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REVIEW ARTICLE

Conversion and onomasiological theory[1]

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Pavol Štekauer, *A theory of conversion in English*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1996. Pp. 155.

1. Summary of contents

When, in 1891, Henry Sweet (1891–98, I: 38–40) used the term CONVERSION for the process that today is also known as ZERO-DERIVATION, he was probably not aware of the debate that the description of this process would still raise one century later.

Štekauer's book bears witness to a renewed interest in conversion. Such an interest partly stems from the fact that it is a simple (or, at least, apparently so), extremely productive process, but also because it remains a challenge to descriptive linguistics. How conversion operates, what its limits are, how converted units should be categorised in the study of morphology and lexis, and even what its real nature is are still open questions despite the attention given to this issue ever since Sweet's grammar.

This book meets some of these questions in the framework of an onomasiological theory, which will be briefly discussed below. The book consists of nine chapters, a section for notes and another for references. The introduction (chapter 1, pp. 11–13) justifies the work and outlines the structure of the book. The remaining eight chapters deal with the description of conversion in the literature (chapter 2, pp. 15–22), its interpretation as zero-derivation (chapter 3, pp. 23–43), the onomasiological theory and conversion (chapter 4, pp. 45–53), phonological variation (chapter 5, pp. 55–95), the use and semantic range of converted units (chapter 6, pp. 97–113), proper nouns and conversion (chapter 7, pp. 115–126), directionality (chapter 8, pp. 127–133), and the productivity of conversion (chapter 9, pp. 135–141).

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2. Bibliographical review

The bibliographical review (chapter 2) has strong and weak points. Foremost among the former is an overview of research on conversion and related issues by a number of eastern European scholars (for example, Dokulil, Horecký, Karaščuk and Smirnickij). This work is largely unfamiliar in the west. By contrast, some other important authors (Adams, Bauer, Haas or Kastovsky) are barely mentioned, or their arguments summarised in little detail. Another weakness is that it overlooks some of the major contributions in this field (for example, Sweet 1891–98, Zandvoort 1972, Tournier 1985). Conflicting views of conversion are contrasted, from the narrowest (conversion only occurs between nouns and verbs (Karaščuk 1977), not cited in the references) to the broadest (conversion includes some cases of homonymy (Smirnickij 1954)). These are also classified according to whether conversion is viewed as a word-formation process (and, if so, whether it is a zero-derivation process or not), or as a case of words being '"utilised" in the function of some other word-class' (15). In the latter case, the discussion is mostly limited to what is usually known as PARTIAL CONVERSION.

3. Zero-derivation

In chapter 3 the author argues against the theory of zero-morphemes in inflectional and derivational morphology. Štekauer first invokes examples of zero-morphemes cited in the literature in relation to the categories of number in nouns and adjectives, and person and tense in verbs. These, he argues, support his belief that zero-morphemes are redundant, if not unworkable as elements establishing contrast in inflectional morphology, because they cannot mark the contrast between two different inflectional forms. He weighs two arguments in favour of zero-morphemes in respect of pairs like $sheep_{SG}$ vs. $sheep_{PL}$. In the first there are two different zero-morphemes (one marking the singular, the other the plural), while in the second there is only one (marking the plural). Štekauer repudiates both positions, the first on the grounds that the basic form of a word in a system of contrast is already marked as such 'via its "status" as a fundamental form' (27) and any zero-morpheme marking the basic form is redundant. The second argument, that of zero-morphemes marking the inflected form, is rejected on the assumption that no valid contrast can be established between marked and unmarked forms if the marking element maintains the marked and the unmarked terms formally identical (27–28).

Similar arguments are cited in respect of tense and person in verbs. An interpretation of the present and past tense forms of verbs like *put* in terms of zero-morphemes is first called into question because the occurrence of such morphemes in both the present and the past form would be redundant in the former, and because a zero-morpheme only in the latter cannot mark

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formal contrast in relation to lack of any mark. As to the category person in verbs, the basic tenet for zero-morphemes entails acceptance of five different zeros, one for each person except for the third person singular. Instead, Štekauer prefers to view person as expressed by the accompanying personal pronouns (and, hence, the *-s/-es* inflection for the third person as a redundant mark).

