Stories of Words: Clothes

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Learning About Words

Many people like to wear the latest fashions. A fashion is a style of clothes that is popular at the moment. Fashions change frequently. These trends are created by the people who make clothes and the people who sell clothes. However, you—a person who buys and wears clothes—have the biggest voice in fashion. You choose which styles will be successful by wearing them.

In 1950s, teens wore bobby socks and saddle shoes. When you bob something, you make it shorter. Bobby socks were given their name because they were shorter than knee socks. Saddle shoes have a piece of material that crosses the middle of the shoe. It looks like the saddle on a horse. That’s how saddle shoes got their name.

Many fashions have come and gone since teen-agers wore bobby socks and saddle shoes. Like fashions, words, too, go in and out of style.
What’s Old Is New

Look at some old pictures and study the clothes people wore. While they often look different today, many types of clothing have the same names.

A Coat or a Jacket?

People have worn coats for thousands of years. The first coats were made of animal fur. People hunted animals for food and used their fur to stay warm.

In the past, coats also helped people stay safe. Knights wore coats made of metal in battle. These coats were called coats of armor or armor, for short. Armor is an old French word that means “weapons” or “arms,” in the sense of military equipment.

Coats that only reach a person’s waist are called jackets. It is believed that the word jacket came from France. Centuries ago, farmers there wore coats that stopped at the waist. This is probably so that their coats did not get in the way as they farmed. The short coat was probably given the name Jacques because it was a popular name among French farmers at the time.
A Dress or a Gown?

Today, dress and gown mean almost the same thing. However, their histories are different. Originally, dress was used as a verb, meaning “to help someone put on clothing.” For several centuries, wealthy people wore complicated clothes that showed their wealth. These clothes were sometimes heavy, had many layers or pieces, and sometimes had to be fastened by another person.

The word gown was first used to describe a loose piece of clothing that was worn like a shirt. Originally, gowns were made of fur and were usually worn by monks. Over time, the bottom of the shirt was extended until it looked more like a long dress. The long garments worn by monks were no longer called gowns but came to be called robes.

The word gown began to be used to describe fancy dresses such as those worn on special events, like weddings. But the nightgowns that some people wear for bed show that the word is sometimes used for clothes that are not very fancy!
What are you wearing today? Are you wearing pants or a skirt? Are you wearing a shirt or a sweater?

**Bottoms**

The word pants is a shortened form of the word pantaloon, which was the name of a character in Italian theater. This popular character wore the type of clothing we now call pants.

We use pants to describe clothing that covers our legs. But there are many different kinds of pants. The word trousers is most often used to describe the pants that men and women wear as part of a business suit.

Today, many people around the world wear a type of pants called jeans. At first, jeans was the name of cotton fabric used to make these popular pants. It was made in the Italian city of Genoa, which is how we get the word jeans.
If you dance or do gymnastics, you might wear tights. Tights are a kind of pants with feet that are worn alone or under a skirt or pants. You might also wear tights to protect your legs from the cold. The word tight comes from a word that means “dense or close,” like tights fit close to your skin.

Leggings are like tights, in that they are made of a stretchy material and keep people warm. (As you might guess, the word leggings comes from the word leg.)

You might have noticed that pants, trousers, tights, and leggings are all plural. They’re often referred to as pairs, as in a pair of pants. These words are plural because the first styles of pants had legs that were made separately. People would put on one leg at a time, then attach the pieces with a belt or other tie. So, even though pants today come in one piece, the word pants shows the history of the clothing.
Tops

Look around your classroom. How many different kinds of tops are your friends wearing? Tops are made in many styles today. They have short or long sleeves. They have round necks or turtle necks. They are made from thick or thin material. All of these styles have different names.

Let’s start with sweaters. The word sweater contains the word “sweat.” That’s because sweaters are made to keep you warm. That meaning of the word, though, only dates from the early 1900s. Before that, sweater meant “a person who works hard.”

People used to wear sweaters to exercise, but today, they more often wear sweatshirts. Again, you can see the word sweat inside sweatshirt. If a sweatshirt has a hood, it may be called a hoodie. The word hood dates back to the 700s, and it has kept the same meaning (“a covering for the head”).
Shirts don’t only keep us warm, though. Many styles of shirts are designed to keep us cool. One is the tank top, a kind of sleeveless shirt. Originally, men and women wore tank tops as shirts when they went swimming.

