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# Heterogeneity in Word-Formation Patterns

Susanne Mühleisen

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# Heterogeneity in Word-Formation Patterns

A corpus-based analysis of suffixation  
with *-ee* and its productivity in English

Susanne Mühleisen

University of Bayreuth



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## Heterogeneity in Word-Formation Patterns

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by Susanne Mühleisen

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## List of abbreviations

App. = Appendix  
BNC = British National Corpus  
C = Corpus item, i.e., one of the words tested in my corpus study (see Appendix 2). The corpus items are numbered in alphabetical order, e.g.:

C 1	<i>Abhorree</i>	C 991	<i>Workee</i>
C 2	<i>Abidee</i>	C 992	<i>Woundee</i>
C 3	<i>Abjectee</i>	C 993	<i>Wrappee</i>
C 4	<i>Abolishee</i>	C 994	<i>Wreckee</i>
C 5	<i>Abrogatee</i>	C 995	<i>Wrestlee</i>
C 6	<i>Absorbee</i>	C 996	<i>Wrongee</i>
C 7	<i>Acceptee</i>	C 997	<i>Yammeree</i>
C 8	<i>Acclaimee</i>	C 998	<i>Yearnee</i>
C 9	<i>Accommodatee</i>	C 999	<i>Yieldde</i>
C 10	<i>Accursee</i>	C 1000	<i>Yodellee</i>
...	...		

EModE = Early Modern English  
F = French  
ICE = International Corpus of English  
ME = Middle English  
NED = New English Dictionary  
NPC = No Phrase Constraint  
ODNW = Oxford Dictionary of New Words  
OE = Old English  
OF = Old French  
OED = Oxford English Dictionary  
UBH = Unitary Base Hypothesis  
WWW = World Wide Web

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## CHAPTER 1

# Introduction

## Polysemy, heterogeneity and ambiguity in word-formation patterns

One of the most persistent problems with postulated word-formation rules is their exclusion of formations that can nevertheless be found in actual usage. An example of a particularly heterogeneous word-formation pattern in English is the formation of nouns by suffixation with *-ee*. In its most typical guise, a word of this kind (e.g. *interviewee*) is formed with a verb that can take an object ('interview someone') and often co-occurs with a complex noun of the same base suffixed with *-er* (e.g. *interviewer*). The following dialogue is taken from the results of a Web-corpus investigation of neologisms of *-ee* formations which is part of the present study. The nature of the data collection, its goals, size and analysis will be explained in more detail in Chapter 2 and Chapter 5. In the example below, we can see the coinage of such a model new *-ee* word in the making:

*beseechee* C 62<sup>1</sup>

Writer A: nothing like a good beseecher

Writer B: ... and of course a good **beseechee**

Writer B: hehee

Writer A: whatever that means

Writer B: the one who is being besought ... of course

Writer B: beseeched

Writer B: the recipient of the beseeching

Writer A: these linguistic gymnastics are exhausting me

Writer B: \*dismayed\* sorry (www.avocadosalad.org, 2002)

---

1. The number 62 identifies *beseechee* as corpus item 62, i.e., C 62 (cf. also List of abbreviations and Appendix 2). All websites cited were accessed between February and July 2005 unless otherwise stated, the exact date of access within this time period is not given for each individual Web citation. Typos and idiosyncratic orthography choices are maintained.

As the conversation above suggests, the new word *beseechee* not only co-occurs with *beseecher*, but the presence of the latter seems to trigger the new coinage – a phenomenon which has been referred to as “paradigm pressure,” i.e., “paradigmatic forces which affect the coining of new words” (Bauer 2001:71). While the logic of the sense relation of a converse antonym is compelling in many *-er* and *-ee* suffix pairs – after all, an *employer* needs an *employee* in the same way as an *adviser* is dependent on an *advisee*, or a *trainer* is only complete with a *trainee* – there are also numerous examples of *-ee* words where this pattern does not exist: *retiree*, for example, neither has a *\*retirer* as an opposite concept, nor does it seem to refer to the recipient of the action of retiring in the same way as *beseechee* is “the recipient of the beseeching.” Similarly, there is no *\*divorcer* to the *divorcee*, no *\*interner* to the *internee*, etc. As we shall see below, there are many more “deviant” cases of *-ee* formations that have served as sources of mystification in a number of linguistic discussions on the “apparently strange conditions on the productivity of these affixes” (Plag 2003: 45). This chapter aims at providing a first overview of the heterogeneity of this word-formation pattern. After this initial problematization, it will offer a number of theoretical and methodological perspectives which are to be explored in the subsequent chapters.

