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# MORPHOSYNTACTIC ANALYSIS OF CONVERSION IN ENGLISH AND TIV:IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

**Nguemo Rachael IORJIIM**
*Department of Languages and Linguistics, Rev. Fr. Moses Orshio Adasu University, Makurdi, Benue State, Nigeria*
*inguemowalters@gmail.com*

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**ABSTRACT**
This study investigates the morphosyntactic analysis of conversion in English and Tiv and its significance for language development. Using the Distributed Morphology framework, it identifies and describes the lexical categories involved in conversion (noun-verb, verb-noun, verb–adjective). The research examines the morphological and syntactic mechanisms that permit conversion in both languages and discusses its implications for language growth. A qualitative approach was used, including semi-structured interviews with 20 bilingual speakers of English and Tiv, as well as researcher introspection. Data are presented in tables and sentences for analysis. The results reveal that conversion is an active word-formation process, mainly involving noun–verb, verb–noun, and adjective–verb shifts. Converted words retain their phonological form but change their grammatical roles according to syntactic context. Findings suggest that conversion promotes lexical expansion, grammatical flexibility, linguistic efficiency, and the standardisation of Tiv by enriching vocabulary and supporting its inclusion in dictionaries and education. Overall, the study demonstrates that understanding conversion enhances knowledge of the morphology–syntax interface and aids language documentation, development, and standardisation.

**Keywords:** Tiv, English, conversion, morphosyntactic, language development, word formation.

## Introduction

Word-formation processes are central to the study of morphology and lexicology. They are among the strategies by which languages expand their lexicons, including affixation, compounding, reduplication, and blending. Conversion (functional shift, category shift, or zero derivation) is a productive word-formation process in morphology, spanning across languages. It occupies a unique theoretical position because it involves a change in word class without any corresponding change in the phonological form of the base. Yule (2016) asserts that the beauty of language lies in its ability to evolve. In morphology, the study of how words change their lexical category, with or without changes in tone, is fascinating and inspiring. This process brings forth new meanings and expressions, contributing significantly to language growth. Through such creative processes, languages continue to evolve and thrive, a testament to the richness and adaptability of human communication.

Scholars seeking to uncover the underlying differences between conversions and other forms of word formation have proposed several definitions. According to Yule (2016), conversion is a shift in a word's function or category without changing its form. It involves a change in word class without altering the word's form. For example, (1). 'weed' refers to an unwanted plant (a noun). b. The act of pulling it down (a verb). This produces an instance of a conversion word, "weed", used as a noun and as a verb without a change in form but with a change in meaning. Plag (2003:107) defines conversion as "a morphological process whereby a lexical item of one grammatical category is reassigned to another grammatical category without any accompanying change in its phonological shape". This is distinct from polysemy. Conversely, Tiv, as a language, is tonal, according to Ugechi (2015), and, as such, tone marking helps differentiate meaning within the same word form. For example: 2. 'Tor' could mean king, 'tòr' pour/tilt, depending on the tone, which has nothing to do with the form, just a diacritic added. More such examples are contained in the Table for analysis. Sudartinah (2016) held this view as well, defining conversion as a change in a word's function without adding or removing affixes. Therefore, conversion involves changing a word's class without altering its form—for instance, 3. The table is made of wood. 'Table' here is a noun. b. We shall table the matter before elders. Here, it is acting as a verb.

In phrasal conversions of some English words, prepositions and articles help realize them. The noun form uses compounding, which, according to Adzer (2020), is the process of joining two or more free morphemes to form a single unit. For instance, 4. To print out is a verb, and a printout is a noun. 5. To take over is a verb, and a takeover is a noun. According to Vladimir (2021), the view is the same: it involves a change in the word class, function, and meaning of a particular lexical unit without any corresponding change in the form of that word, such as adding or subtracting any derivational affixes. However, this does not mean the original word ceases to exist; only its functional pair is obtained.

Conversion in English is one of the most productive and well-studied word-formation processes. The same phonological string can serve as a noun, verb, or adjective depending on its syntactic context. This suggests that only a limited number of phonological differences distinguish grammatical categories. English features noun-to-verb conversion, where verbs are formed by assigning verbal morphosyntactic features to a noun base, and vice versa. Stress shifts often help distinguish them, although many lack phonological differences. Additionally, adjective-to-verb and adjective-to-noun conversions occur. As in Tiv, a word rarely serves in three categories. It often serves in two categories with the aid of tone, although tone does not affect the form of the word but the meaning and changes its class. Overall, conversion highlights the close link between morphology and syntax by allowing the same word form to function differently depending on its grammatical role, thus playing a crucial role in vocabulary expansion and language evolution.

