A Note on Deciding the Direction of Conversion

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1.0

One can observe a very productive process at work in English which will relate the following pairs of words: a bandage: to bandage, a vote: to vote, winter: to winter, to convert: a convert, to split: a split, to try: a try. English linguists have traditionally called the process "conversion"¹: some recent scholars prefer to call it "zero-derivation"². The question of which term is to be selected will merit a study on its own. This paper will not go into the problem. I will adopt the term "conversion" following the old tradition³.

When we have a pair of words apparently related by the process of conversion, we are faced with the problem of deciding which is the deriving base and which the derivative. Roughly speaking, both diachronic and synchronic criteria can be put on the table for consideration.

1.1

When one encounters a conversion pair, it has been the general attitude to assume that he can find the solution from a historical point of view as Marchand (1963(b): 177) points out. He would immediately consult OED to find the first attestation of a word in question, and we shall call such a principle a diachronic criterion, which is to regard historically older forms as a base of derivation. Bladin (1911)⁴, Biese (1941), Jespersen (1942) will represent this position. Unfortunately, this criterion encounters some difficulties. When we look at conversions historically, we must note that they can be said to be of "a two-fold origin" as Biese (1941: 18) and Jespersen (1942: 87ff) explain. The first group consists of word pairs which have descended from OE or early ME when nouns, adjectives, and verbs were distinguished from each other by distinct inflectional affixes. The linguists who intend to regard the earlier attestation of either of a pair as the deriving base and go as far back as OE, Marchand (1963(b): 178) and Lee (1948: 18) remark, seem to tacitly assume that chronological priority goes to the member of a pair which has cognates in the other Germanic languages. For instance, OE verb lufian has no cognates; accordingly, the noun lufu is considered to be the basis. However, this method has a built-in drawback; it fails to work when first record cannot be established for a pair in question (Marchand 1963(b): 177). After all, as Lee (1948: 12) comments, many words in OE were not recorded for posterity. When we go back a history this far, it seems obvious to me that we cannot talk about conversion since we do not have homophonous pairs of words any more. The second group comprises
“the great number of homophones that have been brought about by conversion at different times of the history of the English language” (Biese 1941: 18). Some of these words are foreign loans. The diachronic criterion will be applicable, if at all, only to the second group.

I would intend to exclude the word pairs in group one from consideration when we discuss the identification of the deriving base of a conversion pair in terms of priority in time. But some linguists seek an explanation for the denominal nature of OE weak verbs in conversion. Lee (1948: 6) claims that -ian observed in such verbs as *lufian* and *blōstmian* are not a derivative element but an inflectional suffix because it is in paradigmatic relation with other grammatical endings. Kastovsky (1968: 35–36) who prefers the term zero-derivation criticizes conversionists for not distinguishing between grammatical endings and derivational suffixes. He argues that grammatical endings are not suffixes and acknowledges the “process” of conversion in highly inflected languages such as Latin. Marchand (1969: 362) also remarks that endings are not derivative morphemes and recognizes the existence of the process of “conversion” in French and German. Neither Kastovsky nor Marchand directly talk about denominal verbs in OE, although Marchand (362) comments that the bases of the OE verbs *bisceopian*, *fugelian*, *gamenian* and *hearmian* are respectively *bisceop*, *fugol*, *gamen*, and *hearm*. It can be pointed out that all three linguists have one idea in common: that inflectional endings are irrelevant to the study of “conversion” and only bases must be taken up as the subject of comparison. Therefore, I would be justified in asserting that Kastovsky and Marchand stand by Lee (1948)'s analysis that weak verbs in OE were yielded by conversion.

