



Enriching vocabulary of ESP students

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Abstract

One of the goals of teaching ESP to students of different scientific study fields should be to teach and advise them how to increase and adopt a scope of English words. There are different methods and techniques proposed, but understanding the process itself is essential for the process of adopting new words. Lexical morphology and word formation processes discussed in this paper could be useful in this regard. The basic goal of this paper is to describe one of the most interesting processes - the Conversion, in theory and practice, as numerous English words belong to this process. Lexical Morphology, Etymology and certain Syntax concepts will be included in the analysis using the combined methods (synchrony vs. diachrony, etc.) The results will help enrich the vocabulary of ESP students in an easier and more comprehensive manner.

Keywords: English for Special Purposes, word formation processes, teaching, conversion

1. Introduction

English belongs to a highly productive group of languages because of the different social, cultural and other circumstances. New words are often formed and linguists established a number of processes used for forming new lexicon. A lot of English words are borrowed from German, French, Italian, and adopted in English with none or certain changes in pronunciation, writing, grammatical characteristics, and so on. On the other hand, thanks to syntactical linguistic field and etymology, lexical morphology treats the so-called word formation processes. They are a great source of creating new words in English. Primarily according to productivity, those processes are divided into *major* and *minor*. Conversion, discussed in this paper, is one of the major processes.

One of the major goals of this paper is to analyze the characteristics of conversion. This paper will also examine different types of conversion including conversion from verbs to nouns and vice versa, adjectives to verbs, closed category to any other word category. Besides that, it will also deal with cases of partial conversion, and conversion within the word class itself. The authors who have studied conversion, not just morphologically, but semantically as well, will be mentioned in the paper. Examples showing the use of conversion in practice are taken from magazines and literature.

The area of conversion has been chosen simply because it is perceived as an amazing language tool with a high level of productivity. It seems like conversion, as one of the major word formation processes in English language, is incorporated into communication all the time, as it undoubtedly contributes to the economy of language, in either formal or informal context. Many people also consider forming of new words a fun and creative way of expressing their thoughts and opinions.

According to some linguists (Bauer, 1983), *conversion*, or as it is called *functional shift*, is the process that basically depends on the grammatical function of certain words. It is so because without any changes of its form (pronunciation, spelling, etc.) a word is converted or transferred from one word class to another; from a noun or nominal to verb or verbal or the other way round, from a noun to an adjective or vice versa, from an adverb to an adjective or the other way round,

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and even from the main word to a functional word (adverb to preposition), Changes can happen even within the same class, from one type of a noun to another (Pyles and Algeo, 1993).

The issue of conversion should be put in a wider context describing both minor and major word formation processes, and the process should be analyzed and discussed through examples taken from everyday Modern Standard English.

2. Word Formation Processes

As mentioned above, lexical morphology deals with the manner in which new words appear in English – word formation processes. There are different opinions in linguistics about those processes, because they are rather contemporary. They are basically divided according to productivity, etymology and whether they include or exclude each other into major and minor.

3. Minor Processes

A lot of English words, especially with the development of science, industry, business, IT, etc. are formed by minor processes. According to different authors those processes are less productive. They can easily disappear depending on the situation and because of this they do not become dictionary words. There are several different opinions concerning the division on minor processes and they are very popular especially among youth. Generally (Spasić, 2010) there are:

- *Reduplication* – Process of making the so-called repetition compounds. Many of reduplicative words are onomatopoeic (ding-ding, ping-pong)
- *Blending* – Process of two words fusing into one, the first part of one word is usually combined with the last part of another (*smog* – *smoke* + *fog*, *tragicomedy* – *tragedy* + *comedy*)
- *Clipping* – Process of word reduction, leaving only a part of the word to stand as whole. There are several options – back-clipping (*lab* – *laboratory*), fore-clipping (*plane* – *airplane*), back and fore-clipping (*fridge* – *refrigerator*), etc.
- *Back-formation* – Happens when a word is created from another word by removing a typical affix in language (or a form that looks like it), i.e. derivational morpheme *-er*, added to a verb to form a noun that bears the meaning a person performing the action of the verb. Sometimes the noun enters a language first, followed by the “back-formed” verb (*televise* – *television*)
- *Folk etymology* - Process of changing a word, usually borrowed from another language, to make it more understandable for the native speaker (*leak*, *yacht* – Dutch)
- *Borrowing* – Certain English words are borrowed from IE languages, and they adapted in sound or grammar to their native speech patterns. This process is called *borrowing*, and the borrowed word is a *loanword* (*alcohol* – Arabic, *boss* – Dutch, *piano* – Italian)
- *Root creation* – Some words in English are neither inherited from OE, nor adopted from any foreign language, or formed by any process of compounding or derivation. Those words are formed through the process of root-creation. They can be made by imitating unarticulated sounds like *boom*, *giggle*, *mumble*
- *Coinage* – Invention of completely new words like brand names Exxon, Xerox, Kodak
- *Antonomasia* – Many places and inventions are named after persons somehow connected to them, like Lynch’s Law (after the Virginian captain William Lynch)
- *Acronyms* – Initial letters or syllables of two or more words of one phrase form words, like WHO – World Health Organization, FBI – Federal Bureau of Investigation

It could be concluded that there are a lot of processes in English used to produce new words that make communication better and easier.

4. Major Processes

Apart from conversion, the other two major processes are affixation and compounding (Leech and Svartvik, 2013). They are productive, do not exclude each other, new members appear often so they cannot be counted, and they belong to dictionary words.

Affixation or *derivation* is the process of making new lexemes from other lexemes serving as bases. Those new lexemes are formed by adding a derivational affix to the previously mentioned base. Derivational affixes are bound morphemes and they get their real meaning when attached to a base.

Prefixation is the process of adding a bound derivational prefix to the front of a base denoted with a hyphen, in order to produce a complex word that is a new lexeme at the same time.

Prefixes of English origin, known as Anglo-Saxon ones, are also few in number and they developed in the Old English Period. The Neo-classical or borrowed prefixes can be divided into three categories:

-multi, anti-

Prefixes originating from Classical languages: a-, re-

Latin and Greek prepositions: intra-, circum

Suffixation – a process when a suffix is added to a base. There are Anglo-Saxon suffixes (-ness, -full, -ship) and Neo-Classical (-ism, -al, -an). When suffixes are added they usually change the word class of a base. They are thus divided into nominal, verbal, adjectival and adverbial, and can be derivational or inflectional (grammatical).

Compounding (composition) is the process of joining two or more free morphemes into a new word. Although highly productive in Modern English, it was broadly and frequently used in Old English. There are several ways of compounding:

The compounding of free forms – This process results in the so-called stem-compounds. The first element indicates the particular use to which the object designated is adopted (hair-brush, tooth-paste, etc.)

Genitival compound – A lot of compounds are formed by stem word, but there are compounds consisting of one word in genitive, and another in a stem...They have retained the genitive ending and make up an important group of contemporary compound nouns (lady's maid, bird's nest).

Verbal compounds – Many compound nouns or adjectives originate from French, in which the verb stems were actually the imperative forms with no suffixes (breakfast, cut-throat)

Prepositional compounds – Two or three elements are joined by a preposition (man-of-war, out-of-date).

Conversion – morphologically, syntactically, lexically and phonologically productive process, a source of many dictionary words in English.

5. Conversion – General Characteristics

To reveal the issue of conversion, a theoretical framework should be written. As it was mentioned above, conversion is a process when a word changes either its item or a type of an item-class, without any change of a basic form. "Conversion is the derivational process whereby an item changes its word class without the addition of an affix" (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1987) Pay attention to *fast* in the following examples:

Fast can be dangerous.

He is a *fast* driver.

She drives *fast*.

They *fast* for Easter.

It is obvious that in the first example, *fast* is a *noun*, in the second it is an *adjective*, in the third an *adverb*, and in the fourth a *verb*. Without any change of basic form *fast* belongs to the open class items. According to some authors, *conversion* is derivational process (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1987). Having in mind etymology, for a deeper investigation we should be aware of some ties that have been lost and do not belong to conversion (like in *mind* and *matter*). As a process, *conversion* is not possible in languages with grammatical characteristics of gender, place or time expressed by affixes (Cannon, 1985), but it is a process practically common in English. Some authors (Bauer, 1983), treat conversion as a separate major process or one that belongs either to derivation or compounding.

