

Module II. Lecture 12

Conversion

Plan

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2. Synchronic approach
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1. Definition

Conversion is a characteristic feature of the English word-building system. It is also called affixless derivation or zero-suffixation. The term «conversion» first appeared in the book by Henry Sweet «New English Grammar» in 1891. Conversion is treated differently by different scientists, e.g. professor A.I. Smirntitsky treats conversion as a morphological way of forming words when one part of speech is formed from another part of speech by changing its 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).

Conversion is the main way of forming verbs in Modern English. Verbs can be formed from nouns of different semantic groups and have 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 if they are formed from nouns denoting tools, machines, instruments, weapons, e.g. to hammer, to machine-gun, to rifle, to nail,
- 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, addition 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 from 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 week-end .

Verbs can be also 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.

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 help, a flirt, a scold,
- d) object or result of the action expressed by the verb from which the noun has been converted, e.g. a burn, a find, a purchase,
- e) place 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 deverbial nouns are often used with such verbs as: to have, to get, to take etc., e.g. to have a try, to give a push, to take a swim.

2. Synchronic approach

Conversion pairs are distinguished by the structural identity of the root and phonetic identity of the stem of each of the two words. Synchronically we deal with pairs of words related through conversion that coexist in contemporary English. The two words, e.g. to break and a break, being phonetically identical, the question arises whether they have the same or identical stems, as some linguists are inclined to believe. It will be recalled that the stem carries quite a definite part-of-speech meaning; for instance, within the word-cluster to dress — dress — dresser — dressing — dressy, the stem dresser — carries not only the lexical meaning of the root-morpheme dress-, but also the meaning of substantivity, the stem dressy- the meaning of quality, etc.

These two ingredients — the lexical meaning of the root-morpheme and the part-of-speech meaning of the stem — form part of the meaning of the whole word. It is the stem that requires a definite paradigm; for instance, the word dresser is a noun primarily because it has a noun-stem and not only because of the noun paradigm; likewise, the word materialize is a verb, because first and foremost it has a verbal stem possessing the lexical and grammatical meaning of process or action and requiring a verb paradigm.

What is true of words whose root and stem do not coincide is also true of words with roots and stems that coincide: for instance, the word atom is a noun because of the substantial character of the stem requiring the noun paradigm. The word sell is a verb because of the verbal character of its stem requiring the verb paradigm, etc. It logically follows that the stems of two words making up a conversion pair cannot be regarded as being the same or identical: the stem hand- of the noun hand, for instance, carries a substantival meaning together with the

system of its meanings, such as: 1) the end of the arm beyond the wrist; 2) pointer on a watch or clock; 3) worker in a factory; 4) source of information, etc.; the stem hand- of the verb hand has a different part-of-speech meaning, namely that of the verb, and a different system of meanings: 1) give or help with the hand, 2) pass, etc. Thus, the stems of word-pairs related through conversion have different part-of-speech and denotational meanings. Being phonetically identical they can be regarded as homonymous stems.

A careful examination of the relationship between the lexical meaning of the root-morpheme and the part-of-speech meaning of the stem within a conversion pair reveals that in one of the two words the former does not correspond to the latter. For instance, the lexical meaning of the root-morpheme of the noun hand corresponds to the part-of-speech meaning of its stem: they are both of a substantial character; the lexical meaning of the root-morpheme of the verb hand, however, does not correspond to the part-of-speech meaning of the stem: the root-morpheme denotes an object, whereas the part-of-speech meaning of the stem is that of a process. The same is true of the noun fall whose stem is of a substantial character (which is proved by the noun paradigm fall — falls — fall's — falls', whereas the root-morpheme denotes a certain process.

It will be recalled that the same kind of non-correspondence is typical of the derived word in general. To give but two examples, the part-of-speech meaning of the stem blackness — is that of substantivity, whereas the root-morpheme black- denotes a quality; the part-of-speech meaning of the stem eatable- (that of qualitiveness) does not correspond to the lexical meaning of the root-morpheme denoting a process. It should also be pointed out here that in simple words the lexical meaning of the root corresponds to the part-of-speech meaning of the stem, cf. the two types of meaning of simple words like black *a*, eat *v*, chair *n*, etc. Thus, by analogy with the derivational character of the stem of a derived word it is natural to regard the stem of one of the two words making up a conversion pair as being of a derivational character as well.

The essential difference between affixation and conversion is that affixation is characterized by both semantic and structural derivation (e.g. friend — friendless, dark — darkness, etc.), whereas conversion displays only semantic derivation, i.e. hand — to hand, fall — to fall, taxi — to taxi, etc.; the difference between the two classes of words in affixation is marked both by a special derivational affix and a paradigm, whereas in conversion it is marked only by paradigmatic forms.

3. Typical semantic relations

As one of the two words within a conversion pair is semantically derived from the other, it is of great theoretical and practical importance to determine the semantic relations between words related through conversion. Summing up the findings of the linguists who have done research in this field we can enumerate the following typical semantic relations.

Verbs converted from nouns (denominal verbs)

This is the largest group of words related through conversion. The semantic relations between the nouns and verbs vary greatly. If the noun refers to some object of reality (both animate and inanimate) the converted verb may denote:

1. action characteristic of the object, e.g. ape *n* — ape *v* — ‘imitate in a foolish way’; butcher *n* — butcher *v* — ‘kill animals for food, cut up a killed animal’;
2. instrumental use of the object, e.g. screw *n* — screw *v* — ‘fasten with a screw’; whip *n* — whip *v* — ‘strike with a whip’;
3. acquisition or addition of the object, e.g. fish *n* — fish *v* — ‘catch or try to catch fish’; coat *n* — ‘covering of paint’ — coat *v* — ‘put a coat of paint on’;
4. deprivation of the object, e.g. dust *n* — dust *v* — ‘remove dust from something’; skin *n* — skin *v* — ‘strip off the skin from’; etc.

Nouns converted from verbs (deverbal substantives)

The verb generally referring to an action, the converted noun may denote:

1. instance of the action, e.g. jump *v* — jump *n* — ‘sudden spring from the ground’; move *v* — move *n* — ‘a change of position’;
2. agent of the action, e.g. help *v* — help *n* — ‘a person who helps’; it is of interest to mention that the deverbal personal nouns denoting the doer are mostly derogatory, e.g. bore *v* — bore *n* — ‘a person that bores’; cheat *v* — cheat *n* — ‘a person who cheats’;
3. place of the action, e.g. drive *v* — drive *n* — ‘a path or road along which one drives’; walk *v* — walk *n* — ‘a place for walking’;
4. object or result of the action, e.g. peel *v* — peel *n* — ‘the outer skin of fruit or potatoes taken off; find *v* — find *n* — ‘something found,’ esp. something valuable or pleasant’; etc.

In conclusion it is necessary to point out that in the case of polysemantic words one and the same member of a conversion pair, a verb or a noun, belongs to several of the above-mentioned groups making different derivational bases. For instance, the verb dust belongs to Group 4 of Denominal verbs (deprivation of the object) when it means ‘remove dust from something’, and to Group 3 (acquisition or addition of the object) when it means ‘cover with powder’; the noun slide is referred to Group 3 of Deverbal substantives (place of the action) when denoting a stretch of smooth ice or hard snow on which people slide’ and to Group 2 (agent of the action) when it refers to a part of an instrument or machine that slides, etc.

Questions for discussion

1. Give the definition of the term “conversion”
2. What are the converted nouns? Give examples
3. What are the main characteristics of synchronic approach?
4. Describe the basic English typical semantic relations
5. Describe the deverbal substantives. Give examples

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