On the existence of proper verbs

Abstract

The quality of being proper is always presumed, for perfectly understandable reasons to do with its function in acts of reference, to be restricted to nouns or noun phrases. This article is an exploration of the idea that a defensible case can be made for the real, if often ephemeral, existence of proper verbs. Evidence is presented from four categories of usage, mainly in English, but also in French and Dutch.

Keywords

Proper names, proper verbs, theory of proper names

Nobody doubts that being proper is an essential property of some expressions that perform reference. So it is unnecessary, except to frame the argument which follows, to point out that nouns can be proper (Jacques, Amsterdam) and so can noun phrases, allowing some room for discussion about whether an explicit definite article (in languages which have this feature) is taken as part of the linguistic material which is proper or merely a signal of it (Long Tall Sally, Long Island; The King of Cool, The Red Sea, The High Street, The River Thames, The Long Island). Both sorts taken together are proper names.

Some associations have been made in the literature of philosophy between properhood – the status of being proper – and verbs. Henry (1984: 73-74), for example, sets out the case that has been made for using the concept proper verb to circumvent a notorious difficulty in formal logic. Assuming the truth of the proposition expressed by Pegasus does not exist, one is allowed to infer by the Rule of Existential Generalization, on the analogy of less difficult cases involving proper names, that There is an x such that x does not exist. This is explicitly and unwelcomely contradictory, unlike the plain English sentence as usually understood. The difficulty can be circumvented, using the appropriate calculus, by converting all proper nouns (and indeed definite descriptions) into predicates, “i.e. verbs, proposition-forming functors which form a proposition from a single name” (Henry 1984: 74). In this framework, the proper noun Pegasus has a counterpart proper verb is the x such that that x is Pegasus, which Henry condenses into Pegasizes.1 Denying the existence of Pegasus is achieved through the paraphrase It’s not...
the case that there exists an \( x \) such that \( x \) Pegasizes/Pegasususes, which is suitably non-contradictory. Henry notes that the concept of a logically proper verb in essentially this sense was available in principle to medieval philosophers, e.g. Peter Abelard (Dialectica 130, lines 10-12; de Rijk 1970), in the analysis of predicates which are applicable to only one single individual, for example is the head of state of Barbados, applicable to the present queen of Britain [my example, RC] and that it was used by Russell in a more complex form to facilitate a formally suitable interpretation of his famous problem-sentence The present king of France is bald (Russell 1905: problematized especially at 482-483, 490; Henry 1984: 74, 104).

The question for us is whether this concept or conceit, a formal dodge for circumventing a contradiction which fails to be a contradiction when understood as ordinary English usage, has actually escaped from the logician’s boudoir to find an attested use in ordinary linguistic usage. It will be noticed that where the notion of a counterpart verb is introduced above, the verb Pegasususes has no subject (footnote 1). It should be clear that the only subject it could have, even in principle, is Pegasus or an expression which has precisely the same denotation as Pegasus. That is because it means ‘has the essence of [the unique individual] Pegasus’. The function of this logical item is the \( x \) such that that \( x \) is Pegasus can only be to express a tautology: Pegasus is the \( x \) such that that \( x \) is Pegasus, or to associate a name with a definite description: The [a particular] divine winged stallion born to Poseidon and Medusa is the \( x \) such that that \( x \) is Pegasus. Nothing except the individual in question can have the essence of that individual qua individual. I contend that the former element of the disjunction (expressing a tautology, i.e. not merely associating a name with a definite description) is the basis of an actual linguistic phenomenon. The latter element is an elaborate notational variant of something simpler: is [called] Pegasus. Much might be said about the relation between essences and names implied by the word in square brackets, but not here.

We need to note that the term proper verb also has some limited currency in a sense which goes beyond the point central to the present undertaking: for any verb etymologically derived from a proper noun, whether suffixal in form or not, such as boycott, bowdlerize, galvanize, gaussify [in technical usage] or coventrate [in historical usage; calqued on German (in Nazi propaganda) coventrieren]. The relation between such usages and the usages of central concern (which are subtypes of conversion, i.e. derivation without the use of a lexical affix) here is explored below.\(^2\)

\(^2\) There is another, distinct, use of the term verbum proprium which is not relevant here: ‘non-metaphorical word/verb’ as opposed to the verbum improprium or trope (e.g. Meyer 2005: 802-803).

\(^3\) This usage is found especially in informal online material: see for example the posting of apparent direct relevance by smartykatt (K. B. Starnes) “An update on the proper verb question”, http://prelimsandbeyond.wordpress.com/2008/03/07/an-update-on-the-proper-verb-question/ (7 March 2008, accessed 1 August 2014).
In this article I make a case for the existence in ordinary linguistic usage of proper verbs, or, equivalently for the present purpose, the existence of verbal uses of proper names where the verbalized sense of the name remains proper. This means that the new verbal form does not become synonymous with any ordinary lexical item, and in any case names have no sense of their own which would allow them to be synonymous with anything. The claims of four different verbal phenomena to be proper are presented and evaluated. They are marginal and quite rare – some are extremely rare – in ordinary usage, but have gained a toehold in English-language commercial advertising and as a literary device, and they show signs of being systematically exploitable in some kinds of informal and persuasive usage. They are:

(1) Verbs homonymous with their proper name subjects;
(2) Passive constructions with proper names as verbal forms;
(3) Verbs homonymous with ellipsed proper name adjuncts;
(4) Certain verb forms in out-

I specify the nature of these notions more fully in four separate sections below.

