

Agent Nouns, Productivity and Diachrony: An Analysis of [VN/A]_{N/A} Compounds and *-eur* Derivations in French

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Abstract

This study addresses the semantic structure of two types of French agent nouns, [VN/A]_{N/A} compounds (*porte-drapeau*) and *-eur* derivations (*porteur*) from a diachronic perspective. The focus is on established words listed in the *TLFi*. The main objective is to question Dressler's (1986) hierarchy of Agent: Human Agent > Animal Agent > Plant > Impersonal Agent > Instrument > Locative, which proposes that meaning extension diachronically follows this direction. My previous research results show that, synchronically, the Instrument is the most productive/profitable meaning for the [VN/A]_{N/A} formation. The diachronic results of this study likewise fail to confirm the hierarchy. In particular, the semantic structure of the [VN/A]_{N/A} violates the direction implied by the hierarchy. Hence, I reach the conclusion that the different meanings in the polysemy of Agent can be more or less central for different types of agent formations, i.e. both derivations and compounds; the Agent is not necessarily always the primary meaning from which all others originate. This hypothesis will be further examined in future studies that take into account other agentive formations in French and contrast them with similar formations in Swedish.

1. Introduction

The objective is to examine the semantic structure in diachrony of French [VN/A]_{N/A} compounds and *-eur* derivations. These two productive formation types principally give rise to Agents such as *brise-cœur* ('heartbreaker') and Instruments such as *tâteur* ('false key'). The analysis adopts a semasiological perspective, going from form ([VN/A], *-eur*) to meaning (agentive, instrumental, etc.). Synchronically, my previous results show that in Modern French, Instrument is the most productive meaning, in the profitable sense (see 2 below), for the [VN/A]_{N/A} compound, while Agent is the most profitable one for the *-eur* derivations (see Rosenberg (in preparation)). The synchronic results thus contradict Dressler's (1986) Agent hierarchy. In this study, I will question in particular the theoretical relevance of the Agent hierarchy proposed by Dressler (1986) in diachrony as well. In broader terms, I am questioning the seemingly self-evident view that meaning extension is directional, with one primary meaning being the origin of all others.

The internal structure of the [VN/A]_{N/A} compound reflects the syntactic/semantic relation between a verb/predicate and its direct object/internal argument¹. The second

¹ N.B. Compounds from the 16th century that have an external argument with an Experiencer role, and not an Agent role, are attested, such as *aime-bal* 'ball lover' (Wooldridge 1998:217). There are also some compounds where the second element is instead a subject/external argument to the verb, e.g. *cauchemar* 'nightmare'. These phenomena will be further examined in Rosenberg (in preparation).

element occasionally has an adverbial function (e.g. *traîne-nuit* ‘a bum that hangs out all night’). The [VN/A]_{N/A} compound can be classified as exocentric, i.e. lacking a head; neither the gender nor the number of one of its elements spreads to the compound as a whole. Instead, almost all of these compounds are masculine, with the plural marker in final position. Their meaning is sometimes opaque, such as *accroche-cœur*, ‘curl’, but more often transparent, such as *ouvre-boîte*, ‘tin opener’.

The corpus consists of 1,023 [VN/A]_{N/A} compounds listed in *Le Trésor de la Langue Française informatisé, TLFi*. *Le Trésor de la Langue Française* is a dictionary of the French language of the 19th and 20th centuries, and the ^{TLFi} is the free, online computerised version, consisting of 100 000 words and their history. There are a further 144 *-eur* derivations included in the corpus that are listed in the *TLFi* and based on a verb that is also found in one of the [VN/A]_{N/A} compounds². In all, there are 162 verb types that are part of the 1,023 compounds, but 18 of them do not have an attested *-eur* derivation in the *TLFi*.

Finally, it should be noted that this study makes no difference between nouns and adjectives³, meaning that an adjective can be classified as Instrument (e.g. *gilet pare-balles*, ‘bullet-proof vest’) or Agent (e.g. *domestique casseuse*, ‘careless servant girl’) in the same way as a noun. This decision is based on the fact that there are few adjectives in the corpus, and many of them are nominalised. However, I do not deny the importance of this distinction, which will be taken into account in a future study.

2. Productivity delimiting the object of study

The [VN/A]_{N/A} composition and the *-eur* derivation are two productive formations in Modern French (see e.g. Sleeman & Verheugd (2004:142) regarding *-eur* derivations, and Picone (1992:192-193) regarding [VN]_N compounds). It is therefore important to define the complex notion of productivity. A classic definition is posited by Schultink (1961), who takes productivity to be a morphological phenomenon that occurs unconsciously and gives rise to an infinite number of formations. I have no objections to this definition, but I find Teleman’s (1970:18-19) definition theoretically more precise, and it can, in fact, apply to the [VN/A]_{N/A} and the *-eur* type. Given this definition, it is possible to (i) semantically and syntactically describe the elements of a productive formation, and (ii) predict its meaning. Moreover, the two notions of Corbin (1987:42, 177) involving productivity are highly relevant in delimiting my corpus: “*rentabilité*”, the number of attested occurrences formed by a process (a quantitative approach), and “*disponibilité*”, the capacity to form new words (a qualitative approach). Bauer’s definition of productivity makes use of these notions as well:

‘Productivity’ deals with the number of new words that can be coined using a particular morphological process, and is ambiguous between the sense ‘availability’ [*disponibilité*] and the sense ‘profitability’ [*rentabilité*]. (Bauer 2001:211)

² The grounds for this narrow selection of *-eur* derivations are based on the aim of investigating, in a future study, the potential competition between the semantic structure of the compound and that of the derivation based on the same verb.

³ Chomsky (1981) assumes both categories possess the feature [+N]: N = [+N, -V] and A = [+N, +V].

These two notions thus delimit the object of study: profitability refers to established words, but availability concerns existing words⁴. Following Bauer (2001:36), a word comes into existence from the moment it is first coined, and becomes established when it takes part in the norm (e.g. enters a dictionary). Although this study focuses on the established words in the *TLFi*, the qualitative aspect will not be neglected.

