

Book Review

A Contribution to the Study of Conversion in English¹

Isabel Balteiro. Münster/New York/München/Berlin: Waxmann, 2007. 152 pp.

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1. Introduction

Ever since the first explicit mention of the term ‘conversion’ by Henry Sweet (1891-98), an important number of authors have periodically approached the topic from different perspectives, trying to come to terms with one of the most frequent procedures for word-formation in English. It seems, however, that the interest kindled by the phenomenon runs parallel to the inconsistencies and problems which it poses and, despite the attempts to unify criteria, conversion is still perceived as peculiar compared to other word-formation patterns. In view of the situation, the present work intends to gather a variety of opinions on conversion along with the author’s view of the process.

The structure of the book provides a somewhat unbalanced proportion among five chapters, with three lengthy middle sections which outweigh the introductory and concluding sections. Chapter 1 (pp. 13-17) introduces the topic and lays down the fundamental principles and structure of the book, while Chapter 2 (pp. 18-69) attempts to formulate a working definition of conversion. The issue of the limits of conversion is devoted special attention, both between different word-classes (Chapter 3, pp. 70-115) and within a given word-class (Chapter 4, pp. 116-129). Finally, the main ideas are summarised and pertinent conclusions drawn (Chapter 5, pp. 130-139). A separate section is devoted to the bibliographical references.

2. The process and its characteristics

Before facing such a problematical topic as conversion, certain points need to be made which are not obvious for scholars, such as to which field of linguistics it belongs. In the introduction, Balteiro weighs the pros and cons of the inclusion or not of conversion under syntax, morphology and semantics, and refers back to Zandvoort (1972) and Bauer (1983) as examples of ambiguous positions on this subject. Albeit implicitly detaching word-formation from morphology at a certain point (pp. 13-14), Balteiro concludes that conversion is best conceived under word-formation because it ‘... increases the lexical resources of the English language’ (p. 17) in a manner parallel to affixation or compounding.

Doubts arise as well regarding which term should label this process, with several available alternatives such as ‘conversion’, ‘zero-derivation’, ‘functional shift’ or ‘transfer’ (the last not noted by the author). Balteiro summarises the important implications of each option and anticipates her choice in favour of ‘conversion’ (p. 16), although other terms are actually used throughout the book, mainly in references to other authors (pp. 19-64).

Once the main positions are adopted, the book attempts to redefine conversion, one of the main concerns of the work judging by the space devoted to it, in Chapter 2. This

bibliographical review is shaped into two broad sections, one comprising authors who perceive conversion as a derivational process and the other for those representing the opposing view. Among the former, we find those who hold to notions such as conversion, recategorisation, and morphological metaphor or semantic extension; among the latter, multifunctionality, word-class exchange or lexical redundancy rules.

This two-fold division has advantages and disadvantages. While this approach facilitates an individual assessment of each of the trends under study, it frequently obscures what the different theories often have in common, and this obliges the author (and hence the reader) to repeatedly go back to already explained areas. This is the case, for example, with Štekauer's (1996; 1997) theory, first presented in isolation (pp. 26-29) and then again when contrasted to Marchand (1963; 1969) (pp. 38-40), or with generative morphology, described in relation to zero-suffixation (pp. 42-48) and repeated for Don's (1993) postulates (pp. 53-56). The lack of an author or subject index makes the difficulties inherent in this separate treatment more manifest.

The fact is that Chapter 2 allows Balteiro to put some of the central views of conversion together, with special attention to Marchand (1963; 1969), Don (1993) and Crocco-Gâleas (1997). In each case, the analysis is not restricted to the opinion under consideration, but is also contrasted with other positions, which is useful for an overview of the issue. In addition, despite the lack of tables or figures to facilitate the discussion, the inclusion of examples from the originals is of help for understanding the insights of each proposal. The same cannot be said, however, of some important works which are scarcely considered or only mentioned in passing, for instance Adams (1973), Marchand (1967), and Tournier (1985). By the same token, some other theories, like Štekauer's (1996), are developed hastily without providing the background necessary for a complete comprehension (e.g. Dokulil 1962; 1966). This results in a sharp contrast between some lengthy sections, like 'Zero-suffixation or Zero-Derivation' (pp. 36-53), and others which are examined succinctly, like 'Semantic Extension' (pp. 32-33) and 'Word-class Exchange' (pp. 60-61).

