

## Etymology

### Fishmonger, fishwife

*The following comes from an old, out-of-commission web site called The Mavens' Word of the Day, recycled and distributed by Dick Thien to a list of journalists*

Recently on the NPR show, "Wait, Wait, Don't Tell Me", a contestant identified herself as a fishmonger. This was the occasion for many jokes about "monging fish" and questions (unanswered) about where the word came from. That question in turn reminded me of the word fishwife. I wondered why the one word—fishmonger—seems to have a straightforward meaning of 'fish-seller', while the other has such derogatory connotations about women's temperaments, vocal characteristics, and vocabularies. Is there a common derivation? And why the relationship to fish?

In the compounds fishmonger and fishwife, the "fish" element is circumstantial; the real link lies in the second halves of the compounds, -monger and -wife. Sceptical? Read on.

Let's start with wife. The word's earliest meaning was simply "woman". Today, we use woman in compounds such as chairwoman and policewoman to indicate "woman who does X". In the same way, -wife meant woman who does X business. An alewife kept an alehouse; an oyster-wife sold oysters; a fishwife sold fish. The modern survivors of this meaning are housewife, meaning a woman in charge of a house, and midwife (the combining form mid- is either an adverb of means, or a preposition meaning "with"—the jury's still out on that one).

Fishwives were working-class women who sold fish from baskets along the quays of fishing villages, touting their wares at the top of their lungs. Sweet Molly Malone aside, this was not considered a reputable occupation for women, who too readily picked up the sailors' rough talk, and gained a bad reputation for both the timbre and content of their speech. It's interesting that few dictionaries record this meaning—not even the OED—and our citations are recent, so I can't actually tell when the term entered the language.

Dating is not a problem with monger. The radio show guests made an understandable assumption that if the person is the monger, the main verb must be to "mong".

They probably like to think they were being original, but they weren't. The Old English verb is *mangian*, and *mong* is a variant form of this verb. It meant to traffic in; barter and now survives only in the agent noun, monger, and compounds that use it—the chiefly British terms fishmonger and ironmonger. (The fishmonger's and the ironmonger's are shops that sell fish or hardware, respectively.)

Today, monger is used most often as a more abstract synonym of peddler and trafficker, when referring to something negative that is being promulgated. In this use, it's incredibly productive: a newspaper archive search of the last two years shows the favourite compound form is gossip-monger, with rumour, scandal, mischief, hate, gloom, doom, rule, sensation, cliché and crisis also collocating with a healthy frequency. Its implication can be as benign as "Victorian nonsense-mongers", or as insidious as "brutal race-monger". My favourite is from a particularly florid translation (from the online Early Church Fathers collection) of St. Augustine's anti-Manichaean writings: "O abominable monger! O execrable perdition and ruin of deluded souls!"—this under the chapter-title accusation "He compels to the perpetration of horrible turpitudes". Judging by the kind of vitriol you can excite if you cross St. Augustine, I'd take a fishwife any day.