

Stories of Words: Clothes

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Learning About Words

Where did you get those cool threads? Check out my new kicks.

You wear clothes for many reasons. One reason is to show other people what you like and how you feel. Wearing clothes that show your interests helps you tell others who you are.

Many people like to wear the latest fashions. A fashion is a style of clothes, items, or ideas that is popular at the moment. Fashions change frequently. These trends, or ways of thinking and acting, 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, so 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 and looks like the saddle on a horse. That's how saddle shoes got their name.



Like clothes, toys can become fashionable, go out of fashion, and then become fashionable again. (Think about hula hoops and yo-yos.) Pants that tapered and ended in the middle of the shin were in fashion during the 1950s and 60s. They were worn by girls and women. They were called capris, named by the designer for the island of Capri, in Italy.

In the 1970s, people stopped wearing capris. Then in the 1990s, they became fashionable again. Now, though, capris might be called cropped pants, pedal pushers, or clam diggers. They are also now worn by men and women.

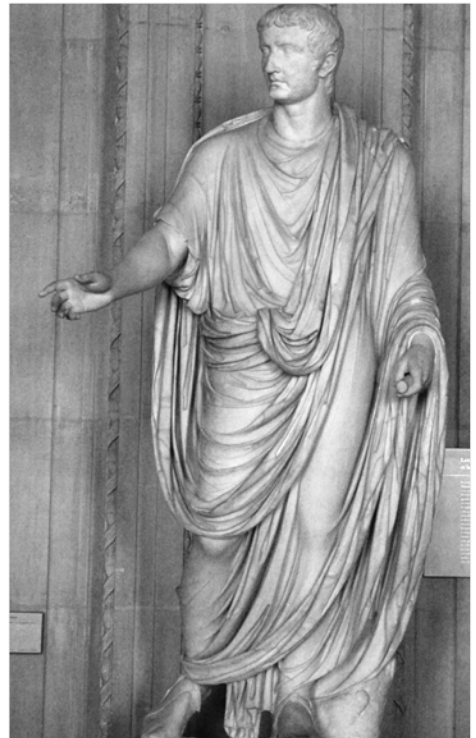
Like fashions, words, too, go into and out of style.



1

What's Old Is New

Scroll through some old pictures and look at the clothes people wore. While they often look different today, many types of clothing have the same names and are worn for the same reasons. You'd have to go back pretty far in history to find clothes you don't recognize at all.



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. Today, coats are made of many kinds of material.

In the 1600s, fur coats were called *parkas*. *Parka*, which comes from a language spoken by the native people of northern Russia, means “a coat made of animal skins or fur.”

Today, we use the word *parka* to describe a coat that can keep a person warm when it's very cold. A parka may also have a hood lined with furry material.



In addition to keeping them warm, people wear coats for protection. Raincoats keep people dry. If you look closely, you'll see that *raincoat* has two words inside it that describe what it's used for: *rain* and *coat*.



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.

When knights were not fighting, they sometimes wore cloth coats that had special patterns. These patterns identified the knight and showed the history of his family. Such patterns are called coats of arms.





coat



jackets

The word *coat* may have come from an old Latin word that meant “a piece of clothing you wear on top of your clothes.” Coats that only reach a person’s waist are called jackets. It is believed that *jacket* came from the French name Jacques, or Jack, in English.

In France, farmers 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 a person’s name because Jacques was a popular name for farmers at the time, which was in the 1400s.





A Skirt or a Shirt?

Skirts and shirts certainly don't look like the same kind of clothing. Skirts cover the legs. Shirts cover the chest. Surprisingly, though, both *skirt* and *shirt* had the same meaning at one time. The words are related to a word that meant "a gown that women wear."

As the meanings of the words began to differ, the word *skirt* came to describe the lower part of the gown, the part from the waist down. The word *shirt* came to describe the top part of the gown, the part from the waist up.



A Dress or a Gown?

The stories of the words *dress* and *gown* are somewhat different. Both dresses and gowns cover a person from the shoulders down, and both have skirts, not pants. They now mean almost the same thing. However, their histories are different.

Originally, *dress* was used as a verb, meaning “to help someone put on clothing.” Today, people help children or others who are hurt get dressed, but why would an adult need someone to help him or her put on clothes?

From the 1500s into the early 1900s, 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 from behind.

Fashionable women wore corsets under a dress to make them look thin. These corsets were closed with laces that were pulled very tight and tied in the back. They could not be tied by the woman wearing them. (The word *corset* is an Old French word that means “little body.”)



The word *gown* has a different history. It 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 part of the shirt was extended until, finally, it looked more like a dress. Gowns were still worn by monks, but any piece of clothing that looked like the robes monks wore came to be called a gown.

