

“Verbing” in Haiku

by Brad Bennett

English-language haiku owe much of their vitality to nouns, but many also include highly effective, dynamic, and integral verbs. Our reservoir of English-language verbs is wide and deep, but sometimes we search for a verb that would more precisely name a particular motion or action, and we can’t find it in the thesaurus. What is the haiku writer to do?

One solution is to invent your own verb, but not in a Seussian way, conjuring up a whole new word from scratch. Rather you can borrow another part of speech and re-designate it as a verb. Some modern English-language haiku include imaginative and successful examples of “verbing,” the practice of using a noun as a verb. (Grammarians also refer to this as “denominalization.”) Our everyday conversations are rife with examples of “denominal verbs.” Some have become so embedded over the years that we take them for granted (e.g. “authoring” a book and “tabling” a topic). Some emerge in the workplace or are inspired by new technology (e.g. xeroxing, texting, and googling). Language is always evolving, and more denominal verbs are finding their way into our conversations and dictionaries each year. Psycholinguist Steven Pinker, in his book *The Sense of Style*, claims that a fifth of English verbs probably started out as nouns or adjectives.¹ Dictionaries add new words every year—Merriam-Webster added 690 in 2023—and many of these are denominal verbs.

According to grammarly.com, “...the first instance of the word *verbification* dates to 1871,”² but the act of verbing far predates that. “Verbing is not a new concept. In fact, it has been around for centuries. William Shakespeare was known for his use of verbing in his plays. He was famous for using nouns as verbs to create new and interesting phrases that are still used today.”³ Shakespearean expert David Crystal writes, “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."⁴

The English language lends itself to verbing, in large part because we don't need to alter the noun when we transform it into a verb. "...it's easy to do because the base forms of verbs don't need special endings. For example, English can use the noun *action* as a verb simply by using it in a verb position within a sentence. But verbing the word *action* in French requires you to add a special ending to the word, which would leave you with *actionner*."⁵ English is not the only language that invites easy verbing. "... many other languages have similar processes for turning nouns into verbs. For example, in Japanese, the verb 'suru' can be added to a noun to create a new verb. This process is known as 'suru-verb' and is commonly used in Japanese."⁶

Verbing has become a common occurrence in our everyday language, but is it an effective strategy for haikuists? Let's look at a successful example of verbing in a recent English-language haiku:

he digs
 I daffodil
 forty-odd autumns

Michele Root-Bernstein⁷

In this delightful poem, Root-Bernstein verbs the noun "daffodil." This new denominal verb feels fresh and natural, it fits smoothly into the poem, and it adds a sense of *karumi* (a light touch). And there's plenty of room for the reader in this haiku. What does it mean to daffodil? Does it mean that the narrator is plopping daffodil bulbs into the holes that their partner is digging? Or is the narrator "flowering" in some way? In addition, balancing the non-denominal common verb "dig" with the freshly-coined denominal verb "daffodil" helps to emphasize the complementary differences in a long-term partnership.

As we can see in Root-Bernstein's poem, the denominal verb acts as a kind of unfinished metaphor or simile, waiting for the reader to give it meaning. As David Crystal writes about verbing, "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."⁸ Root-Bernstein's "daffodil" is just that pop of energy.

Verbing in Haiku History

Because verbing has been an integral part of the dynamic nature of language, there have been many examples of it in English-language haiku over the decades. According to Charlie Trumbull, "James W. Hackett was a great fan of wordplay in his haiku, including inventing new meanings for old words. For poetic reasons he invents locutions, twisting intransitive verbs into transitive and turning nouns into verbs that are not recognized as such by Mr. Webster..."⁹

As Nile dusk deepens
egrets blizzard to the same
solitary isle.

James W. Hackett¹⁰

That image of "blizzarding" egrets is very apt and quite striking.