A similar case is made for the category of degree in adjectives when expressed by periphrastic structures: occurrence of *more* for the comparative marks the following adjective, and makes redundant a hypothetical zero suffix to replace the *-er* inflection, as, Štekauer claims, might be expected from the binary structure principle (36). Lack of affixes for number in adjectives is explained not by zero-affixes, but because adjectives express quality, which is here assumed to exist 'irrespective of the number [...] of the referred object' (36). Additional arguments against zero-derivation given in chapter 5 are dealt with below.

Concerning zero-derivation in derivational morphology, the leading voices in favour of this theory, H. Marchand and D. Kastovsky, are countered in lesser detail, in the latter case leaving aside some relevant references (for example, Kastovsky 1994). Štekauer cites arguments against the notion of zero-derivation by Pennanen (1971), Aronoff (1976) and Lieber (1981), as well as others of his own. These are basically: (i) that conversion is different from other word-formation processes, (ii) that the changes proper to conversion can be explained in the onomasiological theory without resorting to a binary structure (consequently, there is no need for a zero element to fill the first segment of the sequence Form + Meaning), (iii) that a number of different homonymous zeros would be necessary to account for a number of different meanings, and (iv) that a zero-morpheme cannot establish any formal contrast in relation to its unmarked counterpart.

4. An onomasiological theory of conversion

Chapter 4 is a concise exposition of an onomasiological theory of conversion in English. This model is adapted from previous approaches to other word-formation processes in Slovak and Czech (Horecký 1983 and Horecký et al. 1989, and Dokulil 1962, 1966). The essentials of the model are that conversion is a unique word-formation process that encompasses five different stages. In the first, the base unit is recategorised in terms of any one of four conceptual categories (substance, action, quality or circumstance). This alters the logical spectrum of the unit that is being converted, which then experiences change of word-class, phonological and orthographical shaping, and adjustment to the paradigmatic and syntagmatic patterns of the new word-class.

However, except for readers familiar with this model, the theoretical apparatus of onomasiological theory and its interpretation of conversion are

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difficult to understand from Štekauer's description alone. The examples and figures given to illustrate these points are often not enough to follow even some of the basic principles. Therefore, no evaluation of this model can be made here. What is clear is that the theory presented lays emphasis on the semantic dimension of conversion. This is an important contribution, as the semantic side of conversion has often been neglected in favour of the syntactic one. Recategorisation of lexical units in terms of a number of categories (perhaps more specific than the ones above), together with directions on how this recategorisation can be expressed in the semantic structure of the units, may certainly throw light on conversion. Examples showing how this semantic change is expressed in this theory are, as presented by Štekauer (49):

'*bond*$_{N}$ - bond$_{V}$: SUBSTANCE_Fact_ACTION
Interpretation: Substance as a Result of Action.'
'*time*$_{N}$ - *time*$_{V}$: CIRCUMSTANCE_Temp_ACTION
Interpretation: Action in terms of temporal dimension.'
'*clear*$_{A}$ - *clear*$_{V}$: QUALITY_Fact_ACTION
Interpretation: Action resulting in certain Quality.'

5. Formal change and the diachronic component

Chapter 5 is about phonological variation in conversion. This is an important point for Štekauer, not only because it challenges the principle that conversion does not affect the phonological and orthographical structure of the units on which it operates, but because such a variation has sometimes been explained by applying the same rules used for other word-formation processes like affixation, and this runs against his belief that conversion is an independent word-formation process. Following the structure of this chapter, phonological and/or orthographical variation is discussed farther below.

After a short bibliographical review, the book examines the relationship of conversion with other relations between lexemes (homonymy and polysemy) and, more interestingly, with formal identity by diachronic loss of word-class-specific inflectional and/or derivational affixes. This raises the question of the limits of conversion, especially in relation to the importance that such diachronic processes should be granted.