3. The polysemy of Agent

Fillmore assumes the agentive to be “the case of the typically animate perceived instigator of the action identified by the verb” (1968:24), whereas the instrumental is inanimate. Booij (1986:509), however, proposes an intermediate meaning between the Personal Agent and the Instrument, namely the Impersonal Agent. Gross (1990:84) as well notes that a compound such as *coupe-papier* (‘paper cutter’) is ambiguous between a machine that cuts paper (i.e. an Agent), and an instrument used for cutting paper. Ulland (1993:20-22), relying on Cruse (1973:21), likewise includes in the concept of Agents various machines and inanimate Agents, as long as they use their proper force to perform the action.

Regarding the French *-eur* derivation, Winther (1975:59) considers context to play a central role in disambiguating the Agent from the Instrument. Villoing (2002:276, note 29) likewise notes that the Agent and the Instrument are conceptually close. She (2002:290) recalls the hypothesis of Corbin & Temple (1994), according to which [VN]_{NA} compounds are not specified for the opposition person/object, which instead depends on pragmatic, socio-cultural and other factors⁵.

Dressler (1986:526), who adheres to the Natural Morphology⁶ approach, assumes the polysemous concept of Agent to manifest the hierarchical structure: Agent > Instrument > Locative or Source/Origin. The last two meanings in the hierarchy, Source/Origin, are exemplified by *London-er* or *foreign-er*, following Dressler (1986:525, 527). Furthermore:

This hierarchy is reflected not only in the relative frequency of these meanings but also in the primacy of agentivity in language acquisition [...] and in Breton language decay [...], and in diachrony meaning extension seems to go in the same direction [...]. (Dressler 1986:526)

Dressler argues that the “agent hierarchy seems to correspond to the animacy hierarchy” (1986:527) (for the animacy hierarchy, see e.g. Comrie (1981)). So a more elaborated structure is yielded when the two hierarchies are combined: Human Agent > Animal Agent > Plant Agent > Impersonal Agent > Instrument > Locative or Source/Origin, which includes several types of Agents, the Impersonal one as well, thus following Booij’s (1986) extended scheme. Henceforth, when referring to the Agent hierarchy (of Dressler (1986)), I mean this more elaborate hierarchy.

Sleeman & Verheugd (2004:145-149), in line with Dressler (1986), claim that verb-based *-eur* derivations show a gradual deverbalisation during their nominalisation, which follows the semantic structure: Agent [+human] > Instrument [-human] > Product

⁴ Following Dal (2003:13), existing words are seen here as a subgroup of possible words, but they are not necessarily already formed. Also included here are hapaxes (which can result from an error) and neologisms.

⁵ N.B. This hypothesis reflects Benveniste’s (1975) assumption about the two meanings of the French nouns in *-(t)eur*.

⁶ For a description of this theoretical approach, see e.g. Dressler (1977, 1986).

[–human]. However, in my opinion, this structure is far too simple. In particular, the features [+/-human] are not sufficient to account for Animal and Plant Agents. According to their structure, these latter meanings should be classified as Instruments. Nor do Sleeman & Verheugd explicitly state what feature they use to separate the Instrument from the Product (a term that they (ibid.) recycle from Winther (1975) and exemplify by *durcisseur d'ongles*).

With a similar purpose, Devos & Taeldeman (2004) posit the Agentivity hypothesis, according to which the formation of deverbal nouns in Dutch and other Germanic and Romance languages is supposed to be governed by the following structure: **Agent Noun**⁷ [+agentive] [+animate] > Instrumental₂ [+agentive] [–animate] > **Action Noun** [–agentive] [–animate] > Instrumental₁ [–agentive] [–animate]. The instrumental₂ nouns denote machines and devices (i.e. mostly Impersonal Agents in accordance with the terminology of this study), whereas the instrumental₁ nouns refer to substances and products (Devos & Taeldeman 2004:158). This structure is also problematic in my opinion, given its circular use of redundant features that appear simultaneously on two different levels (as a label and as a distinctive feature). The Agents are (needless to say) always [+agentive], but the Instruments can be either [+agentive] or [–agentive] with quite a fuzzy boundary between them. Furthermore, Devos & Taeldeman claim:

The (just as) frequently used type ‘stem + noun’ (for example *brise-soleil* ‘sun-blind’⁸ [...]) derives deverbal nouns in the agentive field, both real ‘nomina agentis’ and instrumental₂ nouns. Just like derivations with *-oire(e)* they never cross their semantic field. The same holds for equivalent structures in English, for example *killjoy*, *pickpocket* (agentive nouns) and Italian, for example *tagliaborse* ‘pickpocket’ [...] (agentives) next to *tagliacarte* ‘letter-opener’ [...] (instrumental₂ nouns). (2004:161-162)

The statement above is strongly contradicted by my synchronic results (cf. 5.1 below) as well as those of the present study (cf. 6 below), since the Instrument is by far the most profitable meaning for this compound type. Devos & Taeldeman remark, however, that the [VN/A]_{N/A} compound “can have a (additional) locative interpretation, too (for example *garde-robe* ‘wardrobe’)” (2004:165), and they also admit other exceptions to the Agentivity hypothesis, such as the instrumental₁ extension of the French nouns in *-eur* and *-ant* (e.g. *autobronzant* ‘self tanner’).

In light of what is shown above, I emphasise that, according to Devos & Taeldeman (2004), the [+agentive] meanings (agent noun or instrumental₂) are historically primary, while the locative [–agentive] meaning is only additional. Consequently, Dressler (1986), Sleeman & Verheugd (2004) and Devos & Taeldeman all claim that semantic extension necessarily follows a diachronic direction: an idea to which I will return and strongly question in this paper (see especially 7 and 8 below).

⁷ The bold characters indicate the respective prototypes for the agentive and non agentive poles.

