

## Goddess, Murderess, Doctress: An Exploration of the English Suffix “-ess” and Its Decline in Use

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### BACKGROUND

- Language shapes perceptions of gender (Pérez and Tavits 2019)
- The “-ess” suffix, borrowed from French, denotes femininity or female association with roles.
- Understanding trends in gendered language, like the “-ess” suffix, shows societal shifts towards inclusivity.
- Analysis shows a decline in “-ess” words over time.
- Scholars have proposed factors behind this decline. (Coard 1960), (Dike 1937)
- More research is needed to understand the impact of gender-neutrality..

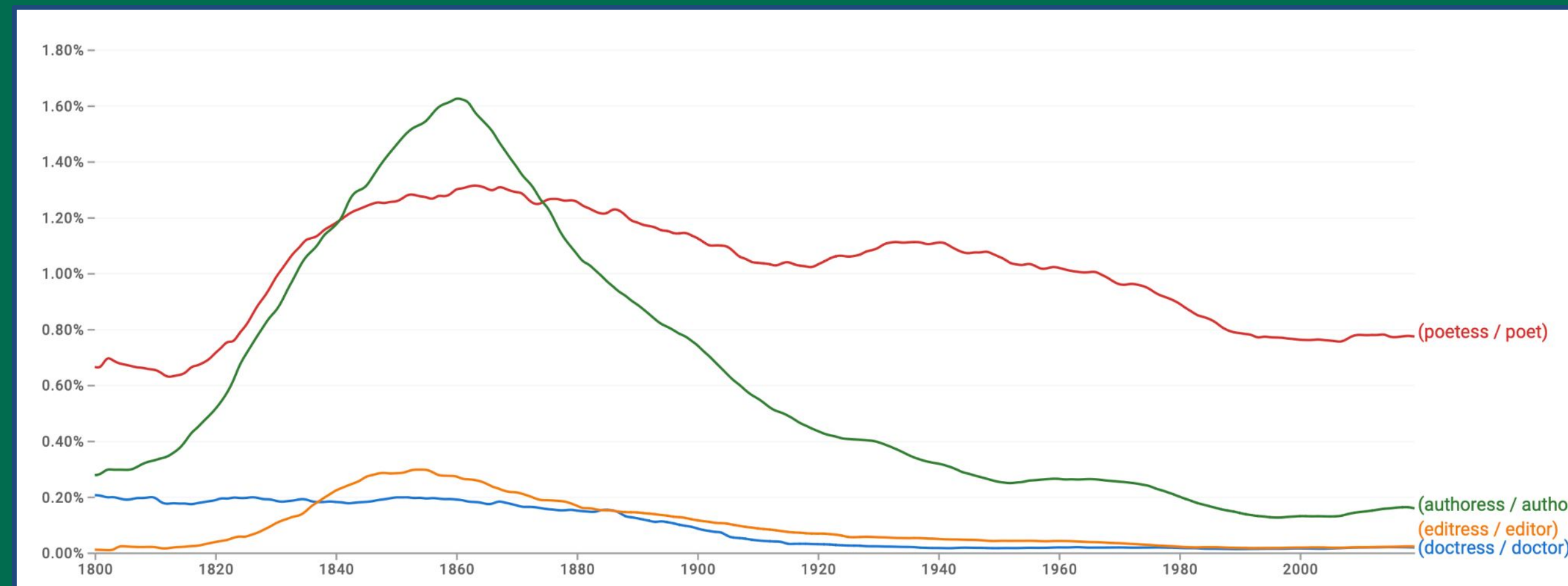
### GRAMMATICAL vs. NATURAL GENDER

- English has natural gender, meaning it only marks gender based on the actual gender of the referent.
- Languages like Spanish or French have grammatical gender, assigning gender to all nouns, even non-human ones.
- Grammatical gender languages require memorizing genders, while natural gender languages use gendered terms based on real-world gender.
- English uses suffixes like “-ess” to denote natural gender, explicitly marking femininity.
- This perpetuates the idea of femininity as an aberration from the masculine or neutral norm.