As is known, the nature of homograph pairs should be discussed in the light of the distinction between the resources used by language to meet lexical needs, and the state in which lexical units exist today regardless of the mechanisms by which they have been created or, as more precisely put by Dr L. Bauer (personal communication), the distinction between word-formation processes, and the way in which speakers at any state of the language may analyse the results of past word-formation or historical processes. A diachronic-oriented study of homograph pairs necessarily has to distinguish

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conversion from loss of word-class-specific marks, whereas the same study from a strictly synchronic perspective does not (Marchand 1963). Analyses which ignore this dilemma lead to unsatisfactory overgeneralisations. On the other hand, to exclude from conversion such cases as *love*$_{N}$-*love*$_{V}$, which present-day speakers do not view differently from, say, *telephone*$_{N}$-*telephone*$_{V}$, is right from a diachronic point of view, but does not reflect the current state of language. And then, to include under conversion homograph pairs whose formal identity is caused by loss of formal marks is synchronically right, but misses the differences between word-formation processes and diachronic evolution.

Štekauer's position is the former, that is, diachronic evidence should not be disregarded in the study of synchronic data. He distinguishes two groups of homograph pairs according to whether their formal identity can be put down to conversion (GENUINE CONVERSION, for example, *telephone*$_{N}$-*telephone*$_{V}$), or to neutralisation of word-class-specific marks (ETYMOLOGICALLY EXCLUDED PAIRS, for example, *love*$_{N}$-*love*$_{V}$ as related to Old English *lufu*$_{N}$-*lufian*$_{V}$, 60). Consequently, he joins those authors who keep conversion and diachronic levelling apart in various degrees (Biese 1941: 18, Zandvoort 1972: 265, Tournier 1985: 179–180, Valera 1996: 66–74). As a result, only 91 out of 214 pairs of homographs are accepted here as conversions, the remaining 123 being discarded on the grounds of their etymology (62).

In view of its thoroughness and extension, the rest of the chapter stands as the core of the book. It examines 214 homograph pairs out of a corpus of 100,000 lexical entries of an English-Czech dictionary. These pairs are classified first as genuine conversion or as etymologically excluded pairs, and then according to their word-classes (adjective and verb, noun and verb, and adjective and noun). Despite the claim that directionality is a secondary feature of conversion and that it does not affect its basic logico-semantic relations (127), the resulting classes of pairs are separated into different groups on the grounds of the direction of conversion; the pairs rendered formally identical by loss of word-class-specific marks are classified according to etymological evidence. All cases, whether conversion or not, are closely scrutinised for differences in their form. The results are expressed numerically, represented graphically in charts, and commented on in detail.

Conversion and diachronic levelling are exhaustively contrasted in summary sections where both types of homograph pairs are shown to have the same phonological properties. As no significant differences can be found, Štekauer concludes that the phonological changes present in certain cases of conversion are not determined by any special word-formation rules, that these changes are not specific word-formation devices, and that the cases of conversion in which they occur are not a different word-formation process, but a minor, unpredictable group within conversion. This is also used as evidence that conversion follows different rules from other processes

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involving derivation, and should not be considered a process of zero-derivation.

Štekauer's view is thus in accordance with a long-standing tradition of accepting as conversion pairs that are phonologically or orthographically slightly different. This position has been seldom challenged, even if it contradicts such a basic principle of conversion as that of absolute identity between the base and the derived unit. The alternative view, that pairs such as *believe*$_{V}$-*belief*$_{N}$, or *use*$_{V}$-*use*$_{N}$ are not substantially different from others like *sing*$_{V}$-*song*$_{N}$, or *gild*$_{V}$-*gold*$_{N}$, and should not be considered as conversion any more than such ablaut-related pairs (put to me by Dr L. Bauer, personal communication) also deserves consideration, which it does not gain here.

