Emeritus, emerita – or simply retired?

Have you noticed that a growing number of retirees refer to themselves as «emeritus»?

Gudleiv Forr, a Norwegian journalist and author, recently pointed out that the title «emeritus» has become increasingly common in this country. One professor after another is referred to as a professor emeritus. He claims that this is a new trend. «As far as I recall, Professor Sverre Steen remained a professor to his death in 1981. So did the Professors Castberg and Andenæs. No emeritus there,» Forr wrote (1).

In addition to professors, the title «emeritus» is especially used by bishops, and recently also by a pope (2) (Figure 1). The office is associated with a dignity which is bestowed for life (3). Its usage, however, is proliferating. In the press, I have recently spotted a «museum curator emerita», a «city court judge emeritus» and a «chaplain emeritus». It will probably not be long before Mr Forr’s prophecy comes true: soon we will see a «journalist emeritus» as well.

Having served, but not gone
Emeritus is Latin and means «having served one’s time». It is used to denote a person who has resigned from certain positions. This does not necessarily mean retirement, only that the person in question has left the position (3).

In some countries, for example Sweden, emeritus is an official title awarded on merit, while in Norway the title is unprotected. An emeritus will commonly retain some duties associated with the position. They can be salaried as teachers on an hourly basis to fill regular teaching or grading duties. In some cases, an emeritus will retain an office at his or her former workplace, but practices vary between different entities, institutions and countries (3).

Emeritus or emerita?
Professor Emerita is a common designation for a female professor on whom the title is bestowed (4). Arne Torp, Professor of Nordic Languages, therefore caused something of a stir when some years ago he claimed that «professor emerita» was a grammatical abomination, in Norwegian as well as in Latin, and that the designation therefore was better left unused (5, 6). If we were to mark the gender of a female professor, she should properly be referred to as profestrix. A retired female professor would then be referred to as a «profestrix emerita», Torp claimed. However, neither «profestrix» nor «profestrix emerita» have been widely used (4), and others claim that in Latin, it is quite possible to imagine the construction «professor emerita» (7).

Nobody disagrees that the Latin noun professor is grammatically masculine, and a feminine counterpart does not exist in the world of language. «These days, however, there are scores of female professors, and we refer to them as professors without any pangs of linguistic conscience,» Finn-Erik Vinje, retired Professor of Nordic Languages, writes in his blog (8). «The word ‘professor’ has become gender-neutral, which is the way of language: the words remain, but their content shifts in pace with development. For emeritus, Latin has a masculine and a feminine form. The ancient Romans gave the epithet ‘emerita’ to a woman who had left office,» according to Vinje (8).

However, Vinje continues: «Professor emerita is not perfect, and may grate on the ears of some linguistically sensitive Latinists. Here, there is no correspondence between the attribute and the main word: the adjective (the participle) is feminine and the noun masculine. Nevertheless, if we are to socialise with female professors and address and designate them, there is no other alternative: a retired female professor must be a professor emerita» (8).

Senior Professor
Many professors emeriti continue working in their discipline, for example with research and publication. But this is not...
necessarily so. When some people refer to themselves as emeritus, we cannot tell whether they have retired or not (Figure 2). Some universities have therefore started to use the term «Senior Professor» for retired professors who continue to be active in their faculty (6).

Senior professors are thus also «profes-sores emeriti» (or «professores emeritae» if they are women), but a «professor emeritus» is not automatically a «senior profes-sor». This could be a handy solution, but is not without problems. The «senior» in the title can easily be misunderstood. In many professions, people reach senior rank before they turn thirty; Senior Consultant is just one example (6).

Other solutions
Several solutions are available. One involves avoiding the troublesome word endings. «Professor em.» or «prof.em.» are convenient abbreviations, and in English, «professor emer.» is also used. These will be correct irrespective of gender. We do in fact use the title «cand.med.», in which cand. is an abbreviation of «candidatus» for men and «candidata» for women (9). However, neither «professor.em.» nor «prof.em.» work especially well orally.

Another option, which I personally favour, is to rewrite. «Former» or «retired» professor should do the job well enough (6).

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References

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