What is Conversion?

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ABSTRACT
The definition of conversion is controversial, and it has been applied in a number of ways. It also refers typically to the major word classes, especially to nouns and verbs because those are the most frequent patterns, whether from noun to verb or from verb to noun. It is however relevant to have a look at what happens in other word classes, so often neglected in this regard. This paper considers conversion in the light of the categories adverb and preposition, and underlines the difficulty in dealing with these cases in the framework of the most widespread interpretations. In doing so, it evidences the need for a better theoretical apparatus in yet one more regard.

KEYWORDS
Conversion, word classes, adverb, noun, preposition, verb

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1 INTRODUCTION

It is well-known that English (along with many other languages, though that is not the focus here) has a construction, here termed 'conversion', which relates pairs or sets of words such as those in (1).

(1)

a cuddle		to cuddle
an empty	empty	to empty
an intellectual	intellectual	
a smile		to smile
a whisk		to whisk

Just what counts as conversion, though, is controversial. Although all the possible criteria listed below are disputed somewhere in the literature, a canonical treatment of conversion can be thought of as defining it by a lengthy set of criteria including the following.

i. Conversion is part of word-formation.
ii. Conversion is a type of derivation.
iii. Conversion involves a change from one word-class to another.
iv. The change from one word-class to another is directional: there is an input and an output form.
v. The form of the lexeme is unchanged between input and output.
vi. The meanings of the input and output in conversion are clearly related: *a coast* 'interface between land and sea' and *to coast* 'move downhill without using power' cannot be a conversion pair despite their homophony.

vii. Conversion is not a free shift between any two words of identical form: if all lexemes from a given word-class can be matched with homophonous forms from another word-class we talk of 'multi-functionality', not 'conversion'. This follows from conversion being derivational.
viii. There must be a pattern of such related pairs, isolated examples are not considered to be conversion.
ix. If conversion is derivational, it cannot apply outside inflection, so that inflected forms cannot take part in conversion.

Not only do different theories of conversion deny some of these criteria, but, as is always the case where multiple criteria are available, the criteria do not always agree, especially since some of the basic terms such as 'word-class' may get different interpretations in different theories. The result is that we may find degrees of conversion, or there may be disagreement as to where the borderline of conversion lies, and, frequently, there may be dispute as to whether individual pairings are instances of conversion or not. In this paper I consider one such case, though it should be noted that there are many that could be considered, including, but not limited to, the following (see also Bauer et al. 2013, pp. 549–562):

i. The relationship between numerals in attributive position and as nouns: *I saw three cars* as opposed to *I shook a three*.
ii. The relationship between noun and adverb in examples like *piggyback*: *Daddy gave me a piggyback* versus *Daddy carried me piggyback*.
iii. The relationship between adjectives and adverbs such as *hard*: *Digging the garden is hard work* versus *I worked very hard today*.
iv. The relationship between phrases and verbs: *He said never mind so I never minded*.
v. The relationship between interjections and verbs: *They oohed and aahed at the fireworks*.

2 STATING THE PROBLEM

English shows patterns of homophony between prepositions and verbs of the following kind:

(2) They walked *down* the hill.	Preposition
(3) He *downed* his beer, and got up to leave.	Verb
(4) She peered *up* the chimney.	Preposition
(5) They *upped* the price of Covid masks by 200%.	Verb

The question is whether such a relationship is a matter of conversion, and if it is, how we might know this and what might be the constraints on it. If it is not conversion, what is it?

The first question to be answered here is whether it is appropriate to call the relevant words 'prepositions' or not. There is a way of avoiding the issue, by calling them 'particles', but that carries with it all sorts of theoretical presuppositions, some of which may not be valid. The real alternative is that they are adverbs. *Up* and *down* (used as examples above) can both be adverbs; if we take a preposition that cannot be an adverb, such as *at*, *of* or *from*, it cannot be used as a verb.[1]

(6) *He never ats two o'clock, he's always three minutes early.
[i.e. He never arrives exactly at two o'clock]
(7) *He never ats university, even though he's enrolled.
[i.e. He is never present at university]
(8) *Where would he from something like that?
[i.e. Where would he get something like that from?]
(9) *London has never really of-ed the tower.
[i.e. London has never really owned the tower.]

