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A Note on Conversion in English

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1. Introduction

This paper concerns English conversion phenomena, with special emphasis on the conversion of an adjective\(^1\) to a noun inside a noun phrase, as illustrated by the following examples:

(1) The *wealthy* are not always happy.
(2) Can you get me a pint of *heavy* (=a kind of beer)?
(3) I always read this *weekly*.

We will look at some circumstances where the above phenomena can take place and discuss whether they can be successfully handled within one of the representative syntactic theories (i.e. the Government-Binding theory).

In the next section, previous remarks on conversion are outlined. In section three, the conversion process inside NP is discussed in view of X-bar theory and Case theory in comparison with other languages with a rich inflection system.

2. Previous Remarks on Conversion

2.1. Sweet (1892–98)
Sweet defines conversion as a process of 'converting a word, i.e. making it into another part of speech without any modification or addition, except, of course, the necessary change of inflection, etc' (section 105).

In examples (1) to (3), words *wealthy, heavy, weekly* behave like nouns, in that two of them follow a determiner (=1, 3), and that the other one seems to function as an object of a preposition (=2). In (1), *the wealthy* seems to constitute a subject noun phrase; in (2) *heavy* is considered as a 'semantic' head of the whole noun phrase,\(^2\) and in (3) *this weekly* seems to function as an object of a verb.

Sentence (1) is an example of *partial conversion*, where the copula indicates that the subject noun phrase is plural. There is no plural inflection attached to the adjective, although comparative or superlative inflection is possible:
(4) the wealthier
(5) the wealthiest

Sentences (2) and (3) are examples of complete conversion. They can be plural:
(6) Two heavies, please.
(7) I burned all the weeklies since I had to move out.

Sweet argues that these conversion processes are characteristic of a language like English in which word inflection does not participate in word differentiation as much as in Latin.³

2.2. Quirk, et al. (1985)
Quirk, et al. also describe the phenomena of partial conversion. Their observation can be summarised as follows:

(a) There is no inflectional evidence of the word's status as a noun.
(b) However, there is inflectional evidence of its unchanged status as an adjective.⁴
(c) Almost any adjective of a permitted class, i.e. applicable to human beings or to abstractions might be used with no constraints on productivity.

With those assumptions, they conclude that converted adjectives should be regarded as 'head of noun phrase' (I.45).

2.3. Conditions on Conversion
As is argued by Quirk, et al., the noun phrase headed by a converted adjective usually denotes a group of people. For example, the wealthy means wealthy people.

There are also cases where [the + adjective] can refer to an abstract notion. The noun phrases are usually singular.⁵

(8) Films go easily from the sublime to the ridiculous. (COBUILD : 1457)
(9) There didn't seem much point in stating the obvious. (ibid. 992)

In the case of complete conversion, however, permitted classes of adjectives are not easily predicted. Meanings seem to be hard to predict. Take heavy for example. Some of the meanings that the converted form of heavy may have are: a rough and violent person,⁶ a somber or ennobled theatrical role or character,⁷ a gun of great weight or large caliber,⁸ (the + plural form) the serious newspapers, journals, etc.,⁹ anything particularly large and weighty of its kind.¹⁰ It seems that meanings can get quite specific as well as
abstract unlike the case of partial conversion.

3. GB and Conversion

3.1. Feature-Based Morpho-Syntax
Muysken and Riemsdijk (1985a) touch on the NP structures of German, Dutch and Spanish. In German and Spanish, the head noun can be omitted as in the following:

00) a. *a black
   a'. a black one (English)
b. *een zwart
   b'. een zwart paard
   'a black horse' (Dutch)
c. ein Schwarzes
   'a black (one)' (German)
d. un negro
   'a black (one)' (Spanish) (p.26)

They argue that the difference between English and German lies in the fact that German has richer inflection and the article and the adjective show overt agreement. They argue that a case feature on the adjective can percolate 'to an NP and then down to the other positions (ibid.):

01) DET [+case]  \[ +case \]
   NP  \[ +case \]
   \[ AP \]
   \[ A' \]
   \[ A [+case] \]
   N'  \[ N' \]
   ein  Schwarzes  \[ \phi \]

The adjective is considered as serving as a case-carrying element inside the noun phrase and that enables NP to be case marked; hence the non-violation of Case filter.

