Weirding the Language: How Grammatical Conversions Impact English

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The *local drunk*, a *regular* at O'Shea's, *emptied* his *cup*, then *motioned* to the *waitress* for another *drink*. The *waitress* *cleared* her throat and *gestured* to the *specials* written on the wall. “Why don't you *try* a *fun* drink?” she *queried*.

The *tired* drunk *narrowed* his eyes. “No, just *hand* me my *usual*,” he *replied*.

What do the italicized words in the passage above all have in common? They are all words which can readily serve as a different part of speech from the one in which they occur, without any concomitant change in the basic form. While a noun here, the word *drunk*, for example, could just as likely have been an adjective, while *waitress* the noun could just easily have become *waitress* the verb. *Empty* is an even more interesting example, since it is a word that was originally an adjective which can occur in modern day usage as both a verb (“empty the wastebasket”) and a noun (“put your empties here”) (Huddleston & Pullam, 2002). This word-formation process, the nature and significance of which is the focus of this paper, can be described as *conversion*. 
From the start, it should be noted that there is variation in the terminology applied to this process. Linguists who compare it to related part of speech changing processes regard it as zero-derivation, a term which indicates that an invisible, or zero morpheme, is what permits these words to change from one part of speech to another. Other linguists who disagree or who wish to take a more neutral stance, as is my intention here, may describe it as conversion, or functional shift. Beyond linguistics, the use of conversion as a rhetorical device has been referred to by literary experts as anthimeria. Popular culture seems to pay some attention to verbification, though other types of conversions appear to be more or less ignored. Even the business world has a pejorative term, genericide, for the conversion of its product names to common nouns or verbs (i.e., google), a process which, unstoppable as it is, has been much deplored by the “victimized” businesses themselves (Cf. Prange, 2006; Harley, 2006).

Regardless of the terminology used, this process in English is not one which should be underestimated, as a number of sources attest. Ingo Plag (1999) describes it as “the most popular of all verb-deriving processes as a subject of linguistic inquiry,” and states that “all researchers agree that is an extremely productive process” (p. 219). David Crystal (2004) lists it along with prefixation, suffixation, and word compounding as one of the four major sources of word creation during the sixteenth century, a contention corroborated by Hughes (2008), who notes the acceleration of grammatical conversion during this period and furthermore attributes it to “the erosion of grammatically distinctive inflections” (p. 73-4). Fowler's (2000) Modern English Usage notes that it is an “ancient process” and one which is “exceedingly common” (p. 181). Similarly, Steven Pinker (1994) states that “easy conversion of nouns to verbs has been part of English grammar for centuries,” (p. 392) and furthermore estimates that one fifth of all English verbs were originally nouns (p. 392). Emphasizing the unique role conversion plays in the language he adds that “it is one of the processes that make English English” (p. 181). Crystal also echoes this sentiment: “Functional shift is one of the
features which makes the English language distinctive” (p. 332). We should not, however, be too hasty in assuming this process exists only in English alone, but rather note that, relative to many languages, it appears to be quite prominent (Cf. Clark & Berman, 1984 for a cross-linguistic analysis of conversion).

To understand the significance of conversion, it will also be necessary to define the types of conversions that exist. As Pinker's comment has already pointed out to us, one of the most common and most remarked upon categories is that of denominal verbs, or verbs which were converted from nouns. Examples that Huddleston & Pullam (2002) give include butcher, butter, ski, can, water, eye, cash, knife, and gesture. The recent productivity of this category was measured more precisely by Plag (1999), whose Oxford English Dictionary-based survey of 20th century lexical innovations found 488 converted words in this category alone. Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvick (1985) also cite deverbal nouns as part of the most productive categories, giving examples such as desire, doubt, love, hit, swim, answer, bore, cover, walk, and divide. Conversion from adjective to noun, as with comic, human, drunk, local, female, natural, and original, as well conversion from adjectives to verbs, as with bare, dim, narrow, dry, smooth, free, brave, calm, and tense, are also fairly productive categories (Huddleston & Pullam, 2002). Though examples of full conversion, in which the results meet the gradability and comparability criteria of other adjectives, are indeed rare, some conversions from noun to adjective can be found in words such as rose and orange, as well as more disputably in words such as fun, sexist, Thatcherite or Oxbridge (i.e., “Your accent is very Oxbridge”) (Huddleston & Pullam, 2002). Another more controversial category is that of verb to adjective. Although words such as amusing, amused, boring, bored, entertaining, stunning, tiring, tired, and worried do meet the criteria of gradability and comparability, some would say that because these are derived from an inflected form of the verb--the participle--rather than the lexical base, they can't be considered full conversions (Huddleston & Pullam, 2002).

