

WORD OF THE MONTH APR 2013

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bunger

– *noun*: (also **lung bungler**) a cigarette.

THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

A recent headline in the online *Sydney Daily Telegraph* ran 'Oh, no, Jackie is back on the evil bungers' (15 February, 2013). The celebrity scoop was that popular Sydney radio presenter Jackie O had started smoking cigarettes again, but would the reader have known that **bunger** was an Australian word for cigarette?

The origin of **bunger** meaning 'cigarette' is unclear. Many Australians will be familiar with the word **bunger** in the sense of 'a kind of firework that explodes loudly'. This Australianism is recorded from the 1920s, and is a variation of the word *banger*. The firework **bunger** was a common feature of *cracker night* festivities across Australia that celebrated public holidays such as Empire Day, Guy Fawkes Day, Commonwealth Day, and King's (later Queen's) Birthday. The **bunger** was so popular that *cracker night* was occasionally called *bunger night*. Since the **bunger** was shaped like a cigarette, and was lit like a cigarette, could this sense of **bunger** be the origin of the cigarette sense?

Another explanation for the origin of **bunger** might come with an earlier Australian word for a cigarette — *bumper*. *Bumper* goes back to the late nineteenth century and usually refers to a cigarette butt. It is often found in the context of people collecting cigarette butts to retrieve the remaining tobacco to make a cigarette. The problem with positing the transformation of *bumper* into *bunger* is that it requires the nasal 'm' sound to change to nasal 'n' (plausible), and for the 'mp' (or 'np') to change to 'ng' (not so plausible phonetically).

The explanation of the origin of **bunger** therefore may lie elsewhere. Among the earliest references to the cigarette **bunger** in the written records is the variant **lung bungler**:

'I've got some good news and some bad news,' J.D. told Alex between the obligatory puff on a **lung bungler**. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 September, 1990)

A thickset man in a thickset red Volvo lights a **lung bungler** and crawls a few metres. (*Melbourne Age*, 21 November, 1992)

It is possible that the original term was not **bunger** but instead was the compound **lung bungler**. And it is not difficult to work out why a cigarette was called a **lung bungler**. One sense of the word *bung* is 'to close, stop, or clog up'. The early examples of **lung bungler** perhaps demonstrate that the term developed from the notion that cigarette smoking 'bungs up your lungs'. If this is the case then **bunger** is an abbreviation of **lung bungler**. The overtly negative connotation of the term **lung bungler** would now be unfamiliar to most people who smoke and use the term **bunger**. Further evidence is needed to determine whether **lung bungler** or the firework **bunger** is the most likely origin of this term.

Bunger and **lung bungler** are being considered for inclusion in the second edition of the *Australian National Dictionary*.