

# V

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## 2 Verbing and Nouning

[AU1]

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## 7 Synonyms

8 Denominalization and nominalization; Zero  
9 conversion

## 10 Definition

11 To verb a noun is to create something of the verbal  
12 category from a nominal; to noun a verb is to do  
13 the reverse.

## 14 Introduction

15 Verbing and nouning are ways to introduce neologisms. The process, also called **denominalization** and **nominalization**, respectively, can be achieved by **compounding**, e.g., forming the verbs “to back up” or “to pig out” by combining a noun with some other term. It can also be achieved by **morphological derivation**, especially via affixation. In the noun → verb direction, the English “incentivize” and “declutter” are verbs which are derived morphologically from the

nouns “incentive” and “clutter,” respectively. By 25  
the same token, the French “brosser” (to brush) 26  
comes from the noun “brosse” (brush), just as the 27  
Spanish “cepillar” comes from “cepillo.” Going in 28  
the verb → noun direction, in English, “suckage” 29  
and “singing” are nouns which derived from verbs 30  
by means of adding suffixes. Similarly, in 31  
Dagaare, a language from Ghana and Burkina 32  
Faso, the nominal “zoobu” (the act of running) is 33  
derived morphologically from the verb “zo” 34  
(to run); “gaabo” (departure) is derived from 35  
“gaa” (to go), while “waabo” (arrival) is derived 36  
from “wa” (to come), all by adding the appropriate 37  
suffix. 38

## Why Are Verbing and Nouning Important for Language Evolution?

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40  
41 A subvariety of verbing and nouning, one of special interest when it comes to language evolution, 42  
is **conversion**, also known as **zero derivation**. 43  
Here, there is a “functional shift” without any 44  
change in surface form. All of the following 45  
arose via verbing of the zero-derivation type: “to 46  
google,” “to parent,” “to medal,” “to access,” “to 47  
trend,” “to bookmark,” “to email,” “to friend,” “to 48  
beer,” “to conference,” “to impact,” “to door,” “to 49  
showcase,” “to host,” “to input,” and “to blog.” 50  
And the nouns in “The new *hire* made a big *ask*, 51  
but it was an epic *fail*” all derived from verbs, but 52  
without compounding or the addition of 53  
affixes – that is, all arose through zero-derivation 54

55 nouning. To come at the point another way, the  
56 hallmark of a noun-based verb, birthed by this  
57 particular method, is that speakers apply regular  
58 inflection directly to the bare form: in English, one  
59 adds “-ed” for the past and perfect form and “-ing”  
60 for the progressive and the gerund. (Notice, e.g.,  
61 that the past tense of “to grandstand” is  
62 “grandstanded,” deriving immediately from the  
63 corresponding noun. As Prasada and Pinker  
64 (1993: 46) point out, it is not “grandstood.”) Sim-  
65 ilarly, in the verb → noun direction, one simply  
66 adds a determiner (such as the definite or indefi-  
67 nite articles “the” or “a”), a plural marker, or an  
68 adjective to the tenseless verbal form: “several  
69 good reads” and “a big get.” It is this latter zero-  
70 derivation subvariety which is most typically  
71 called “verbing and nouning.”

72 Verbing of the zero-derivation kind, i.e., with-  
73 out modification of the surface form, is especially  
74 a feature of languages which are not highly  
75 inflected. Thus English, whose verbal morphol-  
76 ogy is comparatively impoverished, allows it  
77 quite freely. In contrast, to create a new verb  
78 from a noun in French or Spanish, say, the new  
79 form must end in one of the three possible verbal  
80 paradigms (whether “-re,” “-ir,” or “-er” in French  
81 or “-ar,” “-er,” and “-ir” in Spanish). Hence their  
82 neologistic verbs will (almost invariably) have a  
83 different surface form than the source nouns, for  
84 instance, colloquial spoken French has “googler”  
85 and “texter,” rather than just “google” and “texte,”  
86 and Spanish has “googlear.”

### 87 **Are Prescriptive Grammarians Right** 88 **to Be So Hostile to Verbing** 89 **and Nouning?**

90 The evolution of a language, especially in a free  
91 and rapid way, typically raises prescriptive  
92 hackles. Verbing and nouning of this zero-  
93 derivation sort is no exception. Pundits and  
94 bloggers complain that the usages are just busi-  
95 ness speak and technobabble. They find the coin-  
96 ages pointless. (Why use “epic fail” instead of the  
97 existing “failure”? And who needs “to impact”?)  
98 They may even accuse ordinary speakers of a  
99 grammatical gaffe: the untutored are confusedly

100 using nouns as verbs and vice versa! Linguists, in  
101 contrast, tend to be skeptical about such com-  
102 plaints. The process is not novel and is not tied  
103 exclusively to business speak or technology. The  
104 substantives in “a long *run*,” “a refreshing *swim*,”  
105 and “a pleasant *drive*” all started life as verbs, but  
106 are now wholly uncontroversial as nouns. The  
107 verbs in “to *stomach* his complaints,” “to *finger*  
108 a suspect,” “to *head* a committee,” and “to *elbow* a  
109 player” all arose through zero derivation from  
110 names of body parts; the verbs “to boycott,” “to  
111 lynch.” and “to gerrymander” all came from  
112 proper names of notorious figures, and “to ski,”  
113 “to bicycle,” and “to skate” all began life as names  
114 of sporting gear. (Pinker (1995) estimates that  
115 fully one fifth of English verbs arose through  
116 “verbing,” specifically via conversion. See also  
117 Clark and Clark (1979) and Luu (2016).) As  
118 Zwicky notes, moreover, the neologisms typically  
119 do not mean exactly what preexisting alternatives  
120 do, because of changes to connotations, to asso-  
121 ciated imagery, and to **register** (e.g., the level of  
122 formality or technicality of the word). Finally,  
123 these are not grammatically paradoxical cases of,  
124 say, nouns being conjugated and verbs taking  
125 plural endings. They are cases of new nouns/  
126 verbs being created – cases, that is, not of perverse  
127 misuse of the existing tongue, but of the language  
128 itself evolving.

### 129 **Conclusion**

130 In sum, verbing and nouning are linguistic pro-  
131 cesses for creating neologisms of a particular sort.  
132 The subvariety of greatest interest, characteristic  
133 of languages like English with quite simple verbal  
134 morphology, involves taking an old lexical item  
135 belonging to one word class and creating a new  
136 one – whether noun → verb or  
137 verb → noun – without changing the surface  
138 form. The process, known as conversion or zero  
139 derivation, leads to especially fast and efficient  
140 evolution of the language, with new coinages  
141 emerging and spreading seamlessly (particularly  
142 when certain pragmatic constraints are met (see  
143 Kaminski 2010; Luu 2016). While some prescrip-  
144 tive writers disparage this particular kind of

145 language change, linguists find their reasons  
 146 unpersuasive.

147 **Cross-References**

148 ▶ [Grammaticalization Theory](#)

149 ▶ [Language](#)

150 ▶ [Linguistic Evolution](#)

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Uncorrected Proof