⁸ The only attested meaning for *brise-soleil* in the TLFi is ‘sun protection’: “*archit. Dispositif formé soit d'un cadre muni de lamelles métalliques, soit d'éléments en béton avançant sur la façade d'un bâtiment pour protéger des rayons du soleil les baies vitrées.*”

4. The classification terms

My semantic classification of the corpus will make use of the following meanings, presented without any hierarchical order: Human Agent – Animal Agent – Plant Agent – Impersonal Agent – Other Agent – Instrument – Locative – Action – Result. Since the Impersonal Agent is taken into account, the distinction between Agent and Instrument based on the features [+/-animate] is not valid. I will instead use Gross (1990:84), who observes the ambiguity between Agent and Instrument, in order to come up with two criteria to distinguish Impersonal Agent from Instrument⁹: (i) a V-*eur*/VN that V/V (det) N → Impersonal Agent; (ii) a V-*eur*/VN with what one V/V (det) N → Instrument. The compound *gobe-sous* (‘money-burning machine’) is an example of an Impersonal Agent, and *tueuse*¹⁰ (‘sword’), of an Instrument. I admit that these two criteria are not watertight, and can surely be improved, but this is not my objective here. Apart from the Impersonal Agent, the Agents need to be divided into different subtypes: Human Agent, e.g. *pleure-misère* (‘person that always complains of being out of money’), Agent Animal, e.g. *taille-vent* (‘seabird’), and Plant Agent, e.g. *teint-vin* (‘lingonberry’). The Locative meaning can be exemplified by *coupe-gorge* (‘a dangerous, desert place where one risks getting rubbed or murdered’). Rainer (2005:21) notes that Meyer-Lübke (1890) observed the conceptual ambiguity of recipients between Instruments and Locatives.

In my classification, recipients are included under Locative, e.g. *cuisseur*, ‘boiling pot’¹¹. The two meanings Source/Origin are not attested, and are thus excluded from my classification. In addition, I have included three meanings in my classification that are not explicitly present in Dressler’s (1986) hierarchy: Action, Result and Other Agent. An example of an Action is *frotte-nombril* (‘rubbing one’s nose against another person’s nose’). The Result meaning¹² is the result of the action expressed by the verb, such as *chauffe-double* (‘spirits heated twice, the second time with new wine added’). The label Other Agent includes five compounds, e.g. *croque-mitaine* (‘imaginary monster’) and *trousse-galant* (‘disease’, especially ‘cholera’, caused by a micro-organism, hence, agentive).

⁹ Sometimes, the explications in *TLFi* are helpful because they use such words as “*appareil*”, “*machine*”, etc. (= Impersonal Agents) vs. “*instrument*”, “*outil*”, etc. (= Instrument).

¹⁰ Zwanenburg (1983:138) quotes Dubois (1962:44), claiming that the feminine form *-euse* was one way to refer to the machine/Instrument, in contrast to the masculine *-eur*, which referred to the man/Agent, but as the machine became more frequent in industry, this distinction lost its importance. However, Spence (1990:34) questions Dubois’ (1962) claim of an autonomous instrumental *-euse* suffix, given that instrumental *-eur* derivations are much more frequent than the instrumental *-euse* derivation (see also 7.2 below). Moreover, Dressler (1986:526) signals that if Agents, Instruments and Locatives are expressed by different, but parental, affixes, the agentive affixes are the least marked, whereas the locative ones are the most marked. He (ibid.) notes further that, in several languages, the instrumental and locative suffixes are identical to the feminine suffixes (longer than the masculine ones). In line with this reasoning, the French instrumental [VN] formation can, in my opinion, be seen as more marked than the agentive *-eur* derivation, given the more complex structure of the first formation type.

¹¹ Dressler (1986:526) mentions recipient as one meaning in the Agent polysemy, but he does not indicate whether it is instrumental or locative. N.B. Dressler (1986) mentions no criteria whatsoever as to separate the different meanings from each other.

¹² My term seems to correspond to “effected objects” in Devos & Taeldeman (2004:158), i.e. “what comes into existence by *V-ing*”.

5. Previous studies

5.1. Synchronic results in brief

Synchronically, the French [VN/A]_{N/A} formation matches the following productivity hierarchy: Instrument > Human Agent > Impersonal Agent > Action > Locative > Animal Agent > Plant Agent > Other Agent > Result (Rosenberg in preparation). Clashing with the Agent hierarchy, Instrument has become the core meaning (580, or 45%, of the 1,286 attested meanings are Instruments, whereas only 22 % are Human Agents), a phenomenon that leads to two hypotheses: (i) Agent and Instrument constitute two conceptual categories: **homonymy**, thus a view differing from e.g. Booij (1986) and Dressler (1986)¹³; (ii) Agent and Instrument are one conceptual category: **polysemy**. According to Kastovsky, “we should not talk about the productivity of a morphological pattern as a whole, but rather about the productivity of a morphological-semantic type” (1986:596-597). In Modern French, the *-eur* derivation is more profitable for the Agent meaning, whereas the [VN/A]_{N/A} composition is more profitable for the Instrument. Moreover, Štekauer remarks that productivity should concern whole concept clusters, such as Agent:

While admitting competition between synonymous suffixes he [Bauer (2001)] – like other morphologists before him – disregards the much wider competition, including various word-formation processes and types. (2003:699)

So there may seem to be a case of competition as far as productivity is concerned between the different meanings in the Agent polysemy of derivations and those of compounds. Hence, this constitutes the hypothesis adopted in this study, and which, in fact, I claim to be the only possible one, given the existence of several polysemous [VN/A]_{N/A} compounds and *-eur* derivations, which cannot be attributed to mere coincidence (or homonymy).

5.2. Previous diachronic studies bearing on the semantics of [VN/A]_{N/A} compounds

Lloyd (1966:158), referring to Heinimann (1949) and Spitzer (1951, 1952), claims that the [VN/A]_{N/A} compound was used from the beginning exclusively as a proper name to refer to Human Agents, often in an ironic and playful way, and that the fact that this compound belonged to the lower classes would explain the low frequency of attested examples before the 11th and 12th centuries. During the transformation of proper names into common nouns, these compounds often retained some original feature, such as the omission of the determiner before the second noun in the compound (Lloyd 1966:259). Yet, Rohlf's (1954:229) gives the example *vincluna* (‘new moon’) from the 8th century, and the locative noun *Tenegaudia* as well as the proper name *Zeccadenario* from the 9th century; Kreutzer (1967:184) place names such as *Tosabarba* from 723, and *Tenegaudia* from 739. Otherwise, this type is used especially to denote plants, animals and insects, as well as other objects often in the technical domain (Giurescu 1975:68-69).

Bork's (1990) study examines the Romance compounds from a diachronic perspective, and is interested in such aspects as their functions. Before presenting my own results (in 6 below), I will give those of Bork (1990) regarding Old and Middle French:

¹³ In order to avoid fuzzy boundaries, the distinctive features [+/-animate] can be used to separate Agent from Instrument.

