

Oxford Australia Word of the Month

March 2010

Removalist – a person or firm whose business is the transferring of furniture and other contents for those moving house or other premises.

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Removalist

The story behind the Word of the Month

Australian words sometimes become enshrined in the names of literary texts, even when they are not commonly used in everyday Australian English. Darcy Niland used the title *The Shiralee* for his 1955 novel, and many Australians would now know that *shiralee* means ‘swag’. The term *illywhacker* ‘a small-time confidence trickster’ was only slightly better known than *shiralee* when Peter Carey chose it as the title for his 1985 novel. These novelists gave life to terms that were otherwise destined for oblivion. The situation was somewhat different when David Williamson called his 1971 play *The Removalists*. All Australians would have thought: if you engage a firm to shift your furniture from your present house to a new one, what else could this be called but getting the **removalists** in? The potential problem was that this is an Australianism, and anyone outside Australia would have great difficulty understanding the title. In other countries the words **remover** or **mover** would be used instead of **removalist** for the person doing the moving, and **moving company** or **removal company** would be used for the firm rather than **removalists**.

Removalists is a word that has been present in Australian English for a long time, and until recently the earliest clear evidence we had for its use occurred in an advertisement in the Melbourne *Argus* newspaper in 1916:

E. Wridgway, Camberwell, absolutely the best interstate **removalist**; all risks; lowest storage rates.

More recent research has located a number of advertisements in the *Sydney Morning Herald* between 1904 and 1906 for a firm named Kilner’s that is described as ‘**removalists**’: ‘The Up-to-Date Live **Removalists**.—Our covered-in Waggons are everywhere. Kilner’s, 41 Broadway’.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* posted its draft revision of the word **removalist** online in December 2009. In this revision, apart from the Australian sense, the *OED* allows only one very specialised sense of **removalist** ‘a person in favour of the **removal** of something’, and among its illustrations of the sense is this 2007 passage from an American newspaper: ‘The commission discussed the fate of the Robert Moses Parkway, as it did the Skyway in downtown Buffalo, also the target of **removalists**’. So the **removalists** here are people who want to **remove** (i.e. get rid of) something.

In our Australian records we have found an interesting passage from 1855 in the *Colonial Times*, a newspaper from Hobart:

Odd Doings—On Tuesday night a serious disturbance took place at the lodge of the Odd Fellows meeting at host Skreen’s, Campbell-street, when a number of the brothers agreed to a resolution antagonistic to the views of the officers for **removing** the lodge to another house, in consequence of recent misunderstandings. Suddenly a rush was made at the paraphernalia, chests, &c., which were being carried from the room by divers malcontent brothers, when host Skreen locked the door, and sent for the police: but the police on their arrival, declining to interfere, the **removalists** came off with flying colors.

The brothers of the lodge who are involved in the dispute, and who are busy transferring the furniture from one place of residence to another, are not exactly our professional **removalists**, but this passage perhaps provides some early evidence for the way the term **removalist** would develop in Australian English.

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