

Oxford Australia Word of the Month

December 2008

cliner – ‘A girl or girlfriend’

Australian’ National Dictionary

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cliner

The story behind the Word of the Month

W.T. Goodge's poem 'The Great Australian Slangue' was published in a number of Australian newspapers from 1897, before appearing in a book of poems in 1904. The poem begins:

'Tis the everyday Australian
Has a language of his own,
Has a language, or a slanguage,
Which can simply stand alone.

The second stanza continues:

And a bosom friend's a 'cobber'
And a horse a 'prad' or 'moke',
While a casual acquaintance
Is a 'joker' or a 'bloke'.
And his lady-love's his 'donah'
Or his 'clinah' or his 'tart'
Or his 'little bit o' muslin',
As it used to be his 'bart'.

Many will be familiar with the words in the first four lines of the second stanza, although the terms **prad** (ultimately from Dutch *paard* 'horse') and **moke** (originally meaning 'donkey') for a horse are somewhat dated, and even **cobber** ('friend, mate') is becoming dated. The terms for **lady-love** (i.e. 'girlfriend') in the next four lines are less familiar. **Donah** is ultimately from Spanish *dona* 'woman', and found its way to Australia via British slang. In other Englishes *tart* as a term for a woman has always been highly pejorative (often referring to prostitutes), but in Australia at the beginning of the twentieth century it was used positively for 'sweetheart',

probably as a shortening of *jam tart*, in turn rhyming slang for *sweetheart*. The term **bart** in the passage is also rhyming slang for **tart**. The remaining word in the passage is **clinah**, more commonly spelled as **cliner**, and sometimes spelled as **kleiner**.

In 1898 the *Bulletin* newspaper suggested an origin for the word: 'The "clinah" of Goodge's "Australian Slangue" is simply the German *kleine* (fem. of *klein*, small, little, and meaning "little", i.e., woman) Australised. I heard the term first in S.A. (where Germans abound) some years ago'. There is no doubt that the word came from German *kleine*, and is therefore a very rare example of Australian English taking a word from a migrant language: there were significant German and German-speaking populations in South Australia in the nineteenth century. The word **cliner** might be recalled by Australians today from the works of C.J. Dennis, as in these lines from *Songs of the Sentimental Bloke* (1915):

Gorstrooth! I seemed to lose me po'r o' speech.
But, 'er! Oh, strike me pink! She is a peach!
The sweetest in the barrer! Spare me days,
I carn't describe that cliner's winnin' ways.
The way she torks! 'Er lips! 'Er eyes! 'Er hair! . . .
Oh, gimme air!

Cliner remained in Australian English until the 1930s and then disappeared. No doubt some Australians lamented its loss, just as some lament the potential loss of words such as **cobber**. Yet the fact that words disappear is a sign of a living language—only dead languages do not change!

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