A New Process: A New Lexical Evolution

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Abstract

This paper attempts to describe the word formation process known as 'conversion' and a specific lexeme impact which is converted from noun to verb basically by American native speakers or news reports. But many people think that this process is to nouns and exploit them as verbs and many of such usages as impact are really disdainful. My purpose is to provide actual examples of impact taken from American newspapers and give reasons behind the functional shift of impact. As newspapers use the most standard language of time, this paper tries to show how the verb impact has established its transitive use in American Standard English, having gained more semantically emphatic force than its synonymous verb effect.

1. Introduction

English is a very productive as well as versatile language. Due to its versatility, it can not only borrow different new words in it but also it can undergo many different word formation processes to create new lexicon. Some of these word formation processes are much creative - such as derivation or compounding, which have coined words for a long time. But after the extensive use of computer and Internet, computer industry has become the factory of producing neologisms and neosemanticisms. Thus the culture and society paved the way for

new trends i.e. clipping, blending and conversion. As they are recent phenomena, they have not been much studied well yet. Even scholars believe that these new methods are becoming more frequently used. For example, conversion will be more active in the future, and so, it will create a great part of the new words appearing in the English language (Cannon, 1985: 415). Conversion is particularly common in English because the basic form of nouns and verbs is identical in many cases. It is probably the most outstanding new method in the word-formation panorama. It is a curious and attractive subject because it has a wide field of action: all words can undergo conversion to more than one word-form, it is compatible with other word-formation processes, and it has no demonstrated limitations. All these reasons make the scope of conversion nearly unlimited.

Impact is a lexical item which is shifted from a noun to a verb with the help of conversion process basically by American news reporters. So it is not really a new word but it has got a new semantic area which is slightly different from its synonymous word *effect* or *affect*. This paper will attempt to describe the word formation process conversion and then examine the actual examples from three American newspapers: the *Miami Herald*, the *Boston Globe* and *The Philadelphia Inquirer* all of the year 1997 to show the behaviour of the word *impact*. By describing the characteristics of conversion and the depiction of *impact*, this paper will show that it is not a process to colonize noun into verbs rather it is a linguistics boon, an economical use of language.

2. Definition and features

"Conversion is the derivational process whereby an item changes its word-class without the addition of an affix". (Quirk, Randolph and Greenbaum, 1987: 441). Thus, when the noun 'sign' (1) shifts to the verb 'sign(ed)' (2) without any change in the word form we can say this is a case of conversion. The popular example of conversion is *e-mail*. At the beginning of its emergence it was used as a noun but later its widespread use made it a verb *e-mail*. For example *Collins COBUIID English Dictionary for Advance Learner* cites:

*You can contact us by **e-mail**.*
*Jamie **e-mailed** me to say he couldn't come.*

However, it does not mean that this process takes place in all the cases of homophones (Marchand, 1972: 225). Sometimes, the connection has to do with coincidences or old etymological ties that have been lost. For example, 'mind' and 'matter' are cases of this grammatical sameness without connection by conversion—the verbs have nothing to do today with their respective noun forms in terms of semantics (ibid.: 243).

*"Hillary's going to be working, and I wouldn't **mind** sticking around," he told a close friend the other day.*

*Twice a month, Ralph Petley stands at rapt attention in the fluid semicircle of about 80 bidders, his **mind** on the single goal of sending a shipment of antiques to Texas auction houses.*

*At times during the campaign, Mr. Bush simply seemed to be selling his infectious optimism to the point that it almost did not seem to **matter** how much he tortured the English language or what he was really trying to say.*

*For that **matter**, it was still not quite clear what "the right thing" was.*

Conversion must be undoubtedly placed within the phenomena of word-formation; nevertheless, there are some doubts about whether it must be considered a branch of derivation or a separate process by itself (with the same status as derivation or compounding) (Bauer, 1983: 32). Despite this undetermined position in grammar, some scholars assert that conversion will become even more active in the future because it is a very easy way to create new words in English (Cannon, 1985: 415). There is no way to know the number of conversions appearing every day in the spoken language, although we know this number must be high (ibid.: 429). As it is a quite recent phenomenon, the written evidence is not a fully reliable source. In fact BNC, COCA, ANC, such corpora will not be helpful in this purpose; rather Internet sites, famous magazines, newspapers etc. will serve the purpose. We will have to wait a little longer to understand its whole impact, which will surely increase in importance in the next decades.