The standard textbook view tends to describe *-ee* suffixation as verb-based rather than noun-based (cf. Bauer 1983; Katamba 1994), despite some instances – arguably also *biographee* – where no verbal base existed at the time of the new formation (see also discussion in Section 2.2). Katamba’s (1994:65) definition of *-ee* suffixation as “(passive) person who undergoes action indicated by the verb” sums up a number of customary conceptions about this derivation type – (a) passivity, (b) personhood, (c) verbal base – which have to be questioned on account of the following examples:

(a) In the following established and new *-ee* words, the referent is not “passive”:

*absentee*:

- (1) a. One who is absent, or away, on any occasion.  
b. absent voter. Also (chiefly U.S.) **absentee** vote, voter, voting.
- (2) One who systematically stays away from his country or home; a landlord who lives abroad. (*OED*)

*escapee*:

- One who has escaped; *esp.* (a) an escaped convict from a penal settlement;  
(b) an escaped military or political prisoner (*OED*).

*expressee* C 291:

One who expresses an opinion, as in the example<sup>2</sup> below:

“LEGAL DISCLAIMER: The stories, views and opinions expressed on this site are solely those of the **expressee**.”

(www.groups.msn.com, 2005)

*survivee* C 885:

One who has survived (a catastrophe, an accident), as in the following example:

“Question is: Do you offer a Titanic **survivee** ice for his whiskey?”

(www.deathlist.net/forums/index, not dated)

(b) The idea that *-ee* words necessarily have human referents can also be found in statements like the following: “So what do *ee* words have in common? Only one characteristic is agreed on by everyone: *ee* refers to a person. An *abusee* could not be a maltreated parrot or a broken window. This is true of old coinages, or any of the 200 or so new 20th century *ee* words” (Aitchison 1999: n.p.). The examples below, from various sources (Bauer 1987; *OED*; my corpus items) show that pets, farm animals (i) or linguistic and technical components (ii) can indeed be possible referents of *-ee* nominalizations:

Examples (i): animate but non-human:

*trainee*:

1841. First applied to an animal undergoing training, later extended to human reference.

1850. “The trainers first double up one of his fore legs, which they bind fast with a cord; this they pull, and thus compel the **trainee** to come down upon his bent knee”. (*Fraser’s Mag.* XLI 658, cited in *OED*)

*vivisectee*:

1886. Animal undergoing vivisection.

“Whether any attempt at the absolute prohibition of vivisection would not react to the disadvantage of the unhappy ‘**vivisectees**.’” (*Pall Mall G.* 3 June 5/2, cited in *OED*)

*brusher* C 75:

One who is brushed (pet)

“Some super Maltese brushers lay the **brusher** on his sides and/or back, but standing and sitting are the usual brushing positions for me and mine.

---

2. As already explained in Note 1, some of the examples given here are not listed in established dictionaries but have been found in my web-search (Chapter 5) and can be taken as examples of mostly recent word-formations with *-ee*.

Generally, I use a grooming arm to steady the dog, but sometimes brushing is easier without it.”

([www.malteseonly.com/brushouts.html](http://www.malteseonly.com/brushouts.html), 2004)

*cleanee* C 92:

One who is cleaned, including non-humans:

“This benefits both fish – the cleaner gets a meal and the **cleanee** leaves as a healthier fish.”

