

FORUM : COMMENT AND RESPONSE

A COMMENT ON 'THE ABUSE OF ENGLISH BY VISTA STUDENTS' (*English Usage in Southern Africa*, Vol. 17 No. 1, 1986).

Just when I had decided that I should perhaps rather not comment on Stephen Finn's article "The abuse of English by Vista students" (*English Usage* Vol. 17 no. 1) I noticed your Forum section, complete with a spirited comment from Ms B. Smith on Alan Campling's writing and the latter's equally spirited and rather *ad hominem* (*feminam*?) response. So, here goes ...

Finn's article draws attention to what we all know is a critical problem in this country - the low writing proficiency levels of university students, particularly of those for whom English is a second language. He presents some interesting examples of errors and provides Northern Sotho structures to support his contention that the bogey behind it all is mother-tongue interference. There is a degree of oversimplification here, given that the attribution of causes to errors is the most difficult part of any error analysis. Behaviourist notions such as "interference" are now considered intellectually passe, to say the least, although on the other hand there is also growing appreciation for the view that the vehement detractors of behaviourist linguists such as Lado threw the baby out with the bathwater. They could not wish away, or theorise away, the presence of the mother tongue.

The content of Finn's article, then, is not really problematic, though one could argue about interpretation, the relative merits

of error analysis as opposed to performance analysis, and related issues, some more esoteric than others.

No, the problem relates not to content but to form: more specifically one particular little five-letter form that goes by the name of *abuse*, not to mention the crushing title 'THE ABUSE OF ENGLISH BY VISTA STUDENTS'. To put it plainly, if I were a Vista student I'd be pretty miffed. More pertinently, if I had to feel that every time I put my pen to the assignment sheet I ran the risk of *abusing* the English language (Send her victorious...), I'd develop an extreme form of writer's block from which I'd be most unlikely to recover. It would be a rather strange kind of *abuse* anyway, given that this word, in practically all contexts, carries with it a presupposition of intentionality, and the last thing that I would want to do would be to inflict damage on the noble dialect.

I do not for a moment believe that the article was in any way intended to be slighting about the students' efforts. I am also aware that *abuse* has been used in the past by writers commenting on language matters. I think, though, that in the present context this extremely loaded prescriptivist throwback of a term has no justifiable application. I am not suggesting that we go as far as Pit Corder, who avoids even the relatively neutral term *error*, opting instead for *learner idiosyncrasy(!)*, but at a time when students at some South African institutions are apparently sensitive about the superficially innocuous label *second language learner*, we should not only be doing our best to look at language use objectively - we should be using terminology to match.

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PROFESSOR FINN RESPONDS

I'm glad that, backhanded compliment though it might be, Hilton Hubbard evidently agrees that I have kept both the baby and the bathwater. With regard to concepts such as 'interference' being considered *passe*, we apparently read different writers.

He objects to the word 'abuse', which merely means 'improper or wrong use' and not necessarily an intentional one. Where communication breaks down we can talk about 'abuse' and not look for another bland, gutless word. It is time certain academics stopped being patronizing and, therefore, insulting to students or

second language users. Euphemisms merely skirt the issue and cloud details. If we cannot call a spade a spade, the state of the art is sad indeed.

PRETORIA