A consequence of Balteiro's approach is that the discussion of fundamentals proves rather aseptic and looks more like a concatenation of unconnected reviews than like a global critical consideration. This limitation holds for other parts of the book as well and leaves the reader with a feeling of uncertainty about the exact point under discussion. It is among the conclusions of the chapter (pp. 65-69) that we really discover the standpoint of the author. Here, Balteiro presents her view of conversion as a derivational process and emphasises that it '... begins with the *use* of an element in a different paradigmatic and syntagmatic context' (p. 66, italics as in the original). This implies a view of conversion as a relationship between two words and not as a multifunctional phenomenon, a notion which should be restricted, she argues, to specific cases when a word is used in more than one grammatical construction, e.g. *stone* in *a stone* vs. *stone wall*. For Balteiro, hence, conversion occurs from the first moment a word is used '... as if it were another' (p. 68).

Note, however, that conversions are also argued to be different from 'nonce-formations' in that, despite their similarity, only the former become settled in the language. That is, '... "nonce formations" ... may be said to belong only to the level of speech, while "conversion" belongs to the level of language' (p. 67). This covert allusion to Saussurean 'langue' and 'parole' assumes that we can speak of conversion in well-established items, but not in new formations, which contradicts the above statement about 'first use' of conversions. In addition, Balteiro seems to be confusing here two different senses of the term 'nonce-formation', one in which these units are new formations in a language, and another in which

they are words which deviate from the rule, always irrespective of the created word-formation process involved (this point was made to me by P. Štekauer) (see also Quirk et al. 1985: 1522; Štekauer 1996: 97-98; Bauer 2001: 38-39).

In sum, the most positive aspect of these 52 pages is the eventual, though perhaps redundant, definition of conversion as ‘a conceptual syntactic-semantic process, consisting in the use of an already existing lexical item ... in a different syntactic context, which leads to a change of category or word-class’ (p. 65). The subsequent chapters will show that there is much more to the phenomenon than this characterisation suggests.

3. Cornering conversion

The book turns next to one of its main objectives: establishing the boundaries between conversion and neighbouring phenomena. As stated, the focus is directed to the extension of functions of an item beyond the limits of its own lexical category (Chapter 3) and, second, to minor changes within a given word-class (Chapter 4). This inevitably brings up the subject of word-class distinctions.

As is well-known, the current taxonomy of English word-classes poses a number of problems and has been hence largely studied. Many scholars have questioned the validity of the traditional distinction between eight word-classes for Contemporary English, given that this classification was originally devised for such a different language as Greek (see Valera 1996: 14-18). Because of the dissimilar nature of both languages, it is only to be expected that not every Contemporary English word fits perfectly into that classification, so the dilemma is whether the edges between word-classes should be considered as perfectly-fitting or as incompatible (cf. Sweet 1891-98, I: 35-40; Marchand 1963; 1969: 359-365; Zandvoort 1972: 265-276; Adams 1973: 19; Quirk et al. 1985: 410-411; Bauer 2005).

Balteiro is fully aware that conversion hinges on this issue and proceeds to examine the main aspects of the matter, providing a characterisation for the categories noun, verb, adjective, adverb and preposition (pp. 70-74) on which the present and the subsequent chapter rest. In this section, the most general problems of the subject are outlined and various authors examined, depending on whether they use morphological, syntactic or semantic criteria to distinguish between categories (cf. Crystal 2004). The conclusion derived from this review is that ‘... only if word-class distinctions are maintained or acknowledged it makes sense to speak of conversion, since conversion is precisely the change of one word-class or category into another’ (p. 74). Unfortunately, such a relevant contribution as Fries (1957) is superficially referred to, while some recent contributions on the fuzziness of English categories are ignored (Crystal 2004; Taylor 2004; Bauer 2005).

In any case, the core of the discussion is undertaken by dividing the chapter into two large sections, one for partial conversion (pp. 79-100) and one for total conversion (pp. 100-114), a controversial differentiation which the author rejects, but cannot resist to adopt. What follows is a review of the major and minor types of each kind of conversion together with a number of general considerations about word-formation.

