

The Use of Linguistic Conversion to Signify Threat

This short paper discusses a specific linguistic usage that appears to be common within British English, possibly used now more by the older generation of senior citizens. The usage in question involves *linguistic conversion*, which refers to the changing from one word class to another. For example, if a noun becomes a verb, then this would constitute conversion and my research focuses specifically on such use of noun-verb conversion. Conversion, therefore, can be a means by which new word meanings are created. Consider the examples below:

Original word class	New word class	Example	New Meaning
Brown/adjective	Verb	Please <i>brown</i> the meat	To make brown
Butcher/noun	Verb	He <i>butchered</i> his family	To kill
Fear/verb	Noun	There was <i>fear</i> in him	Apprehension

However, the use of conversion that this paper focuses does not involve the creation of a new word per se which in turn is adopted into the language, unlike the three examples above of ‘brown’, ‘butcher’ and ‘fear’. Rather, the focus is on conversion which involves the production of *nonce words* – words which are essentially made up ‘on the spot’. In this sense, a nonce word is created and used within a given moment and does not generally become a real word. However, it is understandable to the listener (or reader) in the context in which it is used.

For example, if a speaker said that a person was ‘heavyish’, then the fact that ‘heavyish’ is not a real word (i.e. not a word found in the dictionary) would not prevent meaning from having been made. This is because the suffix *-ish* would be understood to refer to ‘approximately’, but not ‘exactly’. Perhaps this stems from the use of the suffix in conjunction with setting a time to meet others, such as ‘let’s meet at 3ish’ (i.e. ‘let’s meet around 3:00, but it could be a few minutes before or after’). Therefore, while not a true word, ‘heavyish’ would essentially be understood to mean something to the effect of ‘somewhat heavy/overweight’.

The research, therefore, is concerned specifically with noun-verb conversion in British English which itself involves the production of nonce words. The main factor, however, is that the semantic implications of such words is that they exhibit meanings akin to ‘cause harm/threaten/intimidate’; this, then, is argued to be the most relevant pragmatic

aspect of such conversion. An example will help to illustrate, albeit a personal example deriving from my maternal grandfather (who was born and raised in the Manchester area of England). One day, we were discussing politics and the (then) Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who my grandfather despised. When being asked his opinion of Margaret Thatcher's husband, Denis, the overall conversation proceeded as follows:

(1) Myself: What do you think of Denis Thatcher?

Grandfather: 'I'd *Denis* the bastard!'

In this instance, the noun 'Denis' has become a verb, with the implied meaning, broadly speaking, of 'to cause harm'/'to hurt'.

From the example, it is suggested that this use of conversion is common when the subject of conversation, inevitably a noun, causes anger in the listener and/or is controversial to him/her, in which case it is converted into a verb and the meaning as discussed above, or a similar meaning, is applied.

Another example derives from the Manchester radio station Piccadilly Key 103 in the 1990s, in which a DJ named Steve Penk would call local people in order to harass them (all done as a prank), but then reveal himself at the end. In one instance, he called a woman who had been on a recent holiday and stayed in a caravan. Steve Penk pretended to be an official from the caravan park, insisting that the woman had smoked in the caravan, which was prohibited. The woman strenuously denied the accusation. At one point the conversation went as follows:

(2) DJ: That's why we put a sticker in the caravan saying 'no smoking', you silly woman.

Caller: Don't start *silly woman* me, love.

In the example above, we can again see noun-verb conversion. While 'silly' is an adjective of course, its use as a modifier suggests that it is inseparable from the noun that follows, hence 'silly woman' becoming one unit. The meaning here of *silly woman* when spoken by the addressee on the telephone is arguably suggestive of 'threaten', thus a link to the broader meaning of 'cause harm' or by extension, upset or distress. A reasonable paraphrase might be 'don't start *threatening* me'. Based on her accent, the woman was clearly from the north of England, and while it is not necessarily straightforward to estimate

an individual's age from his/her 'phone voice' alone, the woman arguably sounded as if she were in her late 50s/early 60s. In fact, at one point in the conversation, Penk had referred to her as an 'old tart'.

Another example also illustrates this phenomenon and is taken from the show 'Derek and Clive' with Peter Cook and Dudley Moore, from an episode entitled 'this bloke came up to me'. The example involves two rival football supporters at a match. One has just been kicked to the ground for provoking the other; having been kicked he lets out a sigh of pain ('urgh!').

(3) First fan: 'Urgh!'

Second fan: 'Don't you *urgh* me, mate!'

Three examples, however, do not make a complete paper for the simple reason they cannot give a full picture. What can be demonstrated, however, is the fact that these are authentic examples which do conform to the specific properties of conversion as stated earlier, but a very esoteric usage: a noun becoming a verb in the production of a nonce word whose broad meaning refers to inflicting harm of some kind or has semantic connotations of 'threaten'. The argument, though tentative at this early stage, is that this is a usage more common to perhaps the older generation within England.

A similar example, however, can be found on the US TV comedy *Good Times*, which ran from 1974-1979. In one episode, the superintendent of a Chicago tenement, named Bookman, is annoyed at a tenant. The tenant addresses him as *Bookman*, to which he (Bookman) replies, 'Don't you *Bookman* me!' Bookman is African-American and in his late 30s – collectively, these two factors might suggest that this use of conversion is perhaps more widespread than a certain age group within the British Isles, however. In the example above, Bookman's response arguably equates to an imperative to tell the speaker not to antagonise him; his response also carries with it, however, a veiled threat, along the lines of 'don't you annoy (*Bookman*) me *or else!*'

However, the first two examples in particular that have been provided are more specifically indicative of a usage that, certainly from an anecdotal standpoint, appears to be commonly used by the older generation in England. Clearly, further investigation is needed.

Finding previous research on this subject has proven very difficult thus far, however, but the next stage will involve discussing such usage with senior citizens in the Manchester area where I currently reside, to see if indeed this is a use of conversion with which they are

familiar in terms of having used it themselves (or indeed if they still use it). This can potentially supply more illuminating examples to illustrate this phenomenon and from here, it is hoped that this in turn can help to better determine if indeed such use of conversion is attributable to the older generation within England, and perhaps if such usage is even more common to a specific region of England, in this case, the north-west.

For now, however, data has been presented on a linguistic usage which, to an extent, appears to be used for a very specific purpose within society – the future of this research will attempt to determine *who* uses such conversion and *where* they derive from.