

1 On the **existence** of proper verbs

2

3 *Abstract*

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

10 *Keywords*

11 Proper names, proper verbs, theory of proper names

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

21 Some associations have been made in the literature of philosophy between
22 properhood – the status of being proper – and verbs. Henry (1984: 73-74), for example,
23 sets out the case that has been made for using the concept **proper verb** to circumvent a
24 notorious difficulty in formal logic. Assuming the truth of the proposition expressed by
25 *Pegasus does not exist*, one is allowed to infer by the Rule of Existential Generalization,
26 on the analogy of less difficult cases involving proper names, that *There is an x such that
27 x does not exist*. This is explicitly and unwelcomely contradictory, unlike the plain
28 English sentence as usually understood. The difficulty can be circumvented, using the
29 appropriate calculus, by converting all proper nouns (and indeed definite descriptions)
30 into predicates, “i.e. verbs, proposition-forming functors which form a proposition from
31 a single name” (Henry 1984: 74). In this framework, the proper noun *Pegasus* has a
32 counterpart proper verb *is the x such that that x is Pegasus*, which Henry condenses into
33 *Pegasizes*.¹ Denying the existence of Pegasus is achieved through the paraphrase *It's not*

¹ In fact the use of a suffixal form is a distraction and not necessary – only the grammatical apparatus of tense, voice, mood and aspect is required for verbhood, and not anything beyond these that might be implied by the use of the derivational suffix *-ize*; we could simply say *Pegasuses*, a point of relevance below. From now on, I ease into using the form without such a suffix.

1 *the case that there exists an x such that x Pegasizes/Pegasuses*, which is suitably non-
2 contradictory. Henry notes that the concept of a logically proper verb in essentially this
3 sense was available in principle to medieval philosophers, e.g. Peter Abelard (*Dialectica*
4 130, lines 10-12; de Rijk 1970), in the analysis of predicates which are applicable to
5 only one single individual, for example *is the head of state of Barbados*, applicable to *the*
6 *present queen of Britain* [my example, RC] and that it was used by Russell in a more
7 complex form to facilitate a formally suitable interpretation of his famous problem-
8 sentence *The present king of France is bald* (Russell 1905: problematized especially at
9 482-483, 490; Henry 1984: 74, 104).²

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

28 We need to note that the term *proper verb* also has some limited currency in a
29 sense which goes beyond the point central to the present undertaking: for any verb
30 etymologically derived from a proper noun, whether suffixal in form or not, such as
31 *boycott*, *bowdlerize*, *galvanize*, *gaussify* [in technical usage] or *coventrate* [in historical
32 usage; calqued on German (in Nazi propaganda) *coventrieren*]. The relation between
33 such usages and the usages of central concern (which are subtypes of *conversion*, i.e.
34 derivation without the use of a lexical affix) here is explored below.³

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).

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2 In this article I make a case for the existence in ordinary linguistic usage of
3 proper verbs, or, equivalently for the present purpose, the existence of verbal uses of
4 proper names where the verbalized sense of the name remains proper. This means that
5 the new verbal form does not become synonymous with any ordinary lexical item, and
6 in any case names have no sense of their own which would allow them to be
7 synonymous with anything.⁴ The claims of four different verbal phenomena to be
8 proper are presented and evaluated. They are marginal and quite rare – some are
9 extremely rare – in ordinary usage, but have gained a toehold in English-language
10 commercial advertising and as a literary device, and they show signs of being
11 systematically exploitable in some kinds of informal and persuasive usage. **They are:**

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

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

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

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

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

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*).

1 meaning 'has the essential qualities of (that uniquely identifiable) Schmidt' and not 'has
2 characteristics shared by all individuals called *Schmidt*'.⁵ The only legitimate literal
3 usage of such an expression would be in the tautological *Schmidt Schmidtet*; in any other
4 case, such as *Herr Baumgärtner schmidtet*, the usage would be metaphorical – 'Herr
5 Baumgärtner is like/ has characteristics like (one or some of) those of (the individual
6 called) *Schmidt*'.