Provisionally I shall use the term proper name verb to denote any verb which derives etymologically from a proper name by conversion (i.e. with no lexical suffix such as, in English, -ize, -ify, or, in German, -ier(en)), and return to the question of the validity or usefulness of the term proper verb at the end of the article.

Verbs have the prototypical status of heading verb phrases, which have the function of predication, rather than reference. What could proper predication be? For relevant comparison with proper names, we must discover verbal usages in which the word in question, like a regular name, has no sense, only a denotation, namely the individual essence of at least one individual, and where that verb has as its role to identify a state or action with unique qualities in the same way that the primary function of a name is to identify, refer in some context to, the uniqueness of an individual. Can such a thing exist? Is it even worth embarking on the search?

Suppose we identified a male German individual called Schmidt, but expressed him verbally, using third-person singular present tense morphology: Schmidtet,

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4 For full exposition of the set of ideas about properhood which are assumed in this article, see Coates (2006, 2011). Some of the examples used below are of types discussed by Clark and Clark (1979: esp. section 2.2) within a wider argument about the use of nouns as verbs, and the dependence of their interpretation on contextual factors, especially the presumed mutual knowledge of participants in a conversation (a potential problem in then-current models of generative grammar). I became aware of this article, whose conclusions I fully accept, after a near-final draft of the present work had been written. As will be seen, my purpose is different: to justify a particular essentialist argument that certain verbal usages can be regarded as proper (in the same sense as in proper name).
meaning ‘has the essential qualities of (that uniquely identifiable) Schmidt’ and not ‘has characteristics shared by all individuals called Schmidt’. The only legitimate literal usage of such an expression would be in the tautological Schmidt Schmidtet; in any other case, such as Herr Baumgärtner schmidtet, the usage would be metaphorical – ‘Herr Baumgärtner is like/ has characteristics like (one or some of) those of (the individual called) Schmidt’.

Even if not rejected out of hand as fantasy, the required state of affairs might appear to stifle useful conversation. But a verbal usage dependent on the same nexus of ideas might easily be imagined. Suppose I am nervous before an important event, and a friend says “Just be yourself”. She might alternatively, in a linguistically playful way, say “Just be Richard”, or even, more succinctly, “Just Richard”, i.e. ‘just act according to the essence of Richard’s [i.e. your] personality’. If I obeyed this appropriately, then Richard would have Richarded. Does this kind of usage ever occur?

1. Subjects and related proper name verbs

The earliest example known to me of a verb fulfilling the criteria for properhood described above is in French. In his song “Bruxelles” (1962), the Belgian chansonnier Jacques Brel included the following chorus:

(1) C’était au temps où Bruxelles rêvait

C’était au temps du cinéma muet

C’était au temps où Bruxelles chantait

C’était au temps où Bruxelles bruxellait

It is the last word which will attract attention. It is a neologism, and it can hardly be doubted (assuming that it is not there just for the rhyme) that Brel intended it to mean ‘was just being Brussels’, ‘was doing what typified or expressed the essence of Brussels’, whatever that might imply. It amounts to a playful rejuvenation of the reflexive construction X BEX exemplified in English by She’s herself again at last. The name of the city is built into any paraphrase that one can imagine. Even the seemingly trivially variant case of a true (if contingently so) definite description being substituted (‘was just being the capital of Belgium’, ‘was doing what was typical of or expressed the

\[5\] In fact, of course, the only shared characteristic of all Schmidts is the bearing of the name. It would be unwise to think that there is any causal correlation at all between possession of a name and the possession of some particular stretch of Y-chromosomal DNA; and if all Schmidts did indeed exclusively share some other characteristic, it would constitute an intension, which is something that could be paraphrased using other lexis without mention of the name.

\[6\] I am grateful to Laurie Bauer for comments on a draft of this article.

\[7\] Brel’s innovation was previously discussed in Coates (2005: 10-12), unfortunately slightly misquoted though without damaging the point in question.
essence of the capital of Belgium’), does not involve an adequate paraphrase, being partial or selective or over-prescriptive about whatever the essence of Brussels might be considered to be. Any interpretation actually achieved in conversation depends on some knowledge presumed to be shared by the participants. The conversational utility of this usage is shown by the fact that it has been mercilessly exploited by the tourist industry and in social media, in a range of languages, and is now something of a local cliché:

(2) To relive the days ‘when Brussels brusseled’ (advertising copy promoting short breaks in Brussels, 2003)

The time when Brussels brusseled can be found here ... (Brasserie Breughel promotional material, undated)

Bruxelles bruxelle toujours ... (TripAdvisor France, 13 July 2013)\(^8\)

Essayons de capter dans nos objectifs ce qui fait que Bruxelles bruxelle, ...
(Urbeez, 3 November 2013)\(^9\)

