

Whinger! Wowser! Wanker! **Aussie English: Deprecatory language and the Australian ethos**

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1. Introduction

Abusive epithets form a significant part of the vocabulary of many people and have become a colourful and expressive part of the Australian lexicon, surfacing with great frequency within Australian television, radio, literature, magazines, newspapers and in domestic, social and work domains. Australian terms of abuse are unique compared to those found in other varieties of English. Geoffrey Hughes (1991:176) comments: “the Australian speech community has developed its distinctive array of insults and swear words”.

The aim of this study is to examine the meaning, usage and cultural significance of the popular abusive epithets *whinger*, *wowser* and *wanker* as they are used in contemporary Australian English. Australians are often perceived as honest, forthright and upfront. Renwick (1980:22-29) observes: “Australian men and women are friendly, humorous and sardonic and can also be derisive, disdainful and scornful. They readily express negative feelings and opinions about both situations and people, sometimes about people they are with.”

The words selected for this study are culturally significant and representative of social values in that they express characteristics deemed undesirable in Australian society. Abusive epithets are labels that admonish deviant social behaviour and can be considered to be keys to understanding synchronic cultural values. E.g. the socially leveling term *wanker* ridicules a person who is pretentious and arrogant, thereby suggesting that humility, solidarity and being down-to-earth are highly valued qualities in Australian society. *Wowser* derides prudishness and intolerance, indicative of a *laissez-faire* society, valuing tolerance and open-mindedness. *Whinger* conveys disapproval for a person who complains excessively and without validity, expressing that stoicism and fortitude are valued.

2. Method of Semantic Analysis

The meanings of these words will be represented utilising the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach, as advocated by Anna Wierzbicka and her colleagues (Wierzbicka 1972 and 1996, Goddard 1998, Goddard and Wierzbicka 1994, 2002). NSM, or reductive paraphrase, is arguably the most well-developed, comprehensive and practical approach to cross-cultural semantics in contemporary semantic research. The basic principle of NSM is that the meanings of words can only be defined in terms of other words and to avoid problems of obscurity, circularity and cultural ethnocentrism it is practical to describe complex meanings in terms of simpler ones (Wierzbicka 1972).

As this study aims at describing the semantic structure of abusive epithets, including cultural assumptions underlying their usage, the NSM method of explicating words can be considered to be an adequate tool for these purposes.

Each explication includes attitudinal, behavioral and socially evaluative components to explain the salient characteristics of these cultural concepts. These explications will be supported by current examples of usage, extracted from Australian sources such as the Internet, newspapers, magazines, television, radio and examples from natural speech. These examples of usage convey the meaning of the words by their context. Another key to understanding the semantics of pejorative terms is to examine collocations, common phrase patterns, eg. *pretentious wanker* and *incessant whinger*. Collocations, as commonly found pairs of words, are useful in establishing the meanings of the words in the pair. Modifiers often describe or reinforce the meaning of the insult.

➤ For more information, visit the NSM Homepage:
www.une.edu.au/arts/LCL/disciplines/linguistics/nsmpage.htm

3. *whinger*

The *Macquarie Dictionary* (2002) provides an overly broad definition of the verb form only: *whinge*, to complain, whine.

A *whinger* complains excessively and usually without validity, especially regarding minor, trivial complaints. Corpus data reveals collocations that illustrate the persistent, gratuitous griping of a *whinger*: *incessant whinger*, *perpetual whinger*, *chronic whinger*, *full-time whinger*, *serial whinger*, *terminal whinger*.

In the Australian ethos there is considerable social stigma attached to *whinger*. The anti-social, ineffectual behaviour of a *whinger* is strongly reprobated. In contrast, the *underdog*, the *struggler* and the *little Aussie battler* ‘the brave and determined survivor despite all odds’ are admired and romanticised. Negativity and pessimism are frowned upon whereas tolerance, a positive attitude and an optimistic outlook in the face of adversity is encouraged, as shown by the catchphrases: *against the odds*, *cop it sweet*, *she’ll be right mate*, *hang in there* and the older phrase *she’ll be apples*, these last two phrases giving assurance and meaning ‘everything will be fine’. There is also the phrase *it’s all good* from American English that is emerging in Australian English, similar to *no worries*. Observers remark on the value traditional Australian culture places on toughness and resilience (Wierzbicka 1986:361; Goddard 1998:157). These qualities are reflected in the above idioms.