In the case of the English and Dutch examples, feature percolation is not involved, because no element inside the noun phrase shows agreement. Therefore, no case-carrying element is inside NP and the structures as they stand are ruled out as a violation of Case filter. We should note that (10a) will be grammatical if a definite article is used, although they do not argue why this is so.

3.2. X-Bar Theory and Conversion
Sentence (10a), where black is considered as an adjective, can be ruled out in view of
X-bar syntax. It stipulates that any phrase must contain its structural head:

\[(\bar{12}) \quad \text{XP} = \text{YP} (\text{Specifier}), \quad X' \quad \\
X' = \text{X} (\text{Head}), \quad \text{YP} (\text{Complement}) \quad \\
(X, Y \text{ are arbitrary lexical/non-lexical categories.})\]

Let us recall the conditions on conversion in English. As for partial conversion, adjectives usually denote the quality of human beings and the noun phrase as a whole is usually generic and plural. And as for complete conversion, meanings can get very specific. (10a) is possible as an example of complete conversion only if the adjective is associated with some sorts of nouns such as ink, a ball (for snooker pool), etc:

\[(\bar{13}) \quad \text{NP} \quad \text{DET} \quad \text{N'} \quad \text{a} \quad \text{black} \quad \text{NP} \quad \text{DET} \quad \text{AP} \quad \text{N'} \quad \text{a} \quad \text{black} \quad \phi \]

If we stipulate that partially converted adjectives must be regarded as head, then structures will not violate X-bar theory:

\[(\bar{15}) \quad \text{NP} \quad \text{DET} \quad \text{N'} \quad \text{AP} \quad \text{N'} \quad \text{the poor} \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{NP} \quad \text{DET} \quad \text{N} \quad \text{the poor} \]

This kind of stipulation also seems necessary for German, in order to avoid ruling out grammatical examples. It seems interesting to consider whether these language-particular stipulations may influence the framework of the theory of Universal Grammar.

### 3.3. Case Theory and Conversion

#### 3.3.1. Case Filter and PF Identification

In this section, abstract Case assignment is discussed, based on the theory outlined in Baker (1988). He elaborates on the process within the GB framework. The Case filter requires that every NP get abstract Case. It 'helps identify how NP is to be interpreted in the structure' (p.112).
The way Case is assigned to NP varies from language to language. In inflectional languages, NPs show morphological changes as to which semantic cases are assigned. In the case of English, case assignment is done either by morphological change or adjacency of the Case assigner and NP.

Baker assumes that, irrespective of languages, abstract Case assignment or Case indexing takes place under government, and that Case indexing can be 'manifested in any of these (= putting morpheme on N, adjacency of the governor and NP, etc.) ways at the level of PF' (p.115). And such a requirement can be stated as follows:

16 The Principle of PF Interpretation
Every Case indexing relationship at S-Structure must be interpreted by the rules of PF. (p.116)

The system of Case indexing and its interpretation would look like the following:

17 LEXICON: Items are specified as to how many and what types of Case indexings they can have.

D-STRUCTURE: Semantic and inherent Case indexing takes place under government.

S-STRUCTURE: Structural Case indexing takes place under government.

LF: Every argumental NP is Case-indexed in order to receive its thematic role.

PF: Case indexing is interpreted or overtly represented.

3.3.2. Conversion and Case Filter
Let us look at the conversion process in terms of Case theory. Take nominative Case assignment for example. Consider (18):

18 The wealthy benefit from tax-reform.

The wealthy constitutes NP with wealthy as its syntactic head. AGR in INFL assigns a structural Case to NP under government at S-Structure. It is interpreted at LF as having been assigned an external thematic role. It is also interpreted as being adjacent to the governor at the level of PF.

In the German headless NP, however, it is not clear what is the governor for the
adjective. Muysken and Riemsdijk merely stipulate that the adjective must have a feature [ + case]. We should notice that the agreement is also manifested on the determiner. They do not discuss why it is the adjective and not the determiner that has such a feature. If we follow Baker's analysis, then Case assignment can be checked (or heard) due to the morphological change at the level of PF. The agreement is considered as an explicit sign of Case assignment by a Case assigner.

