

AGENT-SUFFIXES¹ IN CORNISH

A discussion paper by Dr Ken George

Following the production of a detailed paper on this subject by Pol Hodge, I called a meeting to discuss it. Although nominally a meeting of the Vocabulary, Grammar and Research Committee of the Cornish Language Board, it was open to all interested parties, and held via Zoom on June 29th 2021.²

Women are increasingly doing jobs which were traditionally done by men. Although some people are against this, it is generally seen as a good thing. The question arises as to the best titles for these jobs. It is a question which affects all European languages, though there may be a different approach between languages with grammatical gender (e.g. Cornish, French) and those without (e.g. English). There appear to be two diametrically opposed schools of thought.

The first says that in order to recognize that women can do jobs which were formerly the preserve of men, it is desirable to have feminine forms of job titles, and to use them in advertisements. For example, an advertisement for a teacher in Germany needs to mention both *Lehrer* and *Lehrerin*, though how these words are laid out may vary. In Cornish, this approach was taken by Nance (though not in his 1938 dictionary); he coined such terms as *clavyjores* ‘(female) nurse’ (no male equivalent at the time), *scryvynyades* ‘female secretary’. The justification for separate words is found in the texts from Old Cornish onwards, e.g. OldC *redior, rediores*; *lappior, lappiores*; here the <o> is thought to represent /œ/, so that the resulting MidC <-er>, <-ores> may have been [-er], [-'œːrɛs], though the pronunciation of *-ores* in *Gerlyver Meur* is [-'ɔːrɛs]. Many more pairs of words appear in *GM*, some devised by myself. Other scholars have made up feminine job-titles from the agent suffixes *-our* and *-ydh*, though no such forms appear in the texts, nor in *GM*.

The second school of thought says that job-titles should be gender-neutral; i.e. one should not be able to tell from the title whether the job is done by a man or a woman. Consider the English word *actor*. In Shakespeare’s time, all actors were men, called *players*, and women’s parts were played by men or boys. In 1660, women began to play parts in the theatre, but the word *actress* was not introduced until about 1700. In recent decades, this word is seen by some as sexist. They consider that it emphasizes the gender of the player rather than the job, and use *actor* for both male and female players. They wish to see *actress* fall into disuse, as have *victress*, *poetess*, *prophetess*.

The matter was discussed at the meeting for almost two hours in a friendly and constructive manner, though attendees had different views, some held strongly. The suffixes considered were *-or*, *-er*, *-our*, *-ador*, *-yas*, *-ydh*, and *-ek*; together with their feminine forms (where they exist), and their plurals. Each of these is now examined in turn. The data take into account all attested forms, except those where Lhuyd and Pryce are just copying (usually from the *Vocabularium Cornicum*).

¹ Originally ‘Job-titles in Cornish’, but some of the words examined, such as *peghador*, do not refer to jobs.
² The meeting also discussed non-binary pronouns, which are the subject of a separate discussion paper.

Agent-suffixes in *-or*

Job-titles ending in *-or* where the suffix comes from OldC *-þur* = MidC *-wour*, (the lenited form of *gour*) were seen at the meeting as overtly masculine (even more so than English words with *-man* such as fireman).

Table 1a Agent-suffixes in *-or* (native words)

KK (GM20)	English	Singular		Plural
		Old Cornish	MidC	
<i>ankrydor</i>	unbeliever	<i>ancedþur</i>		
<i>aradrór</i>	ploughman	<i>araderuur</i>		
<i>dadhlor</i>	debater	<i>datheluur</i>		
<i>gweythor</i>	workman	<i>gweidþur</i>		<i>guythoryon</i>
<i>gwikor</i>	trader	<i>guicgur</i>	<i>wecor</i> <i>gwicker</i>	<i>gockorion</i> <i>guykcoryon</i> <i>guycoryon</i>
<i>helghor</i>	hunter	<i>helþur</i>	<i>helhor</i> 2	
<i>kasor</i>	warrior	<i>cadþur</i>		
<i>ughelor</i>	noble	<i>hupelþur</i>		

These words are poorly attested in later Cornish; three out of the four attestations of the singular have <-or>, which is what one would expect, since OldC [-ur] > MidC [-or]. The plural ending is <-oryon>. No feminine forms are attested. In Welsh, the corresponding suffix *-wr* (< *gwr*) contrasts with the feminine suffix *-wraig*. The cognate suffix in Cornish would be *-wrek*, but this is not found in the texts.

