

Prikazi knjiga
Book reviews
Rezensionen

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Isabel Balteiro, 2007. *The Directionality of Conversion in English. A Dia-Synchronic Study*. [Linguistic Insights. Studies in Language and Communication Vol. 59]. Bern: Peter Lang. 276 pp. ISBN 978-3-03911-241-8.

1. Introduction

Ever since its first explicit mention by H. Sweet (1891-1898), conversion has raised interest among linguists of different theoretical persuasions. However, the complete formal identity between the two conversion elements has severely strained any attempts at the definition, identification and delimitation of the phenomenon. Moreover, the establishment of derivational precedence between many conversion items has remained as elusive as ever. Conversion is thus still perceived as the odd one among word-formation processes and little new insight can be found on these most fundamental issues; viz. definition, identification, delimitation and directionality. Isabel Balteiro's work is an attempt to collect and examine the different positions on these problems and to propose the author's own. Over and above this, the main goals of the book are a) to empirically and systematically test, on a corpus of actual examples, the different directionality criteria proposed in the literature, and b) to establish whether, and what kind of, directionality exists in conversion.

The book is organised into five chapters and includes eight appendixes. Chapter 1 (the introduction), and particularly Chapter 2, on the definition and identification of conversion, are somewhat eclipsed by the lengthy middle chapters

(Chapter 3 and 4). While the latter do focus on the central issue of the book, viz. directionality, Chapter 2 offers insufficient space for a critical enough examination of the issues raised. Chapter 3 surveys previous interpretations of directionality and the variety of directionality criteria proposed in the literature. Chapter 4 introduces Balteiro's empirical diachronic-synchronic study of directionality and presents its results. Chapter 5 concludes by summing up the main ideas and findings, and includes pointers to the areas where further research is necessary. The list of references and secondary sources is given in a separate section. Finally, the list of corpus data and the results of applying the different directionality criteria to this data are laid out in the eight appendixes at the end of the book.

2. Conversion: a problematic process

In the brief introductory chapter, Balteiro gives the rationale for her research. It is, first, the lack of agreement regarding the nature and limits of this ubiquitous phenomenon. But more importantly, it is the absence of empirical evaluations of the many theoretical proposals. The rest of the first chapter lays out the structure of the book, giving the reader a preview of the methodological procedures and of the main positions and results which follow in later chapters. Nevertheless, despite the commendable methodological advances of this study, i.e. its decidedly empirical orientation, the author cannot but concede that there is a number of problems in the definition and application of some of the directionality criteria. Thus, when the author concludes at the end of the chapter that "there still remains a lot of work to be done on the subject" and that "this study intends to *promote* (emphasis is mine) further research on this controversial topic" (2007: 17), the reader cannot but be alert to the apparent clash between the admittedly problematic nature of some of the criteria, and the robustness of the numerical results laid out in the ensuing chapters.

Chapter 2 represents a bibliographical review of the different positions concerning, on the one hand, the definition and interpretation of conversion (2.2.), and, on the other, its classification and delimitation from other similar phenomena (2.3.). Each of these two sections is rounded off with the author's own standpoint on these points.

In section 2.2., Balteiro makes a distinction between the syntactic and derivational approaches to conversion. The former assume that there is only one lexical unit which comes to be used in a different syntactic context (multifunctionality, e.g. Koziol 1937; Nida 1949, 1957; to an extent Pavesi 1998). Proponents of the latter argue that conversion results in the emergence of a new lexeme. The author also mentions a third view, which defends that there are two elements

which are independent or basic, or even underspecified with respect to categorical distinctions (Farrell 2001). Among the widely accepted derivational approach, Balteiro distinguishes two main trends and an intermediate one; viz. 1) the zero-affixation approach (Marchand, 1969; Adams 1973; Sanders 1988); 2) the non-affixation approach arguing for a derivational process called conversion (Sweet 1989; Kruisinga 1927; Bauer 1983; Quirk et al. 1985); and Don's (1993) intermediate approach proposing morphosemantic affixation without phonological affixation.

As a whole, section 2.2. represents a very welcome overview of the different treatments of conversion in the literature. However, some of the works that would have to be included in an overview of this scope are missing, e.g. Adams (2001), Lieber (2004), Aronoff (1980), or Plag (2003). Also, regrettably, the book does not include a name index, which would allow the reader to more easily navigate through the text. Only some, or the "best-known" approaches, as Balteiro puts it, viz. category underspecification, multifunctionality, zero affixation, morphosemantic affixation without phonological affixation, derivation without affixation, are given separate treatments. However, Clark and Clark (1979), clearly a milestone in conversion research, receive no more than a passing comment. Furthermore, we feel that more background is necessary for the full comprehension of some theories by non-specialists (Štekauer 1996), and at least some information on the theories which have only been mentioned, such as e.g. word-class exchange (Marle 1985).

