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Oxford Word of the Month – May: tag dag

noun: a person who accidentally leaves a garment label showing.

THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

In 2008 a newspaper article with the heading ‘No panties OK, but what about the tag?’ drew attention to a fashion faux pas made by model Jennifer Hawkins. It wasn’t the fact she had chosen not to wear underpants, but that a garment label was clearly showing through the mesh of her dress:

The crowd at Australian Fashion Week was more offended by the visibility in the same photo of the care-instructions label on Hawkins’ dress. A stylist on site yesterday coined Hawkins a ‘tag dag’, and Josh Goot, who designed her black dress with mesh panels down the side, agreed she probably should have removed it. (Australian, 3 May)

Since the modelling of clothes is the point of Fashion Week, leaving a garment label showing may well be considered a shocker. The reference to this fashion fail in 2008 is the first evidence of **tag dag** in the written record, but it can be found in online evidence several years before this. The *tag* in **tag dag** usually refers to the label found inside the back of the collar on most clothing items, which is inclined to stick out above the collar of our shirt, jacket, or dress unless we tuck it back in. The ‘label’ sense of *tag* dates back to the mid-19th century.

The *dag* element in **tag dag** is derived from the Australian colloquial term *dag*, referring to someone who is unfashionable, lacking in style, or socially awkward (first recorded in the 1960s). The teen magazine *Dolly* included it in a colourful list of terms to describe ‘[t]he guy who wouldn’t pass the dress standards at an ABBA revival concert, but keeps asking you out ... dag, dagarama, dag city, daggy fest, daggy suckhead’. (October 1990) The unfashionable *dag* derives from an older Australian meaning of *dag*: an eccentric or entertaining person (first recorded in 1916). Both senses derive from a sheep’s *dag*, a lump of matted wool and excreta hanging around the tail of a sheep. Nothing could be less fashionable.

However the appellation **tag dag** applied to Jennifer Hawkins and other unwitting

tag dags is more likely to be jocular than censorious. It is less a term of abuse than a light-hearted way of pointing out a person's fashion shortcomings or absent-mindedness. Those who don't care about the finer details of their appearance are unlikely to take offence, but what is the proper etiquette if you wish to help a **tag dag**? Opinion differs:

You can either go over and tuck it back in for them without drawing other people's attention to it, or you can sit back in your chair and yell 'Tag dag!'. (A.W. Brownless, Billy's Dictionary for Blokes, 2011)

Don't use the juvenile 'tag dag' line, just tell the person you are going to tuck their tag back in—but say this before you invade their personal space. (Melbourne Herald Sun, Weekend Magazine, 25 May 2013)

Tag dag is included in the second edition of the *Australian National Dictionary* (forthcoming 2016).

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