

# A Cognitive Linguistic Analysis of Verb-to-Noun Conversion in English

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Conversion can be defined as a special kind of derivation that links two different word classes without morphological change of a word itself. Previous studies have proved that noun-to-verb conversion can be viewed as an instance of metonymy. This study has analyzed verb-to-noun conversion by means of metonymy and ICMs, so as to find out the cognitive mechanism behind this linguistic phenomenon. Also, this paper discusses the semantic and cognitive factors which can affect verb-to-noun conversion.

*Keywords:* verb-to-noun, conversion, cognitive metonymy, cognitive linguistics

## Introduction

Word-formations in English have various ways. For example, language users may create new words through the derivation in which new words are formed by adding affixes to the original base, or compounding in which new words are formed by combining two different words (Augustyn, 2013). Conversion is also a crucial way to form new words and to describe the new experiences of human beings. Conversion can be defined as a special kind of derivation that links two different word classes without morphological change of a word itself (Bauer & Valera, 2005). In general, there are four different kinds of conversion: (1) noun-to-verb conversion, such as *dream* and *to dream*, *knife* and *to knife*; (2) verb-to-noun conversion, such as *ban something* and *a ban*, *turn* and *a turn*; (3) adjective-to-verb conversion, such as *tidy* and *to tidy*, *clean* and *to clean*; (4) adjective-to-noun conversion, such as *classic* and *a classic*, *general* and *a general*. Among these conversions, noun-to-verb conversion and verb-to-noun conversion are more common (Quirk et al., 1985).

Cognitive linguistics is a new contemporary linguistic approach to study meaning, grammar, and language learning. Cognitive linguistics provides a new perspective of linguistics studies, which is completely opposite to previous theories. The uniqueness of cognitive linguistics lies in its concentration on the relationship between human language, thinking and their social experience in the world, in other words, cognitive linguists emphasize the role of human cognition and experience in language studies. Therefore, cognitive linguistics has been strongly influenced by the theories and discoveries of other cognitive sciences, especially cognitive psychology, and recently by brain science, especially cognitive neuroscience (Evans, 2012, p. 129). The theoretical system of cognitive linguistics contains various theories, including conceptual metonymy theory, construction grammar,

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mental space theory, and so on. And the aim of the current study is to analyze the internal mechanism of conversion and the cognitive factors behind it from the perspective of cognitive linguistics.

### **Literature Review**

There are a lot of studies on the conversion of verbs and nouns from different perspectives at home and abroad. At the level of semantics, Buck (1997) investigates the semantic properties of English denominal verbs and finds that most denominal verbs are related to objects and events that are very common in our daily life. Xu Shenghuan (2000) has analyzed how the semantic component of an action contained in a noun becomes the semantic basis of noun-verb conversion under a certain context, and discussed the semantic factors affecting conversion. Hu Bo (2011) studies the lexical semantics-syntax interface of the noun-converted verb in English by means of semantics-syntax and has found that most noun-converted verbs have transitivity.

In recent years, more and more scholars have studied noun-verb conversion from a perspective of cognitive linguistics. Twardzisz (1997) adopts a cognitive approach, regarding conversion as a semantic phenomenon, and then determines the examples of specific conversion forms by refining some lower-level schemas from more abstract schemas. Dirven (1999) has found that conversion can be regarded as an instance of metonymy, and noun-to-verb conversion is an example of the event schema. In Dirven's model, the metonymic relationship between nominal participants and events is expanded in three abstract event schemas: an action schema, a motion schema, and an essive schema, or schema of "beingness". According to Cetnarowska (2011), there are two main advantages of treating conversion as metonymy. One is that the same mechanism is used to explain the changes of primary word class and secondary word class. Second, the process of predicting syntactic recategorization and semantic transfer is carried out at the same time. Gao Hang (2008) discusses the frequency and fundamental motivation of verbalization of nouns expressing different semantic roles in modern Chinese from a perspective of cognitive grammar. Gao Hang's analysis shows that the phenomenon of one noun referring to multiple related actions in Chinese is very rare.

