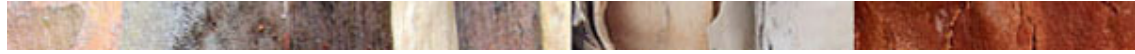


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Oxford Word of the Month – April: rolled-gold

adjective: first-class; absolute.

THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

Rolled-gold is used in Australian English to imply something undeniably good, first-class or genuine, such as a rolled-gold opportunity or a rolled-gold offer.

Evidence dates from the early 1980s. The term is often found in the phrase rolled-gold guarantee, notably used in early 2018 by National Party deputy leader Bridget McKenzie, who gave a ‘rolled-gold guarantee’ that Barnaby Joyce would continue in his role as leader of the Nationals (wrongly, as it turned out).

Rolled-gold is also often found in negative contexts, such as rolled-gold disaster, rolled-gold idiot and rolled-gold betrayal. Negative usage is especially evident in political contexts: ‘Prime Minister John Howard said of Labor: “They are total rolled gold, complete hypocrites on this issue and the Australian public knows it.”’ (Melbourne *Herald-Sun*, 6 October 2000)

The adjective rolled-gold is a figurative use of *rolled gold*, a form of gold used in the manufacture of inexpensive jewellery and other small items. It is a thin coating of gold applied to a baser metal by rolling. With use, the gold on these pieces will eventually wear away to reveal the metal beneath. A rare early figurative use reflects this. A socialist newspaper headline, “‘Rolled-gold’ Laborites’, refers to former Labor Party members who have become anti-Labor election candidates (Sydney *Labor Daily*, 5 August 1927). Their Labor principles have worn off.

How did the meaning shift? How did a term for a cheap method of manufacturing gold items come to have the current sense ‘first-class’ or ‘absolute’ in the Australian lexicon? It is likely that it derives from the appearance of *rolled gold*, since it does not imply lack of quality, but quite the opposite: ‘Rolled-gold guarantees are the best kind you can get. Of course, when you make them you have to be very confident you can deliver.’ (*The Australian*, 1 July 2005)

The historical association of a guarantee with *rolled gold* may give a clue. In the late 19th and early 20th century it became a popular alternative to gold, and there were many advertisements in Australian newspapers for rolled-gold items such as watches and spectacle frames.

Retailers offered ‘guarantees’ for these items, chiefly because the gold coating was known to wear. Advertisements included assurances such as ‘guaranteed to keep their colour’ and ‘guaranteed to wear 20 years’. The following example shows a retailer’s eagerness to assure customers of the quality of a pair of eyeglasses: ‘*Rolled gold* – not gilt, and often called *rolled gold* – but guaranteed for years, from 15/.’ (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 February 1908)

There is a time lag before the current figurative sense appears in the written record. However, it’s interesting to speculate that advertisements such as these, which continued through the early part of the 20th century, may have influenced the adoption into Australian use of the adjective *rolled-gold*, and its particular association with *guarantee*.

Rolled-gold will be considered for inclusion in the next edition of *The Australian National Dictionary*.

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