6. Semantic predictability; proper names

The rest of the book gives secondary attention to other features of conversion. Chapter 6 is about the evolution of converted units, and about some of the principles governing their semantic range. In the former respect, conversions are classified into forms which become part of the language because they meet a common lexical need, and those which are nonce-formations. This is a matter of lexicalization, and not peculiar to conversion. As for the predictability of the semantic range of converted units, Štekauer suggests that meaning based on the basic features of the extralinguistic reality alluded to is more predictable in conversion than that based on the possible situations in which an item of the extralinguistic reality can be set. Thus, nouns like *tea-pot* are reportedly more likely to be converted to verbs with meanings that reflect the basic features of the item denoted by the base term ('to put water in a tea-pot', or 'to put a teapot on a cooker', 109), than with meanings which are possible, but depend on situational variables rather than on the meaning of the base ('to put on weight', or to be 'furious', 109).

Chapter 7 discusses the semantics of proper names. Conversion here plays a minor role and is approached as an argument supporting a view of proper names as polysemantic linguistic signs. Štekauer remarks that proper names behave in conversion just as common names do.

7. Directionality and productivity

Directionality, reported in chapter 5 not to bear any significant influence on the phonological structure of converted units, is contemplated again in chapter 8. Like Leech (1974: 224–225), and unlike Kiparsky (1982: 13–14), for whom directionality of conversion has far-reaching consequences, Štekauer views directionality as a secondary feature. Consequently, directionality serves only classificatory purposes here.

His account of this issue is mostly a review of Marchand's criteria for the directionality of conversion. Following Marchand (1964), these are presented

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as divided into two groups, criteria of content and criteria of external form. In the former, the derived member of a pair is identified by: (i) its semantic dependence on the other, (ii) its smaller range of usage, (iii) its smaller field of reference (that is, more specific meaning), and (iv) a certain semantic pattern (that is, certain meanings, for example, *one who Vs*). Štekauer repudiates these four criteria as follows: semantic analysis of the members of converted pairs can be made just as well in either direction, with the result that semantic dependence may be equally well assumed in either direction and, therefore, yield opposite results; range of usage shows the same limitations as the first criterion, and is based on 'general acceptance and frequency [which] are rather vague and depend upon too many factors' (129); counterexamples to the criterion of semantic range can be found (for example, instrumental verbs), in fact, for Štekauer these other examples would yield results contrary to the ones obtained from the criterion of semantic dependence; the criterion of semantic pattern is based on the same principles as that of semantic dependence, and is denied on the same grounds.

Marchand's (1964) criteria of external form are: (i) certain phonetic forms associate lexical units with certain word-classes (for example, *-ment* refers to the word-class noun), (ii) certain morphological forms indicate that a unit belongs primarily to a given word-class (for example, compounds of the type *blacklist* are typically nouns, and verbs with this form are probably denominal), and (iii) certain stress patterns that parallel word-class contrast can be interpreted as indicating base and derived units (for example, nouns and verbs differing only in their stress patterns indicate that the noun is the derived unit). Again, the first and last of these criteria are dismissed by Štekauer, either because formal identity in Marchand's examples is due to diachronic levelling and should not be accepted as conversions according to Štekauer, stress not being a defining criterion, or because the analysis and/or selection of examples on which the third criterion is based are different. The second criterion of external form, which alludes to the relevance of morphological type, is accepted.

