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Shakespeare's agentive neologisms in *-er*: A functional view

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ABSTRACT

The article is a corpus-based, empirical study into the problem of Shakespearean agentive neologisms in *-er* in the light of a functional approach towards word-formation. Drawing on Kastovsky's (1983) idea of two functions of word-formation, i.e. the lexical and the syntactic one, as well as taking into consideration Strang's (1969) aspectual dichotomy of agentive formations, the collected material is subjected to functionally-oriented analysis. The results of the study demonstrate that the word-formational processes in question are closer to syntactic operations than to lexical ones, which allows to reconsider the status of some Shakespearean lexical innovations and the role they have played in making up the lexicon of contemporary English.

Keywords: agent nouns, neologisms, word-formation, Shakespeare, derivation.

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of Shakespeare's verbal inventiveness has been the subject of numerous scholarly disputes. Most of such studies explore the quantitative aspect of Shakespeare's lexical innovations, and set their sights on estimating the exact number of formations first attested in his works. Hence, many scholars make attempts at evaluating the number of Shakespearean coinages either by presenting antedatings to the first citations provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (e.g. Hulme 1995; Schäfer 1980; Russell 1989), or by discussing the problems with the methodology with the estimates stemming from the use of the *OED* (Shea 2014; Brewer

2012). Other studies (e.g. Nevalainen 2001; Dilorom 2021; Watson 2012) are more oriented towards discussing the word-formational mechanisms that were available in the Early Modern English period and which gave rise to new attestations in the corpus of Shakespeare's plays.

Whatever the case, any study devoted to the problem of the so-called "Shakespearean neologisms" is inherently ridden with the risk of inaccuracy stemming from limitations of research possibilities. It can never be asserted beyond doubt that a given word was either coined or even first used by Shakespeare. With time, fewer and fewer "Shakespearean neologisms" remain, as in many cases earlier attestations were identified. Therefore, the estimates of Shakespearean coinages decrease in number. In 1906, Harold Bayley calculated that the number of words invented by Shakespeare was 9450. The second edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, on the other hand, lists 2,200 alleged Shakespearean neologisms, while in one of the most recent publications on Shakespeare's language, David Crystal (2008) has estimated that a plausible number of true Shakespearean coinages is around 1700.

2. Functions of word-formation in light of Kastovsky (1983) and Strang (1969)

I would like to argue that the afore-mentioned, purely quantitative accounts concerning lexical innovations attributed to Shakespeare do not provide a sufficient insight into our understanding of the dramatist's verbal creativity. Providing raw numbers of Shakespeare's "new words" without taking into consideration their function might result in a misrepresentation of his actual contribution to the English language lexicon. Therefore, not only quantitative, but also the functional aspect of the new attestations identified in the corpus of Shakespeare's plays must be dealt with in order to provide a comprehensive account of the mechanism of word-formational morphemes.

1.1 Two functions of word-formation (Kastovsky 1983)

The concept which provides insight into the mechanics of coining neologisms, and which can be effectively applied in diachronic studies on newly attested formations is Dieter Kastovsky's idea of a double function of word-formation.

According to Kastovsky (1983), the basic function of word-formation is "labelling". This term is used by Kastovsky to refer to a function of word-formation whereby a new lexical unit is coined in order to serve as a designation for some extralinguistic phenomena. A given word-formational process will be activated when a linguistic community is in need of a new word which would function as a name for something newly invented, created, identified, or recognized. The neologism thus derived can be understood in terms of a *lexeme*: it is a lexical unit which becomes an inherent part of the lexicon. In this sense, it corresponds to de Saussurean conception of a word as a *linguistic sign*, composed of the *signifier* and the *signified*. The neologism, therefore, functions as the signifier for a new segment of the extralinguistic reality (i.e. the signified).

However, as Kastovsky (1983) noticed, not all neologisms are meant to act as names, or "labels". In some cases, a new word is derived primarily for the purpose of establishing a kind of deictic relation within a given discourse. Such a neologism does not designate anything new in the extralinguistic world, it is not a "label", but rather acts as an anaphoric device which helps to maintain the cohesion of a passage. This function is illustrated by Kastovsky (1983: 411) with the following examples:

a.   *One of them was **faking**. (…) Could the **faker** keep up free association (…)? The **faker**, whichever he was, had practiced or had natural talents.*

b.   *A few thought they had noticed someone **resembling** the man in the picture. I waited two days tracking one of the supposed **resemblers**, and found no **resemblance** at all.*

c.   *… and whether our own conversation doesn't sound a little **potty**. It's the **pottiness**, you know, that's so awful.*

d.   *Once or twice he **chuckled**… It was following one of those **chuckles** that Paul Drake drawled a question.*

e.   *Solarians did not bud, they **birthed**; and the female was always the **birther**. She remained female for life, no matter how many times she **birthed**.*