Today, we still call the robe that graduates wear a gown. Some people wear nightgowns to sleep. In addition, the word *gown* is used today to describe a fancy dress. Today, dresses are worn at any time, but gowns are usually only worn to special events, like weddings.



2

What's New?

What are you wearing today? Are you wearing pants or a skirt? Are you wearing a shirt or a sweater? Are you wearing the latest fashions?



Bottoms

The word *pants* is a shortened form of the word *pantaloons*, which comes from both French and Italian. Pantaloon was a character in Italian theater who changed his behavior and opinions to please others. 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. One type is called trousers. The word *trousers* is most often used to describe the pants that men and women wear as part of a business suit.





Most people in the United States wear a type of pants called jeans. You might be wearing them now. 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*. A similar blue cotton fabric was made in Nimes, France. Because it was made in Nimes, the fabric came to be called *denim*, or “from Nimes.”

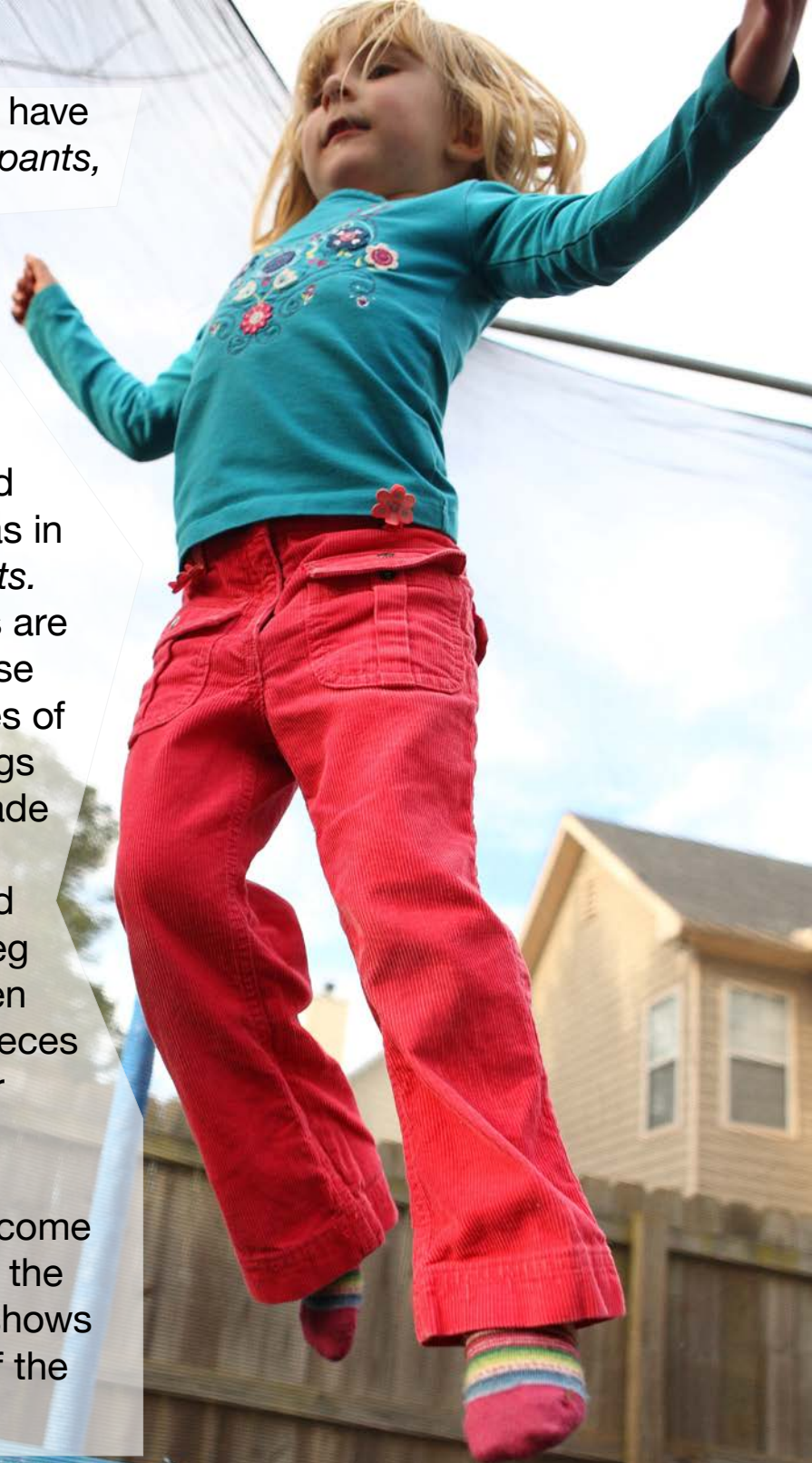


What do you wear when you exercise? If you dance or do gymnastics, you might wear tights. Tights are a kind of pants with feet that are worn alone or under a skirt or pants. You might also wear tights to protect your legs from the cold. Today, some tights are also made without feet. The word *tight* 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*.) Many types of leggings are available today. If they are made with a material that looks like denim, they are called jeggings. The word *jeggings* is a combination of *jeans* and *leggings*.