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Century/Meaning	11 th /12 th	13 th	14 th	15 th	Total
Human Agent	5	18	20	28	71
Animal, Zoological Agent	1	5	-	1	7
Plant Agent	-	2		4	6
Instrument	1	6	19	21	47
Locative/Place name (+Recipient)	1	-	8	6	15
Clothes, Armament, Substance, etc.	2	1	10	8	21
Action (+Result), Game	5	7	7	7	26
Adverbial	-	1	2	4	7
Other ¹⁴	3	7	6	12	28
Total	18	47	72	91	228

Table 1: Bork's (1990) diachronic results for French [VN/A]_{N/A} compounds

I draw attention to the fact that Bork's (1990:94) results only go from the 11th to the 15th century, as opposed to my results below. Moreover, Bork's (1990:71) classification contains some meanings, e.g. the group of clothes, armament and different substances, that I have in most cases classified as Instruments. Note also that adverbials, excluded from my results, are included in Bork's results. Furthermore, there are two other noticeable differences between Bork's (1990) results and my own: firstly, that he does not include Impersonal Agents, and secondly, Bork's (1990) results only give a single meaning for each compound, i.e. the very first attestation, whilst my results also account for the polysemy manifested by single compounds.

To sum up, Bork's (1990) results show that nearly all the different meanings of the Agent polysemy manifested by the [VN/A]_{N/A} compounds are attested from the very beginning. Hence, they can all be seen as primary, and the Agent is not necessarily the one from which all the others originate. Consequently, I claim that Dressler's (1986) Agent hierarchy is not confirmed by Bork's (1990) results. Nevertheless, as shown by table 1 above, Human Agent is the most profitable meaning from a diachronic perspective. However, amongst the first 18 attestations, Action is as profitable as the Human Agent. In addition, table 1 shows that the Instrument is almost as profitable as the Human Agent as early as in the 14th and 15th century.

6. Diachronic results for the polysemy of Agent

Recall that the objective of this diachronic study, ranging from the first attestations in the 12th century to attestations in the 20th century, is to examine the relevance of Dressler's (1986) Agent hierarchy for the semantic structure of [VN/A]_{N/A} compounds and -eur derivations. Remember as well that my results are based on information from the *TLFi*¹⁵.

¹⁴ In this group, Bork (1990:83-92) includes among others nine compounds with *passe-*, e.g. *passefelon*, 'someone that is the most unfaithful' (a Human Agent according to my classification), or *passe-merveille* 'thing ... more than marvellous' (in my opinion, an Instrument). Other compounds included here are *picavet* 'sort of faggot' and *rompetout* 'an impediment to action' (two Instruments following my classification). *Passetemps*, 'joy, satisfaction' is classified as an Action by Bork, in line with my classification, whereas Bork classifies *passejoie* 'extreme joy' as Other.

¹⁵ Given the vast quantity of [VN/A]_{N/A} compounds used in my study, a consultation of e.g. *FEW* (Wartburg 1922-) would not have been very fruitful.

Century/ Meaning	12 th	13 th	14 th	15 th	16 th	17 th	18 th	19 th	20 th	Total
Instrument		8	8	11	21	29	19	183	227	506
Human Ag	1	9 ¹⁶	9 ¹⁷	7 ¹⁸	22 ¹⁹	16	20	94 ²⁰	71	249
Impers Ag				4	1	1	5	33	92	136
Action	1	1	4	2	7	7	6	28	25	81
Locative	2 ²¹	1	2	1	2	3	6	24	21	62
Animal Ag		1			4	5	9	19	7	45
Plant Ag	1				9	3	7	16	5	41
Other Ag					2			2	1	5
Result		1			1	1		1	1	5
Total	5	21	23	25	69	65	72	400	450	1130 (1023)²²

Table 2: Diachronic results for the [VN/A]_{N/A} compounds

This table shows that already the first attestations manifest polysemy. Hence, my results confirm those of Bork's (1990) study (see 5.2 above), that is to say that Dressler's (1986) hierarchy does not fit the semantic structure of the [VN/A]_{N/A} compounds. They also suggest that the Instrument is just as profitable as the Human Agent for the period from the 13th to the 18th century, but during the 19th and the 20th centuries, the Instrument meaning dominates. Another interesting fact is that the Impersonal Agent appears for the first time in the 15th century, but does not become profitable before the 19th century (see also 6.1 below). Note also that the Result meaning is marginal throughout the period. However, the diachronic results for the semantics of the *-eur* derivations do not strictly follow the results above

Century/ Meaning	11 th	12 th	13 th	14 th	15 th	16 th	17 th	18 th	19 th	20 th	Total
Human Ag	1	18	34	20	4	32	10	1	20	2	142
Impers Ag								3	23	16	42
Instrument				3	1	2			16	8	30
Animal Ag			1			2	3	3	6	1	16
Plant Ag								2		1	3
Locative								1	2	1	4
Result										1	1
Action											0
Total	1	18	35	23	5	36	13	10	67	30	238 (144)

Table 3: Diachronic results for the *-eur* derivations

¹⁶ Including two proper names.

¹⁷ Including five proper names.

¹⁸ Including one proper name.

¹⁹ Including one proper name.

²⁰ Including one proper name.

²¹ Including one place name.

²² In tables 2 and 3, the number in parentheses corresponds to the total number of compounds/derivations in my corpus, whilst the other number corresponds to the total number of meanings.

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Table 3 shows that the Agent meaning is by far the most dominant one. The Impersonal Agents and the Instruments do not become profitable until the 19th and 20th century, and the Plant Agent cannot be considered a profitable meaning for the derivations. Furthermore, Action and Result are rare meanings for the *-eur* derivations.

To conclude, the semantic structure of the *-eur* derivations does not deviate as much from Dressler's Agent hierarchy as do the results of the [VN/A]_{NA} compounds. Nevertheless, in contrast to Dressler's hierarchy, but similar to the results of the compounds in table 2 above, table 3 shows that the Impersonal Agent does not find any high position in the hierarchy until the 19th century. This observation thus calls for a closer look at the distribution between Instrument and Impersonal Agent.

