

On Conversion In English

Titik Sudartinah

State University of Yogyakarta

ABSTRACT

There are several processes in English word-formation: coinage, borrowing, compounding, blending, clipping, backformation, acronyms, derivation, and conversion. Among them, conversion is one of the most common to occur. It is the derivational process whereby an item changes its word-class without the addition of any affix. It is done by converting a lexeme belonging to one class to another, without any overt change in shape.

However, it is not easy to determine the original and the converted word in a pair of words that are exactly the same in spelling. There are some elements that are to be considered: the semantic dependence, the range of usage, the semantic range, and also the phonetic shape.

Conversion almost always involves open-class vocabulary, especially noun, verb, and adjective. The converted words produced by this process are also in these three classes. The original words, compared to the converted ones, usually have broader range of meaning and usage.

Keywords: word-formation, conversion, zero-affix

A. Introduction

Every language develops, either to a larger extent or to a narrower one. Therefore, there might be a language that was used to be spoken in the earlier times and no longer in use nowadays. On the other hand, in a certain language that is considered as a productive one, there might be more and more expansion in its elements. This makes the language one that grows larger than before. The expansion usually occurs in morphological level. The phonemic and syntactic levels are in the least to develop. This is due to some restrictions such as in terms of grammatical rules and the number of phonemes that are consistent in a language. Thus, the easiest way of expanding a language is by creating more and more new words.

English is considered as one of productive languages. It grows larger than before. There are more words nowadays compared to those in the previous era. English dictionary is thicker now than before. How can new words be created? Forming a word in English involves various processes, such as through *derivation, compounding, clipping, blending, and conversion.*

B. English Word-Formation Processes

Yule in *The Study of Language* (2002: 63) states that there are several processes that can be used to form new words in English. They are *coinage, borrowing, compounding, blending, clipping, backformation, acronyms, derivation, and conversion.*

1. Coinage

It is one of the least common processes of word-formation in English. Coinage refers to the invention of totally new terms (Yule, 2002: 64). The most typical sources are invented trade names for one company's product which become general terms (without initial capital letters) for any version of that product. Some examples of words formed through coinage are *aspirin, nylon, zipper, teflon, and xerox.* After their coinage, these words become everyday words in English.

2. Borrowing

This process is one of the most common sources of forming new words in English. It is defined as the taking over of words from other languages (Yule, 2002: 65). English has borrowed many words from other languages, such as *kampong* (Malay), *croissant* (French), *piano* (Italian), *boss* (Dutch), and *yogurt* (Turkish).

3. Compounding

Compounding is the process of combining or joining two separate words to form a single one. This is very common in English. Some of the examples are *bookcase, fingerprint, sunburn, wallpaper, and wastebasket.*

4. Blending

Besides compounding, the process called blending also involved joining two separate words to form a single one. However, blending is different from

compounding in the way that blending is typically accomplished by taking only the beginning of one word and joining it to the end of the other word (Yule, 2002: 66). Some famous examples of blending are *smog* (smoke + fog), *brunch* (breakfast + lunch), *telecast* (television + broadcast), *infotainment* (information + entertainment) and *Spanglish* (Spanish + English).

5. Clipping

The element of reduction which is noticeable in blending is even more apparent in the process described as clipping. It occurs when a word of more than one syllable is reduced to a shorter form, often in casual speech. Some examples of clipping are *fax* (facsimile), *gas* (gasoline), *fan* (fanatic), *condo* (condominium), and *math* (mathematics).

6. Backformation

In a backformation, a word is reduced to form another word of a different type. The words involved are usually those categorized as nouns and verbs, such as *television* *televise*, *donation* *donate*, *option* *opt*, *emotion* *emote*, *sculptor* *sculpt*, *burglar* *burgle*, and *swindler* *swindle*.

There is a particular type of backformation which is favored in Australian and British English. The process is named hypocorism. The process goes like this: first a longer word is reduced to a single syllable, then *y* or *ie* is added to the end. Some of the examples of hypocorism are *movie* (moving pictures), *telly* (television), *Aussie* (Australian), *barbie* (barbecue), and *hanky* (handkerchief).

