

This Friday is 'take a hike day' day. A hike is more than a stroll down to the nearest park or a way of stretching your legs before dinner. No, hiking is serious walking. The kind that requires proper footwear and maybe even a map. It's undertaken voluntarily, by and large, and I guess it may – or may not – involve a well-earned lunch. The verb and noun 'walk' is hopelessly general. It really tells you little more than a process involving leg movements and the covering of distance. Hike is walking with attitude, usually worthy, usually planned. It's also the kind of thing city and town dwellers do, hence the national day – the subtext of which is 'let's get out there and make contact with nature, let's swap streets for tracks, pedestrian crossings for streams, diversions for switchbacks, and tacos for soggy sandwiches.' Walking is rarely a neutral activity, and language is full of nuance, criticism, praise and even psychological delineation when describing this most basic action.

Here are a few 'walking' verbs to add to 'hike': saunter, stroll, dawdle, wander, trek, march, stagger, amble, wade, toddle, shuffle, limp, tip-toe...

But I'm really not a lists person – especially when it comes to language. Classification, on the other hand...well that's where it gets interesting. So, what do these walking verbs tell us when we look at them with an eye to proposing a taxonomy?

When I look at all these first as a group I think I see three distinct categories.

One is verbs with the suggestion of purpose, intention, aim or objectives. So this includes hike and track but also march the latter being mostly applicable to either military or collectively directed movement. A peace march for example.

The second, group relates to walking as an enjoyable, pleasurable and personal activity. Here, walking is a relaxing, calming or unhurried activity, this includes saunter, stroll, wander and amble. David Thoreau that incredibly influential writer and commentator on the importance of the outdoor life wrote a very interesting essay about walking in which he describes the verb saunter and speculates its origins as from the French sans-terre, which he takes to mean someone who is free, not tied to a place or people but able to wander wherever life takes them. This use of ways of walking leads us, inevitably, to the figurative use of walking, but I'd rather save that for another time and then there's use of verbs plus particles and all those multi-word verbs of collocations... breeze into, float into, eased into, slipped into...

There's material here for a book, let alone a short podcast.

If you are lucky enough to go for a hike this week, enjoy it.

For those of us who are tied to the city or town it will have to be in the imagination. Or by reading Thoreau's essay, Walking, where he reminds us that even the shortest walk might be an adventure:

Half the walk – he says - is but retracing our steps. We should go forth on the shortest walk, perchance, in the spirit of undying adventure, never to return, --prepared to send back our embalmed hearts only as relics to our desolate kingdoms.