Kastovsky (1983) calls this function "a syntactic function of word-formation". Here, the process of the creation of a new word is more reminiscent of a syntactic transposition than morphological derivation: there is a change of syntactic category without any change of meaning, apart from categorial

one. The syntactic function of word-formation is thus a syntagmatic process, in contradistinction to the afore-mentioned "labelling" function, which operates paradigmatically. In the case of syntactic function of word-formation, the product, i.e. the newly attested word, is frequently an *ad-hoc* formation, heavily dependent semantically on its textual antecedent. Viewed from the diachronic perspective, such formations rarely survive as lexemes – most of them remain *hapax legomena*, i.e. nonce-formations with a single attestation in a given corpus.

It follows, then, that word-formation is by no means a homogeneous phenomenon, and should rather be looked upon as a cline, ranging from purely lexical, paradigmatically-oriented operations to the more syntactic, syntagmatically-oriented ones, in which functional recategorization is basically the only outcome. Such a view allows to reconsider the issue of neologisms and their status in the contemporary lexicon.

1.2 Two types of the suffix *-er* (Strang 1969)

A similar view concerning the suffix *-er* in the diachronic perspective on the English word-formational system has been offered by Barbara Strang (1969). According to Strang (1969), in English word-formation there are two variants of the suffix *–er*, which can be differentiated on syntactic, semantic, and functional grounds. One type represents semantically transparent, actual formations, which merely perform a syntactic function in discourse, while the other type is the "specialized" *–er*, which derives agents functioning as labels. Barbara Strang (1969) suggests that these two types actually represent different etymologies or different histories of *–er* formative. The latter type, the "specialized" *–er* was established in Old English and has been productive at all periods of the language. The other type, the "actual" *–er* has an entirely different history. Barbara Strang argues that this variant of the morpheme came into use under the direct stimulus of Latin models, with a slight reinforcement from French. First nominalizations of this kind appeared in English in the 14th century and they were typically used in biblical translations. Many of those formations at that time were derived from adjectival, usually participial forms from Latin. For example, Latin *interrogantis* was rendered as *asker*, in which the "actual" *–er* can be identified. The reason for the rise of this new type of nominalization, as Strang (1969) suggests, is the decline in adjective inflection for case, number and gender in the Middle English period. To make up for this loss, two competing patterns

were used: one is the syntactic structure "he who", "those who", and the other is the actual nominalization in *–er*, which additionally exhibits tense and aspect contrasts.

3. Shakespearean neologistic agent nouns in *-er*

The afore-discussed dichotomous nature of word-formation will be illustrated with the study of Shakespearean deverbal agentive nouns in *–er*. There are two reasons for such a selection of data. Firstly, agent-formation in *–er* is one of the most productive word-formational processes, and derivatives in *–er* constitute a considerable portion of Shakespearean coinages. Secondly, the agentive nouns in *–er* can serve as an excellent illustration of the phenomenon that Kastovsky (1983) calls "a double function of word-formation". The data subjected to analysis have been compiled from the corpus of Shakespeare's plays (*First Folio of Shakespeare's Plays*, Norton Facsimile, 2nd Edition) and then checked in the *Oxford English Dictionary* for the date of first attestation. Also, it has been confirmed with the *OED* data that the *–er* nouns sampled in the corpus are true derivatives formed on verbal bases, and not merely loanwords ending in the syllable "er". Altogether, there have been sampled 35 deverbal formations in *–er* which, following the *OED* dating, were first attested in Shakespeare's plays.

3.1 Corpus data: Analysis

The result of the semantic and functional analysis of Shakespearean *–er* nouns demonstrates that the vast majority of the nouns sampled in the corpus (as many as 31 out of the total 35) are closer to syntactic recategorizations than to labels. In the data collected, the suffix under inspection tends to play a purely transpositional, syntactic function – it merely nominalizes its underlying proposition, and the derivatives are semantically equivalent to their motivating verbal bases. The majority of Shakespeare's deverbal agent nouns in *–er* are fully transparent semantically and can be paraphrased simply as "one who V-es", where V stands for the verbal base. There are, therefore, no additional semantic features attached. Such a "syntactic" function of Shakespearean word-formation can be identified in the following derivatives:[1]

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[1]   All the *–er* derivatives discussed in the article are listed in the appendix together with

(1)   *appearer* "one who appears" (Per. 5.3.18)
        This is your wife. Per. Reverend appearer, *no.*

(2)   *injurer* "one who injures" (John 2.1.174)
        Thou monstrous Iniurer *of heauen and earth.*

(3)   *employer* "one who employs" (Much Ado 5.2.31)
        Troilous the first imploier *of pandars.*

(4)   *intercepter* "one who intercepts, an interceptor" (Twel. N. 3.4.242)
        Thy intercepter, *full of despight…attends thee at the Orchard end.*