7. Acronyms

Forming new words through acronyms means using the initial letters of a set of words. Usually, acronyms are pronounced as single words. Some acronyms use capital letters such as NATO and UNESCO, and some others do not use capital letters, such as *radar* (radio detecting and ranging), *laser* (light amplification by stimulated emission of radiation), and *scuba* (self contained underwater breathing apparatus).

8. Derivation

Derivation is the most common word-formation process in English. The result of this process is usually a word having different class from the root. It is accomplished by means of adding affixes (prefix, suffix, and/or infix) to words.

Prefix is an affix added to the beginning of a word. The examples are *mis-*, *un-*, and *dis-* in the words *misunderstanding*, *unlike*, and *disable*. An affix form that is added to the end of a word is called suffix, such as *-less*, *-ful*, and *y* in *careless*, *beautiful*, and *handy*. The third type of affix, infix, is an affix that is inserted inside a root. This is not so common in English. However, it is occasionally used in aggravating or fortuitous circumstances by emotionally aroused English speakers, such as in *in-bloody-credible*.

9. Conversion

The last process of English word-formation is called conversion. It refers to a change in the function of a word, for example when a noun comes to be used as a verb without any reduction or addition of affixes. Other labels for this process are category change and functional shift (Yule, 2002: 67). Conversion mainly occurs on nouns and verbs. However, it is possible that other word-classes also undergo it. Some examples of words formed by conversion are *guess* (verb to noun), *experience* (noun to verb), and *good* (adjective to noun).

The later parts of the paper discuss conversion especially on the concepts related to it, its characteristics and process, and the meanings of words formed through conversion especially that involves nouns, verbs, and adjectives.

C. The Characteristics of Conversion in English

Conversion is defined as the derivational process whereby an item changes its word-class without the addition of an affix (Quirk et al, 1987: 441). In line with it, Carstairs-McCarthy (2002: 48) defines conversion as a process whereby a lexeme belonging to one class can simply be 'converted' to another, without any overt change in shape.

Conversion is common in English, since in many cases, many nouns and verbs are identical in their forms. However, conversion does not always happen on words that are homophonous. The terminology used for the process of conversion has not been established yet. The most usual terms are 'conversion', because a word is converted (shifted) to a different part of speech; and 'zero-derivation', because the process is like deriving (transferring) a word into another morphological category with a zero-affix creating a semantic dependence of one word upon another (Quirk, 1997: 1558). This implies that an affix exists although it cannot be

seen. Other less frequently used terms are 'functional shift', 'functional change' or 'zero-marked derivative'.

There is still a controversy about where to place the process of conversion as a way of forming new words in English. Some linguists argue that it is to be put under derivation since both involve changes in the word function, and some other state that conversion is separated from derivation, and therefore, it is placed together with other processes in English word-formation. Even though the position of conversion is not clearly defined yet, Cannon in Bartolome in <http://accurapid.com/journal/31conversion.htm> argues that conversion will occur more often in the future since the process is simple and easy. Without any reduction or addition, a word can have a new class and also meaning.

Conversion is a productive way to increase English lexicon due to the ease in the process. Bauer (1983: 226) states that conversion is a free process and any lexeme can undergo this whenever necessary. The aim of conversion varies with the user. Adults convey it to use fewer words, whereas children perform it in order to be understood, although they frequently produce ungrammatical utterances (Aitchison, 1989: 161).

A word that has undergone the process of conversion only has one of the meanings of the original word. Marchand in Bartolome (<http://accurapid.com/journal/31conversion.htm>) establishes some criteria to determine the original and derived words. The criteria focus on several aspects:

1. the semantic dependence (the word that reports to the meaning of the other is the derivative)
2. the range of usage (the item with the smaller range of use is the converted word)
3. the semantic range (the one with less semantic fields is the shifted item)
4. the phonetic shape (some suffixes express the word-class the item belongs to and, if it does not fit, this is the derivative).

