

THE SEMANTICS OF WORDS FORMED BY CONVERSION IN ENGLISH

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Abstract. Conversion is a highly productive word-formation process in English. By conversion, a verb can be shifted to a noun, an adjective to a verb, a noun to a verb, a function word to a noun... etc. without adding any other elements to the base. A detailed analysis of semantic features of words formed by conversion is the focus of this article, which reveals that the semantic relations between conversion pairs are diverse but closely associated. Therefore, the meaning of a derived word can be deduced from the base in a given context with ease.

1. Introduction

The English language is an inflectional one; therefore, a great number of new lexemes are formed by adding affixes to the roots or stems. However, there is a process highly productive and flexible in present-day English is conversion by which a new lexeme is formed in different part of speech and with different distribution characteristic without adding any derivative elements. The following are some examples:

- (1) "His argument contains too many 'its' and 'buts'."
- (2) "The answer he gave was quite surprising."
- (3) "Do you bottle your fruit or freeze it?"
- (4) "He fathers these children."

This word-formation process has various names: conversion, zero-derivation, functional change. The term 'conversion' is preferred in Bauer (1983) and Quirk et al. (1985:1558) and Jackson et al (2002). According to Quirk et al (1985: 1558), "Conversion is the derivational process whereby an item is adapted or converted to a new word class without the addition of an

affix." Jackson et al (2002:86) in 'Words, Meaning and Vocabulary' defines 'conversion' as a process by which a word belonging to one word-class is shifted to another word-class without altering its pronunciation or spelling.

Lipka (1992:84) in 'An outline of Lexicology' considered this process *zero-derivation*, claiming that this is an extremely productive process in contemporary English by which many new lexemes whose forms are identical with their original ones are formed. The new lexemes are in different word-classes and have different grammatical functions.

Conversion is a highly prolific source for the production of new words since there is no restriction on the form that can undergo conversion in English. In fact, this word-formation process occurs so regularly that many scholars prefer to consider it as a matter of syntactic usage rather than as word-formation. For example, 'coffee' is an uncountable noun, but in a given context, it may be used as a countable noun. Therefore, Bauer (1983: 227) in 'English Word-Formation', Algeo (2010: 242) in 'The Origins and Development

of the English language' called this process *functional shift* to highlight the fact that in such cases words are converted from one grammatical function to another without any change in form.

In fact, it is not easy to differentiate between a base and a derivative formed by conversion. However, to some extent, the directionality of conversion can be determined based on the semantic dependency between the base and the derived word. According to Plag (2003:109), derived words are semantically more complex than their bases; therefore, if one of the pair can be analyzed as being semantically complex than the other, it is the derivative. For example, the verb 'to *net*' can be analyzed as 'to *put in a net*'.

Conversion derivatives in English are formed from different word classes and there are a great number of words formed by this process cited in dictionaries, the most common of which are noun to verb conversion, verb to noun conversion, adjective to verb conversion and adjective to noun conversion. The following are some examples: *hand (n) - hand (v)*, *walk (v) - walk (n)*, *empty (adj) - empty (v)*, *poor (adj) - the poor (n)*. The productivity and ease of conversion is clearly reflected in daily life communication where a coinage can be spontaneously created and of course, the word does not exist in dictionaries. Let us examine the examples below:

(5) "If anybody **oranges** me again tonight, I'll knock his face off."

(Little Speck in Garnered fruit' by Henry)

(6) "He didn't **madam** anybody, even honoured customers like Mrs. Moore."

(By Dickens)

On the basis of revised theory of conversion and directionality of conversion discussed in reference books, the article will address semantic features of conversion derivatives in English.

2. The semantics of conversion derivatives in English

2.1. Noun → verb conversion

Of all words formed by conversion in English, this type takes up the largest percentage. According to Lang (2007), there are about 231 out of 700 are nouns formed from verbs by conversion in his research. Plag (1999) states that there are 488 verbs derived from nouns by conversion in Oxford English Dictionary. Semantic relationships between the bases and the derived words of this type are various but closely related to each other.