Biese (1941: 19) advises us not to use the term conversion when we treat the relations between different parts of speech in OE. He states that weak verbs occupy only part of the OE verbal system and calls attention to the strong verbs which are considered to be related to nouns through gradation. He suggests that the strong verbs cannot be dealt with in terms of conversion. He does not present a further counterargument; yet he would prefer a paradigm which will accommodate an entire verbal system in OE. Pennanen (1971: 22) observes that a question of whether the infinitive ending should be regarded as an inflectional or a derivative element will at present be answered in as many ways as the number of the linguists concerned. He passes a harsh criticism on Lee (1948)'s analysis that it “is a one-sided view of analysing a certain type of OE weak verbs as due to functional change”.

Thus it seems inappropriate to set up the process of conversion to deal with word-formation in OE. Nevertheless, one must note that OE showed a remarkable faculty of deriving new verbs from nouns or adjectives. Moreover, essentially the same semantic relationship can be established between the base nouns and the derived verbs as that would obtain in present-day English (Lee 1948: 9–10, 15–18). Accordingly, one can state that OE laid a foundation of the process of conversion that became more productive as time went on.
If one aims to investigate the conversion in present-day English, it does not matter whether there were a pair of a noun and a verb or a verb and a noun in OE for a conversion pair under consideration. On the contrary we encounter a case where pairs of nouns and verbs whose roots were not homonymous became homonymous in later English (Lee 1948: 11–12). I will deal with such cases as conversion as long as they make a homonymous pair today. The following are a sample of words which were not homonymous in OE but are so in present-day English: *boot, burst, dream, foam, feather, hand, hate, leap, hunger, kiss, land, lather, murder, name, room, shape, shroud, smear, steam, storm, tie, thirst, work.*

Now I would like to discuss the second group of pairs that “have been brought about by conversion”. The practice of deriving verbs from nouns, and vice versa began on a large scale in the first half of the 13th century according to Biese (1941) and Lee (1948). The ME period is characterized by a great reduction in the inflectional system. The final vestige of verbal ending -e disappeared by about 1400 as Bauer (1972: 173) states. Lee (1948: 3) contends that “the extreme loss of grammatical inflections” made the process of conversion in English productive. He even conjectures that if French and German had undergone the similar loss they might have also exhibited the same freedom. Jespersen (1952: §168) remarks that the simplification of endings brought verb and noun forms closer to each other.

One can assert that the above view is not generally accepted. Biese (1941: 390–391) argues that the ultimate source of conversion is not the phonetic fusion of noun and verb forms. He calls attention to the old established habit of forming denominals and deverbals handed down from OE to ME. He claims that the sound change only accelerated the new process of word-formation. Marchand (1969: 362) maintains that leveling of forms and the weakening of endings have little to do with the development of conversion. He refers us to the observation that when the custom of conversion became prominent in early 13th century, the verb-final -n was still retained and the plural ending of the present was not -en or zero yet. Bladin (1911: 14) affirms that the loss of endings is not essential to the rich development of denominal verbs. He (16) remarks that if the loss of endings had played a vital part, the nature of conversion formations would be observed to be different between before 1500 and after that date. He states that the nominal character of the basis should stand out markedly in verbs formed after 1500. Yet it is not the case.

Incidentally, I would like to note that not all conversionists consider the loss of ending as a vital cause of conversion. Kastovsky (1968: 35) gives the impression as if it were so. He bases himself on Koziol (1937: 201) whom he himself considers “to be inconsistent in treating the patterns of English word-formation”. Kastovsky (1968: 35) is also misleading when he refers to “an attitude due to the diachronic standpoint generally adopted by these scholars”. It is far-fetched to claim that the notion of conversion invariably entails his-
toricism.

As I have pointed out at the beginning of 1.1, OED has been often resorted to as a means of deciding the direction of derivation. For the most part it is easy to find in OED which member of a pair is older. But the dictionary has its limitations.