There are some doubts concerning terminology in this field. The term *conversion* is the most common. As it was mentioned above, according to some authors (Quirk et al., 1987), a word can be converted into another class or type with a zero-affix – so the process can be treated as *zero derivation*. Beside those two frequently used terms, there are some more, such as *functional change*, *functional shift* or *zero mark derivation*.

Learners of English in general can easily produce a new word by using the process of conversion. The lexical gap can easily be overcome (Aitchison, 2012). That is why conversion is treated as a very free process, and almost all words can undergo it (Bauer, 1983). Conversion is mostly done among open class items without morphological restrictions. Although some restrictions can exist in derived nouns, they are rare.

Semantically as well, there are some limitations, but this could be a subject matter of another paper. Words created by the process of conversion are *graphically* identical as well. On the other hand, what is not so important to a learner or a student is that it is sometimes difficult to establish a source form and a newly formed word. According to Marchant, there are several criteria to help in solving this problem. Those are the semantic dependence, the range of usage, the semantic range and the phonetic shape (Marchant, 1974).

Knowledge is important, so is the intuition of the speaker. The division of conversion into different types can be of help, as well. It allows one form to be converted in different classes and types, as it was shown above, with the word form *fast*.

The aim of conversion differs in different age groups. Children convert words in order to be understood, regardless of being grammatically correct or not, while adults enrich their vocabulary consciously (Aitchison, 2012).

6. Research Based on Different Types of Conversion

The basic goal of this part of the paper is to show how conversion can be divided. Examples taken from newspapers and magazines are analyzed and could help students – learners to adopt new words in English. There were about hundred different sentences used as a source material, but only some of them are mentioned in this paper.

Being one of the major processes in Modern Standard English, conversion is very productive and a source of the newly formed words. Some basic source words can be converted completely into a newly formed word. Such a conversion is morphologically called *complete*. On the other hand, newly formed words can be converted only partially, gaining only one grammatical characteristic of the source word. Such conversion is called *partial*. Both those types are shortly analyzed and discussed in the following part of the paper. A deeper analysis would require a history of language, or better to say etymology to be taken into consideration, but for the practical use, the following division would be relatively enough.

Conversion from verb to noun

According to some authors (Quirk et al., 1987), there are several different characteristics of a process basically connected with meaning and function, either of a source or newly formed word. Let us pay attention to the following examples and words in italic.

That was the most challenging *experience* of my life.

Joanna faced all the hardships without *fear*.

The race between the candidates at times did have the *feel* of a death struggle.

My children are where I take *hope*.

Nouns such as *experience*, *fear*, *feel* and *hope* converted from verbs in those cases express a state of sensation or mind. They function either as a subject or an object of a sentence, as seen in the above examples.

More than half of the incidents involve loss of consciousness or a heart *attack*.

The Traffic Department is staffed 24/7 for traffic *alerts* and directions.

They had a few *laughs* about the situation.

Words in italic in the above examples, such as *attack*, *alerts*, *laughs* name activity or event denoted by the inflexional suffix of plurality functioning as objects and subjects.

The President's recent *visit* to Germany was very successful.

There is a steady *increase* in computing power that we also see in our homes and offices.

Like his Biblical namesake, Noah got the *call* to save the world's endangered creatures.

Some of the features in the connected cars are activated by voice *command*.

Converted nouns such as *visit*, *increase*, *call* and *command* are objects with a sense of what or which.

One animal is able to give birth to a healthy animal that is the *clone* of a completely different species;

The owners also maintain *contacts* with agents who place estates on sale.

Converted nouns in the above examples play a role of a subject of the source or original verbs, expressing who or what.

The image shown at the top of the *cover* is blurred, and the one shown at the bottom is not clear, either.

This turned out to be a false sign for the *start* of the race.

Smith, in *turn*, called his supervisor and explained the situation.

Converted nouns can express instrument. Verbs can also be nominalised, as shown in the last example.