7 Even if not rejected out of hand as fantasy, the required state of affairs might appear
8 to stifle useful conversation. But a verbal usage dependent on the same nexus of ideas
9 might easily be imagined. Suppose I am nervous before an important event, and a friend
10 says "Just be yourself". She might alternatively, in a linguistically playful way, say "Just
11 be **Richard**", or even, more succinctly, "Just **Richard**", i.e. 'just act according to the
12 essence of **Richard**'s [i.e. your] personality'. If I obeyed this appropriately, then Richard
13 would have **Richarded**. Does this kind of usage ever occur?⁶

14

15 1. *Subjects and related proper name verbs*

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

19 (1) *C'était au temps où Bruxelles rêvait*
20 *C'était au temps du cinéma muet*
21 *C'était au temps où Bruxelles chantait*
22 *C'était au temps où Bruxelles bruxellait*

23 It is the last word which will attract attention. It is a neologism, and it can hardly be
24 doubted (assuming that it is not there just for the rhyme) that Brel intended it to mean
25 'was just being Brussels', 'was doing what typified or expressed the essence of Brussels',
26 whatever that might imply.⁷ It amounts to a playful rejuvenation of the reflexive
27 construction *X BE X* exemplified in English by *She's herself again at last*. The name of the
28 city is built into any paraphrase that one can imagine. Even the seemingly trivially
29 variant case of a true (if contingently so) definite description being substituted ('was
30 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.

1 essence of the capital of Belgium'), does not involve an adequate paraphrase, being
2 partial or selective or over-prescriptive about whatever the essence of Brussels might
3 be considered to be. Any interpretation actually achieved in conversation depends on
4 some knowledge presumed to be shared by the participants. The conversational utility
5 of this usage is shown by the fact that it has been mercilessly exploited by the tourist
6 industry and in social media, in a range of languages, and is now something of a local
7 cliché:

8 (2) *To relive the days 'when Brussels brusseled'* (advertising copy promoting short
9 breaks in Brussels, 2003)

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

12 *Bruxelles bruxelle toujours ...* (TripAdvisor France, 13 July 2013)⁸

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

15 *De Marokkaanse pannenkoekenstand aan de Zuidmarkt is hoe Brussel brusselt*
16 *...¹⁰* (Twitter, 2 March 2014)

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

19 (3) *C'était au temps où Louvain bruxellait*

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

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™ search on 1 August 2014.

⁹ <http://bruxelles.urbeez.com/bruxelles-typique-en-photo-564451.html>, accessed 30 June 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.

1 expect,” with further implicatures depending on speakers’ and hearers’ real-world
2 knowledge of who or what is denoted by the subject.

3 (4) *But Murray was Murraying. He had to fight off two break points in his first*
4 *service game and then was broken in his second.* (Louisa Thomas, *Grantland*,
5 31 January 2012)¹²

6 *Robert is Roberting right now clearly 😊.* (Twitter, 8 June 2014)

7 *Spain is spaining right now with their play ...* (Live Blogging Everything, 10
8 July 2010)¹³

9 *Sun is shining and London is Londoning.* (Twitter, 3 September 2013)¹⁴

10 And somewhat more complexly:

11 (5) *New York is New Yorking the New York out of itself.* (Twitter, 20 December
12 2012)

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

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

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

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

¹² <http://grantland.com/features/maria-sharapova-andy-murray-how-lose-beautifully-australian-open-finals/>, accessed 23 June 2014.

¹³ <http://livebloggingeverything.blogspot.co.uk/2010/07/world-cup-final-spain-vs-holland.html>, accessed 1 July 2014.

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.

