

## WORD CONVERSION AND LEXICAL CATEGORIES

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1. **The traditional picture.** ‘Cash’ in (1a) below and ‘cash’ in (1b) are distinct words from distinct lexical categories with distinct (but related) meanings. ‘Cash’ in (1a) is a noun that means cash, a kind of currency. ‘Cash’ in (1b) is a verb that means cash, a kind of event (in which something is exchanged for cash). The verb ‘cash’ and its meaning were derived from the noun ‘cash’ and its meaning via a process called *word conversion*.
  - a. I needed some cash.
  - b. I cashed a cheque.
2. **A very common process** in English:
  - a. John went for a walk. (verb to noun)
  - b. I have two reds in my hand. (adjective to noun)
  - c. John tried to up the pace. (preposition to verb)
  - d. Mary walked tall. (adjective to adverb)
  - e. They chinked their glasses. (onomatopoeic to verb)
  - f. I own two diesels. (mass noun to count noun)
3. **Lexical categories.** Why is ‘cash’ in (1a) a noun whereas ‘cash’ in (1b) is a verb? One answer: because of what they mean. A better answer: because of their morphosyntactic behaviour.
4. **What I shall do:** First, I will argue that as well as using ‘cash’ in (1b) to mean cash, the event, we also use it to mean cash, the currency, the same thing that we use it to mean in (1a). That is, we use ‘cash’ in (1b) to mean *two* things. Second, I shall propose that ‘cash’ in (1b) is the same word as ‘cash’ in (1a), and that word conversion is not a process in which a new word is created, but one in which an existing word acquires a new meaning. Third, I shall suggest a better way to think about lexical categorization: that it is primarily the categorization of structural positions within sentences, and only secondarily the categorization of words (in virtue of their being used in those positions).
5. **Plausibility.** I am going to argue that we use ‘cash’ in (1b) to mean *two* things. First, some remarks to make this more plausible:
  - a. It is a fact about usage in general that we can use things to do more than one thing in the one use. I might use a button to explode a bomb and thereby explode a dam, thus using the button to explode two things in the one use.
  - b. It is a widely recognised fact about *sentences* that we sometimes mean two things by the one use of a sentence: I might use ‘Mary has nice handwriting’ to mean that Mary has nice handwriting and (thereby) that Mary is not a good philosopher. The *sentence* only means one of these two things, but a *speaker* might use it to mean both.
  - c. It is a (not so widely recognised) fact about sub-sentential expressions that we sometimes mean two things by the one use of a sub-sentential expression: ‘Table six left without paying’. I might use ‘table six’ to mean both table six, *and* (thereby) the man on table six.
  - d. I think it is plausible, then, that we sometimes mean two things by the one use a *word*, and in particular that we might mean two things by ‘cash’ in (1b).

6. **Four facts about (1b):**

- a. A speaker can reasonably expect her audience to understand that by ‘that stuff’ in the second following sentence she means cash, the currency: ‘I cashed a cheque. I love that stuff.’
- b. A speaker can reasonably expect her audience to understand that by the second following sentence she means that she needed some cash, the currency: ‘I cashed a cheque. I needed some.’
- c. A speaker can reasonably expect her audience to understand that by the following sentence she means that she exchanged a cheque for some counterfeit cash: ‘I counterfeit cashed a cheque.’
- d. A speaker can reasonably expect her audience to understand that by ‘cash’ in the following sentence she means some kind of event that involves cash, the currency, even if she knows that her audience is unfamiliar with such usage: ‘I cashed a cheque.’

**I claim:** the *best explanation* for each of these four facts is that we use ‘cash’ in (1b) to mean cash, the currency.

7. **Account of fact (6a)** (similar accounts can be given for each other fact).

- a. *My explanation of (6a):* when a speaker utters (1b) she makes cash, the currency, salient, because by ‘cash’ in (1b) she means cash, the currency. Having made cash, the currency, salient, she can reasonably expect to be understood as meaning cash, the currency, by ‘that stuff’.
- b. *First alternative:* the speaker makes cash, the currency, salient, because events of which ‘cash’ in (1b) are true typically involve cash. My response: eating events typically involve food, so it ought to be reasonable of me to expect you to understand that by ‘that stuff’ in ‘I ate a sandwich. I love that stuff’ I mean food. But this is not reasonable, unless food is made salient elsewhere in the context (unlike the ‘cash’ example).
- c. *Second alternative:* the speaker makes cash, the currency, salient, because there is a word ‘cash’ that we use to mean cash, the currency. My response: there is a word ‘hard’ that means difficult, so it ought to be reasonable of me to expect you to understand that by the second following sentence I mean that the questions were difficult; ‘The chair was hard. The questions were that way too.’ But this is not reasonable, unless the sentences are interpreted zeugmatically (unlike the ‘cash’ example – it might be a bit strange, because ‘cash’ is used in verb position, but that is not zeugma).

8. **Word conversion.** I propose that ‘cash’ in (1b) is the same word as ‘cash’ in (1a). So too for all other instances of word conversion (a big leap). Word conversion is not a process in which a new word is created, but one in which an existing word acquires a new meaning. (So the process is badly named.)

9. **Lexical categorization.** So is ‘cash’ a noun or a verb? It now becomes unclear, on either test. We *want* to say that in *some* sentences (such as (1a)) it is a noun and in *some* sentences (such as (1b)) it is a verb. This reminds me of rugby positions. We categorize players into positions: scrum half, flanker, etc. But this is because of the positions within the team in which they play. Primarily, the categorization is of positions; it is only secondarily of players, in virtue of the position(s) in which they play. (To be a scrum half is to play in a certain type of position, to be a scrum half position is *not* to be a position in which a certain type of person plays.) I propose that the same is true of words and lexical categories. Primarily, we have noun and verb positions within a sentence. Words are nouns or verbs in virtue of the positions in which they are used.