Conversion is extremely productive to increase the English lexicon because it provides an easy way to create new words from existing ones. Thus, the meaning is perfectly comprehensible and the speaker can rapidly fill a meaningful gap in his language or use fewer words (Aitchison, 1989: 161). "Conversion is a totally free process and any lexeme can undergo conversion into any of the open form classes as the need arises" (Bauer, 1983: 226). This means that any word can be shifted to any word class, especially to open classes—nouns, verbs, etc.—and that there are not any morphological restrictions. Up to date, there has only been found one restriction: derived nouns rarely undergo conversion (particularly not to verbs) (Bauer, 1983: 226). This exception is easily understood: if there is already one word in the language, the creation of a new term for this same concept will be blocked for the economy of language. For example, the noun 'denial' will never shift into a verb because this word already derives from the verb 'deny'. In that case, the conversion is blocked because 'to deny' and '*to denial' would mean exactly the same. However, there are some special cases in which this process seems to happen without blocking. This can be exemplified in the noun 'sign', converted into the verb 'to sign', changed by derivation (suffixation) into the noun 'signal' and converted into a new verb, 'to signal'. In this case there is no blocking because these words have slight semantic differences (Bauer, 1983: 226-227).

3. Typology

Conversion mainly produces nouns, verbs and adjectives. The major cases of conversion are from noun to verb like 'name' (to give a name to somebody), 'shape' (to give shape to something) and from verb to noun as in the nouns 'experience', 'fear', 'feel' or 'hope'. Verbs may undergo four different types of conversion. The first one happens when an intransitive verb is used transitively. This type has the meaning of 'to cause to (verb)'. Examples of this kind are 'worked a computer', 'stop the manual recount' and 'run the day-to-day operations'. Transitive verbs can also be used intransitively, that

is the case of 'closed'. This category has been previously converted from adjective to verb, and, afterwards, it has experienced a secondary conversion from transitive to intransitive verb. In this sense, the verb would change the meaning from 'to make close' (transitive use) to 'to become closed' (intransitive use). Conversion from adjective to verb is also common, It can be easily seen by means of examples like 'black(ed)' (to make black), 'open', but it has a lower ratio. Other grammatical categories, including closed-class ones, can only shift to open-class categories, but not to closed-class ones (prepositions, conjunctions). Although their frequency is much less common, the process is not ungrammatical. All morphologic categories have examples of this kind (Cannon, 1985:425-426). Prepositions are probably the most productive ones. They can easily become adverbs, nouns and verbs. This is the case of 'up' and 'out'. In addition, it is not rare that a simple word shifts into more than one category (Hernández, 2005: 3-5).

4. Description of the word *impact*

The *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., records old uses of the same form as a verb, dating back to early 17th century, but its intransitive use with the figurative sense of "to have a (pronounced) effect *on*" (*OED*, *v*, 3b) dates from 1935. Yet, the phrasal form *have an impact on*, which has the same meaning, goes further back to early 19th century. The word in its present denominal sense began first as an intransitive verb, and then as a transitive verb. In this essay I will show how *impact* can function as an intransitive and as a transitive verb by checking the examples of *impact* in written texts.

According to *The American Heritage Book of English Usage* (1996: 106),

> Ninety-five percent [of the Usage Panel] disapprove of the use of *impact* as a transitive verb in the sentence *Companies have used disposable techniques that have a potential for impacting our health.* It's unclear why this usage provokes such a strong response, but it can't be because of novelty.... It may be that its frequent appearance in jargon-riddled remarks of politicians, military officials, and financial analysts has made people suspicious.

Though the elite practioners of English language disdained *impact* as a verb, Hunston and Francis state that *impact* has the potential of functioning as a transitive as well as an intransitive verb.

5. Methodology

Hunston and Francis (2000: 97) state that it is mostly an American way to use *impact* as a verb and British English tends to follow it. This statement attracted my attention and I wanted to investigate the usage of *impact*, because *impact* usually occurs as a noun. It came to my mind that instead of saying 'The speech had an *impact* on my life' is it possible to say 'The speech *impacted* my life.'? But Huston and Francis (2000) did not provide any such example of the verb *impact.*

We know that corpus is the best way to consult and to study the traditional or the recent usage of any word. 'Although some very good corpora are available, I intentionally used the texts of three American newspapers as the corpus for my present research. They are the *Miami Herald*, the *Boston Globe*, and *The Philadelphia Inquirer* all of the year 1997, shortly before the publication of Hunston and Francis (2000). These high-quality newspapers may be considered to represent Standard American English to a considerable degree, and I believe that to see how the verb *impact* is used in their texts is to show how much it is accepted as a transitive verb in American English.'