1 *and politics; shame and sex appeal; money and moral triangulation. (The Times*
2 *of India, 14 July 2004).*¹⁵

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

7 (8) *And I’m not talking about people Bill Clintoning it with creative responses.* ¹⁶

8 *No amount of crafty Bill Clintoning is going to change reality here.*¹⁷

9 A second striking **example** involves a quotation from a song by Beyoncé Knowles,
10 “Partition”.¹⁸ The third verse of the sexually explicit song includes the words:

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

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

15 (10) *Thanks, Beyoncé, but if we’re verbing, I think you meant ‘Bill Clinton’d all on*
16 *my gown,’ not ‘Monica Lewinsky’d’.* ¹⁹

17 The construction is also exemplified by the following:

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

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

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/761564341/Bill_Clinton.html, accessed 30 June 2014) and have not found a lexical entry of the kind implied.

¹⁶ <http://maryland.247sports.com/Board/59410/Contents/Government-Screws-Up-Clemens-Case-4118568> 14 July 2011, accessed 24 June 2014.

¹⁷ <http://www.breitbart.com/Big-Journalism/2012/03/18/Shattering-the-But-Im-A-Comedian-Defense>, 18 March 2012, accessed 24 June 2014.

¹⁸ “Beyoncé”, Columbia Records (2013).

¹⁹ *Vanity Fair*, 6 May 2014, online subscription edition, quoted in *The Independent*, 7 May 2014.

1 British tennis player Tim Henman, appears to be a thing of the past, along with
2 *Henmania*, since the rise to prominence of Andy Murray (compare example (4)).²⁰

3 As a final example consider:

4 (12) *After looking at these pictures of me John Lennoning (there's no other name*
5 *for what I was doing) ...*²¹

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

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

25 (13) *The project 'Belgrading' Belgrade, aimed at preserving the identity and*
26 *cultural heritage of the capital city ...*²²

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

29

30 2. Passive proper name verbs

²⁰ *The Guardian*, July 2003, quoted by Davies (2004: 48). Davies's dissertation (chapter 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-lennoning-and-stuff.html>, 17 May 2014, accessed 7 July 2014.

²² http://www.parking-servis.co.rs/en/information/interesting_topics/2010/08/27/777-belgrading, accessed 7 July 2014.

1 The last examples, illustrating active voice usage of proper name verbs, point implicitly
2 in another direction. Proper name verbs may also include those of the passive form *to*
3 *be/get X-ed*, which mean ‘to be influenced by or subjected to the individual so named’.
4 This may be done for artistic effect, as in the case of the rich source offered by Paul
5 Simon’s song “A Simple Desultory Philippic”.²³ Here we find “I been *Norman Mailed*,
6 *Maxwell Taylored*, ... *John O’Hara’d*, *McNamara’d*, ... *Ayn Randed*, ... *Phil Spectored*, *Lou*
7 *Adlered*, *Barry Sadlered*, ... *Mick Jaggered*, ... *Roy Haleed*, ... *Art Garfunkeled*.” No specific
8 sense can be attached by outsiders to any of these nonce-verbs, and the reader/listener
9 is free to infer that they mean ‘subjected to Norman Mailer [etc.] or to some
10 (unspecified) acts embodying the essence of Norman Mailer [etc.]’. This often happens
11 when the use of the name has high topicality or newsworthiness, and the verbs remain
12 in use for only a short time. Let the following example stand for many:

13 (14) *Batsmen can be given out in various ways, such as bowled, caught, run out,*
14 *stumped, or leg before wicket, and yet still another method of being dismissed*
15 *has been introduced — “Hitlered out.” If a batsman is given out under the new*
16 *l.b.w. rule which enables a bowler to obtain an l.b.w. decision with an off break,*
17 *he will be quite entitled to say that he was “Hitlered out,” as the umpire’s signal*
18 *indicating that the decision was made under the new rule closely resembles the*
19 *Nazi salute.*²⁴

20 Such coinages rarely last beyond a period of newsworthiness, as Davies (2004: chapter
21 3) suggests convincingly. By the time one has a usage of the type illustrated in (14),
22 even if it does not last, it is no longer appropriate to think of it as proper in a synchronic
23 sense, but as a lexical verb with at least one specific sense, whose etymological source is
24 a converted proper name, like many others such as the brand-names mentioned in
25 footnote 28 below.²⁵ Any interpretation achieved in conversation when such a usage is

²³ “The Paul Simon Songbook”, CBS Records LP 62579 (1965).