In English conversion structure, the adjective functions as a head noun and the Case assignment is done by the governor outside NP. In the German example, the situation seems quite different. The adjective shows agreement, which indicates that this element is assigned Case by some other element, whether overt or null.

Suppose, as we have done above, that the adjective functions as a head noun. But then it would sound as if the adjective had properties both as the Case assigner and assignee at the same time. It is not clear whether such line of argument will sound reasonable. Or suppose that the Case assignment takes place at D- or S-Structure. Nominative Case-indexing is done by AGR in INFL just as in English. AGR is a governor and assigns Case to NP by government. Then this would indicate that Case may be assigned and case feature¹² (if we suppose that there is) can percolate down to the determiner and the adjective. This kind of top-down analysis looks clearly different from Muysken and Riemsdijk's:

4. Conclusion

We have discussed some syntactic properties of English conversion in comparison with German. The internal structure of a noun phrase with an adjective as its head seems to pose several problems in light of some modules of the Government-Binding theory.

Co-occurrence phenomena of a definite article and a partially converted adjective seem to require further research from a semantic point of view. The Case assignment process in a more inflectional language such as German, on the other hand, seems to necessitate a further enquiry into morphology and syntax.

Finally, as has been pointed out earlier, language-particular details in English and
German discussed above will provide serious problems for us. It is not clear whether such subtle differences among languages may be treated in terms of parametric variations.

NOTES

1. As Quirk, et al. (1972) point out, conversion is not regarded as 'a historical process' (I.32). It should be treated as 'a process now available for extending the lexical resources of the language' (ibid.).

The direction of derivation (e.g. noun into verb or verb into noun) may be argued in terms of 'the semantic dependence of one item upon another' (ibid.).

Conversion is not limited to the case discussed in this study. For example, nouns can be converted to verbs:
(i) Would you *cash* this cheque, please?
(ii) We *elbowed* our way through the crowd.
(iii) He was *nursed* in luxury.

2. This is an instance of syntactic reanalysis. The internal structure for (2) should be (i) rather than (ii):

(i) \[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{DET} \\
\text{NP} \\
\text{PP} \\
\text{P} \\
\text{NP} \\
\end{array}
\]

(ii) \[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{SPEC} \\
\text{NP} \\
\text{PP} \\
\text{P} \\
\end{array}
\]

3. He writes:

"...Hence also the more inflectional the language is, the easier the discrimination of the parts of speech is. Thus in English, where the adjective is nearly indeclinable, it is more difficult to distinguish it from other parts of speech than in Latin." (section 107)

He argues that the fact that English has a very rigid word order system makes the conversion of parts of speech easy.

However, his statement should be taken with a caveat, for, as we will find out later, in a language with richer inflection, such as German, conversion (e.g. adjective into noun inside NP) seems as productive as in English.

4. The following examples seem to show that the italicised words still retain some syntactic properties as adjectives:
(i) the extraordinarily *ambitious*
(ii) the *poorer* than himself

(Both examples from *SDNEG* : 348)

(iii) The BBC has been criticised for failing to honour a promise, made three years ago, to provide an adequate subtitled news service for the *hard* of hearing. (*JOS* : 11 March, 1990)

In (i), the converted adjective is modified by an adverb. In (ii), *poor* inflects for comparison and takes a complement. In (iii), *hard* takes its complement.

5. In addition to adjectives, present and past participles can also be used in the same construction:
(i) [the + participle] as plural:
"There'll be plenty of money for *the living*, and a decent burial for the dead."

(*COBUILD* : 852)

(ii) [the + participle] as both singular and plural:
Will the accused please stand...

(ibid. 11)

[the + participle] as singular:
The space voyagers set off on their journey to the unknown.

(LDCE : 1156)
cf. The director cast her in a leading part when she was a young unknown of 18. (ibid.)

6. LDCE : 487.
7. RHD : 884.
8. ibid.
10. ibid.
11. When Case is written with a capital C, it means an abstract one in the GB framework and is considered as different from the case in the traditional sense.
12. Although it may be confusing, we will use case with a small c when we discuss Muysken and Riemsdijk’s feature percolation system.

ABBREVIATIONS

COBUILD = Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary
IOS = Independent on Sunday
LDCE = Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (New Edition)
OEDS = A Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary
SNDEG = Sanseido’s New Dictionary of English Grammar

REFERENCES


