

Despite its limitations, *Language Made Plain* is a stimulating introduction which, if suitable for the layman, could be a light auxiliary book for the university student who is not digging too deeply into language.

A. LENNOX-SHORT
CAPE TOWN

J. Alswang and A. van Rensburg. *An English Usage Dictionary for South African Schools*. Johannesburg: Perskor, 1984. R25,00.

Although many fine dictionaries are available, there is always room for another, provided that it makes a positive contribution to the language competence of the community at which it is directed. At first glance this new compilation seems an interesting possibility, at least as a supplement to the standard works usually prescribed in schools.

Close examination reveals, however, not only a lack of the meticulous accuracy so essential in any work of reference, but also an underlying invalidity that can only be detrimental to the development of linguistic and intellectual sensitivity in the pupils for whose use the dictionary is intended. The introductory 'Guide to Users' claims that 'This dictionary enables you to find, in an easy three-column layout, the correct spelling, pronunciation, meaning and usage of words in good, contemporary South African English.' It may seem petty to point out that the layout is, in fact, in two columns and that 'clear' or 'convenient' would have been a more appropriate adjective than 'easy' in this context. This imprecision however sets the tone for much that is to come.

The following is a sample of the content, taken from the first page of the actual dictionary section:

abacus (pl = abacuses)
a frame with beads for calculating
or for teaching counting

Chinese businessmen
use the abacus {n}
(a-bə-kis);

abashed
feeling ashamed or embarrassed

he looked abashed
{av} (ə-basht) when
she scolded him.

aberration
sudden forgetfulness

he did it in a moment
of aberration {n}
(a-bə-ray-shin).

abhor
to detest, to dislike strongly

we abhor {v} (ab-haw)
cruelty to animals;
abhorrent {aj} (ab-
ho-rənt) behaviour;
a feeling of abhorence
{n} (ab-ho-rəns).

The misspelling, abhorence, may have been merely a typographic error, but it should have been picked up, along with such others as eurhythms (twice, p245), grove (for 'groove', p332), interrupt (p654), roneod (p719), and the uncertainty about dependent/dependant(p192), which emerged in the course of a few minutes' skimming. Equally startling was the information that abashed, as used in the above example, is an adverb. A little further exploration revealed that in the expression 'eerily quiet before the storm' (p236), eerily is a verb, as is pip in 'do not swallow the pip of the peach' (p601), while in 'the eagle carried its prey to its eyrie above the gorge' (p266) eyrie is an adjective. Pupils find Parts of Speech confusing enough without this kind of misguidance.

The function of a definition is to indicate precisely what a word means, in order to distinguish between that word and all the others of roughly similar meaning. Simplification may be a good thing, but it actually defeats the purpose of a dictionary when it results in such definitions as the one offered for aberration. 'Sudden forgetfulness' of the kind that is also roughly covered by 'absent-mindedness' or 'amnesia' is not the most significant implication of this particular word, which suggests more in the way of a moral lapse or a deflection from the norm. So too one finds that poem is 'a verse', and verse is 'language in the form of poetry', while prose, on the other hand, is 'normal written language, composition'. No-one who took the trouble to look up these words would be any the wiser for having done so, and a search for the distinction between metaphor and simile would be equally frustrating. If the words are worth including, they deserve more exact definition, particularly if they belong to the

vocabulary of a specialized field. A psychiatrist would be appalled to see schizophrenia characterised in such comic-book terms as 'a mental disorder causing a split personality: the mild old man must suffer from schizophrenia {n} (skie-tsoh-free-nie-ə) to have murdered the child so brutally'.

Care should also be taken to ensure that the grammatical structure of the definition agrees with the Part of Speech of the word being defined. Incredibility is a noun, but its definition, 'not able to be believed', is in the adjectival form. In another example of inconsistency, the term secret agent acquires a (wrongly-applied) hyphen when used in an illustrative sentence. The idea of including examples of usage is a good one, as can be seen in the value of the Afrikaans HAT. One would expect such examples not only to illustrate the grammatical function of the particular word but also to further our understanding of its meaning. 'Chinese businessmen use the abacus' contributes very little, and the same is true of a vast number of the statements intended to illustrate usage, where the focal word would happily be replaced by any one of a dozen others since the statement or expression offers no meaningful context.

A South African English dictionary should, as suggested in the 'Guide to Users', set an example of 'good, contemporary South African English'. Our environment, like any relatively new and mixed society, has indeed enriched the language in many ways, but has also endangered its native accuracy and elegance. It is not the function of a dictionary to confirm negative trends; rather it should uphold standards of expression as far as is reasonable. This is where the present compilation is most disappointing.

As a guide to pronunciation it endorses some of the least appealing aspects of the 'South African accent', despite the qualifying note which accompanies the 'simplified pronunciation code ... exclusive to this dictionary'. Stare is represented as 'stê'; It as 'iet'; increase as 'ieng-krees'; punctuate as 'pungk-chew-ayt'; and prestige as 'pres-teejd'. There is also an uncertainty about the pronunciation of such foreign words as dilettante (di-lə-tahn-tie), pince-nez (pins-nay), and hors de combat (haw-də-kom-bah). It would be a disservice to encourage anyone to sound so gauche.

More serious still are the numerous examples of clumsy, strange, or even downright incorrect English, for example:

misconceived: thought out without proper consideration;

such an ill-mannered retort to the question is impolite;

they gorged themselves on fruit to repletion;
the trawler caught many fish;
thrust: a plunging stroke with an object;
the sibilance of the orator on the radio is irritating;
an incredible increase in the price of petrol;
kick a punt upfield;
he is enamoured with his new car;
eccentric: not round, like an oval: planets travel in an
eccentric orbit;
highways facilitate high-speed traffic;
our teacher is the doyen of the staff;
Jack is the predominant one of the triplets;
cats can hump their backs.

These, and all the others like them, show little feeling for the beauty and subtlety of really good English.

Finally, sentences or phrases included as illustrations should, even in a dictionary intended for local consumption, be objective and factual, and have a universal and permanent relevance. The academic tone of such a publication is undermined by the presence of parochial, easily-dated, tactless or flippant statements like 'apartheid is a way of life in South Africa'; 'miscegenation is illegal in South Africa'; 'intermarriages of blacks and whites causes (sic) problems'; 'Mr Botha is the Prime Minister'; 'spring rains come in September'; 'an insignificant clerk'; teachers adopt a didactic manner outside the classroom'.

This compilation must have taken time, if not care; many of the entries are adequate; the presentation is indeed 'easy'; and the idea was sound. But as long as the final product exemplifies inaccuracies of expression, flattening of distinctions and blurring of thought, it should not find its way onto our bookshelves.

M.J. MARWICK
NATAL EDUCATION DEPARTMENT