

HIPSTERS AND THEIR FEMININE ROOTS

There is something about suffixes. And, as **PETER TRUDGILL** shows, they can sometimes double up



The English word *seamstress* – as many people no longer seem to know – is most properly pronounced ‘sem(p)stress’. The Oxford English Dictionary even offers *sempstress* as an alternative and historically earlier spelling. Pronouncing the word as ‘seem-stress’ is a recent spelling-pronunciation, resulting from the comparative rarity of the word these days, with people therefore encountering it in print before they have heard anybody say it.

Although the verb to *seam* meant ‘to sew a seam’, it could also be extended to mean ‘to sew’ in general. But the noun *seamstress* formed from this is, comparatively speaking, rather new in English. Until about 1600, the normal term for a woman who sewed for a living was *seamster* or *sempster*. The *-ster* suffix at the end of this version of the word was an old Germanic ending which had been used since Anglo-Saxon times to indicate a woman who carried out some kind of job or activity.

In older forms of English there were many words for women’s professional activities which used this ending. A *backster* or *baxter* was a female baker, while a *brewster* was a woman who brewed beer. Female singers were *songsters* or *sangsters*. Babies’ cradles were rocked by a *rockster*.

A *webster* was a woman who wove – a man doing the same work would have been called a *weaver* or *webber*. A *dexter* or *dyester* was a dyer, as was a *hewster* or *huester*; a *blaxter* bleached fabric; a *knitster* knitted; embroidery was carried out by a *browdster*; a *kempster* combed wool or flax for processing; and a *waulkster* or *walkster* was a female waulker or walker – the Scottish and Northern English label for a fuller of cloth.

Most of these words do not survive in modern English, with the major exception of *spinster*. This originally meant a woman who had the spinning of thread as her occupation. Later, because it was so common for unmarried women to spin, the term acquired the meaning of ‘woman who is not married’. It then came to be added to women’s names as an official indication that they were unmarried, the equivalent of *bachelor* for men on marriage certificates.

The ending *-ster* was eventually lost as a feminine suffix in English because terms like *baxter* and *webster* started being applied to men as well, probably as they started performing some of these jobs instead of, or as well as, women.

Gradually the female meaning associated with *-ster* was forgotten. Terms such as *dempster* ‘a judge – ‘one who deemed’ – and *maltster* – ‘a malt-maker’ – may never have referred to women.

Because the suffix was losing its feminine meaning, a new French-derived suffix *-eresse* started being used as a replacement. This is how English acquired words such as *actress* and *manageress*. *Seamstress* derived from the addition of this new French suffix to the original term *seamster* – which of course already had a feminine suffix.

Some of these female occupational words survive as surnames: Baxter, Webster, Dexter and Brewster are common enough family names in Britain. But in our sister language, Dutch, the suffix is still alive and well with its original feminine meaning intact. *Schrijfster* means ‘(male) writer’, but *schrijfster* is its female equivalent. A *speelster* is a female *speler*, ‘player’. And there are many other Dutch male-female word pairs, such as *loper*–*loopster* (‘runner’), *verkoper*–*verkoopster* (‘salesperson’), *ontwerper*–*ontwerpster* (‘designer’), *onderzoeker*–*onderzoekster* (‘researcher’), *verzorger*–*verzorgster* (‘carer’), and *begeleider*–*begeleidster* (‘guide’).

The fact that in English *-ster* is no longer associated with women can be seen from the modern development of words like *fraudster* and *hipster*. The same thing has happened in another sister language of ours, North Frisian, where the modern language has gender-neutral terms such as *schungster* (‘singer’). *Weewster* is their counterpart of *webster*, ‘weaver’. Frisian *saister* corresponds to the obsolete English word *sewster*, which meant a person – originally a woman – who sewed. A *sempstress*, in other words.

YOUNGSTER

Youngster is a word meaning ‘a young person’ which first appeared in English in the 16th century. The apparently related, and most often dialectal, word *younker* actually comes from Dutch *jonkheer*, ‘young master’. It is related to German *Junker*, ‘a young nobleman’, though the word became especially associated with Prussia.



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Much as I may be known for my political engagement (and recipes, of course), not many folk know that since childhood all I wanted to be was a politician.

I wanted to represent the people of Glasgow, make their world a better place, stand up for the downtrodden and deliver social justice. It is an ambition that stretched back long before the days of duck moats on expenses.

I was shortlisted for the constituency where I grew up in North Glasgow for the 2015 general election. But when I found out that one of my oldest friends was also shortlisted I stood down.

He went on to win the seat and represents the constituency.

But I still get a sense of the political rough-and-tumble as I tour with my show, *Alternative, Fact*. It is a very personal take on topics like Brexit, Scottish independence and Donald Trump – none of them issues that I anyone could accuse me of being noncommittal about.

As I tour the country, I often find myself standing on stage in what turns out to be a Leave heartland; it's worth noting that often I don't al-

ways know that until I am actually on stage, given the varying demographics of my audience.

I try not to preach or lecture, rather I attempt to open a dialogue; as in the Scottish independence referendum, my side lost, ergo we have to listen more and talk less. Yet whenever I address one of the 52% and inquire as to whether they are happy with the shambolic shuffling and shifting that seems to epitomise the current governmental approach to extrication, they have not one single qualm or complaint. Their body language is closed, their faces set, their dialogue closed. Not the best recipe for a fun Friday night out!

This is a watershed show for me, a departure from the “man and a mic” approach to comedy. It is me, trying to be funny and thoughtful about the state of the world and a highly personal take on my lifelong obsession with all things political. I still want to make people laugh but I also want to make them think, to reflect and to consider.

■ For more information and tour dates, visit: hardeepsinghkohli.com