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CONVERSION AS A PRODUCTIVE WORD-FORMATION PROCESS IN MODERN ENGLISH

MÜASİR İNGİLİS DİLİNDƏ KONVERSİYA MƏHSULDAR SÖZ YARADICILIĞI PROSESİ KİMİ

XÜLASƏ

Konversiya, yəni mövcud sözün forması dəyişmədən başqa nitq hissəsində işlədilməsi, ingilis dilinin ən xarakterik söz yaradıcılığı üsullarından biridir. Məqalədə konversiyaya dair əsas nəzəri yanaşmalar nəzərdən keçirilir və tarixləri Merriam-Webster lüğətində sənədləşdirilmiş on iki konversiya forması təhlil olunur. Nümunələrdə isimdən felə konversiya texnologiya ilə sıx bağlıdır (*email*, *text*, *google*). Yeni kimi qəbul edilən bəzi konversiyalar əslində köhnədir: *ask* XIII əsrdən, *invite* isə XVII əsrdən isim kimi işlənir; deməli, dəyişən əsasən onların işlənmə tezliyi və üslubudur. Konversiya yolu ilə yaranmış fellər kontekst və ümumi bilik əsasında anlaşılır və bu, danışanların onları niyə asanlıqla qəbul etdiyini izah etməyə kömək edir. Məqalədə belə nəticəyə gəlinir ki, konversiya müasir ingilis dilində məhsuldar olaraq qalır və onun məhsuldarlığı qrammatika qədər işlənmədən və kontekstdən də asılıdır.

Açar sözlər: *konversiya; sıfır derivasiya; söz yaradıcılığı; funksional keçid; məhsuldarlıq; ingilis dilinin morfologiyası.*

Introduction: Many English speakers have used google as a verb or sent someone a text without noticing anything unusual. Neither word gained a suffix or changed its sound when it moved into a new word class. This is conversion, a process in which a word is used in a different syntactic category while its form stays the same [12, p.13]. It is also known as functional shift or zero-derivation. Because it needs no added material, conversion is one of the easiest ways for English speakers to make a new word, and the step from a hammer to to hammer costs the speaker nothing.

Conversion has been studied for a long time, yet it still raises questions. Linguists disagree about whether it is a kind of derivation with an invisible suffix, about how to decide which member of a pair came first, and about why some converted words are accepted at once while others sound odd. This article has two aims. It gives a short overview of the main theoretical positions, and it looks at a small set of documented examples to show how conversion works in present-day English. The examples are not meant to represent the whole lexicon. They were chosen because their history is well recorded and because each of them illustrates a particular point.

The term *zero-derivation* is closely associated with Marchand [8], who treated conversion as derivation with a suffix that has no phonetic form. On this view, a verb such as *to butter* is related to the noun *butter* in the same way as *to legalize* is related to *legal*, except that the suffix cannot be heard. Other scholars use the more neutral term *conversion* [3, p.12]. The debate is still open. Don [7] discusses Lieber's proposal that a converted form is simply listed a second time in the lexicon with a new category, and argues against this *relisting* account. In his view conversion

is subject to phonological and morphological restrictions of the same kind as ordinary affixation, which supports an analysis in terms of zero-derivation. The collection edited by Bauer and Valera [5] shows how wide the range of positions remains. The present article uses the term *conversion*, since nothing in the analysis depends on whether a zero suffix exists.

Valera [13] defines conversion by two conditions: the new word must be formally identical to its base, and it must belong to a different word class. Most accounts distinguish several directions. Noun-to-verb conversion (*a bottle*, *to bottle*) and verb-to-noun conversion (*to walk*, *a walk*) are generally treated as the main types in English, while adjective-to-verb conversion (*empty*, *to empty*) and conversion from other classes, such as *must* used as a noun, are less central [11, p.12]. A detailed description of the semantic patterns of converted nouns and verbs is given in the reference grammar of English morphology by Bauer, Lieber and Plag [4].

