Seeing is believing
Parting is such sweet sorrow
The Taming of the Shrew
The Lady's not for Burning
Waiting for Godot
I'm dreaming of a white Christmas
And it was evening and it was morning, the first day
In the beginning was the word
He has the makings of a real statesman
Price includes furnishings and fittings

In this mixture of familiar phrases the common element is that they all have words ending with the suffix *-ing*. For a native English speaker there is, on the surface, nothing remarkable about this collection: but for someone learning the language all, is not so straightforward. To start with, the ending *-ing* covers both the participle of the related verb as well as a variety of nouns, not only simple verbal nouns expressing the activity that the verb conveys but also events and objects that can be related in different ways. This does not appear to have a parallel in other languages.

Even the humble participle is used in a special way. In the phrase 'I'm dreaming' an ongoing (imperfect) activity is denoted, which differs from the ordinary present tense 'I dream'. Some languages, such as French, have a *past* imperfect tense, but English does past present and future, giving a richer range of expression, as in –

Did/do/will you have to disturb me when I was/am/will be working?

Probably all verbs – except 'auxiliaries like *can, must, may* – are able to produce their related verbal noun (gerund) using the *-ing* suffix. This gerund can be the subject or object of a sentence and can be introduced by a preposition such as *in, by, for*, and also by the word *of*, and can be qualified by an adjective. Some gerunds from intransitive verbs, like *reacting, tumbling, wading*, do not have a usage extending beyond this: others do. Although we would not say 'The reacting is inappropriate', we can certainly use the definite article in saying 'The waiting is over', or 'the fighting has become widespread'. This enables us to express more concerning the activity than just talk about it generically such as saying it is good or bad: we can refer to a specific example of that activity.

We can actually have two closely similar ways of saying the same thing, although they are grammatically different. For instance, the party could be cancelled 'due to me becoming ill' or 'due to my becoming ill'. The listener would accept these as equivalent expressions.

There has been, then, a move towards usage of the noun in more 'concrete' meanings. The Taming of the Shrew refers to a series of events and processes leading up to the achievement of the shrew being tamed. As an instance of how the same word can have progressively more and more concrete meanings, consider the following –

Opening a can of beans, I cut my finger (participle)

Opening a can of beans can be risky (gerund)

I attended the opening of the new wing (an event)

A doorway is an opening in a wall (a physical thing)

There could be an opening in my firm for you (a metaphorical doorway).

Such 'meaning creep' actually goes further. In 'Furnishings and Fittings' the nouns are not denoting activities or events but the **results** of those activities. In other words, the nouns formed from a verb in the **active** 'voice' have taken on a **passive** sense. A building is the result of the process of building, and trimmings are what are produced by the process of trimming something. Another oddity is that some of the more 'concrete' nouns are only used in the plural. We talk of *belongings* but not of a single *belonging*, and likewise with *furnishings*, *takings*, *goings-on* and *winnings*.

Apart from all this, there are some nouns that appear not to have come from verbs in the first place. *Evening* is not a word we relate to a verb *to even*, nor is *morning* from *to morn* (nor *gloaming* from *to gloam*). More recent formations such as *guttering*, *scaffolding* and *lettering* have also been drawn into the same use of the suffix attached to a **noun** rather than to a verb, denoting an area of expertise or the application of a skill.

So it is clear that the simple verbal noun or gerund has been seized upon to perform an extended range of functions in the language, increasing its capability to express an extended range of thoughts. But how, to begin with, did the same suffix come to be used for both participles and nouns, which in other languages are kept distinct? Apparently in Old English (Anglo-Saxon, up to the 12th century) these two parts of speech followed the German pattern that still exists today, the participle having the suffix *–end* and the verbal noun having the suffix *–ung* (from German music we have Mendelssohn's instruction *nicht schleppend* and Wagner's 'Goetterdaemmerung'). The dictionary says that in Old English, the word for *evening* was *aefnung* and the word for *morning* was *morgenung*. These look like verbal nouns but, whether they are, and if so what verbs they derive from, can be left to the experts.

Anyway, during the following generations these two endings merged into the one suffix *–ing*, leading to the present ungrammatical-looking state of affairs. We normally accept these anomalies without the slightest worry. So much for grammar!