

Oxford Australia Word of the Month

August 2009

Schmick – adjective: stylish, excellent.

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Schmick

The story behind the Word of the Month

On 24 January 1995 the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported: 'North Sydney's Greenwood Plaza now has a very schmick-looking Cantonese restaurant doing yum cha seven days a week.' This is one of the earliest pieces of evidence for the word **schmick**, which, in the past five years, has become extremely common in Australian English. It is occasionally spelt **shnick**, as in this example from the same newspaper on 28 January 2003: 'He has his school bag packed, and he's tried on his new school uniform. In the words of his mother, five-year-old Luke Craig "thinks he's pretty shnick"'. The more common spelling, however, is certainly **schmick**.

All kinds of things can be **schmick**, meaning that they are 'stylish, excellent'. Restaurants and clothes are commonly schmick. A bus can be schmick:

Graeme Sturges was spruiking new energy-efficient buses yesterday. 'The two new buses feature Scania's low-emission Euro 5 engines', Mr Sturges said. It all sounded very impressive and Brett Whitely asked a question: 'What does that mean?' 'It means they are very schmick buses,' Mr Sturges replied. (*Hobart Mercury*, 31 October 2008)

Even fishing tackle can be schmick: 'Peter ... knows how to fish. ... [He] has all the schmick tackle including light line and small hooks' (*Canberra Times*

10 May 2009).

So where does **schmick** come from? Most people will say that it must be Yiddish, and that it belongs to that large set of Yiddish words, beginning with *sch-*, that have found their way into English: *schlep* 'a stupid person', *schlimazel* 'an unlucky person', *schlock* 'cheap goods; trash', *schlong* 'penis', *schlub* 'a talentless person', *schlump* 'an inept person', *schmuck* 'a foolish person', and so on. But there seems to be no evidence that this is a Yiddish word, or that it is used in Englishes other than Australian English. In Australia, it seems to have been associated especially with military use.

The very earliest usage we have been able to find is in the *Bulletin* magazine on 10 April 1990. There, the advertising brief for a new women's magazine is described as '*schmick* with gusto'. In a footnote to this article, *schmick* is defined as 'New York Jewish slang: slick with a cheeky twist'. We have been able to find no other evidence for this. German *schmuck* means 'nice, pretty, handsome, spruce', and this is a possible source, but it is difficult to be convinced that a German word could have found its way into Australian English at such a late date.

Thus **schmick** is a puzzling word. It seems to be Australian, perhaps modelled on the structure of the other well-established Yiddish words. The answer to the puzzle may well lie elsewhere, but for the moment we will claim **schmick** as our own.

metrosexual
weapon
of mass destruction
burka
barbecue
senior moment
Sudoku
dishlicker
cyberstalking
Naltrexone
pear-shaped
Bioterrorism
karrack
glycaemic
index
stopper
hornbag
witlof
yakitori