

CONVERSION (AS A WAY OF WORD-BUILDING IN ENGLISH)

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Conversion is a characteristic feature of the English word-building system. It is sometimes referred to as an affixless way of word-building. But there are other types of word-building in which new words are also formed without affixes (most compounds, contracted words, sound-imitation words, etc.). So what is peculiar for this way of word-building?

The term *conversion* first appeared in the book by Henry Sweet 'New English Grammer' in 1891. Conversion is treated differently by different scientists, e.g. prof. Smirnitsky treats conversion as a morphological way of forming words when one part of speech is formed from another part of speech by changing it's paradigm, e.g. to form the verb *to dial* from the noun *dial* we change the paradigm of the noun (a dial, dials) for the paradigm of a regular verb (I dial, he dials, dialed, dialing). A. Marchand in his book 'The categories and Types of Present-day English' treats conversion as a morphological-syntactical word-building because we have not only the change of the paradigm, but also the change of the syntactic function, e.g. *I need some good paper for my room.* (The noun *paper* is an object in the sentence). *I paper my room every year.* (The verb *paper* is the predicate in the sentence).

The historical development of conversion has it's deep roots.

After the Scandinavian conquest, due to the fact that the conquerors and the conquered were people of the same origin, same cultural level, customs and traditions and their languages were alike, Scandinavians and Englishmen could easily communicate. The fact that the languages were alike made communication much easier for them: the roots as it happens to languages of the same origin were mostly alike and differences were in affixes and inflexions. While communicating the English and Scandinavians stressed the parts of words that were alike and neglected those which differed, so as we know in middle English there began a 'levelling' of endings, one of the reasons of which was the Scandinavian conquest. Due to the leveling of endings forms of nouns and verbs coincided:

Old English *lufian* (v), *lufu* (n) – Modern English *love* (n, v),

Old English *drinkan* (v), *drinka* (n) – Modern English *drink* (n, v),

More rarely it is the prefix that was dropped: Old English *bemynd* – Modern English *mind*.

Words borrowed from other languages underwent the same process, for example, French borrowings:

Old French *eschequier* (v), *eschec* (n) – Modern English *check* (n, v),

Old French *crier* (v), *cri* (n) – Modern English *cry* (n, v).

Nowadays, new pairs of converted words are built on the analogy with those already in the word-stock: to phone, to wire, to can etc.

Conversion is the main way of forming verbs in Modern English. Verbs can be formed from nouns of different semantic groups and gave different meanings because of that, e.g.:

a) verbs have instrumental meaning if they are formed from nouns denoting parts of a human body, e.g. *to eye*, *to finger*, *to elbow*, *to shoulder* etc. They have instrumental meaning of they are formed from nouns denoting tools, machines, instruments, weapons, e.g. *to hummer*, *to machine-gun*, *to rifle*, *to mail*.

b) verbs can denote an action characteristic of the living being denoted by the noun from which they have been converted, e.g. *to crowd, to wolf, to ape*.

c) verbs can denote acquisition or deprivation if they are formed from nouns denoting an object, e.g. *to fish, to dust, to peel, to paper*.

d) verbs can denote an action performed at the place denoted by the noun form which they have been converted, e.g. *to park, to garage, to bottle, to corner, to pocket*.

e) verbs can denote an action performed at the time denoted by the noun from which they have been converted, e.g. *to winter, to weekend*.

Verbs can be converted from adjectives, in such cases they denote the change of the state, e.g. *to tame* (to become or make tame), *to clean, to slim* etc.

Verbs can be also converted from other parts of speech, e.g. *to down* (adverb), *to pooh-pooh* (interjection).

Nouns can also be formed by means of conversion from verbs. Converted nouns can denote:

a) Instant of an action, e.g. *a jump, a move*.

b) Process or state, e.g. *sleep, walk*.

c) Agent of the action expressed by the verb from which the noun has been converted e.g. *a drive, a stop, a walk*.

Many nouns converted from verbs can be used only in the singular form and denote momentaneous actions. In such cases we have partial conversion. Such deverbal nouns are often used with verbs: *to have, to get, to take* etc, e.g. *to have a try, to give a push, to take a swim*.

Sometimes nouns are formed from adverbs, e.g. *ups and down*, and even from affixes, e.g. 'ism'- a set of particular or religious ideas or principles (socialism, communism, and all other 'isms' of modern world).

In cases of conversion the problem of criteria of semantic derivation arises: which of the converted pair is primary and which is converted from it. The problem was analyzed by prof. A. I. Smirnitsky. Later on P.A. Soboleva developed her idea and worked out of the following criteria:

1. If the lexical meaning of the root morpheme and the lexico-grammatical meaning of the stem coincide the word is primary, e.g. in cases *pen-to-pen, father-to-father* the nouns are names of an object and a living being. Therefore in the nouns *pen* and *father* the lexical meaning of the root and the lexico-grammatical meaning of the stem coincide. The verb *to pen* and *to father* denote an action, a process, therefore the lexico-grammatical meanings of the stems do not coincide with the lexical meanings of the roots. The verbs have a complex semantic structure and they were converted from nouns.

2. If we compare a converted pair with a synonymic word pair which was formed by means of suffixation we can find out which of pair is primary. This criterion can be applied only to nouns converted from verbs, e.g. *chat* n. and *chat* v. can be compared with *conversation-converse*.

3. The criterion based on derivational relations is of more universal character. In this case we must take a word-cluster of relative words to which the converted pair belongs. If the root stem of the word-cluster has suffixes added to noun stem the noun is primary in the converted pair and vice versa, e.g. in the word-cluster: *hand* n., *hand* v., *handy, handful* the affixed words have suffixes added to a noun stem, that is why the noun is primary and the verb is converted from it. In the word-cluster: *dance* n., *dance* v., *dancing, dancer* we see that the primary word is a verb and the noun is converted from it.