I came across around 2244 occurrences in the *Boston Globe*, 1278 occurrences in the *Miami Herald* and 2940 occurrences in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. In all these newspapers the noun form as well as the verb form of *impact* was abundantly used. I have studied all these examples and then divided them in different groups. For example, in what forms did impact occur (*impacts, impacted, impacting* etc.), what things did precede or succeed impact (*impact on, impact upon, the impact, an impact, to impact, will impact* etc.). In this way I have systematically arranged all the examples (shown in Table 1). Then I have tried to explain the semantic difference between *effect and impact* and tried to show why we need the verb

impact. Before confirming what type of a verb *impact* is, I will show how *impact* behaved in the corpora.

6. Examples of the transitive *impact* from American newspapers:

In the three American newspapers a full growth of the verb can be seen. That is, it occurs in various forms, with a modal verb in a verb phrase and taking a direct object, also in the form of a *to*-infinitive. Table 1 below shows the forms and occurrences of *impact* in the three newspapers.

Table 1: Forms and its frequencies of occurrence of *impact* in the three American Newspapers

Newspapers	*Impact* (vt) + O	Bare infinitive	*To*-infinitive	Phrasal verb	Passive
The *Miami Herald*	impacts everyone, impacted me, impacting our immigrant.	will impact *Haitian*, can impact, would impact, may impact.	is going to impact, is to impact, the opportunity to impact.	impact on our lives, impacts on his entire career.	will be impacted by, were definitely impacted.
	15	9	5	4	7
The *Boston Globe*	impacts the park, impacted the women's pro game, impacting the hard drive.	will impact *achievement*, may impact *a variety*.	continue to impact, to impact the community, enough to impact.	impact on the audiences, impacted on more than one quarter.	would be impacted, has been impacted by these.
	9	11	9	3	21
The *Philadelphia Inquirer*	impacts the lives, impacted his family, impacting the quality.	will impact *the township*, would impact *her*, may impact *safety operation*.	Nil	impact on Medicare, impacts on traffic, impacts upon the youngest.	Morale was further impacted by a process.
	33	17		8	14

The figures below each group of forms indicate its frequencies of occurrence.

6.1. *impact* (vt) + O
1.   *he solstice is something that **impacts** everyone's life,*
2.   *how a project **impacts** the park, " she said.*
3.   *It's a decision that **impacts** your lifestyle.*
4.   *we also realize that history **impacts** the lives of people*
5.   *The law **impacts** a lot of people*
6.   *That **impacted** me so much, "Loput said.*
7.   *the Lady Huskies have **impacted** the women's pro game*
8.   *his personal conduct **impacted** his family*
9.   *that means you're **impacting** the quality of instruction*
10.   *uable insight into issues **impacting** our immigrant community*
11.   *My intermodal modem is **impacting** the hard drive in my software*

In all of these examples *impact* has a direct object and the meaning is synonymous to *effect*. So these are actual instances of transitive verb.

6.2. Bare Infinitive:
12.   *The fear, he predicts, **will impact** Haitian businesses*
13.   *to see how much traffic **will impact** the township, " he said.*
14.   *a single flood event that **will impact** several thousand square mile*
15.   *Those variables probably **will impact** achievement nearly as much*
16.   *The definition **can impact** young minds, says NAACP*
17.   *additional traffic **would impact** nearby farms*
18.   *A rule like this **would impact** her enormously, "McGann said*
19.   *They **may impact** negatively Miami Herald's economy*
20.   *to cost cutting that **may impact** safety operations.*

In the examples of bare infinitive, the modal verb *will* tends to occur more than *can*, *would* and *may*. The instances of *will* here are conveying the message on the part of the speaker in addition to certainty that some future happening will be carried out. If something is added or a new rule is implemented what would be the possible

outcome, is expressed by *would*. *Can* and *may* also state future possibility.