De Marokkaanse pannenkoekenstand aan de Zuidmarkt is hoe Brussel brusselt ...\(^{10}\) (Twitter, 2 March 2014)

If we think instead of a hypothetical corresponding sentence with the name of a different city substituted:

(3) C’était au temps où Louvain bruxellait

it is clear that this is a metaphorical usage: Louvain was being, or doing something, like Brussels, rather than literally being Brussels.\(^{11}\) However, when Brussels is the subject, the metaphoricity is necessarily absent, and we therefore have a semantically definable class of phenomena of uncountable membership (but rare usage) whose subject is necessarily and literally the same as an expression which forms part of the definition and which is formed by conversion from that expression (Brussels: to Brussels, ‘to have the characteristics or essence of Brussels’). Such expressions are occasionally found in English, and appear to carry the implicature “The situation is or was much as you would ...”

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\(^8\) Certain very well-known web-sites such as TripAdvisor, Flickr and Facebook are not referenced in full. Less familiar sites are. No material is quoted that could not be found and checked using a simple Google\textsuperscript{TM} search on 1 August 2014.


\(^{10}\) ‘The Moroccan pancake stall on the South Market is the way Brussels brussels ...’.

\(^{11}\) A real instance of this has been discovered: “Au temps où Uccle Bruxellait!”,
http://www.pavillonlouisxv.be/album-1681958.html, accessed 25 June 2014. Uccle is a suburb of Brussels, making the interpretation of the phrase in terms of metaphoricity or otherwise complicated. It is likely, but not necessary, that any such case would be taken by those who know it as an allusion to the Brel song.
expect,” with further implicatures depending on speakers’ and hearers’ real-world knowledge of who or what is denoted by the subject.

(4) But Murray was Murraying. He had to fight off two break points in his first service game and then was broken in his second. (Louisa Thomas, Grantland, 31 January 2012)\(^\text{12}\)

Robert is Roberting right now clearly 😂. (Twitter, 8 June 2014)

Spain is spaining right now with their play ... (Live Blogging Everything, 10 July 2010)\(^\text{13}\)

Sun is shining and London is Londoning. (Twitter, 3 September 2013)\(^\text{14}\)

And somewhat more complexly:

(5) New York is New Yorking the New York out of itself. (Twitter, 20 December 2012)

Finally, although it involves just a catchy marketing pun, the following depends on, or encourages, the idea that Glasgow can be a verbal notion.

(6) There’s a lot of Glasgowing on in 1990. (Slogan for Glasgow European City of Culture, 1990)

When what the subject of the verb denotes is not directly related to the essence of what the verb denotes, the process of lexicalization, and thus by definition deproperization, begins. Proper name verbs in the narrowest sense are inherently unstable – they have a short half-life and rapidly decay to the more stable condition of having lexical content (though they are often ephemeral even in this condition). This is well illustrated by what has happened in the case of to Bill Clinton. The first quotation below shows the verb already (though implicitly) with a heteronymous subject, but with the idea that it alluded to ‘anything President Bill Clinton is, was or embodied’ not far below the surface:

(7) At one stroke, the new verb ‘Bill Clintonned’ [sic] was seen to embody that fabulous mix adored by a world drunk on an extraordinary cocktail — celebrity


\(^\text{14}\) We are faced with the practical difficulty of deciding whether the first letter of the verb should be upper or lower case in English. Some writers have decided to do one thing, some the other. If a true proper verb can be identified, perhaps capitalizing it would be justified, but it is not a point to suffer for.
and politics; shame and sex appeal; money and moral triangulation. (The Times of India, 14 July 2004).

I take this to mean that the verb could be understood as meaning ‘to do what was typical of or expressed the essence of Bill Clinton, or anything he did’, notionally predicated of Bill Clinton alone. It rapidly came to be used in specific senses, including ‘to spin, put a gloss on, twist the truth, mislead’, i.e. it came to be used lexically:

(8) And I’m not talking about people Bill Clintoning it with creative responses.  

No amount of crafty Bill Clintoning is going to change reality here.

A second striking example involves a quotation from a song by Beyoncé Knowles, “Partition”. The third verse of the sexually explicit song includes the words:

(9) He popped all my buttons and he ripped my blouse/ He Monica Lewinski’d [sic] all on my gown.

Ms Lewinsky wrote, in a public response, alluding to the outcome of Bill Clinton’s alleged sexual exploits, i.e. using the verb in a lexical sense:

(10) Thanks, Beyoncé, but if we’re verbal, I think you meant ‘Bill Clinton’d all on my gown,’ not ‘Monica Lewinsky’d’.  

The construction is also exemplified by the following:

(11) …but Grosjean can’t take advantage, Henmaning (how long before it officially becomes a verb?) an easy volley into the net before slicing a straightforward backhand wide.

The metalinguistic comment in the quoted text indicates that the Guardian writer was aware that these constructions are possible but rare, and usually too ephemeral to hit “official” publications like dictionaries. Henmaning (used in a lexical sense ‘making unforced errors’, with a range of more specific implicatures), exploiting the name of

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15 The Times of India notes before this extract: “Bill Clinton, the noun, already exists in Microsoft’s Encarta Dictionary.” This seems to be not strictly true; I have only discovered a link to the biographical article in the archived Encarta encyclopedia (https://web.archive.org/web/20091028034833/http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_a.761564341/Bill_Clinton.html, accessed 30 June 2014) and have not found a lexical entry of the kind implied.