Other native words with <-or> in **GM20** are:

- *hwibanor* ‘whistler’, which since it is thus found in OldC, would be better spelled *hwibaner*; I was probably influenced by Welsh *chwibanwr*.
- *stenor* ‘tinner’, which is found only in Late Cornish,

Otherwise, agent-suffixes with <-or> are loans, some assimilated, some not:

Table 1b Agent-suffixes in *-or* (loans)

KK (GM20)	Loans from	English	Singular		Plural	
			<i>-or</i>	Other	<i>-ors</i>	Other
<i>dettor</i>	Eng.	debtor	1			
<i>ferror</i>	Lat.	blacksmith	1			
<i>gwerryor</i>	Eng.	warrior	8			
<i>imperator</i>	Lat.	emperor	1			
<i>kofessor</i>	Eng.	confessor			1	
<i>persecutor</i>	Eng.	persecutor	3			
<i>senator</i>	Eng.	senator	2	<i>-ur</i> 1		
<i>tormentor</i>	Eng.	tormentor			6	<i>-ourys</i> 1 <i>-ores</i> 3 <i>-oris</i> 10 <i>-ours</i> 5
<i>victor</i>	Eng.	victor	1			

These have English plurals and no attested feminine forms.

Agent-suffixes in <-er>

As with <-or>, there are here both native words and loan-words; they are tabulated separately. The suffix <-er> in native words comes from Latin *-ārius*; the normal development (highlighted in green in the tables) was OldC *-or* [-œr] > MidC *-er* [-er] > LateC *-ar* [-ar]³.

Table 2a Agent-suffixes in *-er* (native words)

KK (GM20)	English	Singular				Plural			Fem. form
		Normal development	Other	English	Cornish	Irregular			
		<i>-or</i>	<i>-er</i>	<i>-ar</i>				<i>-ores</i>	
<i>aweyler</i>	evangelist			2		<i>-ers</i> 8		<i>-ors</i> 1	
<i>barner</i>	judge		1					<i>-eriov</i> 1	
<i>darader</i>	doorkeeper	1							
<i>dasprenyer</i>	redeemer			1					
<i>devyder</i>	sheep-worrier		1						
<i>difenner</i>	defendant	1							
<i>diskryjyer</i>	unbeliever		3						
<i>drogoberer</i>	evil-doer	1							
<i>dysker</i>	instructor			1					
<i>gwiader</i>	weaver		2	6					
<i>gwrier</i>	creator		8	8					
<i>harfyller</i>	fiddler	1						1	
<i>helghyer</i>	hunter		1						
<i>hoelaner</i>	salter	1							
<i>huder</i>	magician	2	3						
<i>kendoner</i>	debtor		1						
<i>keryer</i>	cobbler	1							
<i>koeg-kowser</i>	wind-bag					<i>-ers</i> 1			
<i>kusulyer</i>	counsellor		1						
<i>lenner</i>	reader		3					<i>-erio</i> 1	
<i>liwer</i>	painter	1		3					
<i>masoberer</i>	well-doer				<i>-ur</i> 1				
<i>meliner</i>	miller		4						
<i>myser</i>	reaper			4				<i>-ouzion</i> 1	
<i>oberer</i>	worker	1							
<i>omdowler</i>	wrestler			1					
<i>owrer</i>	goldsmith				<i>-e</i> 1				
<i>pennrewler</i>	director		1						
<i>piber</i>	piper		1				<i>-oryon</i> 1		
<i>pregowther</i>	preacher		2	3			<i>-orryan</i> 1		
<i>prener</i>	buyer			2					
<i>pronter</i>	priest		21	1	<i>-yr</i> 3			<i>-iran</i> 1 <i>-yryyan</i> 3 <i>-eryon</i> 1 <i>-yryan</i> 4 <i>-irion</i> 1 <i>-erian</i> 1	
<i>pystrier</i>	sorcerer	1	1		<i>-our</i> 1				
<i>Revener</i>	Roman				<i>-uer</i> 1				
<i>senedher</i>	senator							<i>-errio</i> 1	
<i>sether</i>	diver	1		4					
<i>skoler</i>	scholar			1	<i>-ur</i> 2			<i>-urion</i> 1	

³

Some scholars claim that <-ar> meant [-œr], but I do not think that this was the case.