Let's start with the verbs derived from nouns denoting tools or instruments. There are a number of these words in dictionaries such as *to pen*, *to paint*, *to knife*, *to brake*, *to drum*, *to coat*, *to mask*.... We can examine the following examples:

(7) "She **penned** a few words of thanks."

(Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2010)

(8) "He **nailed** a little sign that read Doc Brown has moved upstairs."

(Old Doc Brown - a song)

Obviously, the meaning of 'penned' and 'nailed' in (7) and (8) represents the action performed using these tools.

However, the semantic relationship between the base and the derivative is not always direct. In communication, the meaning of the derived word is metaphorically deduced from the original one in a given context. Let us consider the following examples:

(9) "Heavy seas rose as the ship knifed through 15-foot waves..."

(Cruise Travel March/April 1982)

(10) "Finally he had her pinned to the floor, her arms bound in his grasp to her body."

('Dinner at...' by O. Henry)

It is clear that the verb 'knife' in example (9) does not simply 'perform or act with a knife', but 'act as if with a knife blade'. Similarly, 'pin' in (10) means 'act as if with a pin'.

Secondly, we can form new verbs from names of some animals and the verbs represent actions typically characterized by those animals. They are such verbs as *to worm*, *to dog*, *to fox*, *to golf*...

(11) "The father, Vincent Daudet, was a silk manufacturer—a man **dogged** through life by misfortune and failure."

(<http://encyclopedia.jrank.org>)

(12) "The train was **snaking** its way through the mountains."

(<http://2.vndic.net>)

Like (i), the semantic relationship between the meaning of 'dog' and 'snake' in these two examples with that of the bases is a hidden comparison, which is the matter of metaphor.

By conversion, nouns denoting parts of the body can also be changed to verbs showing actions performed by these parts. Some of these verbs are to

hand, *to leg*, *to eye*, *to elbow*, *to finger*... Unlike the previous categories, the meaning of derived words of this type is directly related to the meaning of the base. Let us consider the following examples:

(13) "He **eyed** me with suspicion, and I **eyed** him back, curiously..."

(The Crucible: An Autobiography by Colonel Yay, Filipina American Guerrilla, p 17)

(14) "She doesn't like eating food that's been **fingered** by someone else."

(Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2010)

Clearly, 'eye' in (13) means 'look with eyes' and 'finger' in (14) is 'touch using finger'.

Some nouns denoting occupations or duties are used as verbs representing actions characterized by these jobs or duties. Common verbs of this type are 'to nurse', 'to father', 'to referee', 'to cook', 'to groom...' In this category, the derived word normally means 'work or act as...' which can be easily deduced from the meaning of the base.

(15) "She **nurses** her aged mother."

(Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2010)

(16) "Who **refereed** the match?"

(Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2010)

In (15), the verb 'nurse' means 'look after her mother as a nurse'; and in (16), 'referee' has the same meaning as 'be the referee of'.

In addition, nouns denoting places can sometimes function as verbs indicating the process through which the places are occupied or meaning 'put things in/on that place'. Some typical examples of this type are *to room*, *to place*, *to table*, *to corner*, *to shelve*, *to shelter*....

(17) "He's **rooming** with my friend Alan."

(Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2010)

(18) "One of the elderly librarians, who was **shelving** books nearby, scowled at us."

(<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com>)

Not only do nouns denoting places function as verbs, nouns of containers can be verbs which mean 'put something in the container'.

(19) "She quickly **pocketed** the note without reading it."

(Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2010)

(20) "Do you **bottle** your fruit or freeze it?"

(Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2010)

Some nouns referring to meals can be used as verbs showing the process of having the meals.