Here's another example from a 20th century haiku poet, Anne McKay. In this one, McKay first creates a new compound noun, "redbloom," and then turns it into a verb:

again the blackbird
wings redblooming
on the road

Anne McKay¹¹

Of course, haikuists have continued to take advantage of this technique in the 21st century. Let's explore some more recent examples of successful verbing in English-language haiku. In this essay, I will focus on haiku that incorporate newly coined (or at least new to me) examples of verbing, not ones that have been folded into our language already.

Verbing can be used to great advantage in English-language haiku for a variety of reasons. First, it can create surprising, dynamic, and effective freshness. Secondly, it can contribute to the precision and concision of our haiku. Thirdly, since denominal verbs start as nouns, they are inherently flexible and can yield effective ambiguity. Fourthly, denominal verbs can provide euphony, or harmonious sound, in our haiku. Lastly, they can help to create *karumi*, humor, and a friendly, colloquial voice. Let's examine these advantages with examples.

Freshness

Writing haiku is an act of creation; we want our poems to be fresh, with new and vibrant language. As poet Jacqueline Suskin writes, "If I'm trying to invite anyone and everyone into my work, that doesn't mean I use simplified language. Instead, I have to build a language that is both uncommon and understandable."¹² Verbing can be both uncommon and understandable. What is more uncommon than creating a new word? And when you verb, you start with a recognizable noun, so the resulting new denominal verb should still be understandable to the reader, as in this example:

white-throated
white-crowned
sparrowing spring

Anne Elise Burgevin¹³

What could be more common and recognizable than a sparrow? But turning “sparrow” into a verb is fresh and highly effective. It adds motion to the poem and invites the reader to ponder what sparrowing means.

anxiety attack
I snapdragon
out of it

Tomislav Sjekloca¹⁴

In this haiku, the denominal verb “snapdragon” helps to create disjunction. The reader is expecting the comment “I snap out of it,” but instead we experience the calming effect of flowers. Part of the freshness of verbing is in its surprise.

Precision and Concision

For poets, precision is vital to the act of creation. We want each word to be the perfect one. As essayist Paul O. Williams wrote, “...the search for the exact word in haiku...is a careful and quiet search.... It demands opposite qualities sometimes—penetration and whimsy, passive waiting and mental exploration, constraint and freedom.”¹⁵ Verbing is one way to achieve that precision that combines “constraint and freedom.” The writer makes up the perfect word for what they want to describe. Thus, the well-chosen denominal verb can “umami” a haiku.

early spring
a grackle robins ahead
on the trail

Brad Bennett¹⁶

If you’re a forest bather like I am, you’ve probably encountered robins foraging on the trail ahead of you. When you walk

toward them, they fly away farther up the trail. When you approach them again, they fly ahead again. One day I noted that same behavior in a pair of grackles. Rather than try to (probably unsuccessfully) cram a description of that particular behavior into my small haiku, I used “robin” as a verb to accurately and more succinctly describe the behavior. Many denominal verbs “...earn a place in the language by making it easy to express concepts that would otherwise require tedious circumlocutions.”¹⁷ Isn’t that what a haiku is all about: paring down a moment into its purest and most concise essence? “The purpose of verbing is to make what we say immediate and to-the-point.”¹⁸ Choosing the right denominal verb can pare down words and syllables, abetting our efforts to be efficient and concise.

pond ice melting
 a stray cat figure-eights
 my ankles

Brad Bennett¹⁹

Flexibility and Ambiguity

By verbing, we use the flexibility of the English language to great effect. A word that serves or suggests multiple roles (e.g. a noun turned into a verb) provides multiple readings, and therefore more vibrancy. In the following poem, “waterfalling” generates a very dynamic energy in the haiku:

ancient caldera
 clouds waterfalling
 over the rim

Debbie Strange²⁰

Sometimes a denominal verb can add another sensory element to your haiku. In the following haiku, Pauly uses “grunting” instead

of “pulling on.” Of course, the word “grunt” is already a noun and a verb, but Pauly adds the preposition “on,” and turns it into a new verb. The reader still gets the meaning of “pulling on,” but now enjoys an additional auditory sensory experience and some playful humor:

New Year’s Day
grunting my boot
on the wrong foot

Bill Pauly²¹

As we know, many one-line haiku are constructed to achieve deliberate ambiguity. One word or phrase can act as a pivot that provides multiple meanings. Because of this, one-line haiku are fertile grounds for verbing. The denominal verb serves as the pivot word and yields effective and intriguing ambiguity.

in her corner of my living rooms an elephant

Michele Root-Bernstein²²

This haiku pivots around the word “rooms.” In one reading, the cut is in between “rooms” and “an,” which makes “living rooms” a noun. You could also read this haiku without a hard cut, thereby turning “rooms” into a denominal verb.

In the following poem, “birdsong” is first read as a noun. But it could also be read as an imperative verb, directed at unspecified birds or humans, urging them to “birdsong” each moment:

birdsong every now

Brad Bennett²³

Euphony

Sometimes, a denominal verb will give the haiku writer the extra advantage of adding more euphony, which helps to create unity. In the following haiku, the denominal verb “kite-tail” adds another hard c-sound to accompany “sky,” “crows,” and “hawk,” and also repeats the word “tail,” thereby contributing to the overall cohesion of the poem:

open sky
crows kite-tail
the red-tailed hawk

Jacquie Pearce²⁴

Karumi, Humor, and Colloquial Language

Centuries ago, Bashō advocated for using colloquial language in haiku. English-language haiku continue to rely on ordinary language, in no small part because it is dynamic and flexible. Verbing is a prime example of colloquial language, and thus helps us “everyday” our haiku and senryu. And since verbing is most definitely a playful linguistic act, denominal verbs can add *karumi* to a haiku, as in this one:

blue-skying from now on nothing but

Beverly Acuff Momoi²⁵

Of course, humor is one manifestation of *karumi*, and some denominal verbs are quite wry or even downright funny:

Daffodils
in our backyard—
we clown car it

Rebecca Lilly²⁶

Use With Caution

As we have seen, verbing can be used to great advantage in haiku. However, as is true when considering any literary and linguistic techniques in haiku, it is important to use verbing judiciously. First and foremost, we don't want the new verb to distract the reader from the haiku moment. We don't want the denominal verb to sound too clever, which would move the reader's attention away from the poem to the poet's dexterity. Secondly, we want to eschew clichés. Some denominal verbs sound like buzzwords, and that takes away from their freshness. Thirdly, we want to avoid creating a denominal verb that is too novel. If the new word is too strange, the reader may not understand it, or it may travel too far from the essence of the haiku's sensory experiences. Robert Spiess wrote, "If American haiku have a major fault, it may be the overemphasis on originality. Originality does not mean novelty, but direct contact with things in their original nature."²⁷

Here are some other questions you may want to ask yourself about newly-coined denominal verbs: Is there another existing word that does the job already? If so, there's no need to make up a new one. Your new verb will invariably become the "hot word" in the haiku. Are you ready for that? Do you want that word to get most of the attention? Also, is your denominal verb too bulky? That could certainly take away from the concision of the haiku. Finally, some denominal verbs describe cultural trends or memes. Will your verb pass the test of time? Does it matter to you if it won't?

Proper Nouns

Here's one more thing to consider when verbing: it is easier to verb common nouns. To verb a proper noun successfully, you want to make sure the person, place, thing, or idea is well-known, as in this haiku:

Paris pond
 a frog Picassos
 my face

George Swede²⁸

Other Kinds of Anthimeria

Verbing is one form of what grammarians call “anthimeria,” the use of one part of speech for another. The adventurous haikuist is not limited to verbing nouns and can dabble in other forms of anthimeria by verbing other parts of speech. In the following haiku, verbs were created from an adverb and a second person pronoun:

wind uprivering ripples

Brad Bennett²⁹

back south
 I return
 to y'alling

Alan S. Bridges³⁰

Past Participles

Of course, the haiku poet can also explore the opposite procedure—they can start with a verb and create other parts of speech. For instance, one verb form, the past participle, is often used as an adjective. In the following haiku, “acorned,” “pine needled,” and “springed” all start as nouns, get transformed into verbs, and finally serve as newly coined adjectives. Perhaps we could say they’ve been “adjectived.”