The word tank comes from an Indian word that means “a container for a small body of water.” Today, we use the word pool or pond to describe small areas of water. Some people use the term bathing suit to describe clothes that they wear to swim. Other people call these clothes swimming suits.

By far, the most popular shirt today is the T-shirt, or tee shirt. Workers originally wore T-shirts under a work shirt or instead of a work shirt when it was hot. Today T-shirts are worn by people of every age and on many different occasions. Often, T-shirts have messages printed on them.

Why is it called a T-shirt? Lay a T-shirt on a table or bed with the neck pointing away from you. See how the shirt looks like the letter T?
Suppose you are walking to school and you need help crossing a busy street. How would you find someone to help you? You’d probably look for a bright green or yellow vest that tells you a crossing guard is nearby. The vest is a kind of uniform.

**Uniforms**

Uniforms tell us if someone does a particular kind of work. Police officers and firefighters wear uniforms so that people can identify them easily in times of emergency. The word uniform comes from a Latin word that means “something that is the same in a group.” Some uniforms do not look exactly alike, but they are used to protect clothes. For example, some types of workers, such as artists, wear smocks to protect their clothes from dirt or paint.
Like smocks, lab coats protect the clothes that doctors and scientists wear. The “lab” is a shortened form of the word laboratory where scientists conduct experiments. Doctors do not necessarily conduct experiments in laboratories but the name is used to describe the coats they wear in hospitals.

Doctors, nurses, and other medical workers often wear scrubs. Scrubs allow people to move freely and are easy to clean. You probably know the word scrub, if one of your home chores is to clean plates. The history of scrub is unclear, but its meaning in German and Dutch is “to scrape.”

Soldiers and other members of the armed forces also wear uniforms. Wearing uniforms helps soldiers know who their friends are and who can help them if they’re in trouble.
Today, soldiers often wear uniforms made of khaki, which is a light brown cotton material. The word khaki comes from Urdu, a language that is spoken today in Pakistan and India. The word means “dust” or “dusty,” which is a way to describe the color.

The meaning of khaki has expanded to include cotton pants made of this material and the color of these pants. People often wear khakis when they don’t want to dress formally, but they want to wear something neater than jeans. Khakis are also often worn as part of a work or school uniform.
Sports Clothes

If you’re on a team, you might wear a uniform. Uniforms make it clear which team a player is on. Plus, unlike everyday clothes, uniforms are supposed to get dirty.

Many uniforms are made of a fabric called jersey, which is easy to clean. The word jersey has several meanings. It’s the name of a state (New Jersey), a breed of dairy cow, and an island off the coast of England. The last of these meanings relates to fabrics because it’s where the fabric was originally made.

Jersey was originally made of wool and was used in sweaters. People wore jersey sweaters to play sports. Today’s jersey fabric is still made with wool sometimes, but it’s also made with cotton and other fibers that are lighter in weight and cooler.
**Play Clothes**

Sometimes clothes for playing are not uniform but they are still unique. Have you ever pretended to be a racecar driver, a doctor, or a superhero? A red cape can make you a superhero! Costumes help you pretend to be someone else. The word costume is from an Italian word that means “a style of dress” or “a fashion.”

Actors also wear costumes. Their costumes help the audience imagine the characters they are playing and the time and place of the story.

Today, both children and adults wear costumes, often at Halloween. Some adults go to conventions that attract thousands of people who dress up as space aliens, cartoon characters, or people who lived in different periods in history. Dressing up can help them bring to life the characters they love.
What protects you from the sun, the rain, and the cold, and also makes you look cool? A hat! Or is it a cap?

Both hat and cap come from Old English words that mean “head covering.” Today, there are differences in hats and caps, but people often use the two words as though they are the same.

**Changing Hats**

Hats usually have a crown and a brim. The crown of a person’s head is the very top. As you might guess, the crown of a hat covers the top of a person’s head.

The brim of a hat is attached to the bottom of the crown. It is usually made of stiff material that sticks out. Hat brims protect people from the weather and from the sun. The word brim means “rim” or “edge.”
If you have seen pictures of cowboys, you might have noticed the big hats they wear. One type is called a ten-gallon hat. Gallon could be a misinterpretation of the word galón, which means “headband” in Spanish. It could also be a version of tan galán, which means “so gallant.” Gallant means “heroic” or “brave.”