Taking into consideration the full semantic transparency of the majority of
the deverbal *–er* formations, it could be argued that the nominalizations
in question function as reduced sentences, and are thus closer to syntactic
processes than to word-formational operations. The equivalence of the
attested *–er* derivatives to syntactic structures is especially visible in
expressions where the *–er* noun is the second element in a compound word.
In such cases, the word-formational operation merely transposes the direct
object of the transitive verb into the modifier element within the compound
word, as in the examples (5) – (7) provided below:

(5)   *gull-catcher*: "one who catches gulls" (Twel. N. 2.5.204):
        An. *Nor I neither*
        Fab. *Heere comes my noble* gull-catcher
        To. *Wilt thou set thy foote o'my necke*[2]

(6)   *king-killer*: "one who kills a king" (Timon 4.3.382)
        Lye where the light Fome of the Sea may beate
        Thy graue stone dayly, make thine Epitaph,
        That death in me, at others liues may laugh.
        O thou sweete king-killer, *and deare diuorce*
        Twixt naturall Sunne and fire: thou bright defiler
        Of Himens purest bed, thou valiant Mars,
        Thou euer, yong, fresh, loued, and delicate wooer,

_____

        glosses.
2   All quotations are from the *First Folio of Shakespeare's Plays* (Norton Facsimile, 2nd
        edition).

> *Whose blush doth thawe the consecrated Snow*
> *That lyes on Dians lap.*

(7)   *fortune-teller*: "one who tells fortunes" (Com. Err. 5.1.239)
       Along with them
       They brought one Pinch, a hungry leane-fac'd Villaine;
       A meere Anatomie, a Mountebanke,
       A thred-bare Iugler, and a fortune-teller,
       A needy-hollow-ey'd-sharpe-looking-wretch;
       A liuing dead man.

The syntactic function of deverbal agent nouns in *–er* is especially evident in the case of formations which are contextually dependent, in the sense that their reference is so general and inclusive that it does not characterize particularly any individual. One such example is the derivative *breather* meaning "one who breathes", that is, one who lives. (Ant. & Cl. 3.3.24):

(8)   Mes. *She creepes: her motion, & her station are as one.*
       She shewes a body, rather then a life,
       A Statue, then a breather.

In the case of this derivative, the nominalization is not really a label, as it does not help to identify the referent directly. Rather, the *-er* noun functions here as a deictic device which helps to maintain the cohesion of the text.

The deictic role of agent nouns in *–er* can also be identified in the case of the afore-mentioned *actual* agents, i.e. formations designating performers of actions in which the act of doing is concurrent with the temporal point of reference supplied by the context. In general, actual agents express meanings like "sb who is performing a given action at the moment", so, functionally, they are equivalent to verbs in progressive aspect. The analysis of the Shakespearean agentive formations in *–er* demonstrates that a considerable amount of the first attestations sampled in the corpus function as actual nominalizations, e.g.

(9)   *pauser* (Macb. 2.3.117)
       Th' expedition of my violent Loue Out-run the pawser, *Reason.*

(10)   *opposer* (All's Well 3.1.6)
        Holy seemes the quarrell Vpon your Graces part: blacke and fearefull On the
        opposer.

(11)   *waverer* (Rom. & Jul. 2.3.89)
        But come young wauerer, *come goe with me.*

Only four of all the 35 sampled types in *–er* have slightly different semantic structures, where a higher level of lexicalization can be identified. They can be claimed to have been coined in order to designate an entity in the extralinguistic world, and the *–er* application here simultaneously characterizes and constricts the number of potential referents by attaching some additional semantic features which are not present in the motivating verbal bases. One such additional sematic feature is [Professional], which can be identified in the following derivatives:

(12)   *hare-finder:* "a man whose business is to find or espy a hare in form"
        (Much Ado 1.1.186)
        Or doe you play the flowting jacke, to tell vs Cupid is a good Hare-finder?

(13)   *perfumer:* "one employed to fumigate or perfume rooms" (Much Ado
        1.3.60)
        Being entertain'd for a perfumer, *as I was smoaking a musty roome.*

(14)   *rat-catcher:* "one whose business is to catch rats" (Rom. & Jul. 3.1.78)
        Tybalt, you Rat-catcher, *will you walke?*

Also, the derivative *all-seer* "one who sees all" (Rich. III 5.1.20) has a restricted designation, since it functions as a noun of unique reference and designates God

