

Language worth wearing

by Sabine Eiche

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For many centuries now, those of us living in non-tropical places – for instance, Canada and Britain – have spent more time dressed than undressed. With clothes so much a part of our lives, it was easy for dress terminology to slip off the body and reappear in a figurative role in our language.

What sparked my curiosity about this was bombast – a word that can be traced back to “bombyx,” the Latin for silk (and silkworm). By the 16th century, bombast denoted cotton or wool padding in clothes. Soon afterwards, bombast appeared as a term for padded or puffed up speech. Jonathan Swift, in “A Tale of a Tub,” used the word bombastry to mean bombastic composition. Fustian travelled the same road as bombast. It’s now an old-fashioned word for nonsense, but originally fustian was a cloth for padding clothes. The source is the medieval Latin “fustaneum,” which some believe is based on Fostat, a locality in Egypt where the cloth was produced.

In former times, clothes said a lot about the person wearing them. The colour and cut of a man’s coat constituted his badge of identity. The word turncoat – literally someone who turns his coat inside out – is recorded as early as 1557. It soon became a synonym for deserter, renegade or opportunist. An infamous turncoat in history is the Duke of Saxony, whose lands were a battleground for Spain and France during the Thirty Years’ War (1618-48). He’d show the colours of his blue-white reversible coat according to who was winning – blue for Spain, or white for France.

The physical characteristics of an item of clothing were not lost when the word wandered away to play a different part in the language. Take the example of collar, which derives from the Latin “collum,” neck. It was used already in the 16th century as a verb meaning to seize or capture, literally to grab someone by their collar. Similar, though much gentler in effect, is the verb to buttonhole. It dates from the 19th century. If you buttonhole someone, you’re detaining him, often against his will – as though preventing his escape by inserting your finger in the button-hole of his lapel.

The shoe inspired a number of 20th century expressions. Around 1938, Americans took the word heel – the back and lowest part of a shoe – and turned it into a synonym for an untrustworthy man. A human heel is a low fellow. In the 1960s, shoestring – the thin cord for tying up shoes – was introduced as a colloquial word for a small amount of money. To live or do something on a shoestring means doing it with limited funds.

It wasn't until the 1550s that lace (from the Latin "laqueus," noose) referred to ornamental threadwork. Then, both sexes favoured lace as decorative trim for collars and cuffs. By the next century, lace was serving as a verb as well as a noun, meaning to add a dash of spirits to a beverage – if real lace is trimming for a dress, lacing with spirits is trimming for a drink.

Dress fills an enormous wardrobe with expressions. Watch for a future column on idioms of dress.