(21) "We **breakfasted** on pastries and coffee from the hotel's *Il Fornaio Panetteria* and used a coupon we'd received at check-in to get free *biscotti*."

(<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com>)

(22) "They celebrated by **feasting** all day."

(Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2010)

Furthermore, nouns denoting means of transport can be verbs which represent actions of traveling/ or sending something by or on these means.

(23) "I'll **ship** it back and safe keep it, but I don't want anything else to do with it."

(<http://sentence.yourdictionary.com>)

(24) "I usually **bus** to work in the morning."

(Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2010)

One more remarkable point of noun-verb conversion is that a noun which is the outer or an important part of a unit can be used as a verb whose meaning is 'derive of/ remove from...'

(25) "Have you ever seen them **skin** a sheep?"

(The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle': A Novel, p158)

(26) "It's as easy as **shelling** peas."

(Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2010)

Last but not least, we can change nouns denoting materials to verbs which mean 'provide materials'. Some examples of these verbs are *to feather*, *to ink*, *to gas*, *to coal*, *water*...

(27) "An eagle had the ill hap to be struck with an arrow **feathered** from her own wing."

(A Dictionary of the English Language: In which the Words are Deduced ..., Vol 2)

To sum up, the above semantic features of noun-verb conversion pairs are typical and the most common from which the meaning of the derived word can be easily deduced from its original. In communication, however, the semantic relationship between the base and its derivative is rather complex. The complexity can be illustrated in the following joke:

(28) Daughter: Mother! It is correct to say you 'water a horse' when he's thirsty?

Mother: Yes, quite correct.

Daughter (Picking up a saucer): I'm going to milk the cat.

([2]: 72)

The meanings of noun-verb conversion pairs can be summarized in the following table.

Table 1: Meanings of typical noun - verb conversion pairs

NOUN → VERB CONVERSION	
NOUN	VERB
Instruments/tools	Actions performed by or as if with instruments/ tools
Animals	Actions characterized by animals
Parts of body	Actions performed by parts of body
Jobs/duties	Work or act as the jobs/ duties
Places	Process through which places are occupied or putting things in/on the places
Containers	Putting something in the containers
Meals	Process of having meals
Means of transport	Travelling by these means or sending something/ somebody on these means
Outer of a unit	Depriving of...../ removing of....
Materials	Provide materials for....

2.2. Verb → Noun conversion

Due to flexibility of this phenomenon, a great number of nouns can be formed from verbs by conversion.

First, verbs of senses, wishes, emotion such as want, love, like, smell,

hope... can be nouns referring to these states.

(29) "*Her wish came true.*"

(Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2010)

(30) "*Similar to her love for horticulture, she always demonstrated a great love for animals.*"

(<http://books.google.com.vn> - *In the Shadow of Angels* by Charles Maldon Sr, p114)

Some action verbs can function as nouns referring to events or activities which are results performed via the verbs like 'watch, lie, interview, walk, run, go...'

(31) "*I only had two swims last year.*"

(Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2010)

(32) "*Oxford to London is about an hour's run by train.*"

(Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2010)

Also, some other action verbs can be nouns denoting the results of actions performed via verb such as 'answer, find, bet, catch...'

(33) "*Our gardener was marvelous find.*"

(Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2010)

(34) "*I'd lay my bet while the woman wrote it down in her book - there weren't any ticket stubs then, mind.*"

(<http://books.google.com.vn> - *Witness - The Story of... ..*)

In other cases, we can find nouns created from verbs which take the pattern 'verb + sb', whose meaning is 'to cause sb to become'. The derived nouns are then the subjects of actions performed via these verbs. Some

common examples are 'bore, cheat, coach ...'

(35) "The sheriff ran Happy Jake out of town, saying he was a **cheat** but I think he was just better at gambling than the others."

(<http://sentence.yourdictionary.com/cheat>)

(36) "Jackson is a real **bore**; he's Dracula every single year, ughh."