On the other hand, there are many one-word adverbs which are never used as prepositions — *here*, *there*, *now*, *then*, *soon* — and which equally are not used as verbs. So we must have overlapping sets, and the only set that allows the construction that is of interest here is where preposition and adverb share a form. Some authorities now prefer to talk in terms of transitive and intransitive prepositions (Emonds 1972), but since this does not change the basic question, the traditional word-class names are perfectly useful here.

Having said that, there are many instances of a single form being sometimes a preposition and sometimes an adverb which cannot be used as verbs. Consider, as simple examples, *above* and *below*. We do not find:

(10) *He was so scared of being caught speeding that he always belowed the speed limit by at least three kph.
(11) *He always looked as though he drank a lot, but although he was often breath tested he never aboved the limit at all.

Here it is relatively easy to see what the verbs would mean if they existed, but they do not seem to exist. Neither do they sound plausible. At the very least this seems to suggest that the comment in Bauer (1983, p. 227) that lexical items 'can be used as required' demands a great deal of refinement.

1 I think it is Roger Lass who notes that you cannot prove that a platypus does not lay eggs by showing a picture of it not laying eggs. My asterisked examples here prove just as little, for the same reason. There may well be relevant examples which I have not found or which do not sound familiar to me because I do not speak the right variety of English. In which case the claims are at best claims for my own variety, and even then may show my ignorance. Whatever the facts of the case, a more extensive set of examples would be helpful in determining just what is likely to be possible.

For the purposes of this paper, it would be useful to have a label for the class of words whose form is used both as a preposition and an adverb. Unfortunately, English word-formation seems only to allow 'adverb-preposition'(compare *singer-songwriter* as a model of the formation type). If this becomes a wider issue, I hope a better label can be found. An alternative position might be that there is no such class, just a series of words performing various functions, but that leaves us with no way to circumscribe the relevant set. Note that this cannot be a syntactic process, because the syntax should not have access to the fact that *up* can be a preposition and can be an adverb any more than it has access to the fact that *swallow* can be a noun naming a species of bird or a verb meaning to make food and drink go down your throat.

Interestingly, and surely not coincidentally, precisely the same set of words appears to show up with nominal function, as illustrated in Table 1.

Preposition	**Noun usage**	**Gloss**
Up.	She's on the up and up.	'become more successful'
Down.	She has a down on me.	'have an unjustified bad opinion of'
At	*	
From	*	
Above	*She thinks she's an above	'a superior person'
Below	*She loves diving to the below	'a place below the surface'
NB:	I assume that mention is not a relevant type, because we can usually allow that: *The* up *in* use up; *What kind of* from *is this?*	

TABLE 1. Homophonous prepositions and nouns

Other relevant words have homophonous nouns or verbs, as illustrated in Table 2.

Preposition	**Noun usage**	**Verb usage**
Beyond	into the great beyond She lives in the back of beyond	
In	I have an in with her She understands the ins and out of it	
Like	I've never seen the like You have to compare like with like	
Near		She is nearing her goal
Off	She's ready for the off	They said she offed her attacker
Out	She's on the outs with everyone	She was outed by her ex
Over	This is the last over of the match	

TABLE 2. More prepositions with homophonous nouns and/or verbs

Before I discuss these examples, let me say something about homophony between adverb-prepositions and adjectives. At first glance, the phenomenon is related, since we find (at least in conservative British English) *the up train*, *the down train*, *the through train* and so on (and more generally, *the up escalator*, *the down escalator*, *no through*

road). But English allows all kinds of words in attributive position, without any necessary implication that these are best classified as adjectives: *the then president*, *the upstairs facilities*, *these three weeks*, *enough beer*. Sometimes such words do show other behaviour that is typical of adjectives, such as gradability: *She is more down than I had realised*; *She is feeling very down*. Such behaviour cannot be guaranteed, though. In order to avoid problems of classification, I shall ignore preposition to adjective conversion here.

3 THE NATURE OF THE RELEVANT EXAMPLES

What we need to recognise about the nouns and verbs discussed here is that they are unsystematic and that they are frequently informal (even slangy). In some instances (e.g. with *near*) it may not be clear whether the preposition gives rise to the noun/verb or vice versa: in the case of *round*, we would probably feel that the adjective was the basic form (which seems to be the etymology). All this suggests that they are not properly integrated into the system of English. Unlike the use of conversion to link nouns and verbs, there is little productivity, new forms sound awkward, sometimes jocular, but are apparently still created, such as *to out*. Not only does this seem to exclude the possibility of conversion, it also seems to rule out coercion, since coercion, usually thought of as a semantic reading associated with syntactic usage, would be expected to be automatic (and coercion is not usually taken to involve a change of word-class).

