1 Introduction

For several centuries English has been well known for its many cases of conversion, for instance it is used very frequently by Shakespeare, almost as a stylistic device of his. And to this day it has remained a prominent feature of the language. The standard definition of conversion (Bauer 1988: 90-2; Spencer 1991: 20) is a change in word-class without any alteration in form, i.e. zero-derivation (Cruse 1986: 132f.). Take for example the following instances.

(1)

He binned (v) the letter. ← bin (n)
They rubbish (v) the idea. ← rubbish (n)
Dave was out clubbing (v) on Saturday. ← club (n)
He claims that he has been scapegoated. (v) ← scapegoat (n)

But even these examples show that conversion involves subtle semantic shifts which are not obvious if it is treated as a mechanical process, for instance the second example, to rubbish is not “to make rubbish” but to “reject something as worthless”, i.e. “to treat as rubbish”. The third example shows the use of to club in the sense of “to visit many clubs in succession, or at least one club for a prolonged period of time”.

The second point to note here is that cases of conversion are to be found most commonly in colloquial registers of English. If you look up to rubbish in a recent Oxford dictionary such as the tenth edition of the Concise Oxford Dictionary (2000) then you find that it is labelled “British informal”; the CoBuild dictionary also labels it “informal”. The source of these instances in informal speech is of relevance to the matter at hand and will be returned to presently.
In recent decades a further development can be observed\(^\text{25}\) which, for the want of a better word, I term \textit{univerbation}. By this is meant that structures consisting of several words are reduced to one, as when a verbal phrase is compacted to a single word as seen in (2).

\begin{quote}
(2)
\begin{itemize}
\item They overnighted in Athlone on the way to the West.
\item They stayed overnight in Athlone on the way to the West.
\end{itemize}
\end{quote}

Such cases illustrate a process which is part of a long-term typological shift in English. The latter is what has been observed in the shift from a morphologically complex to an inflectionally simplified language and is conventionally referred to as a move from synthetic to analytic. The current process can be viewed as a later stage in an analytic language where lexical compaction, i.e. univerbation, is in evidence and can thus be interpreted as part of a typological cycle.

A few remarks on terminology are called for here. \textit{Conversion} refers to a formal process, a change in word-class without a change in form. \textit{Univerbation} refers to a more general structural shift in the language by which phrases are reduced to single words, this can be to a verb, noun or adjective. There is also a use of \textit{univerbation} to refer to a process whereby more than one word is reduced to one through intermediate steps of cliticisation. This usage is frequent in studies on grammaticalisation and is associated with cases where words show a gradual loss of semantic profile accompanied by a reduction in phonetic form and finally attachment to a host lexical item initiating a change in status to bound morpheme. Old English \textit{dēm} meaning “decree, judgement” would be a good example here as it no longer exists as an unbound morpheme but simply as a suffix indicating state or quality, as in \textit{wise : wisdom}.\(^\text{26}\) This is essentially different from the kind of univerbation being dealt with here: in the cases of univerbation in grammaticalisation there are several intermediate steps, i.e. there is a cline between full lexical item and completely bound morpheme. But in the cases to be looked at here there is a direct switch from verbal phrase to single word. It should also be said that the concern here is not with reductions from a phrasal verb to simple verb though there are attested cases of this too in recent English, consider

\(^{25}\) This does not seem to have drawn the attention of grammarians to any significant extent, for instance the section on verbs in Biber et al. (1999: 357-450) does not contain any reference to this phenomenon.

\(^{26}\) A reflex of an umlauted verb related directly to this noun can be seen in Modern English \textit{to deem} as in \textit{to deem something necessary}, i.e. \textit{to judge something necessary}.
(3), and these do illustrate a principle which is in evidence in the type of univerbation discussed in this contribution, namely the desire to achieve greater directness in discourse.

(3)

She talked about her family.
But: We’re talking Ø big money now.²⁷

2 Data

Below a series of ordered examples are offered which will function as linguistic material for the subsequent discussion. The sources of this material are all oral and from the media in the wider sense, e.g. from news reports, political commentaries, talk shows and the like. They have been collected over the past two years and stem from British, Irish and American English. This latter fact is important as it suggests that the process of univerbation illustrated by the material is not confined to any subset of varieties of English and hence cannot be directly linked to external factors such as the social circumstances obtaining for a particular variety.²⁸ In addition it should be stated that some instances were premeditated — as with prepared journalists’ reports — while others were spontaneous utterances, most commonly gleaned from phone-ins on radio and television or from audience remarks in talk shows. The distinction between spontaneous and premeditated utterances is essential to draw as for the latter one can assume that the univerbation is, at least to a certain degree, part of a professional jargon. This is especially true of journalese. The spontaneous examples are more interesting because they illustrate unconscious linguistic behaviour by speakers acting within the typological framework of their native language. Below the abbreviation SU in parentheses refers to ‘spontaneous utterances’ and ‘PS’ to ‘premeditated speech’. There are intermediate cases where a journalist or television host is speaking without a prepared script, such instances are labelled FS for ‘free speech’ all other instances are not from the corpus of examples.

