Conversion/Zero-Derivation: 2000-2025

Salvador Valera

1. Introduction
2. The Concept
   Setting and Relevance
3. Background
   Theories/Tradition: Transflexion, Zeroes, No Conversion
4. Definitions
   Word class, Identity, and a Diachronic Aside
5. Directionality
6. Semantics
   Metonymy, Type Coercion
7. Other
   Relationship, Productivity and Constraints, Degrees
8. Today

1. Introduction

'[…] a process whereby a word is turned into a distinct, but semantically and/or grammatically closely related, word without any change of form'

e.g.	*bottle*	>	*to bottle*	noun-to-verb
	to go	>	[have a] *go*	verb-to-noun
	clear	>	*to clear*	adjective-to-verb

2.   The concept

'[…] a process whereby a **word** is turned into a distinct, but **semantically** and/or **grammatically** closely related, word without any change of **form**'

Setting
Conversion engages several levels of language description at the same time. Following Kastovsky (1977), conversion lies '[a]t the crossroads of morphology, syntax, semantics, and the lexicon'.

As a result, the definition raises questions at a number of levels and, despite the simplicity of the terms, many are still without a unanimous answer:
   i)   for substantial differences in the more general question of the interpretation of how language is operationalized,
   ii) because each of the fields involved at the crossroads views this process from a different angle,
   iii) for the various manifestations of conversion (or not),
   iv) …

2.   The concept

'[…] a process whereby a word is turned into a distinct, but semantically and/or grammatically closely related, word without any change of form'

Relevance

Implications of the description of conversion are particularly prominent in:
i)   morphological theory,
ii)   lexicology,
iii) in grammar (cross-cutting concept, cf. Quirk et al. 1985),
iv)   in language theory:
   a. the systemic nature of morphological zeroes: Inflectional? Derivational?,
   b. the limits of (the identity of) words in their relation with syntax (the interaction between words and syntax),
   c. the place of word-classes in the description of words and of grammar, and how it is to be understood,
   d. the conflict between economy of expression and transparency in the formalization of the linguistic sign,
   e. the role of some figures speech in word formation.

3. Background

Revisions: Štekauer (1996)
             Bauer and Huddleston (2002)
             Manova and Dressler (2005)
             Carstairs-McCarthy (2006)
             …

Revisions not always echoed: 'A revolution is needed' (Bauer 2024)

Flexible interpretations of the conditions set for conversion in the literature[1], for:
    i)   the value given to formal changes in presumed conversion,
    ii)   the nature of word-classes,
    iii)   the specificities of the identification of word-classes in each language,
    iv)   …

[1] Word-class change + formal identity

3. Background

Revisions: Štekauer (1996)
                 Bauer and Huddleston (2002)
                 Manova and Dressler (2005)
                 Carstairs-McCarthy (2006)

                 …

Revisions not always echoed: 'A revolution is needed' (Bauer 2024)

Flexible interpretations of the conditions set for conversion in the literature[1]:
   i)   word-class change and formal identity (canonical),
   ii)   word-class change but **no** formal identity (stress shift but root-based
          conversion too),
   iii)   **no** word-class change and formal identity (type coercion),
   iv)   **no** word-class change and **no** formal identity (**!!**)

[1] Word-class change + formal identity

3.   Background

Theories/Tradition

    Transflexion (Slavic languages) '[…] result[s] in similar changes as the ones found in conversion by way of a grammatical morphemes' (Ivanová 2016: 22).

    Derivational output signalled by inflectional morphology reassessed, particularly in highly inflectional languages.

3. Background

Theories/Tradition

Transflexion (Slavic languages) '[…] result[s] in similar changes as the ones found in conversion by way of a grammatical morphemes' (Ivanová 2016: 22).

Derivational output signaled by inflectional morphology reassessed, particularly in highly inflectional languages.

Zeroes   e.g.   *review*   *review·   ed*

put   *put·   Ø*

system   *system·   ize*

question   *to question·Ø*

3. Background

Theories/Tradition

Transflexion (Slavic languages) '[…] result[s] in similar changes as the ones found in conversion by way of a grammatical morphemes' (Ivanová 2016: 22).

Derivational output signaled by inflectional morphology reassessed, particularly in highly inflectional languages.

Zeroes' comeback: Dahl and Fábregas (2017)

                    Iordăchioaia and Melloni (2023)

                    Iordăchioaia (to appear)

                    Fábregas (to appear)

Not always in defense of the concept:

                    Cetnarowska (2023)

                    Don (2005, 2023).