With regard to partial conversion, Balteiro rejects as true conversions the two types of constructions analysed, namely ‘adjective → noun’ like *poor* → *the poor* and ‘noun → adjective’ like *milk* in *milk bottle*. After considering, perhaps with excessive detail, the issue of noun+noun compounds and their demarcation from syntax (pp. 83-90), she concludes that both of the above kinds can be accounted for by ellipsis, which rules them out of word-

formation. In relation to Balteiro's classification, it is not completely clear to us why the types 'adjective → noun' and 'noun → adjective' are cited as major types of partial conversion, but 'adverb → adjective' and 'adjective → adverb' are considered minor types. Since no justification is provided, one wonders whether such detachment responds to frequency of application, to the nature of the word-classes involved or to some presupposed criterion.

Similarly, one can hardly agree with the status as conversions of some of the types presented in this section. Balteiro illustrates partial conversion with examples like 'adverb/preposition → conjunction' (1), 'verb → preposition' (2), or 'any word-class → interjection' (3) which, even if eventually rejected as conversions, pose specific problems. It would seem that the problem of the first two cases has more to do with the unstable nature of the word-classes adverb, preposition and conjunction than with conversion in itself, so perhaps these examples fit best in the discussion of word-class distinctions. Moreover, the so-called converted interjections can be argued to be a case of ellipsis or shift in pragmatic use, but not of conversion.

- (1) *Directly* he noticed this he hurried down (p. 97, my italics)
- (2) *Concerning* your request, I would like to inform you (p. 98, my italics)
- (3) Bravo, fire, good, help (p. 99)

By contrast to the above, the following section focuses on total conversion. In this case, the derived word adopts not only the functional potential of the new category, but also its inflectional features:

- (4) hammer_N → hammer_V: hammers, hammering, hammered

Three major types are discussed at this point: 'noun → verb' (e.g. *hammer_V*), 'verb → noun' (e.g. *turn_N*) and 'adjective → verb' (e.g. *dry_V*), essentially based on the classifications produced by Adams (1973), Quirk et al. (1985) and Zandvoort (1972), with occasional examples from other linguists. As with partial conversion, some types considered as minor do not seem entirely relevant for the topic, for example 'affix → noun' (5), 'phrase/sentence → noun' (6), or 'verb → adjective' (7). According to the definition of conversion provided in Chapter 2, only '...an already existing lexical item' (p. 65) can act as input for conversion, which automatically excludes (5) and (6) as possible candidates (the former is a suffix and the latter is a sentence). Finally, the 'verb → adjective' type may merely consist of an adjectival use of the participle of *to frighten*, as the author herself admits the doubtful status of such items as total conversions (cf. Bauer & Valera 2005: 10).

- (5) Patriotism, nationalism and any other *isms* you'd like to name (p. 108, my italics)
- (6) His "*I don't know's*" are a perfect nuisance (p. 108, my italics)
- (7) a. He was the person *frightening* us all
b. He was very *frightening* (p. 110, my italics)

This review of partial and total conversion closes with a summary of cases where there are phonological differences between both members of the pair, as in 'record_N – re'cord_V or relief – relieve (pp. 110-114). As a conclusion, Balteiro states that all cases of partial conversion can be accounted for by phenomena such as shortening, compounding or ellipsis; hence she rejects the validity of the term. In the same vein, total conversion is acknowledged only for the types 'noun → verb', 'verb → noun' and 'adjective → verb'. However, as put to me by Prof. Štekauer (pers. comm. 2007), ellipsis may theoretically apply to any word-formation process, which does not seem an entirely accurate justification for the constructions which Balteiro describes.

Once the shift in use between different word-classes has been considered, Chapter 4 engages in a concise treatment of 'change of secondary word-class' (Quirk et al. 1985: 1563) or 'conversion as a syntactic process' (Bauer 1983: 227), i.e. cases where an item undergoes minor semantic or syntactic adjustments within its own category. Balteiro concentrates on nouns, verbs and adjectives and considers, among others, cases of non-count nouns used as count nouns (*two coffees*) and vice versa (*an inch of pencil*), proper nouns used as common nouns (*a Picasso*), or intransitive verbs used transitively (*run* in *run the water*). As happens in other parts of the book, one misses reference to related publications at this point, e.g. Štekauer (1996: 115-126; 1997) in the case of converted proper nouns. This lack of discussion makes this chapter unexpectedly brief, mainly considering that, together with Chapter 3, it constitutes the essence of the present work. In spite of this, the author concludes that conversion can never be acknowledged in the above cases because no change of word-class or of prototypical characteristic is fulfilled, even if such cases are '(very) conversion-like' (p. 129).

