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The Ninky-Nonk and the Number One
Mucker-Upper: Children's Television and Morphological Inventiveness

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It would be as well, I think, to begin immediately with a few words about the title of this talk, which is unabashedly attention-grabbing, and where exactly the ideas that I will be expounding here come from. The reason for this brief preamble is that very often, research projects arise from casual and apparently random observations, and that there seems little reason not to openly state as much from the outset. In this instance, the starting point was observing the reactions of children exposed to two different television programmes on the BBC's young children's channel CBeebies. The first of these programmes is called "In The Night Garden". It is produced by the same company and very much in the same vein as the now infamous "Teletubbies", and is narrated by Shakespearean actor Derek Jacobi. The second is an almost disturbingly surreal programme, from an adult perspective at least, entitled "The Numberjacks", the heroes of which are a set of numbers that live in a sofa and which come out on occasion to solve digit-related problems.

"In The Night Garden" contains characters revelling in names such as Igglepiggle, Upsy Daisy, Maka Pakka, the Tombliboos and the Ninky Nonk, which as the name does nothing to suggest, is a small train that can drive up and down trees and go to sleep. These names prove to be a source of almost uncontrollable mirth for some children, who after having watched the programme for the first time, spend many happy hours repeating the names. Similarly, in "The Numberjacks", there is an occasional character called the Numbertaker, a wicked man who seeks to eliminate numbers and whose first appearance in the show is accompanied by the following song:

[...]
With his number Sucker-upper,
He's a number Mucker-upper,
He's as mean a Numbertaker as can be!!!

Likewise, children seem immensely amused by the *number mucker upper* and *number sucker upper* constructions. The question which intrigued me was why such forms were seen to be so highly amusing to this young viewer. My initial feeling was that the childish delight taken in such words was a result of the fact that they were entirely invented, and inventive, and that somehow this tapped into a seam of lexical creativity which is highly productive in young children. This hypothesis, you will note, revolves around the notions of inventiveness,

creativity and, for good measure, productivity, and I would like therefore to use the morphological structures I have just highlighted to see whether we can throw any light on the notions of creativity and inventiveness.

Before moving on to examine the data, we need therefore to set out our terminological stall and attempt to see exactly what is meant, or more precisely, what I intend to mean, by the term “inventive” and in particular, the distinction to be drawn between this and creativity, as they pertain to the data presented in this talk. This of course is a huge endeavour, tackled most notably by Laurie Bauer (Bauer 1983 and 2001), so the following remarks must of necessity remain relatively sketchy.

In Bauer (1983, 63), the author tries to differentiate between productivity and creativity, whereby creativity is defined as “the native speaker’s ability to extend the language system in a motivated, but unpredictable (non-rule governed) way,” in contrast with productivity, which is, instead, defined as “rule-governed innovation”. In his later study of morphological productivity (Bauer 2001), the distinction between creativity and productivity is looked at again in considerably greater detail, and once again, productivity is seen as rule-governed, creativity as, in some sense, escaping the rules. Both of these terms are seen by Bauer as hyponyms of “innovation”, and creativity is identified as “non-productive innovation”, therefore lacking generality and predictability, but ultimately Bauer confesses that “a precise definition of the difference proves elusive.” (Bauer 2001, 206). However, in neither of these works does Bauer use the term “inventiveness”.

To introduce the notion of inventiveness to the debate, it seems to me that we need to group creativity and productivity together, as Bauer does, and contrast them with inventiveness. Creativity, at least as it should be understood in a linguistic perspective, refers to potentiality, which may or may not be expressed as the case may be. It is, strictly speaking, a highly neutral notion, one that should be devoid of any form of value judgement as to the output. Indeed, the creativity of language should be seen merely as a process, a mechanical procedure whereby X becomes, or can potentially become, Y by virtue of the application of rule Z. This is close to what Bauer terms productivity, and to what Chomsky refers to as “the ‘creative’ aspect of language” (Chomsky 1978, 11), famously the “the central fact to which any significant linguistic theory must address itself” (Chomsky 1964, 7).¹ To take a lexical example, the application of a rule stating that the suffix *-dom* can be added to nouns to create a noun meaning something along the lines of “a territory under the dominion of X” could

¹ For an excellent and very comprehensive discussion of the notion of creativity in the Chomskyan framework, see D’Agostino 1984.

result in the creation of a lexeme *lobsterdom*, which should be seen as an example of creativity.