Zero morph contested for the proliferation of zeroes and their correspondence with a wide semantic range.

Zeroes allowed in V>N conversion, but not in N>V conversion.

3. Background

Theories/Tradition

Non-dynamic approaches:

Conversion as a rule of lexical creation: an entry is recreated as a separate, new one, even if modulated on the former.

Conversion as a paradigm shift that enables new fits in terms of paradigms and syntactic frames, and new inflectional capabilities (not by addition of a morpheme).

Conversion as word-class underspecification, or precategoriality: roots are fundamentally not specified for word class (syntax specifies the word class).

4. Definitions

Word class. Identity

(A type of) morphological conversion can be described for a language or not, according to:
i) the flexibility of the conditions under which it is defined:
    a. word-class change (hard to attest, esp. if central and peripheral membership are allowed)

4. Definitions

Word class. Identity

(A type of) morphological conversion can be described for a language or not, according to:
i) the flexibility of the conditions under which it is defined:
  a. word-class change (hard to attest, esp. if central and peripheral membership are allowed)
     ➡ Side-effect: partial vs. central conversion

4. Definitions

Word class. Identity

(A type of) morphological conversion can be described for a language or not, according to:

i) the flexibility of the conditions under which it is defined:
   a. word-class change (hard to attest, esp. if central and peripheral membership are allowed)

   → Side-effect: partial vs. central conversion

   → Additional questions: which level of word-class identity
                             (primary vs. secondary)?

4. Definitions

Word class. Identity

(A type of) morphological conversion can be described for a language or not, according to:

i) the flexibility of the conditions under which it is defined:

    a. word-class change (hard to attest, esp. if central and peripheral membership are allowed)

        Side-effect: partial vs. central conversion

        Additional questions: which level of word-class identity

                                               (primary vs. secondary)?

    b. formal identity (what counts?)   Tournier (1985: 174)

                                              Hockett (1994: 173)

                                              Iacobini (2000)

                                              Manova & Dressler 2005: 67ff)

                                              Carstairs-McCarthy (2006: 752-753)

4. Definitions

Word class. Identity

(A type of) morphological conversion can be described for a language or not, according to:
i)   the flexibility of the conditions under which it is defined:
    a. word-class change (hard to attest, esp. if central and peripheral membership are allowed)

        → Side-effect: partial vs. central conversion
        → Additional questions: which level of word-class identity
                                      (primary vs. secondary)?

    b. formal identity (what counts?)

ii) whether types of conversion are allowed (e.g. root-based), and which types. This results in a more accurate description of conversion: It is in accordance with what each language allows.
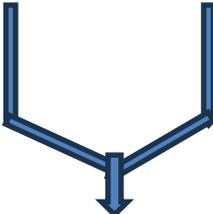
4. Definitions

Word class. Identity

(A type of) morphological conversion can be described for a language or not, according to:

i)   the flexibility of the conditions under which it is defined:

    a.   word-class change (hard to attest, esp. if central and peripheral membership are allowed)

        Side-effect: partial vs. central conversion

        Additional questions: which level of word-class identity
                                    (primary vs. secondary)?

    b.   formal identity (what counts?)

ii)   whether types of conversion are allowed (e.g. root-based), and which types. Major types of conversion (paradigm-restraining vs. non-paradigmatically marked, e.g. in adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions)?

4. Definitions

A diachronic aside

If types of conversion are not allowed according to formal identity:

O.E.	?: *luf·u*^{N} *luf·ian*^{V}
Mi.E	Diachronic Levelling
Mod.E.	Levelling vs. conversion: *love*^{N} *love*^{V} $\neq$ *telephone*^{N} ⟵ *telephone*^{V}

If types of conversion are allowed according to formal identity:

O.E.	Root-based conversion: *luf·u*^{N} ⟵ *luf·ian*^{V}
Mi.E	Diachronic levelling
Mod.E.	Word-based conversion: *love*^{N} ⟵ *love*^{V} $\sim$ *telephone*^{N} ⟵ *telephone*^{V}

5. Directionality

Methods

Chronological attestation of historical priority
Marchand (1964):   Semantic dependence
                        Semantic pattern, range   Bram (2011)
                        Frequency
                        Distribution

Criteria in other languages (Don 2005 for Dutch, Ševčíková 2024 for Czech, …)

Plank (2010):   The relevance of senses

Ruz (2025):   The relevance of senses does not help.

