

LEXICOGRAPHY IN THE RABBITRY

by J.I. McNitt
OSU Rabbit Research Center
Oregon State University
Corvallis, OR 97331

Note: Opinions expressed in this article are entirely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Rabbit Research Center or the editors of the Journal of Applied Rabbit Research. The author will welcome suggestions and comments on the ideas posed.

INTRODUCTION

The rabbit industry is developing rapidly. There is little doubt that the recent upsurge of interest in rabbits as a commercial enterprise in the US and as a source of food both here and in developing countries will continue and the rabbit will become more highly utilized throughout the world. In the face of this, it is important that producers of meat rabbits reach some agreement on terminology to be used for the various ages and types of rabbit and rabbit meat. Is a newly born rabbit a bunny, a kit, a kitten or a pup? What is the proper name for rabbits which have just been weaned? How should one refer to rabbits that are kept for replacement breeding stock but which have not yet reached the status of doe or buck? Do we need names for other ages or groups of rabbits? Is there another perhaps less emotive, name for rabbit meat?

METHOD

To approach these questions, a word-for-word search has been made of Websters New Collegiate Dictionary (Woolf, 1973) and a list of words relating to rabbits or which the author felt might be of use in the rabbitry compiled. The definitions of these words were then checked in Websters Third New International Dictionary of the English Language (Gove, 1961). Reference has also been made to Funk and Wagnalls New Standard Dictionary of the English Language (Funk, et al, 1955). Unless otherwise specified, all definitions used in this article refer to those from Websters Third New International Dictionary of the English Language. A compilation of definitions is shown in Table 1. These are the words which clearly relate to rabbit production and are known and used by most producers although the usage and definitions may differ slightly from those given. Each of the questions posed in the introduction will be discussed in the light of these definitions with other words and definitions provided as required. It should be noted that for most of the words used here the full definition has not been included but only those parts relating directly to rabbits or those parts which the author feels are of potential use to the rabbit industry. After discussion of the above questions a lexicon of rabbit terms will be provided which the author feels are the most suitable or useful to the industry.

DISCUSSION

1. Newly born rabbits.

Newly born rabbits are referred to in the scientific and popular literature as bunnies, kittens, pups or kits. All dictionaries consulted included the term 'pet name' or 'familiar name' in the definition of bunny. To overcome consumer resistance to rabbit consumption, it is vital that any connotation of devouring pets or relation to the Easter bunny be stringently avoided. Bunny is thus not an acceptable term. Pup, according to all sources, refers to a young dog or the young of various marine mammals such as seals or sea otters. Since neither of these terms is adequate and kitten does provide the required definition, it seems adequate. In popular usage however kitten is almost always used to refer to young cats. It is therefore suggested that the term 'kitling' be adopted. Websters (Gove, 1961) defines this as 'dialectal British; kitten'. Murray et al. (1933) however (in a British dictionary) define kitling as 'the young of any animal'. Since this term is rarely used in modern English it is suggested that kitling be adopted as the formal term for a newly born rabbit and that kit be used as a shortened form. Other terms (some of which are archaic) which might be used are junior which is too general as it refers to all rabbits under six months of age (Meek, 1947, ARBA, 1976); sucker or suckling (Gove, 1961); rabbit sucker (Funk, et al, 1963) or rabbit starter (Murray, et al, 1933 None of these however are particularly appealing.

2. Newly weaned rabbits.

Newly weaned rabbits can be referred to as weaners or weanlings which are defined as "a young animal weaned from its mother" and "a child or animal newly weaned," respectively. Weaners will very soon however fall into one of the classes discussed under the next heading.

3. Rabbits after weaning.

This category includes two groups of rabbits: those to be marketed for consumption and those to be retained as breeding stock. The former are generally known as fryers; a widely used and understood term which should be retained (although the definition provided in the Websters dictionary should be updated). Terms such as fatling or broiler add no further information and could, in fact, be misleading and should thus not be used. No terms which describe young rabbits being kept for breeding stock have been found. Most herds do have replacement stock coming on and it is inconvenient and imprecise to have to refer to these animals as 'young stock being kept for breeding replacements'. Replacement stock is also imprecise as it does not indicate whether the replacement has in fact taken place nor does it indicate the sex of the animals. Meek (1974) defines a youngster as a rabbit under adult age but this seems quite loose as a definition. Since no adequate term is available, it is suggested that the terms buckling and doeling be borrowed from the goat breeders and be adopted to describe young male and female breeding stock, respectively, from the time of weaning until they are actually placed in service. These terms will provide information regarding the sex of the animal as well as defining fairly precisely its age and intended use.

4. Names for other ages or groups of animals.

At the present time the author feels that the names of the types of stock found in the normal commercial rabbit enterprise have been quite well defined. It may be however that further divisions or descriptions are necessary; for instance, capon has been included in Table 1 although

fryers are not generally castrated. Reader suggestions would be appreciated.

5. Meat from rabbits.

Gove, et al. (1961) define meat as 'animal tissue used-as-food; specifically flesh of domesticated cattle, sheep, swine and goats - distinguished especially in legal and commercial usage from flesh of other kinds of mammals. Rabbit-meat (with a hyphen) is defined as 'red archangel' which on further search was found to be a Eurasian annual weedy herb (*Lamium purpureum*) which is also called the red dead nettle. It thus appears that rabbit producers may not be legally able to refer to their product as "meat" and also are unable to modify it to "rabbit-meat" because that term relates to a plant! No term was found which describes the flesh of rabbits used as food although this may be the most important word that must be located, because the proper choice of an attractive name will help to overcome the innate consumer resistance that we all so often decry.