6.1. Distribution between Impersonal Agent and Instrument

In his study of the Spanish suffix *-dor*, Rainer (2004) observes that the Impersonal Agent is not attested before the 19th century, that is to say, before the industrial revolution. Diachronically, Rainer (2005:30) as well as my results in tables 2 and 3 above show that the Impersonal Agent is quite a modern phenomenon, dating from the 19th and 20th century. In other words, Impersonal Agents are not sanctioned diachronically, but synchronically, they are justified, given their high frequency in the semantic structure of agent nouns. My intention in presenting the two tables below is to highlight the impact the introduction of the Impersonal Agent has on the semantic structure of agent nouns, especially in the sense that it favours Agents at the expense of Instruments:

Century/ Meaning	12th	13th	14th	15th	16th	17th	18th	19th	20th	Total
Instrument		8	8	11	21	29	19	183	227	506
Impers Ag				4	1	1	5	33	92	136
Total		8	8	15	22	30	24	216	319	642
Instrument=Total		8	8	15	22	30	24	211	311	629²³

Table 4: Diachronic results of the distribution between Instrument and Impersonal Agent for the [VN/A]_{NA} compounds

Century/ Meaning	12th	13th	14th	15th	16th	17th	18th	19th	20th	Total
Impers Ag							3	23	16	42
Instrument			3	1	2			16	8	30
Total			3	1	2		3	39	24	72
Instrument=Total			3	1	2		3	37	22	68

Table 5: Diachronic results of the distribution between Instrument and Impersonal Agent for the -eur derivations

In comparing the two tables above, the difference between the compounds and the derivations is clear: when the Impersonal Agent is introduced, the first ones are still predominantly instrumental (79 % are Instruments), whereas the second ones become

²³ N.B. The difference as to the total number of the two classification models (Imp Ag or Instr vs. Instr) in tables 4 and 5 depends on the fact that some compounds/derivations are polysemous, thus referring to both an Impersonal Agent and an Instrument.

predominantly agentive (58 % are Impersonal Agents). In my opinion, there is no reason to abandon the non fuzzy criterion based on the distinctive features [+animate] (=Agent) and [-animate] (=Instrument) of Fillmore (1968). Moreover, only this criterion can be diachronically motivated. In future works, I will therefore claim that Impersonal Agents should be excluded from the polysemy of Agent.

6.2. *Semantic extension of the polysemous compounds and derivations*

In this section, the aim is to follow the semantic extension for each polysemous word in order to see how well it matches with the direction stipulated by Dressler's (1986) hierarchy. In the corpus, there are 96 [VN/A]_{N/A} compounds (9 %) and 72 *-eur* derivations (50 %) that are polysemous, and hence, manifest an internal hierarchy. The fact that the compounds are less polysemous than the derivations is, in my opinion, due to their more complex structure, which gives rise to more specialised and restricted meanings, which are not as easily extendable. Let us first look at the polysemous compounds in table 6.

Table 6 shows that of the 96 polysemous [VN/A]_{N/A} compounds, 57, i.e. 59 %, follow the direction of Dressler's (1986) Agent hierarchy; in contrast, 39 compounds, i.e. 41 %, do not (those marked in grey). The number of violations here is considerable, and I claim therefore that Dressler's hierarchy does not seem valid in accounting for the semantic extension of the polysemous compounds. Moreover, in most cases, the first attested meaning is instrumental. For example, the compound *casse-gueule* manifests a semantic extension clashing with the direction of Dressler's hierarchy. The first attestation is Locative ('a dark and dangerous place'), the second is Instrument ('spirits'), and the third is Action ('a risky mission').

*Agent Nouns, Productivity and Diachrony:
An Analysis of [VN/A]_{NA} Compounds and -eur Derivations in French*

[VN/A] _{NA} Compounds	Hum Ag	Anim Ag	Plant Ag	Imp Ag	Instr	Loc	Act	Res	
<i>abat-jour</i>		18 th			17 th				
<i>accroche-cœur</i>	1635			1874	1842				
<i>allume-feu</i>				19 th	19 th				
<i>attrape-mouche(s)</i>		1752	1700		19 th				
<i>boit-tout</i>	19 th				18 th				
<i>bouche-trou</i>	17 th				18 th				
<i>boute-feu</i>	15 th				14 th				
<i>boute-hors</i>					17 th		14 th		
<i>bouteroue</i>	13 th (PrN)				17 th				
<i>brise-glace(s)</i>				20 th	18 th				
<i>brise-mèche</i>				20 th	20 th				
<i>casse-cou</i>	1798					1718	1808		
<i>casse-croûte</i>					1803		1898		
<i>casse-cul</i>	20 th						18 th		
<i>casse-gueule</i>					1866	1808	1914		
<i>casse-mèche</i>				20 th	20 th				
<i>casse-museau</i>					15 th		17 th		
<i>casse-noisettes</i>	19 th				17 th				
<i>casse-noix</i>		16 th			17 th				
<i>casse-pierre</i>			19 th		20 th				
<i>casse-tête</i>					17 th		18 th		
<i>cauchemar</i>	18 th						14 th		
<i>chasse-marée</i>	13 th			15 th					
<i>chasse-neige</i>				19 th	19 th		20 th		
<i>chausse-trap(p)e</i>			12 th		13 th				
<i>claque-dent</i>	15 th (PrN)					19 th			
<i>cloche-pied</i>	15 th				19 th				
<i>coupe-choux</i>	14 th (PrN)				19 th				
<i>coupe-racines</i>				19 th	19 th				
<i>coupe-tête</i>	14 th						17 th		
<i>engoulevent</i>	13 th (PrN)	18 th							
<i>essuie-glace(s)</i>				19 th	19 th				
<i>fouille-merde</i>	20 th	19 th							
<i>gagne-pain</i>	13 th						16 th		
<i>garde-côte</i>	12 th			15 th					
<i>garde-note(s)</i>	16 th				19 th				
<i>garde-robés</i>						12 th ²⁴		16 th	
<i>gobe-mouche(s)</i>	16 th	17 th	18 th						
<i>gratte-ciel</i>	1915				1911				
<i>happe-lopin</i>	19 th	19 th							
<i>happelourde</i>	1532				1564				
<i>hausse-pied</i>		19 th			14 th				
<i>hoche-pied</i>		19 th			14 th				
<i>lève-nez</i>	19 th				20 th				
<i>mange-tout</i>	19 th		18 th	16 th					
<i>marchepied</i>					13 th	14 th			
<i>monte-lettres</i>				20 th	20 th				
<i>monte-livres</i>				20 th	20 th				
<i>monte-paquets</i>				20 th	20 th				

²⁴ *Garde-robe* has in fact several locative meanings: (i) 1190 ‘room where one keeps the clothes’; (ii) 13th century ‘chest’ or ‘closet’; (iii) 1314 ‘toilet’. Note further the metonymical relation CONTAINER for CONTENTS for the meaning (iv) 1540 ‘all the clothes of someone’ (cf. Panther & Thornburg (2002:283)).

