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Abstract

This paper explores the language of knit as a key influence on its status as an artform and craft. The basic nature of the language used in knitting is so commonplace, so entrenched in our language at large, that it leads to distinct associations with everydayness that knit can struggle to overcome, often leading knit to be considered "only" a simple craft. We find that the skills needed for knitting are disassociated with the value of knitting as skill and cultural presence. From dismissive language aimed at the knitter to cultural significance throughout history from metaphor to online neologisms this paper explores the relationship knitting has had with both creating and being shaped by language. Historical linguistics associates a range of "higher" crafts with imported Romance language words, whereas the "lower" craft status of knit is echoed by its use in in the English language (and elsewhere) where simple, domestic words are used. The historical and cultural reckoning of knit, and the language that perpetuated these attitudes today, has influenced perception consciously and subconsciously. With new terminology heralding knit as an evolving, person-centred community that is driving the subject forward. Knit, in its own terms, has many a yarn to tell.

Keywords: language; metaphor; social context; knitting; textile language

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Introduction

The humble origins of knit can be linked to the high success and democratization of knit as cottage and major industry and as hobby phenomenon. From the origins of the word "knit" linking to "knot" and the knotting of fishing nets, the links to manual labor and working-class activity is set from the beginning. Knits are working clothes, functional wear, *under*wear, designed for warmth and protection as opposed to decoration. "Higher" crafts such as embroidery and goldwork on the other hand, created desirable artifacts and garments afforded only by the wealthy.

Knitting has been a common commodity in British society for centuries. Throughout this time the language around knitting has evolved with changes in society and technology. Contemporarily, the accumulated knitting language provides a sprawling and often confusing landscape of terms and meanings with frequent crossover and confusion. Semantic frames (Fillmore 1976) are constructs that allow people to understand the relevance of terminology based on context and can allow simple knitting words such as "hold," "tuck" etc. to remain clear in context. However, when using a search engine model that works using decontextualized words it is almost impossible to sort the genuine knit content from some of the common metaphors and idioms found in English. This digital distinctiveness of "googleability" that is so useful and highly prized in contemporary societies is hard to come by because of the prevalence that knitting has built up over centuries of domestic and industrial use.

When thinking about the language of knit, the cultural value of knitted artifacts is an important factor. Strawn (2012, 1) describes knitting as "so ubiquitous and commonplace that it fades into the social, cultural, and historical background." She goes on to suggest that the utilitarian nature of knitted garments meant that the items were either worn out into rags or unraveled and repurposed – a fate not always shared by woven counterparts. This lack of historic representation is certainly something that is echoed in museum and textile archives. The underrepresentation of knitted items in these archives is likely to be caused by a combination of not being seen as noteworthy enough to keep and being overworn. On the lack of knit preserved in historical collections Wilson (1982, 74) suggests "knits were used for rather mundane purposes and were seldom treasured and preserved." The stretchiness of knit cemented its success as material for underwear, or for closeness to the skin. This would give it increased likelihood of damage from bodily fluids and friction. Because of this, items would both not survive and be unlikely targets for preservation. The lack of preserved examples of knit also reduces the opportunities for discourse around the subject. Fewer historical records results in fewer scholarly discussions, therefore the meta-discourse language vocabulary relating to knit didn't evolve in the same way as other, better-preserved, and more highly revered

crafts with only recent evidence of knit scholarship coming of age.

Two words that currently do a disservice to knitting are "only" and "just," which minimize a complexity of understanding related to the craft and culture of knitting. "It's only knitting" is a way of marginalizing knitting from study and development (Turney 2009, 5). How can something be so commonplace and so ubiquitous, not by default be important? It is paradoxical, that something so common and prevalent in society can be so misunderstood in terms of value. The mechanization of industry led to warped ideas of how much effort goes into a garment, and particularly any kind of one-off design. There seem to be diverse ranges of thought from "knitting is automatic" and happens at the "press of a button" or should be hard labor for nonprofit.

Basic Language

It is important to note the role of language in this cultural undervaluation. The democratic nature of knitting, easily accessible and widely practised for centuries has close links with farming, country life, cottage industry and the working classes. The portable nature of handknitting made it easy to fit into short gaps of time around a busy working life - such as the Shetland knitters famed for knitting on the move to maximize productivity (Black 2012, 53) - and the tactile nature of (simpler) knits lend themselves well to dull firelight. It is no wonder then that the language around knitting developments can be as perfunctory as the act itself. The words given to the expanding lexicon of knitting were not imported from the fashionable cultures of the time, but the commonplace home or work life – or so we

must assume. Other four-letter knitting words such as tuck, slip, miss, hold, loop, welt, have multitudes of alternative meanings that certainly have common and difficult to place word origins when considered as knitting terms. This implies a domesticity to the development of knitting as a craft or a pastime, one developed by the people through cultural associations (Steed 2016, 140).

