

Oxford Australia Word of the Month

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Migaloo – *noun* ‘a white person’.

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Migaloo

The story behind the Word of the Month

In June 2000 the Brisbane *Courier-Mail* reported: 'A rare albino humpback spotted off the coast is believed to be the same one first spied in 1992. The whale, dubbed **Migaloo** ... is expected to reach Queensland's warmer waters this week. It was spotted late last week off the New South Wales central coast.' In 2010 the name given to the albino whale was widely known: 'Between June and November the most popular tours were whale watching tours. He said about 11,000 whales cruised past the area last year including the white whale **Migaloo**' (*Gold Coast Sun*, February 2010). Where did this word **migaloo** come from?

Our earliest evidence for the word is in the *Queenslander* newspaper from Brisbane in 1891, where it is spelt meggooloo: 'Murry, a black person, meggooloo, a white person'. The word is from the Mayi-Kutuna Aboriginal language of the Leichhardt River area of north Queensland, where it meant 'a person'. It was borrowed from that language into many other Aboriginal languages of the area.

Most Australians will recognise the word *Murry* (usually now spelt *Murri*) as a Queensland word for 'Aboriginal person', synonymous with *Koori* from Victoria and southern New South Wales, and *Nyungar* from south-western Western Australia. These Aboriginal words have now become part of Standard Australian English. For most of the twentieth century, **migaloo** was used primarily in Aboriginal English or in very restricted contexts where the writer or speaker knows that the word **migaloo** is used in Aboriginal English for a 'white person': 'She looked at me not as an individual, or as a male, or as a well meaning academic, but as a white man, a **migloo**, with a fear that was not personal at all but historical and communal and unforgettable' (H. Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier*, 1981).

When the word **migaloo** was applied to the albino whale we have the situation where a word moves out from the restricted context of Aboriginal English into the wider community of Australian English. It will be interesting to see if its use remains limited to this name for the whale, or whether its meaning within Aboriginal culture becomes more widely known..