**The profile of the Tiv people**

According to Udu (2009), 'Tiv' has a tripartite meaning; first, it is the ancestral father of the Tiv race of central Nigeria. Second, it is the ethnic group, a descendant of the Tiv, and lastly, the language spoken by the race. As a linguistic family, Dwyer & Yankee (1985) and Blench (2012) classify Tiv as belonging to the Bantoid subgroup of the Benue-Congo and as an indigenous language, particularly in Benue State. Abraham (1940) specifically stated that documented evidence of grammatical and lexical features links Tiv to the Bantoid group. From a broader perspective, Greenberg (1963) classifies all African languages, including Tiv, and identifies Tiv as a member of the Bantoid languages. The study uses Tiv as a language to investigate conversion as a productive word-formation process. The existence of verb-to-noun, noun-to-verb, adjective-to-verb, and adjective-to-noun conversions is also noted.

**Statement of the problem.**

Conversion, a process of word formation in morphology, occupies a central place among the productive processes for expanding a language's vocabulary. Scholars of these (English and Tiv) languages have been intensively concerned with other formation processes, but scarcely with conversion. For instance, Adzer (2020) expounded on Tiv compounds and compounding, identifying and explaining their formation processes in Tiv. Adzer (2019) emphasised noun inflexions, another form of formation involving prefixing, suffixing, and infixes, which can be total or partial. Aor (2020) focused on reduplication as a formation process in Tiv, highlighting the morphological and phonological features involved. Damkor et al. (2021) examined prefixing and suffixing to form nouns from adjectives and nouns from verbs. Tarhom (2021) worked on the inflectional morphemes of Tiv, with emphasis on maintaining or changing class. Ajim, S. and Ugechi, E. (2022) found that verb roots and adjectives undergo nominalization mostly in Tiv. Usar, I. and Cyril, O. (2023) aimed to integrate and naturalize English and Hausa loanwords into Tiv to expand the Tiv vocabulary. Ukeyima, F. and Ishima, J. (2023) again explicated the derivational process even in the numeral system in Tiv. Most recently, Adzer, M. and Adzer, C (2024) identified and described the different ways words in Tiv are affixed. What morphological rules govern the process of affixation in Tiv, and how do the morphological realizations function in the language? All the aforementioned scholars worked extensively on the Tiv language to develop it.

Despite the numerous scholarly works examined, conversion in Tiv has received no attention, which is a cause for concern. Vladimir (2021) noted passive English conversions alongside other forms. Against this background, the study aims to analyse the morphosyntactic processes of conversion in English and Tiv, and the implications for language development, with the specific objectives to: identify and describe the lexical categories that undergo conversion in English and Tiv (noun-verb, verb-noun, verb-adjective); examine the morphological and syntactic mechanisms that license conversion in English and Tiv within a morphosyntactic framework; and assess the implications of conversion for language development, particularly for the description, documentation, and standardization of the Tiv language. The research questions guiding the analysis are as follows: Which lexical categories undergo conversion, and how can they be identified and described? What morphological and syntactic mechanisms license conversion within the morphosyntactic framework? What are the implications of conversion for language development?

**Theoretical framework**

The study adopts Distributed Morphology (DM) as its theoretical framework. Developed by Morris Halle and Alec Marantz in 1993, DM treats word formation as an extension of syntactic processes, with morphological processes distributed across multiple grammatical modules. It emphasizes the syntactic derivation of complex words and the late insertion of phonological forms. DM argues that morphology is not a separate component of syntax and phonology, proposing instead that word structure is built into syntax, while

vocabulary items realize abstract morphemes. Proponents argue that morphological forms such as verb tenses, number, and aspect are determined by syntactic structure, thereby illustrating the integrative nature of these grammatical components. DM contributes to understanding this word-formation process (conversion) in English by enabling bidirectional conversion without phonological change. At the same time, in Tiv, it applies to verb-stem alternation (vowel mutations or tone shifts that mark tense/aspect without affixation), treating them as syntactically conditioned vocabulary competition or readjustments. Many researchers have used this theory. Embick (2010) shows how DM handles allomorph selection in both English and Latin, arguing that it accounts for variation in a principled way. It can thus be considered suitable for word conversion between English and Tiv. Arregi and Nevins (2012) used DM to explain complex verb forms in Basque through morphological readjustment rules. Kramer (2016) applied DM to Amharic to explain gender and number agreement, showing the model's adaptability to understudied languages. More recently, Udu (2025) used DM to examine the interplay among syntax, morphology, and phonology in the formation of verb stems in Tiv. DM unifies conversion as a syntactic process across languages, attributing differences to language-specific vocabulary lists and phonological constraints. Its productivity stems from abstract null heads, but in Tiv (a tone language), conversion integrates prosodic features that aid analysis.

