

The *-er* 'processive' suffix and *You little bottler!*

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In New Zealand and Australian English, there is a lexical item *bottler*, as in *you (little) bottler!*, which expresses intense approval of or admiration for the person or thing so designated; as one might expect, it can also be used ironically. It is listed in the *Oxford Dictionary of New Zealand English* (Orsman 1997), the *Heinemann New Zealand Dictionary* (Orsman & Ransom 1989) and in the *Macquarie Dictionary* (Delbridge 1991), but none gives any indication of the provenience of this rather curious expression. Early attestations can be found in Orsman (1997). I suggest here a possible explanation of its origin, as a result of a brief examination of one dimension of the suffix *-er*.

Consider the following lexical items, all of which are either current in the English spoken by people living on the Hauraki Plains in the North Island of New Zealand, or are known to them:¹

baconer 'pig of a size suitable for killing for bacon and ham'

boner 'bovine good only for the grade of beef known as "manufacturing"'

bottler 'person/thing considered outstanding in some way'

broiler 'young chicken suitable for broiling or grilling'

chopper 'overweight or aged pig useful only for sausage meat'

cooker 'fruit, esp. apple, suitable for cooking rather than eating raw'

eater 'fruit, esp. apple, suitable for eating raw'

freezer 'sheep or other animal bred for the frozen meat export trade, or killed for that purpose'

killer 'animal to be killed for meat'

porker 'pig of a size optimal for killing for prime pork'

roaster 'roasting fowl' (also *pot-roaster*)

seller 'object (car, book) which sells well' (*bestseller*)

skinner 'bovine good only for its hide'

weaner 'young animal recently weaned from mother, usually of pigs, cows'

None of the items in this (non-exhaustive) list is specific to the Hauraki Plains: all are listed in one or more of the dictionaries consulted (the above, plus the *OED* and *Webster's Third*), sometimes noted as specifically

Australasian usage (*bottler* and *no-hoper*; v. note 3 for this last), and sometimes with slightly different or more extensive or meanings than those noted above (in the USA, according to Webster's, a *chopper* is an old ewe).

Webster's gives the following two relevant definitions of *-er*:

- 'one that produces or yields' (*porker, vealer, wooler*)
- 'one that is a suitable object of a specified action' (*broiler, fryer*)²

Ignoring for the moment the apparent exception of *bottler*, in all the nouns listed above the suffix *-er* clearly pertains to a process undergone or undergoable by the animal/object concerned, i.e., it pertains to what is common to Webster's two definitions. Let us refer to it as the 'processive' suffix. It derives nouns basically from verbs, in spite of such apparent exceptions as *porker* and *baconer*.

The processive suffix is a productive one, so much so that the general lack of recognition of its role is a little surprising. Marchand (1969:280) lists *lifer* as slang (v. note 3), but otherwise does not recognise the category at all (since his description is based on the first edition of the *OED*, this implies that its use in British English is not widespread). Let us imagine a context to illustrate this productivity: if we had to grade incoming logs in a saw-milling operation into two categories, those which could be sawn into planks and those suitable only for chipping to make particle-board, we might well use the nonce terms *planker* and *chipper*: in context, both nouns are semantically transparent (I do not know if this actually happens, and nor did the people I asked, but all agreed on the unambiguous meaning in this context of the two terms suggested). Note that while *chipper* can be seen as deriving from a verb *to chip* 'to reduce to chips', **to plank* is somewhat doubtful outside of this specific context. A possible explanation is that the processive suffix by definition converts its base into a verb, such that pigs, when processed, may be *porked* or *baconed*.

The range of possible nouns is limited in principle only by the potential or intended processes. For fruit, eater, cooker, juicer, pulper, slicer, corer, peeler, jammer, winer, crusher, pig-feeder, preserver, seller, squeezer, piper, dumper, composter, drier/dryer, and so on, are all immediately understandable within a given real-world context, that of grading fruit according to its intended end: the piece of fruit concerned will be pulped, cored, sold, have its pips removed, be made into wine or jam, thrown on the dump or to the pigs or onto the compost heap, and so on. For poultry, one might have a boiler, broiler, stower, frier/fryer, fricasee-er, mincer, casseroler, poacher, smoker, etc., while a pig may, as noted above, be *porked* or *baconed*.³

That there are constraints on such derivations is shown by the unacceptability of **sausager* (= *chopper*), **hamburgerer* (= *boner*); the constraint in the case of **hamburgerer* is not phonological (cf. *poulterer*, *upholsterer*, *adulterer*, *sorcerer*, and *murderer*), although it might possibly be seen as some form of the repeated morph constraint (Menn & MacWhinney 1984), but there

are phonological ones, as in **coq-au-vin-er* (assuming even approximate French pronunciation of *vin*). But insofar as an object or animal can undergo a process of some kind, the processive *-er* is potentially available to produce the appropriate noun. There is no doubt a definable limit to the real-world contexts (only so many processes), and possibly a further constraint pertaining to the frequency or the "ordinariness" of the processes envisaged: for poultry, a ?**hā ngi-er* seems an unlikely formation, for example.

Although such matters remain unclear for the present, we are now in a position to consider *bottler*. At Agricultural and Pastoral (A&P) Shows — an annual fixture of life in rural New Zealand — fruit preserved in glass jars, or *bottled fruit*, is judged on uniformity of size and flawless condition, among other criteria. A piece of fruit that is a *bottler* is one that is flawlessly excellent, and it is not at all impossible that this is the origin of *you bottler!* applied to persons. This suggested metaphorical origin receives some support from the once widespread and still extant expression, often used ironically, *Your/His blood/piss is worth bottling* (cf. Orsman 1997, *bottle*).

Whatever the origin of *bottler* may be, it is clear that processive *-er* could stand further investigation, across varieties of English.

References

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Notes

¹A number of people provided spontaneous data in 1985, at stock sales or in casual conversation. Some terms, such as *baconer*, *boner*, *broiler*, *porker*, *skinner*, are currently used in local papers (in announcements of upcoming stock sales, for example). I am grateful to those friends and neighbours who provided definitions when asked, and in particular to Cary Douglas, Bruce Silva and Daphne Wong Too. My thanks go also to Harry Orsman and Peter Ranby.

²In U.S. usage, *fryer/frier* 'chicken suitable for (deep) frying' (Webster's), while in U.K. (plural) 'fish for frying' (OED).

³There are three items referring to people which seem to belong in this general category, although other analyses are certainly possible: a *looker* 'good-looking person, us. female' gets looked at appreciatively, a *lifer* 'convict serving a life sentence' is undergoing the process of being imprisoned for life, and a *no-hoper* 'highly incompetent person, social misfit or outcast; unpromising animal' is one from whom nothing is to be hoped.