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Looking at Language

A Tense Time with Verbs

by Richard Lederer, Ph.D.

Have you heard the one about the man who went to trial for having pulled a woman down a street by the hair? When the judge asked the arresting officer, “Was she drugged?” the policeman answered, “Yes sir, a full block.” Or the one about the woman who asked a Boston cab driver where she could get scrod. “I didn’t know that the verb had that past tense,” muttered the cabbie.

Both jokes rely on the fact that verb tenses in English are crazy, fraught with a fearful asymmetry and puzzling unpredictability. Some verbs form their past tense by adding *-d*, *-ed*, or *-t*—*walk*, *walked*; *bend*, *bent*. Others go back in time through an internal vowel change—*begin*, *began*; *sing*, *sang*. Another cluster adds *-d* or *-t* and undergoes an internal vowel change—*lose*, *lost*; *buy*, *bought*. And still others don’t change at all—*set*, *set*; *put*, *put*. No wonder, then, that our eyes glaze and our breath quickens when we have to form the past tense of verbs like *dive*, *weave*, *shine*, *sneak*, and *baby-sit*.

The past tenses of verbs in our language cause so many of us to become tense that I’ve written a poem about the insanity:

The verbs in English are a fright.
How can we learn to read and write?
Today we speak, but first we spoke;
Some faucets leak, but never loke.
Today we write, but first we wrote;
We bite our tongues, but never bote.

Each day I teach, for years I taught,
And preachers preach, but never praught.
This tale I tell; this tale I told;
I smell the flowers, but never smold.

If knights still slay, as once they slew,
Then do we play, as once we plew?
If I still do as once I did,
Then do cows moo, as they once mid?

I love to win, and games I’ve won;
I seldom sin, and never son.
I hate to lose, and games I lost;
I didn’t choose, and never chost.

I love to sing, and songs I sang;
I fling a ball, but never flang.
I strike that ball, that ball I struck;
This poem I like, but never luck.

I take a break, a break I took;
I bake a cake, but never book.
I eat that cake, that cake I ate;
I beat an egg, but never bate.

I often swim, as I once swam;
I skim some milk, but never skam.
I fly a kite that I once flew;
I tie a knot, but never tew.

I see the truth, the truth I saw;
I flee from falsehood, never flaw.
I stand for truth, as I once stood;
I land a fish, but never lood.

About these verbs I sit and think.
These verbs don’t fit. They seem to wink
At me, who sat for years and thought
Of verbs that never fat or wrought.

Richard Lederer, Ph.D., is the author of more than 3,000 books and articles about language and humor. His syndicated column, “Looking at Language,” appears in newspapers and magazines throughout the United States. His new title, *Comma Sense: A Fun-damental Guide to Punctuation*, with John Shore, is now available from St. Martin’s Press. E-mail: richard.lederer@pobox.com



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