

Lesson 2.1: Introduction to Verbs – Verbs and Unconscious Knowledge

We all have heard that a verb is an action word, or maybe that a verb is an action or state, but you may have suspected that we're going to abandon that in favor of identifying verbs according to their morphology and syntax.

Why is the "verb is an action or state" an inadequate definition? Well, adjectives and nouns can also express states; in the phrase "a happy child" *happy* is a state, but it's an adjective, not a verb. In a phrase like "your perseverance," you could say that *perseverance* is a state – but it's a noun, not a verb. Nouns can also express actions: *the kick, a struggle, the mingling*, etc. This kind of logical subjectivity regarding the traditional notions of parts of speech can be misleading and make us doubt our intuitions. And here again, the nonsense words approach to sentence analysis reinforces that we rely on morphology and syntax not meaning to identify categories. What's the verb in this sentence?

The quixlets blorked a chorn.

You can identify *blorked* as a verb here because of *-ed* suffix, which you know (even if you don't know you know) is a past tense ending that attaches to verbs. We also know it's a verb because of its position between the subject noun phrase, *the quixlets*, and the object noun phrase, *a chorn*, a typical position for verbs in English.

Activity: You likely dealt with ways of identifying nouns if you analyzed a nonsense sentence, as suggested in Lesson 1.1. With a nonsense sentence like the one above or ones you or your students create, have them formulate how they know a meaningless word is a verb. You will have the beginnings of some information to include in a verb chart.