Other more peripheral categories also exist. Structure class words can be converted to other
parts of speech, as in the expressions “no ifs, ands, or buts about it,” “it's a real must,” “the how and why of things,” “they downed their drinks,” or “they were outing.” Phrases themselves, such as a has-been, a free-for-all, or the low-down can also be seen as converted parts of speech, and even bound morphemes can sometimes stand alone, as is the case with isms or ologies (Crystal, 2003). Sometimes counted as well are changes in secondary word class, such as the use of proper nouns for common nouns as in watt, sandwich, kleenex (see earlier comment on “genericide”), the use of noncount nouns as count nouns, as with luggages or coffees (a trend which Crystal [2003] notes is occurring in many types of world English), and words which require no inflectional change, but do require phonological change through a shift in stress, such as progress, insult or convict.

This wide range of categories might lead us to agree with Laurie Bauer (1983) who felt that “if there are constraints on conversion, they have yet to be demonstrated” (p. 226). In fact this statement might seem most true if we consider the everyday flexibility of this process, and include those numerous instances which would not be found in dictionaries or even in our mental lexicons. As Harley (2006) points out, “This is a very productive process in English, which people regularly perform on the fly” (p. 105). The example she gives is “Babe Ruth homered his way into the hearts of America,” (p. 105), but casual observation of my own personal interactions has produced numerous others. My oldest sister, for example, recently explained, “There's a lot of angry to go around.” A friend, when jokingly asked the question, “50% more what?” about a mysterious menu item exclaimed it “had 50% more delicious.” As a means of deciding who would drive a few weeks ago, the suggestion was made to “paper-rock-scissors it.” Though these casual, playful uses of the language would not be likely to be found in any dictionary, they were rather effective in communicating their meaning.

Nevertheless, the more creative uses of conversion, particularly with in the case of denominal verbs, seem to be a source of dismay for numerous editors and prescriptive grammarians. Fowler
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(2000) notes that in the 20th century, public resistance has hardened to the process of conversion, and lists the words author, contact, critique, host, impact, and parent as verbs that have come under fierce resistance (p. 182) though it gives no details about who exactly is resisting them. Perhaps one such source of resistance is LePan (2003), who in The Broadview Book of Common Errors in English, states that access is best kept as a noun (except, perhaps, when it comes to computers), that impact's widespread use as a verb is awkward and undesirable, and that author is a gratuitous verbification and should simply remain a noun in all circumstances. LePan, who does in fact admit to the value of the conversion process as a whole, uses this reasoning for what verbs are acceptable: “...if it fulfills no useful purpose—if clearer and more concise ways of saying the same thing already exist—then it's better to avoid it” (p. 68).