Conversion from noun to verb

Another significant type of conversion happens when a noun as a source word is transferred into a verb – a newly formed word. According to some authors (Quirk et al., 1997), such words can be divided into several sub-classes. The following represented and briefly analyzed examples describe those classes.

Verbs expressing put in or on, such as the verbs in the following examples:

The recent allegations that the officials *pocketed* \$4.8 billion Agency loan date from 2020.

Well, I think it was when we were in Amsterdam, *filming* a TV show.

Verbs meaning to provide or to give:

He helped to *shape* the future of his country.

That oil company not only *fuels* most of the country's industry, but also pays 40 percent of government tax revenues.

Verbs expressing action done when noun is an instrument:

Talks in Geneva to *hammer* out the final details surprisingly stalled last month;

The antilock *brake* system can be activated by sudden braking;

There are still four billion people out there who don't know to *yo-yo*.

Verbs that have the meaning to act:

Both major international events *hosted* roughly the same number of journalists.

Verbs that have the sense of making something, with the original source noun as a subject:

Judge Lewis will *rule* this afternoon.

The company *shipped* batches of medicines to help the vulnerable population.

CEO *telephoned* the employee of the month to offer his congratulations.

There are two more types of complete conversion. One of them is conversion from an *adjective* to a *verb* (de-adjectival verbs). They are transitive according to their morphological characteristics.

You'd have domestic production falling, whole cities *blackened* out, whole industries threatened.

The Algerian President has challenged the West to *open* up international financial institutions to leaders of the developing world.

The economy is clearly *slowing*.

All the mentioned verbs function as predicates.

Finally, in the second type of complete conversion, certain *closed class items* such as prepositions can be converted into adverbs, nouns and verbs.

Up the difficulty by combining moves.

Young wolves from the valley, *out* to establish their own packs, have started prospecting in the area.

Although *adverbs* belong to the *open class items*, the examples of conversion of adverbs are presented here because this process is rather rare.

This company had a credibility gap between the image that is cultivated with the community on the *outside* and how the members of that community were treated on the *inside*.

Conversion of interjections and non-lexical items:

The reason chimps cannot emit a string of *ho ho ho*'s is that they cannot make more than a single sound when they exhale or inhale.

Humans, in contrast, can chop up a single exhalation into multiple bursts of *ha ha ha* or words

Affixes can be converted into nouns and proper names:

Mini, taken over by BMW, is creating its own niche of cars.

Onomatopoeic expressions can be converted into verbs:

Then, in the busses and limousines, mobile phones began to *buzz* and *beep*.

The industry still spends most of its money *wooing* professionals.

Phrase compounds can be converted into adjectives:

You would have laughed more at the *borrow-the-mower* joke if you had heard it aloud while in a group, rather than reading it silently and alone.

They are so *down-to-earth*.

We've worked gathering confidential information for a *now-it-can-be-told* account of the race for the White House.

As it can be concluded from the above analysis, the examples representing everyday Modern Standard English show that all types of complete conversion are applied in forming new words. The process primarily covers the two basic word items – nouns and verbs – but, as it can be seen, adjectives, adverbs, closed class items, and some non-lexical

7. Partial Conversion

The second type of conversion is rather doubtful for use in practical adoption of English. The grammatical background of a student or learner of English should be wider and deeper. In the process of converting, the user has to be aware of the changes to be applied and of the parts that stand unconverted. The function of the word is very important as well (Quirk et al., 1997). There are several subtypes of partial conversion, and they will be briefly analyzed in this paper because of their complexity.

Conversion from noun to adjective:

The deals come and go at a dizzying pace. Blink, and a hat stand is sold for \$15 and a *mahogany* music box for \$75.

Her two antique double spool beds cost her a total of \$250 at Dutch Auction Sales.

The issue was also confirmed by Mr. Jones on *South Jersey* Auction.

Once a week, Pete Peterson sends a shipment of antiques to *Texas* auction houses.

Words in italic represent adjectives converted from nouns. The only possibility to establish conversion is when denominal adjective is used attributively – according to the function. When denominal adjectives function predicatively, the conversion cannot be proven.

Opposite conversion – from an adjective into a noun

This process of conversion is rather rare and happens when a noun converted from an adjective expresses a synonym.