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 *mṛ-* ...), apparently with substitution of *-er* suffix⁵ [frequentative] for the Angloromani inflectional endings.” This

1 first introduced depends on some knowledge presumed to be shared by the
2 participants, in this case about current political symbolism. The source of the
3 expression may be recovered and appreciated as an artful or artistic device by those
4 with appropriate knowledge, but knowledge of the allusion is unnecessary for the verb
5 to be used successfully in appropriate contexts after its initial appearance, because it
6 will have gained a lexical sense: *be hitlered out* = ‘be dismissed leg before wicket by an
7 off-break’.

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

14 (15) *You know when you’ve been Tangoed!*

15 It will be obvious that the slogan itself probably intended no specific meaning beyond
16 ‘you are aware of the effect of/ when you are struck by (a) Tango’, and thus contained
17 *Tango* as a proper name verb like those mentioned in the Paul Simon song; and it will
18 also be obvious how *Tango* could easily come be used as a transitive lexical verb to
19 mean ‘slap’, or metaphorically ‘shock, publicly insult’, which it did briefly.²⁶

20 Closely related to the *Tango* case is what appears to be the extended use of the
21 structure of the verb phrase in the slogan to mean ‘be (adversely) affected by ...’, as in:

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

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

27

28 3. *Proper name verbs and related ellipsed proper adjuncts*

29 The theoretical possibility offered by proper name verbs has been exploited in recent
30 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),
<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=tangoed>, accessed 27 June 2014.

1 some desirable activity is referred to in a slogan using the business name of those who
2 are hiring their services:²⁷

3 (17) *You can do it if you B&Q it.*

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

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

17 (18) *You can do it if you do it using [things from] B&Q.*

18 And the second:

19 (19) *Don't shop [just anywhere] for it, shop at Argos for it.*

20 It is clear that some examples of this phenomenon may pass into ordinary lexical usage
21 (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 *heroin*, *hoover*, *biro*, *yo-yo*, *escalator*, *tarmac*, *sellotape*, *xerox*, *google*, *frisbee*, *jacuzzi*, *marigolds* and many others, or *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 *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."

<http://www.the75andztclub.co.uk/forum/showthread.php?t=86306> (2011), accessed

1 the full denotation of the brand, i.e. they retain their properhood; they refer more
2 narrowly than the denotation of the generic term mentioned in the first clause, and this
3 narrow reference is delimited by the denotation of a proper name. **Firm evidence that**
4 **this possibility may generalize beyond the products of the marketing psychologists into**
5 **ordinary usage** is offered by the following:

6 (20) *Am planning to fly in and out of new york then fly down to orlando then*
7 *amtrak / greyhound it down to the keys* (TripAdvisor, 2009)

8 *I usually greyhound it up to San Marcos to visit friends in Kyle.* (Flickr, 2009)

9 *If there's enough interest we'll arrange a bus down from Birmingham and back*
10 *OR Megabus it down, crash in a hostel, and Megabus it up the next day.*
11 (Facebook, 2010)

12 *you could just Ryanair it over to Clifden for the show on the weekend*³⁰

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

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

19 (21) *This chick facebooked me and said im hot*³²

20

21 *About this girl who subtweets whens [sic] shes mad and then facebooks him*
22 *drunk* (Twitter, 2014)

23

24 *"Mom Just Facebooked Me and Dad Knows How to Text"*: article title
25 (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."

³² <http://forum.bodybuilding.com/showthread.php?t=6351441> (2007), accessed 1 August 2014.