<i>skryfer</i>	writer		1			-ars 1			
<i>telynnyer</i>	harper								
<i>toller</i>	tax-collector	1		1					
<i>toeller</i>	deceiver	1	1						
<i>tregher</i>	tailor			1					
<i>triger</i>	dweller		2					-erion 1 -erio 1	
<i>troggyer</i>	tucker			3	-a 1				
<i>trygher</i>	victor		1						
<i>yonker</i>	youth			2					

99% of the singular cases follow the normal development. Although the usual plural suffix in GM20 is *-oryon*, variants of this spelling are more common in the texts. It is usually interpreted as [-'ørjøn], but possibly meant [-'ærjøn], with the first <o> still representing [œ] as in OldC. English plurals in *-s* are also found. For two words, there is a feminine form in *-ores*.

The results for loan-words are similar:

Table 2b Agent-suffixes in *-or* (loans)

KK (GM20)	English	Singular			Other	Plural		Fem. form
		Normal development				English	Cornish	
		<i>-or</i>	<i>-er</i>	<i>-ar</i>				<i>-ores</i>
<i>archer</i>	archer		1			-ers 1		
<i>astronomer</i>	astrologer		1					
<i>avoutrer</i>	adulterer			1				
<i>bachelor</i>	bachelor		3					
<i>beggyer</i>	beggar		2			-ars 1		
<i>bonkyer</i>	cooper					-ars 3		
<i>boster</i>	boaster						-eryon 1	
<i>boteller</i>	butler		7					
<i>chansler</i>	chancellor			1				
<i>chowner</i>	chandler		2					
<i>drushyer</i>	thresher		2	1				
<i>flatter</i>	deceiver						-uryon 1	1
<i>folyer</i>	follower					-ars 1		
<i>formyer</i>	creator		3					
<i>gidyer</i>	guide			1				
<i>gravyer</i>	engraver	1						
<i>guider</i>	guide		1					
<i>jayler</i>	gaoler		12	1		-ers 2		
<i>jogler</i>	juggler				eer 1			
<i>juster</i>	justiciary		1			-ers 1		
<i>kampyer</i>	champion				ur 1			
<i>karpenter</i>	carpenter					-ers 1	-oryon 2	
<i>kawser</i>	cause		1					
<i>klappyer</i>	chatterer		1			-ers 1		
<i>komner</i>	commoner							
<i>konforter</i>	comforter		2					
<i>konseler</i>	councillor		6	1				
<i>krefter</i>	craftsman		1					
<i>krosser</i>	crozier-bearer		5					
<i>lappyer</i>	acrobat	1						1
<i>leader</i>	leader		1					
<i>ledyer</i>	leader		1					
<i>maker</i>	maker		3					

<i>marner</i>	mariner					-ers 2		
<i>menyster</i>	administrator		1			-ers 2		
<i>menystrer</i>	administrator	1						
<i>messejer</i>	messenger		28					
<i>mester</i>	master		87					
<i>offiser</i>	officer		1			-ers 2		
<i>omajer</i>	vassal		1					
<i>outlayer</i>	outlaw		2					
<i>palmer</i>	pilgrim						-oryon 1	
<i>pomster</i>	quack-doctor		1					
<i>pratyer</i>	orator		1					
<i>preparer</i>	preparer			1				
<i>prisner</i>	prisoner		4	1	-our 1	-ers 7		
						-es 2		
<i>redeemer</i>	redeemer		1	2				
<i>redyer</i>	reader	1	1					1
<i>Revenner</i>	Roman		1					
<i>rewler</i>	ruler		5	1		-es 1		
<i>robbyer</i>	robber	1						
<i>router</i>	director					-ors 1		
<i>souder</i>	soldier					-rys 8	-oryon 3	
							-oryan 2	
							-oryen 1	
<i>spenser</i>	butler		2					
<i>stranger</i>	stranger		2					
<i>striver</i>	striver	1						
<i>tanter</i>	suitor		1					
<i>tempter</i>	tempter		1					
<i>ynjiner</i>	engineer	1						

Again 99% of the spellings fit the normal development, even though the source is different. As expected, the English plural *-ers* is more evident, but it often takes part in the Cornish development *-ers* > *-ars*. Cornish plurals of the type *-oryon* are also found, as are feminine forms in *-ores*.

Agent-suffixes in <-ador>

The source of this suffix is Latin *-atorem*. Its normal development was to *-adur* (as in Welsh), and the second vowel was unrounded, giving *-adyr*.