### METHODS

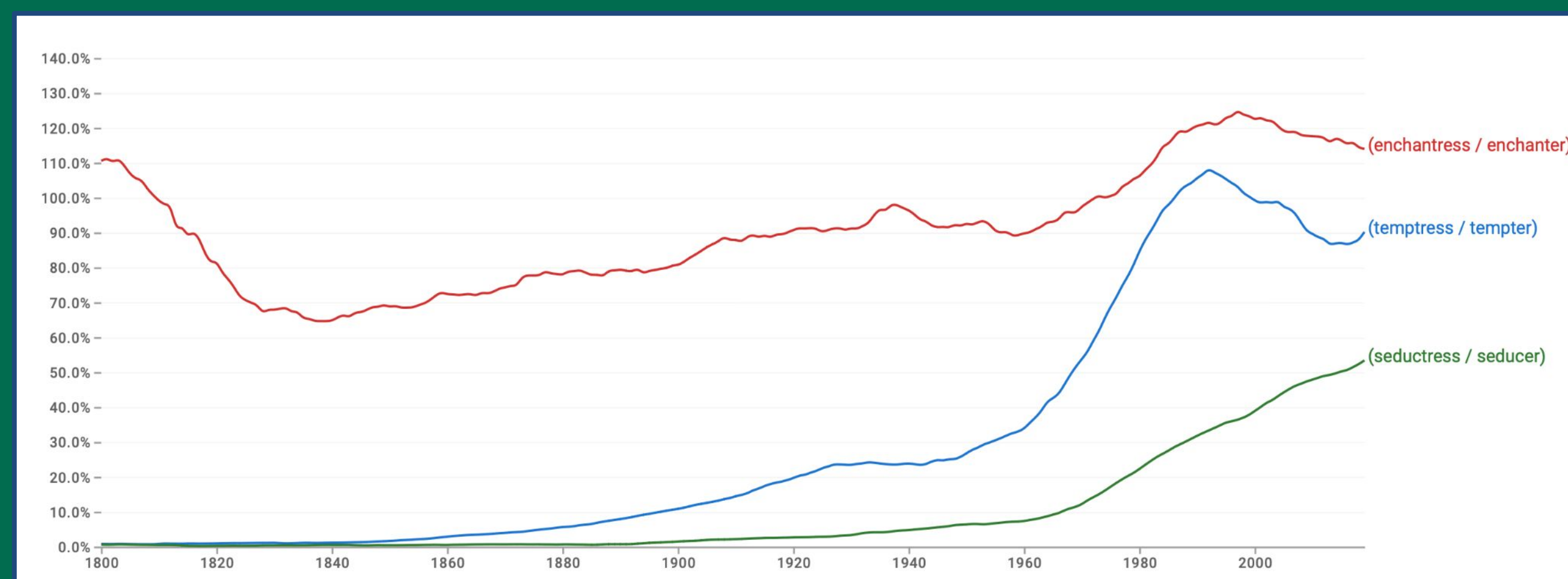
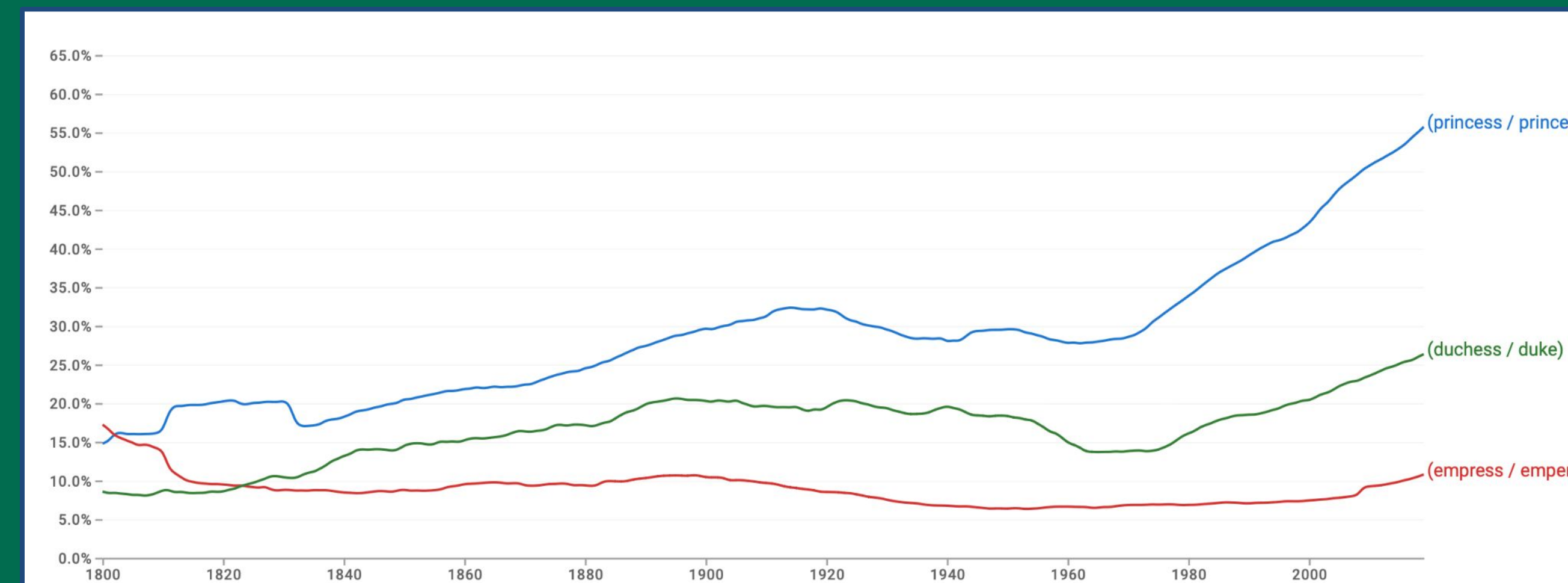
- The study uses Google Ngram Viewer to track how often words with “-ess” are used compared to their non-suffixed versions in Google Books from 1800 to 2019.
- Words are sorted into categories based on their connection to non-suffixed forms.
- Research analyzes these categories through a gender studies lens to understand how they change over time in relation to gender-neutral language.