19 Vanity Fair, 6 May 2014, online subscription edition, quoted in The Independent, 7 May 2014.
British tennis player Tim Henman, appears to be a thing of the past, along with
Henmania, since the rise to prominence of Andy Murray (compare example (4)).

As a final example consider:

(12) After looking at these pictures of me John Lennoning (there's no other name
for what I was doing) ...

In this, the proper name verb is used absolutely, intransitively, to mean 'to behave as (if)
John Lennon'. There is no warrant in the blog quoted to suggest that the expression
might be lexicalized in some particular sense relevant to the life of John Lennon (e.g.
'seek publicity', 'be a musician', 'have distinctive glasses'). It might be debated
metaphysically whether Afam, the author of the blog, is claiming that he was behaving
like John Lennon, in which case the usage is metaphorical like the hypothetical case
quoted above of Herr Baumgärtner “schmidtting”, or whether he is claiming to have John
Lennon’s persona and therefore be him, in which case we might make a case for a truly
proper usage of the Schmidt “Schmidtting” type – and in which case the verbal
expression X-ing actually means being X. It seems probable that the metaphorical usage
will be intended in the overwhelming majority of such cases; but it is not inconceivable
that Dr Jekyll might have said, under his breath, “I'm Mr Hyde-ing today”. I have not
discovered a convincing instance of this possibility, but I see no reason to dismiss the
possibility out of hand, especially in a literary context or in conversational word-play.
Dr Jekyll might just as convincingly have whispered, “I'm being Mr Hyde today”, but any
semantic distinction between being Mr Hyde and Mr Hyde-ing is fine indeed.

A rare counterpart to the case of subjects with related proper name verbs is
offered by the following, which illustrates a proper name verb with a direct object that
is related rather than a subject:

(13) The project ‘Belgrading’ Belgrade, aimed at preserving the identity and
cultural heritage of the capital city ...

The intended meaning of the title of this project is clearly 'giving or restoring the
essence of Belgrade to Belgrade'.

2. Passive proper name verbs

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3, 41-83) contains an excellent detailed and thorough study of name to verb
conversions in a corpus of newspaper articles.
21 http://www.theramblingsofamadman-afam.com/2014/05/notes-on-john-
22 http://www.parking-
servis.co.rs/en/information/interesting_topics/2010/08/27/777-belgrading, accessed
7 July 2014.
The last examples, illustrating active voice usage of proper name verbs, point implicitly in another direction. Proper name verbs may also include those of the passive form to be/get X-ed, which mean ‘to be influenced by or subjected to the individual so named’. This may be done for artistic effect, as in the case of the rich source offered by Paul Simon’s song “A Simple Desultory Philippic”. Here we find “I been Norman Mailered, Maxwell Taylored, ... John O’Hara’d, McNamara’d, ... Ayn Randed, ... Phil Spectored, Lou Adlered, Barry Sadlered, ... Mick Jaggered, ... Roy Haleed, ... Art Garfunkeled.” No specific sense can be attached by outsiders to any of these nonce-verbs, and the reader/listener is free to infer that they mean ‘subjected to Norman Mailer [etc.] or to some (unspecified) acts embodying the essence of Norman Mailer [etc.’. This often happens when the use of the name has high topicality or newsworthiness, and the verbs remain in use for only a short time. Let the following example stand for many:

(14) Batsmen can be given out in various ways, such as bowled, caught, run out, stumped, or leg before wicket, and yet still another method of being dismissed has been introduced — “Hitlered out.” If a batsman is given out under the new l.b.w. rule which enables a bowler to obtain an l.b.w. decision with an off break, he will be quite entitled to say that he was “Hitlered out,” as the umpire’s signal indicating that the decision was made under the new rule closely resembles the Nazi salute.

Such coinages rarely last beyond a period of newsworthiness, as Davies (2004: chapter 3) suggests convincingly. By the time one has a usage of the type illustrated in (14), even if it does not last, it is no longer appropriate to think of it as proper in a synchronic sense, but as a lexical verb with at least one specific sense, whose etymological source is a converted proper name, like many others such as the brand-names mentioned in footnote 28 below. Any interpretation achieved in conversation when such a usage is

