Because modern English has shed most of the flexional endings that distinguish grammatical functions and because English word order is more fixed than ever before, 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 function shift or conversion, endows our language 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 shifting:

Q. What has four wheels and flies? A. A garbage truck.
Q. What makes the Tower of Pisa lean? A. It never eats.
Q. Why did the moron cut a hole in the rug? A. He wanted to see the floor show.
Q. Why couldn't the moron complete his cross-country trip? A. Every time he saw a "Clean Rest Rooms" sign, he went in and cleaned them.

In the May 1978 Kickshaws, Ralph Beaman offered the grammatically ambiguous headline HOUSE ARRESTS MARK CHRISTMAS DAY SENTENCE POSTPONED. To this boggler we may add such functional teasers as SHIP SAILS TODAY and RAIN CLOUDS WELCOME AT AIRPORT. And because so many words can be several parts of speech without any change in morphology, even standard sentences can bounce a reader back and forth from one meaning to another:

Time flies. ("The time flies" or "You time the flies")
The detective looked hard.
Pam hated visiting relatives.
I know you like the palm of my hand.
There goes the 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, perhaps "because psychologically the object or concept tends to precede the action." (Mario Pei, The Story of English, p. 173) Consider, for example, the names we give to the parts of the body. Almost any of these can, without much ado or ceremony, be made into a verb. We may HEAD a committee, EYE
our opponent, FACE a problem, SHOULDER or ELBOW our way through a crowd, FOOT a bill, or TOE a mark -- without any modification in the form of each word. In Growth and Structure of the English Language (p. 167), Otto Jespersen lists twenty-three of these anatomical noun-to-verb shifts, some of which are rare but all of which are entered in Webster’s Third:

- arm
- breast
- eye
- hand
- lip
- stomach
- beard
- chin
- finger
- jaw
- nose
- thumb
- body
- ear
- fist
- knee
- shoulder
- tongue
- brain
- elbow
- foot
- limb
- skin

In separate Word Study articles, Isabel Kadison (May 1951) and Robert Coard (February 1962) bring the list to 49 by adding the following, some of which are slang or sports terms:

- ankle
- blood
- gut
- hip
- knuckle
- muscle
- palm
- tooth
- back
- cheek
- hair
- knuckle
- nail
- rib
- wrist
- belly
- face
- head
- leg
- neck
- scalp
- bone
- flesh
- heel
- mouth
- nerve
- toe

Kadison coins the term "anatonym" for this kind of convertible noun denoting a part or constituent of the body.

Smaller lists of noun-verb interchanges can be made from the names of animals (APE, BUCK, WOLF, ...), professions (BUTCHER, NURSE, TUTOR, ...) and objects (BOOK, PAPER, TELEPHONE, ...).

Some nouns become verbs only when there is an accompanying change in pronunciation: -SE words like USE, HOUSE, and EXCUSE; -ATE words like DELEGATE, GRADUATE, and AFFILIATE; and -MENT words like COMPLIMENT, IMPLEMENT, and SUPPLEMENT. Other nouns, almost all of them consisting of two syllables and two Latinate word parts, transmogrify into verbs by undergoing a shift in stress and often a change in vowel pronunciation. Hans Marchand, in The Categories and Types of Present-Day English Word Formation (p. 378), lists the following 45 examples:

- abstract
- compound
- compress
- concert
- conduct
- confines
- conflict
- conscript
- consort
- construct
- contest
- contract
- convert
- digest
- discount
- escort
- export
- extract
- ferment
- import
- impress
- increase
- insert
- insult
- invert
- invite
- perfume
- permit
- pervert
- present
- proceeds
- produce
- progress
- protest
- rebel
- recess
- regress
- retail
- survey
- spreadsheet
- transfer
- transform
- transform
- transport
- transport
- perfume
- recess
- regress
- retail
- survey
- spreadsheet
- transfer
- transform
- transform
- transport

To this line-up I would add:

- addict
- address
- affect
- compact
- decrease
- defect
- desert
- excerpt
- exploit
- impact
- incline
- miscount
- mismatch
- misprint

...
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>object</th>
<th>process</th>
<th>refuse</th>
<th>subject</th>
<th>suspect</th>
<th>upset</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

ADDRESS is the only word I can think of that exhibits both forestress and backstress as a noun and a verb, depending on the meaning. Finally, I suggest the new slang words ADMIT, COMBINE, REJECT, REPEAT, RERUN, RETARD and REWRITE.

Three-syllable words in this pattern that occur to me are ATTRIBUTE, INTERCEPT and MISCONDUCT. Can readers think of others?

Just as nouns often become verbs, so verbs may be converted into nouns. We may, for example, take a BREAK, CUT, DRIVE, REST, RUN, STAND, or WALK. I would ask the reader to make a list of ten one-syllable verbs that come to mind and then to see how many of them are also nouns; my guess is all of them. Now try a list of ten one-syllable nouns and see how many are also verbs.

The movement back and forth between nouns and adjectives is also remarkably free in modern English. For an imposing column of noun-into-adjective conversions, we may again turn to the names of parts of the body: HEAD librarian, EYE glasses, SHOULDER holster, ELBOW room, TOE nail, and so on. Recently, an advertising ditty extolling the virtues of milk, played upon the ability of nouns to convert to adjectives:

What makes a brownie brownier? Milk does!
What makes roast beef beefier? Milk does!
What makes a doughnut doughnuttier? Milk does!

'Cause milk is a natural.

Adjectives may, in turn, don nounal qualities as we can see in the following colorful examples. An event may happen out of the BLUE, or we may listen to the BLUES. We may eat the WHITE of an egg or refrain from firing until we see the WHITES of the enemy's eyes. We may drive for the GREEN or hang GREENS for Christmas. When a business stays out of the RED and in the BLACK, the boss will feel in the PINK.

Noun-adjective switches that are accompanied by changes in pronunciation and stress include MINUTE and INVALID, while among verb-adjective pairings of this type are CLOSE, PERFECT, and -ATE words like APPROXIMATE and SEPARATE.

As the distinctions between one part of speech and another become blurred, it seems that almost any interchange is possible. This flexibility of the English language is illustrated by the four-by-four matrix given on the next page. A single example of each conversion follows.

I add to these examples with some beyond the Noun-Adjective-Adverb-Verb matrix. Can Word Ways readers come up with additional types?