1 evidently meaning ‘contact or expose [someone], using Facebook’, and of course *Google*
2 was being used in a similar way meaning ‘search for, using Google’ before there was
3 ever the legal controversy about its being used in a generic, non-branded, sense (see
4 footnote 28). *Tweet* appears to be a deliberate creation to substitute for a potential
5 similar usage of *Twitter*, though the latter is occasionally recorded as a synonymous
6 verb, for unclear reasons (perhaps authorial ignorance).³³

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

- 11 (22) *Yup, you're wasting valuable Marks and Spencering time.*³⁴
12 (i.e. valuable time *to shop/ for shopping* at Marks and Spencer)
- 13 *Londoning it for the week* (Twitter, 2014)
- 14 *lets London it again soon* (Bebo archive, 2007)
- 15 *Been Londoning it up over here with my mate ...* (Bebo archive, c. 2009)
- 16 *Jack and I are Londoning it up this Sunday! By Londoning ... I mean meeting*
17 *each other in London.* (Facebook, 2011)
18 (i.e. *go to London, be in London*)³⁵

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

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

24 In a more or less parallel fashion, in Dutch, the verb *brusselen* is used to mean ‘zich
25 inzetten voor Brussel’, ‘Brussel bezoeken, in Brussel werken of wonen, of een activiteit
26 doen m[et] b[etrekking] t[ot] Brussel’,³⁶ as well as ‘to assign responsibility for some
27 policy to the European Union’, based on the metonymic usage of *Brussel* and its
28 equivalents in other languages to refer to the European Union, its Council or Parliament.

³³ “*Erykah Badu Twitters Her Home Birth*”, headline in *Huffington Post*,
<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/02/02/erykah-badu-twiters-her-n-163267.html>, 2 February 2009, accessed 1 August 2014.

³⁴ <http://www.cookdandbombd.co.uk/forums/index.php?topic=5952.0>, accessed 27 June 2014.

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.

³⁶ ‘support, push for’, ‘visit, work or live in, or do something with reference to’; definitions in <http://www.vlaamswaardenboek.be/definities/term/brusselen>, accessed 27 June 2014.

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

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

6 *Brusselen*, the infinitive form of the Dutch verb, is also the name of a blogspot.³⁸

7 A rare additional possibility, not involving adjunct ellipsis but **converting to a**
8 **verb an element within a phrasal direct object and raising a human argument to the**
9 **direct object position associated with this new verb**,³⁹ is illustrated by:

10 (25) *We like to think we de-Melbourned him, but Melbourne seem to be de-*
11 *Melbourning Melbourne.*⁴⁰

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

18

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

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

³⁷ <http://murraygunn.id.au/blog/?p=320>, accessed 30 June 2014.

³⁸ <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>, 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).

1 (26) [...] o it offends mee
 2 to the soule, to heare a robustious per[i]wig-pated fellowe
 3 tere a passion to totters, to very rags, to spleet the eares [10]
 4 of the groundlings, vvho for the most part are capable
 5 of nothing but inexplicable dumbe showes, and noyse:
 6 I would haue such a fellow whipt for ore-dooing
 7 Termagant, it out Herods Herod, pray you auoyde it.⁴²

8 The conveyed or implicated meaning is something like: ‘To do this would be to rant
 9 even more than the notorious ranter Herod [as a stage character, RC] would’, or, as is
 10 often thought, ‘To do this would be to be more cruel than the notoriously cruel Herod’.
 11 This novel construction inspired others:

12 (27) 1655 T. Fuller *Church-history of Britain* viii. 21 Herein, Morgan, Out-
 13 Bonnered even Bonner himself.⁴³

14 The *Oxford English dictionary (OED)* identifies a broader category of “phrases
 15 where the derived verb in *out-* is cognate with its object: to outdo a person or thing in
 16 the sphere of action in which they have particular expertise or aptitude, or for which
 17 they are renowned; to reach a level of accomplishment in a particular quality or
 18 property superior to that normally associated with it. The earliest examples, formed
 19 from both nouns and verbs, are from Shakespeare. The construction is rare in the 17th
 20 and 18th centuries, but becomes common from the 19th century, when phrases formed
 21 on adjectives also appear.” The editors then identify phrases “[f]ormed on proper
 22 names: to outdo a person, nation, or sect in respect of the attribute for which they are
 23 renowned, as *to out-Nero Nero*,⁴⁴ *to out-Auden Auden*.⁴⁵ ... *New English Dictionary* [i.e.
 24 the first edition of *OED*] (1903) remarks: ‘The vast development of this, as of so many
 25 other Shakesperian [sic] usages, belongs to the 19th century, in which such expressions
 26 have been used almost without limit.’” Finally, they identify the grammatically closest

⁴² Second Quarto reading, *The Oxfordian Hamlet* online,
<http://www.sourcetext.com/sourcebook/oxhamlet/act3-2.htm>, accessed 23 June 2014.

