Sticky Deverbal Nouns

## 1. Introduction

I will examine the mechanics of how a person comes to be described by a deverbal noun, and how those labels then stay attached (stuck) to the person. The application of deverbal nouns, and the label's stickiness, is influenced by three factors.

1.  The permanence of the result: If an action inflicts a permanent state of being upon another person, the deverbal noun resists being put into the past tense.
2.  The social prevalence of the action affects how quickly the label is applied: Verbs that are enacted commonly take more instantiations of the verb for the label to be applied in a defining sense. Semantically, these verbs are marked with the habituality aspect.
3.  The perception, or judgements of others: A person may perceive others to be defined by the verb, and therefore apply the deverbal noun form, irrespective to whether the person labeled uses it themselves.

These factors interact intimately in their influence on the generation and persistence of deverbal nouns. In order to illustrate my point, I will be providing  pragmatic tests, modeled after those presented in lecture. I will be addressing the verbs *drive, sing, teach, murder,* and *rape* specifically, though other verbs will be mentioned, but not investigated. All instances of failed tests are marked with pound signs, questionable sentences are marked with percents, and passable tests are unmarked. Sentences were tested on friends, family, coworkers, and university students from other majors.

## 2. The Problem

Certain deverbal nouns strongly resist being put into the past tense as a defining characteristic. My current theory includes three types of deverbal noun class, each with its own criteria that must be met in order for the label to be applied to a person.

The first class of deverbal nouns that I provide will be those that are applied, and shed easily. The second set that I provide are deverbal nouns that are applied because the amount of action that the actor has taken has become a defining characteristic. The third class are deverbal nouns that result from verbs that quickly define a person, and resist being shed. Below, I will elaborate upon this theory, and present example sentences. Sentences marked with a pound sign are ungrammatical, and unmarked sentences are grammatical.

First, there are deverbal nouns that are applied when their verbal conditions are met, and then fail, or are placed into the past tense, as soon as the conditions change. This class of deverbal nouns are derived from verbs are commonplace actions.

1. Quick deverbal nouns:
    a.  Christie used to be the driver for the lab, but she passed the buck.
    b.  Cordelia is the lead driver for the group.
    c.  Was Cordelia the driver for the last crime scene?
    d.  John must have been the driver for the last one - I saw him behind the wheel.
    e.  I don't know if we're going to stop for coffee - ask the driver.
    f.  # Cordelia was the driver, but she isn't able to drive.

Second, there are deverbal nouns that are used to describe a defining characteristic of the referent: These labels may be used in the past tense to indicate the formerly defining

characteristic without consequence. This class of deverbal nouns is derived from verbs that are commonplace, and require a marked number of iterations of the verb in order to be applied.

2. <u>Marked deverbal nouns</u>:
   a. Greg used to be my second grade teacher.
   b. Simone is a teacher at Valley Middle School.
   c. Was Simone a teacher at Valley Middle School?
   d. Simone must have been the teacher for that class - I saw her at the head of the room.
   e. #Simone was the teacher, but she was never hired.

Third, there are deverbal nouns that are applied after the actor has committed the verb once, and then resist being used to describe a formerly defining characteristic. This class of deverbal nouns is generated by verbs that are uncommon, or socially unacceptable.

3. <u>Resistant deverbal nouns</u>:
   I. Murder
      a. #Ted used to be a murderer.
      b. Is Ted a murderer?
      c. Ted must have been the murderer - he was seen committing the act.
      d. #Ted used to be a murderer, but he didn't kill anyone.
   II. Rape[1]
      a. #Albert used to be a rapist.
      b. Was Albert a rapist?
      c. Albert must have been the rapist - his DNA was found at the crime scene.
      d. #Albert used to be a rapist, but he never sexually assaulted anyone.