# Decline of feminine “-ess” suffix signals shift towards gender-neutral language



Many profession-related terms have now-obsolete feminine forms, such as poetess, doctress, authoress, and editress. These have generally fallen into disuse since the mid-19th century and the versions without the suffix can be used to denote referents of any gender.

Terms that refer to female members of royalty and nobility, in contrast, have seen an overall increase from their 19th century relative frequencies. An important distinction to be made is that even in modern usage the non-suffixed word in these pairs denotes an explicitly male referent, rather than a referent of any gender



Other terms that refer less to women of different professions and more to women with certain qualities have seen an increase in relative frequency. The feminine forms typically have sexist connotations. The fact that words such as “enchantress,” “temptress,” and “seductress” show a much higher frequency relative to their non-suffixed counterparts than profession words reflects sexist stereotypes and views of women as manipulative.

### Works Cited



The decline in the usage of these feminine forms since the 19th century suggests a societal shift towards gender-neutral language, where the non-suffixed versions can now denote referents of any gender. This shift aligns with societal change since the 19th century, and with efforts to promote inclusivity and equality by avoiding the reinforcement of gender roles through linguistic forms. However, a contrasting trend is observed in terms referring to female members of royalty and nobility, which have seen an overall increase in usage and whose non-suffixed counterparts explicitly denote male referents, highlighting the persistence of gendered language in certain contexts. Furthermore, the higher frequency of terms like “enchantress,” “temptress,” and “seductress,” which often pejoratively refer to women with certain qualities reflects underlying sexist stereotypes and views of women, underscoring the complex relationship between language, gender, and societal attitudes.

### Graphs generated using Google Ngram Viewer

#### Purpose:

- Investigating the evolution of the suffix “-ess” in the English language.
- Contextualizing this evolution within broader societal shifts in gender dynamics.

#### Methods:

- Corpus linguistics analysis
- Word-usage data from Google Ngram Viewer.
- Examining social and political trends in the English-speaking world.

#### Historical Context:

- Borrowed from French “-esse,” used to denote femininity or female association.
- Some words directly borrowed from French, others English inventions from agent nouns.
- Traces back to Latin “-issa” and ancient Greek “-ισσα.”

#### Decline in Usage:

- Documented decline in the use of “-ess” suffixed words over time.
- Studies by Coard and Dike highlight factors contributing to this decline.
- Factors include societal attitudes, linguistic conventions, and shifts in gender dynamics.

#### Analysis of Google Ngram Data:

- Trends from 1800–2019 show varying levels of decline.
- Different categories of “-ess” suffixed words exhibit distinct trends.
- Observation of trends in professions, obsolete forms, and female animals.

#### Significance and Implications:

- The decline suggests a move towards more gender-neutral language.
- Gender-neutral language contributes to greater gender equality and inclusivity.
- Challenges traditional stereotypes and biases by avoiding reinforcement of gender roles.