The disagreement between the positions held by Marchand and Štekauer stems largely from the fact that the latter believes that diachronic evidence is relevant for the study of conversion, and hence rejects as conversion homograph pairs that a synchronic position would accept. However, no arguments can be found in the book removing the doubts raised on this point by Marchand (1963: 177–180) or Adams (1973: 39–42), and which are both of a theoretical and practical kind. In relation to the theoretical considerations, no mention is made of the separation of diachronic and synchronic evidence as expressed by Marchand, apart from the need to integrate them in the case of conversion, and the preeminence of the former over the latter (131). In fact, diachronic evidence seems to be accepted because no other criterion is available. As to the practical difficulties, the

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author relies on the etymological data and, apparently, on the dates of the earliest record of each term of a word pair in *The compact edition of the Oxford English dictionary* (1971, Oxford: Oxford University Press). However, no explicit criteria are given about how long the earliest records should be separated by before they can be accepted as significant (and how this span should be adapted to records of Old English, Middle English, and Modern English), whether the earliest record is used as a reference regardless of its sense and of its current use, or what direction is assumed when the earliest records of each term of the pair are very close or approximate. Even if Štekauer's position seems congruent in many respects, it is based on fewer examples, less exhaustive analyses, and a much less explicit theoretical standpoint than Marchand's.

Chapter 9 assesses the productivity of conversion based on Ayto (1990), a dictionary of neologisms. The conversions found therein are classified according to word-class, direction of conversion, and semantic relationship between the base and derived units. This analysis confirms the well-known productivity of conversion, especially between nouns and verbs.

8. The limits of conversion

This is a crucial question that Štekauer tackles rather superficially. He accepts as conversion what others term partial conversion and, as usual in the literature, centres his attention on noun-premodifying nouns (*concrete floor*, 17), and on adjectives acting as heads of noun phrases (*the poor*, 18). In the former construction, the basic argument is that 'the use of DENOMINAL ADJECTIVES in attributival function is so typical in English that it hardly can be considered an "occasional" use of words in atypical functions' (my emphasis, 18). However, Štekauer's terminology seems to prejudge the nature of premodifiers (note the term 'denominal adjectives' capitalised above for *concrete* in *concrete floor*). He also overlooks the importance of the limits between word-classes in the study of conversion. As pointed out by Dr R. P. Lutzeier 'a new concept of conversion would rest first of all on clear definitions of [...] "parts of speech" and on [the] notion of word' (personal communication; see also Adams 1973: 19). No such background is made explicit in this book, except for a brief discussion stating that 'it is inadmissible for a word to belong to several word-classes simultaneously' (19), and a review of the syntactic and semantic heterogeneity of adjectives (16–17). Hence, cases as the ones above can be perhaps too flexibly taken as conversion between the word-classes adjective and noun.

The status of these premodifiers is controversial. They share with adjectives some features (while at the same time lacking others), but it is hard to accept these as sufficient evidence that words like *concrete* in *concrete floor* are 'denominal adjectives'. In fact, as shown by Levi (1978), they can be traced back to an underlying structure from which they can shift to the surface

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position of premodifier, but where their nominal status is beyond doubt. In this view, their occurrence in positions normally filled by adjectives is ultimately determined by a syntactic process, rather than by creation of a new lexeme with, allegedly, new syntactic and semantic properties. To accept as conversion such cases would account for their surface syntax, but would also ignore the processes responsible for this structure of premodification and, consequently, the syntactic and semantic relations that these nouns maintain with their heads.

At the same time, a reading of conversion in these examples would extend conversion to all word-classes, for word-class membership in English fades out into fuzzy boundaries where morphological, syntactic and/or semantic features are shared by two or more word-classes. Similar cases of lexical units that a priori are members of one word-class, but that can realise functions proper to another can be found in nouns and adjectives, but also in verbs, adverbs, prepositions and conjunctions, for peripheral word-class membership is as characteristic of English as conversion. To allow for the notion of partial conversion and to say that the limits between word-classes in English are not clear-cut are two different answers to the same question. Even if both positions are possible, it seems more appropriate to deal with behaviours like the above in terms of an attribute proper to English word-classes, to their grammatical description, and/or to the syntax of English, rather than to creation of new lexemes.