Table 3 Agent-suffixes in -ador

KK (GM20)	English	Singular		Plural		Fem. forms
		Normal development	Other	English	Cornish	
		<i>-adur(e)</i>	<i>-adyr</i>			
<i>dyskador</i>	teacher			<i>-adzher</i> 2		
<i>gonador</i>	sower			<i>-adar</i> 3		
<i>koskador</i>	sleeper	1				
<i>kusulyador</i>	counsellor			<i>-oder</i> 1		
<i>lewyador</i>	pilot			<i>-ader</i> 1		
<i>peghador</i>	sinner	4	1		<i>-adoryon</i> 1 <i>-adorryan</i> 3 <i>-adoryan</i> 2 <i>-adorion</i> 1 <i>-adourrian</i> 1	<i>-adures</i> 2 <i>-adyres</i> 1 <i>-adores</i> 1 <i>-adoras</i> 1
<i>pyskador</i>	fisherman	1	2	<i>-ador</i> 1 <i>-adar</i> 4	<i>-aders</i> 2	
<i>roevador</i>	rower	1		<i>-adar</i> 4		
<i>selwador</i>	saviour	5		<i>-ador</i> 2 <i>-adour</i> 2 <i>-ader</i> 1		

The normal development of the singular is evident in only 42% of the cases. The forms *-ador* > *-adar* are almost as common. Nance generalized the suffix as *-ador*, and this has been followed in KK. Lhuyd's *deskadzher* 'teacher' is obviously made up. The suffix *-adur* would not have been subject to assibilation or palatalization, since the [d] is followed by a vowel and [r]. Only two words exhibit plurals: *peghador* has divers variants of *-oryon*, and *pyskador* has English *-s*. The only feminine forms are those associated with the word for 'sinner' (!); they are *-ures* > *-yres* and *-ores* > *-oras*.

Agent-suffixes in <-our>

Except for *penn-kangour* ‘centurion’, which contains *gour* ‘man’, all of these words are borrowings from French, either directly or through Middle English. The spelling <-our> is French in origin.

Table 4 Agent-suffixes in -our

KK (GM20)	English	Singular			Plural				
		Normal development	Other		Normal	Other			
		-our(e) -owr(e)	-or(e)	-ar		-ours -owrs	-ors	-ars	
<i>amour</i>	friend	1	1			1	7		
<i>asketour</i>	executor	1							
<i>awtour</i>	author		4				4		
<i>brybour</i>	vagabond	1	6		-ur 1				-ous 1
<i>doktour</i>	doctor	5	5		-ur(e) 2	6	5		-orus 1
<i>emperour</i>	emperor	40	7		-ur 1 -er 1				
<i>faytour</i>	swindler	1	2						
<i>governour</i>	governor	2	1	2	-er 2		1	1	
<i>konkerrou</i>	conqueror	2	1						
<i>mentenour</i>	maintainer	2							
<i>penn-kangour</i>	centurion				-er 1				
<i>savvour</i>	saviour	87	1		-ur 1				
<i>traytour</i>	traitor	6	13			3	2		
<i>trompou</i>	trumpeter					1			

For the singular, *-or* is nearly as common as *-our*. The same variation is found in the plural *-ours* ~ *-ors*. There are no Cornish suffixes in the plural. No feminine forms are attested.

Dealing with *-er*, *-or*, *-ador* and *-our*

It was suggested at the meeting (though not as a formal proposal) adopting an inclusive approach, which could accommodate both schools of thought, at least for words presently written as *-er* and *-or*. Speakers wishing to preserve a difference between masculine and feminine endings would write *-or* (m.) and *-ores* (f.). Those wishing to use a gender-neutral ending would write *-er*. Although a word such as *skrif* would apply to both male and female writers, the grammatical gender of the word was a subject for debate. At present practically all nouns are grammatically either masculine or feminine, by definition; words in *-er* are traditionally grammatically masculine, and following adjectives do not suffer lenition; e.g. *skrif da* ‘a good writer’. Some participants objected to this; one solution is to deem gender-neutral words as both masculine and feminine, allowing both *skrif da* and *skrif dha*; but this solution is contrary to the idea of gender-neutrality. So one would have *skrif da* on the one hand, and *skrif da* / *skrifores dha* on the other.

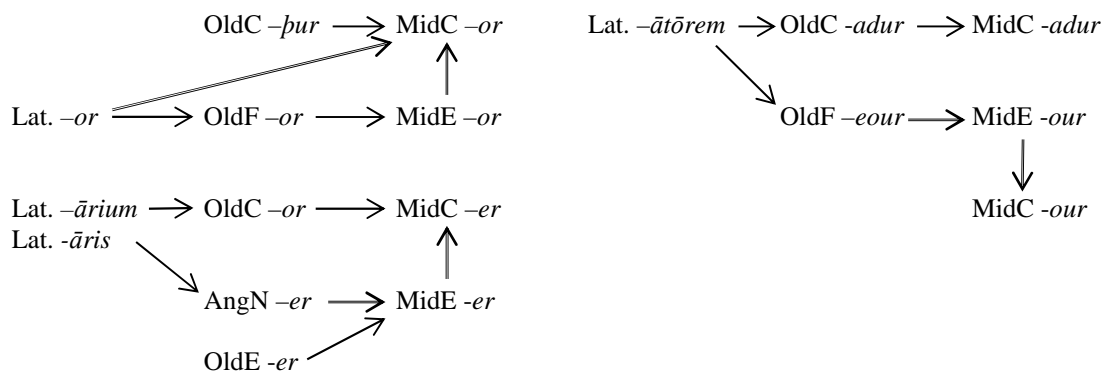
This division would not extend to the plural, because the Cornish plural suffix of both the *-er* words and the *-or* words is *-oryon*. This was not thought to be of great moment.

