



Paul Warren

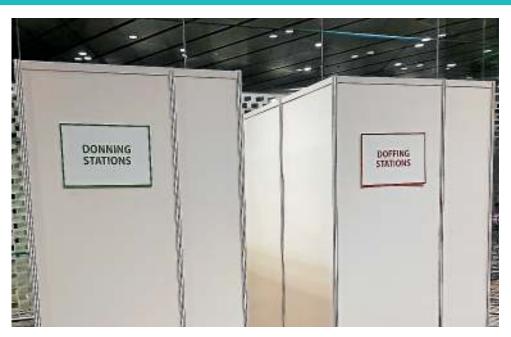
Professor of Linguistics at Victoria University

hile we were travelling through Singapore airport recently and subsequently spending 10 days in an Auckland MIQ facility, I became more acutely aware of the current frequent use of the words donning and doffing.

We came across them most often in the context of donning and doffing personal protective equipment or PPE. For example, the airport had two adjacent sets of cubicles, one labelled "donning stations" and the other "doffing stations". Interestingly, the first had its text and outline in green, the second in red.

I think what made these usages remarkable to me is that the verbs donand *doff* are otherwise very infrequent, and my previous encounters with them had been in rather restricted and primarily literary contexts, such as reading of someone doffing their hat as a respectful greeting. Suddenly it seemed like we were seeing them everywhere.

We should remember, though, that the frequency with which words occur is not uniform across contexts and that there are vocational differences in usage. I



Donning and doffing

Language Matters

medical circles find the appearance of donning and doffing unremarkable.

We got to wondering where these words came from and a dive into the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) confirmed that they started life as contractions, for "do on" and "do off". Now, of course, we express these meanings by using put with on and take

While we can still say that front-line

probably would say it like that in most contexts, donning and doffing have taken on the status of specialist vocabulary. Putting on stations and taking off stations would somehow not have the same

Like most good English contractions, early use of *don* and *doff* included apostrophes to show where something had been elided (d'on and d'off), though this was quite variable. By the time the spelling became standardised, the apostrophe had gone.

Attested early uses also confirm that ao on and ao off were phrasal verbs each

made of two components that could be separated by another word (like put on and take off). A verse from the Song of Solomon in a 16th-century Bible includes I have (have) put off my cote (coat), how can I do it on agayne?

The OED observes that from the 16th and 17th centuries onwards both don and doff became restricted to northern varieties (i.e., to the north of England), elsewhere being archaic. In his 1755 Dictionary Johnson noted at the end of his entry for doff that this "word is in all its senses obsolete, and scarcely used except by rusticks"

Both *don* and *doff* saw something of a revival in the 19th century as literary words with an archaic flavour, and the word donnings is attested from that time as an expression meaning one's Sunday clothes or finery.

I took to Google for a quick survey of recent history, searching for the forms donning and doffing, since searching don would give hits for the name or a Spanish nobleman or an Oxbridge lecturer.

Searching over each of the past three calendar years, I found increasing hits for donning, from 219,000 in 2019 to 291,000 in 2020 and 329,000 in 2021. While *donning* is more frequent than doffing, the latter rose dramatically, from 26,400 in 2019 to 60,200 in 2020 and then to 73,200 in 2021.

If these numbers are indicative of changes in how often the words are used (rather than just in how much stuff gets put on the internet), we seem to be doing a lot more donning and doffing under Covid.

Contact us

Got a language query? Email opinion@ stuff.co.nz. Not all queries will be answered.

are "brand names". So it is that the

THE SCOTSMAN

Name stoush needs

an amicable finish

apparently delivered five days a week. And we were equally confused when we discovered Aberdeen has a population of just 622 people, and St Andrews is not far from Cornwall. But then we realised, this is not Scotland at all –

somewhat taken aback to read that Forfar

t *The Scotsman*, we like to

think we know a little bit about Scotland. So we were

is known for its cheese curds, which are

it's Canada! Suddenly, it all made sense. There are, it's fair to say, a lot of Scottish-sounding names in many former colonies, particularly Canada.

However, names can be a most serious business when there's money involved, such as when they

Viewpoint Scotch Whisky Association is currently embroiled in a legal dispute with a Canadian distiller over the use of "Scottish sounding names". And, given the importance of Scotch whisky to our economy, who can blame

> On the one hand, we sort of feel we should shudder at the thought. But, on the other, given the historic connections between the two countries and the many descendants of the Scottish diaspora who have maintained a distinctively Scottish culture in North America, we really hope that an amicable solution can be reached and glasses raised to one another in the spirit of friendship.