Most of the homophonous pairs derived by conversion are foreign loans. Marchand (1963(b): 179) brings it to our notice that OED does not indicate the derivational relationship when either of the pair members originates in a foreign language. For instance, appeal (n) goes back to OF appel and appeal (v) is traced to OF appeler. Marchand (1963(b): 177) also notes that OED sometimes cannot but leave the question open for words which are traceable to OE or earlier. He takes up curse, shape, whistle as examples. Another problem Marchand (1963(b): 177) brings up is that there are cases when OED does not discuss the relationship and assumes a certain derivational direction. Denominal derivation is assumed for answer, care, deal, end, fear, harm, hire, love, mark, shame, whereas deverbal derivation is assumed in the case of drink, flight, help, play, sting.

When the date of the first attestation is given, it is not almighty. Because "a number of words can be ante-dated"3 as Biese (1941: 11) points out although his work is based on OED. Lee (1948: 25) seems to defend the utility of OED by arguing that a word in question was settled in English by the year indicated by OED although the word may have actually been put to use much earlier. It may well be so. Yet I would think that the method will not work when the attested dates of a pair are very close to each other. Marchand (1963(b): 177) and Adams (1973: 40) also refer to this point.

It is to be noted that Adams, who points out the weakness of a diachronic criterion, seems to give some weight to historical evidence. She (41) criticizes Marchand (1969: 376) for having classified cook as an instance of agentive nominalization together with cheat and spy. She directs attention to a historical fact that the noun came down from OE and that the verb did not appear until 1380. But a synchronic grammar should select a descriptive analysis that will reflect the intuitions of the present English-speaking population. As a matter of fact, Adams’ comment (41) that "the noun cook 'looks like' an agentive nominalization" can be taken to betray an instance of native speaker's intuition (my single quotation marks). If we undertake a synchronic analysis, we must bear in mind that the native speakers of a language have no historical memory except in the case of archaisms as Marchand (1963(a): 71) and Kastovsky (1968: 37) mention.

1.2

A historical perspective should not be totally ruled out. The relatedness between a derivant and a derivative may not be constant with each pair and can change as time goes on. Besides, the conversion-derived words one aims
to investigate may reveal a different degree of relatedness to their deriving bases. As early as in 1911, Bladin (31) noticed this point and said that a verb can be called a denominal as long as there is a connection between the verb and the noun. Clark & Clark (1979) did a more systematic study on this problem. They (767) first direct attention to our ability to create and understand expressions we have never heard before. They call these expressions innovations. They\(^6\) observe that denominal verbs start as a complete innovation and reach the stage of “idiomatization” by going through six stages. I would like to introduce the six stages from Clark & Clark (1979: 804–805).

(a) Complete Innovations

The examples are *bargain-counter, Cagney, erratum, pie, Wayne*, etc. Some may remain nonce forms, while others may go on to the next stage.

(b) Near-Innovations.

When an innovation is used more than once and is recognized as the same form, then we have a near-innovation.

(c) Half-Assimilated Transparent Idioms

Some verbs become transparent idioms for one group of speakers, but remain innovations for everyone else. *Key in the data* is an example.

(d) Assimilated Transparent Idioms

The verbs appear to be fully assimilated into English. A native speaker would know their meaning even if he had not heard them before. Examples are *bicycle, crowbar, paperclip, truck*, etc.

(e) Partly Specialized Idioms

The interpretation of the verbs are no longer entirely transparent. Examples are *smoke a pipe, park the car*, etc. Clark & Clark (781) notes that one would wonder why *land the plane* means “put down” and *ground the plane* “keep down” instead of the other way round.

(f) Opaque Idioms

The verbs have come to such obscure denominal origins that, for most people, they are completely opaque. They are recognized to be verbs pure and simple by most people. Examples are *boycott, diddle, dun, fudge*, etc.

When we do a research on conversion-derived words, we should pay close attention to what level of idiomatization the subject words are in. A synchronic student may not be interested in the historical development of a word but he should be aware of the place the words under consideration occupy in the plane of semantic development. When words derived by conversion are considered to have come to the last stage of “opaque idiom”, no explanation for derivational relationship should be attempted except for the purpose of etymology because a derived verb has a very obscure denominal status for most speakers of English. A synchronic analysis should be in line with Trnka’s remark (1970:5) quoted below:

> It is obvious that the problem must be examined without any preconditions 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.

