SOMETHING HAS HAPPENED TO THE English language – not texting, but the way we actually speak – and it’s not just affecting our students. Sure, they can be blamed for bringing versing into the vocabulary – as in Bonga Binga Small Good School versed North West Southside Secondary, or I’ll verse you later – but it’s we grownups who are to blame. After all, we agreed that these sort of nouns could be accessed as other parts of speech, and look at how that’s impacted.

Time once was that if something was impacted you went to your dentist. No longer. Impact has been verbed – or should that be verberated? – into impacted, which means something entirely new, as in: the network crash impacted on the students. Actually, that should read: the network crash impacted the students. Then it got adjectivated. Impacted now describes a product or service that is in severely short supply as a result of high demand – which is why we now get impacted schools. Time once was we used only to get impacted stools – but let’s not go there.

It’s time we took action on all this verberating and adjectivating and nourcing. The proper way to start is to agendarise the issue and identifi cate action items that, which, when completed, we can say we’ve actioned. In the old days we used to take action, and when we’d finished we said we’d taken action, but some bright spark changed that. Apparently ‘took action’ morphed fi rst into tooktioned, but that sounded like something only a hobbit would do, so along came actioned, which sounded, well, much more actionatistical. Obviously, actioned got leveraged into common use, while tooktioned got overkilled, if you understand, sorta.

Grammarians and even real people are, of course, divided – in the sense of divided or divisibilated – on the matter. At least, they’re versing each other. Some say using nouns as verbs is terrible while others say go verbs: it’s just what English does. Of course, English doesn’t just turn nouns into verbs, it also turns verbs into nouns. Take take down, for example, which got adjectivated by way of takedown, as in, say, takedown scaffold, which then got nounced into the website takedowns we have today. Ditto takeaway or – the horror, the horror – takeout.

Is a defence of English as wot woz spoke worth actioning? Probably not.

As James D Nicoll put it in 1990, ‘The problem with defending the purity of the English language is that English is about as pure as a cribhouse whore. We don’t just borrow words; on occasion, English has pursued other languages down alleyways to beat them unconscious and rifled their pockets for new vocabulary.’ Rifled? Heck, it pursues itself down alleyways to beat itself unconscious and rifle its own pockets.

Consider this: parent was kicking around as a noun in 1450, and checked in as a verb way back in 1663, so if you think parenting is new, think again. Medal was a noun in 1578 but gained verb status, as in medalling, in 1822. Our notorious impact was a noun in 1781 but, get this, started life as a verb back in 1601. And nobody seems to mind focus, which was leading a happy life as a noun in 1656 and became a verb relatively recently in 1875, which makes you wonder why contact – a noun in 1626 that became a verb in 1834 – gets such a hard time.

Versing, by the way, was registered way back in the 1913 edition of Webster’s Dictionary, which recorded Shakespeare’s use of the verb in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, the play where Oberon is versing Titania. As Titania puts it, versing means to speak in verse.

This month’s Last Word was written by Steve Holden, Editor of Teacher, with frank disregard for the purity of the English language.

Thanks to Eric Lippert for the earliest known recorded usage of parent, medal, impact, focus and contact as a noun and verb listed above. Visit http://blogs.msdn.com/ericlippert

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