The European rabbit producers do not seem to have been innovative in their descriptions either as the definitions for rabbits for meat in German, French, Spanish and Italian are, respectively, Fleischkaninchen (meat rabbits), race de lapin elevée pour la viande (breed of rabbits raised for meat), conejos para carne (rabbits for meat) and coniglio da carne (rabbits for meat) (Anon. 1962) The only suggestion the author has is one which does not seem to be entirely suitable. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (Murray, et al., 1933) the term coney originally was used to describe the adult *Oryctolagus cuniculus* while rabbit was used to describe only the young. This usage is still found in market reports in the United Kingdom of England, Scotland and Wales but generally is used for wild rabbits. The questions which attach to this suggestion are the acceptability in the supermarket and the fact that the term coney currently is also used to refer to the rock hyrax (*Procavia capensis*) of Southern Africa and the pika or whistling hare (*Ochotona princeps*) of the Rocky Mountains. If the populations of these and the usage of the terms are sufficiently limited perhaps coney could be used to describe the flesh of rabbits used as food.

Another limitation to the use of this term is the slang usage in the eastern US where coney refers to a hot dog. The OSU Rabbit Research Center has suggested the term "cunie:" The author finds this no more appealing than coney, although it might create less confusion. A euphonic term that will appeal to consumers is required (the term "chevon" must surely increase the acceptability of goat meat). Another possibility is to use the term "rabbit meat; rather than "rabbit". As one producer told me, "I don't eat rabbit; I eat rabbit meat." This might divert attention away from the "bunny" connotation of rabbit.

A lexicon for the rabbitry

Based on the above discussion, a lexicon for the rabbitry is presented in Table 2. As previously mentioned, this is for discussion purposes and the author would appreciate letters from readers who wish to make comments or further suggestions.

CONCLUSION

Generally commercial rabbit raisers have an adequate vocabulary to describe their stock. There are however multiple usages which lead to confusion and which need to be eliminated by agreement between producers as to what the proper terminology should be. A term is needed to

describe the meat from rabbits. If possible this should not include the term rabbit due to confusion with the Easter bunny which may deter some consumers.

Table 1. Words Found Relating Directly to Rabbits or Rabbit Production.

Buck: a male of any of several four-footed mammals (as goat, sheep, hare, rabbit, guinea pig or rat.)

Bunny: (also bunny rabbit), rabbit, especially a young rabbit-often used as a pet name.

Capon: a castrated male rabbit.

Coney or cony: rabbit, especially the European rabbit (Oryctolagus cuniculus), also hyrax.

Doe: the female especially when adult of any of various mammals of which the male is called buck.

Fryer: something intended for or used for frying as ...a rabbit of 2 to 3 months of age.

Herd: a number of one kind of animal kept together under human control as ...a herd of ranch mink, a herd of laboratory mice.

Kitten: an immature individual of various small mammals (hamster kitten, rabbit kitten)

Kit also Kitt: short for kitten: a young, immature or much undersized individual of one of the smaller fur bearing animals (fox kit).

Rabbit: A small grayish brown mammal (Oryctolagus cuniculus)...

Rabbitry: a place where domestic rabbits are kept; also, a rabbit raising enterprise.

Table 2. A Lexicon for the Rabbitry

Buck: a mature male rabbit used for breeding

Buckling: an immature male rabbit between weaning and maturity. Bucklings will generally be used for breeding.

Capon: a castrated male rabbit

Coney (Cunie): flesh from rabbits used as food

Doe: a mature female rabbit used for breeding

Doeling: an immature female rabbit between weaning and maturity. Doelings will generally be used for breeding

Fryer: a rabbit before the age of 12 weeks kept for consumption

Herd: a number of rabbits kept together under the control of one farmer

Kitling (Kit): a rabbit from birth to weaning

Rabbit: a small mammal (Oryctolagus cuniculus)

Rabbitry: a place where domestic rabbits are kept, also: a rabbit raising enterprise

Weaner, (Weanling): a newly weaned rabbit regardless of intended future use.

REFERENCES

Anonymous (1962). Livestock Feeding and Management-Multilingual Illustrated Dictionary. Lohmann and Co., K.G. Cuxhaven, Germany.

ARBA (1976) Official Guide to Raising Better Rabbits. American Rabbit Breeders Association Bloomington, Ill.

Funk, I.K., Thomas, C. and Vizetelly, F.H. (1963). Funk and Wagnalls Dictionary of the English Language. Funk and Wagnalls, New York.

Gove, P.B. (ed). (1961) Websters Third International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged. G. and C. Merriam, Springfield, Mass.

Little, W., Fowler, H.W. and Coulson, J. (1955) Shorter Oxford English Dictionary. Oxford University Press, London.

Meek, M.W. (1947). Rabbit Raising for Profit. Greenberg: Publisher, New York.

Murray, J.A.H., Bradley, H., Craigie, W.A. and Onions, C.T. (1933). The Oxford English Dictionary. Oxford University Press, London.

Wolf, H.B. (ed) (1973). Websters New Collegiate Dictionary. G & C Merriam, Springfield, Mass.