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24 The Barrier Miner, 27 October 1936, http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/47926429, accessed 26 June 2014. Cases where the term exists as a verb only because of its phonology rather than any actual connection with the person or thing whose proper name is used are discounted, for example Cockney rhyming slang Adam and Eve ‘believe’, Hugo Boss ‘doss’.
25 The “best known” case of this in English may be spurious. The slang word mullered ‘thrashed, crushed, thoroughly beaten, defeated, hammered; drunk’ has often been derived popularly from the surname of the German footballer Gerd Müller, a prolific goal-scorer, but this alleged origin has been disputed, for example by OED and Green (2014). Müller scored twice against England, including the winner in their match at the 1970 World Cup. But the word has been noted in print for the first time as late as 1990 (OED). This was the year in which the very successful Müllerlight® and Müller® Rice dairy desserts were launched in the UK, which may or may not be a coincidence. The company had entered the UK market in 1987 with its fruit corner yogurts in divided plastic pots. OED offers the equally speculative etymology: “Probably < Angloromani mul-, preterite stem of mer- to die (cognate with Sanskrit mf-...), apparently with substitution of -er suffix [frequentative] for the Angloromani inflectional endings.”
first introduced depends on some knowledge presumed to be shared by the
participants, in this case about current political symbolism. The source of the
expression may be recovered and appreciated as an artful or artistic device by those
with appropriate knowledge, but knowledge of the allusion is unnecessary for the verb
to be used successfully in appropriate contexts after its initial appearance, because it
will have gained a lexical sense: be hitlered out = 'be dismissed leg before wicket by an
off-break'.

An instance of the same phenomenon where the verb form retained a proper
flavour for longer after coining can be found in the successful mid-1990s advertising
campaign for the sugared soft orange drink Tango (a brand of Britvic plc; campaign by
HHCL). The original ads featured a fat man coloured orange tapping Tango drinkers on
the shoulder, slapping both their cheeks as they turned round, and then vanishing. The
narrator then spoke the punch-line:

(15)  You know when you've been Tangoed!

It will be obvious that the slogan itself probably intended no specific meaning beyond
'you are aware of the effect of/ when you are struck by (a) Tango', and thus contained
_Tango_ as a proper name verb like those mentioned in the Paul Simon song; and it will
also be obvious how _Tango_ could easily come be used as a transitive lexical verb to
mean 'slap', or metaphorically 'shock, publicly insult', which it did briefly.  

Closely related to the _Tango_ case is what appears to be the extended use of the
structure of the verb phrase in the slogan to mean 'be (adversely) affected by …', as in:

(16)  Has your town been Tescoed? (Facebook, 1 June 2012; page
/mytownsbeentescoed)

This usage slots into a more widespread pattern whereby a name is promoted from a
place in an adjunct phrase to replace a semantically bleached verb such as _do_ or _go_, to
which we now turn.

3. Proper name verbs and related ellipsed proper adjuncts

The theoretical possibility offered by proper name verbs has been exploited in recent
years by the consumer advertising industry. The advertisers’ strategy is to ensure that

might be consistent with Green’s view (2008, s.v.) that the word has existed in spoken
prison slang since the 1950s.

26 Urban dictionary, entry by Karl Steiger (2004),
some desirable activity is referred to in a slogan using the business name of those who are hiring their services:\(^{27}\)

\[17\] \textit{You can do it if you B\&Q it.}

\[18\] \textit{Don't shop for it, Argos it.} [Later campaign:] \textit{Find it, get it, Argos it.} [Also, in a further development, which assumes familiarity with the later slogan:] \textit{Choose how to Argos it} (i.e. `select your mode of delivery or collection')

The verbalized brand-name \(X\) carries the generalized sense `to use product \(X\) to the job of Ying'. The intention is to associate a verbal notion with the company's name \([\text{do (i.e. 'succeed at')} = \text{B\&Q, shop for = Argos}]\).\(^{28}\) In the later variant of the Argos campaign, what is implicated seems less clear, but it follows the success of "getting" what you need, and therefore appears to be a rhetorical climax, one step better even than getting it. The precise intended meaning of these slogans is not wholly clear – probably the matter is not worth pursuing because there may not be a precise intended meaning – but given the biclausal construction in these two instances the verb in the second might be interpreted as the verb in the first with an adjunct of variable structure and content which does not need a precise generic structural definition. The first might be:

\[18\] \textit{You can do it if you do it using [things from] B\&Q.}

And the second:

\[19\] \textit{Don't shop [just anywhere] for it, shop at Argos for it.}

It is clear that some examples of this phenomenon may pass into ordinary lexical usage (such as those in footnote 28).\(^{29}\) But I suggest that the above examples retain in the verb.

\(^{27}\) "Brand names used as verbs is always a positive development …" (The Corcoran Group, Twitter, 26 October 2012), accessed 8 July 2014. The writer is clearly alluding to popular usage, not legal sentiment.

\(^{28}\) But surely without the expectation that the brand-name will be adopted into common parlance as a word in its own right, a synonym of a corresponding generic term or doing duty for one that does not exist, as has happened without the intervention of paid manipulators in the cases of \textit{heroine, hoover, biro, yo-yo, escalator, tarmac, sellotape, xerox, google, frisbee, jacuzzi, marigolds} and many others, or \textit{frigidaire, pédalo and digicode} in French. On some of these and a wide range of others, see for example Dick (2004), Samland (2010). The etymological brand association may remain latent, but easily recoverable if the brand persists. If the term is used generically, litigation may follow, as has happened or been threatened in several of the above cases. It is of interest and relevance that the Microsoft® Word editor I am using tried to enforce the symbolic capitalization of several of the above words as I typed them.

\(^{29}\) A speculative Google™ search on \textit{been Duluxed} reveals that this expression has frequently been used in the generalized sense of 'painted (out), "whitewashed"', for instance: “As I gratefully disembarked I noticed that ‘Aeroflot’ has been duluxed out on the side of the plane and replaced with Air Estonia.”