**Methodology**

This research adopts a qualitative design. Data were obtained through semi-structured interviews. Participant observation involved purposive selection of 20 competent speakers of both English and Tiv (male/female) aged 40–50, with interviews lasting 30–45 minutes, in the Makurdi Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria. The area was chosen because it is an academic environment with more than three higher institutions of learning, where competent Tiv speakers are also found. The interviews were conducted in formal and informal settings, such as school environments, offices, and village gatherings, reflecting both formal and natural language use. Audio recordings, notes, and introspection were employed; data were transcribed, translated, and recorded for further analysis. The selected data are presented in the data presentation section in tabular form to capture the objectives; converted words are also presented in sentences, with an explanation for each category of change. The Tiv words are glossed for better understanding. The analytical method is guided by the Distributed Morphology Theory of Halle and Marantz (1993).

**Data presentation/ Analysis.**

Distributed Morphology framework provides a way to analyze how the same root can function as different word classes in both English and Tiv through syntactic categorization rather than lexical derivation. Example;

6. Jighjigh bought a **book**. Please **book** a bus for two. "Book" is the root word; "noun"/ "verb" are categorizers.

- **Identification and description of lexical categories that undergo conversion in English (noun-verb, verb-noun, verb-adjective, noun- Adjective, and verb-adjective).**

**Table 1. noun -verb**

| English words | Noun | Verb |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Book | Book | To book |
| 2. Dance | The dance | To dance |
| 3. Cook | The cook | To cook |
| 4. Drive | The drive | To drive |
| 5. Judge | The judge | To judgy |
| 6. Work | The work | To work |
| 7. Table | A table | To table |
| 8. Abstract | The abstract | To abstract |
| 9. Bottle | A bottle | To bottle |
| 10. Butter | A butter | To butter |

a. Jighjigh bought a book. Please book a bus for two.
b. The dance was humorous. They dance every Friday.
c. The cook is busy. Senater will cook rice for breakfast today.
d. It was a long drive. I drive to work myself.
e. The judge will be in court today. Do not judge before interrogation.
f. I have a lot of work. I work all day.
g. I have a big table in my office. I tabled the issue before my husband.
h. Jighjigh read only the abstract. He needs to abstract the keywords.
i. Pour the milk in the bottle. The company will bottle the milk tomorrow.
j. Pass the butter for the toast, please. I like to butter my bread before eating.

Table 2. Verb - Noun

| English words | Verb | Noun |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Run | To run | A run |
| 2. play | To play | The play |
| 3. call | To call | A call |
| 4. reply | To reply | A reply |
| 5. Help | To help | A help |

**a.** I run every morning. She went for a run.
**b.** Children play always. The play was entertaining.
**c.** I promise to call tomorrow. The call came in at the right time.
**d.** I want to repay the mail. He is waiting for the reply.
**e.** Jighjigh help the poor a lot. Your help is appreciated.

**Table 3. Noun - Adjectives**

| English words | Noun | Adjective |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Silk | The silk | A silk |
| 2. Stone | Stone | Stone |
| 3. School | The school | A school |
| 4. Family | The family | A family |
| 5. Iron | The iron | An iron |

a. Silk is expensive now. She wore a silk material today.
b. She sat on the stone wall to admire the ancient stone.
c. My school is far. Senater wore a school uniform.
d. My family is large. We held a family meeting.
e. Iron is a useful metal. He installed an iron gate.

Table 4. Verb - Adjective

| English words | Verbs | Adjective |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Clean | To clean | A clean |
| 2. Empty | To empty | An empty… |
| 3. Dirty | To be dirty | A dirty… |
| 4. Slow | To slow | A slow … |
| 5. Light | To light | A light |

a. Please, clean the plates. The plates are clean.
b. There is a need to empty the bottles. These are empty bottles.
c. Do not dirty yourself in the rain. The environment is dirty.
d. Please, slow the car a bit. The car is slow.
e. Please, light the candle. The bag is light.