All in all, beyond the otherwise very useful general grid, the author gives little in the way of critical examination of the different proposals. Also, among the possible interpretations that have only been mentioned, there are a few whose even cursory treatment would enhance the quality of the overview. In particular, approaches proposing category-changing inflection (Myers 1984; Olsen 1990), which would at least act as pointers toward a typologically more adequate line of research (among others, the here unmentioned work by Manova 2005; Manova and Dressler 2005; Kiefer 2005).

The section ends with the author's own definition of conversion, which includes references to its features on the syntactic, morphological and semantic planes. In short, Balteiro contends that conversion is "certainly a word-formation process in the sense that new items are created or 'formed' in the lexicon, despite the absence of overt signs that mark the derivational relation" (2007: 19). She also argues that there is no justification for the zero-morpheme analysis, essentially embracing traditional arguments against a zero-derivation analysis, such as proliferation of different zeroes in cases of conversion to multiple word-classes, fallacy of the overt analogue criterion as argued by Sanders (1988), etc.

In Section 2.3, the author sets out to delimit conversion from other superficially similar phenomena and to provide a classification of conversion types. First, she argues for a diachronic filter which would help distinguish between conversion proper and pseudo-conversion. The former category refers to semantically related and formally identical elements which are derivationally related and the latter to those elements whose mentioned features are the result of e.g. levelling (loss of final endings which has led to identity of form), borrowing and other similar phenomena. This distinction was central to Balteiro's study, as it allowed her to limit the database to only those examples that qualify as conversion proper.

The second distinction is that between total and partial conversion, and finally, there is the distinction between conversion between and within word-classes. Balteiro only acknowledges total conversion as conversion. Regarding partial conversion, i.e. cases such as the use of adjectives as nominal heads and attributive use of nouns, the author expressly rejects the conversion interpretation. She sets out to show that "there is no such thing as partial conversion" since "the examples usually identified as such may be differently explained without resorting to conversion" (2007: 40). However, this strong assertion is, unfortunately, not substantiated with equally strong arguments. It is only followed by assertive statements to this effect. What is more, following a short review of the relevant discussions, Balteiro too has to concede that "we also believe that it is sometimes quite difficult to determine where the process of ellipsis or shortening¹ ends and that of conversion begins" (ibid. 44) and that there is no clear-cut boundary between nouns and premodifiers and adjectives (ibid. 47). One is thus left with the impression that no new perspectives or solutions have been advanced for this old debate. Finally, Balteiro also argues that changes within word-classes should not be treated as conversion. Her claim that these phenomena are of purely grammatical nature and do not answer to lexical needs also remains unsubstantiated, but it is a claim that is, at least intuitively, clear and appealing.

In the concluding remarks for this chapter, Balteiro pulls together her main points, admitting only noun to verb, verb to noun and adjective to verb conversion as genuine conversion. The author opens this summary with a list of phenomena that have been implicated in the (mis)identification of conversion. However, while some of them have been explained, others, such as *grammaticalisation*, *lexicalisation*, are only brought up in the final summary or have previously been mentioned under a different name (e.g. *truncation*, arguably stand-

¹ Shortening and ellipsis are proposed as alternative explanations for the use of adjectives as nominal heads.

ing for the previously mentioned *shortening*). This, unfortunately, may cause some confusion in the reader.

3. Directionality: overview of past approaches

In Chapter 3, Balteiro turns to the central topic of the book, viz. directionality. Most generally, the problem lies in the disagreement among different directionality criteria. This leads to the unfortunate situation where different directionality criteria may suggest opposite directions for one and the same conversion pair. The author identifies two main stands on the directionality issue, and makes further distinctions within one of them.

The first is the non-directional and no-derivational view, which maintains that there is no directionality between conversion items as there is no derivational relationship to begin with (Green 1972, Ljung 1976, Lieber 1981, Farrell 2001)². The second stand is that conversion is inherently a directional process, but there are differences in how the directionality problem is handled. One approach is to say that directionality cannot be determined (Bloomfield 1933, Jackendoff 1974). Another take is that directionality may be determined, but opinions diverge on a) what kinds of directionality there are; and b) what criteria are relevant for determining directionality.

As for the first question, Balteiro gives a brief account of multidirectionality (Twardzisz 1997) and bidirectionality (Leech 1981) as alternatives to the classic account of conversion as a unidirectional process. While according to the predominant, unidirectional, view, the direction of conversion is clearly either from A to B or from B to A, bi- and multidirectional accounts allow for either or any direction, respectively. The author illustrates bidirectionality with the following example from Leech (1981). For *goad*(N) and *goad*(V) either direction is acceptable since there are acceptable analogies for both directions:

- (1) a. *goad*(V) → *goad*(N) (=an implement with which to goad an animal)
 wrap(V) → *wrap*(N) (= a garment with which to wrap oneself)
 cover(V) → *cover*(N) (= a thing with which to cover something)

² A similar view maintains that directionality is synchronically irrelevant, as Balteiro observes for Quirk et al. (1985).