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. Which word do you see inside *sweater*? You probably see 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*. Sometimes people wear sweatshirts with sweatpants. These names are often shortened to just *sweats*.

If a sweatshirt has a hood, it may be called a hoodie. The word *hood* is interesting, too. It dates back to the 700s, and it has kept the same meaning (“a covering for the head”) in many languages.





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. Together with a pair of shorts or pants, the outfit was called a tank suit.

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. And we use the term *bathing suit* to describe clothes we wear when we swim. (Some people still use the word *bathing* instead of *swimming*.)



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. Many people still wear T-shirts like this.

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*?

When they were first made, T-shirts were white and had no writing or designs on them. That has changed! Today, T-shirts are used to tell others what musical group you like or what team you play on. They also advertise foods people like to eat, and they celebrate special events, such as birthdays. There are as many T-shirt messages as people!



3

Clothes With a Job

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.



Uniforms

That vest is a kind of uniform. Uniforms quickly identify groups of people. In fact, the word *uniform* comes from a Latin word that means “something that is the same in a group.” If you look at the parts of the word, you’ll see the prefix *uni-*, which means “one” and *form*, which means “shape.” So, a uniform is clothing that takes one shape.

Uniforms tell us if someone goes to a particular school or works for a particular store or company. Police officers and firefighters wear uniforms so that people can identify them easily in times of emergency.



Some uniforms do not look exactly alike, but they fit the same need. They protect a person's clothes. For example, students and artists wear smocks to paint. A smock is a type of work uniform that protects the clothes. Workers also wear smocks to protect their clothes from dirt. The history of *smock* is not clear, but it may have meant "to put on a garment." It may also have meant "a covering that fits over something."

Like smocks, lab coats protect the clothes doctors and scientists wear. The *lab* part of *lab coat* is a shortened form of the word *laboratory*. Both doctors and scientists conduct experiments in laboratories. In addition, when you see a person in a lab coat in a hospital, you can tell right away that you're seeing a doctor. The lab coat is a kind of uniform that helps you identify a person who can help you.





In addition to lab coats, 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*, especially 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 actually means "dust" or "dusty," which is a way to describe the color.

Today, *khaki* refers to both the 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 worn as part of a work or school uniform.



Sports Clothes

What do you wear when you play sports? 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.

Jerseys are shaped differently for different sports to allow players to move easily. But people who play sports also use the word *jersey* to describe an outfit they wear when playing sports such as soccer or football.



Play Clothes

Sometimes clothes for playing are not uniform. Instead they are 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.” Adults and children often wear costumes on Halloween. These costumes can be pretty, scary, or funny.





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

Today, both children and adults wear costumes. Adults go to conventions that attract thousands of people who dress up as space aliens and cartoon characters, and as real people who lived in different periods in history. Dressing up can help them bring to life the characters they love.



4

What's on Your Head?

What protects you from the sun, the rain, and the cold, and also makes you look cool? A hat!



Changing Hats

It seems there are as many kinds of head coverings as there are heads. However, two of the most popular are hats and caps. 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.





Hats usually have a crown and a brim. The crown of a person's head is the very top, where kings and queens wear their crowns. 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.

Ten-gallon hat seems to be an English version of a Spanish word. *Gallon* could be 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.”

The 10-gallon hat was probably modeled after the sombrero, which was also designed to protect people from the sun. Sombreros have very wide brims that are turned up at the edges. They are so big that they shade a person’s head, eyes, neck, and shoulders. In Spanish, the word *sombrero* means “shade-maker.”





Caps

When you hear the word *cap*, what picture comes to mind? You probably see a baseball cap. That's where the meanings of *hat* and *cap* have joined. Caps are usually not worn to shade the eyes, but of course, baseball caps do just that.

While hats have brims, the part of a cap that shades the face is called a visor. About 600 years ago, soldiers put visors on their steel helmets. These visors had holes that allowed people to see and breathe, but they were pulled down to protect the face.