Because conversion mostly happens to nouns and verbs, there are some things to be considered:

1. Verbs tend to be abstract since they represent actions, whereas nouns are usually concrete because they name things.
2. Conversion has direct relationship with the changes in part of speech, thus, the result is usually a noun, verb, or adjective.
3. Sometimes a word can undergo conversion into more than one category.

D. The Process of Conversion in English

As mentioned in the previous part of this paper, the term conversion refers to the process of converting a word into a new word with different part of speech without any changes in spelling. This is a common process in English since there are many words in English that are identical but have different part of speech.

The process of creating new words through conversion involves the existence of zero-affix and zero-morpheme. They are named zero because the affix and morpheme are not visible in the new words, yet they do exist. The following tables illustrate how conversion occurs in English.

Table 1

| Adjective | Verb |
|-----------|---------|
| dark | darken |
| black | blacken |
| white | whiten |
| red | redden |

Table 2

| Adjective | Verb |
|-----------|--------|
| brown | brown |
| green | green |
| purple | purple |
| yellow | yellow |

Both Table 1 and 2 show the change in the part of speech of the words, from adjectives into verbs. The difference is on the suffix attached to the verbs in the first table. In table 1, the suffix *en* is added to the adjectives as a morpheme which means 'make (something) adjective' or 'turn (something) into adjective'. In table 2, no suffix is attached on the verbs derived from the adjectives. The process of conversion can be said to occur here. Without any addition to the original word, a new word with new part of speech and meaning can be formed. Zero-affix or zero-morpheme always accompanies any word that undergoes conversion.

E. Conversion from Verb, Noun, and Adjective

There are many examples showing the existence of conversion. However, the process of conversion is not as simple as it seems. This process is easy to be recognized since both words involved (the original and derivative) are identical in spelling. Besides the change in the function, the derived words formed through conversion sometimes also have different meanings from those of the original.

The words involved in conversion are usually nouns and verbs. However, it is possible that other classes of word also undergo the process of conversion. Some types of conversion in English are presented below. Some of the examples are taken from Hornby's *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*.

1. Conversion from verb to noun

A noun that is derived from a verb through the process of conversion can have several meanings such as:

a. To show the state of mind or sensation

e.g. (1) The news caused a war scare.

(2) He held her to him in a warm embrace.

In example (1) and (2), the verbs *scare* and *embrace* are converted into nouns. Based on the semantic dependence, the meanings of the converted nouns report the meanings of the original verbs. Both *scare* (n) and *embrace* (n) have the meaning of 'showing the state of scare/embrace'.

b. To show an event or activity

e.g. (3) We've had a good many laughs over his foolishness.

(4) I heard the cry of an animal in pain in the park.

People commonly know the words *laugh* and *cry* as verbs. However, syntactically, in the examples (3) and (4), both words function as nouns. This is shown by the plural marker *s* attached to the word *laugh* and the article *the* preceding *cry*. Based on the meanings, compared to the meanings conveyed by the verbs *laugh* and *cry*, both nouns in example (3) and (4) have narrower meanings than the original verbs. They only show 'the event of laughing/crying'.

c. To show the object of the original verb

e.g. (5) Are political suspects kept under police observation in your country?

(6) He's got a deep cut on the leg.

The meaning conveyed by both *suspect* (n) and *cut* (n) is showing the object of the original verb. *Suspect* (n) means 'the person who is suspected', whereas *cut* (n) means 'something that is cut'.

d. To show the subject of the original verb

e.g. (7) Having a word processor would be a help.

(8) There is a tramp begging for food.

In examples (7) and (8) both underlined words are nouns. This is proven by the article *a* preceding them. The word *help* (n) and *tramp* (n) are converted from the verbs without any changes in spelling. Both nouns convey the meaning of 'something/someone that is doing the verb'. Thus, the word *help* (n) in example (7) means 'something that helps' and *tramp* (n) in example (8) means 'someone that tramps'.

e. To show an instrument

e.g. (9) He got a good start in business.