4. Conclusions

In the last chapter, the author picks up the most relevant ideas explained throughout the book for a final comment. From the conclusions included in these pages, it becomes apparent that, despite the ambitious goals established by Balteiro, more space is required for a comprehensive consideration of conversion. If, as she claims, this process needs to be urgently bounded from other phenomena, there is still a long way to go.

Scarce mention is made, for example, of processes whose results are identical to conversion, but which have been often confused with it, such as diachronic levelling, homomorphy, homonymy or polysemy (cf. Valera 1996; 2006: 173-174). Any study on word-formation has to adopt a given position towards them depending on its diachronic or synchronic orientation, but this is passed out in the present work. Instead, the discussion on diachronic processes is reduced to *friendly*_{ADJ} vs. *friendly*_{ADV}, rejected as conversions due to their different origin in Old English: *freóndlic* (adjective) and *freondlice* (adverb) (p. 91).

Another ignored topic is the identification of directionality in conversion, i.e. which member of the pair is the base and which the derived item, a crucial issue and one often lacking consensus. Various options have been suggested for identification of the base: first, the member of the pair attested earliest is the base; second, the simplest item of the pair in semantic terms is the base; third, the base is discerned by native linguistic competence. The implications of each choice are important for any theory of conversion because they influence both the conception of word-formation as diachronic or synchronic and a view of conversion as a process and not as multifunctionality (see Bauer & Valera 2005: 11-12).

One weakness of the book is that it overlooks important references of the subject, as Cetnarowska (1993), Sundby (1995) or Vogel (1996), as well as a number of recent works on word-formation or conversion, for example Adams (2001), Bauer (2001; 2003), Bauer & Valera (2005), Don (2005), Plag (2003), Štekauer (2006), Štekauer & Lieber (2005) or Valera (2006). As a consequence, a close reading will inevitably meet areas where further research would be desirable, for example morphological productivity.

It is a well-known fact that conversion is particularly frequent in the English language and gives rise to many new formations. However, no attention is paid in this work to its rate of output or to the constraints which affect it, something infelicitous considering the author's view of conversion as a derivational pattern. Perhaps for this reason, the use of the terms 'productive' or 'productivity' is not always methodical, and Balteiro seems to be referring to different notions with the same terms, e.g. 'extremely productive' (p. 31) or 'quite productive' (pp. 110, 119) allude to the profitability of the process, while 'not productive' (p. 25) is used as a synonym for 'not available' – see Bauer (2001: 209-210) for the distinction 'availability' vs. 'profitability'.

Among the book's assets is the straightforward terminology used, which favours its understanding by linguists of whatever theoretical framework. This work can be, therefore, a good opportunity for the introduction of the non-expert to the subject although, for the same reason, it may not appeal to specialists. In addition, the already mentioned thematic arrangement of the bibliographical review proves advantageous for consults as well as for comparisons between different authors.

In sum, *A contribution to the study of conversion in English* can be considered a summary of the state of the art and a compendium of different opinions about conversion in English. The variety of conceptions which are included and assessed offers the reader the possibility to notice the links between some opposed perspectives for a better understanding of this process. As the reader advances, there is the feeling that conversion is much more complex a process than it initially seems and, in that sense, Balteiro successfully portrays the many nuances of this process. Not all the goals of the study are achieved, however, in that the book does not provide a 'renewed definition and delimitation' (p. 130) of the phenomenon, at least not more than previous works have done. It appears that Balteiro's personal opinions are expressed only in very specific areas, and this minimizes the critical role of the writer.

Be that as it may, this work evidences that the debate on conversion is in full swing today and not exhausted at all. Many of the issues discussed decades ago have not been resolved yet and, as is confirmed by this work, the ultimate solution is not within reach whatsoever. This seems more than enough to spur the study of conversion until the long-awaited formula for a full comprehension of the process is produced.

Note

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