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CONVERSION IN ENGLISH

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Attempts to classify the words of a language into parts of speech in terms of semantic aspects cannot have universal application as they tend to conceal genuine differences among languages instead of revealing them. Our structural approach leads us to the statement that the classification of words must be based primarily on the participation of words in the basic morphological oppositions actually found in a language and that the bundle of the oppositions into which particular words of the language enter constitutes their class. Thus in English all words that take part—at least potentially—in the opposition of countability versus uncountability, in that of singularity versus plurality and in that of the adnominal case versus the common case, are substantives, while the words which participate in the oppositions of the present tense v. preterite, indicative v. imperative, and the third person sing. ind. versus all other persons sing. ind., form the class of finite verbs, and all other words that do not take part in any bundle of basic morphological oppositions belong to the class which may be called—in want of a better term—'neutral'. A further criterion for the subdivision of the neutral class is provided by the syntagmatic relationship of determination. If a 'neutral' word is used for the determination of substantives and only substantives, it is an adjective, while its use as a determinant of other neutral words or verbs makes it an adverb. The application of the syntagmatic relationship of determination to the subdivision of neutral words makes the discussion of whether *cannon* in *the cannon ball* is an adjective or a substantive, superfluous. In fact, it is a 'neutral' part of speech, and being a determinant of the substantive *ball* it belongs to a special subclass of these words. It may be noted that our sub-division of word-classes has little in common with Jespersen's theory of rank-classes as opposed to word-classes, and that it has nothing to do with syntactic relationships as it is based entirely on the morphological level of a language as viewed from its horizontal axis, i.e. from the viewpoint of the chains of words the study of which[1] I proposed to term syntagmatic morphology (or, morphological syntagmatics). Neither syntactic nor semantic relationships enter into our definition of word-classes or subclasses. It should be remembered that structural morphology covers much wider range of linguistic facts than the traditional one, since it embraces not only paradigmatic oppositions like singular v. plural, indicative v. imperative, including their phonemic implementations, but also syntagmatic relationships of words, among which the determination v. indetermination relationship is the most important one. A similar distinction between paradigmatics and syntagmatics maintains itself also on the other levels of language, e.g. in phonemics and syntax the units of which, phonemes and sentences, can be analyzed in terms of both axes.

From what has been stated it follows that word-classes in English have different

relations to each other than e.g. in Czech or in German, since the bundle of distinctive morphological features between the verb and the noun is smaller in English. The result is that the so-called conversion of one word-class into the other, i.e.the formation of verbs from substantives and that of substantives from verbs without the help of any derivational exponents, is easier in English than in Czech or German. The productivity of the conversion in English cannot be, however, accounted for as due to the regularity and facility of morphological exponents, as it stands to reason that for German of which conversion is not so typical, the derivation of the verbs *lieben* and *kreuzen* from the substantives *Liebe* and *Kreuz* is as easy as the corresponding formations for English. It is obvious that conversion is far from being a process depending on the phonemic implementation of morphological oppositions. In the present writer's view the chief motive of the wide extension of the conversion of nouns into verbs in English is to be sought in the speakers' strong need of new verbs with stricter semantic boundaries and with more definite shades of meaning than are those possessed by the old verbs. Thus *motor* (v.) is a more concrete and adequate expression for the activity involved than *drive* (v.), *finger* (v.) is more special than *touch with the fingers*. The fact is that substantives have always more special and concrete meanings than verbs,[2] and the formation of verbs from substantives without the help of any derivative suffixes which took place in all Old Germanic languages supplied a welcome model for satisfying the need of more concreteness keenly felt by English speakers especially in the 16th and 17th centuries. Our view that this was the chief motive of the productivity of this conversion is in full accordance with the fact that adjectives (which have less concrete limits of meaning than substantives and like verbs express a continuum of something that is devoid of countability) are converted to verbs much less frequently than substantives in spite of such old-standing models as *warm* (adj., v.) and *light* (adj., v.). It is also noteworthy that some of the verbs like *white, bright, chaste, deaf, deep, moist* used in Middle English were replaced by the derivative formations *whiten, brighten, chasten, deafen, deepen, moisten* in Early Modern English, so that only a relatively small number of verbs in Present-day English (cf. *bare, clear, obscure, slow*) are converted adjectives.

The conversion of verbs into substantives is less productive than that of substantives into verbs. Some formations of this type are confined to the familiar, vulgar and idiolectic speech, or to specified verbal constructions, while they are rarely, if ever, used in other syntactic functions, especially in that of the subject which represents, from the semantic point of view, the most independent part of the sentence. Thus constructions like *have a smoke, take a dip, take a ride, give a dip, give a dig, give a try* are in common colloquial use, while the use of the substantives *smoke* (in the sense of 'smoking'), *ride, dip, dig, try*, etc. is still comparatively rare. It is also interesting to note that some of them do not occur without being accompanied by an article or a qualifying/or quantifying/adjective, i.e. their morphological function as substantives is, or must be, corroborated by the contextual words. Most of deverbal substantives, however, have penetrated into all morphological and syntactical functions which other nouns are capable to perform, cf. *bathe, chat, drink, build, count, find, laugh, lead, make, rise, run, say, show, smell, smile, start, stay, wash, wait, win, yield,* and many others. As regards the chief motive of this conversion, we have every reason to believe that it is due to the speakers' need to impart the morphological oppositions and syntagmatic relationships of substantives to the lexical meaning covered by the verb in question. In this way new substantives with wider or else different semantic boundaries than the old nouns come into existence. In such constructions

as *take a ride, have a smoke, give another try* the use of the verbal nouns makes their sense more concrete and precise than the use of the simple verbs *ride, smoke,* and *try,* which denote a continuum of actions devoid of any countability and plurality.