Whinger has connotations of weakness, self-pity and the inability to cope with the pressures of life in a mature manner. The word has semantic parallels with *sook*, *cry-baby*, to *brood* or *sulk*, and expressions like *to worry*, *dwelling on something* or *to feel sorry for yourself* – although *brood* and *sulk* have connotations of being sullen and quiet rather than the nagging characteristic of a *whinger*. However, *brood* also has angry undertones while to *sulk* is more ‘to pout’.

Social reproval of the *whinger* is indicative of the value Australians place on acceptance and coping. McFadyen (1995:5) states: “many Australians confront daily a great range of problems both material and social however the Australian culture tends to forbid complaining about one’s lot”.

Although *whinge* is an early English word, from OE *hwinsian* ‘whine’, today it is much more common in Australian and New Zealand English than in British English (Goddard 1998:156). Morris (2001:112) claims that *whinge* and *whinger* are emerging into American and Canadian English, although the near synonyms to *whine*, to *bitch* (as in *nagging*) and the epithet *whiner* are currently most prevalent.

3.1 Examples of Usage: *whinger*

- (1) “Sometimes I get sick of hearing myself complain, and feel like a **whinger**; a selfish, self-indulgent person who wants attention so that they can continue to malingering.”
www.depressionet.com.au (Collected 10/08/2003)
- (2) “Don’t moan and complain unnecessarily; nobody likes a **whinger**.”
How to be a Man, (p.105).
- (3) “They regarded him as something of a burden, criticising him as having a low pain threshold, a **whinger** and a gross complainer.”
www.ssaa.org.au/casey.html (Collected online 12/08/2003)
- (4) “The chronic **whinger** has a lot going for him – a fun job, a beautiful, committed girlfriend and a tasteful apartment. But he’s convinced he’s drawn one of life’s short straws.”
www.ourbrisbane.yourmovies.com.au/reviews (Collected online 10/08/2003)
- (5) “What remains is a cumbersome tale of a mysterious haunting, featuring a painfully woe-is-me **whinger** in Quinn.”
www.penrithcity.nsw.gov.au/lib/reviews27.htm (Collected online 10/08/2003)
- (6) “When a member of the Opposition speaks in reply to a budget, it is easy for the Government to point the finger and accuse him of being a **whinger** or being ungrateful.”
http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/Prod/Parlment/HansArt.nsf
(Collected online 12/08/2003)
- (7) “I only wish to say that, as I say in my report and submission, I am not a vexatious complainant; I am not a **whinger** or a troublemaker.
*www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/LACA/crimeinthecommunity/transcripts/28marc
hofficial.pdf* (Collected online 12/08/2003)
- (8) “Unfortunately you will have to grin and bear it. Nobody likes a **whinger**.”
www.thelounge.com.au/welcome/show_article.cfm? (Collected
online 12/08/2003)

- (9) “During his time on the South Australian bench he protested his cause to such a degree that he was seen as a **whinger**.”
www.federationpress.com.au/Books/BennettCooper.htm
 (Collected online 12/08/2003)
- (10) Many parents don’t like to lodge complaints, thinking they will be seen as **whingers** and naggers.”
<http://disc.server.com/discussion.cgi?id=54406> (Collected online 11/08/2003)

3.2 Explication of *whinger*

whinger

- (a) a kind of person
- (b) people of this kind think something like this many times:
- (c) ‘something bad is happening to me’
- (d) ‘I can’t do anything’
- (e) ‘I want someone else to do something about this’
- (f) ‘if other people know how I feel they can do something’
- (g) when something not very bad happens to people of this kind they want other people to know this
- (h) because of this they say many things to other people for some time
- (i) other people don’t want to hear people say things like this
- (j) people think it is bad to be like this

