In the fifth of a series of articles on words invented by Shakespeare (*Williamisms*), David Crystal considers verbs hewn from nouns.

Verbing

When the old grammarians defined a noun as 'the name of a person, place or thing' and a verb as 'a doing word', they never reckoned with Williamisms. Nouns as names? As static, passive, descriptive labels, and no more? Not a bit.

The verb neologisms in the plays are some of Shakespeare's most powerful linguistic creations – and it is worth noting that large numbers of them started out in life as nouns. Indeed, this method of coining new verbs is so frequent, it's almost as if he saw *every* noun as having a potential verb lurking inside it. No, 'lurking' isn't right. 'Bubbling' would be better. The metaphor here needs to be dynamic, to suggest repressed activity beneath the surface, just waiting for a context to release it, like the burst of energy which comes when you uncork a bottle of champagne.

This is Mowbray complaining about his sentence of banishment, in *Richard II* (I.iii.160):

Within my mouth you have enjailed my tongue,
Doubly portcullised with my teeth and lips...

Try saying that first line aloud, giving full prominence to the verb. What a marvellously compact and vigorous expression *enjailed* is! Compare it with the loss of force which comes as soon as you turn it back into a noun:

Within my mouth you've put my tongue in jail...

If there's any champagne left in that sentence at all, it's gone rather flat.

The Mowbray example shows two ways of creating new verbs, and both result in the release of a surprising amount of semantic energy, and a corresponding increase in dramatic impact. The first line shows the use of the prefix *en-* (which, by the way, appears as *em-* before letters *p*, *b*, and *m*). *En-* had been known in English since the end of the 13th century. *Enamour, enchant,* and many other words had been borrowed from Old French, and idiosyncratic ('nonce') uses of the prefix are attested from that time. Certainly, by the time Shakespeare was writing, *en-/em-* was proving to be a very useful way of coining new words.

If you look just for the unusual ('nonce') uses of *en-/em-* cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary* during the 1500s, you'll find over 60 examples. These rise to nearly 100 during the 1600s – several due to Shakespeare. Interestingly, nonce coinages using *en-/em-* then drop to less than 20 during the 1700s, rising again to over 80 in the 1800s. It's evidently a prefix which goes in and out of fashion. There is only one instance cited for the 1900s – a poetic use of *enwiden*. The prefix seems to be an unusual method of word creation these days – which is perhaps why such words as *enjail* strike us so forcibly.

Williamisms? *Othello* is a good place to look. 'If that the Turkish fleet / Be not ensheltered and embayed, they are drowned', worries Montano, the Governor of Cyprus (II.i.17). 'Hail to thee, lady, and the grace of heaven.../ Enwheel thee round!' gushes Cassio to Desdemona (II.i.88). And one of the most striking *en*-coinages is given to Iago, as he insinuates to Othello, 'Do but encave yourself' (IV.i.80).

The other method of verb-making is to take a noun and turn it into a verb without adding any sort of prefix, as happens with Mowbray's *portcullised*. These are surprisingly effective creations. It must be the economy of expression that does it. After all, if you want to say that your tongue has been shut in behind your teeth and lips like a portcullis, the only other way of doing so is to use such words as 'like a'. Similes are wordy things. There's something appealing about the immediacy, the punchiness of a straight noun-to-verb conversion, without any extra words – which is presumably why we use this technique so much ourselves, on occasions when emotions are running high and we want to get to the point as quickly and as incisively as possible. 'But *why* can't I have another biscuit?', complains the persistent child for the fifth time. 'I'll biscuit you if you don't get off to bed now!', responds the patience-losing parent.

GROUNDLINGO

John McEnery's firking Pistol

John Tramper

Rewind 400 years. Pistol has managed to take a French prisoner, and asks the Boy to find out his name. 'He says his name is Master Fer', the Boy reports. 'Master Fer?', says Pistol, 'I'll fer him, and firk him, and ferret him'. No need to comment on the second of these verbs, one supposes, but the first and third show noun-to-verb conversion in truly violent action. As do these rather more upper-crust examples:

Grace me no grace, nor uncle me no uncle
(York, in *Richard II*, II.iii.8)
Still virginalling upon his palm?
(Leontes, in *The Winter's Tale*, I.ii.127)
Why, what read you there / That have so cowarded and chased your blood / Out of appearance?
(King Harry, in *Henry V*, II.ii.71)

The technique adds a physical impact and urgency to the situation. Leontes' perception of the movement of Hermione's fingers on Polixenes' hand is made more immediate, even erotic by turning *virginals* into a verb.

And what could be more physical than 'to lip a wanton in a secure couch'? Put it this way: Which would be more likely to arouse your anger, if you were Othello?

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