

# Can words ending in 'man' apply equally to women?

Peter  
Trudgill



email: [newsdesk@archant.co.uk](mailto:newsdesk@archant.co.uk)



■ Royal Mail bicycles, for use by postmen, postwomen or post-ladies....

Everybody who lives in my part of Norwich agrees that we have a truly wonderful, helpful, popular, and very efficient postman. Her name is Kelly.

Can I call her the postman? She calls herself our post-lady, which is very reasonable since she is, obviously, not a man.

But these words ending in -man are very interesting. Can they apply to women? Does it feel OK to you to say "she's a postman"? I don't find it too bad. After all, we don't say "post man". We say "postm'n". "She's a milkman" does sound odd to me, though. Is that just because there aren't many female milkmen around? Postwoman sounds OK – but milkwoman doesn't, does it?

In the 1970s, there was a lot of fuss about 'chairman'. Feminists argued it made no sense to call a woman a chair-man: it was an outrage to imply that only men were suitable for such a position. Some people said a woman should be called a "chair-woman". Others preferred "chair". Yet others didn't want to be called after a piece of furniture.

Personally, I thought "she's the chairm'n" sounded all right. Arguing that chairman

meant 'chair-man' was, I reckoned, an example of 'the etymological fallacy', which holds that the current meaning of a word should be the same as its etymology, its historical meaning. This isn't so. Obviously a chairman was originally a man in a chair. But a cupboard was equally obviously originally a board for cups; and a saucer was obviously originally something for serving sauces in. A word means what it means, not what it used to mean.

But a real sexist outrage did, in a way, occur – even if it happened very many centuries ago. The word "man" originally meant 'human being' or 'person' – as in "mankind" or "man is destroying the

planet". But then there was a gradual shift of meaning so that 'man' mostly ended up meaning 'male person' – as if men were normal as human beings and women less so. Nobody seems to find the word "woman" sexist, even though it ends in -man too.

It comes originally from the Anglo-Saxon "wif-mann", where "wif" (modern "wife") meant 'woman', and "mann" meant 'person'. (The old Anglo-Saxon word for 'male person' was "wer".) There was no such thing as posting letters in early Anglo-Saxon Norwich but, if there had been and we'd been alive then, everyone round this way would most certainly have wanted Kelly to be our post-mann.