(10) You have to remove the cover before you know what inside it is.

Besides stating an activity and other meanings that are previously discussed, the conversion from verb to noun might also show an instrument. The term *instrument* is defined as (a) a device used to perform a particular piece of work and (b) a way of achieving or causing something. The word *start* in example (9) conveys the meaning (b), while the word *cover* has the meaning (a).

2. Conversion from noun to verb

The meanings aroused by the process of conversion from noun to verb are:

a. To show an activity of putting something in/on noun

e.g. (11) He pocketed the money.

(12) They've been filming for six months.

The words *pocket* and *film* are more familiar as nouns than as verbs. As nouns, they also have broader range of meaning and usage. Therefore, the word *pocket* (v) and *film* (v) are considered as the converted forms. These words clearly show the activity of putting something in/on noun putting something in the pocket (11) / film (12).

b. To give noun

e.g. (13) They named the child John.

(14) He shaped a pot on a wheel.

The words *name* (v) and *shape* (v) are converted from their nouns. This conversion also cause slight changes in the meaning of both words. *Name* (v) means 'to give a name' and *shape* (v) means 'to give shape'.

c. To show an activity done with the noun as the instrument

e.g. (15) He hammers down the lid of a box to fasten it.

- (16) The children string up lanterns among the trees across the street.

The underlined words are converted from *hammer* (n) and *string* (n). The meaning aroused by the conversion is 'an activity done with the noun as the instrument'. Thus, the meaning of *hammer* (v) in example (15) is 'an activity done with hammer' and *string* (v) in example (16) means 'an activity done with string'.

d. To make something into noun

e.g. (17) The President is scheduled to make a speech tomorrow.

(18) An emperor is a monarch who rules over an empire.

The meaning of the words *schedule* (v) and *rule* (v) in the above examples is 'to make something into noun'. Therefore, the meaning of *schedule* in example (17) is 'to make something into schedule' and *rule* in example (18) is 'to make something into rule'.

e. To send with noun

e.g. (19) The company has shipped a container of silk.

(20) I'll phone you tomorrow.

The converted words *ship* (v) and *phone* (v) have direct relationship in meaning with the original nouns. Both words mean 'to send with noun' to send with ship/phone.

3. Conversion from adjective to verb

An adjective can undergo the process of conversion, especially into a verb. The meaning aroused by this process is 'to make adjective'. Some examples of conversion from adjective to verb are:

(21) You should slow up a bit if you want to avoid a breakdown.

(22) He opened the door to let me in.

The words *slow* (adj) and *open* (adj) are converted into verbs. However, the meaning of the verbs is still in relation with the adjectives that is 'to make slow/open'.

4. Conversion from adjective to noun

Even though this type of conversion rarely occurs, an adjective can also change into a noun through the process of conversion. This usually happens when the adjective is attached in a noun phrase. Syntactically, the adjective functions as a noun, which sometimes can be recognized through the use of the article *the* or *a*. For example:

(23) You must be prepared for the worst.

(24) I am telling you for your own good.

However, in some cases, if the number of the adjective is changed, it can no longer function as a noun and the sentence formed is ungrammatical. For example:

(25) We've got some older fans now, but the more the merrier everyone's welcome!

If the word *more* is changed into plural by adding the suffix *s* to become *mores*, the sentence is no longer grammatical: (26) We've got some older fans now, but the mores the merrier everyone's welcome!

F. Conclusion

Conversion is a very common process of word-formation in English. It is the derivational process whereby an item changes its word-class without the addition of any affix. It is done by converting a lexeme belonging to one class to another, without any overt change in shape.

However, it is not easy to determine the original and the converted word in a pair of words that are exactly the same in spelling. There are some elements that are to be considered: the semantic dependence, the range of usage, the semantic range, and also the phonetic shape.

Conversion almost always involves open-class vocabulary, especially noun, verb, and adjective. The converted words produced by this process are also in these three classes. The original words, compared to the converted ones, usually have broader range of meaning and usage.

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