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 anonyms, as they are called—verbalized body parts:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>arm</th>
<th>face</th>
<th>hip</th>
<th>palm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>back</td>
<td>finger</td>
<td>jaw</td>
<td>rib</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>belly</td>
<td>fist</td>
<td>knee</td>
<td>scalp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>body</td>
<td>flesh</td>
<td>kneecap</td>
<td>shoulder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bone</td>
<td>foot</td>
<td>knuckle</td>
<td>skin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brain</td>
<td>gum</td>
<td>lip</td>
<td>stomach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>breast</td>
<td>gut</td>
<td>mouth</td>
<td>thumb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chin</td>
<td>hand</td>
<td>muscle</td>
<td>toe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>elbow</td>
<td>head</td>
<td>neck</td>
<td>tongue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eye</td>
<td>heel</td>
<td>nose</td>
<td>wrist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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:

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

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:

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City of San Diego
Environmental Services
Refuse Collection
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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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>abstract</th>
<th>convert</th>
<th>import</th>
<th>object</th>
<th>pervert</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>addict</td>
<td>convict</td>
<td>indent</td>
<td>offprint</td>
<td>present</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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 "Southerners," you probably can add examples to the lists immediately preceding with the likes of the nouns POlice and DISplay.