

# **Conversion/Functional Shift: An Indispensable Tool for Creativity in English language and Literature**

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## **Abstract**

English language is dynamic and this attribute makes it outstanding among the languages existing in our world today. Although, Grammarians and Usage Panels tried tremendously to establish the standard usage of the English words, the fact remains that according to Calvert ((2017), there is no Academy to define officially accepted words. Neologisms are coined regularly in all fields of man's endeavour - Medicine, Science and Technology, Music and Entertaining Industries; and new slangs are constantly being developed. More often than not, some of these new words enter wider usage and become listed in the English lexicon while others remain restricted to small circles; hence, the issue of full and partial conversion respectively. This study tends to consider the contributions of functional shift in English as a productive process which ensures maximal creativity on the part of English language users and the brain behind the thriving of the English language,

Keywords: Creativity, conversion, functionality, the English language, shift

## **Introduction**

English has an extraordinary rich vocabulary and willingness to absorb new words. Left to borrowings alone, English may not meet the demands of the time; so, it tends to reproduce exactly its kind through the process of functional shift to accommodate its need in various regions and times. With this, a word is converted to function as a particular word class whenever the need arises. Consequently, English language tends to develop consistently and is ever ready to adapt to the changes inherent in our changing world. So, English language reproduces through functional shift and voraciously feed on loan words through borrowing and tends to face extinction/death if it fails in its dynamism.

## **What is Conversion/Functional Shift?**

Simply put, conversion or functional shift is the process of using a word from a particular word-class and to function as a member of another word-class. That is, turning a noun for instance, into a verb or turning a verb into an adjective in a quite different context.

Finegan (2012, p. 56) defines conversion/functional shift as Functional shift, or conversion as it is also called, is the process where a word converts from one syntactic category, that is, word class or part of speech, to another without any change to the form of the word.

Similarly, Yule(1996, p.67) asserts as follows: ‘A change in the function of word, as for example, when a noun comes to be used as a verb (without any reduction), is generally known as conversion. Other labels for this very common process are ‘category change’ and ‘functional shift’.

### **Productivity of Functional Shift in the English language**

Functional shift is a productive process in English due to the flexibility it affords the users. It goes further to promote clarity and economy in the use of words. According to Lyons, ‘within the limits set by the rules of grammar, which are perhaps partly universal and partly specific to particular languages, native speakers of a language are free to act creatively; ...this notion of rule governed creativity is closely associated with that of productivity’ (23). In the English language, virtually all the word-classes of the English language can undergo a functional shift in modern English; as there do not seem to be any restrictions regarding the forms that can be shifted or converted (Briton and Briton,2010,p.226). Yule(1996, p.67) notes that the process is particularly productive in modern English with new uses occurring frequently. Harley confirms it by saying, “this is a very productive process in English, which people regularly perform on the fly” (105).

(Aitchison,1987, p.161) further notes:

[Functional shift] is extremely productive to increase the English lexicon because it provides an 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.

The productivity of functional shift in English contributes to the thriving of the English language. Functional shift allows flexibility in the use of words, and this spices up the language and makes it lively. Many authors have written volumes on this Functional shift, however, its scope is inexhaustible. Calvert (2017) in quoting Berube made it clear that functional shift has received attention for many centuries and as far back as 1601, the word **impact** was first recorded as a verb (5). Plag (2003, p.219) describes the process as the most popular of all verb-deriving processes and that all researchers agree that it is an extremely productive process. Fowler notes that functional shift is “an ancient process” and one which is “exceedingly common” (181). It is believed that one fifth of all English verbs were originally nouns (Pinker, 1994, p.392). This shows the unique role which functional shift plays in the English language.