From one direction comes the rich smell of frying bread, from another the aroma of boiled pork dumplings, and from yet another fermented or “smelly” bean curd, a *Chinese* favourite.

Just one form is a noun, and if a plural suffix is added, the form is not grammatical.

We have to assume the *worst*.

We've got some older fans now, but the more the *merrier* – everyone's welcome!

Conversion within the same word class

According to some grammarians, there is a phrase that expresses some situations in conversion. When conversion happens within the same word class changing only grammatical category, it is called *change of the secondary word class* (Quirk et al., 1997) or *conversion as syntactic process* (Bauer, 1983). The opinions and terminology in this field differ.

An uncountable noun converts into countable, proven by an appropriate suffix. The process could be opposite, too:

A cargo rocket blasted off Thursday carrying about two tons of *supplies*.

Because *cabaret*, that's the whole idea of it – you're sort of sitting in the audiences lap for an hour and a half.

Josh found himself totally at home in the role of arbiter-in-*chief*.

Proper nouns can be converted into common:

Today, more than a third of all cars sold to Europeans are *diesels*.

The meaning of a noun can be converted too – from stative into dynamic meaning, followed by the progressive form of a verb:

She was being a “*trouper*”, said a friend, but she was “exhausted, a zombie”.

Verbs are converted within the same class:

This techno-whiz *worked a computer* to get the latest Florida vote.

The media consultant who had *run the day-to-day operations* on the campaign, answered the call.

Words in italic are transferred from intransitive to transitive verbs, or the process can be opposite when a verb is converted from an adjective. The verb then changes its meaning.

The drama that reached such a fever pitch after the polls *closed* had begun a good two years earlier.

It took them about 30 seconds to announce and *close* a sale.

An intransitive verb can be converted into a linking verb or copula, and it needs a subject complement to fulfil the meaning:

Her oldest son, George, *sat frozen* in an armchair, clicking his TV remote.

The roaring room *grew silent*.

Some monotransitive verbs can be transferred into complex transitive, requiring an indirect and direct object:

The President is under fire at home for the ardent peace initiatives that *won him the award*.

How did you decide *to make it a cabaret*?

Both adjectives and adverbs can be converted within the same class.

Adjectives that can be compared become uncomparated:

The CFO was brusque and a little incredulous.

Also, stative adjective concerning meaning can be transferred into dynamic:

She described the experience of being *accused* of cheating as “devastating”.

Adverbs rarely undergo the change using conversion considering meaning – manner to temporal adverbs in the following two examples:

On a chilly late-summer morning, Pascal Wick sits perfectly *still* atop a rock.

There are *still* four billion people out there who do not know to play that game.

There are the so-called marginal cases of conversion, change in pronunciation and stress, but they could be studied more for the purpose of another paper. As it can be seen above, the issue of partial conversion, conversion within the same class, and other types briefly mentioned in the paper, can be rather complex and require a more comprehensive knowledge of English structure in general.

8. Conclusion

Language is what differs humans from animals, among other characteristics. Generally, it helps humans communicate with each other, share thoughts, ideas, feelings, leading to prosperity. Such an important tool as language is often taken for granted, but it belongs to a very vast scientific field called linguistics. It is divided into different sub-fields, but the major interest is a word – how it is formed, and what it means according to its function. Different processes involved in producing new words in English are always interesting to investigate. They are divided into major and minor and briefly described in the paper. The main goal of the paper was to give a theoretical framework for one of the major word formation processes – conversion, and through a set of examples, analyze and describe it.

The role of conversion in the process of forming new words is immense and important. That is why it can be of great help to our ESP students to enrich their vocabulary in an interesting way and gain a deeper understanding of the language itself and its processes. They will in turn comprehend how one word can be used to express name, action, characteristic, time, manner, or description.

The basic goal of this paper was to describe one of the most productive word formation processes – conversion. Why is it so? Because knowing the basic characteristics of how a word is converted or shifted from one class or type to another without changing the basic form can help students or learners in general enrich their vocabulary in an easier way. Combined method is used to reveal this matter. Examples provided in this paper can serve as an input in learning English language. A survey among students is recommended to complement the research made.

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