Most of the current studies focus on noun-to-verb conversion. For example, Augustyn (2013) further discusses the cognitive motivation behind the noun-to-verb conversion process. Baeskow (2021) has studied the process of noun-to-verb conversion by using metonymy and event schema and proposed that metonymic event construals are distributed on three abstract levels. There are few studies on the conversion of verb-to-noun, therefore, the current study will focus on verb-to-noun conversion and analyze its internal cognitive mechanism. Previous studies have proved that noun-to-verb conversion can be viewed as an instance of metonymy (Dirven, 1999), and the current study will follow the same point of view, in other words, this study aims to analyze verb-to-noun conversion by means of metonymy, so as to find out the inner mechanism and cognitive factors behind this linguistic phenomenon.

### **Cognitive Mechanism of Verb-to-Noun Conversion**

In this section we will analyze the inner mechanism of verb-to-noun conversion from an angle of conceptual metonymy.

### 3.1 Conceptual Metonymy and the Action ICM

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metonymy uses one object or entity to refer to another object or entity which is closely related to it. Traditionally, metonymy is described as a continuity relationship based on important contact points between concepts (Korch, 1999). It is worth mentioning that metonymy usually operates within only one conceptual domain (Thomaßen, 2004). In this regard, metaphor and metonymy are different, because metaphorical relations usually involve two different conceptual domains. Metonymy can be represented by the formula of “B for A” (Evans & Green, 2006). For example, in the sentence “his wheels are parked behind his house”, the metonymic relation can be represented by the formula PART FOR WHOLE.

Lakoff (1987) has proposed the theory of idealized cognitive models (ICMs). According to him, cognitive framework domains are conceived of as idealized cognitive models and categories are related to idealized cognitive models (ICMs). ICMs are “idealized” because they do not represent instances of specific experiences, but abstract concepts derived from particular experiences (Evans & Green, 2006). In Lakoff’s theory, ICMs are comprised of knowledge representations such as image schemata, metaphoric mappings, and metonymic mappings (Lakoff, 1987). So metonymy operates within idealized cognitive models (Radden & Kövecses, 1999). Therefore, a metonymic mapping may occur between the whole and parts of a specific ICM. Among a variety of metonymical mappings, the PARTS FOR WHOLE metonymy can be used to analyze noun-to-verb conversion. And when applying to analyze the noun-to-verb conversion, the metonymy PARTS FOR WHOLE will change into PARTS OF THE ACTION ICM FOR THE WHOLE ACTION (Kuczok, 2011). According to Kuczok, the ACTION ICM consists of different parts, including DESTINATION/GOAL, MANNER, TIME, OBJECT, AGENT, INSTRUMENT, PLACE, and RESULT. These parts can represent the whole ACTION ICM so that a noun can be converted into a verb through conversion. These are used for analyzing noun-to-verb action, and in fact, verb-to-noun conversion is also operated in such an ACTION ICM. However, the metonymic mappings will be changed from PARTS OF THE ACTION ICM FOR THE WHOLE ACTION into THE WHOLE ACTION FOR PARTS OF THE ACTION ICM in the verb-to-noun conversion.

### 3.2 Analysis of Verb-to-Noun Conversion Through Conceptual Metonymy

The metonymic mappings of verb-to-noun conversion in English can be divided into eight types, including, ACTION FOR DESTINATION, ACTION FOR AGENT, ACTION FOR OBJECT, ACTION FOR RESULT, ACTION FOR MANNER, ACTION FOR TIME, ACTION FOR PLACE and ACTION FOR INSTRUMENT. The above eight types will be further illustrated with specific examples as follows:

#### (1) ACTION FOR DESTINATION/GOAL

- (a). Mary has the desire to become a French teacher in the future.
- (b). Henry is a man of many wants about money.