According to Crystal (1980, p.332), ‘functional shift is one of the features which makes the English language distinctive’ (Crystal’s assertion seems most plausible if we consider the flexibility of this process in the language. Although Bauer notes that if there are constraints in this process, they are yet to be demonstrated (226), Safire (2005, p.136), among others, however; has a contrary view. Hence, his assertion: ‘Don’t lard your prose with functional shifties’. In spite of these struggles to curb excesses, greater numbers of words disapproved from shifting from one class to the other are busy gaining considerations. For instance, Calvert (2017, p.5) notes:

... Some Usage Panel statistics from survey taken between 1987 and 1996:84 disapproved of **access** as a verb in non-technical contexts; 74% disapproved of the sentence - He has authored a dozen books on the subject; 95% disapproved of the use of **impact** as a transitive verb; and although **contact** as a verb met with 66% disapproval in 1969, it seems to have won a victory less than 20 years later, with 65% of the Usage Panel accepting this [functional shift].

Today, the word – ‘**access**’has gained recognition as a **verb** and can be exemplified with the following instances:

- a) I can’t **access** most of my data on the computer without using password. (Verb)
- b) She can **access** her profile through face book. (Verb)
- c) They will **access** the data tomorrow. (Verb)

Instances of using the word **impact** as a transitive verb:

- a) If I separate you from Uche, it will **impact** on your friendship. (Verb)
- b) They are decisions that **impact** our lifestyles. (Verb)
- c) When the hammers **impact** on the nails, they bend. (Verb)

In the process of functional shift, when a derivative adopts all the inflectional markers or features of the class it is converted into, it is called a full conversion; but when it adopts some features and not all, it is called a partial conversion.

### **Instances of Productivity of Functional Shift**

It is noted that virtually all the word-classes of the English Language can undergo a functional shift. Let us exemplify functional shift using the content words as illustratively enshrined in various sample texts.

### Sample Text 1

*Find me to marry one with Octavius Caesar, and **companion** me with my mistress... dear Isis, keep decorum, and **fortune** him accordingly! ... And that which most with you should **safe** my going/is Fulvia's death... Since my **becomings** kill me, when they do not/**Eye** well to you... This common body/Like to a vagabond flag upon the stream/Goes to and back, **lackeying** the varying tide... that what I would have spoke/was beastly **dumb'd** by him... a hand that kings/Have **lipt (lipped)**, and trembled kissing... We have **jaded** out o' the field... henceforth/The white hand of a lady **fever** thee... The hearts/That **spaniel'd** me at heels... Wouldst thou be **window'd**in great Rome, and see...Your wife Octavia/... shall acquire no honour/**Demuring** upon me... **Ballad** us out o' tune: the quick comedians... Some squeea king Cleopatra **boy** my greatness... (Anthony and Cleopatra I.ii.31-V.ii.220 in Shakespeare, 1996).*

From the text above, it is obvious that Shakespeare made use of these words competently and, in such a way that they become part of another word class at any point in time as the need arises. In the instances given, some words are overtly marked by taking inflectional pattern suitable to the word-class they are converted into just like the words: **lackey**-lackeying and **demure**-demuring, taking the present continuous aspect of the verb being converted to. Also, the words: **dumb**-dumbed, **lip**-lipped, **jade**-jaded, **spaniel**-spanieled and **window**-windowed taking the past tense marker of the verb they are converted to. However, there are some others that are covertly marked such as **safe**, **fortune**, **ballad**, **fever**, **eye**, **companion** and **boy**. These words as used above are instances where functional shift exhibits its flexibility the most, because these words are devoid of any form of inflection based on the uses they are subjected to.

### Sample Text 2

*He **doctors** sick horses...Would you**paper** a room with representations of horses?... 'You must **paper** it', said the gentleman, rather warmly. 'You must paper it', said Thomas Gradgrind, 'whether you like it or not. Don't tell us you wouldn't **paper** it....' I would **fancy**... Suppose you were going to **carpet** a room, would you use a carpet having a representation of flowers upon it?'... [In] **prairie** manner ... 'he was goosed last night, he was goosed the night before last, he was goosed today'... (Dickens,1996, pps 35-45).*