A practical problem is directionality. When a noun and a verb share the same form, which of them is the base? Plag [11] and Balteiro [2] discuss several criteria. Historical evidence is one, since the earlier attested form is usually the base. Semantic dependence is another: the meaning of *to hammer* includes the meaning of *hammer*, but not the other way round. Balteiro [2] argues that these criteria do not always agree and that a pair can look different from a historical and from a present-day point of view. In this article historical dates are taken from Merriam-Webster [9], which gives a first known use for each recorded sense.

Conversion also raises a question of meaning. Clark and Clark [6] collected more than 1,300 English verbs formed from nouns and grouped them into semantic types, among them locatum verbs (*blanket the bed*), location verbs (*kennel the dog*), duration verbs (*summer in France*), agent verbs (*butcher the cow*), goal verbs (*powder the aspirin*) and instrument verbs (*hammer the nail*, *bicycle into town*). Their central point was that the meaning of a new verb of this kind is not fixed in advance. The listener works it out from the context and from knowledge shared with the speaker. Michaelis and Hsiao [10] take this idea further and argue that recent innovations such as *stan* and *gaslight* are interpreted through a small set of regular processes, not through context alone. Conversion is also limited by blocking, the tendency for a new form not to arise when a word with the same meaning already exists [1].

The examples discussed below fall into two groups. The first contains verbs formed from nouns that became common with new technology or in public discussion: *email*, *text*, *google*, *microwave*, *gaslight*, *adult* and *friend*. The second contains nouns formed from verbs, which are often felt to be recent or informal (*ask*, *invite*, *fail*, *must*), together with the adjective-to-verb pair *empty*. For each converted form the first known use of the relevant sense was checked in the Merriam-Webster online dictionary on 26 September 2026 [9]. The set is small and deliberately chosen, so the analysis is qualitative. Its purpose is to illustrate tendencies, not to measure them.

Table 1. The twelve converted forms and the first known use of the relevant sense, as given by Merriam-Webster [9]

Item	Direction	Sense of the converted form	First known use
email	noun → verb	to send email to someone	1983 (noun: 1979)
text	noun → verb	to send a text message	1998
google	proper noun → verb	to search with Google	2000
microwave	noun → verb	to cook or heat in a microwave oven	1973
gaslight	title (proper noun) → verb	to manipulate someone psychologically (sense 1)	1953
adult	noun/adjective → verb	to behave like a responsible adult	1909
friend	noun → verb	to add someone to a list of friends on	13th century (verb); social-media sense

Item	Direction	Sense of the converted form	First known use
		social media	later
ask	verb → noun	something requested, as in *a big ask*	13th century
invite	verb → noun	invitation	1659
must	modal verb → noun	something essential	1598
fail	verb → noun	failure	13th century
empty	adjective → verb	to remove the contents of	before the 12th century

The first group in Table 1 shows how closely noun-to-verb conversion follows new technology. The noun *email* is recorded from 1979 and the verb from 1983, so the verb followed the noun by only four years. *Microwave* became a verb in 1973, *text* in 1998 and *google* in 2000. In Clark and Clark's [6] terms these are mostly instrument verbs: the noun names the tool or medium, and the verb means to do something with it. *Google* is a special case, because its base is a proper noun and a trademark. Here a brand name has become an ordinary verb, which shows how easily conversion can apply even to proper nouns.

The same group also shows that conversion is not always recent. Merriam-Webster [9] dates the psychological sense of the verb *gaslight* to 1953. The verb does not come from the ordinary noun *gaslight*, 'light made by burning gas', but from the title of Patrick Hamilton's play *Gas Light* (1938) and its film versions of 1940 and 1944, in which a man tries to make his wife believe that she is going insane [9]. Like *google*, then, it is a name that has become a verb. *Adult* has been recorded as a verb since 1909. With *friend* the verb itself is very old, and what is new is only its social-media sense. This is semantic extension of an existing conversion rather than a new conversion, and it illustrates Balteiro's [2] point that the status of a pair can look different depending on whether it is viewed historically or from the present day.

