

BILINGUALISM: the perpetual headache of acquiring the second language

by Mey Hurter

If I refer, elsewhere in this issue, with rather too much asperity to the end-product of our educational system, it is my earnest wish that what follows here will smooth the ruffled feathers of many a capable, conscientious and overtaxed teacher of the young. The examples I shall cite are genuine and constitute a random selection of gleanings from village schools over a period of years. The glaring errors reflect the fact that in great areas of South Africa English has virtually become a foreign language. It is not my purpose to go into the reasons for this. The real interest lies in trying to account for the errors themselves: how did the pupil come to write what he did?

There seem to me to be at least five factors involved in rendering the task of mastering the second language an almost impossible one. They are, as I see it: faulty pronunciation, which leads to incorrect spelling; the incompetent use of the dictionary; Afrikaans analogy, especially as regards idiom; mere inability to spell; and, finally, that turncoat phenomenon, the English verb, which insists upon changing its form to suit number or tense — and even tries snobbishly to keep up with the few vestiges of the subjunctive mood still left in the language. Some of these obstacles will emerge from the examples which follow, with comment only where necessary; readers will identify most of the faults for themselves.

When I *hold still* (Afr.: *stilhou*), I throw two cents in the *metre*.

I said to my mother: '*Midday*, Mother'. (Afr.: *Middag*, *Ma*, in greeting his parent).

My mother said I could *mistress* children to my party. (The child used the dictionary noun *nooi* = *mistress*, instead of the verb *nooi* = *to invite*.)

The children go to my mother to say *fentjoo* for the party.

The news came *through the vineyard* (the *grape-vine*?).

In a certain *room* in this *palace* (*palace*) it *ghost* (Afr.: *spook dit*).

The man broke a *tact* (Afr.: *tak* = *branch*) of and fell into the *shear*. (Confusion between Afr. *skeur* = a crevice and *skeer* = *shear*, as in the shearing of sheep).

He *glip* off the back *from* the horse and his *feets thathg* (touching, i.e. *touched*) the ground and he *is* now *charm* (Afr.: *verheug* = *pleased*).

A man who looks after sheep is a sheep waiter (Afr.: *skaapwagter*).

The plural of man is woman.

(Women's Libbers, I suggest this as a slogan!)

Bader had a higher *rung* than the other soldiers (The writer is not confusing Bader and the ladder of fame; he is merely referring to his position as an officer. Cf. Afr.: *rang*).

The *bajonet* was stuck into the *strow* (*straw*) just an inch *behind* (in front of?) Bader's nose. (The mind boggles at the man's anatomy.)

Goliath said to David: 'Today I *mak you dead* (Afr.: *maak jou dood*) and *giveness* you body to the birds of the air'.

David *sling the ding* and *tref for the giant forehead* (*struck the giant ...*).

He *sat* (*set*) a stone in this sling and took aim *carefully* and the giant *felled* dead.

David was a shepherd: he must *past his sheep up* (Afr.: *sy skape oppas*).

He selected five *glib* (*smooth*) stones (Afr.: *gladde klippe*).

Ierley in the morning then my dog *make me alive* (Afr.: *maak my wakker*).

She is in bed because she is *tyred*. (We suggest a strict diet.)

The feminine of god is *Jesus*.

Will you please *rape* the shoes for me?

This is part of the letter reserving hotel accommodation:

Please *gives* our girls a *room* with *an* bathroom *inglose* (*included?*) and the boy will have a *signal* room We will eat all *eatings* (*meals?*) in the *eatingroom* in *you* Hotel

A small swan is *swanger* (Afr. for *pregnant*. The precocity of these young birds!).

Mr H. *teach* us Afrikaans, our *land's tail* (cf. Afr. *taal: language*).

Leapfrog is a small *teatpole*.

The following extracts are from a ghost story which had evidently been carefully prepared. We imagine plenty of oral practice and a blackboard finally bristling with lists of vocabulary and idiomatic expressions:

Last night *are* very cold and it *is snow*. A most peculiar thing happened. The *most* (*ghost*) *work* (walked) to the *citzen* and there *is moving*. (The expression *most peculiar thing* had obviously been furnished by the teacher, who must, in marking the essay, have been taken aback at the way in which the dark night and the white snow had conspired to produce this 'peculiar' identification between *most* and *ghost*.)

The essay continues:

I was not *sleep* and I *caprice* to my mother, but there was *now* answer and I *caprice weather* (Afr.: *weer* = *again*; *die weer* = *the weather*) to my mother. (The unravelling of the mistake *caprice* calls for a certain amount of detective ability: the child had obviously inadvertently looked up *gril* = *a caprice* instead of *gil* = *to scream*.) Then my mother *year hoe hoe hoe* and my mother said don't *wary*.

The next morning my mother *see* the *spur* of the *most* in the snow. (Are we fair in expecting this bewildered young Theseus, who is working his unaided way through the maze

of possible words supplied by the *Tweetalige Woordeboek*, to be able to distinguish between the lethal weapon of a trained fighting cock and the cold indentations left in the snow by the *moe-ing most*? Well may he cry: 'Ariadne, thou fickle jade, where is my guide, my promised ball of string?')

After that we decided to *make a plane* (Afr.: *maak 'n plan*).

We shall now *feature* to another house. (Afr.: *trek = a feature*, instead of *trek = to move*.)

That these numerous mistakes should be made; that teachers should be driven to distraction; that some even 'throw in the towel' — all of this is to be expected. What *is* suprising is that, with sheer hard work, determination and practice, some of these pupils do eventually manage to become reasonably bilingual. 'Meneer' and 'Juffrou' do not always labour in vain.