(<http://sentence.yourdictionary.com/bore>)

Verbs which refer to positions or levels of actions can function as nouns denoting positions or places where the actions occur such as 'turn, divide, rise, bend, stop, start...'

(37) "Brandon drove on slowly down to the first **turn**, easily maneuvering the silver 991 Porsche around the sharp **bend**....

.... She glanced back up the hill as they made another sharp **turn**, slowly continuing downward".

(<http://books.google.com.vn> - A Taste for Murder by Robert Ziegler, Chapter 8)

Besides, some verbs like *cover*, *wrap* can be changed to nouns which function as products made from actions performed via verbs.

(38) "The magazine had a picture of a horse on the **cover**."

(Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2010)

(39) "He took her **wrap** and put it around her, letting his fingers linger briefly on her bare, warm shoulder."

(<http://sentence.yourdictionary.com/wrap>)

In short, from the analysis of 2.2, the meaning of verb-noun conversion pairs is shown to be easily deduced in given contexts due to the fact that the semantic relationship between the base and the derived word is direct. The following table is the summary of meanings of verb - noun conversion pairs.

Table 2: Meanings of typical verb - noun conversion pairs

VERB → NOUN CONVERSION	
VERB	NOUN
Verbs of senses/emotions/ wishes	Nouns referring to states of sense/ emotions/ wishes
Action verbs referring to events/ activities	Nouns indicating events/ activities resulting from verbs
Action verbs	Nouns showing results of actions performed via verbs
Verbs taking the pattern 'V + sb' which means 'cause sb to become'	
Verbs referring positions or levels of actions	Nouns showing positions or places where actions occur
Action verbs which mean 'cover'	Nouns which are products resulting from verbs

2.3. Mass noun → Count-noun conversion

This type of conversion is highly productive in spoken communication because of its flexibility and simplicity. The derived word in this category often refers to a unit, a kind, or a specific example of an abstract noun. Consider the following examples:

(40) "I would like two **coffees**, please!"

(41) "The cost of some *rubbers* is too expensive."

(42) "I have a *difficulty* in solving this problem."

It is clear from the examples that mass nouns have become count nouns and their meanings have changed as well. In (37), 'two coffees' mean two cups of coffee; in (38) 'some rubbers' here refer to some kinds of rubber and in the last example, 'a difficulty' is only one example of difficulty.

The semantic relationships of this type can be summarized as follows:

Table 3: Meanings of typical mass noun - count noun conversion pairs

MASS NOUN → COUNT NOUN CONVERSION	
MASS NOUN	COUNT NOUN
Nouns of liquid	Units measuring the liquid
Nouns of solid	Kinds of the solid
Abstract nouns referring to concepts	Examples of the nouns

2.4. Proper noun → Common noun conversion

Like Mass noun → count-noun conversion, this type is rather preferable in communication, especially in advertising. Names of producers, writers, inventors are used as common names referring to their products, works and inventions. Here are some examples:

(40) "What are you reading, a *Shakespeare*?"

(41) "May I use your *Mercedes* for a while?"

Obviously, the semantic relationship between the base and the derived word is metonymy.

Here is the table illustrating semantic relationships between the proper nouns and derived common nouns of this type.

Table 4: Meanings of typical proper noun - common noun conversion pairs

PROPER NOUNS → COMMON NOUN CONVERSION	
PROPER NOUN	COMMON NOUN
Names of producers	products
Names of writers/ authors	works
Names of inventors	inventions

2.5. Adjective → Noun conversion

By conversion, English adjectives can be changed to nouns which refer to either specific groups of people or concepts.

If the base is an adjective of quality characterized by a specific group of people, the derived word is a plural noun preceded by the article 'the' refers to that group of people. They are such words as 'the rich, the homeless, the poor, the blind, the deaf, the disabled...'

(42) "He had always expressed sympathy for the *homeless*, but said he would never offer cash because he figured they would spend it on whatever got them into that situation in the first place."