- b. goad(N) → goad(V)
 knife(N) → knife(V) (= to stab with a knife)
 pin (N) → pin (V) (= to fasten with a pin)

This does not mean that Balteiro herself subscribes to this view of bidirectionality. In fact she does not, but at this point she does not stop to comment on the practical and theoretical value of this type of paradigmatic analogising. Instead, the reader has to wait until the end of the chapter for a criticism of this view. Namely, similar analogies, but with derivational morphemes, have already been criticised by others (e.g. Sanders 1988) precisely for suggesting *contradictory* directions for the same conversion pair. Balteiro's own view of bidirectionality is postponed until much later in the book. This is unfortunate as her view is based on different assumptions and makes more sense. In essence, it concerns mutual influence of the different senses of elements of the same conversion pair (for which different 'directions' may also be proposed and proven with diachronic criteria).

Following this, Balteiro dedicates over 20 pages to the illustration of the different directionality criteria proposed in the unidirectional camp. She presents both the diachronic (dates of first record, etymology) and the synchronic criteria (semantic dependence, semantic range, restriction of usage, semantic pattern etc), together with their flaws as identified by their advocates themselves. This overview is very informative and reasonably detailed, however, once again, it may strike the reader as somewhat aseptic. One has to wait until the end of the chapter for Balteiro's criticism of some approaches and for her own standpoint. The latter could be summarised as follows: a) problems inherent to some directionality criteria should not take away from the importance of establishing the direction; b) directionality is inherent to conversion; and c) the main reason for the directionality problem has been in the absence of a validity test, and in the mere theoretical speculations that have not been checked by comparing different theories or linguistic facts (data). This makes a nice and smooth transition into the most important part of the book, the discussion of the results of Balteiro's own diachronic-synchronic study.

4. Directionality: the study

Chapter 4 represents the gist of the book. If the reader is willing to suspend her, and Balteiro's own, reservations regarding the theoretical and practical weaknesses of some directionality criteria, the results presented in this chapter are

impressive. All the more so as they are not products of the author's own intuition,³ but came out of the application of the different directionality criteria to a corpus of over 700 lexical units.⁴ The results seem to validate most previous intuitive solutions. And yet, since no single criterion is without problems, as Balteiro duly acknowledges, and since solutions to most of them are either impossible to find or would require massive projects unrelated to the present study, Balteiro's results could be qualified as the best that she could get with the resources she had.

Let us outline the procedure and methodological decisions Balteiro makes. The author begins by introducing the different directionality criteria, one by one. She begins with the two diachronic criteria (etymology and dates of first record), continues with the synchronic criteria, some of which are semantic (semantic range, semantic dependence, semantic pattern), others quantitative (restriction of usage⁵), formal (stress, morphologic type, phonetic shape) and even typological (principle of relative markedness).

Each criterion is presented in a way that highlights its potential flaws and ability to skew the results. Sometimes these flaws had to be ignored as in the case of semantic dependence, where one has to take on trust the accuracy of lexicographic practice or rely on intuitive judgements regarding which item is implied in the definition of the other. Sometimes Balteiro proposes solutions that would attenuate the problems, but leaves their applicability for future research. For example, in the case of dates of first records, the question is, what is the relevant time interval between the first records of the two conversion items which would allow the direction to be established. She proposes calculating the average time difference between the appearances of the two items as suggestive of how long it takes for one item to convert into the other. However, she is also fully aware that average values may misrepresent much of the data, as each conversion pair may have its own personal history. At other times, Balteiro decides to apply very similar solutions to minimise the effects on the data of the flaws inherent to some criteria. For example, for the criterion of restriction of usage, she calculates the average difference in frequency for the N to V pairs and V to

³ Although intuition, albeit of an institutionalised kind, does lie at the heart of the dictionary sources consulted for criteria such as semantic dependence. But other criteria are not much more objective either. For example, the criterion of restriction of usage implies that one has to decide what differences in the frequencies between individual conversion items qualify as relevant for determining the direction.

⁴ Although the author included over 300 word-pairs in her initial analysis (see p. 90), after filtering out pseudo-conversions (cases of borrowing, levelling etc.) using the criterion of etymology, the number of actual conversion pairs dropped to 231.

⁵ This one actually has a diachronic component to it; see Balteiro (2007: 125).

N pairs and decides on a specific cut off point beyond which she would treat the frequency differences as unable to identify the direction clearly.