❖ **Identification and description of lexical categories that undergo conversion in Tiv (noun-verb, noun-adjective, verb-noun, verb-adjective).**

**Table 5. Noun- verb**

| **Tiv words** | **Noun** | **Verb** |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Ya | House/compound | To eat |
| 2. Wua | Corn | To grind |
| 3. Tsue | Fishhook | To seize |
| 4. Mondu | Cocoyam | To Shine |
| 5. Ishe | Eye | To Cost |
| 6. Tsa | Tail/farmland | To lodge |
| 7. ikyor/ikyôr | Yam seed | To hunt |
| 8. vaa | Ululation | To Cry |
| 9. kunya | Ring | To be ashamed |
| 10. kaha | A fork (branch) | To dig |

*a.* *Heneter maa ya doo*. Heneter built a nice house. *Heneter va ya luam.* Heneter come and eat food.
*b.* *Wua u ú lôô la u mende.* The corn you planted has germinated. *Wua mkem mela sha nase.* Use a grinding stone to grind the pepper.
*c.* *Myam tsue u kôlun ishu.* I bought a fishhook for fishing. Heneter tsue ikyuleke la sha tségh zwa ve I inumbe. Heneter seize the maize because of a vow from game.
*d.* *Heneter lôô mondu kpishi.* Heneter planted plenty of water yam. *Ka inja ér iyange I à ta waan inyian nahan*. It seems the sun will shine brighter today.
*e.* *Ankyegh ne pie ishe.* The chicken is blind. *Ikyondu ne taver ishe.* The cost of the cloth much.

**Table 6. Noun - Adjective**

| **Tiv words** | **Noun** | **Adjective** |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Ule/ulé | Palm front | To be sad |
| 2. Kunya | Ring | Pity |
| 3. Wuhe | Co-wife | To catch a cold |
| 4. Anger | native cloth | Gossip |

a. *I tim ule hi pe or la akpé la.* They made a sign with a palm front where the man is dead. *Kwase la ulé sha ku u hur-or na.* The woman is so sad because of the death of her friend.
b. *Heneter wa ishiôr na kunya sha ihyôwe.* Heneter engaged his fiancée with a ring. Kunya kôrum a mbayev mba ikyosun. I feel pity for orphans.

c. *Wuhe m maar.* My co-wife has given birth. *Hii ne va a wuhe.* The harmattan came with cold.
d. Anger taver ishe u yamen higen. "Anger", the native cloth is costly now. Hanma or nan fa kwase angér la. Everyone knows the woman, the gossipy.

Table 7. Verb - Adjective

| Tiv words | Verbs | Adjective |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Tsule | To tie | Tight |
| 2. Nger | To write | Many |
| 3. Kuma | To pinch | Enough |
| 4. Tuha | To rear | Insult |
| 5. Vihi | To spoil | Ugly |
| 6. Pee | To winnow | (cachexia)cachectic |
| 7. Kungu | Kapok/cottonwool fluff | White |
| 8. Tav | To fetch firewood | Tall |
| 9. Tsar | To light | Communicable/transmit |

*a. Heneter, tsule koo la itaver. Heneter, tie the rope too tight.*
*b. U pee ishwa hi ikyagh ki chuku ka can.* To winnow your benniseeds in a small container is difficult. *Ngu pee sha ciu angev nyôr un iyol.* He looks cachectic because of the illness.
*c. Asaa kuma m shin nguhar.* I have a pinch of thorns on my leg. *Kwaghyan ne kuma sha hanma or*. The food is enough round for everybody.
*d. M nger washika hi terem.* I wrote a letter to my father. *Iyough nger ke kasua higen.* Yams are many in the market now.
*e. Heneter ka á ér tom tsebelee sha tseu ibua I á tuha la,* Heneter worked hard to rear healthy cattle.

❖ **Examining the morphological and syntactic mechanisms that license conversion in English and Tiv within a morphosyntactic framework.**

The identified words, as used in the sentences, illustrate conversion because the same phonological form appears in different syntactic environments without any overt affix. Example 7. a. There is a need to empty the bottles. b. These are empty bottles.
"empty" has the lexical category of both verb and adjective. As a verb, it is the head of the verb phrase (VP) and uses the noun phrase the bottle as its complement. As an adjective, it modifies the noun bottle within the noun phrase. "empty" as a verb makes the bottle become empty, and "empty" as an adjective indicates that the bottle has nothing inside.
Distributed morphology holds that lexical items are assigned fixed categories in the lexicon. Instead, roots are category-neutral, and syntactic structures determine their grammatical category. The change is morphosyntactic rather than morphological.