6. Semantics

Semantic range
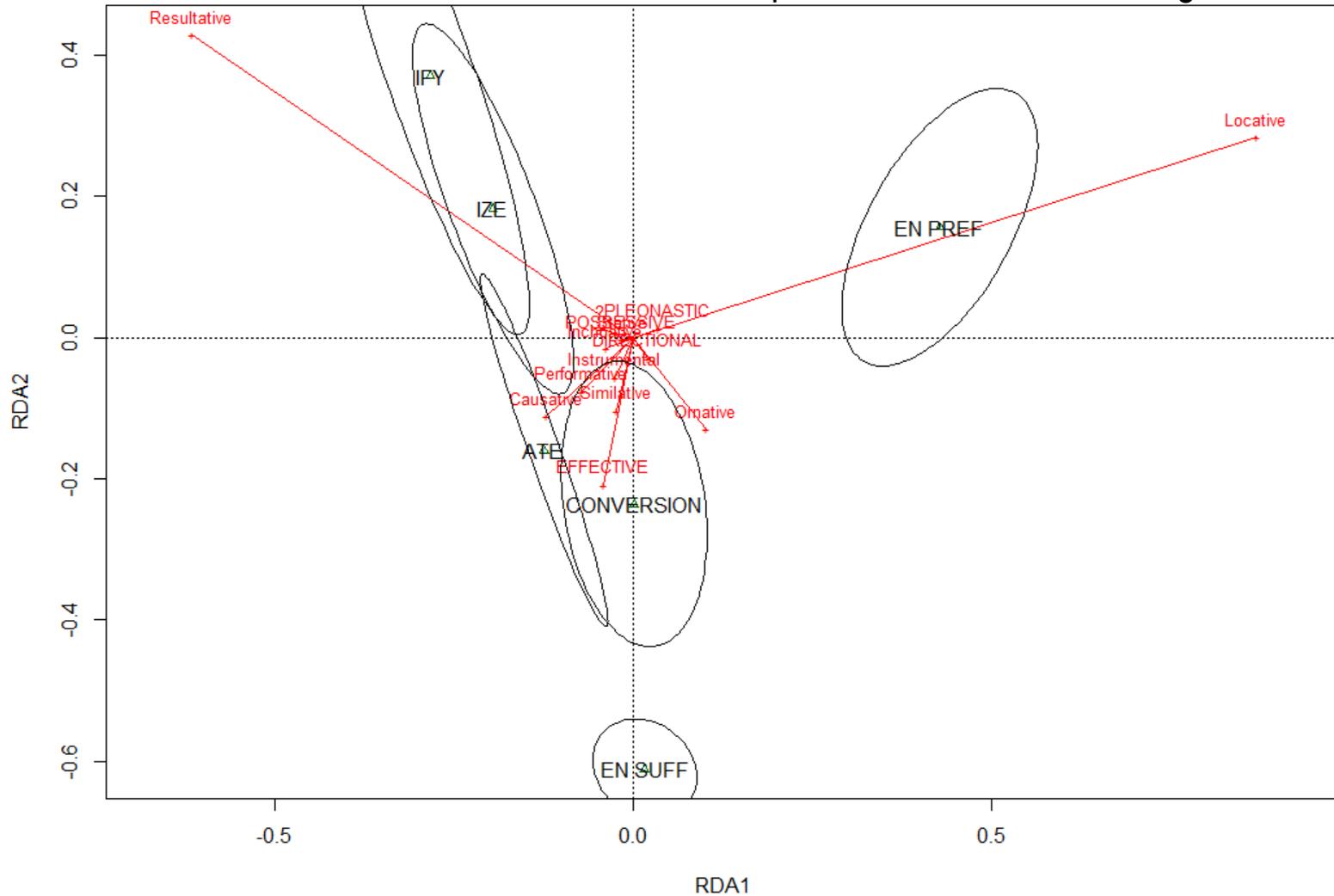
Semantic categories cited in the literatura for N > V:

Locative	'to put into N'
Ornative	'to provide with N'
Causative	'to cause to be N'
Resultative	'to turn into N'
Inchoative	'to become N'
Performative	'to behave as N'
Similative	'to be like N'
Instrumental	'to use (as) a N'
Privative	'to remove N'
Stative	'to be N'