Keeping in mind the above choices/concessions, the results of most criteria taken individually provided clear directions for most conversion pairs. But more important than the value of each single criterion was the question of how far the results of individual criteria matched. This would be a validity test for the criteria themselves. Therefore, after presenting each new criterion, Balteiro immediately contrasted its results with those of the criteria introduced before. This produced a series of comparisons between the different criteria, and again the directions provided by most pairs of criteria matched to high degrees. Thus, for example, the hypothesis that an element that appears later in the language would also be the less frequent one, was validated. However, this was only after certain results were ignored. Namely, the criteria could only really be contrasted on the basis of the results they were able to provide. This means that after ignoring cases for which either of the criteria could not provide a solution or cases where directions doubtfully established by one criterion were corroborated by the other criterion, the percentages of agreement increased. For example, contrasting semantic range and dates of first record gave an initial correspondence of 79.65%, but ended up at a high 89.61% after the data has been ‘cleaned’.

Comparisons of more than 2 criteria produced significantly weaker results, but only at first. Here too the results were significantly affected by the limited applicability of some of the criteria. The criterion of stress, for example, could provide directions for only 62 conversion pairs. Including it as a criterion among the criteria with much wider applicability, and not cleaning the data in the manner explained above, would mean significantly lower correspondence rates. “A contrast among diachronic, content and stress criteria shows agreement only in 30 directions (12.98% of the total data). However, if we consider that stress only provides 62 directions, and we focus on only those 62 cases, the agreements between the directions provided by those criteria is then 48.38%” (Balteiro 2007: 177).

Generally speaking, once the data was cleaned, and all the criteria were considered together, Balteiro was able to provide a clear and definitive direction for 96% of the actual conversions. $N \rightarrow V$ conversion accounted for 65% of the clearly established directions and $V \rightarrow N$ conversion for 35% of these cases. However, if we remember that these figures concern only the cases where the criteria were able to provide a solution, a few more observations have to be made. In the total corpus of 231 actual conversion pairs, there were 125 (54.11%) pairs with convergence of *all the criteria that provided a solution*. However, the number of criteria that provided solutions varied between 8 and 4. Cases where 8 criteria provided the solution *and* agreed accounted for a relatively small

4.76% of the actual conversion pairs; but cases where only 4 criteria provided solutions and converged were not that numerous either (0.43%). In most cases, agreement between all the criteria that provided a solution meant agreement between 6 criteria (28.14%) and 7 criteria (15.58%), which is still quite a strong result. In addition to the previous, there were also 54 (23.37%) cases where all but one criterion provided the same directions; in 32 cases (13.86%), all but two criteria converged; and in 20 cases (8.66%) three or more criteria provided a different solution. The general conclusion Balteiro makes on the basis of these figures is that *conversion is a (uni-) directional process* (2007: 187, emphasis in the original). There is no a priori reason to dismiss this conclusion, but it would be interesting to see if the use of a different set of conversion pairs, the use of different dictionary sources⁶ and corpora,⁷ and/or different methodological choices would produce similar results.

5. Conclusion

Balteiro's study is genuine refreshment in this field of study, which has become old in more than one way. For one, debates as to the definition, identification and directionality of conversion have been going on for decades, but at the same time, little new insight has been offered. Balteiro's work is decidedly empirical and much more ambitious than many before. Admittedly, it does not have a lot of new premises on which to build impressive new theories or produce novel results. However, it does subject to empirical and critical evaluation the intuitions of a few prominent researchers which have been recycled by others but rarely seriously or empirically tested. This book has its weaknesses. Firstly, there are problems with a lot of criteria that cannot be easily solved, and may have impacted on the results. But the author does not pretend the problems do not exist. Secondly, the second chapter, on the definition and identification of conversion, suffers from some flaws, which, we presume, are due to Balteiro's reluctance to devote too much space to issues that are not of primary importance to her study. Hence, one of the chapters seems to lack a few important references, but also some more detail or critical stance to be truly persuasive. The last of the objectives is style of presentation. Namely, the most important chapter becomes diffi-

⁶ Relevant e.g. for the criterion of semantic dependence for which dictionary definitions were consulted.

⁷ Relevant, e.g. for frequency counts, esp. if sociolinguistic variation were to be included in the analysis. The latter is an aspect that is missing in the present study. In addition, the International Corpus of English served as the main resource, but others may have been chosen in its place, e.g. the BNC, or perhaps better yet a corpus of American English such as the Corpus of Contemporary American English or the American National Corpus.

cult to follow due to the sheer number of tables and figures. It is also relatively impractical to have to navigate between the final chapter and the appendices to inspect the actual corpus data. However, we are aware that this kind of data arrangement is something that cannot be easily avoided in empirical research, and empiricism is indeed the greatest merit of this book.

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