

THE STUDY OF CONVERSION ON THE DIACHRONIC LEVEL

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Annotation: *This article explores the phenomenon of conversion (zero derivation) from a diachronic perspective. It investigates the historical development of conversion in the English language, identifies patterns of word-class shifts over time, and analyzes the linguistic mechanisms and socio-cultural factors that influenced these changes. The study emphasizes the role of conversion in enriching the English lexicon and enhancing syntactic flexibility.*

Keywords: *conversion, zero derivation, diachronic linguistics, word-formation, grammatical shift, functional shift, lexical innovation, historical linguistics, English language evolution, morphological change*

Introduction. Conversion, also known as zero derivation, is a word-formation process in which a lexical item changes its grammatical category without any morphological alteration. For instance, the noun email can be used as a verb ("to email"). While many studies address conversion from a synchronic perspective, its diachronic development reveals significant insights into the evolution of the English language and its morphological economy.

Historical Background. Old English showed limited productivity in conversion, with inflectional morphology restricting word-class shifts. However, as English evolved, particularly after the Norman Conquest and throughout the Middle English period, inflectional endings weakened, and analytic constructions became more prominent. This morphological simplification created favorable conditions for conversion. During the Early Modern English period, conversion became increasingly productive. Shakespearean texts offer numerous examples, such as to elbow, to dog, and to blanket, indicating a creative exploitation of existing vocabulary through functional shift. These innovations reflect broader linguistic trends, such as syntactic flexibility and lexical economy.

Conversion typically occurs between specific grammatical categories. The most frequent historical conversions include:

Noun → Verb (e.g., to hammer, to bottle)

Verb → Noun (e.g., a guess, a run)

Adjective → Noun (e.g., a native, a regular)

A diachronic semantic analysis of a conversion pair reveals that in the course of time the semantic structure of the base may acquire a new meaning or several meanings under the influence of the meanings of the converted word. This semantic process has been termed reconversion in linguistic literature. There is an essential difference between conversion and reconversion: being a way of forming words conversion leads to a numerical enlargement of the English vocabulary, whereas reconversion only brings about a new meaning correlated with one of the meanings of the converted word. In some cases, conversion is motivated by metaphorical extension, semantic shift, or contextual ambiguity. For example, the noun contact was nominalized in the 17th century and later began to function as a verb in the 19th century, likely under the influence of scientific and technological discourse.

The diachronic spread of conversion is closely tied to socio-cultural and pragmatic factors. The rise of scientific discourse, commerce, journalism, and later digital communication required a rapid expansion of vocabulary. Conversion offered a concise and efficient means to adapt existing words to new grammatical and functional roles. The democratization of literacy and increased exposure to written and spoken English also promoted the acceptance of converted forms. Sociocultural factors influence people's feelings, values, beliefs, behaviors, attitudes, and interactions. Examples include social classes, religious beliefs, wealth distribution, language, business practices, social values, customer preferences, social organization, and attitude towards work.

Conclusion. The diachronic study of conversion reveals it as a central mechanism of linguistic innovation in English. Its increasing productivity over time correlates with broader historical developments, including morphological simplification, the rise of analytic syntax, and sociocultural changes. As English continues to evolve, conversion remains a dynamic force shaping the language's lexical and grammatical structure.

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