(<http://sentence.yourdictionary.com/homeless>)

If the base is an adjective denoting quality of a thing, the derived word refers to a concept of that quality.

(43) "You cannot pretend there's no *evil* in the world."

(Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2010)

(44) "You did **right** to tell me the truth."

(Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2010)

The following table is a summary of these semantic relationships.

Table 5: Meanings of typical adjective – noun conversion pairs

ADJECTIVE → NOUN CONVERSION	
ADJECTIVE	NOUN
Adjectives of quality characterized by a specific group of people	Concrete nouns denoting groups of people
Adjectives denoting quality of things	Abstract nouns referring to concepts of that quality.

2.6. Adjective → Verb conversion

In present-day English, verbs formed from adjectives are popularly used. The derived words in this category mean 'cause to become or become...' We can consider the examples below:

(45) "Tidy your room please!"

(Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2010)

(46) "The sky cleared after the storm."

(Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2010)

In example (48), 'Tidy your room' mean 'Make your room tidy', and in (49) 'The sky cleared' has the same meaning as 'The sky became clear'.

From the two examples, we can see that if the verb is preceded by a personal subject, its meaning is 'cause to become...' vice versa, when the verb follows a non-personal subject, it means 'become + Adjective...' We can summarize the

semantic relationships between the bases and the derived words as follows:

Table 6: Meanings of typical adjective – verb conversion pairs

ADJECTIVE → VERB CONVERSION	
ADJECTIVE	VERB
Personal subject + Adjective	Cause to become....
Non- personal subject + Adjective	Become + Adjective....

2.7. Function word / Phrase → noun conversion

Due to flexibility of conversion in English, a function word or a phrase can be easily changed to a noun to meet the immediate demand of communication. This type is widely used in every day communication because of its shortness. Instead of using long sentences, the idea can be communicated in a much shorter way with nouns derived from function words by conversion. The derived words of this type are abstract nouns referring to concepts whose meaning is deduced from the function words or phrases. This is clearly illustrated in the following examples:

(47) "It tells you about the how and the why of flight."

(48) "This book is a must for the students of aerodynamics."

(49) "Other must-dos include shopping in the markets, called 'souks'."

3. Conclusion

There is a wide diversity of conversion in English. A verb can be shifted to a noun, an adjective to a verb, a noun to a verb, a function word to a noun... etc. Although the meaning of some derivatives can be only deduced

from specific contexts of situation, semantic relations between conversion pairs are generally explicit. The semantic features discussed in this article are distinctive of common conversion types in English. On the basis of these semantic relations between conversion pairs, the language

user can flexibly create a new word or guess the meaning of a new word easily in communication. Hopefully, the article will have a remarkable contribution to language teaching and learning at Vinh University and a useful reference for teachers and learners of English.

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TÓM TẮT

ĐẶC ĐIỂM NGHĨA CỦA TỪ CHUYỂN LOẠI TRONG TIẾNG ANH

Chuyển loại từ là hiện tượng tạo từ mới khá phổ biến trong tiếng Anh. Bằng phép chuyển đổi từ loại, một danh từ có thể được tạo ra từ động từ hay tính từ, các danh từ hay tính từ có thể được chuyển thành động từ; thậm chí một danh từ có thể được tạo ra từ hư từ, v.v..., mà không cần thêm bất kì một yếu tố nào vào từ gốc. Bài viết đi sâu phân tích các nét nghĩa của từ phái sinh từ hiện tượng chuyển loại từ để thấy rõ mối quan hệ về nghĩa của các cặp từ chuyển loại là đa dạng nhưng liên quan chặt chẽ với nhau. Vì vậy, nghĩa của từ phái sinh có thể dễ dàng suy diễn từ từ gốc của nó trong ngữ cảnh nhất định.

(a) KHOA SƯ PHẠM NGOẠI NGỮ, TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC VINH.