Inventiveness, on the other hand, a term not used by Chomsky in any of his works, I believe should be seen as the individual appropriation of creativity, the output of which is not only novel but positively valued by others. Inventiveness is rule-governed creativity renewed and highly thought of. Thus the example of *lobsterdom* should only be seen as inventive inasmuch as listeners or readers respond positively to its use. What it means to “respond positively” is something in itself which needs theorising, of course, but for the purposes of this paper, we shall rely on a pre-theoretical and largely intuitive notion of what it might mean. In this instance, it may be to find the word *lobsterdom* amusing.

This distinction needs to be borne in mind as we look at the two phenomena I propose to examine. I shall want, for reasons of time and space, to concentrate here on the second phenomenon, that of reduplicated *-er* suffixation, but if only because of the unashamedly self-publicising character of the title, I shall begin with a few words about the Ninky-Nonk.

It would appear that *ninky nonk*, in its formation, is an example of rule-governed creativity. It is a fine example of what has been called *ablaut reduplication*, *apophony*, *consonance*, *consonantal rhyme* or *vowel gradation* (Aroui and Arleo, forthcoming), whereby two or more contiguous segments in a binomial expression are identical, except for vowel contrast.² This is something that has been addressed by a number of linguists in the past (most notably Thun), who have noted the very strong cross-linguistic bias towards a sequence of high vowel in the first item and low vowel in the second. For example, Aroui and Arleo, in a survey of 51 languages, find that almost 60% of such binomials have the close front vowel /i/ in the first item.³

In that *ninky nonk* conforms to this pattern, it is clearly creative. Inasmuch as it caused peals of laughter among the watching children, it also qualifies as an inventive form. The question that arises, of course, is why *ninky nonk* crosses this line. There is something about this form that is “phonologically funny” (Munat 177) or “euphoniement accrocheur” (Busuttill 140), but just what that factor is remains frustratingly elusive. It cannot simply be the succession of vowels, because intuitively *flip flop* and *hip hop* would probably not adduce

² Note that the two contiguous segments in question are not strictly identical, the first containing a second syllable in <-y> absent from the second. I am undecided as to how this pattern impinges on the conclusion I reach as regards the metrical structure of both ablaut reduplication and double *-er* suffixation. Aroui and Arleo include a number of such non-identical pairings in their study.

³ Powerful confirmation of this bias was provided to me, entirely serendipitously, but unfortunately equally belatedly, by my four year-old son, who recently remarked to me that “we say ‘kiss and cuddle’. We can’t say ‘cuddle and kiss’, because it doesn’t rhyme”. I take “not rhyme” here to mean something akin to ‘somewhat dissonant’ or ‘euphonically unlikely’ – perhaps the words my four-year old was groping for!

the same result, though of course this could be tested. The succession of velar nasals is almost certainly a factor, as may well be, and this is the crucial factor which enables us to move on to the second phenomenon at more length, the metrical structure or rhythm.

I believe that these same broadly euphonic considerations have a role to play in what I refer to as double -er suffixation. The English suffix -er can be used to form agentive nouns from verbs, and is universally considered to be highly productive. The Oxford English Dictionary, in the entry on -er, suffix¹, states “In mod.Eng. they [-er derivatives] may be formed on all vbs., excepting some of those which have agent-nouns ending in -or, and some others for which this function is served by ns. of different formation (e.g. *correspond*, *correspondent*).” With phrasal verbs, there are three logical possibilities for using the -er suffix, all of which are attested:

1. V -er + particle:
passer-by / runner-up / hanger on
2. V + particle + -er:
put out (a device for stealing the light from street lamps, from *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* by J.K. Rowling)
washer up / pepper up (these last two have entries in the OED)
3. V + -er + particle + -er
You know what they say, a non-answerer backer alone is in bad company.⁴
Andy Fenner dressed up as a pantomime horse and galloped around while a nice helper-outer rode astride, handing out fruit.⁵

It is of course these latter examples that are of interest here, where there appears in contemporary English to exist a case of reduplicated suffixation, the -er suffix being appended both to the verb and its particle. A number of questions arise, in particular in light of the distinction between creativity and inventiveness I am trying to uphold. Recall that the working hypothesis is that because of the ‘success’ of the *mucker upper* formation with a young audience, this pattern is inventive rather than merely creative.

To attempt to put this idea to the test, we need first of all to determine how widespread the phenomenon is. The following table shows the results of a brief and preliminary Internet survey conducted to answer this question. The verbs in question were taken from an on-line list of phrasal verbs, <http://www.usingenglish.com/reference/phrasal-verbs>, and comprise all of the phrasal verbs beginning with the letter ‘A’. The first of the two figures is the number of

⁴ <http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendid=85064969> accessed 21 April 2009.

⁵ Example taken from the OED, under the entry “pantomime”.

hits obtained on a Google search conducted on 15 January 2009 using the string “Verb+ER Particle+ER” (i.e. *accounter forer*, *acher forer*, *acter on(n)er*, etc.). This figure has been adjusted, where possible and feasible, to account for repeated hits and false positives, notably spelling mistakes. The second of the figures is the number of hits for the same string using the GoogleBooks search engine, the aim being to weed out as many of the hits from blogs, forums and other similar sites as possible.

ACCOUNT FOR	0	0
ACHE FOR	0	0
ACT ON	0	0
ACT OUT⁶	169	69
ADD UP	251	29
ACT UP	7	0
AIM AT	0	0
ALLOW FOR	0	0
ANGLE FOR	0	0
ANSWER BACK	3	0
ANSWER FOR	0	0
ARGUE OUT	0	0
ASK AFTER	0	0
ASK AROUND	1	0
ASK FOR	31	0
ASK IN	0	0
ASK OUT	294	0
ASK OVER	0	0
ASK ROUND	0	0
AUCTION OFF	0	0

Table 1: Google hits of phrasal verbs with reduplicated -er, beginning with ‘A’

The first remark to be made is that out of 20 possible words, 6 have attested reduplicated suffixal forms. Preliminary investigations further into the alphabet would seem to indicate that this ratio approximately holds good throughout the corpus, though this necessitates confirmation. Any conclusions on this evidence would be laughably fragile, of course, but it would appear that this is not a vanishingly rare form. Also worthy of note, *en passant*, and something to which we will return, is the phonological form of the attested verbs: five out of six have a particle that finishes with an occlusive, and five out of six are composed of two monosyllabic forms.

We turn now to see how the reduplicated forms fare in dictionaries, and in particular in the OED. There are a total of 14 reduplicated -er forms to be found in the OED, which can be divided into three categories:

⁶ The relatively large number of Google Book hits is due to “acter outer” being a term in psychoanalysis to refer to a particular behavioural disorder.

1. Words which are granted their own entry:

picker upper
fixer upper (colloq. US)⁷
maker upper
opener upper (colloq. US)
pepper upper (colloq. and chiefly US)

2. Words which are the subject of a sub-entry of the verb or derived noun:

looker upper
mucker upper
tearer downer (colloq.)
tidier upper (colloq.)
waker upper (colloq.)
warmer upper
washer upper (colloq.)

3. Words which feature in citations for other entries, and are subject to no exemplification or discussion

chatter upper (in sex)
helper outer (in pantomime)

While it might be argued that 14 examples in a corpus as extensive as the Oxford English Dictionary is hardly evidence of a frequent pattern, it is nevertheless a figure which puts considerable pressure on my original hypothesis, which was that the *mucker upper* form was a highly inventive pattern which drew its appeal from its originality.

