

Balteiro, Isabel (2007a) *A Contribution to the Study of Conversion in English*. Münster/New York/München/Berlin: Waxmann. Pp 152.

Balteiro, Isabel (2007b) *The Directionality of Conversion in English: A Dia-Synchronic Study*. Bern/Berlin/Bruxelles/Frankfurt am Main/New York/Oxford/Wien: Peter Lang. Pp 276.

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Conversion (for example, noun *father* → verb *father*) is one of the frequent ways in which English words are coined. Indeed, the device seems to be absent in most other Indo-European languages and, in the few which do have it, it is rare (for instance, French verb *être* → noun *être*, Spanish verb *ser* → noun *ser*). Although it is taken to be a minor way of forming words when contrasted with major ones such as compounding, derivation, and borrowing, its significance cannot be overlooked, as it represents probably over two percent of the words now coined in English.¹ The frequency of conversion gives the language plasticity not found in other Indo-European languages.

Despite its apparently uncomplicated nature, when thoroughly examined this phenomenon proves to be complex and its boundaries are not easy to define. Henry Sweet (1898) seems to have been the first to study conversion and to call it by that name. Many researchers have since tried to deal with conversion, probably no two having agreed on its scope (what one may consider conversion, another might not) and hence on its nature. Balteiro's two books propose how conversion should be understood and why certain phenomena which have often been misunderstood as conversion should be excluded.

The first book (*A Contribution to the Study of Conversion in English*), more general than the second one (*The Directionality of Conversion in English: A Dia-Synchronic Study*), looks at conversion from the morphological, lexical, syntactic, and semantic viewpoints. The author examines earlier research, in which the phenomenon was seen as either a derivational process (researchers taking that approach called it

¹ “Functional change words comprise 2 percent of neologisms in Present-Day English, although many more are used as nonce words for stylistic effect” (Simonini 1966: 755).

“recategorisation”, “morphological metaphor”, “semantic extension”, and “zero-suffixation”, amongst other names) or as a functional change (researchers taking that approach called it “multifunctionality”, “word-class exchange”, or “category underspecification”). Balteiro’s frequent cross-references and comparisons between those two approaches make it easier for the reader to evaluate the different trends and also to avoid seeing them as two different and unconnected sections in her book. (Balteiro 2007a.)

After distinguishing conversion treated as a morphological process and as a process of word-formation, the author states her own position. She defines 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” (Balteiro 2007a: 65).

As for the boundaries of conversion as well as the differences between conversion and (apparently) similar phenomena, Balteiro acknowledges the fuzziness of English word-classes and takes a clear position by stating that “(...) only if word-class distinctions are maintained or acknowledged does it make sense to speak of conversion, since conversion is precisely the change of one word-class or category into another” (2007a: 74). She is thus able to speak of “true conversions” and rejects some examples of so-called “partial conversions” (such as adjective *poor* → *the poor* and adjective *intellectual* → *an intellectual*) as not being true conversions. Instead, she explains those cases as occurrences of other linguistic phenomena such as ellipsis, compounding, and shortening. Similarly, Balteiro analyses pairs of words differentiated only by stress (for example, noun *rélay* versus verb *reláy*) and those differentiated only by the presence of voicing (noun *house* versus verb *house*) and concludes that they are not examples of conversion. She acknowledges so-called “total conversion” as an existing category but, unlike previous researchers, recognizes it only for the following types: noun → verb, verb → noun, and adjective → verb. In spite of this new perspective, and probably for the sake of the reader’s understanding, the sections or structure in the book reflect previous classifications, that is, the distinction between partial and total conversion, which nevertheless she rejects. However, I would argue that, as happens with other linguistic categories, there is often a gradation and, therefore, not always can one expect categories to be sharply distinct.

Balteiro also examines so-called “change of secondary word-class”, that is, “changes” within a given word-class, for example non-count nouns → count nouns and vice versa, as in *two coffees* or *an inch of pencil*, or intransitive verb → transitive verb, as in *run the water*, which Quirk et al. (1985) and other authors have defined as conversions. Balteiro, however, after justifying her position, considers them to be instances of semantic or syntactic adjustments within a given category rather than examples of conversion.

In her second book, *The Directionality of Conversion in English: A Dia-Synchronic Study*, the author exclusively deals with the direction of the mechanism, which she considers “a problematic word-formation process”, although she also points out other problematic issues on conversion which have been differently treated by earlier writers. In doing this she goes back to the idea in her first book (*A Contribution to the Study of Conversion in English*) concerning the fact that this mechanism of word-formation is often nothing more than a dumping ground.

After contextualising the question of the direction of conversion within the main problems of conversion, the author focuses on the “chicken-and-egg” issue, that is, on the directionality of the process. Balteiro critically reviews previous approaches to the question of the direction of conversion, which range from perspectives claiming that conversion is non-directional to those that claim that conversion is directional and, therefore, that its direction may be determined. Among the latter, different proposals are also critically explored: multidirectionality, bidirectionality, and unidirectionality. Questions such as the weight given to diachronic and synchronic data by different approaches, as well as the importance of morphological and phonological criteria, are addressed. Furthermore, Balteiro says that “the idea of directionality is built into the definition of conversion itself” (2007b: 89). That is to say, in her view, “whenever conversion is assumed, a directional relation between a base word and the output of the process is also necessarily assumed since, as the word conversion itself indicates, there is a turn/change/transformation or reorganisation of something into something else which also (and inevitably) implies a direction” (2007b: 84).²

² However, I would argue that sometimes we cannot determine the direction even though we know that there was a direction.

Balteiro's most important contribution in this book is her corpus-based study of the direction of the most characteristic type of conversion (noun → verb). However, the author's introductory critical discussion of the criteria proposed by earlier linguists for determining the direction is also useful. She raises questions such as the distinction between potential and apparent conversions, on the one hand, and true conversions, on the other, which she considers a necessary step previous to determining the direction. Balteiro seems to be the first to go beyond the mere theoretical discussion of the directionality of this word-formation process, as she claims in the Introduction. She analyses empirical data, a corpus of over 367 potential conversion word pairs, both diachronically and synchronically. To do so, she applies ten criteria which have been put forward by previous authors, mainly Marchand (1964). These criteria include etymology, first recordings, semantic dependence, usage restriction, semantic range, semantic pattern, phonetic shape, morphological type, stress, and the principle of relative markedness. Application of each criterion to the potential conversion word pairs selected leads Balteiro to provide a good amount of critical comments questioning not only the criteria used but also their applicability.

Balteiro's results suggest that the best way to solve the directionality of conversion is by resorting to diachronic criteria, mainly the etymological one, and not dates of first records as many previous scholars tended to claim.

Despite her conclusions, she admits that there is still a long way to go on this topic because a redefinition of the criteria is still called for. Numerous hints and arguments for such an enterprise are found in this book.

Both books, which are well documented and employ straightforward terminology, are essential for anyone interested in conversion and word-formation in general.

References

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