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Oxford Word of the Month – October: **flagfall**

- **noun**: 1 An initial minimum hiring charge for a taxi, as part of the overall fare.
- 2 A fixed initial charge incurred when making a call on a mobile phone.

THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

Today mobile phone charges in Australia may include a **flagfall** fee—a fixed amount that is part of the cost of the call. The earliest evidence we have of its use is the following:

*Major new market players AAPT and Primus have both entered the market with a discount call rate accompanied by a one-off, 12 cent a call connection **flagfall**. (Melbourne Herald Sun, 30 August 1997)*

Flagfall in this sense is originally Australian, but is now used more widely. Where does the term come from, and why does it contain the element flag?

The mobile phone **flagfall** is a transferred use of an earlier Australian term used in taxi hire. Early taxis had a small mechanical lever, the ‘flag’, that could be seen from outside the cab. In the ‘up’ position it meant the taxi was for hire. When a passenger entered the cab, the driver turned the lever into the ‘down’ position to begin the fare. A flat rate was charged at **flagfall** before the taximeter began calculating the distance travelled. The New South Wales Government Gazette in 1931 defined it this way: “‘Flag fall’ means the amount of fare recorded by a taximeter immediately upon the flag being lowered to set the taximeter in motion at the commencement of a hiring.’”

The introduction of electronic taximeters in the 1980s meant that the old mechanical flag became obsolete. Instead, the taximeter automatically recorded the fixed initial charge before the vehicle moved off. Since this charge had historically been called **flagfall**, the name continued to be used, despite taxis no longer having a visible ‘flag’ to raise and lower.

This is how **flagfall** became separated from its original reference to a flag, and came to mean simply an initial fixed fee for a service. The use of **flagfall** to describe such a charge for a mobile phone is a transferred sense of the taxi

flagfall. Telcos have a history of charging initial fixed fees for some services, as our phone bills demonstrate. However, our long experience of these fees does not mean we like them, as this newspaper suggests:

*In themselves every little tweak of a mobile phone contract can be justified—**flagfall** charges, off-peak discounts, cheaper rates for calling within the same network—but when you put them together, the net effect is to make it virtually impossible for consumers to find out which mobile phone plan is best for them. (Canberra Times , 18 January 2012)*

Both senses of **flagfall** are included in the second edition of the *Australian National Dictionary* (forthcoming 2016).

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