As shown, there appear to be three types of verbs that result in three different deverbal noun types. These classes are influenced by the commonality of the verb: Common actions take more of the verb to become deverbal nouns. Verbs that can be repeated on the same object (one typically drives the same car; Trent Reznor usually sings Closer at every concert) do not generate deverbal nouns in the same fashion as verbs that cannot be repeated on the same object: One cannot murder the same person multiple times. *Rape* splits the lines between these distinctions, as a perpetrator may assault one person more than once. The law, which informs my personal definition of rape, indicates that each act of penetration (of any sort, with any body part, or object, no matter how slight) is a new act of illegality, and may be charged accordingly.[2]

## 3. Criteria for deverbal noun application

In this section, I strive to develop a firmer explanation for the differences that separate the deverbal noun classes that I have theorised. Deverbal nouns all desire certain characteristics, just like their regular verb counterparts. Namely, application of the label requires that the verb has been completed at least once, and potentially with habituality. The

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[1] The verb *rape* seems to have contention in the generation of its deverbal noun. Dictionaries seem to contain the same entry for both *raper* and *rapist*. Further discussion on the matter can be read at the English Stack Exchange, as linked in the reference section.

[2] California state law indicates that each "new" act of penetration, with a body part, or object, is a new instance of rape. This definition means that removing a body part, and reinserting it, constitutes a new act of rape.

application of the deverbal noun may be achieved through social labeling, such as a friend calling another a *writer*, or through personal use, such as a person calling themselves a *singer*.

As described in Section 2, there are three verb types that result in different levels of label stickiness. These deverbal noun classes demand certain criteria be met in order for the label to be applied.

- Verbs like *drive* become deverbal nouns whenever their conditions are met, and then the deverbal noun fails as soon as the conditions are not longer being met.
  - These deverbal nouns are easily done away with, and their conditions are readily met.
  - These actions are common - most people will say that they drive, without broadly referring to themselves as a *driver*, unless they do so professionally.

Deverbal nouns used to describe what a person does, or is notable for taking on the semantic habitual aspect, as described by Bertinetto and Lenci: "Habituality, as commonly conceived, presupposes a more or less regular iteration of an event, such that the resulting habit is regarded as a characterizing property of a given referent." (in Eds. R. Binnick 2012).

- Verbs like *sing* are only applied as deverbal nouns once the subject has verbed a certain number of times, or perhaps, performs publicly or for money/charity, and then can be said to have been a former activity.
  - These deverbal nouns take habitual action in order to have them applied to the actor, and then can be used in the past tense.
  - While still common, the use of the deverbal noun forms of these actions require either an amount of action, or the societal or personal application of the label.

- Verbs like *murder*, and *rape*, only need to be done once for the deverbal noun to apply, and then never go away[3] - people are regarded historically as murderers, or rapists.
  - These deverbal nouns are clingy - the deverbal noun label cannot simply be placed into the past, even though the results are understood to be in the past.
  - These actions are uncommon, and attract profound social punishments.
    - One must note, however that the verb *kill* does not follow this formula. While one cannot be a murderer without being a killer, the deverbal noun is… strange[4].

[3]  Note that some religions accept penance - that is, the murderer/rapist.. has confessed to their sin, and has performed a contrition/penitent action, and is thereby redeemed in the eyes of the church. Alternatively, some churches preach that conversion to their denomination is rebirth, and thereby cleanses you of previous wrongdoing. While this case is quite interesting, I believe that uttering a sentence such as "I used to be a murderer" to someone outside of that religious community would very often result in confusion, denial, or arguments.

[4] I think that this is because of the use of the verbs. Generally, someone who works in a slaughterhouse and is actively involved in the termination of the life of an animal is not socially considered a *murderer* (usually), even though the person is a *killer* by definition. With respect to termination of the life of a person, the term "killer" is nearly as sticky as "murderer" - but the term "executioner" is not as sticky, due to the social acceptance of a person's job being executing a sentence of death that has been given by a legal authority as the result of judicial proceedings.