Mention of dictionary attestations should be made here. For instance, the 10th edition of the Concise Oxford Dictionary has the word mailshot as

²⁷ There just could be an analogy of talk + direct object with discuss which of course also is a transitive verb.
²⁸ This is not to say that second language varieties of English, for instance in Africa or Asia, do not show formally similar structures as in the following Indian example: The handicapped toilet ← A toilet for handicapped people.
“an item, especially a piece of advertising material, sent to a large number of addresses” whereas the CoBuild dictionary, which is some 12 years older, does not have the word at all. This of course points to the recency of the word. However, the Concise Oxford Dictionary does not have the corresponding verb to mailshot which is attested in the present corpus as The labour party wants to mailshot the electorate in advance of the coming election (FS). There is a generalisation here, namely that new words tend to appear as nouns first and later, by zero derivation, to turn up as verbs.

2.1 Verb from verbal phrase

The process of univerbation can be seen most clearly in the present type of shift, i.e. from a verbal phrase to a single verb. This is the shift which is hinted at in the title of the present paper with the example of to track. For the current data presentation, examples are given in the sentence or phrase in which they occurred and directly below the fuller form from which they can be assumed to be derived as in the following instance.

(4) The conservatives seem to be tracking changes in public opinion. (FS) \(\leftarrow\) The conservatives seem to be keeping track of changes in public opinion.

There follow a selection of examples which illustrate univerbation from verbal phrases.

(5) They need to resource the NHS better. (SU) \(\leftarrow\) They need to provide the NHS with better resources.

(6) How about detailing the measures you would take? (FS) \(\leftarrow\) How about giving details about the measures you would take?

(7) If we could minibus around town. (SU) \(\leftarrow\) If we could take the minibus around town.
(8) 
The government would have to examine the whole tax income and progress it from there. (PS) 
The government would have to examine the whole tax income and then make progress / move forward from there.

(9) 
The road has been ramped. (SU) 
The road has been fitted with ramps.

(10) 
He bankrolled various revolutions. (FS) 
He paid for various revolutions with his bank roll.

(11) 
Can you video the football game for us? (SU) 
Can you record the football game on video for us?

(12) 
She paused the tape-recorder by mistake. (SU) 
She put the tape-recorder on pause.

(13) 
The party has costed its transport plans at 2 billion pounds. (PS) 
The party has estimated the cost of its transport plans at 2 billion pounds.

(14) 
There’s been an unacceptable degree of foot-dragging on this issue. (PS) 
There’s been an unacceptable degree of people dragging their feet on this issue.

(15) 
I’ve nothing against fast-tracking, but this child was fast-tracked into an adoption without proper preparation. (SU) 
I’ve nothing against moving in the fast-track, but this child was pushed into the fast-track for an adoption without proper preparation.

(16) 
They need to security clear the asylum seekers at the point of entry. (SU) 
They need to clear the asylum seekers for security at the point of entry.

(17) 
We can’t continue to grant aid the universities at this level. (PS) 
We can’t continue to give the universities grants at this level.
2.2 Verb from noun

These are the classic cases of conversion — as in (18) — any number of which could be listed here. However, the concern is not with straightforward cases of zero derivation, so the examples found in the present corpus will not be presented. What should be said, however, is that there are many cases where the source verb phrase is not that clear, as in (19).

(18)
We interface with the students on a number of levels. (FS) ←
interface (n.)

(19)
He was pay-rolled by Archer into lying. (FS) ←
He lied because he was on his pay-roll. or He was put on his pay-roll to bribe him into lying.

2.3 Noun from verbal phrase

Again, these can be viewed as instances of conversion, as in (20). There are, however, some cases where the noun in question has the shape of a deverbal formation but there is no source verbal phrase, see (21).

(20)
This whole thing is one big piss-take. (SU) ←
To take the piss out of someone.

(21)
The run-up to the election. (FS) ← *They ran up to the election.

But there are other examples of this kind of formation, e.g. run-off, run-out where a corresponding verb phrase is not present or not with the same meaning, for instance the meaning of run-out as “a length of time or space over which something gradually lessens or ceases” (Concise Oxford Dictionary, 10th edition) is not necessarily derived from “to run out”. Frequently the source verbal phrase is, however, still available as in the following instances.
They ran through the text once more.
There was time for a run-through that afternoon.
You can still get out of the contract.
A get-out clause.
They gave away free samples.
A give-away.