acorned
and pine needled
morning run

Sandi Pray³¹

sky
falling
petal
by
participle

springed
snow

Michele Root-Bernstein³²

As all the haiku above demonstrate, verbing can add fresh, precise, concise, flexible, effectively ambiguous, light, humorous, and colloquial aspects to our haiku. If we use denominal verbs mindfully and carefully, we can help create new meaning and resonance in our poems. Perhaps you are already verbing in your haiku. If not, I hope you'll "toolbox" the technique for the future.

finally spring sky as a verb

Rich Youmans³³

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Alan Bridges, Anne Burgevin, Kristen Lindquist, Michele Root-Bernstein, and Charlie Trumbull for their help in finding examples of verbing in haiku.

Notes:

1. Pinker, Steven. *The Sense of Style*. NY: Viking, 2014, p. 238.
2. "The Basics of Verbing Nouns," *grammarly.com*.
3. "The Act of Verbing a Noun," *readable.com*.
4. Crystal, David. "Verbing," *Around the Globe* 7 (1998), p. 20.
Accessed from *davidcrystal.com*.
5. "The Basics of Verbing Nouns," *grammarly.com*.
6. "The Act of Verbing a Noun," *readable.com*.
7. *Kingfisher* 7.
8. Crystal, David. "Verbing," *Around the Globe* 7 (1998), p. 20.
Accessed from *davidcrystal.com*.
9. Trumbull, Charles. "Verbs in Haiku," paper presented at The Midwest, Cradle of American Haiku Festival, Mineral Point, WI, July 2010. Unpublished.
10. *Kó*, Spring–Summer 2000.
11. McKay, Anne. *At Mull River*. Vienna, MD: wind chimes press, 1995.
12. Suskin, Jacqueline. *Every Day is a Poem*. Sounds True, 2020, p. 74.
13. *Penn State Press*, Long Term Ecological Reflections Project.
14. *tsuri-dōrō* 18.
15. Williams, Paul O. *The Nick of Time: Essays on Haiku Aesthetics*. Foster City, CA: Press Here, 2001, p. 88.
16. *Akitsu Quarterly*, Fall 2022.
17. Pinker, Steven. *The Sense of Style*. NY: Viking, 2014, p. 239.
18. "The Basics of Verbing Nouns," *grammarly.com*.
19. *bottle rockets* 45.
20. *Mariposa* 49.
21. *Frogpond* 34:1.
22. *Modern Haiku* 48.2.
23. *Under the Bashō*, November 2019.
24. *Frogpond* 46:1.
25. *Sonic Boom* 22.
26. Lilly, Rebecca. *Yesterday's Footprints*. Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2012.
27. Spiess, Robert. *A Year's Speculations on Haiku*. Madison, WI: Modern Haiku, 1995.
28. Swede, George. *Almost Unseen: Selected Haiku of George Swede*. Randy M. Brooks, Ed. Decatur, IL: Brooks Books, 2000, p. 49.
29. *Acorn* 48.

30. Unpublished.
31. *The Heron's Nest* 25:1.
32. *Half Day Moon Journal* 1.
33. *Kingfisher* 8.

Brad Bennett, a former elementary school teacher, now teaches haiku to adults. He has published three collections of haiku with Red Moon Press: *a drop of pond* (2016), which won a Touchstone Distinguished Book Award from the Haiku Foundation, *a turn in the river* (2019), which was shortlisted for the Touchstone Award, and *a box of feathers* (2022), which won Honorable Mentions in the Touchstone Awards and Haiku Society of America's Merit Book Awards. He also served as the haiku and senryu editor of Frogpond from 2021-2023.