[VN/A] _{N/A} Compounds	Hum Ag	Anim Ag	Plant Ag	Imp Ag	Instr	Loc	Act	Res	
<i>passe-colère</i>	20 th				20 th				
<i>passe-lacet</i>	1880				1827				
<i>passe-pied</i>						17 th	16 th		
<i>pince-fesses</i>						1949	1931		
<i>pince-maille</i>	14 th (PrN)				19 th				
<i>pique-bœuf</i>	16 th	18 th			17 th				
<i>porte-aiguille</i>					18 th	19 th			
<i>porte-bagages</i>					19 th	20 th			
<i>porte-bonheur</i>	18 th				19 th				
<i>porte-bouteilles</i>	16 th				18 th	19 th			
<i>porte-chance</i>	20 th				20 th				
<i>porte-cigares</i>					1845	1837			
<i>porte-cigarettes</i>					1886	1857			
<i>porte-clef(s)</i>	1571				1581				
<i>porte-crosse</i>	17 th				19 th				
<i>porte-épée</i>	1552				1581				
<i>porte-étendard</i>	17 th				18 th				
<i>porte-fort</i>	1951						1936		
<i>porte-glaive</i>	18 th				20 th				
<i>porte-guigne</i>	20 th				20 th				
<i>porte-jupe</i>	17 th				20 th				
<i>porte-malheur</i>	17 th	18 th							
<i>portemanteau</i>	1507				1640	1547			
<i>porte-montre</i>					1975	1908			
<i>porte-parole</i>	16 th				19 th				
<i>porte-plume</i>		19 th			18 th				
<i>porte-queue</i>	15 th	18 th							
<i>porte-respect</i>	18 th				17 th				
<i>porte-veine</i>	20 th				20 th				
<i>porte-voix</i>	18 th				17 th				
<i>rinse-bouches</i>						19 th	20 th		
<i>rinse-bouteilles</i>				20 th	19 th				
<i>serre-file</i>	17 th			19 th					
<i>serre-papier(s)</i>					1766	1720			
<i>souffre-douleur</i>	1662	1678			1607				
<i>taille-douce</i>							16 th	17 th	
<i>taille-vent</i>		19 th			20 th				
<i>tape-cul</i>					15 th		19 th		
<i>tête-vin</i>	15 th				16 th				
<i>tire-ligne</i>	19 th				17 th				
<i>tirelire</i>	17 th					13 th			
<i>tourne-bride</i>						18 th	17 th		
<i>tourne-broche</i>	15 th	1678			1663				
<i>tranche-caillé</i>				20 th	20 th				
<i>trotte-menu</i>	13 th	17 th							
<i>tue-mouche(s)</i>			1823		1872				
<i>vide-bouteille</i>	16 th				19 th	18 th			
Total									96

Table 6: Diachronic results for the polysemous [VN/A]_{N/A} compounds

*Agent Nouns, Productivity and Diachrony:
An Analysis of [VN/A]_{NA} Compounds and -eur Derivations in French*

The polysemous *-eur* derivations are shown in table 7 below:

-eur Derivations	Hum Ag	Anim Ag	Plant Ag	Imp Ag	Instr	Loc	Act	Res	
<i>abaisseur</i>	1564				19 th				
<i>accrocheur</i>	1635			1874	1842				
<i>allumeur</i>	1374			1890					
<i>arracheur</i>	13 th				1866				
<i>batteur</i>	1204				1877				
<i>becqueteur</i>	1883	1882							
<i>boucheur</i>	1550			19 th					
<i>branleur</i>	1690			1930					
<i>briseur</i>	12 th			20 th					
<i>brûleur</i>	13 th			1853					
<i>chauffeur</i>	1680					1830			
<i>chercheur</i>	1538			20 th					
<i>colleur</i>	1544			20 th					
<i>compteur</i>	1213			1752					
<i>coucheur</i>	1534			20 th					
<i>coupeur</i>	1230	1805		20 th					
<i>cuiseur</i>	1270			1928		1929			
<i>écorcheur</i>	13 th				19 th				
<i>écraseur</i>	1571				1857				
<i>essuyeur</i>	19 th				1377				
<i>étouffeur</i>	19 th	1775							
<i>forceur</i>	1507	20 th							
<i>fouilleur</i>	1511				20 th				
<i>frotteur</i>	1372				20 th				
<i>fumeur</i>	1690					1868			
<i>gobeur</i>	1524	1679							
<i>gratteur</i>	14 th			1829					
<i>guérisseur</i>	14 th			19 th					
<i>hacheur</i>	14 ^{th25}			20 th					
<i>haleur</i>	1680				20 th				
<i>lanceur</i>	13 th			1864					
<i>laveur</i>	1390			1867					
<i>marcheur</i>	1500	1791		1773					
<i>mireur</i>	1872			1840					
<i>mouilleur</i>	1576			1831					
<i>ouvreur</i>	1210			1877					
<i>pêcheur</i>	1140				19 th				
<i>peigneur</i>	1243			1812					
<i>peleur</i>	20 ^e				1861				
<i>perceur</i>	15 th			1894					
<i>peseur</i>	1250			1949					
<i>piqueur</i>	1387				19 th				
<i>pisseur</i>	1464				1963				
<i>pleureur</i>	1050		20 th		19 th				

²⁵ The Human Agent meaning is only attested in Littré (1957): ‘chaser’ or ‘engraver’ in the 14th century. This is the only instance in this study where a dictionary other than the *TLFi* has been consulted.