2.4 Adjective from verbal or prepositional phrase

In the area of univerbation a process which is particularly striking in present-day English is the derivation of a single adjective from a verbal phrase.

(23)
The better suburbs constitute a gated community. (PS) ←
The better suburbs constitute a community which lives behind gates.

(24)
You’re dealing with receipted childminders. (SU) ←
You’re dealing with childminders who issue receipts.

(25)
I’m a separated father. (SU) ←
I’m a father who is separated from his wife.

(26)
The taxi situation is stretching the patience of the queueing public. (PS) ←
The taxi situation is stretching the patience of the public who stands in queues.

(27)
The major retailers should bear the interests of the buying public in mind. (FS) ←
The major retailers should bear the interests of the public who buy goods in mind.

(28)
The reporting world is weary of the election wrangling. (PS) ←
Those who report are weary of the election wrangling.

The cases of conversion to adjective can frequently involve the creation of a compound adjective. In general one can maintain that a compound
adjective will result where the elements of the source phrase are not entirely obvious. For example, the phrase the buying public does not occur as the goods-buying public as it is clear that the public buy goods, i.e. one can observe the use of default assumptions here. For buy the default would seem to be goods and if something else is being referred to then this is specified as in the following attestation which shows the explicit mention of a non-default object for this verb.

\[(29)\]
\[
\text{The service-buying sector of the industry has had to be revamped in the nineties. (FS)}
\]

The following attestations of compound adjectives seem to substantiate the assumption that one is dealing with non-default meanings with such complex formations.

\[(30)\]
\[
\text{She was work-ready at the time. (SU)} \leftarrow
\text{She was ready for work at the time.}
\]

\[(31)\]
\[
\text{The vehicle is wheelchair-accessible. (SU)} \leftarrow
\text{The vehicle can be accessed by wheelchair.}
\]

\[(32)\]
\[
\text{The new ring-road was part-financed by the European Regional Development Fund. (PS)} \leftarrow
\text{The new ring-road was financed in part by the European Regional Development Fund.}
\]

The above discussion does not exhaust all the cases of adjectival univerbation to be found in present-day English. In particular there are instances in which a phrase is reduced to a single adjective which then appears in predicative position as in the following instance.

\[(33)\]
\[
\text{Most of the kids are unstructured during the summer holidays. (SU)} \leftarrow
\text{Most of the kids have no structure to their lives during the summer holidays.}
\]
This is a case of predicative adjective use from an attested attributive use, cf. *They lead very structured lives in the old people’s home*. In addition the noun which is qualified has now been deleted. From this and similar cases one can postulate a cline in the development of bare adjectives which looks like the following. Note that there is a semantic extension from an object (here: *lives*) to an animate noun (here: *they*) which is associated with of the former.

\[\text{(34)}\]

1) Attributive Adj + Noun $\rightarrow$
2) Noun + Predicative Adj $\rightarrow$
3) predicative Adj only

1) *They lead unstructured lives.*
2) *Their lives are unstructured.*
3) *They are unstructured.*

This kind of reduction and extension can lead to an overburdening of certain converted adjectives and an increasing requirement for contextualisation. Consider the following instances.

\[\text{(35)}\]

*The results of their highers. (school leaving results)*
*A Saturday special. (offer, party, disco, etc.)*
*Can you give me your empties? (empty bottles, paper cups, etc.)*

Of course this kind of development has been around for some considerable time, for example, *afters* for dessert, as in *A meal with no afters or earlies for early potatoes* and is common with all word classes, e.g. *Slip-ons* (shoes without buckles or laces) [← verbal phrase], *The ins and outs of the case. Their marriage is one long series of ups and downs.* [← prepositions], *We drink coffee for our elevenses.* [← countable numeral]. The motivation for such reductions probably lies in unambiguous contextualisation. This can be seen with a recent example: *wheelie bin* is a relatively new term for a rubbish bin on wheels and the abbreviated form *wheelie* is already attested, most likely because the context in which *wheelie (bin)* occurs is sufficiently clear to allow for the reduction without giving rise to misunderstanding. Other examples could be cited in this context, such as *wrinklie, crumblie* (for older person) or *royals* (for members of the English royal family).
The key consideration is context. The simplest cases are those where there is only one context which is automatically assumed. But certain adjectives show two contexts, for instance in the singular or plural (36a) and the context can vary across anglophone countries (36b).

(36)

- **a Secondary** (sg: school)  
  Secondary (pl: cancer)
- **b Primary** (school in Britain)  
  Primary (election in the United States)

### 3 Discussion

#### 3.1 Motivation for univerbation

The simplest cases of univerbation are those where the reduction takes place simply because of the clarity of the context as with adjectives deriving from phrases consisting of an adjective plus noun. However, this explanation cannot be advanced for the univerbation from verbal phrases to verbs. As opposed to adjectives from adjectival phrases one is not simply dealing with the deletion of an element (noun in an adjectival phrase) but with an active restructuring of the syntax and so some kind of motivation other than ellipsis must lie behind the process. I now suggest two reasons for this univerbation which would place this type of change in the area of speaker-motivated change, i.e. ultimately deriving from pragmatic considerations in speech contexts.