Component (a) explains that a *whinger* is a type of person who exhibits a specific kind of behaviour and personality traits. Line (b) introduces the attitudinal components of the explication that explain the ‘mentality’ of a *whinger*. There is also a time specification showing the repetition of this frame of mind, that these ‘kind of people’ think like this often, ‘many times’. Component (c) suggests a perceived problem. Line (d) indicates a sense of ‘helplessness’, an inability to cope, that the ‘problem’ is seen as insurmountable. Lines (e), (f) and (g) suggest dependency and the compulsion to externalise or relay a minor, perceived problems to others, to burden others. A *whinger* is typically reliant and wants other people to take action on their behalf. They are perceived as melodramatic and present a ‘suffering’, ‘woe is me’ attitude, seeking attention and sympathy from other people through their behaviour as shown by the collocations *self-pitying whinger* and *pathetic whinger*. Component (g) also implies that a *whinger* exaggerates their complaints and overreacts to situations, they amplify the severity of their problems or have invalid complaints. They dramatise their situation and overreact to problems. A person cannot be labelled a *whinger* if their complaints are genuine, justifiable or severe.

Components (h) and (i) explain the constant, semi-controlled repetition of a complaint or complaints, as illustrated by the collocations *terminal whinger*, *chronic whinger* and *serial whinger*. A *whinger* is persistent in their complaints yet will not take initiative to control or rectify their problems. They seem to complain and criticise without seeking solutions to their complaints. A *whinger* is perceived as demanding, irritating, tiresome and annoying. Finally, line (j) is a sociolinguistic comment indicating that a *whinger* is strongly socially reproved for their bad behaviour.

4. *wowser*

The *Macquarie Dictionary* (2002) defines a *wowser* as: a prudish teetotaler; a killjoy. This definition is too narrow as *wowser* can be employed to deride anyone who is perceived as a ‘spoilsport’ or ‘wet blanket’ and might be variously described as puritanical, moralistic, close-minded, sanctimonious, judgemental and critical of the pleasures of others. In 1916, Australian poet C. J. Dennis defined a *wowser* as “an ineffably pious person who mistakes the world for a penitentiary and himself for a warder”.

Wowser is the cultural antithesis of the Australian *larrikin*, a mischievous, good-humoured and rebellious type. The Australian culture is generally tolerant and liberal-minded, having an aversion for the *wowser*. Freedom of choice is respected and solidarity and loyalty are valued qualities (Wierzbicka 1986:361). The behaviour, opinions and beliefs of a *wowser* are perceived as conservative, ‘fuddy-duddy’ and ‘stuffy’, as shown by the collocations *old wowser* and *old-fashioned wowser*.

Our concept of the *wowser* was initially, and still is to some extent, associated with religion and has also elicited related epithets such as *bible-basher* and *devil dodger* (Baker 1970:137). Religious *wowsers* are frequently perceived as intolerant, outspoken and censorious ‘fanatics’ or ‘fundamentalists’ and are often seen to actively protest against the habits or pastimes of which they disapprove, especially gambling, promiscuity and the consumption of alcohol.

Wowser was coined in Australia and is also used in New Zealand English. It does not appear to have entered other varieties of English and has no direct synonyms in other Englishes. The etymology of *wowser* is contentious. Australian politician and journalist John Norton (1862-1916) is generally credited with coining the word as an acronym of the slogan: We Only Want Social Evils Remedied (or Rectified), first used by Norton in 1899 in the Sydney newspaper *Truth*. It is most likely that this is a clever after-the-fact etymology. Hornadge cites an earlier usage in Victoria circa 1870 where *hot-gospellers* became known as *Rousers* or *Wowsers* (1980:176). There is a Yorkshire dialectal word *to wow* meaning ‘to mew as a cat, howl or bark as a dog, wail, to whine, grumble, complain’, and it is possible that this is relevant to the origin of *wowser* (OED). Etymology is often a useful tool when considering meaning but is not necessarily reflective of contemporary usage. Etymologies are frequently unreliable and conflicting; for example, Butler (2001:201) claims that the word *whine* was an attempt to capture the sound of an arrow whizzing past whereas Morris (2001:112) maintains that the word is from the Germanic *hwinan*, meaning ‘to complain’.

