Feminine Suffixes in English

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to examine the distribution of some feminine suffixes in English and to discuss the way these suffixes are used. Fowler (1926) once discussed the use of the nouns with feminine suffixes and predicted that the day would come when feminine forms for vocation-words were a special need of the future, with the coming expansion of vocations open to women. Contrary to Fowler’s prediction, the use of feminine suffixes has declined and has become less acceptable due to the influence of feminism.

In this article, I observe several feminine suffixes such as -ette, -trix, and -ess and how they are used in the context of present-day English. I argue that -ette and -trix forms are of limited use. On the other hand, I demonstrate that -ess is the most common form among feminine suffixes, but that a reduction in the use of -ess forms over time is apparent. Besides, it is shown that forms in -ess convey negative connotations and that they tend to have derogatory meanings: author and authoress definitely have different connotations. While a number of forms with masculine suffixes such as -er or -or are also used for females, there still remains the use of -ess forms in English. I argue that the frequency of the use of -ess forms differs from word to word, i.e. some forms with -ess are still in use and others are no longer in use.

Key Words: gender, feminine suffix, masculine suffix