([richard-seaman.com/Underwater/Belize/OtherFish/index.html](http://richard-seaman.com/Underwater/Belize/OtherFish/index.html), not dated)

*milkee* C 470:

One who is milked (farm animal)

“If you get dairy goats, you’ll probably want to build this nifty stanchion to make milking easy for both the milker and the **milkee**.”

([www.motherearthnews.com/Do-It-Yourself/2002-06-01/Milking-Stanchion](http://www.motherearthnews.com/Do-It-Yourself/2002-06-01/Milking-Stanchion))

Examples (ii): inanimate and non-human

*possessee*:

1982 David Gil “Case Marking, Phonological Size, and Linear Order” *Syntax and Semantics* 15: 122 “Possessive constructions in which it marks the subject **possessee** phrase ... are used by all but the die-hard purists”. (Bauer 1987:318)

*dependee* C 159:

Matching component in a technical operation:

“If a match is found, a persistent dependency is created between the matching component, the “**dependee**,” and the calling component, the “dependent”” (Docs.sun.com, not dated)

*surfee* C 881:

Notice the balance between the length of the timer and the time it takes pages to load. As you surf you may like sites that only require 10 seconds before you can surf again, but this does not benefit pages that load slowly. So observe not only from the surfer perspective but also from the “**surfee**”<sup>3</sup> point of view.

([www.ebizyourhome.com/articles/traffic\\_exchanges.html](http://www.ebizyourhome.com/articles/traffic_exchanges.html) not dated)

(c) The third condition cited above, “action indicated by the verb,” is also questionable. In the following examples, the verbal base of the *-ee* formations is non-existent, at least not in English:

---

3. It could be argued here, of course, that the webpage visited (i.e., the “*surfee*”) stands metonymically for the (human) creator of the webpage. As personification of machines is rather common, a final decision on the “person” or “non-person” status of *surfee* is difficult to make here. Please note that *surfee* has various possible meanings (cf. discussion in Section 2.3).



*lessee*:

1481. One to whom a lease is granted; a tenant under a lease (*OED*).  
 “Lessees ... [shall] fynde goode and suffycient suertie” 1495. *Act 11 Hen. VII*,  
 c. 9 §2, cited in *OED*.

*refugee*:

1685. A fugitive; someone who seeks refuge in a foreign country (cf. *OED*).<sup>4</sup>

*benefactee*:

1982. A description of a grammatical role in linguistic terminology “like NP1 it is not agentive, and it is typically affected by the verb, generally as a **benefactee** or **malefactee**” (David Gil, “Case marking, phonological size, and linear order,” *Syntax and Semantics* 8: 315, in Bauer 1987).<sup>5</sup>

*therapee* C 903:

1999. Someone undergoing therapy.  
 “The seating was slightly different, two simple chairs nudged close together like therapist and **therapee**.”  
 (www.guardian.co.uk/world/1999/mar/05/clinton.usa2)

Such initial “deviant” examples may serve as an indication that the formation and interpretation of *-ee* words are possibly more diverse than can be captured by a single word-formation rule.

Recent work in morphology and lexical semantics has taken a closer look at the heterogeneous and polysemous nature of derivations with *-ee* (cf. Barker 1998), sometimes in combination with the more widely explored *-er* suffix (e.g. Baeskow 2002; Booij & Lieber 2004; Lieber 2004). While approaches and interests in this derivational affix vary, it is undisputed that the diversity in formation patterns, meanings and interpretations of *-ee* words poses a challenge both for the idea of word-formation rules in particular and for the relationship between lexical semantics and word-formation in general. The derivational affix *-ee* makes for a prime example in exploring issues of heterogeneity, polysemy and ambiguity in word-formation.

Rochelle Lieber, in her introduction to *Morphology and Lexical Semantics* (2004: 2), points out that lexical semantics of word-formation (as opposed to words) has so far been neglected, and she poses a number of questions that should

4. Note that this is also an instance of “non-passivity.”

5. Note that this is also an instance of “non-person reference.”