-eur Derivations	Hum Ag	Anim Ag	Plant Ag	Imp Ag	Instr	Loc	Act	Res	
<i>porteur</i>	12 th	1680		1869					
<i>pousseur</i>	1690			1959	1903				
<i>presseur</i>	1384				19 th				
<i>protecteur</i> ²⁶	1234				1869				
<i>purgeur</i>	1531			1869					
<i>rabatteur</i>	1585	1850			1904				
<i>racleur</i>	1576				1896				
<i>ramasseur</i>	1509			1867					
<i>ratisseur</i>	1532				1530				
<i>releveur</i>	1200			1877	1865				
<i>repousseur</i>	1611			20 th					
<i>rinceur</i>	1561			1904					
<i>rogneur</i>	1354			1875					
<i>rongeur</i>	1530	1800			1314				
<i>rouleur</i>	1284	1734		1725					
<i>sauteur</i>	1380	1526			1875	1828			
<i>sécheur</i>	1611			1874					
<i>suceur</i>	1564	1809		1948	1964				
<i>suiveur</i>	1200			20 th					
<i>tailleur</i>	1165							1905	
<i>tâteur</i>	1372			1961	1833				
<i>tordeur</i>	14 th	1803		1872					
<i>traceur</i>	1558			1877					
<i>traîneur</i>	1330	1694							
<i>trancheur</i>	1208			19 th					
<i>trompeur</i>	1390				1557				
<i>trotteur</i>	15 th	1215		1894					
<i>tueur</i>	1200				14 th				
Total									72

Table 7: Diachronic results for the polysemous -eur derivations

It follows from table 7 that of the 72 polysemous derivations, 16, i.e. 22%, have a semantic extension that violates the direction of Dressler's Agent hierarchy (these are marked in grey). In contrast, the extension of 56 derivations, i.e. 78 %, matches with the direction of the hierarchy. *Rongeur* is one of the rare derivations with an instrumental meaning attested first ('rasp'); the second attested meaning is Human Agent, followed by Animal Agent. Once again, we see that the -eur derivations follow the direction of Dressler's hierarchy much more closely than do the compounds, presumably because they are predominantly agentive. Following Rainer (2005:30), the suffix -dor seems to manifest a complementary distribution of agentive vs. instrumental at least in Modern Spanish. However, my results do not favour the account of complementary distribution as to the -eur derivations, since there is only one derivation in the corpus, *rompeur*, that has only the instrumental meaning attested. Consequently, I cannot see how the complementary distribution could be a sufficient reason to reject the idea of semantic extension.

²⁶ N.B. The suffix here is -teur. In the same way as *amateur*, this derivation differs from the other -eur derivations in the corpus. Nevertheless, I decided to include these sorts of derivations as well.

To sum up the diachronic results, the Agent hierarchy as proposed by Dressler (1986) finds no support where the two French agentive formations studied here are concerned. This hierarchy seems to be just a model, logical and theoretically motivated, but that does not reflect the structure of the Agent polysemy such as it is expressed by different word formations types. It is the semantic structure of the [VN/A]_{N/A} compound, in particular, that prompts me to reach this conclusion.

7. Explanations of semantic extension

7.1. Three explanations of a diachronic nature

Rainer (2005:26, 29) observes that given a diachronic or a synchronic perspective, semantic extension will be explained differently; it is therefore dangerous to study semantic extension by extrapolating diachronic evidence from synchronic evidence. He (2005:26-29) identifies three diachronic origins of the instrumental and locative uses of the deverbal agentive suffixes in Romance languages that have nothing to do with semantics or cognition: ellipsis, homonymisation and borrowing.

The ellipsis explanation is proposed by Darmesteter (1972) [1877], according to Rainer (2005:28), and stipulates that the instrumental use of the *-eur* derivation, dating from the 19th century, is caused by an ellipsis of the head noun in the NP²⁷. I note that Winther (1975:78) too assumes the *-eur* suffix to be fundamentally adjectival. Given that the instrumental use precedes the adjectival one, Spence (1990:33) thinks that it is absurd to consider the adjectival nominalization to be the only source of the instrumental noun in *-eur*. In light of my results, it is obvious that a vast majority of the first instrumental attestations do not issue from ellipsis (e.g. *essuyeur* ('towel'), from the 14th century). As to the instrumental use of the [VN/A]_{N/A} compound, often prior to the agentive one, it can rarely be assigned an elliptic origin.

As to the explanation of homonymisation, i.e. a collision of two different suffixes mediated by a phonetic change, it surely cannot account for the [VN/A]_{N/A} compound, even though it might have some relevance for the *-eur* derivation (cf. note 5 above)²⁸.

The borrowing explanation is, according to Rainer (2005:28), already noted by Meyer-Lübke (1966:§66) [1921] for some instrumental and locative formations in Old French. Rainer (2005:32) also points to the possibility that Romance influence could be the cause of the non agentive uses of Germanic *-er* derivations (cf. *counter* vs. *compteur*). Agent nouns in Proto-Germanic seem to have lacked the non agentive use, but within a few centuries during the Middle Ages, all European languages seem to have acquired such a use (Rainer 2005:33). As to my results, it is clear that this last explanation can hardly account for the polysemy of the [VN/A]_{N/A} compound, which is already present in the first attestations. Moreover, the verification or not of one of these explanations does not constitute a central objective of this study. I will instead go for a semantic/cognitive explanation, which has the power to account for the synchronic results as well.

²⁷ There are two possibilities: *appareil* + A in *-eur* → *releveur* and *machine* + A in *-euse* → *peleuse*.

²⁸ Rainer (2005:28) notes that in Provençal, in Catalan and in some Italian dialects, the instrumental Latin suffix, *-torium*, has become identical to the agentive Latin suffix, *-torem*, which explains the resultant polysemy. However, this polysemy is also found in Spanish, but here the two suffixes are still separate (*-dero* and *-dor*), thus contradicting the homonymisation explanation (Rainer:ibid.).