The results from all of the foregoing tables are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5a Principal attested spellings

		Singular		Plural		Feminine form
		Common	Rare	Common	Rare	
-or	native	<i>-or</i>	<i>-er</i>	<i>-oryon</i>		
-or	loan	<i>-or</i>	<i>-ur</i>	<i>-ors, -oris, -ours</i>		
-er	native	<i>-er</i>	<i>-ur, -our</i>	<i>-oryon, -ers</i>	<i>-eryon, -eryow</i>	<i>-ores</i>
-er	loan	<i>-er</i>	<i>-ur, -our</i>	<i>-ers, -oryon</i>	<i>-eryon</i>	<i>-ores</i>
-ador	native	<i>-adur, -ador</i>	<i>-ader, -adour</i>	<i>-adoryon</i>	<i>-aders</i>	<i>-adures, -adores</i>
-our	loan	<i>-our, -or</i>	<i>-ur, -er</i>	<i>-ours, -ors</i>		

This table shows that the same principle may be extended to **-ador** and **-our**, without going too much against the evidence of the texts. It would mean replacing **-our** by **-or** (as well as **-er**), a change which would be familiar to American speakers of Cornish.



The flow diagrams above give some idea of the complexity of agent-suffixes.

Table 5b Attested singular forms of agent-suffixes

KK		Attested forms in MidC			
		<i>-er</i>	<i>-or</i>	<i>-our</i>	<i>-ur</i>
-or	native	yes	yes		
-or	loan		yes		yes
-er	native	yes		yes	yes
-er	loan	yes		yes	yes
-ador	native	yes	yes	yes	yes
-our	loan	yes	yes	yes	yes

Table 5b shows a degree of confusion between the attested spellings (the common ones are in **bold**), which may be used to advantage in setting up gender-neutral forms (**-er**) and male / female forms (**-or** / **-ores**).

Agent-suffixes in <-ek>, <-yas> and <-ydh>

Although words containing these suffixes are grammatically masculine, it was felt that they do not necessarily denote a male person (as does *-or*). They could refer to a male or a female agent. Nevertheless, there are two examples of feminine forms of *-ek* in the texts: *koelyoges* ‘female soothsayer’ (found as *cuillioges* in Old Cornish) and *kentrevoges* ‘female neighbour’ (thus spelled at BM.1551). Using these as an example, other words with *-oges* have been made up; e.g. *medhoges* ‘lady doctor’.

The case of *-yas* is an interesting one. In the texts, there are numerous examples of words with *-yas* (< OldC *-iat*), e.g. *gwithyas* ‘keeper’, *dasprenyas* ‘redeemer’. The only example of a feminine suffix is on page 241 of Lhuyd’s *Archaeologia Britannica*, where he writes:

Such Nouns when of the Feminine Gender, are commonly form’d by the addition of es. As
†*Seuyades, A woman-taylor.*

Although Lhuyd marked the word with an obelus, implying that it came from Old Cornish, it is only the masculine form *seuyad* ‘tailor’ which is found in *Vocabularium Cornicum*. Lhuyd added the *-es* himself, thus creating a feminine agent-suffix *-yades*. It could be argued that it is badly formed, i.e. that if *-yades* had existed in Old Cornish, it would have suffered assibilation to **-yases*. Many more words in *-yades* have been added to the vocabulary, including some made up by myself for *GM09*. At the meeting, there was some resistance to the suggestion that they be discontinued, and *-yas* used as a gender-neutral suffix.

The suffix *-ydh* has been compared with English *-ist*, and therefore seen as gender-neutral. Examples from the texts include *brisydh* ‘judge’ and *prydydh* ‘poet’. No plurals are recorded, and no feminine forms. Nance included the feminine suffix *-ydhes* in his 1938 dictionary; it does not appear in *GM*.