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BACK TO BASICS: A COGNITIVE ANALYSIS OF CONVERSION DE-ADJECTIVAL NOMINALISATION IN ENGLISH

The purpose of the present article is to investigate, within the cognitive grammar framework, morphological motivation of adjectives functioning as nouns and factors that determine their change of grammatical category.

Cognitive grammar (Langacker 1987, 1991a) makes a broad distinction between only two kinds of linguistic expressions called predications – those that designate things and those that designate relations. Although the classification is so minimal, compared with the traditional approach where more classes are distinguished, there is still a possibility for members of one class to move to the other. The article is concerned with formal mechanisms of the process as well as finding answers to the following questions: *Under what circumstances and what kind of **atemporal relations** (i.e., adjectives) can become **things** (i.e., nouns) without undergoing any affixation process? What are the basic types of de-adjectival conversion nominalisations? What is the meaning of so derived lexical items?* As semantics seems to play a major part in the process of nominalisation, an attempt at finding some satisfactory solutions to these problems cannot be made without reference to the linguistic theory in which it received due recognition, or without coming back to the basic truths that are most easily overlooked.

Basic terms

I will start by briefly reviewing some basic theoretical concepts as set forth in Langacker (1987, 1991a). Cognitive grammar assumes that lexicon, morphology and syntax form a continuum of symbolic units, divided only arbitrarily into separate components. Langacker (1991b:1) argues that *it is ultimately as pointless to analyze grammatical units without reference to their semantic value as to write a dictionary which omits the meanings of its lexical*

items. Meaning is not defined by formal, logic rules based on truth conditions, but on the contrary – a conceptual view of meaning, in which semantic structure is equated with conceptual structure, has been adopted. Semantic structures are referred to as **linguistic predications**.

The theory posits that the meaning of a predication involves more than just its objective content – i.e. speakers have the inherent ability to construe conceived situations in different ways for purposes of linguistic coding. This ability, which is regarded as fundamental to understanding grammatical organisation, is known as **imagery**. Various dimensions of imagery are recognised, the most important of which is the profile/base distinction. Linguistic predications are defined via the imposition of a figure/ground organisation on one or more **cognitive domains** (or bases) of varying degrees of complexity. The base for a linguistic predication is its domain. An aspect singled out of the base that a predication designates is called the **profile**, and the relation between the profile and base determines the semantic value of a linguistic expression. Different expressions can invoke the same domain, but nevertheless contrast semantically by choosing alternate profiles within the common base. **Schemas** are generalisations extracted from specific structures. They categorise such structures through relations of elaboration or extension, and are used for creating novel expressions and usage. Within the profile, one entity is usually given special prominence with respect to other profiled entities. This entity, the **trajector**, can be regarded as the figure in a relational profile, and prominent parts of the profile other than the trajector are called **landmarks**.

Basic categorisation problems

First of all, let us think about what makes a word a noun or an adjective and how the same word can, in one context, be recognised as an adjective, while in another, it changes its syntactic category not experiencing any alterations to its form and becomes a noun. Cognitive linguistics rejected the classical view of categorisation which claims that categories are clearly defined by means of binary features, have precise boundaries, and all their members have equal status. It presupposes that any entity that exhibits all the defining features of a category is a representative of that category. By contrast, cognitive linguists have adopted a prototype view of grammatical categories, according to which, some members of a category are better examples of it while others can have a marginal status; as a consequence, boundaries of categories have become fuzzy and blurred. Just as there are central and peripheral representatives of the conceptual category FURNITURE,¹ the same holds true for a linguistic category like NOUN

¹ For detailed discussion of prototype categories see Taylor (1989).

whose membership is graded. Although the centre of the category NOUN lies far away from the centre of the category ADJECTIVE (one prototypically designating a discrete, concrete, three dimensional entity, the other indicating a quality of a person or thing referred to by a NOUN), there is a certain degree of overlapping between the two seemingly independent categories. Colour terms and nationalities (discussed further in the article), both likely to function as NOUNS and ADJECTIVES, can serve as examples.

Langacker (1987:189) describes NOUNS as linguistic units which profile *things*, where *thing* is defined as *a region in some domain*. Persons and objects are bounded regions in the domain of three-dimensional space, while mass concrete nouns profile unbounded regions. Because physical objects occupy bounded regions in three-dimensional space, expressions which designate such objects qualify as count nouns. Contrasted with NOUNS, there are ADJECTIVES, defined as linguistic units which profile *atemporal relations*. It is possible for a *relation* to become a *thing* by a projection of the thing-schema on to non-spatial domains; as a consequence, linguistic units which profile regions in other domains, such as colour or nationality, get included in the NOUN category. The process can be called **category extension** and is semantic in nature due to the fact that it is the resemblance of meaning between two members of distinct categories which permits different significations to get associated, resulting in the shift of category.