When using the metonymy ACTION FOR DESTINATION/GOAL in verb-to-noun conversion, the action represents the destination or goal of this action. In example (1)a, the verb *desire* is converted into a noun, which describes Mary’s goal of being a teacher. And in example (1)b, *want* is changed into a noun from a verb, which describes Henry’s goal of having a lot of money.

#### (2) ACTION FOR AGENT

- (a). He was a cook who worked in a restaurant in the past.

(b). The man looks like a tramp.

The metonymy ACTION FOR AGENT underlies the meaning that the action can be used to represent the agent of the action. In sentence (2)a, the verb *cook* is converted into a noun denoting the person who cooks food or whose job is cooking. In sentence (2)b, the verb *tramp* is used as a noun which means a person with no home or job who travels from place to place or a man who is tramping.

### (3) ACTION FOR OBJECT

(a). The export in China is increasing at present.

(b). I made a great find in a small bookstore yesterday.

In the case of the metonymy ACTION FOR OBJECT, the action will stand for the object of the action that is the thing or person towards which the action is performed. In sentence (3)a, the verb *export* is converted into a noun which means the products that are exported to other countries. In sentence (3)b the verb *find* becomes a noun which means the great books that were found by "I".

### (4) ACTION FOR RESULT

(a). I saw severe burns on his feet.

(b). The fall from her horse made her legs broken.

When employing the metonymy ACTION FOR RESULT in verb-to-noun conversion, action stands for the results or effects of the action. In sentence (4)a, the verb *burn* is converted into a noun which means an injury caused by burning or the result or product of burning. In the second sentence, the (4)b, the verb *fall* is used to describe the effect of falling, which causes leg injury, so the original verb becomes a noun.

### (5) ACTION FOR MANNER

(a). The boy gives the door a hard kick, so his mother scolds him.

(b). Her classmates often recognize her by her walk.

In the case of the metonymy ACTION FOR MANNER, the action describes the manner of the action, which is the way of acting or behaving. In sentence (5)a, the verb *kick* is used to refer to the way of kicking. The boy's mother scolds him because he kicks the door too rudely and his behavior is impolite. In sentence (5)b, the verb *walk* is used as a noun to refer to the way of walking. Her classmates can recognize her through her walk because she has a special way of walking.

### (6) ACTION FOR TIME

(a). On my last travel, I encountered my friend Bob.

(b). It is her first visit to Beijing and she makes friends with many people.

Every action takes place at a specific time. The metonymy ACTION FOR TIME underlies that the time of the action performed is represented by the action itself. In sentence (6)a, the verb *travel* is converted into a noun which denotes the time of traveling and at that time, "I" met Bob. In sentence (6)b, the verb *visit* becomes a noun which refers to the time of visiting. When first visiting Beijing, "she" makes many friends.

### (7) ACTION FOR PLACE

(a). The man has gotten off at the last stop.

(b). I feel comfortable and relax in this mountain retreat.

Similar to time, an action usually takes place in a specific place. And in the case of the ACTION FOR PLACE metonymy, the action can stand for the place of the action performed. In sentence (7)a, the verb *stop* is

converted into a noun which means a place where a bus or train stops regularly for passengers to get on or off. The man stopped his moving process in the place of a stop. In sentence (7)b, the verb *retreat* changes into a noun referring to a quiet or isolated place that you go to in order to rest or to do things in private. In the retreat, a special place in the mountain, “I” can keep relax and rest.

#### (8) ACTION FOR INSTRUMENT

(a). I tucked some plastic wrap around the bread to keep them fresh.

(b). There is no effective cure for AIDS.

When using the ACTION FOR INSTRUMENT metonymy in verb-to-noun conversion, the action is used to represent the instrument for performing the action. In sentence (8)a, the verb *wrap* becomes a noun to denote the instrument that is used for wrapping things in. In sentence (8)b, the verb *cure* is converted into a noun which means a medicine or other treatment that cures the illness. Therefore, the noun *cure* in this sentence means the instrument for curing AIDS.

