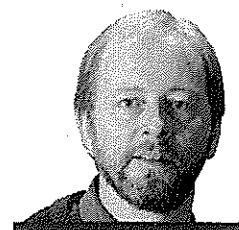


FEATURES

NZ is doing good after South Africa bet England

EVER wondered how good you really are? How often have we all answered "I'm good" to those common greetings of "how (are) you doing?" or "how are you?" On the face of it, we might not have been doing good or being good at all. Language purists might tell us that the correct response to these greeting questions should be "well", an adverb, rather than "good", an adjective.

Yet this is not the only example of words being used in a way that differs from what grammar books might tell us. Think about that "very fun party" your child went to the other weekend, and was it "so fun" or "such fun"? (Note that we



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can say the party was "so exciting", but not "such exciting", and that the party bags contained "such junk" but not "so junk".)

Or remember how the traffic was "moving slow" on your way

home. Using adjectives as adverbs (good, slow) or nouns as adjectives (fun) is not that peculiar. It is part of a process that linguists call conversion, the use of a word that is traditionally associated with one part of speech as though it were another type of word altogether.

In particular, it is doing this without changing the basic form of the word, which makes it different from the relationship between words like "rational" and "rationalise".

Calvin, in the *Calvin and Hobbes* cartoon, had a good term for this when he said that "verbing weirds language".

"Verbing" here means the use

as verbs of words that we would at first blush think of as being some other part of speech. This seems primarily to affect nouns, but it also happens to adjectives.

Verbing is pretty common in English and has been for much of the history of the language. It leads quite quickly to accepted new usages. For instance, most of us are probably quite comfortable with the idea of a party at which we "farewell" a departing colleague, though visitors from other English-speaking areas might find that using farewell as a verb really is "weirding" language.

Compared with verbing, there is something rather more compli-

cated going on when young children say that in their next game they are "versing" team X, Y or Z. You can see how this happens; NZ v Australia is heard as NZ "verses" Australia, and from there the verb to "verse" gains a foothold and a conjugation — he verses, we verse, yesterday they versed, I am versing, etc. This is not surprising — children are, after all, phenomenally good at picking patterns and analysing language in terms of those patterns. That is why they go through a stage of saying "runned" and "foots" instead of ran and feet. Adding -ed for a past tense and -s for a plural are the regular patterns.

So analysing "versus" as "verse" with "s" added to mark the third person singular is not out of the ordinary. If your kids play the same team again, will they "re-verse" them, I wonder?

On the topic of teams, has anyone else noticed the difference in usage between New Zealand and England when it comes to whether a team is singular — "New Zealand is playing Australia" — or plural — "England are playing India"? It's tempting to think that the difference might relate to Kiwis playing together as a team, while the English team remains a collection of individuals.

Another odd development is to

report a winning outcome as "we bet them". It is as though we need something explicit to show the past tense of "beat", and there are analogical forms in meet-met, feed-fed, lead-led, etc. Confusion with the gambling verb doesn't seem to block the use of bet, and maybe "beated" sounds too much like those children's forms.

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