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Nouns Illustrating Adjective-Noun Conversion in English

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports a study concerned with finding examples used in ordinary everyday English of nouns derived from adjectives through the word-formation process of conversion. The study involved, in the main, a close examination for common adjective-derived noun headwords of two first-rate learner's dictionaries: Hornby's *Oxford*

Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English (edited by Wehmeier (2000)) and *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary* (edited by Sinclair (1987)). The examples collected in the course of the study are, for the most part, listed in the paper according to semantic subclasses determined by the kinds of general meanings (e.g.: "ADJECTIVE person", "Person with ADJECTIVE beliefs, views, or attitudes", etc) which the nouns are formed from the adjective bases to express. It is expected that the examples will prove of some value in the teaching of the English vocabulary in second or foreign language situations.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is actually the report of a study aimed at finding as many examples as possible of nouns used in ordinary everyday English which are derived from adjectives through the process of *conversion*. The examples were originally required for a section in a teaching text on the English vocabulary that was intended for learners in second or foreign language situations.

As is well known, conversion is the word-formation process whereby a lexical item is simply converted or adapted from one grammatical class to another without an affix. For example, we can talk of the conversion of the adjective *daily* (as in: "We read it in a *daily* newspaper") to the noun *daily* (as in: "We read it in a *daily*"). That the two instances of the word *daily* (the base adjective and the derived noun) belong to two different grammatical classes is only clear from the fact that they are used in different sentence positions. In English, conversion is indeed an important word- formation process, and adjective-noun conversion is one of its main categories (see, e.g.: Francis,

1967; Strang, 1967; Marchand, 1969; Adams, 1973; and Quirk *et al.*, 1985).

2. THE STUDY

The study involved a close examination for nouns derived from adjectives by conversion of two widely acclaimed learner's dictionaries: Hornby's *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* (edited by Wehmeier (2000)) and *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary* (edited by Sinclair (1987)). These are dictionaries that generally indicate which headwords are adjectives and then, where appropriate, which are nouns derived from the adjectives by conversion.

However, it was not always clear from the dictionaries whether the adjective or the noun should be taken as the base, while the other member of the pair was to be regarded as the derived item. This problem often arose where the noun (rather than the adjective) is listed first in one or both of the dictionaries. For instance, in both dictionaries the noun *agnostic* is listed before the adjective *agnostic*; and in one of the dictionaries the noun *adhesive* is listed before the adjective *adhesive*, while it is only in the other that it is listed first as an adjective. It was eventually decided to take the adjective as the base (from which the noun is derived) in dealing with items like *agnostic* and *adhesive* if the pairs have such typically adjectival endings as *-ic* and *-ive* (*cf.*: Adams, 1973: 18; Close, 1975: 151). But, in general, it was decided to leave out any adjective/noun pairs for which we had no way of resolving problems relating to the direction of the conversion.

To enhance the usefulness of our examples of adjective-derived nouns from the two dictionaries, we went on to try and divide them up as much as possible into semantic

subclasses on the basis of the kinds of meaning particular adjectives are converted to nouns to express. For example, the adjectives *adolescent* and *fugitive* are converted to the nouns *adolescent* and *fugitive* respectively to express the meaning “ADJECTIVE [*i.e.* : *adolescent/fugitive/...*] person”, and so they were put in the semantic subclass “ADJECTIVE person”; the adjectives *agnostic* and *radical* are converted to the nouns *agnostic* and *radical* respectively with the meaning “person with ADJECTIVE [*i.e.* : *agnostic/radical/...*] beliefs, views or attitudes”, and they went into the semantic subclass “Person with ADJECTIVE beliefs, views, or attitudes”; etc.

Lastly, it was necessary to leave out some of the adjective-derived nouns found in the dictionaries because they were considered rather uncommon or technical (*e.g.*: *agoraphobic*, *paranoiac/paranoid*, *schizophrenic*, *psychic*, *bourgeois*, *prophylactic*, *emetic*, *demonstrative* (from Linguistics)).

3. THE FINDINGS

In A – M below, our examples from the data are listed according to the various semantic subclasses of adjective-derived nouns in English that we could establish. The number of examples listed for each subclass is roughly proportionate to the total number of the examples of adjective-derived nouns in the subclass which we could take from the data. Thus the number of examples listed for a particular subclass may be taken as a rough measure of the importance of the subclass (*i.e.* of the extent to which the related adjective-noun conversion pattern may be said to be productive) in non-technical, everyday English – with the more important subclasses having more examples and the less important fewer examples. In cases where an example is a noun with more than one

quite distinct meaning, it will be found listed for more than one subclass (*e.g.*: the noun *Chinese* is listed for “The ADJECTIVE language” and “Person of ADJECTIVE nationality or origin”).

However, there are some other examples that we did not really succeed in sorting into any of the semantic subclasses. This miscellany of adjective-derived nouns we list together at the end, in N below. It will be noticed that some of the items in this case appear more than once in the list (*e.g.*: *international*, *single*) as they express more than one distinct meaning.