### 3.3 The Cognitive and Semantic Factors Affecting Verb-to-Noun Conversion

There are some cognitive factors involve in verb-to-noun conversion. In order to further analyze these factors, we need to utilize the concept of profile. The profile of an expression can represent the particular focus of attention within the conceptual basis of the expression. What is profiled in a scene is what we pay more attention to (Langacker, 2008). According to Langacker, what distinguishes verbs and nouns is that they profile different aspects of a scene. Verbs profile processes while nouns profile things (Langacker, 1987). If we pay more attention to a thing, a lexical item becomes a noun. On the contrary, if we focus on the whole process, a lexical item becomes a verb. Hence, from the point of view of cognitive linguistic, the conversion between a verb and a noun is actually the result of a shift of profile in a scene (Augustyn, 2013). So, when we focus on the thing, while the lexical item is originally a verb, we will use conversion to change its word class into a noun through the WHOLE FOR PARTS metonymy.

Semantically, the semantic content of nouns contains the semantic component of action, and the semantic content of verbs also contains the semantic components of things. So the meanings of nouns and verbs are mutually inclusive. This is because action and things are two parts that are difficult to separate from each other just like a person and his walk. Specifically, the formation of things requires a specific action, and the characteristics and functions of things can only appear under the influence of certain actions. At the same time, there is no action that occurs abstractly and independently without things, because actions need things to be their carriers (Xu, 2001). As a result of the mutually contained and interrelated relationships between nouns and verbs, the ACTION ICM involves many components about nouns. And because metonymic mappings are the cognitive processes involved in ICMs, the WHOLE FOR PARTS metonymy can operate within the ACTION ICM.

### Conclusion

Conversion is a crucial way of word-formation in English. Metonymic mapping can be defined as a cognitive process in which one concept is used to refer to the other concept within the same conceptual domain. The verb-to-noun conversion is actually the result of metonymic mappings that operates in a special type of ICM, the ACTION ICM. The ACTION ICM consists of many components, including, DESTINATION/GOAL, MANNER, TIME, OBJECT, AGENT, INSTRUMENT, PLACE, and RESULT, and these components can be

represented by the whole action through THE WHOLE ACTION FOR PARTS OF THE ACTION ICM metonymy. Specifically, In the case of the ACTION FOR DESTINATION/ GOAL metonymy, the goal or aim of doing an action is represented by the action. When employing the metonymy of ACTION FOR AGENT, the action stands for the agent performing that action. Thirdly, in the case of the metonymy ACTION FOR OBJECT, the action represents the object of that action. Fourthly, if the metonymy of ACTION FOR RESULT is applied, the action stands for the effects, results or products of doing the action. In the case of ACTION FOR MANNER metonymy, the action is used to refer to the manner of doing the action, or to be more precise, the way of behaving when performing the action. An action usually takes place at a certain time, so the action can stand for the time of performing an action within ACTION ICM through using the metonymy of ACTION FOR TIME. An action is often performed in a particular place. In ACTION FOR PLACE metonymy, the action stands for the place where the action takes place. When the ACTION FOR INSTRUMENT metonymy is employed, the action represents the instrument required for doing the action.

This study also investigates the cognitive and semantic factors that affect verb-to-noun conversion. Firstly, it is found that the major cognitive factor is the change of profile in cognitive construal. Verbs often profile processes or the relationship between entities, while nouns often profile things. Therefore, if more attention is paid to things rather than processes or relationships, a verb will be converted into a noun. Secondly, the semantic factor is related to the mutually inclusive relationship between meanings of verbs and nouns, that is to say, things and actions of things cannot be separated from one another. Because the formation of things requires the function of actions and actions need things to become their carriers, the semantic content of verbs and nouns are interrelated, which is the semantic basis for verb-to-noun conversion.

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