This ordinary nature of many knitting words that only have textile meanings in the contexts of the initiated, means they tend to go unnoticed and un-heralded – they don't have a uniqueness attached to the craft of knitting, they have double meanings attached to function and the general drudgery of ordinary life. Because the common language words were simply applied as knit developed, many associations can be made with actions, materials and qualities of working-class, "common as tuck," origin.

The basic nature of knitting words which commonly have mono-syllabic formation is a far cry from the imported, often polysyllabic words for crafts like jewelry, embroidery, tapestry etc. that are considered "higher status," or at least crafts with historically more upper class appreciation. Not that knitting doesn't have its exotic interlopers, such as fléchage, brioche, guilloche, entrelac, picot, intarsia etc. though these tend to be for specific techniques. The shift here may come from the movement of knitting as a "workaday" activity to a finer level of cloth enjoyed by the richer classes who brought in French and Italian words for decorative processes - something the working-class knitters probably didn't have time to be knitting.

Multi-Language and Locational Development

There is evidence in some closely related modern languages that the development of words for knitting occurred independently. In English, the word "knit" likely derives from the word "knot" (OED qv), whereas in closely related German, the word for knitting "stricken" derives from "stick" or "twig" (Duden 2022). These words representing *process* (English) and *tool* (German) indicate different ways in which the socio-linguistic community thought about knitting. Thirsk (1989) proposes that the relative recency of knitting compared to weave can be illustrated by the absence of precise terms meaning "knit" such as the Spanish *hacer punto* (making stitches). Though knitting is thought to have been imported and transported around the globe - with various theories as to first origins – the language was not transported with it.

To create a variety of surface texture in knitted fabric, the basic knit stitch is used in combination with purl stitch. Technically these are not different stitches but the face and reverse of the fundamental stitch. Because the "knit" side of this stitch has a smooth, flat quality, this has become the commonly accepted "right" side (Rutt 1987, 12) of a stocking stitch or plain knit fabric. Linguistically the differentiation in language between *knit* and *purl* found in English is unusual. There are many more examples of languages not having a dedicated word for "purl" and instead have a term that is a modification on "knit" showing an otherness or reverse of the knit stitch. Some examples include German *links stricken* (knit to the left); in Norwegian *å strikke vrang* (knit wrong); Dutch

averechts breien (knit wrong); and Spanish *tejer del revés* (knit from the back). Icelandic has the charming *prjóna brugðið* (knit bumpy), compared to the *knit* meaning *prjóna slett* (knit smooth)[1].

The origins of *purl* are unclear, with vague and varied connections to *pirl* and *pearl*. "Purl," "relating to twisted loops of thread" (OED qv), seems likely to have derived from "pirl" ("to twist, wind, or spin … [OED qv]), and "pearl" ("to set, decorate, or stud with or as with pearls" [OED qv]). The origins of this "Purl" can be traced to both embroidery and lace-making, and suggested origins vary between Scots, Italian, Swedish and more. The likelihood is that this short, simple word sounds like many different things and links can be drawn with many other words and meanings. As discussed, different language may be explained by different cultural perspectives and geographies, but it may be worth noting here that among Scots Gaelic, Welsh and Irish Gaelic there is also no unique word for purl, each using the English *purl* instead.

In addition to the international variations in knitting language there are various regional differences, perpetuated through different teaching and social scenarios. Different books, education institutions and different technologies will often have an impact on which terms are used to describe stitches. For example, the "Ottoman" stitch takes its name from a common knitted or woven, structure with horizontal raised stripes. Using a hand-flat industrial knitting machine these tend to be known as "ripple" fabrics, on a domestic machine "double hems" and in hand knitting "welts." Though these stitches have minor technical differences, the overall effect is equivalent, though the names

suggest different derivations based on technology and cultural influences.