4.1 Examples of Usage: *wowser*

- (1) “Few will be surprised however, by his sponsorship of current private members bills relating to public nudity, discrimination against heterosexuals, police powers, and life sentences, because his public image is of a **wowser** who advocates draconian punishments, even for crimes that have come to be accepted as victimless.”

www.econ.usyd.edu.au/drawingboard/digest/0111/smith
(Collected online 1/04/2002)

- (2) “You see in the past, most of the people who talked about problem gambling tended to come from churches or the welfare sector and people said: oh well, they’re just being do-gooders, they’re being **wowers**.”
<http://www.scoop.co.nz/mason/stories/AU9907/S00086>
 (Collected online 9/04/2002 - interview with Australian PM John Howard)
- (3) “He used the terms commonsense, right and wrong and values, amid catcalls from Labor, and has been accused of being a censorious **wowser**.”
www.mapinc.org/ccnews/v02/n1053 (Collected online 9/04/2002)
- (4) “...the movie’s censorship is an act of prudish **wowers**.”
www.slashdot.org/articles (Collected online 9/04/2002)
- (5) “Australians have also long reviled the **wowser**. ‘I don’t trust anyone who doesn’t get drunk,’ a well known female singer once told me.”
www.smh.com.au/cgi-bin/common/popupPrintArticle.pl?path=/articles/2002/09/20/1032054962011.html (Collected online 9/04/2002)
- (6) “A **wowser** is... a person who is more shocked at seeing two inches of underskirt than he would be at seeing a mountain of misery.”
www.australianbeers.com/culture/wowers (Collected 9/04/2002)
- (7) “We play music and have a few parties but the neighbours have a whinge. They’re just stuffy old **wowers** though.”
Male, 26
- (8) “What a pack of puritanical hypocrites. I’d much rather live next door to a hard-working hooker than a narrow-minded **wowser**.”
www.australianbeers.com/culture/wowers (Collected 9/04/2002)
- (9) “When it comes to **wowser** favourites like the abolition of abortion and euthanasia, he’ll be there to encourage and support the introduction of private member.”
members.optusnet.com.au/~thesquiz/v4n6.htm (Collected 3/06/2002)
- (10) “A **wowser** is perceived by his opponents as a spoilsport trying to impose his puritan prohibitions on the whole community.”
www.wn.com.au/prohealth/gaming1.htm (Collected 3/06/2002)

4.2 Explication of *wowser*

wowser

- (a) a kind of person
- (b) people of this kind think something like this:
- (c) ‘I am a good person’
- (d) ‘I don’t do anything bad’
- (e) ‘other people do many bad things’
- (f) ‘I want other people to live like I do’
- (g) people of this kind think much about the things other people do

- (h) they don't want other people to do the things they think are bad
- (i) they think they know what is good for other people
- (j) they say many things because of this
- (k) when they do this they feel something good
- (l) people think it is bad to be like this

Component (c) indicates that a *wowser* is self-righteous, perceiving themselves to be moral, proper and respectable. Line (d) suggests that a *wowser* is prudish and moralistic. Line (e) explains that this kind of person is judgemental and critical of other people and mostly disapproving and condemnatory. Rather than being perceived as temperance, their attitude is viewed as zealous and prudish. They are narrow-minded, intolerant and prejudiced. Component (f) suggests that a *wowser* imposes their own rigid morals onto other people. Line (g) indicates that a *wowser* is unduly preoccupied with the pastimes of others. They are perceived as 'nosy' and excessively curious about or involved in the lives and habits of other people.