6.3. *To* infinitives

21. *something that's **going to impact** the child.*
22. *Division 1-A is not **going to impact** your league.*
23 *It may be able to impact more directly what happens.*
24. *ts' presence is more likely **to impact** Boston Latin School because*
23. *My goal is **to impact** young people who haven't yet*
24. *jobs have the opportunity **to impact** people's lives on a day-to-day*
25. *like they can do something **to impact** their disease do better*
26. *vox populi **threatens to impact** both judges and juries.*
27. *cupy the media but **seem not to impact** his fortunes on Main Street.*
28. *"It is **designed to impact** black men in a disparate*
29. *am would be improved enough **to impact** attendance.*

In the first four examples *impact* occurs as a main verb after a semi-auxiliary 'be able to' and 'be likely to' respectively. In example 23 *to impact young people* is a complement, preceded by the linking verb. In examples 24 and 25 the infinitive clause functions as a postmodifier. Example 26 exemplifies *impact* as an object. In examples 29 *to impact* functions as adverbial.

6.4. The phrasal verb in the American newspapers

30. *and how that will **impact on** our lives.*
31. *It **impacts on** his entire career.*
32. *coming out next summer will **impact on** the audiences.*
33. *But I'd be surprised if it **impacted on** more than one quarter.*
34. *estate project that adversely **impacts on** traffic or flooding prob*
35. *as children that seriously **impacts on** them, and they keep going*
36. *on America that would **impact on** Medicare, on education*
37. *allocation of state resources **impacts upon** the youngest*

In the last example, *impact upon* is a variant of the phrasal verb. These phrasal verbs also function as transitive verbs and the noun phrase following each of them is a prepositional object.

6.5. Passive

38. *industry would be immediately **impacted by** anything*
39. *Future development will be **impacted by** what you do*
40. *there were a lot of people **impacted by** it.*
41. *Greek Community has been **impacted by** these recent events.*
42. *Morale was further **impacted by** a process*
43. *Some pools would be **impacted** only on the highest tides,*
44. *The kids were definitely **impacted**.*

It can be noticed that these examples have the past participle form of *impact*. In examples 43 and 44 *impacted* is not followed by a *by*-phrase. This can be a stylistic way. The agent is clearly mentioned in the context so it is not important to point it out again. In example 43 it is followed by an adverbial of place, which suggests the agent. The two adverbials *immediately* and *further* in examples 38 and 42 respectively express time and addition. In 44 *definitely* expresses the writer's attitude.

There is only one example in the *Boston Globe* where the phrasal verb is interrupted by an adverb:

45. *governments will continue to **impact negatively on** Cubans' health* In the *Boston Globe* an adverb *negatively* appears. It is an adverb of manner. So it can be said adverbs of manner can collocate with *impact*. Probably this structure is more emphatic than an adverb preceding the phrasal verb to express something.

7. The reasons to accept *impact* as a verb

In the above discussion I have given a detailed linguistic description of *impact*, which proves that *impact* can appear in any of its verb forms. Now I will concentrate on its semantic area. Though I have already mentioned *effect* as a synonym of *impact*, *to impact* has no precise synonym. Its unique connotation carries the seemingly self-contradictory virtues of nuance and power that its oft-nominated

replacement, *affect*, does not. A comparison will make the point clear.

> *A 5 cent-a-gallon hike in gas prices affects you.*
> *A dollar-a-gallon hike in gas prices impacts you.*

Note the transitive usage of *impact* in the previous pages. Also note the example in CNN "Impact your World" " < http://edition. cnn.com/ SPECIALS/impact.your.world/ >. It can be seen that in most cases the object of *impact* is *life* or *life style*, *world* etc. which are very vital. If it appears in a bare infinitive, it says about cause and effect of something. For example traffic causes a problem in town life or farm. So the sense of the meaning of *impact* is more serious that of *effect* or *affect*.

8. Conclusion

According to the Usage Panel for *The American Heritage Book of English Usage* the transitive *impact* is not generally accepted, but Huston and Francis (2000: 97) present a plausible process by which this word has changed from the phrasal verb *impact on* to "an ordinary transitive verb." The three American newspapers of the year 1997 show a maturity of *impact* as a transitive verb. It may be better to mention that this word mostly occurs in newspapers and it is more suitable in news reporting. The abundant use of the transitive *impact* proves that it is basically an American attempt. The headline on the webpage of CNN could have been "Move your World", "Change your World" etc. instead of "Impact Your World. The need of using *impact* in the title of the webpage of CNN and the objects followed by the transitive verb (p:6) proves that there can be a little semantic difference between *effect* or *affect* and *impact*. The lexeme *impact* has got a strength, an intensity which the verb *effect* or *affect* lacks. So the news reporters are eager to use it as a verb that can be used in more serious cases.

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