7.2. *Semantic/cognitive explanations*

Apart from those discussed in the previous section, Rainer (2005:22-23) mentions some semantic/cognitive explanations for the extension of the Agent polysemy. According to Panagl (1977), the instrumental use is the result of an extension of the agentive use by metaphor, an idea expressed early on by Meyer-Lübke (1890), or by metonymy. This explanation, however, is problematic since a primary agentive formation does not always exist (Panagl (1977:13) cited by Rainer (2005:22)). Thus, in order to keep the explanation involving metaphor or metonymy, Rainer firstly posits reinterpretation of the agentive use as instrumental mediated by metaphor or metonymy (Rainer 2005:22-23) as one possible mechanism. The metaphorical or metonymical extensions explain the diachronic origin of the instrumental use, which can later, by reinterpretation, become the basis for other instrumental uses. Another possibility is the mechanism of approximation: the instrumental use can appear by metaphor or metonymy in using an agentive pattern (not an individual word as in the case of reinterpretation) in an approximate way (Rainer 2005:23). According to Rainer (2005:26), metaphoric approximation is the most probable explanation. He (2005:24-25) finds support for this in the first instrumental attestations of the Spanish suffix *-dor*, since several of them lack a primary agentive formation; instead, it seems to be a question of complementary distribution. However, my results for the *-eur* derivations do not show much evidence of complementary distribution (cf. 6.2 above). Nor can the Agent always be considered as primary; 91 % of the [VN/A]_{N/A} compounds are monosemous and their meaning is for the most part non agentive. In other words, none of these explanations is satisfactory according to my results.

Blocking, i.e. competing instrumental patterns that block the instrumental extension of a certain word formation process, constitutes another explanation (Rainer 2005:30). Using this explanation, Spence (1990) puts forward the hypothesis that the instrumental extension of *-eur* in French depends on a loss of productivity of the (competing) instrumental suffixes *-oir* and *-oire* (< Latin *-orium/-oriam*)²⁹. Spence (1990) questions the hypothesis of Dubois (1962) that *-eur* replaced *-oir* during industrialisation, when machine replaced man, because he claims that the instrumental use of *-eur* is attested even before the industrial revolution³⁰. Beard (1990:118), however, questions the whole blocking explanation, because in Serbo-Croatian, the existence of a productive instrumental suffix does not block the instrumental use of another agentive suffix. Nor do my results lend support to this hypothesis; given the strong productivity of the Instrument meaning of the [VN/A]_{N/A} compound, that certainly does not block the instrumental use of the *-eur* derivation. I will thus once again emphasise the importance of taking into account the competition between different word formation processes, i.e. both derivations and compounds, and not just limiting the study to different derivation types.

Another explanation mentioned by Rainer (2005:31-33) is the cognitive approach by Ryder (1991), who studies the passage from Agent to Instrument in terms of prototype analysis. Diachronically, this explanation is just as problematic as that of Booij (1986) – Rainer (2005:30) criticises Booij's (1986) semantic extension scheme (Pers Ag > Impers Ag > Instr) predicting that the agentive interpretation, even if not attested, should always be possible – since the first instrumental attestations do not correspond to Impersonal Agents; that would constitute the natural transition between Agent and Instrument (Rainer

²⁹ Furthermore, Spence (1990:29) mentions that some *-oir* derivations express the Locative rather than the Instrument, and in English, the *-ory* suffix, with the same Latin origin, forms Locative nouns (ibid.:32).

³⁰ N.B. This is the same criticism as that put forward by Spence (1990) concerning the ellipsis explanation (cf. 7.1 above).

2005:31). Furthermore, Ryder (1991:299), referring to Kastovsky (1971), claims that, in Old English, the *-er* suffix is restricted to Human Agents (e.g. *bæcere*, *writere*), but that:

Extensions to other referent types found in modern *-er* [here and below, my italics] forms are the result of shifts in construal of the defining episode, with resultant changes in the importance of each of the characteristics of the referents of originally agentive *-er* forms. (1991:303)

This quotation clearly indicates that Ryder considers Agent to be the primary meaning.

To summarise, my objection to all the explanations given here lies precisely in the fact that they all view the Agent meaning as primary, a view that has been contradicted by my results, especially those for the [VN/A]_{N/A} compound.

8. Conclusion

This study, which addresses the Agent polysemy in diachrony as manifested by French [VN/A]_{N/A} compounds and *-eur* derivations, questions the relevance of Dressler's (1986) Agent hierarchy. My results show that the direction indicated by this hierarchy is not confirmed. In particular, the semantic structure of the [VN/A]_{N/A} compound, with the Instrument as its central, and most profitable, meaning, goes against the direction of this hierarchy. In contrast, the semantic structure of *-eur* derivations, with the Agent as the most profitable meaning, follows the hierarchy's direction quite closely, except for the low profitability of the Animal and Plant Agents. This difference between compounds, which adhere to the instrumental pole, and derivations, which adhere to the agentive pole, has a great impact on the distribution of Instruments vs. Impersonal Agents as well: the first favour the Instruments, while the second favour the Impersonal Agents. Moreover, I would like to emphasise that as a consequence of the introduction of Impersonal Agents in the polysemy of Agent, the total number of agentive meanings increases, hollowing out the instrumental ones. As to the semantic extension of polysemous words in my corpus, it does not strictly follow the direction of Dressler's (1986) Agent hierarchy. Once again, the extension of the compounds in particular goes against the hierarchy, given that almost all of the different meanings of the Agent polysemy can be classified as primary. Furthermore, after having discussed several diachronic and semantic/cognitive explanations, I reach the conclusion that none of them is satisfactory in accounting for my results, because each departs from the hypothesis that the Agent is necessarily the one and only primary meaning.

Instead, I claim that all the different meanings in the Agent polysemy can be qualified as primary, but that they are more or less central, and more or less profitable, for different word formation types. More precisely, I object to the idea of a (diachronic) passage from Agent to Instrument³¹. My future studies will further explore the agentive field in French by extending it to two other Agentive types, i.e. the *-oir(e)* derivations (one hypothesis is that this type is predominantly Locative), and those with *-ant*, and will also take a contrastive perspective with Swedish, a Germanic language.

³¹ Another of my hypotheses, in line with this reasoning, is that the figurative meaning can be primary to the literal one. This is the case for [VN/A]_{N/A} compounds whose first or only attested meaning is often figurative, e.g. *tord-boyaux*, *casse-pattes*, *casse-poitrine* (all three denote 'bad and strong alcohol').

Electronic resources

Le Trésor de la Langue Française informatisé, <http://atilf.atilf.fr/tlf.htm>.

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