\url{http://www.the75andztclub.co.uk/forum/showthread.php?t=86306} (2011), accessed
the full denotation of the brand, i.e. they retain their properhood; they refer more narrowly than the denotation of the generic term mentioned in the first clause, and this narrow reference is delimited by the denotation of a proper name. Firm evidence that this possibility may generalize beyond the products of the marketing psychologists into ordinary usage is offered by the following:

(20)  
Am planning to fly in and out of New York then fly down to Orlando then Amtrak / Greyhound it down to the keys (TripAdvisor, 2009)  
I usually greyhound it up to San Marcos to visit friends in Kyle. (Flickr, 2009)  
If there's enough interest we'll arrange a bus down from Birmingham and back OR Megabus it down, crash in a hostel, and Megabus it up the next day. (Facebook, 2010)  

You could just Ryanair it over to Clifden for the show on the weekend30  

where the writers use the travel company brand names Amtrak, Greyhound, Megabus and Ryanair in the structure to X it to indicate, using a verb form, not just what mode of transport they will use, but which company's services will be called on. This evidently paraphrases elliptically 'go/come to [place] using [brand]'31.

Beyond the sphere of travel, we find brand-names of online entities being converted in a similar way, and sometimes used transitively:

(21)  
This chick facebooked me and said I'm hot32  

About this girl who subtweets when she's mad and then facebook him drunk (Twitter, 2014)  

"Mom Just Facebooked Me and Dad Knows How to Text": article title  

(Turnbull 2010)  

30 June 2014. I am not aware that this expression has been used in an advertising slogan for Dulux paint; the example quoted shows how vulnerable brand-names can be to lexicalization.  

30  http://www.horseandhound.co.uk/forums/archive/index.php/t-557733.html, accessed 1 July 2014. No full analysis is offered here of what seems to be a dummy direct object it in certain examples in (8), (20) and (22), which is clearly distinct from the referential it in (17).  

31 There is a professional literature on the matter of brands as verbs; see for example Coby Berman, https://medium.com/i-m-h-o/product-names-used-as-verbs-b84265af447b, accessed 8 July 2014: "Successful social products have one commonality that signifies their dominance: they are talked about as verbs."  

evidently meaning ‘contact or expose [someone], using Facebook’, and of course Google was being used in a similar way meaning ‘search for, using Google’ before there was ever the legal controversy about its being used in a generic, non-branded, sense (see footnote 28). Tweet appears to be a deliberate creation to substitute for a potential similar usage of Twitter, though the latter is occasionally recorded as a synonymous verb, for unclear reasons (perhaps authorial ignorance).

It is therefore possible in English systematically to promote a proper name in an adjunct (especially a place or instrument adverbial) to (main) verb status and to ellipse the notional adjunct which contains the proper name, especially where the main verb is semantically bleached or conversationally implicated:

(22) **Yup, you’re wasting valuable Marks and Spencering time.**
    (i.e. valuable time to shop/ for shopping at Marks and Spencer)

    *Londoning it for the week* (Twitter, 2014)

    *lets London it again soon* (Bebo archive, 2007)

    *Been Londoning it up over here with my mate ...*  (Bebo archive, c. 2009)

    *Jack and I are Londoning it up this Sunday! By Londoning ... I mean meeting each other in London.* (Facebook, 2011)

    (i.e. go to London, be in London)

and with metaphorical application to another place than London, indicating that the expression has achieved, or is on its way to achieving, lexical status (? ‘have a good time’) for the writer:

(23) **My girl from London arrives tomorrow. We’re gonna ‘London’ it up all over this town.** (Twitter, 2010)

In a more or less parallel fashion, in Dutch, the verb *brussen* is used to mean ‘zich inzetten voor Brussel’, ‘Brussel bezoeken, in Brussel werken of wonen, of een activiteit doen m[et] b[etrekkings] t[ot] Brussel’, as well as ‘to assign responsibility for some policy to the European Union’, based on the metonymic usage of Brussel and its equivalents in other languages to refer to the European Union, its Council or Parliament.

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35 This possibility is exploited punningly in the many instances of the type *Brighton-ing up the weekend with friends* that can be found in web sources.

That may be viewed as a specialized application of the second definition quoted. The city-name may receive the same treatment in English, as witnessed by this very specific lexicalization:

(24) *It was Brusseling when I arrived in Belgium – that misty drizzle that never quite settles.* (Murray Gunn blog, 2008)\(^{37}\)

*Brusselen*, the infinitive form of the Dutch verb, is also the name of a blogspot.\(^ {38}\)

A rare additional possibility, not involving adjunct ellipsis but converting to a verb an element within a phrasal direct object and raising a human argument to the direct object position associated with this new verb,\(^ {39}\) is illustrated by:

(25) *We like to think we de-Melbourned him, but Melbourne seem to be de-Melbourning Melbourne.*\(^ {40}\)

The derived verb in this case contains the place-name *Melbourne*, and is clearly intended to mean ‘to remove the essence of Melbourne from’. In the first clause, there is a human direct object; in the second, the direct object is a place-name, or more likely the name of a football team, and the structure bears comparison with that in example (5). The second clause also serves as a structural harbinger and as a kind of semantic inverse of the subject matter of section 4.

