Humping a grouse cobber  
Dymphna Lonergan

When I arrived in Adelaide in the 1970s, they were called cobbers. Those small, chocolate covered squares of hard caramel now go by the name mates. The word mate has nudged ahead of cobber in popularity, probably since the republican debate in the 1990s when mateship was widely discussed as a proposed term for inclusion in the Constitution of Australia.

By the time of the republican debate, the word cobber had been in print for just over one hundred years. Appearing first in the Worker in Sydney in 1893, it points to a rural origin. The Australian National Dictionary suggests the British dialectal word cob, ‘to take a liking to’ as a probable origin of cobber, and the use of the word seems to support the need for friendship in the harsh environment of the Australian bush. If we no longer hear cobber used much, it may simply have outlived its usefulness because the social conditions that created it have changed (and because mate is shorter, and more suited to these downsized and core business times).

On the other hand, the word cobber appears in a current online urbandictionary website with the claim that it is not an archaic word, but simply little understood as an equivalent to mate. Therefore, while cobber seems to have been superseded by mate as a more commercially viable term for chocolate-coated caramel squares, cobber still has currency for technology-focused young Australians.

The English Dialect Dictionary cautions that cob ‘to like’ is not widely known. It certainly seems curious that this apparently rare verb could evolve quickly into an Australian noun widely used in the 1890s. Perhaps cobber’s origin lies elsewhere. For instance, Amanda Laugesen in Diggerspeak (2005) suggests an origin in Yiddish khaber meaning ‘comrade’ which is closer in meaning and sound to cobber than it is to cob. The problem with this proposal, is finding social conditions in nineteenth century Australia to match. Loquacious Irish-speaking migrants, however, and those who spoke an Irish English dialect were a significant presence in nineteenth century Australia. The Irish word cabaire may be a worthwhile consideration for the origin of Australian cobber. A cabaire (pronounced cobbereh) is a mildly derogatory term for a ‘chatterbox’. The Irish magpie is a cabaire breac, ‘a speckled prattler’. The word
cabaire is even found in the Irish English, notably in County Clare, in the form cabairlin ‘a small saucy-mouthed person or animal’. Emigrants came from Clare in the nineteenth century when it was still largely an Irish-speaking district. The Irish MP Michael Davitt on a visit to Australia in 1898 noted hearing ‘many a Clare tongue in celtic’ in Toowoomba. No doubt, other ‘celtic’ speaking Irish people took to the roads as itinerant workers.

The Australian term cobber is never anything but positive, while the cabaire could get under your skin. It is not unusual, however, for derisive words to evolve into endearments over time: the Australian endearment word bastard is a clear example of this. In a sparsely populated rural Australia, the advantages of a cabaire may have outweighed the disadvantages. A cabaire would shorten anyone’s road, and excessive talking is something that good friends do together.

Australianisms of unknown or uncertain etymology should be worried over more than they are. After all, we are in a favourable position to identify the beginnings of Australian English through written records. In addition, as we know more and more about the social conditions of colonial Australia, we may profitably reconsider Australian English words that claim dubious or unsustainable etymology. Another such word is hump, ‘carry’. Arguably, a revisionist approach to Australian English should not apply to the word hump because it is plausible that the verb to hump could have derived from the noun hump, especially when what we usually think of as being humped in nineteenth century Australia is a traveller’s bluey or a swag. In the distance, the approaching traveller carrying a swag on his bag could indeed suggest a humpbacked person; however, the origin of the Australian verb to hump, is probably on the more hectic and active goldfields.

The Empire (Sydney) is our first entry for hump ‘to carry’. In 1851, the word appeared a number of times as a goldfield term, with diggers humping cradles or swags. The noun humper referred to a worker at the diggings who humped the clay away. Once the diggings era was over, the humper was a swagman and what he humped was his bluey
Many Irish speakers worked on the diggings in the 1850s and their word for ‘to carry’ was iompar (pronounced ‘ummper’). This Irish verb serves many purposes, from conveying and transporting: errai a iompar ‘to carry goods’; to transmitting: fuaim a iompar ‘to carry a sound’; supporting and sustaining: cosa ag iompar boird ‘legs supporting a table’; through to wearing: cota mór a iompar, ‘to wear an overcoat’, and behaving: tú féin a iompar go maith, ‘to behave yourself well’. Diarmaid Ó Muirithe has found the Irish word iompar in use in the English of Kilkenny today to mean ‘a lift’ (in a car etc.). The word acquires an initial h after the preposition le, e.g. trom le hiompar ‘heavy to carry’ and éadrom le hiompar ‘light to carry’. An Adelaide woman claims that her mother used the term humpin’ in Kilkenny, Ireland, sixty years ago. She understood it to mean carrying a heavy load with the danger of hurting your back. However, as Ó Muirithe has not recorded this term in his Anglo-Irish words collection, and as I have not found it in any other Irish sources, it is not certain that the word humpin’ is Irish English. The Irish language word iompar, however, may have played a part in the development of Australian English hump ‘to carry’.

First recorded in 1924, the Australian word grouse may not be so popular today, but it is included on the urbandictionary website as Australian slang, primarily in use in Melbourne. According to the ABC’s online Word Map, however, grouse meaning ‘excellent’ is in use all over Australia. Ulster Scots has groosh ‘excellent’, and that meaning matches Australian grouse. Groosh, in turn, may be the Scots word grush, ‘thriving, healthy’ (OED). Could groosh have developed into grouse in Australia? It seems unlikely that the sound would change from ‘oo’ to ‘ow’ and that the sh would drop out in such a short time.

To Australian-born Irish language learners, the word grouse suggests the Irish approbation and adjective ar feabhas, ‘excellent’. The noun feabhas, meaning ‘excellence’, and pronounced ‘fyowss’ becomes the adjective ‘excellent’ with the addition of the preposition ar. Following lenition, feabhas becomes fheabhas, pronounced ‘yowss’ (‘ow’ as in cow). The entire approbatory phrase ar fheabhas sounds like ‘ryowss’. A person could be ar fheabhas, meaning in excellent health, or something could be ar fheabhas, meaning very good or excellent. The Australian English word grouse is similarly used as an approbation, and as an adjective. The urbandictionary website offers as approbation: ‘How was the footy?’ ‘Grouse’, along

This is a preprint of an article accepted for publication in ‘Ozwords’.
with the adjectival ‘I had a grouse day’. Australian *grouse*, meaning ‘excellent’ may be another Irish-influenced Australian word.

The possible connection between *hump* and the Irish word *iompar* was raised with me by an Australian born learner at this year’s Irish language *daonscoil* ‘folkschool’ in Sydney. Other learners have mentioned the similarity between *ar fheabhas* and *grouse*. These Australian-English and Irish language mindsets have a unique perspective. Just as it took Australian native-born eyes to capture the Australian landscape, (early colonial landscape painting often suggesting Europe rather than Australia) Australian mindsets that embrace languages other than English may bring new ways to unpack more worrisome Australian English words.

**Bibliography**


Ó Dónaill, Níall. *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla*, Baile Átha Cliath (Dublin): Oifig an tSoláthair, 1977


Ulster Scots (online) 20 July 2005 <www.ullans.com>

Unpublished manuscript: Egan, Tom, ‘Some Irish Words surviving in North Clare’, np, 2000

Urban dictionary 8 July 2005 <http://www.urbandictionary.com>