Textile Design is an evolving subject and each year many new designers graduate from institutions where they adopted the teaching and language of their tutors, who in turn learnt from their previous generation. Add to this a catalogue of historically changing terms, a wide and evolving online set of terms and several crossovers with similarly named stitches in different crafts (e.g., crochet and embroidery) and a hand-knitting history passed on verbally. It is no wonder that knitters often drop in and out of using many different terms for the same things. Though, despite this multitude of words in constant use and exchange, the English language really sticks with "knit" as a multipurpose word used as verb, noun and adjective … *the knitter knits to make knits!*

Metaphor and Idiom

Metaphor makes up an important part of the history of textile language with frequent reference to life, love and the human condition (numerous excellent examples can be found in Materials, Memories and Metaphors by Solveigh Goett 2016). Historically there are many terms that use "knitting," though not in the textile-craft context. The "knit" meaning to knot or bind together predates knitting in the British Isles by several centuries and is used as a general reference to joining, in physical, biological and romantic senses. The OED presents such varied examples as becoming pregnant is to be "knit with egg" (1603), that Naval recruits in WW2 would refer to women or girls as "knitting" with a singular being "a piece of knitting" and an archaic tradition speaks of a "knitting-cup" as a

cup of wine handed around at a wedding celebration (OED qv). These survive in the "knitting together" metaphor including the "knitting of brows" and the "close knit," though over the years as the "knit" meaning knot passed out of common usage, the social understanding of those terms will have converged with what we now know as knitting.

Textile metaphors for interpersonal relationships go back much further than the knit examples, but those textile words would follow the fashions in technology and industry of the times. As the textile knit eventually replaced the knotting knit; the reference to knit in common metaphor will have edged out other textile words as knitting grew in popularity and domestic visibility. Weaving and spinning moved out of homes and into industrial settings, replaced in the home setting by portable hand-knitting. With this the language adopted is more from common usage than specialist terms.

Though many of these archaic phrases come and go from language, examples persist in contemporary everyday language. The concept of knitting generally refers to something close, intermeshed or joined. The "close knit" idea if we assume ownership to a textile meaning, simply refers to a tightly knitted fabric, or something so dense that it is impermeable. Broken bones are said to "knit together," which likely refers to the older "knot" meaning, but this doesn't stop us imagining tiny loops and needles when we hear it.

Some idioms relating to knitting have entered common parlance. "Stick to your knitting" is a term essentially meaning "stay in your lane," which comes under debate as to whether it is a sexist term or a

business term. A similar phrase exists in Italian also – "Fare la calzetta" – "go back to your sock making" a statement to mind one's business often used a derogatory term against women (as informed by an Italian friend). The use of knitting here as a metaphor for a repetitive task certainly has a point, but the implication that it is something limited from which someone should not stray is more problematic.

In a more contemporary example, the reframing of hand-knitting has had an impact on trend-led language. The blank schema metaphor, "X is the new Y," came into common usage in the early 2000s and knitting crept into some of the earlier examples "Knitting is the new rock 'n' roll" (Cavendish 2002) having superseded the specific "X is the new black" and regular fashion usage (McFedries 2008). This speaks to the renewal of the popularity of knitting in the early 2000s while also highlighting its new status as hobby and pleasurable, and mindful pastime. Hand knitting now is a leisure domain rather than an economical option for essential, functional wear.

Multiplicity, Confusion and Error

The language barrier around knitting is multi-faceted with pluralities of words for the same thing; difference in terminology between closely related languages; and a plethora of symbols and abbreviations. Malcolm-Davies (2019, Malcolm-Davies, Gilbert, and Lervad 2018) describes knitting in archaeological terms, to be the "poor cousin" of older and better understood textile crafts such as weaving. She sees the under-representation of knitting in literature as perpetuated by accounts using inaccurate and

ambiguous terminology, and instead proposes a consistent knitting vocabulary that doesn't make assumptions about the (possibly unknown) manufacturing method. In her research, Malcolm-Davies proposes new terminology and recording protocol to describe archaeological knitted finds. Interestingly, this protocol borrows language from contemporary, industrial terms that are more descriptive of generic features than implicit of methods.

An interesting feature of Malcolm-Davies' (2019) work is the differentiation between the act of knitting – knit as a verb – and the outcome of knitting – knit as a noun. This versatility in the word adds to the confusion and ambiguity found in existing definitions and makes searching for content more problematic. When you add to this an inherent confusion among non-experts of the identifiable difference between knitting, crochet, warp-knitting, weaving, etc. it is no wonder that broad language use around textiles is problematic.