### Sample Text 3

*There **wet** for your pains... You and your **ragged** books ... oh make me want to **pulp** your brain... And I will scorn the **jibes** of these bush minds... And you must chirrup like a cockatoo... **Shaming** our heritage before the world... Tethered, as it were, to my **dirtyed** heels... I dislike this strange unhealthy **mouthing** you perform... but the Bale is still **feasting** his eyes on the images...*

*Will guru morin **wet** my throat? ... And we are not **feuding** in something I have forgotten... Have you forgotten? If he has serve him a **slap** to wake his brain... He seeks to have me as his property where I must **fade** beneath his jealous hold...Do any of my wives report a **failing** in my manliness? ... That, with a virgin young and hot within, my **failing** strength would rise and save my pride... Or will the smell of the **wet** soil be too much for your delicate nostrils? ... Is a man's bedroom to be made naked to any flea that **chances** to wander through? ... A python for mother, and **fathered** beyond doubt by a blubber-bottomed baboon... planning for a final burst of life, he **husbands** his strength and before I even **don** a cap, I find yet another stranger in my bed... Below the humming birds which **smoke** the face of Sango... in years to come, we must leave **virgin** plot of lives, rich decay... (Soyinka,1963, pps 1-52).*

In the above extract, the highlighted words have multiple class members. The word **wet** could be adjective, noun or verb depending on usage. In the initial and second usage of the word in the above text, it is used as verb while in the third usage; it is used as an adjective. The word **rag** is a noun, but here, it is used as verb-ragged, the word **pulp** could be adjective, noun, or verb, but it is used as a verb. These words - **mouthing**, **feasting** and **feuding** are all of noun origin, but were used as verbs. The word **dirty** could be verb, adverb, or adjective but it is used as verb. The word **slap** could be a noun, verb or adverb but it is used as a noun in the text under analysis. The word **fade** could be verb, adjective, or noun, but used as verb, the words **chances** and **smoke** could be noun, verb or adjective but are used as verbs. The words **father**, **husband** and **don** are nouns but are used as verbs. The word **virgin** could be a noun or an adjective but is used as adjective.

For a word to change classes and still, maintain a multiple class membership is evidence of flexibility. It is also a way to exploit a reader's existing knowledge because some of these words in question are not new to the language. For one to associate the meaning of the converted word to the word from which it is converted is a sign of sharing a semantic relation and/or evidence of semantic extension. Hence, the possibility of writers or speakers to exploit a reader's existing knowledge

In addition to the above examples, the following are given to support some of the cases of functional shift in sentences using the following words: **round**, **down**, **back**, **second**, **reverse**, **past** and **dream**

### 1. Examples using the word 'round':

- a) We went **round** Lagos in a taxi. (Preposition)

- b) She **rounded** off the discussion. (Verb)
  - c) I tried to bring him **round**. (Adverb)
  - d) Caroline has a **round** face like a moon. (Adjective)
  - e) The nurse was on her round to look after the patients. (Noun)
- (Murthy 2007, p.8)

Similarly, Eyisi (2006, p.19) made her marks in the use of the word '**round**' as:

- a) He ate six whole **rounds** of bread and butter. (Noun)
- b) She **rounded** the corner at top speed. (Verb)
- c) Peter has a **round** mirror in his room. (Adjective)
- d) Drake sailed **round** the world and came back to England. (Preposition).
- e) Turn your chair **round** and face me. (Adverb)

Apart from Murthy and Eyisi's contributions, the above examples can be rewritten in such a way that the word **round** will function without inflections on the form. Consider the following:

- a) He ate a **round** of fruit salad. (Noun)
- b) We are to **round** the corner at top speed. (Verb)
- c) I have a **round** table in the dining. (Adjective)
- d) He danced **round** the tree for fun. (Preposition)
- e) Turn the table **round** to face your audience. (Adverb)

## 2. Examples using the word '**down**':

- a) She ran **down** the road. (Preposition)
- b) She fell **down**. (Adverb)
- c) She is feeling very **down** today. (Adjective)
- d) My doona is filled with **down**. (noun)
- e) Watch him **down** this schooner of beer. (Verb)