2.1

At the end of the last two sections, I have suggested that synchronic criteria are preferable to diachronic ones. An etymological study has a role to play but history is one thing, derivation is another. Marchand (1963(b): 179) states as follows:

Historical relation refers to an external succession of two events on the vertical plane of time, derivational relation refers to structural position on the horizontal plane of a system.

Backformation is a term in historical linguistics. For instance, it has been a traditional explanation that burgle, edit, peddle, scavenge, sculpt were backformed respectively from burglar, editor, peddler, scavenger, sculptor. Marchand (1963(a): 171–175) brings it to our attention that synchronic content analysis of these words reveals that backformation is divided into two types. Burgle is analysed to be derived from burlar in accordance with the historical origin. This type occupies a larger part in backformation. On the other hand, editor, peddler, scavenger and sculptor are synchronically considered to be derivatives.

The synchronic criteria which we are laying down will largely depend on semantics. When we have homophonous words we should first check whether or not they will meet the basic condition on pairing before we submit them to further analysis. Marchand (1963(b): 176; 1964: 11) states that the basic condition is that the words in question have some semantic features in common. Note that we are not talking about etymological ties. Therefore, such pairs as given below are not taken up in the study of conversion: convict (v)/convict (n), defect (n)/defect (v), exact (a)/exact (v), exploit (n)/exploit (v), handle (n)/handle (v), matter (v)/matter (n), mind (v)/mind (n), object (n)/object (v), project (n)/project(v).

2.2

Marchand (1964) presented four criteria for deciding the direction of derivation. They will be discussed in the following. The first Criterion is Semantic Range. Marchand states as follows:

Of the two homophonous words exhibiting similar sets of semantic features, the one with the smaller field of reference is the derivative.

. . . the more specific word is the derivative.

Two linguists capture conversion along the same lines. According to Lyons (1977: 307), the process of conversion can be analysed in terms of semantic markedness. He defines a semantically marked lexeme as “one that is more specific in sense than the corresponding semantically unmarked lexeme”. Trnka (1970: 6) proposes that a deriving base has some other meanings in addition to those of its corresponding derivative whose meaning is entirely covered by
that of the deriving base.

But such analyses based on the semantic range are not without their drawbacks. Adams (1973: 55) counters Marchand by asserting that "A shepherd looks after sheep only, but one may shepherd many other creatures". Sugiura (1974: 223) casts doubt on Trnka's proposal by raising a question how to determine accurately that a word has more meanings than another, although he himself supports semantic criteria in principle.

Instead, Sugiura (1974: 226) gives his own criterion employing Chafe's notion of derivational unit and Hattori's semantic theory. He offers a formula as follows:

**BASE + DERIVATIONAL UNIT = DERIVED FORM**

For an equation to be soluble only one variable can be allowed. Sugiura apparently tries to set up a finite number of DERIVATIONAL UNITS. But it is not clear if they will constitute a closed set. Besides, we would have to have a putative DERIVED FORM before we actually determine which is a derived form and which a deriving base. I would think that counting the number of senses of a word in a dictionary will be a more objective procedure although the number of senses of a word may fluctuate according to the way of definition.

Ljung (1977: 166–167) throws an interesting criticism on Marchand (1964) in terms of paraphrazability. He takes Marchand's criterion of semantic range to mean that the denominal verbs are more specialized in meaning than the base nouns. In other words he remarks that Marchand (1964) implies that the denominal verbs can only express the "standard" use of what the base nouns refer to. Consequently, in the following examples, (1) can be paraphrased into (4) by means of a homophonous denominal verb but (2) and (3) are not paraphrizable.