The knitting machine was invented in 1589 and the origins of knitting before this are much harder to pin down. The industrialization of knitting from the late 16th Century continued the common naming trajectory that hand knitting had used. Old "hand frames" (or stocking frames) operate with such parts as "jacks," "slur cocks," "shanks" and "beards."

First hobbyist domestic machinery came about in the latter half of the 19th Century – these were small either flat or cylindrical bed machines operated with crank handles, soon beginning to resemble double-bed machines (Black 2012, 132–133). "Domestic" machines as they have since been known brought with them a glut of industrially derived terms.

Language about "carriages," "traverses," "racking" etc. became more common place, and the language of hand knitting (presumably the domestic knitting machine was primarily aimed at the keen hand-knitter) would also be used interchangeably.

This confusion between hand knitting and industrial knitting can be highlighted with the example of rows. In hand-knitting rows are knitted on straight needles and rounds are knitted on circular or double-pointed needles. On a knitting machine a row and a round are essentially the same as in hand knitting, but there is the issue of the "traverse" – the movement of the carriage, and the "course" – the movement of the yarn across the machine. Each row may be made up of one course and/or traverse, but each row may be made up of several courses and even more traverses depending on the complexity.

Continuing the verbosity that has come from hybridizing technology and domesticity, there is an additional factor of fashion and textile in use. Each of the following terms may be used interchangeably (though sometimes mean slightly different things); stocking stitch, stockinette/stockinet, single-bed jersey, single jersey, jersey, plain knit. Some of these terms are favored by industry, some hand knitters, some fashion, some technology.

Similarly, what we now know as Fair Isle (or fairisle) may also be termed as, float jacquard, or a punch card fabric. Both of which are much more generic than what one might consider a true Fair Isle – a banded pattern knitted in 2 colors per row. Domestic knitting machines made this technology accessible through punch cards – a simple binary choice of 2 colors per row in a 24 or 30 stitch

repeat. Though this can be used to make true Fair Isle patterns, it often isn't but retains the name. Fair Isle has also become a pseudonym for the Christmas jumper, and vice versa, though while Fair Isle remains a 2-colour floated, single-face jacquard, the Christmas jumper is more often a mass-produced, multicolor double-bed jacquard featuring any number of colors per row.

Materials and Makers
No discussion of mislabeling in knit would be complete without addressing the "wool" versus "yarn" confusion that can be rife among non-specialists and keen knitters alike. *Wool* refers to both a range of fibers and the yarn made from them, but it is often used as a term for all yarn, regardless of fiber type. This leads to a lot of confusion when seeking out yarn – e.g., the question "what kind of wool do you want?" and the oxymoronic answer "acrylic wool"! This may be an example of metonymy - the use of one "entity" to stand for another (Lakoff and Johnson 2003, 36). In the case of *wool* and British English, wool was so dominant a fiber for centuries that it became a catch all term that covers later imports and synthetic replacements. Recent developments in this area include an increase in yarns described as "vegan," which while technically correct, is often a greenwashing term to make plastic yarns sound more desirable.

Yarn terminology continues to confuse in textile areas, where uninitiated speakers don't know that not all long lengths of fiber or filament are called the same thing. *Yarn* is commonly used in knit and crochet, *thread* in weaving and embroidery and *floss* in hand-embroidery. The more confusing

aspect of this is there is often not a huge discernible difference between these materials, and beginners or outsiders may use these terms and *string, twine* or *rope* interchangeably.

The concept of maker knowledge, experience and process is another contributor to the manipulation of language to suit the desires of consumers. The issue around "hand making" is something that has gone through ups and downs over time. Hand made goods fell out of fashion at the advent of machinery, but now is a problematic but desirable term attributed to goods made by a range of means. The OED defines "handmade" as "made by hand, as opposed to by machine," (OED qv) though in the case of machine knitting, hand and machine processes are far from mutually exclusive. The process of knitting on a domestic machine, or a hand flat machine – the clue is in the name there – can be a very laborious one with opportunities for hand-manipulation taking hours per piece in some cases. The idea that a knitting machine is fully automated is only true in the case of expensive, industrial options, and these still require many human interventions to make interesting outcomes.

Knit designer makers often refer to their processes in a range of resourceful ways that promote the hand making element, for example, "hand powered industrial knitting machine" (Jo-Ami 2022); "Knitted parts are made on an elbow powered knitting machine" (Almaborealis 2022). The acknowledgement of the human process in machine making is very important to understand the time and labor involved in making items on hand-powered machinery. This directly equates to the value and retail price of goods, so must be made explicit.

