

Nouns and Verbs

I was reading a fascinating book last week about the development of language, and there was some really interesting stuff about the importance of distinguishing between nouns and verbs.

One of the frustrating things about English is that one word can have several different meanings (think of the word *cool*) and several different functions. The same word can be a noun sometimes and a verb at other times.

Most of us probably remember being introduced to *nouns* as *naming words* and *verbs* as *doing words*, which is a pretty good start. Some other clues (according to my book) are in the *behaviour* of the word. If it behaves like a noun, it's a noun. If it behaves like a verb... you get the idea.

So, what is noun behaviour?

1. A noun indicates a naming function in some way:

The *hero* was a tall, slim, heroic-looking *man*
Beauty is in the *eye* of the *beholder*.

2. A noun often follows an article (a, the):

The *hero* was dark and handsome. He wore *a* figure-hugging *jacket* ...

3. A noun often follows a preposition (a preposition comes before a noun):

The *hero* was dark and handsome, *with* a neat *goatee* and *moustache*

4. It can be the subject or the object of a verb (i.e. associated with the verb, but not part of the verb):

The *hero* picked up the *revolver*

5. The subject or object is often more than one word, but if the words act together like a noun, they form a noun phrase. Nothing to worry about:

The *dark, handsome hero with the trim goatee* picked up the *small bejewelled revolver*.

And what is verb behaviour?

1. A verb indicates an action or a state (harder to pick, but important)

The hero *picked up* the revolver, which *was* a small jewelled piece

2. A verb usually follows a subject (someone/thing that is causing the action to happen):

The hero dashed bravely into the room and *swept* Mildred off her feet.

3. A verb has a (limited) range of different forms, many of which involve more than one word:

The hero *was dashing* into the room when he *tripped* over his shoelace, which he *had* unwisely *neglected to fasten* properly.

The book I'm reading this week is even more interesting. It's about ways in which the English reveal their background by the way they speak (not just the posh accent, but other stuff too). Watch this space.....

Dorothy (a proper noun, naming various individuals nearly all of whom these days are over 50)