

# LETTER TO EDITOR

Dear Sir,

I have read with interest Mr. Lee Kok Wah's contribution as to the (sometimes undesirable) connotations and implications of the word *engineer* in English language. Having, after my retirement, taken to some dabbling in etymology I looked into the origins of the word.

The word *engineer* seems to have acquired its sooty image some two centuries ago during the days of the steam engine, when drivers of steam locomotives or operators of steam engines were also called engineers. It was different in earlier days. Both *engine* and *engineer* derive from the Latin word *ingenium* with the meaning: natural quality, disposition or temper,

talents, genius and, in mediaeval Latin, clever device. It entered via Old French *engine* into English and appears in the 13th century as *engine* meaning in a more abstract sense: contrivance, artifice, ingenuity, genius and as a device: machine of war, mechanical contrivance, complex machine. The English *engineer* is traced back to the 14th century naming a designer or constructor of engines or works, originally of military engines. It perhaps unfortunate that in English the prefix *en-* (of engine) being nowadays associated in people's mind with mechanical hardware has been carried over into the name of the profession instead of the more intellectual *in-*.

Regarding the use of the title 'Ir.', I am of the opinion that a member

of IEM should be given the right to carry the title even if not registered with BEM.

Yours truly,  
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## EDITOR'S NOTE:

*Mr. Kochle has hit a bull's eye. History is often neither black nor white; history is painted in shades of gray. Words often have a complicated history. We cannot really chose any one sense or meaning exclusively – doing so would be a betrayal of the long and proud history of engineering. Perhaps we should embrace our history and traditions, and accept that the precision and rigour of our profession maybe insulted for parsing the ambiguity of history.* ■