



Amber: Hello, I'm Amber, and you're listening to bbclearningenglish.com.
In Weekender today, we consider a linguistic dilemma - should we call a woman who acts an 'actress'? Does the use of the word 'actor' to describe both men and women make more sense?

We hear from two acclaimed actresses - Fiona Shaw and Zoë Wannamaker. And from David Marsh who's the author of The Guardian newspaper style guide.

But first, a little history: The word 'actress' was first used round about 1700. But women began acting on the English stage in 1656, when King Charles II permitted it. So there's a gap between women starting to act in 1656 when they were called 'actor', and women being called 'actress' round about 1700. Then, if we jump forward to the 1970s and 1980s, women began to choose the term 'actor' instead of 'actress' as a direct result of the women's movement and an awareness of gender bias in language. Women began to take back the term 'actor', and it's often used today.

Zoë Wannamaker explains that in the 1970s and 1980s there was 'a stigma' – a feeling that people disapproved – of being called an actress. This was because the word actress seemed to have the 'connotation', or suggested meaning, of being a prostitute.

Zoë Wannamaker

‘There was supposed to be a feeling of equality and also, there was this stigma against being called an actress because particularly in this country, in Great Britain, the name actress seemed to have this connotation of being a prostitute.’

Amber: So Zoë Wannamaker called herself an actor because it seemed more respectable! And some people still think the word actress is pejorative – it expresses disapproval.

The Guardian newspaper has banned the term ‘actress’ from its pages, deciding that ‘actor’ should be used for both men and women. So, for example, the paper has to say that the actor Helen Mirren recently won an Oscar for Best Actress!

David March, author of the newspaper’s style guide, says the change was in response to feedback from readers who thought ‘actor’ should be used for men and women. But he points out that it’s very useful to have two terms. Why? Oh, and as you listen, try to catch the informal word he uses to refer to men.

David Marsh

‘If I want to say that Judy Dench is the finest actor in Britain, that’s unambiguous – it means she’s better than the blokes. If I say she’s the finest actress, it means she’s better than Helen Mirren and other female actors, which is not saying the same things at all.’

Amber: So having two words is useful because you can refer to men and women performers as two groups. And the informal word for men? ‘Blokes’.

Now here’s Fiona Shaw who says the words we use are simply the words we’re used to using – they’re ‘attitudes of custom and habit’. She explains that it doesn’t make the experiences of actors and actresses the same, just by using the same word – that would be ‘humbug’, nonsense and dishonest.

Fiona Shaw

‘These are just attitudes of custom and habit aren’t they? – what words we use – on one hand. On the other hand, I think the experience of being an actress is so fundamentally different to being an actor that any illusion that making the name the same, would make the experience of an actress the same, would be humbug really and would just cover the cracks.’

Amber: Listen again and try to catch the expression she uses to describe how using actor instead of actress is just a superficial change – a change on the surface of things!

Fiona Shaw

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Amber: ‘Cover the cracks’ – a superficial change. Finally, Fiona Shaw explains that there are so few parts for women to act that their lives are harder. So it’s not degrading, in her view, to be called an actress – there’s no ‘diminishment of status’! She says it’s not a sign, or ‘badge’, of shame but a badge of?

Fiona Shaw

‘In young actors’ experience, there is one in eight parts for women – I mean, one part for every eight parts there are for men. So a young actress’s life is entirely different to an actor’s and I don’t see any diminishment of status in being called an actress as opposed to an actor – if anything, the badge of shame is the badge of pride because it’s a much tougher job!’

Amber: So, Fiona Shaw says being called an actress is a ‘badge of pride’ – it’s something to be proud of.

Now here's a list of the language we focussed on in the programme today.

stigma

connotation

pejorative

blokes

humbug

diminishment of status

badge of shame

badge of pride

More topical stories and language explanations next time at
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