A. *ADJECTIVE person*

adolescent	delinquent	intellectual
alien	fugitive	itinerant
ascetic	homosexual	junior
bilingual	hopeful	notable
black	illiterate	prodigal
celibate	imbecile	senior
clairvoyant	inferior	superior
contemporary	innocent	white

B. *Person with ADJECTIVE beliefs, views, or attitudes*

agnostic	liberal	revolutionary
authoritarian	militant	romantic
conservative	moderate	subversive
deviant	neutral	utopian

egalitarian	progressive
independent	radical

C. *Person having the disease or condition of being ADJECTIVE*

alcoholic	epileptic	paralytic
asthmatic	lunatic	rheumatic
consumptive	melancholic	
diabetic	neurotic	

D. *ADJECTIVE person or thing*

female	opposite	possible
male	indispensable	

E. *ADJECTIVE thing or substance*

eatable (usually plural)	liquid	solid
edible (usually plural)	necessary (usually plural)	synthetic
equivalent	perishable (usually plural)	valuable(usually plural)
hybrid	plastic	

F. *Medicine or some other substance with ADJECTIVE properties*

abrasive	cosmetic	purgative
absorbent	contraceptive	restorative
adhesive	laxative	sedative
antibiotic	narcotic	solvent

antiseptic palliative

G. *ADJECTIVE colour*

black	grey	yellow
blue	pink	white
brown	purple	
green	red	

H. *ADJECTIVE publication*

annual	comic	periodical
bi-monthly	daily	quarterly
bi-weekly	monthly	weekly

We may also mention here the related minor subclass of “ADJECTIVE plant” with *annual*, *biennial* and *perennial* as the usual members.

I. *ADJECTIVE stage in a competition*

preliminary	quarterfinal	semi-final	final
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These nouns are often used in the plural.

J. *Member of the ADJECTIVE religion or sect*

Anglican	Episcopalian	Wesleyan
Catholic	Methodist	Muslim
Christian	Protestant	

K. *Person of ADJECTIVE nationality or origin*

African	Egyptian	Japanese
Algerian	European	Nigerian
American	Finnish	Norwegian
Australian	German	Pakistani
Arab	Ghanaian	Russian
Brazilian	Greek	Singaporean
Canadian	Indian	Swiss
Chinese	Italian	Yugoslavian/Yugoslav
Czech	Iraqi	

The nouns in this subclass are usually used to refer to natives or citizens of the nations (or continents) from whose names the base adjectives have been formed (often by affixation). The base adjectives, however, do not normally indicate qualities, but things belonging or relating to, or originating from, such nations (or continents) (as in: *Egyptian books*, *Indian politics*, *Japanese cars*, etc). It is also to be noted that *Frenchman/Frenchwoman* and *Englishman/Englishwoman* are used to refer to a man/woman who is a native or citizen of France and England respectively; and *the French* and *the English* are used, respectively, to refer to the French people and the English people collectively.

L. *The ADJECTIVE language*

Arabic	Greek	Polish
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Chinese	Hindi	Portuguese
Czech	Hungarian	Romanian
English	Japanese	Spanish
Finnish	Iraqi	Swahili
French	Italian	Swedish
German	Norwegian	

It will be noticed that some of the nouns here (*Chinese, Czech, Finnish, German, etc*) have the same form as those in subclass K above. Thus, for example, *Chinese* means either “person of Chinese nationality or origin” or “the Chinese language”. In other words, the adjectives *Chinese, Czech, etc* are converted to nouns to express more than one distinct meaning (3 above).

M. *ADJECTIVE principle or aspect of something*

basic	essential	inessential
constant	external	fundamental

The items here are usually used in the plural.

N. *Some other adjective-derived nouns*

automatic (gear)	multinational (company)
automatic (gun)	negative (photograph)
musical (play/film)	neutral (gear)
classic (writer/book)	offensive (attack)
comic (actor)	oral (examination)

commercial (radio/TV advertisement)	primary (election)
documentary (film/programme)	principal (teacher)
editorial (opinion)	regular (customer)
empty (bottle)	single (bedroom)
exclusive (story)	single (record)
friendly (match)	single (ticket)
inaugural (speech/lecture)	social (gathering)
initial (letter)	spiritual (song)
international (match)	subsidiary (company)
international (player)	terminal (point)
memorial (object)	variable (factor)
mercenary (soldier)	

These are the adjective-derived nouns that we claim do not quite share in the kind of group meaning that defines each of our adjective-noun semantic subclasses (A – M) presented above. Thus, for instance, an *adolescent* (like a *bilingual*, *contemporary*, etc) fits into the semantic subclass A, headed “ADJECTIVE person”. However, an *international* (listed twice in the subclass here) is not just an “international person” or an “international thing” but an “international *player*” or an “international *match*” – meanings so circumscribed that they cannot be accommodated under the heading “ADJECTIVE person” or “ADJECTIVE thing”, or under some such other group heading. Hence, for the non-native learner of English, the adjective-derived noun in this case usually assumes something of an

idiom, as its exact meaning has to be specially learnt: it cannot be fully guessed from the meaning of the adjective base.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

As already explained, this paper is the report of a study with the primary purpose of finding as many examples as possible of nouns formed from adjectives through the word-formation process of conversion in English which the non-native learner would generally want to be familiar with. To enhance their value, the examples collected in the course of the study have in large part been listed in the paper (3A – L above) according to semantic subclasses based on the kinds of general meanings the nouns are formed from the adjective bases to express : “ADJECTIVE person”, “Person with ADJECTIVE beliefs, views, or attitudes”, “Person having the disease or condition of being ADJECTIVE”, etc. It is expected that the examples will be found of some use in the teaching of the English vocabulary in second or foreign language situations.

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