(1) John drove the nails into the door with a hammer.
(2) John scratched his back with a hammer.
(3) John tickled Jane with a hammer.
(4) John hammered the nails into the door.

Ljung (1977: 167) criticizes Marchand arguing that the criterion of semantic range yields a contradictory result that sometimes the nouns must be said to be derived from the corresponding instrumental verbs because the verbs have wider range of meaning. His basis is that "we can hammer with a hoe, saw with a knife, etc". Ljung (1977: 175) claims that regarding word-formation rules as some transformations will be a solution. I cannot assess his claim because he does not talk about the detail of his proposal. It is to be noted, moreover, that he (174) acknowledges that homophones like hammer (n) and hammer (v) are derivationally related and that the direction is denominal. I would think that the problem of "standard use" should not be discounted and will require further investigation based on a larger corpus. McCawley (1971: 26–327), Green (1972: 85–86), and Kageyama (1980: 233–239) will provide a material for consideration.
In particular Kageyama (239) takes in “standard use” as a constraint on the application of his rule of noun incorporation to denominal verbs. Yet it seems to me more advisable to take up this problem in relation to the description of the character of denominal verbs after they have been established through certain criteria. It must be emphasized that semantic range constitutes only part of the whole criteria.

2.3

The second criterion proposed by Marchand is Semantic Dependence. Marchand (1964: 12) captures it as follows:

The word that for its analysis is dependent on the content of the other pair member is necessarily the derivative.

Lieber (1981: 186) formulates essentially the same thing as a semantic interpretation rules for denominal verbs and deverbal nouns. His formulation seems to be more explicit. The first part of his rule is cited below:

Given a semantically specified X, and semantically underspecified verb Y, X must serve as an argument in the interpretation of Y.

Now let us turn our eyes to the illustrations (Marchand 1963(a): 172–173, 1963(b): 180–181, 1964: 12; Huddleston 1984: 24). Peddler is traditionally thought to be the derivant and have yielded peddle by back-formation. But semantically peddler is analysed as “one who peddles”. Therefore, peddle is considered to be the deriving base synchronically. To father is defined in terms of semantic features of a noun father whereas a cheat is explicable by content features of to cheat. To saw is defined as “use a saw, cut with a saw”. It is more natural to define to bottle as “put in a bottle” than to analyse a bottle as “container into which one puts what one bottles”.

Ljung (1977: 165–166) denounces Marchand for assuming that there are “natural” definitions. Ljung contends that one can saw without a saw just as one can hammer without a hammer. He goes on to argue that the denominal account of to saw requires the redefinition of a saw to accommodate both “standard and non-standard” saws. As we discussed a short while ago, the problem of “standard use” leaves much to be investigated. I would claim that the redefinition of the verb rather than the noun can take care of the problem Ljung has raised. My claim will be corroborated by definitions for to saw in The Random House Dictionary as follows: “to cut as if using a saw”, “to work (something) from side to side like a saw” (my emphasis). Kiparsky (1983: 9) accepts Ljung’s argument on to hammer but points out that in some verbs the base nouns are necessarily involved as an instrument in the activity. He remarks that “the following sentences are deviant and can at best be understood in a metaphorical sense”:

1. *She taped the picture to the wall with pushpins.
2. *They chained the prisoner with a rope.
3. *Jim buttoned up his pants with a zipper.
(4) *He pitchforked the manure with a shovel.
(5) *Let's bicycle across France on our tricycles.
(6) *Screw the fixture on the wall with nails.
These illustrations shows at least that the semantic dependence of denominal verbs on their base nouns cannot be discounted.