Many linguists are inclined to think that there are strong nominal tendencies in English. Surely there are and have been, but it is equally true that there also have been strong tendencies towards verbalization in the historical development of the language. It is therefore more correct to say that both word-classes constitute a morphological opposition the terms of which are in closer correlationship in English than in other languages. There is, of course, a sort of bridge connecting nouns with verbs in all Indo-European languages, namely the so-called nominal forms like infinitives and participles, but even this bridge links both parts of speech more effectively in English than in other languages. The development of gerundial constructions in English is especially characteristic of the close cooperation displayed by the two word-classes.

A question may be asked now as to the criteria by which one of the terms of the noun—verb opposition can be designated as fundamental. In other words: Which term of the dichotomic oppositions, such as *love* (sbst.) — *love* (v.), *change* (sbst.) — *change* (v.), *dress* (sbst.) — *dress* (v.), *stay* (sbst.) — *stay* (v.), *finger* (sbst.) — *finger* (v.), *doctor* (sbst.) — *doctor* (v.), etc., is the fundamental one? The problem cannot be solved in terms of the present-day historical grammar. Postquam is not propter quam, and the assumption of the Neogrammarians that any sort of historical statement constitutes an explanation proves to be fallacious. We do know, of course, that **luƀōjan* 'to love' was formed on the basis of **luƀō* 'love' in Old Germanic, but the question is whether this formative relationship between the substantive *love* and the verb *love* is still valid in Present-day English. It is obvious that the problem must be examined without any preconceptions adopted from the analysis of the older stages of the language, if we wish to establish a structural rule in this particular area of linguistic analysis. The fact is that in such pairs as *love* (sbst.) — *love* (v.) or *finger* (sbst.) — *finger* (v.), there is no derivative suffix to show the secondary character of its bearer, and another difficulty for a correct grammatical diagnosis is the fact that noun—verb opposition is not a privative one, so that one term cannot be assessed as primary and the other as secondary, as is the case with *man* — *men, king* — *kings, sheep* (sing.) — *sheep* (pl.). Neither can analogy be invoked for the solution to this problem, since the proportions of the type *hate* (v.): *hatred* (sbst.) = *love* (v.) : *love* (sbst.) or *reprove* (v.) : *reproval* (sbst.) = *rebuke* (v.) : *rebuke* (sbst.) are of problematic value for our question and cannot be applied, moreover, to all cases of conversion. This theory, advanced by A. I. Smirnickij,[3] does not hold good, as rightly pointed out by P. A. Soboleva, who put forward some other aspects of the problem. She maintains[4] that if all or most of derivatives are of deverbative character, such as *worker, working, workable,* the fundamental word *work* must primarily be a verb, and vice versa, if there are such derivatives as *handy, handful, handless,* the fundamental word must be primarily a substantive. Nor can Soboleva's criterion be decisive for all cases of conversion, and it seems that nothing remains but to resort to the semantic aspect of both terms as to a criterion. By applying it, two different kinds of noun—verb oppositions can be distinguished. First, if the semantic content of a verb, such as *finger, function, doctor,* is entirely covered by that of the corresponding noun, which also has some other meanings in addition to those of the verb, we are entitled to regard the verb as semantically secondary and the noun as primary, i.e. as the basis of the conversion. There are many verbs that belong to this group,

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cf. *average, beggar, bottle, class, bulk, corner, edge, fox, husband, minister, nest, nut, motor, paper, pocket, post, sense* 'to realize the meaning of', *shoulder, stamp, tour; pastor, religion, press-agent, express,* in American English. On the other hand, if a noun receives its whole semantic content from the verb which has some other meanings in addition to that of the noun, it is the verb which must be regarded as semantically primary. The deverbative nouns *dig, find, guess, feel, lead, mould, swim, ride, slide, know, know-how* are examples to the point. The other group is represented by the noun—verb oppositions, the terms of which are on the same level of semantic fullness or independence of each other. In such contrastive pairs as *love* (sbst.) — *love* (v.), *light* (sbst.) — *light* (v.), *order* (sbst.) — *order* (v.), *laugh* (sbst.) — *laugh* (v.), neither noun nor verb can be termed semantically primary or semantically secondary.— The same distinction can be made among the noun—verb oppositions the terms of which are differentiated by alternations of accent and (or) phonemes, cf. *use* (sbst.) — *use* (v.), *proof* (sbst.) — *prove* (v.), *life* (sbst.) — *live* (v.), *breath* (sbst.) — *breathe*(v.), *loath* (sbst.) — *loathe, blood* (sbst.) — *bleed* (v.), *forecast* (sbst.) — *forecast* (v.), *record* (sbst.) — *record* (v.), *house* (sbst.) — *house* (v.). Except the last pair, all these formations belong to the latter group.