The second group makes the point more strongly. Nouns such as *an ask*, *an invite* and *a fail* are sometimes felt to be recent or informal, and Merriam-Webster notes that the noun *invite* has drawn objections from some readers [9]. Yet the same dictionary records the noun *ask* from the thirteenth century, *invite* from 1659 and *must* from 1598, and it describes the noun use of *invite* as an example of the ordinary process of functional shift. What has changed is the frequency and register of these nouns. Phrases such as *a big ask* or *an epic fail* are typical of informal language, and it is probably their wider use, not their existence, that makes them feel new. The only adjective-to-verb pair in the set, *empty*, is also the oldest item, recorded before the twelfth century. With only one adjective-to-verb example, the sample says nothing about recent trends in this type.

These observations fit the theoretical accounts reviewed above. Conversion is productive in modern English because it requires no new material and because the meaning of a new form can be worked out from context and shared knowledge [6, p.10]. A verb like *to text* was probably easy to accept because the noun was already familiar. At the same time, conversion is not unlimited. Blocking [1] makes it less likely that a verb will arise when a suitable verb already exists, and new forms still need a community of speakers who find them useful. Productivity therefore depends as much on use and context as on grammar. The examples also show that dictionary dates are a practical way of settling directionality in clear cases, although, as Balteiro [2] and Plag [11] note, historical and present-day criteria do not always lead to the same answer.

For language teaching, conversion offers a simple and useful point. Learners can be shown that many English nouns can also be used as verbs, and the other way round, without any change of form. At the same time, they need to know that some converted forms, such as *a big ask* or *to adult*, belong to informal registers and may be out of place in academic writing.

Result: This study has clear limits. It is based on a small, deliberately chosen set of examples and on the first known use dates of a single dictionary, which may be revised as new evidence appears. A corpus-based study with a larger sample would be needed to measure how often each type of conversion occurs and how quickly new converted forms spread. Even within

these limits, the examples suggest that conversion remains productive in modern English, that much of what feels new about it is a change in frequency and register, and that its success depends on speakers' ability to interpret a familiar form in a new role.

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Айгюн Рустамзаде

Конверсия как продуктивный способ словообразования в современном английском языке

Аннотация

Конверсия — использование существующего слова в новом грамматическом классе без изменения его формы — является одним из наиболее характерных словообразовательных процессов в английском языке. В данной статье рассматриваются основные теоретические подходы к конверсии и анализируются двенадцать примеров конверсии, время появления которых зафиксировано в словаре Merriam-Webster. В рассматриваемой выборке переход существительных в глаголы тесно связан со сферой технологий (примеры: “email”, “text”, “google”). Некоторые случаи конверсии, воспринимаемые как новые, на самом деле имеют давнюю историю: слово “ask” используется в качестве существительного с XIII века, а “invite” — с XVII века, поэтому изменения коснулись главным образом частотности их употребления и стилистической окраски. Интерпретация глаголов, образованных путем конверсии, опирается на контекст и фоновые знания, что объясняет, почему носители языка так легко принимают подобные новообразования. В статье делается вывод о том, что конверсия остается продуктивным процессом в современном английском языке, а ее продуктивность в равной степени зависит как от грамматики, так и от особенностей употребления и контекста.

Ключевые слова: *конверсия; нулевая деривация; словообразование; функциональный сдвиг; продуктивность; морфология английского языка.*

Aygun Rustamzadeh

Conversion as a productive word-formation process in modern english

Abstract

Conversion, the use of an existing word in a new word class without any change of form, is one of the most characteristic word-formation processes of English. This article reviews the main theoretical accounts of conversion and discusses twelve converted forms whose dates are documented in the Merriam-Webster dictionary. In the sample, noun-to-verb conversion is closely tied to technology, as with *email*, *text* and *google*. Several conversions that feel new turn out to be old: *ask* has been used as a noun since the thirteenth century and *invite* since the seventeenth, so what has changed is mainly their frequency and register. Converted verbs are interpreted through context and shared knowledge, which helps to explain why speakers accept them so readily. The article concludes that conversion remains productive in modern English and that its productivity depends on use and context as much as on grammar.

Keywords: *conversion; zero-derivation; word formation; functional shift; productivity; English morphology.*

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