Actual, potential, and possible words

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The distinction between actual and possible words is a commonplace of any handbook of morphology, quite independently of theoretical orientation. And in fact, this distinction is indispensible as soon as one begins to tackle the phenomenon of productivity, which presupposes both notions.

In my paper I would like to argue that this traditional dichotomy is insufficient for the purpose of morphological description and explanation. The main focus will be on the status of blocked words, such as *stealer* 'thief', which are often said to be possible words which happen not to be used because of the existence of a well-entrenched synonym (*thief* in our case). Now, looking more closely at blocked words, one can observe that they do not behave exactly in the same way than ordinary possible words. Possible words, normally, can serve as the base of further word formation just like actual words, but this is not the case of blocked words. While one can argue, for example, that **stealer* is blocked by *thief*, one cannot argue that **piano stealer* is blocked by *piano thief*, since the latter is not an established word and hence cannot exert any blocking force. Nevertheless, the oddness of **stealer* seems to be somehow "inherited" in further steps of word formation. Blocked words, though well-formed from a certain perspective, obviously behave differently from ordinary possible words and hence should be treated differently.

I will propose to replace the dichotomy actual vs. possible by the trichotomy actual vs. potential vs. possible, where "potential" refers to the status of blocked words, which are well-formed according to a certain pattern of word-formation but nevertheless cannot serve as input to further word formation. Their status in the mental lexicon is clearly different. The usefulness of this distinction will be illustrated by some case studies.