The basics of conversion

According to Centarowska (1993:14), the term **conversion** was most probably first introduced by Sweet in his *New English Grammar* published in Oxford in 1892. It denoted the taking on by word of a function which is not its basic one. Sweet used the notion of conversion with reference to syntactic transposition of words like the nominal use of the adjective *poor* in the phrase *the poor*. Quirk (1972:1009) describes conversion as *derivational process in which no addition of an affix takes place while an item is adapted or converted to a new word-class*. It is interesting to note that in Quirk's study the process of conversion is treated as gradual, in which a distinction is made between full and partial conversion. Quirk claims that in expressions such as *the poor*, *the wealthy*, *the ignorant*, *the wicked*, etc., the adjective is only partially converted into a noun as it functions as the head of the noun phrase, but syntactically it behaves like a noun rather than an adjective.

Bauer (1983:226) pays attention to the importance of conversion for the English language:

Conversion is an extremely productive way of producing new words in English. There do not appear to be morphological restrictions on the forms that can undergo conversion, so that

compounds, derivatives, acronyms, blends, clipped forms are all acceptable inputs to the conversion process.

Štekauer (1998:11), on the other hand, observes that *the most striking feature of conversion is that it always linguistically expresses the conceptual recategorization of the extra-linguistic reality.* According to him the basic features of conversion in English are as follows:

- a) conceptual recategorisation,
- b) unanalysable onomasiological level,
- c) change of word-class,
- d) close semantic affinity between conversion pair members,
- e) phonematic/orthographic identity of fundamental forms,
- f) change of paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations at the system level (langue).

Since the phenomenon of conversion presupposes so many aspects, different terminology has been applied by linguists to underline its multifarious nature. Other terms used interchangeably, although having different connotations, are: zero-derivation, zero-affixation, bare nominalisation and paradigmatic derivation.

Basic mechanisms of de-adjectival nominalisation

As it has already been observed in the present article, cognitive grammar explains nominalisation in terms of semantic extension. To understand the mechanism of the process, we will first have to look more closely at the notions of NOUN characterised as a *thing* and ADJECTIVE perceived as a *simple atemporal relation*. We can assume after Langacker (1991b:74) that:

[...] most broadly the meanings of linguistic expressions divide themselves into 'nominal' vs. 'relational' predications. These two types do not necessarily differ in the nature of their intrinsic content, but rather in how this content is construed and profiled. A nominal predication presupposes the interconnections among a set of conceived entities, and profiles the region thus established. On the other hand, a relational predication presupposes a set of entities, and profiles the interconnections among these entities.

Thus, a noun profiles a thing, i.e. a region in some domain, where a region is characterised as a set of interconnected entities, whereas an adjective constituting the category of relational predication puts interconnections in profile (rather than simply presupposing them as part of the base). Semantic extension operates by means of profile shift. In de-adjectival nominalisation, some facet of the relational predication is reified (i.e., construed as a thing) and put in profile, while the relational profile of the adjective gets demoted to the unprofiled base of predication. Interconnections function as the most important elements of adjectives. They and the participating entities are highlighted in the case of relations, while in the conceptualisation of things both types of elements, i.e.

relations and entities, remain part of the unprofiled base. In the case of de-adjectival nominalisation a shift in the atemporal relation's profile takes place. It means that the relations between the trajector and landmark, constituting the essence of its category, are not in focus of attention, but rather it is shifted to the whole region. The process can be illustrated by the following examples:

(1)

(a) I don't mind that *purple* curtain.

(b) *Purple* doesn't go well with that curtain.

In (1a) *purple* shows characteristics of an adjective because it profiles a relationship between the trajector elaborated by the thing *curtain* and the landmark which serves as the elaboration site for *purple*. In (1b), on the other hand, *purple* constitutes a higher level of conceptual organisation as it designates a bounded region in colour space. The above examples seem to prove that atemporal relations can be transformed into things not by changing conceptual content, but rather by their profiling of interconnections.

Basic typology

When we talk about adjectives in English that can or cannot undergo the process of conversion nominalisation, for the needs of this particular article, we can distinguish two basic classes. The first one includes adjectives that function as heads of noun phrases and which Bertrand (1995:49) calls **invariable adjectival nouns**, the other one, following the same author, can be referred to as **variable adjectival nouns**.

Class 1

The poor have been causing great concern.

The rich live in large houses.