The other construction, that of phrases like *the poor*, is also cited as conversion rather than as a case of ellipsis. Štekauer rejects the latter option because 'each naming unit can result from the process of denomination only. It cannot be the result of "events" on the syntactic level' (18). He also argues that, in this view, a reading of ellipsis could be extended to conversion between nouns and verbs ('*to use a display*, or *to show on a display* in the relation *display*$_{N}$-*display*$_{V}$, or the construction *rejected part* in the relation *reject*$_{V}$-*reject*$_{N}$', 18–19), and this, by extension, would make the notion of conversion redundant. However, Štekauer does not explain how *rejected* in *rejected part* would drop the *-ed* ending, or would shift the stress, if at all.

An interpretation of ellipsis in these cases is not incompatible with conversion. Ellipsis has often been cited in the specialised literature as bearing responsibility for syntactic behaviours that may in time lead to conversion. This can be seen in the noun *stimulant* cited by Adams (1973: 16), originally an adjective, but today fully accepted as a noun, probably as a result of occurrence without its nominal superordinate collocate (presumably a hyponym of SUBSTANCE). Constructions like *the poor*, where an adjective apparently heads a noun phrase (but remains an adjective, as is shown by its inflectional behaviour), are probably part of a process of ellipsis that may or may not lead to the same result. Yet, from what shows in these examples, it is more than doubtful that they are part of a word-formation process rather than of a syntactic one, even if such a process may result in

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permanent assumption of (morphological, syntactic, and/or semantic) features of a new word-class.

Thus, although extension of the functional potential of a lexical unit beyond the limits of its word-class is admittedly a requirement of conversion, Štekauer does not clarify the extent to which such an extension should reach, or to which it should be parallelled by semantic change. The scope of conversion is also neglected as far as SECONDARY WORD-CLASS CONVERSION is concerned. Countable uses of uncountable nouns, gradation of non-gradable adjectives, or transitive uses of typically intransitive verbs are sometimes accepted as secondary conversion (thus in Leech 1974: 215–216 and Quirk et al., 1985: 1563 et passim; see Bauer 1983: 227–228). Unfortunately, no mention is made in the book of how changes in the grammar of a unit within the limits of one word-class should be understood.

9. An appraisal

Overall, a certain lack of balance can be felt in the detail in which some issues are studied. Special attention is given to somewhat marginal questions, like zero-derivation in inflectional morphology (chapter 3), or conversion and proper nouns (chapter 7). By contrast, central issues, such as the limits of conversion in relation to syntactic processes (chapter 2) or the diachronic loss of word-class-specific marks (chapters 5 and 8), are discussed in less detail than might be desirable. This is especially so in the model of conversion itself (chapter 4), as the onomasiological theory is merely outlined, probably because the author assumes more familiarity with its theoretical apparatus than is likely to exist outside eastern Europe. As a result, neither the model nor its account of conversion are as clear as they could be.

From a procedural point of view, the thoroughness of some parts of the book sharply contrasts with the vagueness of others. Thus, although diachronic evidence is deemed crucial in respect of the limits of conversion, little detail is given as to the criteria by which homograph pairs are accepted or rejected as genuine conversion. As for diachronic evidence and directionality, Štekauer leaves inexplicit how this evidence should be documented and measured in relation to synchronic data. Etymological relations between the members of the pair are cited in both cases as the key factor, but no evaluation of the results obtained can be made with the information given.

All in all, the book attains its goal only partly if, as declared in the introduction, it was intended to analyse conversion 'with the aim to outline a comprehensive theory of this word-formation process in English' (11). The use of an onomasiological theoretical model that is not explained in detail is a serious limitation and the discussions are not conclusive in points that are central to the notion of conversion. Therefore, contrary to what is claimed (13), the result is hardly more comprehensive than other studies (for example,

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Biese's, Kastovsky's, Marchand's or Tournier's). This does not mean that the result is unimportant. Štekauer provides an account of conversion from a point of view that may yield valuable insights in this field. He also points out the importance of semantic criteria for the delimitation of the scope of conversion. These may prove crucial because of the imprecise correlation between word-classes and syntactic functions, but also because, as a word-formation process, conversion should have a direct influence on the semantics of the units on which it operates.

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