⁴³ This and references of a similar structure below are taken from *Oxford English dictionary* online (accessed frequently), lightly edited for ease of reading.

⁴⁴ “[T]o irresponsibly assume the attitude of nonchalance or negligence to a great extent when something must be done to avert a crisis; to surpass Nero in nonchalance.” *Urban dictionary*, entry by uttam maharjan [sic] (2010),
<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=out-Nero%20Nero>, accessed 23 June 2014.

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.

1 parallel, phrases “[f]ormed on common nouns, as *to out-villain villainy, to out-infidel the*
2 *infidel*”, though, as can be seen, not necessarily formed on the homonymous common
3 noun:

4 (28) 1612 J. Davies *Muses Sacrifice* folio 113^v: So hath a Painter licence too, to
5 paint A Saint-like face, till it the Saint out saint.

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

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

14 (29) 1603 T. Dekker et al. *Patient Grissill* signature C2^v: If you should beare all
15 the wrongs, you would be out Athlassed.

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

18 1635 E. Rainbow *Labour* 25: You shall observe them to out-Epicure the
19 foole in the Gospell.

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

22 1681 E. Hiceringill *The Character of a Sham Plotter in Works* (published
23 1716) I. 219: Dulness and Slander enough to out-Billingsgate Heraclitus
24 Ridens.

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

29 (30) 1597 Shakespeare *Richard II* 5. iii. 107: Our prayers do outpray his.

30 1608 Shakespeare *King Lear* 24. 6: My selfe could else outfrowne false
31 Fortunes frowne.

32 The construction is still current:

1 (31) *Agarkar, Bangar and Zaheer Khan did much of the rest – out-Englating*
2 *the England bowlers in their mastery of line, length, accuracy and patience.*
3 *(Wisden,⁴⁶ 2003)*

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

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

24 5. *Drawing-together and conclusion*

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

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

⁴⁶ <http://www.espncriinfo.com/wisdenalmanack/content/story/154971.html>,
accessed 30 June 2014.

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

8 As we noted at the outset, it is axiomatic that names have to do with reference,
9 and the idea of proper verbs may appear on that account to be theoretically incoherent,
10 since verbs are not referring expressions. However, we have limited the concept to
11 verbs which have no additional lexical apparatus in their morphology; they are all
12 simply conversions of proper nouns – or strictly, of proper names. This means that they
13 are always etymologically transparent, and their etymon (the name in question) can be
14 readily accessed even in the context of normal use. The name from which each is
15 derived accordingly forms the main element of its meaning, which is always, for some
16 name X, ‘to have the essential but unspecified characteristics of X’, ‘to be what X is’, ‘to
17 do what X does’, ‘to affect or use X’, and ‘to be affected by X’, i.e. without a semantically
18 rich lexical verbal element needing to be encoded by a lexical affix. The examples
19 discussed in this article therefore amount to: ‘X + (the grammatical feature) intransitive’
20 (‘to be what X is’, ‘to do what X does’; sections 1. and 4.; also including intransitives with
21 implicit locational adjuncts, ‘X + locative’ (‘to be at or go to X’; some of section 3. : (17)-
22 (21)); ‘X + transitive’ (‘to affect or use X’; some of section 3.: (22)); and ‘X + passive’ (‘to
23 be affected by X’; section 2.).⁴⁷ The name as a referring expression is what is essential to
24 the meaning of the verb, and conversion (i.e. the addition of a silent grammatically
25 verbal feature) with this essential intact is what licenses the notion *proper verb*.

26

27

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6

7 *All links mentioned in this article were active and safe on 1 August 2014.*