The corrupt will not be liable for prosecution.

Class 2

Americans have become the strongest nation in the world.

There are no *blondes* in my group.

He is a *major* in the U.S. army.

Nominalisations belonging to Class 1 do not inflect for number or for genitive case, they take a definite determiner, have generic reference and take plural concord, whereas those in Class 2 can have both plural and singular forms, can be inflected for the genitive and take indefinite determiners. Analysing the above examples in a broader perspective, it seems justified to treat the process of de-adjectival nominalisation as a continuum, in which on one end of the scale there is a prototypical adjective, and on the other end a prototypical noun.

Perceived in this way, Class 1 constitutes an intermediate stage of conversion from an adjective into a noun, having characteristics of both, while in Class 2 the features typical of a noun are more salient. In fact, within the very boundaries (themselves opaque and fuzzy) of the two classes a prototypical structure can be observed. When we speak of *the rich* or *the aged*, we refer, as Quirk (1985:138) describes it, to *certain well-established classes of persons*. So it seems that the most prototypical Class 1 members designate entire groups of people sharing the same:

- **nationality** (*the French, the Dutch, the Welsh, etc.*),
- **age** (*the old, the young, the elderly, the aged, etc.*),
- **social status** (*the unemployed, the poor, the homeless, the famous, the rich, the underprivileged, etc.*),
- **physical state** (*the blind, the deaf, the dumb, the handicapped, the disabled, the sick, the wounded, the living, the dead, etc.*),
- **features of character** (*the brave, the meek, the faint-hearted, etc.*).

All of these refer to people having in common some distinguishing characteristics which single them out from the rest. It is also possible to create, along these lines, further conversions taking as a reference other features, although they will definitely be less prototypical and the noun status of many of them can be questioned, e.g.:

- **height** (*the tall, the short, the middle-height, etc.*),
- **physical aspect** (*the slim, the fat, the pretty, the ugly, etc.*),
- **emotional state** (*the happy, the funny, the scared, etc.*),
- **intellectual capacities** (*the silly, the sensible, the clever, etc.*).

The reason why many of them are less acceptable is that people with these characteristics do not form natural and compact classes, which means that somebody being fat or pretty is, in most situations, not enough to be perceived as belonging to some special group. So it seems that the features are too common as well as transitory (allowing for the possibility of being changed – e.g. somebody happy can become sad, or somebody fat can lose weight) to sufficiently separate their members from the rest. This way of generating peripheral extensions from the centre of the prototype can be very productive. Cognitive grammar accommodates the projection of grammatical rules to novel expressions through the same basic devices required to handle the specialised use and figurative extension of lexical items. An interesting example, taken from a *Business Week* magazine advertisement, is quoted by Bertrand (1995:58):

(2) The new Lexus. What *the driven* will want to drive.

The advertisement refers to the normally chauffeur-driven executives who, with the Lexus, will want to actually take over the driving. The advertising trick is to make ordinary people want to feel they can identify with top executives if

they buy this make of car. In this example *the driven* is a group of people blessed with exceptional wealth who are very different from the common mortal. In the same way, *the rich* is a way for ordinary people to describe a very exceptional and inaccessible class, with the added undercurrent of envy and resentment towards a group felt to be very different to oneself. Bertrand (1995:59) concludes that *it is the IAN² form that facilitates and stresses this distancing from the group described*.

Semantic extension can also operate in a different direction leading to the creation of Class 1 de-adjectival conversion nominalisations referring not to groups of people, but rather to groups of abstract ideas or phenomena, e.g.:

(3)

(a) He has always been fascinated by *the supernatural*.

(b) She thought about it as something very ordinary, very down-to-earth, far from *the philosophical*.

(c) Have you heard *the latest*? John is getting married.

Although here the first parameter of Quirk's (1985:138) definition – *classes of persons* – has changed, the second one, which is the necessity of sharing common *well-established* features, has stayed the same. Other examples of Class 1 border cases include the following:

(4) The young students found the course difficult, *the older* found it easy.

Here, *the older* does not have generic reference and is elliptical for *the older students*, situating it closer than other Class 1 representatives to the adjective end on the conversion scale.

There are Class 1 members that unlike nouns can be premodified by adverbs (*the extremely old, the very wise*) and others that like nouns can be premodified by adjectives (*the humble poor*). Quirk (1985:251) observes that premodification by adverbs seems to be easier than premodification by adjectives. On the other hand, postmodification by relative clauses (*the old who resist change*) and postmodification by prepositional phrases (*the young in spirit*) is characteristic of nouns. Another reason for Class 1 members to be placed closer to the adjective end of the scale than the representatives of Class 2 is the fact that, in contrast with the latter, they can be inflected for comparison (*the younger*). Still, the class is by no means monolithic as many of its members do not share these qualities (**the more unemployed*).