(Collins and Hollo, 32)

Similarly, Yadugiri (2008, pps.210-211) uses the word '**down**' thus:

- a) Prices will come **down**. (Adverb)
- b) We went **down** the road. (Preposition)
- c) My computer is **down**. (Adjective)
- d) The storm has **downed** several trees in the region. (Verb)
- e) There was a slight **down** on her arms. (Noun)

### 3. Examples using the word '**back**':

- a) She will come **back** tomorrow. (adverb)
- b) We forgot to lock the **back** door. (adjective)
- c) All her friends **backed** her when she decided to contest the election. (verb)
- d) Please sign on the **back** of the cheque. (noun)

(Yadugiri, 2008, p.211)

### 4. Examples using the word '**second**':

- a) She came **second** in the race. (Adverb)
- b) She is **second** in the list. (Adjective)
- c) I **seconded** Ravi's proposal. (Verb)
- d) Change from the first to the **second** . (Noun)

(Yadugiri,2008,p.211)

### 5. Examples using the word '**reverse**':

- a) She went in the **reverse** direction. (adjective)
- b) She **reversed** into the garage. (verb)

- c) The quality hasn't improved, quite the **reverse**. (noun)  
(Yadugiri, 2008,p.211)

#### 6. Examples using the word 'past':

- a) A car drove **past** the door. (preposition)  
b) A car drove **past** . (prepositional adverb)  
(Quirk and Greenbaum, 2004,p.145)

#### Grammatical words as Verbs

down → downed (As in: **they downed their drinks**)

out → outed (As in: **they were outed**)

but → but (As in: **but me no but**)

In addition, these conjunctions: **if**, **and** together with **but** can be used as nouns, the adjective **yellow** is used as verb, the prepositions **up** and **down** are used as noun. The interjection **ho hoho** served as noun. The adverb **how** and **why** are used as noun. As for the productivity of zero-derivation, virtually all the word-classes of the English language can undergo zero-derivation including affixes. For instance, "**biology and zoology are welcomed; any other logy is prohibited**". Quirk and Greenbaum (2004, p. 442) gave another instance as "patriotism, and any other **isms** you'd like to name".

#### Creativity of Functional Shift

Creativity may have other senses but for this study it is meant to portray English language users' ability to manipulate English words skilfully in such a way that they reflect the users' intended meaning at least possible cost and at the right circumstance. For this analysis, the works of Davies(2018) and Chukwu(2011) will be used to that effect. In this study, creativity is viewed in two ways - '**Dominant creativity**' and '**Recessive creativity**'. These terms are employed to bring to light the easily perceived creativity and receding creativity. While the work of Davies(2018) will be used to analyse the dominant creativity, the work of Chukwu(2011) will be used for recessive creativity.

### Sample Text 5

*My wife's expected date of delivery will be in October and she was advised by our family doctor to have enough rest. However, on this fateful day – 28<sup>th</sup> September, 2018, she **hollywooded** till 2am. When I got up in the middle of the night, I thought she was drinking a glass of water; but no, she was merely **beveraging**. Surprisingly, the list of names to be chosen from for our baby that will be **octobered** was still where I kept it untouched. Angrily, I asked her why she had not attended to it. She told me that she was sorry for **hollywooding** all the while; that she was carried away by the interesting episode. She confessed that she even forgot that her boss, who will be **novembering**, gave her an assignment to draft an invitation card. Then, I asked her to turn off the video. She was like asking me to give her some minutes to round off. Seeing my stern look and determined disposition, she turned off the video, took the list of names and selected 'Florence'. 'Why Florence', I asked? She told me that she expected our daughter to take up a nursing profession and become a 'Florence Nightingale' of our time; having visualised how she will be **Florence Nightingale-ing** round the casualty ward, soothing the wounds of the casualties and mopping the **fevered** brows, the name was therefore chosen for her. 'Since when did you turn out to be kind-hearted and selfless'? I queried. 'Why not choose the name Elizabeth'? 'Am I not worthy to have Queen Elizabeth in my home'? I blushed. 'In short, be informed, you have **womed** a queen and she cannot be exchanged for a nurse; no way!' 'But nurses are highly valued abroad', my wife persisted. 'Keep quiet!' I shouted. 'I wouldn't want any person to **queen** me an inch further after the next twenty to twenty five years to come; and negotiation is hereby terminated!' – 'The matter closed!' 'My baby will be named after Queen Elizabeth'. That's all!*