Components (h) and (i) indicate that a *wowser* lives by their own standards and perceptions of morality and expects that other people do likewise. A *wowser* is typically moralistic and sanctimonious. Line (j) refers to the interfering, intrusive, outspoken and dictatorial nature of a *wowser*. A *wowser* may actively and fanatically protest against the behaviour and activities they abhor. They can be opinionated, aggressive, antagonistic and dogmatic in their beliefs and controlling of other people. Line (k) reinforces the notion of self-righteousness and moral superiority felt by the *wowser* for their enthusiastic condemnation of others. By staunchly disseminating their beliefs they feel as if they have accomplished something positive for society. Lastly, line (l) notes the social reproof of a *wowser* for their anti-social behaviour that contravenes the Australian ethos.

5. *wanker*

The Macquarie Dictionary (2002) does not provide a definition for *wanker* but lists it as a nominal noun form of the verb *wank*. *Wank* is a colloquial term in Australian English, meaning 'to masturbate'. The meaning of this word has developed a metaphorical usage, whereby *to wank* or to be a *wanker* means that a person exhibits behaviour that is egotistical and self-indulgent. The usage probably evolved in its meaning due to its original reference to sexual gratification becoming analogous to 'satisfying' one's ego and vanity by bragging.

There are many related phrases in Australian English, including: *to be full of it*, *he's up himself*, *he's got tickets on himself* (although these phrases can be applied to men and women, including *wanker* itself), *know-it-all* and *dick puller*. Corpora analysis has revealed the following collocations: *smug wanker*, *egotistical wanker*, *pretentious wanker*, *arrogant wanker*, *obnoxious wanker*, *conceited wanker*, *opinionated wanker*. There are also 'empty' modifiers that serve to highlight and emphasise the insult, e.g. *total wanker*, *real wanker*, *complete wanker*, *absolute wanker*, *utter wanker*.

Australia is often labelled as an egalitarian society. McFadyen (1995:6) states that Australia has become renowned as a country without social classes and with a strong commitment to social equality, where "no one is better than anyone else and there is no ingrained authority structures".

This environment has given rise to the socially levelling *tall poppy syndrome*. (A person who stands out from the crowd by being successful, wealthy, or famous may be called a *tall poppy*. It is often remarked that Australians have a tendency to ‘cut’ *tall poppies* down to size by denigrating them, to *rubbish* or *knock* them, if they are conceited in their success.). Australian culture disapproves of the vain, useless *wanker* with ‘superior’ airs, instead valuing and glorifying figures of tangible success and humility such as the *unsung hero* and the *quiet achiever*.

Wanker is evolving in some phrasal usage to refer to a person who is a *snob* in regards to a subject already perceived as pretentious, e.g. *wine wanker*, *fashion wanker*, *car wanker*.

Wanker was originally a British English epithet and is still common to the UK. One theory claims *wanker* is derived from a 19th century Yorkshire dialect meaning *simpleton* (Green 1998). Other varieties of English have near synonyms, e.g. *jerk* (US and Canadian English) although this is closer in meaning to *arsehole*. *Tosser* (British English) has parallels to *wanker* and also has connotations of stupidity. A new acronym, *figjam*, is an acronym for *fuck I’m good, just ask me* and may have originated in New Zealand.

5.1 Examples of Usage: *wanker*

- (1) “It is good that Australians are generally unpretentious. Often it is also good that Australians are able to be direct and straightforward in their communication. The Australian abhorrence of pretension comes out in some strange ways. No one wants to be seen as ‘a **wanker**’. Everyone wants to be seen as ordinary. No one wants to be seen as getting either above him or herself. If they do they will be knocked down by the others.”
Conversations, Margo Kingston, Sydney Morning Herald, 17/07/01
- (2) “People will think you’re a conceited **wanker** if you do this.”
How to be a Man (p.216).
- (3) “They turned into a bunch of obnoxious **wankers!**”
www.mtvreview.com.au/oasis (Collected online 7/07/2002)
- (4) “Most people at school thought he was a pretentious **wanker**.”
*Manchester revives past glories through music, Stephanie Bunbury
The Age, 20/07/02*
- (5) “I want to say ‘I’m a nice bloke ... read my books’ but it’s difficult to say that and not sound like a total **wanker**.”
www.panmacmillan.com.au/pandemonium (Collected online 16/08/2004)
- (6) “As your arty **wanker** friends will tell you, life imitates art.”
www.optususers.com.au/aaronsblog (Collected 16/08/2004)
- (7) “With a bit of imagination you’ll be able to identify hints of all kinds of different things berry, lemon, spice, oak, and toast are the sorts of things you hear wine **wankers** rabbiting on about at length.