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. If it's really cold, balaclavas or ski masks, which cover the face, can provide warmth. The word *balaclava* comes from the village Balaclava in the Middle East, where the hat was first made.

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

You've probably seen football helmets, and you may have worn a 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 when they fall from bicycles, skateboards, and horses. Many head injuries can be prevented by helmets.



Decorative Hats

Not everything worn on the head is a hat or a cap. The fascinator is a decoration that women wear on their head. The word *fascinator* comes from the word *fascinate*, which means “to capture someone’s attention.”

Fascinators are made with materials such as feathers, netting, or beads. Unlike hats, fascinators don’t fit snugly on the head. They are attached to the hair with clips, combs, or headbands.

Many women around the world cover their head and hair with a headscarf. Women who are Muslim wear a headscarf called a hijab. In Arabic, the word *hijab* means “veil,” as in “to protect something that is meant to be private.”



5

Clothes From Other Cultures

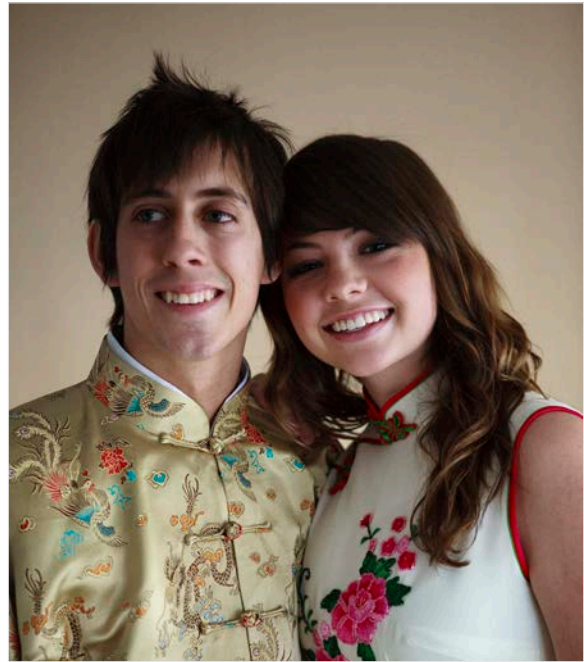
Early people lived and worked within a very small area because travel was difficult and dangerous. They were so isolated that they developed their own languages and ways of dress. Some traditional clothing is still worn today.



Collars

The word *mandarin* was first used by Portuguese and Dutch explorers to describe Chinese officials. This makes sense since the word meant “councilor” or “state official” in Sanskrit, a language from India. In fact, the first part of that word, *man-*, meant “to think.” The explorers then began to use the word *mandarin* to describe many things that were common in China but unknown in Europe.

During the 1600s, Europeans wore shirts with large collars or ruffs. In contrast, Chinese people wore shirts that had small collars that stood up. The European explorers began to use the word *mandarin* to describe both the officials and the clothes that had this collar. So, a coat with the short collar became known as a mandarin coat, and the collar itself became known as a mandarin collar.



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.” Today, *sari* is the name of both the fabric and the style of clothing.

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.

A sari can also show that the wearer is from a particular area of India. Its fabric may have patterns that tell the history of that region. Even though saris are quite different from one another, they are always rich in color and culture.



Kimonos

Like *sari*, the Japanese word *kimono* simply means “clothes.” However, 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.

Also like saris, 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 wedding may have a pair of cranes. In Japan, cranes represent 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.



Kilts

Saris and kilts are similar in that both are made from a single piece of fabric that is wrapped around the body. Kilts are made with wool that is woven into a fabric called a tartan. The word *kilt* originally meant “to tuck” because the fabric was folded and tucked to keep it on the body.

Each Scottish clan has its own tartan with unique colors and patterns. A clan is a group of people who are members of an extended family. All members of a clan wear the same tartan to show their loyalty to the clan.

Kilts are traditionally worn by Scottish men. Today, they are no longer wrapped around the body. Instead, their pleats are sewn into place. They are worn to everyday and formal events. And today, women wear kilts, too.





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.

As you read at the beginning of this book, bobby socks and capri pants were popular in the 1950s. Very few people use the term *bobby socks* now to describe short socks. Today, people might call them crew socks or athletic socks instead.





Capri pants fell out of fashion, too, but then they became popular again in the late 1990s.

They're still called *capri pants*, but they might have other names, too, such as *cropped pants* or *clam diggers*.

Leggings have a much longer history. They have been worn in different styles for centuries, but they became popular again in the 1960s. Lately, though, some different varieties of leggings were invented, and they needed new words to describe them. In this way, *jeggings* (*jeans* and *leggings*) and *treggings* (*trousers* and *leggings*) were created.



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

coat 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.



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