4. Proper name verbs in out- and related proper direct objects

We conclude with a type of phenomenon which takes the notion of the proper name verb back much further in time. In English, there has existed for some four hundred years a construction in which a verb is formed by conversion from a proper noun \(X\) which features as or in its direct object, and prefixed with \(out-\), carrying the sense ‘do something typical of or essential to \(X\) to a greater degree than even \(X\) does or did or would do’.\(^ {41}\) It is now a rather frequently exploited device. The earliest instance and *locus classicus* is in a speech by Hamlet in *Hamlet* (3.ii.14):

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\(^ {38}\) [http://brusselen.blogspot.co.uk/](http://brusselen.blogspot.co.uk/), accessed 27 June 2014.

\(^ {39}\) The terminology of movement is used only as a convenient metaphor.

\(^ {40}\) [http://www.bigfooty.com/forum/threads/list-of-2014-free-agents.1041876/page-9](http://www.bigfooty.com/forum/threads/list-of-2014-free-agents.1041876/page-9), accessed 8 July 2014. Laurie Bauer has pointed out to me that this appears to be a specialization of the now-proverbial type “You can take the boy out of the country but you can’t take the country out of the boy”.

\(^ {41}\) See Bauer (no date: 11-12) for a brief discussion of whether these forms illustrate prefixation or compounding, and for fuller discussion prompted by the perceived frequency of its usage in the *Guardian* newspaper, Bauer and Renouf (2001), Bauer (2008).
[26]  [...] o it offends mee  
to the soule, to heare a robustious per[i]wig-pated fellowe  
tere a passion to totters, to very rags, to spleet the eares [10]  
of the groundlings, vwho for the most part are capable  
of nothing but inexplicable dumbe showes, and noyse:  
I would have such a fellow whipt for ore-dooing  
Termagant, it out Herods Herod, pray you auoyde it.  

The conveyed or implicated meaning is something like: ‘To do this would be to rant even more than the notorious rarter Herod [as a stage character, RC] would’, or, as is often thought, ‘To do this would be to be more cruel than the notoriously cruel Herod’.

This novel construction inspired others:

[27]  1655 T. Fuller Church-history of Britain viii. 21 Herein, Morgan, Out-Bonnered even Bonner himself.  

The Oxford English dictionary (OED) identifies a broader category of “phrases where the derived verb in out- is cognate with its object: to outdo a person or thing in the sphere of action in which they have particular expertise or aptitude, or for which they are renowned; to reach a level of accomplishment in a particular quality or property superior to that normally associated with it. The earliest examples, formed from both nouns and verbs, are from Shakespeare. The construction is rare in the 17th and 18th centuries, but becomes common from the 19th century, when phrases formed on adjectives also appear.” The editors then identify phrases “[f]ormed on proper names: to outdo a person, nation, or sect in respect of the attribute for which they are renowned, as to out-Nero Nero, 44 to out-Auden Auden. ... New English Dictionary [i.e. the first edition of OED] (1903) remarks: ‘The vast development of this, as of so many other Shakesperian [sic] usages, belongs to the 19th century, in which such expressions have been used almost without limit.” Finally, they identify the grammatically closest

43 This and references of a similar structure below are taken from Oxford English dictionary online (accessed frequently), lightly edited for ease of reading.  
45 As seen for example in “Unfortunately, 741 does not warn JM of the risks attendant upon trying to out-Auden Auden.” (Denis Donoghue, New York Times, 15 June 1980.) It may be possible to arrive at an understanding of *to out-Auden McNeice ‘to display more of what is essential to Auden than McNeice does’, just as it might be possible to attach a sense to Uccle bruxellait ‘Uccle was doing what is essential to Brussels’. If that is accepted, the use of the word related in section headings 1., 3. and 4. might be seen as too restrictive. We return to this matter in the discussion of lexicalization below.
parallel, phrases “[f]ormed on common nouns, as to out-villain villainy, to out-infidel the infidel”, though, as can be seen, not necessarily formed on the homonymous common noun:

(28) 1612 J. Davies *Muses Sacrifice* folio 113v: So hath a Painter licence too, to paint A Saint-like face, till it the Saint out saint.

before 1616 Shakespeare *All’s Well that ends Well* (1623) 4. iii. 276: He hath out-villain’d villanie so farre, that the raritie redeemes him.

It is generally thought that Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* between 1599 and 1602. It does indeed seem certain that other examples of the same or similar structures were inspired by him, since none pre-date *Hamlet* and the earliest others follow it closely in time. The following, taken from *OED*, exemplify the broader category of construction where a proper name is embodied in the verb but the direct object is not identical with it:

(29) 1603 T. Dekker et al. *Patient Grissill* signature C2v: If you should beare all the wrongs, you would be out Athlassed.

before 1616 Shakespeare *Cymbeline* (published 1623) 3. iv. 35: Whose tongue Out-venomes all the Wormes of Nyle.

