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Oxford Word of the Month – November: schmick up

verb: to smarten (something) up; to renovate (something); to improve (something) superficially.

THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

Six years ago in a Word of the Month we reported on our research into the word **schmick**, an adjective meaning ‘stylish, excellent’. At the time we noted it had become very common in Australian English in the previous five years, and could be applied to all sorts of things, including people, vehicles, and restaurants. Its origin was a puzzle to us. We determined that it was probably Australian and likely to be modelled on the structure of various Yiddish words borrowed into English, such as *schlock* ‘cheap goods; trash’, and *schmuck* ‘a foolish person’.

This month we are updating you on **schmick** developments. Time has confirmed our initial assumption about its Australian origin and provided more evidence. We have pushed back the date of the first written evidence to the 1970s, and found that the earliest form of the word is **smick**, in this classified advertisement: ‘Panel vans, super paint, super cond., super **smick**, mag wheels.’ (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 July 1972) We now think it may be a blend of the words *sm(art)* and *(sl)ick*, with the initial sound later modified to *schm-*, following the model of Yiddish borrowings. This is now the most common form of the word found in the evidence.

New terms have developed from **schmick**. **Schmick up** is a verb describing the process of making something **schmick**, and the first evidence appears in the mid-1990s. Again, it can apply to many different things (although restaurants, houses, cars, and people feature strongly):

Schmicked-up politicians, frocked-up wives and the top dogs of the business world let loose on their annual night of immunity from the Australian media.

(*Sydney Daily Telegraph*, 19 June 2003)

The shire council took the place over in the Seventies and **shmicked it up** with toilets and barbecues and garbage bins, and called it Bochow Park. (G. Greer, *White Beech* 2014)

There is some recent evidence of a noun developing from the verb. A **schmick-up** is the act of smartening something up:

The groomsmen and the groom are coming in for the morning and they have the run of Barberista. ... They can get a nice **schmick-up** before the big day. (*Illawarra Mercury*, 16 November 2011)

Interestingly, in the evidence for the new verb and noun we found examples of the form **smick up**, recalling the early **smick** form of the adjective, in the same Tasmanian newspaper article:

If you are a seller, take my tip and spend a couple of days at least **smicking your place up**.

One of Tony's **smick-ups** was to render, or at least stucco, the block walls in the big room he loosely describes as his studio. (*Hobart Mercury*, 14 October 2008)

However the evidence shows that this variant form is very rare, and that **schmick up** is the form in common usage.

Schmick up (verb), **schmick-up** (noun), and **schmick** are all included in the forthcoming second edition of the *Australian National Dictionary* (2016).

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