The American Heritage Book of English Usage (1996) also cites some interesting Usage Panel statistics from surveys taken between 1987 and 1996: 84% disapproved of access as a verb in non-technical contexts; 74% disapproved of the sentence He has authored a dozen books on the subject; 95% percent disapproved of the use of impact as a transitive verb; and although contact as a verb met with 66% disapproval in 1969, it seems to have won a victory less than 20 years later, with 65% of the Usage Panel accepting this conversion. Furthermore, American Heritage gives us some interesting historical notes on these words' struggles to attain acceptance as verbs. For example, impact was first recorded as a verb in 1601 (Berube, 1996), indicating that novelty is not the factor that subjects it to the kind of vehemence it often receives, a dislike which has even inspired one editor to name his website impactisnotaverb.com. Contact was first recorded as a verb in the early 19th century (Berube, 1996), but didn't even gain notice by grammarians until the 20th century, when it was descried for its vagueness. Oddly enough, it seems that this vagueness is precisely what has enabled it to thrive in a time period in which a person can be contacted by email, phone call, text message, instant message, fax, mail, etc.
Other sources, including some notorious grammar mavens, have weighed in on the matter as well. William Safire (2005), a widely respected arbiter of correct language usage, has offered the satirical rule, “Don't verb nouns,” descrying gift as a verb because its past participle, gifted, can be confusing, and denigrating “lazy and unnecessary coinages” like disincentivize and disambiguate. Mignon Fogharty (2007), who hosts the popular Grammar Girl podcast, embraced verbifications like microwave, google, and even verbify itself, but described one media usage of GoDaddification as “horrible...fueled by laziness...awkward,” and later, “outrageous and gratuitious.” Even Bill Watterson, through his comic strip Calvin and Hobbes, seems to offer his own rather critical opinion on the issue. In response to Calvin's statement, “Verbing weirds language,” Hobbes sardonically suggests, “Maybe we can eventually make language a complete impediment to understanding.”

Despite the numerous complaints, one area in which even the most conservative prescriptivists would be likely to accept innovative conversions is literature. When E.E. Cummings, wrote, “anyone lived in a pretty how town/(with up so floating many bells down) spring summer autumn winter/he sang his didn't he danced his did,” he converted an indefinite pronoun to a noun, an adverbial interrogative to an adjective, up so floating many bells down to an object complement of the preposition with, and didn't and did to simple nouns. Conversions are not merely the domain of modern writers; rather, writers have taken poetic license to maximize the effect of their words for centuries. One of the masters of this technique was Shakespeare, who Crystal (2003; 2004) notes as having imaginatively written:

Thou losest here, a better where to find (2004, p. 332)

They, from their own misdeeds askance their eyes (2004, p. 332)

Grace me no grace, nor uncle me no uncle (2003, p. 63)

It out-herods Herod (2003, p. 63)

The hearts/ That spanieleed me at heels (2004, p. 333)
A hand that kings have *lipped* (2004, p. 333)

While the value of these syntactic “violations” are quite possible to observe from a subjective literary standpoint, research has recently attempted to explain from a scientific standpoint what happens when our brains encounter conversions. When Thierry et al. (2008) selected 40 different instances of grammatical conversions from Shakespeare's writing and analyzed the event-related brain waves that resulted from exposure to them, they found that their subjects exhibited a spike in brain activity and a longer processing time when reading these as opposed to other sentences. It appears that the brain does first regard these words as semantically acceptable, but then demonstrates positive brain waves characteristic of a reevaluation or resolution of a syntactic structure that was first perceived as incorrect. Philip Davis, one of the researchers involved with this project, explains their findings:

The brain reacts to reading a phrase such as ‘he godded me’ from the tragedy of Coriolanus, in a similar way to putting a jigsaw puzzle together. If it is easy to see which pieces slot together you become bored of the game, but if the pieces don’t appear to fit, when we know they should, the brain becomes excited. By throwing odd words into seemingly normal sentences, Shakespeare surprises the brain and catches it off guard in a manner that produces a sudden burst of activity - a sense of drama created out of the simplest of things (University of Liverpool, 2006).

In face of such research, one wonders what would have happened to Shakespeare had he taken modern stylistic advice such as Safire's (2005), “don't lard your prose with functional shifties (p. 136).”

From a personal point of view, I feel that greater understanding of conversion could benefit me and my English-teaching colleagues in numerous ways. Many have pointed out that in spite of the guides, the Usage Panels and the grammar mavens, there is no Academy of English, no final arbiter of right and wrong; yet those of us who wield the proverbial red pen may be viewed as exactly that. What is critical, therefore, is that before we draw those red lines, we must be aware of the flexibility that
exists in our language, and must afford our students the same creativity that we afford ourselves. Is *impact* or *contact* or *access* a verb, they may ask. What should we tell them? It is only through a thorough understanding of the history, derision, and benefits of conversion that we can answer that question effectively.
References