*8. Heneter maa ya doo. Heneter built a nice house. Heneter va ya luam.* Heneter come and eat food. *"ya"* functions as a noun (a house) and as a verb (to eat). There is no morphological change; rather, a syntactic category is assigned to the root.
*9. U pee ishwa hi ikyagh ki chuku ka can.* To winnow your benniseeds in a small container is difficult. *Ngu pee sha ciu angev nyôr un iyol.* He looks cachectic because of the illness. "*pee"* is also used in both sentences without any affixes.

❖ **The implications of conversion for language development.**

Conversion has important implications for language development because it enables a language (English and Tiv) to;

a. Expand its vocabulary and adapt to new communicative needs without creating entirely new word forms, contributing to lexical growth.

b. It enhances grammatical flexibility by allowing a single lexical root to function in different grammatical categories depending on its syntactic environment.
c. It contributes to linguistic economy; it prevents inventing completely new words, making communication more efficient and reducing the need for complex morphological processes.
d. As the converted words become widely accepted, especially for Tiv, they will enter dictionaries and educational materials, contributing to the standardization and modernization of the language.

**Discussion of Findings**

i. The lexical categories that undergo conversion in both languages.

The lexical categories in the data presentation that undergo conversion are as follows and are productive in both languages.

1. Noun-verb
2. Verb-noun
3. Noun-adjective
4. Verb-adjective

**ii. The morphological and syntactic mechanisms that license conversion.**

Conversion occurs without affixes, as the analysis shows. Unlike normal derivation, where you add a prefix to change a word's class, conversion adds nothing to the base word. The word changes its grammatical role depending on where it appears in a sentence, altering meaning and class without changing form. Noun to verb, adjective to verb, etc. Examples 1 and 6 are reiterated. 'weed' refers to an unwanted plant (a noun). The act of pulling it down (a verb). Jighjigh bought a book. Please book a bus for two. "Book" is the root word; "noun" and "verb" are categorizers. The role of functional heads (N, V, A) applies within distributed morphology. DM also enables bidirectional conversion without phonological change. This agrees with Yule (2016) and Plag (2003).

**iii. The implications of conversion for language development.**

Conversion expands vocabulary and promotes flexibility. It enhances the development and documentation of a language and contributes to linguistic economy. As converted words become widely accepted, especially in Tiv, they will be incorporated into dictionaries and educational materials, contributing to the standardization and modernization of the language.

**Conclusion**

The study examined the morphosyntactic analysis of conversion in English and Tiv: Implications for Language Development. The findings reveal that conversion in English and Tiv is highly productive, with words shifting categories while maintaining the same form. This includes noun–verb, noun–adjective, and verb–adjective conversions in both languages. For instance: Heneter wa ishiôr na kunya sha ihyôwe. Heneter engaged his fiancée with a ring. Kunya kôrum a mbayev mba ikyosun. I feel pity for orphans. The Tiv word "kunya" serves in two categories, as a noun and as an adjective. The words used in these sentences illustrate conversion, as the same phonological form appears in different syntactic environments without any overt affix.

Distributed Morphology holds that lexical items are assigned fixed categories in the lexicon. Instead, roots are category-neutral, and syntactic structures determine their grammatical category. The change is morphosyntactic rather than morphological. The findings also show that conversion has important implications for language development, as it enables languages (English and Tiv) to expand their vocabularies and adapt to new communicative needs without creating entirely new word forms, thereby contributing to lexical growth. It enhances grammatical flexibility by allowing a single lexical root to function in different grammatical categories depending on its syntactic environment. It contributes to linguistic economy by avoiding the need to invent completely new words, making communication more

efficient and reducing the need for complex morphological processes. As converted words become widely accepted, especially in Tiv, they will enter dictionaries and educational materials, contributing to the standardization and modernization of the language. Ultimately, understanding conversion in English and Tiv enriches linguistic theory and supports the sustainable development of indigenous languages in multilingual societies. The study recommends that universities and research institutions create electronic corpora, digital dictionaries, and language databases for English and other indigenous languages (like Tiv) to facilitate linguistic research, natural language processing, and language preservation.

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