Also important to note is that of the 14 forms, all 14 have particles with a final occlusive and 13 are a combination of monosyllabic verb with monosyllabic particle, such that when the suffix is appended, we are left with a pattern of four syllables, strong/weak/strong/weak. Even the apparent exception to this, *opener upper* < *open up*, when suffixed, is likely to be pronounced [əʊpənə ʌpə] with four syllables, and is thus only partially exceptional.

Before returning to the issue of phonology, we need to continue picking apart the original hypothesis by seeing to what extent this pattern has been picked up on in the linguistic literature. Once again, the picture is somewhat mixed. There are indeed references to such reduplicated forms, stretching back over a number of decades, thus suggesting that the pattern is not original, but these references are rather disparate, an indication that it has yet to be taken seriously as an object of linguistic analysis or that such analysis has proved elusive. For example, Bauer (1983, 289) says they “tend to feel very clumsy, and as a result tend to be

⁷ Where the OED gives an indication as to geographical origin and style, this has been indicated.

used mainly in colloquial speech”⁸. Similarly, Blevins (527) refers to them as “colloquial”. In both cases, it is hard to escape the suspicion that the term “colloquial” is used rather dismissively, as if the very fact that something is colloquial means that it is somehow less worthy of serious consideration.

This last remark is borne out by the following citation, which also presents the advantage of being somewhat older, thus providing the perfect transition to a brief consideration of the diachrony of reduplicated -er suffixation. In a pre-war article, Wentworth refers to:

The current, popular, grotesque way of forming new low-colloquial and slang compound nouns of agency - adding -er to an intransitive verb and another -er to its adverb, e.g., *maker-upper* - is (judging tentatively from eighteen documented and countless undocumented instances of use) national in occurrence, journalistic in origin, collegiate in vogue, and economical in expression of ideas.

The pattern receives brief mentions elsewhere in the literature (Bolinger 116 – “popular coinages”, Busuttill 145, for example), but to my knowledge, there is only one full scholarly article devoted entirely to the issue, that by Bert Cappelle, to which we will return.

Another way of testing what we might wish to refer as the “degree of inventiveness” of the pattern is to look at its history, to determine whether we are dealing with something that is well established or which seems to be relatively novel. A number of sources, discussed in Cappelle (forthcoming), would seem to indicate that this is a purely twentieth century phenomenon, with a peak in popularity between the 1920s and the 1940s. The attestations in the OED, in particular, as well as the quote from Wentworth above would seem to support this view, along with the remarks of no less an authority than H.L. Mencken, who wrote in 1956 that “There was a transient fashion in the second lustrum of the 30s for nouns on the order of *maker-upper*, compounded of a verb and an adverb, with -er added to each. A somewhat similar fashion, in the days before the Civil War, had produced forms such as *come outer*” (Mencken 381).

⁸ Despite the very high esteem in which I hold Bauer’s work, this strikes me as a rather odd statement. First of all, it is by no means clear why a correlation should be established between clumsiness and colloquialness. Second, the logic would seem to be backwards. It is not hard to understand how some people, speaking from the purist corner, may wish to claim that because something is colloquial, it is *ipso facto* clumsy, but more difficult to see why something which is clumsy would come to be colloquial, as Bauer seems to be arguing. Finally, I shall try to argue that the popularity of these formations arises precisely because they are NOT clumsy, however we may wish to qualify that notion.

Further support to this position is provided by a search on the TIME corpus⁹ of all the nominalised phrasal verbs with ‘up’, which produced the following results:

FIXER-UPPER	7 hits
BUILDER-UPPER	3
STIRRER-UPPER	3
CHECKER-UPPER	2
BUSTER-UPPER	2
CLEANER-UPPER	2
PEPPER-UPPER	2
WHIPPER-UPPER	1
UPPER-UPPER	1
TRIPPER-UPPER	1
SOFTENER-UPPER	1
PICKER-UPPER	1
PANTS-PULLER-UPPER	1
DISHER-UPPER	1
CHEERER-UPPER	1
TOTAL	29