Used for description of the polysemanticity, and for other purposes too.
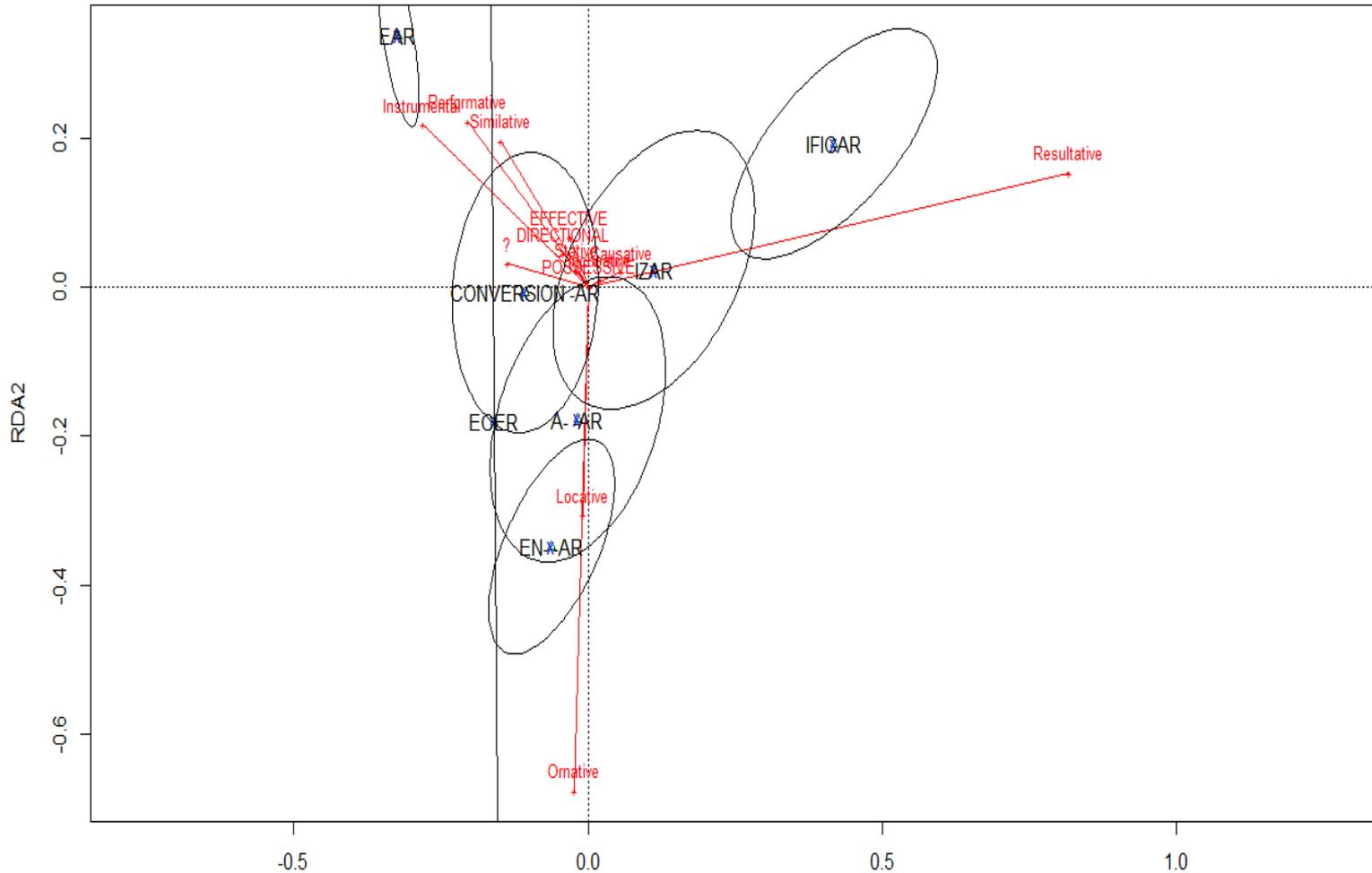
6. Semantics

Semantic range

A representation of RDA for English data

6. Semantics

Semantic range

A representation of RDA for Spanish data

6. Semantics

Type coercion

Nouns:	Mass/count
	…
Verbs:	Transitive/intransitive
	…
Adjectives:	Gradable/non-gradable
	…

'[…] a type of category change which involves constructional coercion [vs.] a word formation process' (Cetnarowska to appear).