## 4. Discussion

I will be discussing the third category in detail, as I have had difficulty finding literature on the subject. While Rapp (2014) says "These are personal nouns referring to situations that can be used to characterize an individual even when the situation is already over (*Mörder* 'murderer'; *Flüchtling* 'fugitive')." she does not detail the manner in which these deverbal nouns come to be generated, applied, and then resist being used in the sense of being formerly (but no longer) applicable.

The verb *murder* only takes one instance of verbing in order to mark the actor as a deverbal noun: A *murderer*. The state of being a murderer, only taking one instance of murder, has to do with the permanence of the result of the action of the action. Disregarding fantasy, a murderer can only kill one person once, and their death cannot be reversed. As well, the irregularity of people enacting murder also seems to affect the application, and tenacity, of the deverbal noun. Murder is an extremely uncommon pastime: It is a societally unacceptable activity, and therefore garners intense social strictures. While most people sing along with the radio in the car, almost no one murders their coworker while watching an episode of Dexter. The aberrance of this action is more marked, and therefore more likely to draw the deverbal noun faster, and resist being used in as a past characteristic.

*Kill* on the other hand, does not seem to follow this model; a killer does not have to be human: *That ostrich is a killer*. Nor does the killed object of the verb need to be human: *I killed a bird by accident this morning*. Indeed, the killing doesn't even need to literal: *She killed that calculus test* (I have yet to hear someone say *I murdered that test)*. One can be called a killer without doing anything particularly harmful: *She's a killer on the dancefloor*. However, when the killer is a human, that kills a human, with <u>intent</u>, as one cannot be a murderer without being a killer, the deverbal noun follows the formula of *murder*.[5]

The issue with *murder* and *kill*, is that they inflict a state of being both ways - that is, the person who has committed the act is now a *murderer*, and the person that was killed is now a *murder victim*. These states <u>stick</u>: the negation or discontinuation of *murderer* is not possible, in society at large. One cannot typically say:

I.     Murder
   e.   *I <u>used</u> to be a murderer, but I gave it up - the pay is terrible.*

Once a person has achieved the status of *murderer* they are forever branded by those who know. Indeed, disregarding fantasy novels, no one ever says

I.     Murder
   f.   *I <u>used</u> to be a murder victim, but I gave it up - the pay is terrible.*

*Murderer* is not the only deverbal noun to follow this formula; consider *usurper, traitor, rapist[6],...* the properties that make these into deverbal nouns, having committed usurpation, treason, or rape are irreversible. Notably, these are also infrequent activities. Most

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[5] There are instances where one may be a killer of other humans without incurring the label of *murderer*. Consider cases of manslaughter, and negligent homicide. Caitlyn Jenner killed another person while driving drunk, but was not convicted, and is generally not referred to as a murderer. As well, some people use the deverbal noun for animals: *Pitbulls are murderers! Your dog murdered my chickens!* And these uses are generally accepted, despite the fact that the animals are not considered "sentient".

[6] Another point that Karl brought up was that of beastiality. As in *Harvey is a pig-f\*cker*! It's an act that's know to have occurred in the past, but just one instance brands a person for life.

anyone can readily say that they write on a daily basis - emails, texts, notes, so forth. Almost no one can easily say that they overthrew a ruling government, committed treason against their country, or forced themselves upon an unwilling partner.

Strikingly, when a person is a professional killer, they *can* be a *former-assassin, ex-executioner, used to be a hit-person*. In these instances, the fact that the person is a murderer is a defining characteristic- and yet they can be *former, ex-, used to be...* A person can be a former assassin, but they can't be a former murderer - yet an assassin can't <u>be</u> an assassin without having murdered someone.

As I have shown above, the state of being a *murderer* is influenced by the permanence of its results, and its social aberrance. These two aspects combine to make the deverbal noun incredibly sticky and therefore difficult to slough off. *Murderer* is not the only verb to follow this formula, though the other verbs that do are also socially unacceptable.

*Kill* does not follow the same formula as *murder*, as its executions are applied more broadly. Professions which require killing, even of other humans, may be ceased, and then the deverbal noun can be used in a past-tense sense.