Many machine knitters will be familiar with the bitter disappointment expressed by somebody saying "oh, you mean you didn't make this by hand? ."

Emerging Technology
The language continues to throw up anomalies as knitting technology develops. The development of seamless knitting through electronic manufacture (rather than its hand-knitted ancestor "knitting in the round") has brought with it a new wave of competing vocabulary. The Shima Seiki brand (Japanese) use "Wholegarment," Stoll (German) use "Knit & Wear" and you will also see the terms Digital Knitting, 3D knitting and CNC (Computerized Numerical Control) knitting used interchangeably. Which terms win out tends to be based on the technology used or the background makers come from. For example, CNC is used more commonly in engineering and architectural where it is a familiar term and the use of "garment" and "wear" are less appropriate. With the continuation of interdisciplinary development in knitting the language boundaries will continue to blur and diversify with terms such as "membrane" more common in place of "cloth" or "fabric."

Other projects such as Kniterate (2022), make more accessible digital knitting machines. Their portmanteau name communicates what their product does – knit on repeat. Upon emergence to the market, it was reported as a 3D printer for clothing, allowing you to produce garments at the "touch of a button" (Murray-Nag 2017). These technologies bring knitting to new audiences and foster further opportunity for language to meld and cross pollinate.

The popularity of hand knitting in tandem with the expansion of internet and social media platforms saw the emergence of yarn-craft-based Ravelry in 2007. With around 8.5 million registers users and in the region of 1 million active users per month, Ravelry has created an online community for knitters around the world. The platform facilitates the sharing of knitting and crochet patterns and includes a forums area – which brings online the popularity for knitting as a social exercise (Harrison and Ogden 2021). In this space particularly, a new community (and many sub – communities) of global knitters have formed, and written down their new languages of knit. Abbreviations are an established part of hand-knitting patterns and form an exclusive shorthand for communication on the topic. Converging with the internet's fondness for acronyms and new hybrids there is now a vast lexicon of "online knit speak." Examples include:

- "UFO" an unfinished object, usually a work in progress that has been abandoned or neglected
- "SABLE" - stash (yarn collection) acquisition beyond life expectancy
- "Ambistitcherous" - Having the ability to: 1) knit in two different styles (e.g., Continental and English). 2) do multiple crafts e.g., knit and crochet (PeggyO2001 2021)

The global nature of this communication offers different evolutions from the historically hyper local discussion (e.g., knitters from the Yorkshire Dales "swaving" as they knit and Shetland's Old Norse terms for sheep breeds [Rutter 2019, 19–26]). While knitters are bringing their own country specific or even regional terminology to the table it seems likely from a linguistics perspective that there will be leveling or standardization of language, with the most popular or commonly used words and terms becoming the norm.

Conclusion - The (Knitted) Fabric of Life – A Victim of Its Own Success

This account of knitting and language is far from conclusive, there are thousands of terms in different languages, areas, communities and usage from extremely local historical terms to mass industry and huge online communities. The language of knitting has followed the basic trajectory of knitting itself. At first domestic, linked with common people in poor settings, moving into specialist and industrial language. From there knitting became mainstream again through fashion, resurgence of hand-knitting and a democratization of knitting facilitated through this current digital age. The hangover of all those words that came from simple and humble origins remains very clearly in English. Steed (2016, 143) states that knitting disguises its true and complex nature "appearing harmless, non-threatening and familiar." The language certainly adds to a picture that knitting is simplistic, mundane, old-fashioned and easy - something that knitters know well, isn't the case.

Any low status that knit has gathered has ultimately changed over time, but it is still difficult to shake associations with being "old-fashioned" or "easy." Confidently we can say that knitting is successful, with global reach and a real feel of ubiquity. Any sense of basic language shouldn't really hold knitting back when colorful internet terminology opens up new avenues of meaning. Which of these neologisms will stay will depend how long fashions last and who is heard by the most people. It is possible that due to the democratic nature of knitting and the role of the internet in popularizing and pushing forward the craft, that differences in knitting language will converge. Perhaps one day the establishment of a professional jargon (Hock and Joseph 1996, 328) – a kind of lingua franca – will come about as is a common and indeed necessary process in any situation in which multiple linguistic communities interact. But for now, we can leave these loose ends and celebrate the immense amount of knitting vocabulary of knitters throughout global history.

Note

1. Languages are chosen anecdotally based on the experience of authors and relevance of translations. Translations are experiential and may be translated differently by others.

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