6. Semantics

Metonymy

Cited extensively: Kövecses and Radden (1998)
                       Dirven (1999)
                       Radden and Kövecses (1999)
                       …
                        Cetnarowska (2011)
                        Kuczok (2014)
                        Bauer (2017)
                       …

Questions:
- Separate from morphological processes (like syntactic processes are), intertwined such that '[w]ord-formation processes, as well as syntactic processes, can be metonymically motivated' (Cetnarowska to appear), or openly viewing semantic change (as in noun/verb conversion)
- Based on cognitive patterns (Benczes and Szabó to appear) vs. more irregular and idiosyncratic (Bauer 2018).

…

7. Other

Relationship

Relation of: Systematic morphological process
              Lexical dependence
              Formal identity
              Grammatical contrast

Homomorphy (Quirk et al. 1985)?

Really necessary?

              Various types

7. Other

Productivity and constraints

Reassessed as a productive process (esp. if types are allowed):
      Bauer (2001)
      Plag (2003)
      Don (2005)
      Lieber (2005)
      Bauer, Lieber and Plag (2013).

Phonological, morphological, syntactic (non-paradigmatic cases), semantic

      'I'll have to *perspective* that'   (?)

7. Other

Degrees of conversion

Partial vs. full conversion again in the literature:
       Cetnarowska (to appear)
       Soares Rodrigues (to appear)
       Ševčíková and Pakerys (to appear).

Types/sources of conversion?
    e.g. syntactic conversion: Syntactic pattern   *The* [Adj] *are*…
                           Frequent use
                           Lexicalization   *The hopefuls are*…

    Nominalizations

    Participles

8. Today

Conversion is handled most successfully at a language-specific level.

Resistance to require full formal identity has been/is being overcome.

Nature of the input (citation form, inflected form, etc.) emerges as most relevant.

Word classes no longer viewed as strict, universal categories, so categorial shift may differ cross-linguistically.

Directionality to be researched by senses.

Metonymy becomes prominent in conversion.

The semantics of conversion appears as a major point, also for directionality.

Growing evidence towards a general explanation to account for the cognitive and linguistic strategies that underlie conversion.

Many questions still to address.

8. Today

2000. Conversion and onomasiological theory. Review Article of P. Štekauer *A Theory of Conversion in English*. 1996. Frankfurt: P. Lang. *Journal of Linguistics* 36: 145–155.

2005. *Approaches to Conversion / Zero-Derivation.* Münster: Waxmann.

2006. Conversion. 2006. In K. Brown (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*. Second edition. Oxford: Elsevier; 172–175.

2006. Review of I. Mel'cuk *Aspects of the theory of morphology*, ed. by David Beck. 2007. *Folia Linguistica* 41 (1/2): 187–193.

2008. Review of G. Booij *The Grammar of Words*. *English Language and Linguistics* 12 (1): 187–193.

2010. Affixation vs. conversion: The resolution of conflicting patterns. In F. Rainer, W.U. Dressler, D. Kastovsky & H.C. Luschützky (eds.) *Variation and Change in Morphology*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: J. Benjamins; 15–32.

2011. Meaning predictability and conversion. *Folia Linguistica* 45(1): 165–199.

2012. *Word-formation in the World's Languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

2014. Conversion. In R. Lieber & P. Štekauer (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Derivational Morphology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 154–168.

8. Today

2015. Sense inheritance in English word-formation. In L. Bauer, L. Körtvélyessy & P. Štekauer (eds.), *Semantics of Complex Words*. Dordrecht: Springer; 67–84.

2017. Conversion and figurative extension of meaning. *SKASE Journal of Theoretical Linguistics* 14(2): 2–17.

2020. Semantic patterns in noun-to-verb conversion in English. In L. Körtvélyessy & P. Štekauer (eds.), *Complex Words: Advances in Morphology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 311–334.

2021. Conversion in English: homonymy, polysemy and paronymy. *English Language and Linguistics*: 1–24.

2021. Main morphological formal means (III): Approaches to conversion. In A. Fábregas, V. Acedo-Matellán, G. Armstrong, M.C. Cuervo & I. Pujol Payet (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Spanish Morphology*. London: Routledge; 40-54.

2023. The semantics of noun-to-verb zero-derivation in English and Spanish. *Zeitschrift fur Sprachwissenschaft*: 42(1): 153–180.

2025. Conversion. To appear. Chem: Springer.

8. Today

Bauer, Laurie & Salvador Valera (eds.). To appear 2025. *Morphological Conversion: Theory, Typology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Thank you!

Conversion/Zero-Derivation: 2000-2025

Laurie Bauer
Salvador Valera