A New Process: A New Lexical Evolution

Massrura Mostafa

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 COBUILD 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 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

The Dhaka University Journal of Linguistics
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 practitioners 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 Hunston 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

The Dhaka University Journal of Linguistics
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

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

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

6.1. impact (vt) + O
1. The 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. usable 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-
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-
24 and 25 the infinitive clause functions as a
auxiliary ‘be able to’ and ‘be likely to’ respectively. In example 23 to
postmodifier. Example 26 exemplifies impact as an object. In
25 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
35. as children that seriously impacts on them, and they keep
go ing
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-
38 and 42 respectively express time and addition. In 44 definitely expresses the
phrase. This can be a stylistic way. The agent is clearly mentioned in
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
adverbial: Example 26 exemplifies impact as an object. In
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.

References