## 5. Conclusion

When describing a person as a *singer*, the implication is that they sing consistently, and do so specifically as a performer (singing along with the radio does not make a person a singer). Unlike a murderer inflicting a permanent state on the murder victim, singing a song renders that song sung, and then that particular song may be repeated ad nauseum.

Describing someone as a *writer* also indicates habitual action, but writing an email (however many of them) does not mark someone as a writer. *Driver* is seemingly applied arbitrarily, typically when someone is physically behind the wheel of a vehicle, though it can be used to describe a characteristic that is based on a habitual action, as with a race car driver.

However, one can easily refute the status of singer/writer/driver. *Jay used to be a singer/writer/(professional) driver.* The properties that render one a *singer* are easily stopped, and while the events leading to having been a *singer* have still occurred, their results do not seem to demand an irreversible branding. Rapp (2014) elaborates:

> … there is an important difference between single event and habitual personal nouns: it is completely natural to call someone who has murdered a murderer but it is quite marked to call someone who has taught a teacher.

Lexical and pragmatic data indicates that the stickiness of these deverbal nouns follow a pattern:

<u>Perception</u>: Others think you are the deverbal noun.

These perceptions can be, and it seems often are, superficial. People may think that someone is a murderer (a jury can convict an innocent person just as they can convict a serial killer). People may think that Jay is a writer based on a blurb they put online, or a driver based on seeing them behind the wheel of a car, even if in a parking lot. People's labeling of another person becomes a part of that person's identity, however briefly or permanently, or ill-informed the label may be. Perception has subsections based on the prevalence of the action:

Unmarked: These verbs are participated in by the vast majority of the population, on a frequent basis. These deverbal nouns are attached and discarded at will.

Marked - Acceptable: These verbs are still rather common occurrences, but the frequency of the action becomes a defining characteristic of the person doing the verb. These verbs require a vast number of iterations, or specific intent for the action to be defining. These deverbal nouns are difficult to attach, and are easily placed into the past.

Marked - Unacceptable: These verbs are extremely uncommon, and socially reviled. These deverbal nouns are attached quickly, and resist negation or cessation.

Persistence: An actor enacts the verb repeatedly, and therefore become classified as the deverbal noun, either by themselves or by others. The number of repetitions needed for the deverbal noun to apply seems vary from person, to person, however.

Others may label you, despite you having done little of the verb, and despite the fact that you do not apply the label to yourself. For example, Karl took one class about sailing, and now his family considers him a sailor, though he does not apply the label to himself.

Yourself and others apply a deverbal noun to you, despite you having done little of a verb. Consider Joanne, who had little practice with writing, and became an international superstar after being snapped up by Bloomsbury Publishing.

Others label you, as you have worked diligently to gain the deverbal noun, but you do not apply the label to yourself. For instance, Simone may go through a crucible to become a teacher, but never apply their teaching credentials, though the institution that provided them the diploma considers Simone a teacher.

Persistence, though, when applied to *murder*, can put the agent in a special class of deverbal nouns: *serial murderer*.[7]

Permanence: The permanent effect of an action on another human being can also create the environment for a deverbal noun to be applied to the agent of the action.

Results of verbs that are more permanent result in the deverbal noun label faster than verbs with less permanent results:

Impermanent: *Driver*: when you are in the driver's seat, you are a driver. When you are out of the driver's seat, you are not a driver (unless you do so professionally, but it's unclear what exactly makes one a pro-driver: Persistence? Employment?). This ties in closely with deverbal nouns such as:

More permanent: *Singer*: if a person sings (consistently) with the intent of creating music.

Definitely permanent: murderer: when a person has killed another, the murdered person is irrevocably dead, in this reality.

I have endeavoured with this paper to illustrate that there appear to be three types of verbs that result in three different levels of deverbal noun stickiness. The three classes of adherence are influenced by the commonality of the verb, and the permanence of the result.

