

CORRESPONDENCE

From Mr N.P. Cowley

I refer to the article 'Soweto is where it's at' by Thabang Thoka that appeared in **English Usage in Southern Africa**, Vol. 17, No. 2, 1986. On pp. 20-21 it is stated that the term 'muntu-obligado' for one's best friend is derived from **medulla oblongata**, the Latin medical term for an organ at the back of the brain which some African tribes see as being the seat of the personality. But surely the origin lies in the Portuguese expression 'Muito obrigado' - 'thank you very much; much obliged', which represents the sort of sentiment one might have about one's best friend. I consider it far more likely that a term commonly used by Portuguese shopkeepers, with whom Africans come into almost daily contact, would be absorbed into tsotsie-taal, with the 'muito' being adapted slightly into a similar-sounding and appropriate Zulu word, than that an obscure (to most people) medical term could be so absorbed.

N.P. COWLEY
STATE LANGUAGE SERVICES
PRETORIA

From Mr James McClurg

Thabang Thoka's article, 'Soweto is Where it's At', in your latest issue, made fascinating reading, and he is to be congratulated on it. However, two of the derivations he gives seem to me to be open to query.

He tells us 'pikinini' comes from Chinese pidgin English. But all standard dictionaries I have consulted agree that (irrespective of the variety of spellings) it is derived from the Spanish 'pequeño' or the Portuguese 'pequeno', meaning 'small' -- perhaps directly from the Portuguese 'pequenino', meaning 'little one'. I cannot help thinking that this is both the more authoritative and the more probable derivation.

I also find it hard to accept that 'muntu-obligado' has anything to do with the medulla oblongata. Surely it is much more likely to have come directly from the Portuguese 'muito obrigado', meaning 'thank you very much'.

JAMES McCLURG
MUIZENBERG