**Caps**

When you hear the word cap, you probably think of a baseball cap. That’s where the meanings of hat and cap have joined. Caps are usually not worn to shade the eyes, but baseball caps do just that.

Unlike baseball caps, earlier caps were made without brims. They were usually made from soft fabrics that can stretch to fit the head. Knit caps do just that, protecting the wearer from the cold.

Another kind of cap that’s been popular for many years is the beret. Berets are soft woolen caps that don’t have a brim. They are often thought of as French, but berets were worn as early as 1500 BCE in Greece. The word beret is French, meaning “cap.”
Helmets

If you ride a bike, you have your own bicycle helmet. Helmets are designed to protect the head from injury. The word helmet comes from an older word that means “a protective covering.”

Soldiers have worn helmets for thousands of years. Today, workers in other jobs wear helmets, too. Firefighters wear them. Workers at building sites wear helmets called hard hats.

In addition to football, helmets are worn in sports such as bicycling, skateboarding, and horseback riding. In the United States, thousands of people are injured each year when they fall from bicycles, skateboards, and horses. Many head injuries can be prevented by helmets.
Early people lived and worked within a very small area because travel was difficult and dangerous. They were so isolated that they developed their own languages and ways of dress. Some traditional clothing is still worn today.

Saris

Saris are one of the oldest forms of clothing still in use, dating from at least 3,000 BCE. The word sari comes from a Hindi word that means “garment” or “clothes.” The sari is the most common garment worn by women in India today. Saris are made of a long piece of fabric that is wrapped around the body and draped over one shoulder. The quality of the material is changed to suit the occasion. A sari worn for a wedding, for example, could be made with silk and have sparkling beads. An everyday sari could be made with a less expensive material, such as cotton.
Kimonos

The Japanese word kimono simply means “clothes.” When European explorers and natives of Japan began to trade more often, English speakers came to use the word kimono to describe the robe-like garment worn by Japanese people.

Kimonos can be rich in material and design, and they can tell a story or send a message. For example, a kimono worn at a Japanese wedding may have a pair of cranes, which represents wishes for an eternity of happiness.

Today, we think of kimonos as clothing for women. However, men have also worn kimonos. Kimonos for men and women are made with similar materials, such as cotton and silk, but their colors and designs were different. Kimonos worn by men tended to be simpler in color and pattern.
Ponchos

When Spanish explorers landed in South America, they saw people wearing a sort of rectangular blanket. The blanket had a hole in the middle so that it could be pulled over the head and worn around the shoulders. This blanket was called a poncho. The word poncho may have come from a Chilean word that means “woolen fabric.” At night, a poncho could be taken off and used as a blanket or a bed.

Traditional ponchos are made with tan, brown, white, or other muted colors. Today, though, ponchos may be made with bright colors and have a hood. They may also be made of plastic and used as a raincoat. The shape of the poncho remains the same, but it has been adapted by many people and other cultures to suit their needs and fashion.
Our Changing Language

Language is a tool we use to describe our world. As we need new words to describe new things, we create them. When we no longer need these words, we stop using them. In this way, language changes frequently.

Fashion changes frequently, too. Words are needed to describe new trends. When those trends are no longer popular, people stop using the words.

Today, there are socks that look a great deal like the bobby socks that were popular in the 1950s. But no one describes their socks as bobby socks. Rather, people refer to crew socks or athletic socks.

As people find different ways to express themselves in the clothes they wear, new words will be created and old words will be redefined to fit the latest fashion. What is the latest clothing trend in your school? What words are used to describe these clothes?
Glossary

cloth of arms a design that was first worn on a knight’s clothing to show who he was; today, it is used to show something about a family’s history

culture the way a group of people lives, acts, and thinks

fashion a style of dressing or acting that is popular

fashionable something that follows the latest fashion or trend

material cloth or fabric used to make clothing and other items

style a way of doing or making something

traditional an idea or practice that is taught by one generation to the next one

trend the way people are thinking and acting at a time; literally, “the way something bends”

uniform a style of clothing that identifies people as being part of a group

Think About It

• What is your favorite piece of clothing? Draw a picture of it or describe it, then tell why it’s your favorite.

• Compare two pieces of clothing you read about in this book. How are they alike? How are they different?

• Work with a friend to create a new type of clothing. Create a name for your creation and draw a picture of it to share with your class. Explain why it should become the latest fashion.