Table 2: *Upper* phrasal verbs in the TIME corpus

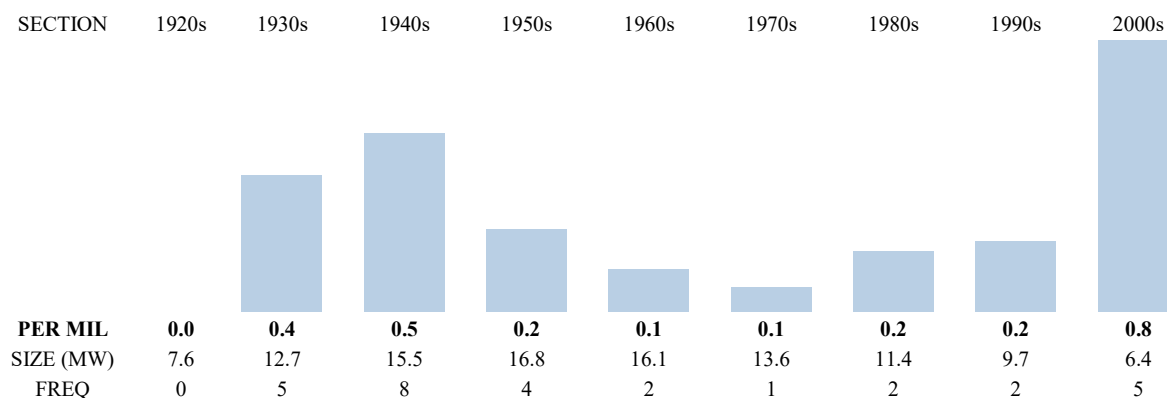


Table 3: Relative frequency of *upper* phrasal verbs in the TIME corpus¹⁰

The results here are very much in line with previous discussion, with one notable exception. First, we have an overwhelming majority of monosyllabic verbs (14 out of the 15 different verbs, the only exception being *soften up*, but for which the same remarks apply as for *open up* above). Second, it does indeed appear as if there was a peak in the use of reduplicated phrasal verbs in the 1940s and that they began to tail off thereafter. The new

⁹ <http://corpus.byu.edu/time/x.asp>

¹⁰ The figures in the last three lines represent, respectively: frequency per million words in the corpus (the figure corresponding to the bar), size of the corpus for the given decade, absolute frequency of *upper* forms.

point to note, however, is the dramatic increase in the pattern after 2000. We can only speculate as to why this may be: genuine revitalisation of a morphological rule which appeared to be disappearing, or colloquialisation of the magazine TIME, such that formations of this kind, without ever having been under threat in speech, were able to find their way more readily into the pages of the magazine? If the former, then this is a tiny shred of evidence in favour of the starting hypothesis, that this is a novel form – a re-inventive one, so to speak. If the latter, and I would be inclined to favour this view, then again, the hypothesis falls flat. Reduplicated -er affixes are not inventive, they are simply creative, in that they are the application of a morphological rule whereby double affixation is possible on English phrasal verbs.

Or is it? Might it yet be possible to rescue a modicum of inventiveness for this double -er pattern? To do so, we will need to examine whether they are indeed the result of a morphological rule, or whether we might be able to draw a form of parallel with the Ninky Nonk we appeared to have abandoned by the wayside earlier.

To doubt that *doubler upper* nouns, as Cappelle cleverly dubs them, are not the result of a morphological rule might on the face of it seem a rather ridiculous proposition. As we hinted in the introduction, the suffix -er is a staple of textbooks on word formation in English, because it is so productive and transparent in its usage. Cappelle provides an extremely enlightening attempt to explain the existence of such nominalised forms in morphological terms. But we need, I think, to give serious consideration to the idea that these forms have gained a certain popularity for phonological reasons, and more particularly for reasons of euphony, not unlike the ablaut reduplication forms. Cappelle regards such an attempt as “linguistically naïve”, but there is some evidence that needs careful consideration, evidence of two kinds: the metrical patterns we have already seen, and retriPLICATION.