One puzzling aspect of the behaviour of the relevant verbs is their meanings. The verbs *up* and *down* are not used as opposites, but have several meanings, illustrated in Table 3.

Example	**Gloss**
They upped the price.	[‘increase’, ‘put up’]
They upped and left.	[‘did something unexpected’]
They upped sticks, and we don’t know where they’ve gone.	[‘unexpectedly move out’]
They have upped their game, and are a lot better than last season’s team.	[‘improve’]
They have upped the rhetoric.	[‘increase’, *‘put up’]
They downed their beer.	[‘consumed quickly’]
They downed the aeroplane.	[‘brought/shot down’, ‘caused to fail’]
They downed tools.	[‘put down’, *down tools* often = ‘go on strike’]
The strong winds downed trees.	[‘knocked down’]
They are on the up and up.	[‘improving’ or ‘genuine’]
They are used to the ups and downs of such a lifestyle.	[‘vicissitudes’]
They have a down on me.	[‘unfair negative perception’]

TABLE 3. The lack of systematicity of examples

What can we say about the relationship between *down* in *I fell down the hole* and *down* in *I downed my tools for the day*?

The relationship is too sporadic and too lexically restricted to be a matter of syntax.

Although word-formation processes are typically prone to gaps in the output (which may look like gaps in what lexical items make up the input), the restrictions here are particularly strong and apparently unsystematic.

Although the words produced may be 'ostentatious' (in the words of Zwicky & Pullum 1987), there is no question of differing abilities to create relevant forms, or variation in outputs, such as is mentioned by Zwicky & Pullum for 'expressive' morphology.

It seems reasonably clear that the interpretation of these words involves metonymy, except insofar as they involve a change of word-class, something which prototypical metonymy does not do. However, conversion has been included as a form of metonymy by several scholars for some time, so we can probably ignore that factor. It must be allowed, though, that just because metonymy is involved and there is a change of word-class, it does not necessarily follow that conversion is involved. It could just be ad hoc metonymy.

4 WHAT CAN WE CONCLUDE?

If we go back and look at the set of criteria for conversion given earlier in this paper, preposition to verb or preposition to noun shifts look like conversion, even if we can quibble about the application of some of the criteria. The changes look like instances of directed word-formation without any change of form and with related semantics. We can add that it is hard to say that the examples illustrate any other type, except metonymy.

But the nature of the examples and the lack of systematicity of the formation type throw doubt on this: the paradigm is limited, the semantic shifts are unpredictable, the output is stylistically marked in a way that is not necessarily typical of conversion. Even if such points are in a minority, they are sufficient to raise questions about the nature of the relationship found in these constructions. Perhaps most importantly, defining the potential class of the input here is theoretically awkward. If we cannot determine whether a particular phenomenon is an instance of conversion or not, it suggests that we do not have a clear enough picture of conversion to work with, and that such theory as there is (and, of course, so much theory is contradictory) is not sufficient to deal with marginal types.

It seems to me that the problem facing us is this: we have a very general phenomenon of metonymy, and a huge number of different subtypes of metonymy, some of them not even linguistic. While we may be able to recognise the overarching phenomenon (though there is even disagreement on that), we do not have any consensus on how to distinguish the various subtypes. We have prototypical behaviour in those instances where we have sufficient data to detect patterns, but we cannot use these prototypical features to divide up the field when it comes to the less central patterns.

As morphologists trying to deal with a classification of linguistic phenomena, this leaves us in a difficult position. We can draw the line where we like. And if you want to disagree with Bauer (1983) that *to up the price* is an instance of conversion (or even raise the question of whether Bauer was just overly naïve), you can do so by redrawing the lines or writing a new definition, or providing a different view of just what conversion might be. Whether any of this provides progress in our field is a moot point.

In the instance dealt with here, we might feel that it could be treated as simple metonymy, as relisting or as conversion, but it is not clear that we can defend any one of these against others, and it is not clear what would constitute relevant evidence. This, I suggest, is a poor state for theorists to be in, and a sign that a revolution in our thinking is required.

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