Common action verbs with impermanent results generate the least sticky deverbal noun class. Common action verbs that take more iterations of the verb to become deverbal nouns are moderately sticky, but can used to describe former characteristics. Uncommon

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[7] I've gotten feedback about this indicating that people are more used to hearing *serial killer*. I'm more used to hearing *serial murderer* - this may be due to the fact that most of my close friends are in the police force, or military.That said, I don't find serial killer to be incorrect.

action verbs with permanent results that take very little of the action to generate deverbal nouns are extremely sticky, and highly resistant to being used to describe past characteristics.

My analysis is plagued by a lack of experimental data. Consulting the introspection of others without context is only so productive. Further research may be benefitted by laboratory testing. I would be interested to see the results of an experiment where galvanic response is measured through the palms as participants read sentences that I provided in Section 2 after watching a clip of the court proceedings for, say Ted Bundy, or a video of something unrelated

Another issue that I had in generating this analysis is due to the seeming lack of literature on this particular aspect of deverbal nouns. It is entirely possible that I was just incapable of locating them, due to improper search criteria (at no point did I use *sticky, tenacious,* nor *resistant* in my attempts). Alternatively, there may not be literature to be had. This subject is quite interesting - I would like to see which verbs fall into which categories, or if my proposals are even capable of standing up to the crush of English, let alone cross linguistic data.

# References

Bertinetto, P., & Lenci, A. (2012). Aspect: Habituality, Pluractionality, and Imperfectivity. In R. Binnick (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Tense and Aspect*. Oxford University Press. Habituality, as commonly conceived, presupposes a more or less regular iteration of an event, such that the resulting habit is regarded as a characterizing property of a given referent. The notion of habituality is thus strictly related to iterativity, although the two should not be confused. This article describes the respective features of habituality and iterativity, and places them in the framework of the broader notion of "verbal pluractionality" on the one side, and of "gnomic imperfectivity" on the other. Pluractionality covers a variety of phenomena, including event-internal pluractionality and event-external pluractionality. This article proposes a set of criteria to distinguish habituality from iterativity within event-external pluractionality, and shows that the distinction depends on aspect. It also considers habituals and other gnomic imperfectives, the logical structure of gnomic sentences, and the spelling out of the precise interpretation of the gnomic operator, and, finally, examines habituality in English and Slavic languages.

Christiansen, T. (2014, May 9). Raper vs. Rapist; Why the shift in suffix? Retrieved December 6, 2015, from http://tiny.cc/etymologyquestion

Rape And Sexual Assault Generally, 10 U.S.C. § 920 - ART. 120-c (2006).

Rapp, Irene. "On the Temporal Interpretation of Present Participles in German." *Journal of Semantics* (2014). *Oxford Journals*. Web. 15 Mar. 2015. doi: 10.1093/jos/ffu005. "I will show that the intersective interpretation can be maintained if we assume that these examples involve a specific kind of noun, label nouns. These are personal nouns referring to situations that can be used to characterize an individual even when the situation is already over (*Mörder* 'murderer', *Flüchtling* 'fugitive')."
This paper restricts use of source material to sections five, and six of the paper.

Title IX, Of crimes against the person involving sexual assault, and crimes against public decency and good morals, S. 1 (1972-2013). Cal. Penal Code § 261-9, et seq.

Wikipedia. Habitual aspect. (2011, April 16). Retrieved December 6, 2015, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Habitual_aspect
"As its name suggests, the **habitual aspect** specifies an action as occurring habitually: the subject performs the action usually, ordinarily, or customarily. The habitual aspect is a type of imperfective aspect; the latter does not depict an event as a single entity viewed only as a whole, but instead specifies something about its internal temporal structure."
This article was started by a Wikipedia user under the screen name Duoduoduo. A review of their user profile indicates that they are a professor emeritus of economics, and their primary focuses on Wikipedia are the creation and review of articles in that field as well as linguistics.