It might seem that conversion does not offer any great difficulties to the learners who wish to speak correct English, but as a matter of fact it does. The difficulties are of semantic nature. They spring from the fact that the converted verbs or nouns are distinct lexical units and may develop varied shades of meaning under the cover of the same form. The polysemy of words which results from it is further increased by the phenomenon of re-conversion, termed oscillation by O. Jespersen. To use Jespersen's example in his *Modern English Grammar* (VI. 95), *cable* 'anchor, rope' is converted into a verb 'to telegraph', and then, by re-conversion, a new substantive is formed from the verb with the sense 'telegram'. In this way *cable* has acquired three distinct meanings, and the same is true of *brush, phone, sail, dart, ring* and many other words. If then we are aware that the excessive polysemy of words for which conversion is partly responsible cannot be a special blessing for a language, the extensive use of converted words cannot be reckoned one of the chief merits of the English language (cf. Jespersen, o.c., 95). In fact, some limitations must be imposed upon its productivity. Many substantives, such as *arm* 'upper limb of human body', *body, hair, ear, neck, throat, tongue, soul, person, woman, child, son, sun, night, row* 'line of objects', and verbs like *come, do, seek, appear, seem,* are not subject to conversion. Moreover, Modern English has given preference to suffixed words like *acclamation, exclamation, difference, invitation, repetition,* and relegated the converted nouns *acclaim, exclaim, differ, invite, repeat* to obsolete or vulgar and special uses. Neither are converted the words derived by means of productive suffixes from living kernels, such as *teacher, teaching, friendship, freedom, government, soften, colonize.* It is natural, of course, that the nouns denoting various kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, flowers, fruits, vegetables and some other specified objects and abstract notions need no corresponding verbs. In spite of all these restrictions, it can be stated that conversion is one of the most characteristic features of English morphology and we may even risk the statement that the conversion of substantives of foreign origin into verbs is a reliable mark of their adoption into the colloquial use of English.

It has not been within the scope of this paper written in honour of Professor Josef Vachek's sixtieth birthday to present a detailed account of all problems connected with conversions in English. If it is enough to give a general outline of my approach

to them in terms of paradigmatic and syntagmatic morphology, it will have accomplished its purpose.

NOTES

[1] Cf. 'On the Basic Categories of Syntagmatic Morphology', *Travaux linguistiques de Prague 2*. 165—9 (Prague, 1966).

[2] Cf. the introductory chapter to my *Syntax of the English Verb from Caxton to Dryden, Travaux du Cercle linguistique de Prague 3*. 13—4 (Prague, 1930).

[3] A. I. Smirnickij, 'Po povodu konversiji' v anglijskom jezyke, *Inostrannyje jazyki v škole*. 1954 : 3. 12—24 (Moscow, 1954).

[4] P. A. Soboleva, 'Ob osnovnom i proizvodnom slove pri slovoobrazovateľnych otnošenijach po konversiji', *Voprosy jazykoznanija*, 8 : 2. 91—5 (Moscow, 1959).

[5] V. Bladin, *Studies in Denominative Verbs in English* (Uppsala, 1911). — Y. M. Biese, *Origin and Development of Conversions in English* (Helsinki, 1941).

[6] It should be noted that H. Koziol, *Handbuch der englischen Wortbildungslehre* (Heidelberg, 1937) and other linguists regard the terms of noun—verb conversion as functions of the same word. A. I. Smirnickij, 'Tak nazyvajemaja konversija i čeredovanije zvukov v anglijskom jazyke', *Inostrannyje jazyki v škole* 1953 : 5. 21—31 (Moscow, 1953), rightly pointed out logical inconsistencies arising from this incorrect conception. It must be remembered that the zero suffix is one of the exponents by which verbs are distinguished from nouns, and that apart from this verbs enter into other morphological oppositions than nouns. What *love* (sbst.) and *love* (v.) has in common is only the kernel *love-*.

RESUMÉ

Konverse v angličtině

Autor se omezuje jen na konverse mezi substantivy a slovesy. Velkou produktivnost anglické konverse vykládá sémantickou potřebou větší konkrétnosti, které angličtí mluvčí dosahují užitím substantiv ve funkci speciálních činností (srovn. *the motor — to motor*) nebo naopak zasunutím slovesa do protikladů substantivních (srovn. *to take a dip, to have a swim*). Autor ukazuje, že lze spíše mluvit o intimní součinnosti slovesa se substantivem než jednostranně o tendenci angličtiny k nominálnosti. Otázku primárnosti slovesa nebo substantiva v procesu konverse lze řešit jen z hlediska významových vztahů, ježto protiklad substantivum—sloveso je neprivativního rázu. Autor hodnotí konversi v systému sdělných jazykových prostředků a vyslovuje názor, že přílišná produktivnost konverse — stejně jako homonymie a polysémantičnost — není vždy kladem.