Although central representatives of the category require the generic *the*, peripheral instances can function without it:

² IAN stands for 'invariable adjectival nouns' and roughly corresponds to Class 1 adjectival nominalisations.

(5)

(a) He is acceptable to both *old* and *young*.

(b) Britain's 3 million *unemployed* may soon start to protest.

(c) There were 28 *dead* in the accident.

(d) The issue is of interest to most *French*.

There are also examples where Class 1 members, similarly to Class 2, can take singular concord, e.g.:

(6) The accused was led into the dock.

Class 2 nominalisations refer to :

– **nationality** (*Americans, Italians*),

– **regional origin** (*Texans, Europeans, Spartans*),

– **religion** (*Catholics, Moslems, Puritans, Protestants*),

– **political party** (*Conservatives, Republicans, Radicals*),

– **health problems** (*anorexics, alcoholics, hypochondriacs*).

Treating the above examples as more or less central, or prototypical, we can find further extensions of the subcategories. Langacker (1991b:194) observes that:

[...] *coherent mental experience is structured with reference to previous experience. The activation of a previously established cognitive routine serves as standard (S) for an act of comparison in which some facet of current experience functions as target (T): to the extent that S>T approximates zero, the overall event is one of recognition, and T is thereby interpreted as an instance of S.*

In the quoted examples more central class representatives serve as models for the initiation of novel nominalisations, for instance, the criterion of **regional origin** can be broadened to include **ethnic origin** (*whites, blacks*), **language community** (*Hispanics*), or even **real life/fiction characters** (*goodies, baddies*). Other representatives might constitute miscellaneous groups of people like *vegetarians, militants, intellectuals, blondes, brunettes, homosexuals, gays, relatives, mortals, humans*. These instantiations elaborate the schema in different ways along various parameters. Just like in the case of Class 1, new extensions can be created changing the profiled domain from humans into non-animates: *chemicals, basics, colds*. Finally, some nominalisations can refer both to humans and non-animates, e.g.:

major – (a) ‘an army officer’, (b) ‘the main course’,

principal – (a) ‘a person with the highest authority’, (b) ‘an amount of money lent’,

black – (a) ‘an ethnic group member’, (b) ‘a colour’.

Semantic extension lies at the core of all possible instances studied as conversion de-adjectival nominalisation. In fact, a prototypical adjective can serve as a point of departure for extensions which can be schematic for others. Perceived in this way, the linguistic phenomenon of de-adjectival conversion

nominalisation can be described as a gradual bounding of interconnections within the atemporal relation. Different phases of the process can be identified, Class 1 and Class 2 being important landmarks along the way, situated respectively closer and further from the point of departure and further and closer to their destination which is a bounded region, or a prototypical noun. Nominalisation can be illustrated as a continuum by the following examples:³

Adjective	Class 1	Class 2	Noun
German nation	the German	Germans	German (language)
white people	the white	Whites	white (colour)
basic things	the basics	Basics	Basic (program)
good people/things	the good	Good	good (goodness)

Although Class 1 and Class 2 representatives can both refer to the domains of **nationality** and **ethnic origin**, they are perceived in a different way in both cases. *The German* and *the white* have a generic reference and comprise the whole national or ethnic class of people, whereas *Germans* and *whites* designate individual representatives of the nation or ethnic group. The difference is very similar to that between mass nouns and count nouns as it has been discussed by Langacker (1991a:79). Analysing the expressions *gravel* and *pebbles*, he notes that although both nouns can refer to the same entity, the speaker perceives *gravel* as a heap of undifferentiated instances of small stones, while *pebbles* (which can be the same objects) are seen as a replicate mass of numerous instances of small stones.

In the foregoing analysis we have made an attempt at applying the cognitive grammar apparatus to the linguistic phenomenon of de-adjectival conversion nominalisation in English. Although only very basic examples have been discussed, the reader could get an idea of the scope of the problems involved. Our goal was to present conversion nominalisation as a symbolic resource providing the speakers with a productive word formation tool.

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³ The linear way of presenting the data in the table, concise though it may seem, is definitely an oversimplification. The very noun *white* has five separate dictionary entries: (1) a white colour or pigment, (2) white clothes or material, (3) the substance that surrounds the yolk of an egg, (4) a member of a race, (5) a part of the eye. *The basics*, on the other hand, can be situated half way between Class 1 and Class 2 as it possesses only the plural form.

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