

REVIEWS

Jean Branford ed. *A Dictionary of South African English*
Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1978. xxvii +
308 pp.

*You cook a pan of spinach, and we burn a mess of greens.
You wear clothes, and we wear threads. ... You call the
police and we drop a dime. You say wow! We say ain't that
a blip. You care, love and hurt, and we care, love and hurt.
The differences are but a shade.*

Sandra Haggerty: 'On digging the difference'
Los Angeles Times.

*We don't talk fancy grammar and eat anchovy toast. But to
live under the kitchen doesn't say we aren't educated.*

Mary Norten: *The Borrowers.*

D.R. Beeton and Helen Dorner, editors of *A Dictionary
of English Usage in Southern Africa* (which appeared in 1975),
point out that their aim is prescriptive. Jean Bran-
ford, in the introduction to her dictionary, sets out as
clearly her method of operation.

The status label *substandard* does appear, but it is
restricted to points of usage, rather than of voca-
bulary. Thus it marks the use of *by* for standard
at ... and other structures translated, or trans-
literated from Afrikaans. ... It is seldom used for
lexical items ... except where the term itself is
a transliteration.

(p. xvii)

And where Beeton and Dorner refer to a 'record of pro-

blems', Jean Branford mentions a 'general handbook'. Differences of intention between these two dictionaries are therefore not as wide as they seem.

Neither dictionary, furthermore, draws too rigid a line between what may be termed 'standard' and 'non-standard' English; in almost every case usage is allowed to determine the validity of an entry. This is an important principle, for a standard dialect is in no *linguistic* way superior to other forms: it is not more logical, or even more complex (and certainly not always more expressive) than the many and divergent 'dialects' that make up the enriched amalgam of South African English. Any judgement as to the superiority of one expression over another is bound to be a social judgement rather than a linguistic one. Jean Branford expresses it thus:

... In a multiracial and multilingual country, there are many words which, while they are completely harmless in the view of a large number of people, will and do give hurt and offence to others. These include 'boy', 'girl', 'coon', 'coolie', 'hotnot', 'spider', 'rock' and many more. ... The inclusion of such items in this text is purely a record of their use and existence in the language, and should not be interpreted as a mark of approval or signal of their acceptability: nor should the presence of certain of the illustrative material be regarded as endorsement of the sentiments it contains.

(p. xvii)

As there are, naturally, systematic differences between the 'standard' forms of written communication and the 'argot' that is the spoken language of everyday situations, prescription is inevitable - and welcome - in pioneer dictionaries. The possibility exists, however, that this prescriptive element could become the primary focus at the expense of other, and equally important, aspects. That this happens in neither of the modern dictionaries of South African English usage says much for the editorial sense and vision of D.R. Beeton, Helen Dorner and Jean Branford.

Dr Branford has collected over 3 000 main entries and joins *A Dictionary of English Usage in Southern Africa* in dispelling a number of myths about English in this country. She reveals it for what it is: a rich and varied means of communication deriving from our British and European antecedents, from the languages of people resident in South Africa, and not least from the needs generated by

the tensions, joys and frustrations of day-to-day living. As such the book is a mixture of humour and pathos, and a collage of both the esoteric and the prosaic in our lives. Sources are generally impeccable and suggest a surprising range. An entry derived, for example, from the pages of *Fair Lady* finds a contrast in a word extracted from Uys Krige's *The Dream and the Desert*. These ingredients are the making of a work that, while generally informative and instructive, is also a panacea for anyone weary of words in a general sense. It is, in short, eminently readable and enjoyable.

A criticism, though not a serious one, is that entries might at times have been defined in more detail. An example is the following insertion:

copper *n. errone.* Used in S.A. for bras. [fr Afk.
(geel) koper brass lit. 'yellow copper']

So the small shrivelled body was laid out in the large, heavy coffin with its glistening copper fittings.

Krige. *Dream & Desert* 1953.

If the editor has extracted evidence solely from isolated literary examples that this is a *common* error in South African English usage (incorporating all shades of language user) then her findings might be open to question. Greater precision would have resulted if the words, 'by Afrikaans speakers' had been inserted after 'in S.A.' However, let it be said at once that any claim of scientific objectivity about usage begs the question. In opinions on usage, cogency and reasoning, not numbers, are what give weight to the decisions arrived at, and Dr. Branford's problem is conceivably that the narrow context of a dictionary sentence gives too few clues to the force of a particular word. One needs to presuppose that the spoken word is not independent of the written.

Another small point is that one or two words in common use have been omitted. One such is 'boy', when used as the Black equivalent of 'terr', which finds a place in the dictionary.

When weighed in the balance of the editor's larger achievement these small gaps and quibbles are insignificant. We have been presented with an interesting and finely researched work, which emphasizes the large contribution made by those who 'don't talk fancy grammar', even though - as in all human affairs - the differences between one group and another 'are but a shade'.

A Dictionary of South African English is more than an entertaining book, and more even than a handy reference tool: it is a record of South African life. For, as M.H. Dohan expresses it, the vocabulary of each generation 'reflects its historical climate and - unconsciously created - reveals as no mere history can the spirit of a time' (*Our Own Words*, p. 3).

A.D.A.

Nicolas Ferguson. *Language Learning by Objectives*. London: Evans Brothers Limited. 1979. vi + 122 pp. Paperback, n.p.

Language Learning by Objectives deals with the teaching of English as a foreign language (TEFL) and belongs together with the course *English by Objectives*. The approach of this book is sensible and realistic. In his Preface, Mr Ferguson isolates 'three striking sources of inefficiency in modern teaching'. They are:

1. '... teaching is generally divorced from the use we make of language. We teach an unapplied system ...'
2. '... we teach students to do and say things with language which are fundamentally insignificant to them as persons, and consequently they say these things formally and impersonally.'
3. We teach 'all the students in a group at the same rate'.

Mr Ferguson thereafter points to five types of institution involved in language teaching. They vary from 'private institutions, with trained professional teachers, and motivated students studying under excellent conditions' to 'school systems with polyvalent teachers teaching under great pressure, with a very imperfect command of the language they are teaching, and with students of varying backgrounds, some of whom are almost totally lacking in motivation, placed together in very large groups of unbalanced levels' (Introduction).

The implication of these two sets of lists is presumably that this book, and more particularly the method it proposes, will avoid present sources of inefficiency and be suited to all five categories of teaching institution. The content of this book ought, therefore, to be evaluated accordingly.

'Many course writers,' says Mr Ferguson, 'are only indirectly in contact with the reality of the teaching situation in schools' (Introduction). In contrast, this book aims to present a practical approach that focusses