2.4
The third criterion propounded by Marchand is restriction of usage. He (1964: 13) puts it as follows:
If one word has a smaller range of usage than its pair member, it must be considered the derivative.
The restriction of usage refers to a few observations of Marchand's: that one of the pair member occurs only in certain forms; that one of the pair words sounds jocular; that one of the pair items is used only in literary style. Needless to say, a form limited in some way is considered the derivative. The core of this criterion, it must be stressed, is that he (13) maintains that it can be taken to mean that the word which is less frequent in occurrence is the derivative. It is to be noted that Bladin (1911: 32) also took up the relative frequency of noun and verb to determine the direction of derivation. If the frequency of words under study can be examined accurately in terms of word-forms and their meanings, it will be the most objective criterion in synchronic study.

2.5
The fourth criterion to come up in Marchand (1964: 15) is Semantic Pattern. He insists that there are characteristic meanings or paraphrases for certain denominals and deverbals. However, the criterion will not work in practice because the semantic patterns are discovered through other criteria, in particular, semantic range and semantic dependence.

2.6
When a non-native speaker tries to collect data on a class of words yielded by conversion, he needs a mechanical discovery procedure as a working hypothesis since he cannot depend on his own intuition to determine the direction of derivation. Chafe's comment (1970: 122) will be an encouragement to him;
When introspection and surface evidence are contradictory, it is the former which is decisive. . . . I suspect, however, that there is a correlation between frequency of occurrence and the property of being basic or underived which reflects ultimately a greater cognitive salience. . . .
Therefore, as a first approximation, a foreign linguist should collect his samples of denominal verbs, deverbal nouns, etc. on the basis of frequency of occurrence. As we have seen in 2.4, Marchand and Bladin advance this criterion. To investigate and determine the frequency of a number of words in terms of both
word-forms and semantics will require an interminable and laborious work. In practice, the order of entry of words in a dictionary can be taken to indicate the frequency of words if it has the policy of arranging vocabulary in order of frequency. The Random House Dictionary of the English Language seems to be employable as such a tool. Aronoff (1976: 116) will sanction using a monolingual dictionary as a tool to come close to the lexicon of native speakers. Next, he will adjust his data by considering semantic information, native speaker’s judgment, if available, and if absolutely necessary, historical information. As for semantic information, the criterion of semantic dependence will be fairly accessible to him because definitions in monolingual dictionaries will provide a good guide for him in semantic analysis.

Notes
1) Sweet (1891: 88) appears to have introduced the term.
2) This term has been borrowed from Lyons (1977: 522) and is used as a short nomenclature for “derivation by a zero-morpheme”.
3) Zgusta (1971: 129) comments: “the classification of single phenomena is often a matter of tradition and linguistic convention. . . .”
4) Bladin himself investigated the historical transition of denominal verbs based on OED. But it is of interest to note that he (32) claims that “from the purely descriptive point of view we can form no opinion as to which is the oldest member of a word pair”. He brings up two criteria: the relative frequency of noun and verb and considerable chronological precedence.
5) A linguist who takes a synchronic position should read a literature of a diachronic linguist accurately. Marchand (1963(b): 178) comments that “Biese accepts the derivational relation as established by OED”. But it is evidently an oversimplification.
6) Clark & Clark presents a synchronic study of denominal verbs in present-day English based on the extensive samples of their own collection. But it is to be noted that they (768) consider denominal verbs were historically derived from their “parent” nouns.
7) McCawley (1971: 32) declares that his analysis cannot offer a firm basis for the restriction of “standard use”.
8) Sugiyura (1974: 224) called my attention to this remark.

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Abstract

When one treats a word-formation process called "conversion" or "zero-derivation", he encounters the problem of deciding which is the deriving base and which the derivative. It has been the general attitude to assume that one can find the solution by historical criteria. The first attestation of a word under study in OED has been referred to. Yet historical criteria face some difficulties. OED itself has its limitations. It must be emphasized that native speakers of a language have no historical memory except in the case of archaisms. Accordingly, synchronic criteria seem preferable in the study of conversion in present-day English. Marchand (1964) proposed four such criteria, among which semantic dependence of the derivative on the base and the frequency of occurrence seem to be a practical analysing tool which is accessible even to a foreign linguist.

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