1. *To achieve directness.* This is certainly true of its use in certain professional jargons such as journalesse. The short form has a certain pithiness, which is in keeping with journalistic style, and is also a feature of colloquial language.£

(37)

*How does this development impact U. S. politics?* (FS) ←

*What impact does this development have on U.S. politics?*

(38)

*They reported conflicting views on his whereabouts.* (FS) ←

*They reported on conflicting views on his whereabouts.*

£ Of course this sort of thing is a feature of official jargons of English, just think of the (former) British Railways announcement of arriving trains: *The five forty to King’s Lynn will platform shortly.* ← *The five forty to King’s Lynn will arrive at the platform shortly.*
There are good historical antecedents for this kind of development. Consider the verb *to scold*. This was previously used with the preposition *at* and was parallel with other verbs which denoted direct personal confrontation such as *to scream at, to shout at* (in this sense *scold* is different from *scorn, rebuke, criticise* all of which can be used indirectly, without personal confrontation). The loss of preposition with *scold* gave it additional directness and immediacy as with the present-day sentences just quoted.

It should be noted that speakers do not always wish to achieve directness, i.e. there is a certain tension between pithiness and circumlocution. Longer forms allow for some respite when formulating one’s thoughts while talking and there are many examples which illustrate precisely this roundabout mode of expression as in the following attestation of a politician answering a journalist who was pressing him on a sensitive topical issue.

(39)
*We’re taking a certain cautious and largely sceptical and not altogether positive view of this development.* (FS)

Another factor in this complex should be mentioned here: there would appear to be a correlation between directness and circumlocution on the colloquial/formal axis. As a rule of thumb one can claim that, where alternatives exist, the contrast between full and short forms is maintained to distinguish formal versus informal style levels.

2. *To increase the subjective perspective.* This is linguistically a more interesting aspect because it fits in with the general tendency of structures to show an increase in subjectification over time. Consider for a moment the development of adverbs like *while* from a purely temporal reference (ultimately from Old English *whilum* dative plural, meaning “at times”) to a concessive adverb (Hopper & Traugott 1993: 85-6) as in *While she is interested in teaching she wants to become a doctor.* Now in this light one can take a fresh look at cases of univerbation. Here is a telling example taken from a talk show. The context is one where a discussion was held about so-called shadow beliefs, the specific issue here being what is called a “light-bulb experience”, i.e. a psychological insight or sudden realisation.
Oprah (talking to a member of the audience): *So you had a light-bulb experience for yourself too.*
Dorothy: *Yeah, yeah I did.*
Oprah: *Really, you light-bulbed yourself?*
Dorothy: *Sure, I light-bulbed suddenly in the car on the way to work and after that the knot was loosen...*

The point here is that the member of the audience is increasing the subjective perspective by compacting the verbal phrase *to have a light-bulb experience* into a single verb *to light-bulb*.

### 3.2 Theoretical implications

1. **Analysis of compounds.** The readiness with which speakers engage in this univerbation is proof of the connection between a full phrase and a simple verb. This offers additional proof of the reverse process, namely the linguist’s analysis of compounds as underlying phrases, e.g. *pickpocket* as “some who picks someone else’s pocket” or *drawbridge* as “a bridge which is drawn”.

2. **Increased contextualisation.** There is an increasing reliance on pragmatics and discourse context. This is usually assumed to be a feature of language contact, language shift, pidginisation and other externally motivated scenarios for language change. But here one sees that it can happen without any social upheaval, often accompanied by such phenomena as imperfect second language acquisition, and shows what is possible in a language without causing genuine misunderstanding.

### 4 Conclusion

If one reviews the instances of univerbation presented above, one might be tempted to dismiss them as on the fly nonce-formations which have a half-life of a few seconds. But that would be to miss an essential point. Nonce formations are made by speakers who are behaving in accordance with the typological possibilities of their native language. If speakers of English create such nonce formations then this means that this type of structure is in keeping with the typological profile, the look and feel, of present-day English, or, to put it in venerable historical terms, it fits “the
genius of the language”. The increase in subjectification which such univerbation allows is possible in English where the analytic nature of the language shows enough flexibility in word-class shift and compaction to provide structures where a verbal phrase is shifted to a bare verb and then produced with the first person singular thus subjectifying the structure completely. This element of subjective perspective combined with the pithiness and directness which such structures embody would account for the popularity of this reduction process with verbal phrases, at least in colloquial registers and certain jargons, and may well spread to the written language later.

References