The vast majority of double suffixed phrasal verbs involve a monosyllabic verb and monosyllabic particle, which when suffixed produce a four syllable structure with alternating strong and weak syllables. There is strong evidence that this metrical pattern is universal in children’s counting rhymes (Arleo 2001), among other things, and the possibility that in some sense, the output of the affixation process is pleasing to the ear is a factor in its extension should not be dismissed out of hand. There is clearly something euphonic about the ninky nonk and other ablaut reduplicates, just as there is with the childish initial /w/ reduplication (*milky-wilky, hurty wurty*), and the same may be true of reduplicated -er suffixes. Further evidence, or at least food for thought, in favour of this proposal is that while phrasal verbs do admit a double -ee suffix, in examples such as “Can anyone tell me what my askee outee

meant when he said ‘well, I am kind of splitting up with my girlfriend right now’¹¹, these are emphatically rarer than the -er counterpart. While other explanations may well be possible, it is hard to imagine that the obligatory final stress born by -ee is not a factor.

Exhibit B in the case for an explanation of double -er based in part on euphonic considerations is a phenomenon I propose to call -er retriPLICATION, i.e. whereby a phrasal verb actually bears the -er suffix three times, once on the verb and twice on the particle. Examples include:

They cram into the restaurant hoping to get a glimpse of the famous
restaurant closer-downer¹²
I'm very much a dreamer and a tryer-outerer i.e. being a wannabe geek¹³

This third -er surely does not lend itself to morphological analysis, and yet it is by no means very rare. A Google search on 13 March 2009 showed 3 880 hits for *upperer*, the vast majority of which appeared to be genuine phrasal verb derivations. That this third -er is not felt by speakers to be anything other than a phonetic addendum is evidenced by occasional spellings such as “Are you a good adder-upper-rah ?? or do you need a calculator?”¹⁴ or “U can be my advice giver-outer-rah”¹⁵.

That -er may in many cases not be a morpheme, but a useful euphonic tool in that it supplies an additional syllable necessarily pronounced with a schwa, is also suggested by more outlandish and playful inventions such as “It is handy having a spider-getter-outer-ofe-the-houser around.”¹⁶, or “Dishwasher getter outer ofer”, which is a creation of the author, but one that has been used without attracting so much as a murmur of protest from fellow English speakers.

To conclude then: both of the quasi-morphological phenomena I chose to illustrate this paper can lay a certain claim to inventiveness, within the scope of the definition I proposed at the outset. The claim of the ninky nonk ablaut reduplication is stronger, because the positive evaluation is more evident (to state matters bluntly, everybody I have questioned loves the word *ninky nonk!*). As for -er duplication, the inventiveness, I would contend, lies not so much in its popularity, which remains to be proven, but in the fact that speakers appear to be

¹¹ <http://manslations.com/2009/02/23/is-he-shy-or-just-not-interested/> accessed on 23 January 2009

¹² <http://forums.2kgames.com/forums/archive/index.php/t-1022-p-2.html> accessed on 24 January 2009

¹³ <http://kornfest.com/userstags/hobbies/i039m-very-much-dreamer-and-tryer-outerer-ie-being-wannabe-geek> accessed on 3 February 2009

¹⁴ http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index;_ylt=AomuzLlpZpOburvdXG9zFcTty6IX;_ylv=3?qid=20070419231721AAZA2Lu&show=7#profile-info-6185ce64ac6d19a3788c83d88d5e8998aa accessed on 3 February 2009

¹⁵ <http://l0st-with0ut-y0u.spaces.live.com/Blog/cns!1peyj5-FcIMD5DylgB279d1A!778.entry> accessed on 3 February 2009

¹⁶ <http://sabrinafaire.com/2004/08/06/thumbs-and-weddings-and-grandmothers-oh-my/> accessed on 3 February 2009

innovating in their use of the morpheme and transforming it into something of a phonetic adjunct for purely euphonic reasons. Both cases seem to suggest that we might be well advised to pay more attention to the question of “ear-catchiness” in our analyses of linguistic structures.

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