1635 E. Rainbow *Labour* 25: You shall observe them to out-Epicure the foole in the Gospell.

before 1644 F. Quarles *Virgin Widow* (published 1649) 1. i. 9: Her impetuous rage Out-devils the whole Academe of Hell.

1681 E. Hickeringill *The Character of a Sham Plotter* in *Works* (published 1716) I. 219: Dulness and Slander enough to out-Billingsgate Heraclitus Ridens.

Shakespeare as innovator, however, was adapting what was already his innovation, a construction where the direct object was common rather than proper, and the expression embedded in the derived verb was itself a verb (or at least homonymous with a verb):

(30) 1597 Shakespeare *Richard II* 5. iii. 107: Our prayers do outpray his.

1608 Shakespeare *King Lear* 24. 6: My selfe could else outfrowne false Fortunes frowne.

The construction is still current:
Agarkar, Bangar and Zaheer Khan did much of the rest – out-Englanding the England bowlers in their mastery of line, length, accuracy and patience. (Wisden, 2003)

Each in their own different ways, Asda, Sainsbury’s and Morrisons are out-Tescoing Tesco. (Retail Week, 21 August 2009)

It is a moot point whether the early crucial examples quoted show properhood of the verb in the same way as the examples in sections 1., 2. and 3. The proper nouns seen in out-Herod and out-Athlassed can be taken as alluding to a specific property of a named individual which can also find conventional lexical expression in the form of verbs or verb phrases (Herod = ‘rant’ or ‘be cruel’, according to one’s viewpoint; Athlas = ‘be capable of bearing huge loads’; England ‘be a master of line, length, etc.’). But they could be taken, by anyone unfamiliar with the conventionally understood characteristics of the individual named, in a sense that suggests compatibility with what we have seen in sections 1., 2. and 3.: it out Herods Herod ‘it has more of whatever typifies or expresses the essence of Herod than Herod does or did’; Morgan, Out-Bonnered even Bonner himself ‘Morgan did more of whatever typifies or expresses the essence of Bonner than Bonner does or did’; out-Tescoing Tesco ‘doing more of whatever typifies or expresses the essence of Tesco than Tesco does or did’. Let us call this real but remote possibility the proper reading whilst acknowledging that in order to be rhetorically effective the expressions need to be understood as having a common or lexical reading such as the ones involving ranting or cruelty and heavy weights and mastery of line and length.

5. Drawing-together and conclusion

The sets of examples above suggest that it is possible for a verb derived by conversion from a proper name to retain a meaning that is precisely that of the proper name, or which makes that meaning verbal through the use of grammatical apparatus such as voice, tense and aspect. It is not unreasonable to call this constrained sub-type of proper name verbs proper verbs, or to call the usage the verbal use of proper names. We have seen that the condition is unstable in some usages, especially that illustrated in section 2., and is likely to experience a drift towards the lexicalization of the name in question in a particular sense, i.e. to become a “proper verb” in the more liberal but irrelevant sense mentioned in footnote 3.

In principle any proper name can be used in these ways. The relevant meaning involves a non-specific allusion to the essential characteristics of the individual named, i.e. to what makes X X. Brussels used to brussel(s) and presumably still does; Paul Simon

was affected by a non-specific trait of Art Garfunkel; we may spend our leisure hours
Argosing (it) or Londoning it up; and we may amaze our friends by out-Tescoing Tesco
without letting on which characteristic of Tesco, if any, we are drawing attention to an
excess of. Specific meanings may be implicated in particular conversational contexts,
but these will not be conventionalized; however, usage changes meanings, and when
they do become focused and conventionalized through increasing frequency of usage,
their ephemeral verbal properhood decays to more stable particles of lexical meaning.

As we noted at the outset, it is axiomatic that names have to do with reference,
and the idea of proper verbs may appear on that account to be theoretically incoherent,
since verbs are not referring expressions. However, we have limited the concept to
verbs which have no additional lexical apparatus in their morphology; they are all
simply conversions of proper nouns – or strictly, of proper names. This means that they
are always etymologically transparent, and their etymon (the name in question) can be
readily accessed even in the context of normal use. The name from which each is
derived accordingly forms the main element of its meaning, which is always, for some
name X, ‘to have the essential but unspecified characteristics of X’, ‘to be what X is’, ‘to
do what X does’, ‘to affect or use X’, and ‘to be affected by X’, i.e. without a semantically
rich lexical verbal element needing to be encoded by a lexical affix. The examples
discussed in this article therefore amount to: ‘X + (the grammatical feature) intransitive’
(‘to be what X is’, ‘to do what X does’; sections 1. and 4.; also including intransitives with
implicit locational adjuncts, ‘X + locative’ (‘to be at or go to X’; some of section 3.: (17)-
(21)); ‘X + transitive’ (‘to affect or use X’; some of section 3.: (22)); and ‘X + passive’ (to
be affected by X’; section 2.). The name as a referring expression is what is essential to
the meaning of the verb, and conversion (i.e. the addition of a silent grammatically
verbal feature) with this essential intact is what licenses the notion proper verb.

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47 The “translations” in parentheses are somewhat arbitrary English expressions, and
are to be understood as just convenient renderings of instances of the ‘X + feature’
formulations.


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