How to be a Man (p.90).

- (8) “[He] was a vain, erratic, arrogant, self-centred and stubborn **wanker**.”
Come off it. Quit Mincing about and Sink the Boot in.
Andrew Masterson, The Age, 28/10/01
- (9) “You may call him a **wanker**, particularly for his statement that his current album is the greatest Australian release yet.”
www.amo.org.au/interview (Collected 7/05/03)
- (10) “A **wanker** is usually a self praising individual who pleases no one but themselves.”
www.health.curtin.edu.au/nursing/ww/slang/physiology (Collected 7/05/2003)

5.2 Explication of *wanker*

wanker

- (a) a kind of person
- (b) people of this kind think something like this:
- (c) ‘I am someone very good’
- (d) ‘I know many things’
- (e) ‘other people don’t know these things’
- (f) ‘I want other people to know what I think about things’
- (g) people of this kind want other people to think good things about them
- (h) because of this, they say many good things about themselves
- (i) when they do this they feel something good
- (j) other people don’t want to hear people say things like this
- (k) people think it is bad to be like this
- (l) some people think it is bad to say this word

The attitudinal components (c), (d) and (e) indicate the typical arrogance and egotism of a *wanker*. They feel a sense of material, social and intellectual superiority over other people. A *wanker* perceives themselves to be knowledgeable and in possession of information that is inaccessible or material goods that are unattainable to other people. Line (f) explains that a *wanker* is opinionated and feel their opinion is valuable. Self-absorbed and egotistical they are extroverted, confident, highly opinionated and dogmatic in their interaction with other people as a result of their exaggerated and delusional self-perception.

Components (g), (h) and (i) indicate that a *wanker* is boastful, brags, is self-indulgent and feels a sense of superiority. Line (j) indicates that although *wankers* perceive themselves to be important and impressive others see them as annoying and vainglorious. A *wanker* is a selfish, inconsiderate conversationalist. They are solely concerned with discussing their own interests, oblivious to their co-conversationalists. Component (k) suggests that a *wanker* is socially reproved for their bad social behaviour. Line (l) suggests that the word is perceived as socially unacceptable. *Wanker* is a mildly offensive term due to the sexual connotations of the term. In the progressive social climate of Australia ‘some’ although very few people may take offence at hearing this word. *Wanker* is widely accepted and used frequently in the media.

6. Conclusion

Whinger, *wowser* and *wanker* are prevalent pejorative terms in Australian English that encode social and cultural values by way of expressing contempt for certain behaviour and attitudes. These words highlight traits that are widely reproved in Australian society and therefore serve to discourage or reproach 'bad behaviour' with identifiable labels that have shared meaning in our culture.

These words have a complex semantic structure and reductive paraphrase is an effective tool for thoroughly defining these terms meanwhile avoiding culture-biased analysis, circular, obscure or inaccurate definition and other traditional problems of lexicography.

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Notes

Current proposed semantic primes (Goddard and Wierzbicka (eds) 2002)

Substantives: I, YOU, SOMEONE, PEOPLE,
SOMETHING/THING, BODY
Determiners: THIS, THE SAME, OTHER
Quantifiers: ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MUCH/MANY
Evaluators: GOOD, BAD
Descriptors: BIG, SMALL
Mental predicates: THINK, KNOW, WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR
Speech: SAY, WORDS, TRUE
Actions, events and movement: DO, HAPPEN, MOVE
Existence and possession: THERE IS, HAVE
Life and death: LIVE, DIE
Time: WHEN/TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME,
A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME
Space: WHERE/PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR,
NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE
Logical concepts: NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF
Intensifier, augmentor: VERY, MORE
Taxonomy, partonomy: KIND OF, PART OF
Similarity: LIKE

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