[Davies, 2018, pps. 48-54(emphasis mine)]

Considering these words - '**hollywooded**', '**beveraging**', '**octobered**', '**hollywooding**', '**novembering**', '**Florence Nightingale-ing**', '**fevered**', '**womed**' and '**queen**', they obviously reflect very clear instances of creativity. Even people with little knowledge of English will know that the words are used in an uncommon way. These easily noticed traits of functional shift are termed dominant creativity.

However, some other times, we observe a rather smooth transition of word from one wordclass to the other without attracting much attention. This is possible because such words are not new in the language but are used in other sense. Not only that, they tend to fit in, in the grammatical structure of the language; so much so that even the native speakers hardly see it as an ungrammatical usage of English words. For such usages, let us consider extracts from Chukwu's literary work.

### Sample Text 7

*... In fact, what will I recount that I'm still lacking in the face of the earth. Yet, I need a caretaker to **man** all these in the way I **treasure**...I hope this dining and wining will **cement** our relationship! ... (You've done well! You wanted to be like me, but your **chase** proved a wild goose!) ... I have been grinding and feeding your mouth but you've been grinding yours and **blinding** my eyes! ... Papa, you **panicked** me!... Trading is good but what happens if after your years of service you're **booted** out ignominiously on a trumped up charge, what then will become of the person?... Every stone will be turned to **ferret** out resources for nurture ... Keep fit and may God speed you in your enterprise! ... He couldn't look at our faces and was somewhat **quailing**... How can a person be owed over three months arrears and yet you call the person a **salaried** earner...Suffering and success are recognised as God's **makings**, but there is a plea that the **better** should remain. Now, therefore, will you have to go with the **worse**? (Chukwu, 2011, pps.63-119).*

The highlighted words could be used as other parts of speech other than the ones they are used in the above extract. For instance, the words: **man, treasure, cement, chase, blind(ing), panick (ed), boot(ed), ferret, quail(ing), salary (ied), make (ings), better, and worse** could serve as other word class other than the ones they served currently, provided they are reverted to their bases and inflections removed. Therefore, they can serve the following: The word **man** is of noun origin and could serve as noun or verb but is used as verb. The word **treasure** could be a noun or verb but is used as a verb; **cement** could be a noun or verb but is used as a verb; **chase** could be a noun or verb but it is used as a noun. The word **blind** (with **-ing** inflection removed) could serve as adjective or verb but used as verb; **panick**(with **-ed** inflection removed) could serve as adjective, noun or verb but used as verb; **boot** (with **-ed** inflection removed) could serve as noun or verb but used as verb; **quail** (with **-ing** inflection removed) could serve as a noun or a verb but used as a verb; **salary** is of noun origin but with the present inflection **-ied** as in **salaried**, it then serves as an adjective. The words **better** and **worse** could serve as adjective, adverb, verb or noun simultaneously, but are used as nouns.

In these highlighted words, there are smooth transitions from one word class to the other unlike the examples in the Sample Text 6. With this smooth transition, the process is termed recessive creativity. In this case, the writer uses the words skilfully in such a way that they do exactly what the writer intends them to do at a particular point in time and in the right circumstance. This is what we call creativity and/or competence!

## **Conclusion**

Functional shift is actually a veritable tool in the hands of competent users of English as this gives them a good platform for ingenious use of English words in such a way that they satisfy maximally, all their communicative needs. Functional shift spices up the English language and gives it polish; hence, its ability to overcome language death. Some languages today are

considered as dead languages like Latin. However, the English language is alive, dynamic and needs no revitalization.

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