(15)   *That high* All-seer, *which I dallied with.*

4. Conclusion

To conclude, it seems that most of what is generally referred to as "Shakespeare's neologisms" are words whose primary function is purely

syntactic, at least as far as agent formation in *–er* is concerned. Despite the fact that the sample subjected to analysis was quite small, covering only 35 types, the proportions featured in the data provide strong confirmation for the tendency of the agentive *–er* towards "syntactic", syntagmatic operations: as many as 88,57% of the sampled types display such syntactic behaviour. As has been demonstrated, the coinages that function as new names (in the sense of Kastovsky's "labels") are scarce in the corpus: they constitute merely 11,42% of the data gathered. The fact that most of the Shakespearean *–er* coinages are closer to syntactic operations than to lexeme formations questions their status as neologisms, since they might be looked upon as having been generated rather than invented by Shakespeare. It seems plausible that these nouns might not have been perceived as "new words" by Elizabethan audience, since the act of *–er* suffixation here can hardly be treated as an act of naming. Shakespeare's coinages in *–er* are evidently not meant as formations whose primary function is to enlarge the contemporary lexicon. Rather, the suffix *–er* functions here merely as a vehicle for condensing information, which in turn results in the conciseness of expression that on the one hand strengthens the dramatic effect of a given passage, and on the other is convenient metrically and helps to maintain textual cohesion.

The semantic transparency of the agentive coinages in *–er*, the full rule-governedness and productivity of the process, and the fact that in most cases the derivatives act as a kind of grammatical shorthand for a phrase meaning "one who V-es / is V-ing at the moment" render such words unnecessary to be listed in a dictionary. These words do not comply with the idea of a word as a linguistic sign, as they do not represent any "signified", to use de Saussure's term. The fact that they were recorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary* might be attributed to the special affinity which the *OED* editors are believed to have had towards Shakespeare and his language. As Crystal has remarked: "Shakespeare, of course, was a special target of the first *OED* editors: they went through his work with a toothcomb" (2008: 8–9).

Therefore, the question of how many words Shakespeare invented seems to be irrelevant, because, as I hope to have shown, not all of his verbal inventions have the same lexical status. Taking into consideration the function of his coinages might result in still different estimates of Shakespearean neologisms than one would come up with by simply counting the first attestations provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

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APPENDIX

SHAKESPEARE'S DEVERBAL AGENTIVE NEOLOGISMS IN *-ER*

all-seer: "one who sees all" (Rich. III 5.1.20)
appearer: "one who appears" (Per. 5.3.18)
boggler: "one who boggles or hesitates" (Ant. & Cl. 3.13.110)
breather: "he who breathes" (Ant. & Cl. 3.3.24)
breeder: "that who breeds or produces offspring" (Tit. A. 4.2.68)
candle-holder: "one who holds a candle; an attendant or assistant who lights those
              who are engaged in any work or ceremony by night" (Rom. & Jul.
              1.4.38)
cheerer: "one who cheers" (Hen.V 5.2.41)
confirmer: "one who confirms" (John 3.1.24)
counter-caster: "one who casts with counters" (Oth. 1.1.31)
cutter-off: "one who cuts off" (A.Y.L. 1.2.53)
employer: "one who employs" (Much Ado 5.2.31)
fortune-teller: "one who tells fortunes" (Com. Err. 5.1.239)

gibbet-maker: "one who makes gibbets" (Tit. A. 4.3.79)

gull-catcher: "one who catches gulls" (Twel. N. 2.5.204)

hare-finder: "a man whose business is to find or espy a hare in form" (Much Ado 1.1.186)

injurer: "one who injures" (John 2.1.174)

intercepter: "one who intercepts" (Twel. N. 3.4.242)

interposer: "one who interposes" (Merch. V. 3.2.329)

king-killer: "one who kills a king" (Timon 4.3.382)

manager: "one who manages (something specified)" (L.L.L. 1.2.188)

moraller: "a moralizer" (Oth. 2.3.294)

night-brawler: "one who brawls during the night" (Oth. 2.3.196)

opposer: "one who opposes or contends against a person, doctrine, argument, cause, scheme, etc." (All's Well 3.1.6)

pauser: "one who pauses" (Macb. 2.3.117)

perfumer: "one employed to fumigate or perfume rooms" (Much Ado 1.3.60)

plodder: "one who plods" (L.L.L. 1.1.186)

protester: "one who makes a protestation or a solemn affirmation" (Jul. C. 1.2.74)

rat-catcher: "one whose business is to catch rats" (Rom. & Jul. 3.1.78)

ratifier: "one who ratifies" (Ham. 4.5.105)

rumourer: "one who disseminates rumours" (Cor. 4.6.47)

sin-absolver: "one who absolves sins" (Rom. & Jul. 3.3.50)

thunder-bearer: "the bearer of thunders" (Lear 2.4.230)

torturer: "one who inflicts or causes torture" (Rich. II 3.2.198)

undeserver: "one who is not deserving (of sth)" (2 Hen. IV 2.4.406)

waverer: "one who wavers" (Rom. & Jul. 2.3.89)