

Cryptic style or cryptology or useful brevity

by A.J. Smit

A.A.G. Andertons's article 'Deliberate Departures from Traditional Syntax' in the September 1974 issue of *English Usage in Southern Africa*, and more specifically his reference to the effects of headlines and of brevity, prompted me to look more closely at the effect that abbreviations, but more so acronyms, might have on the usage of English in the future. My readers probably share the tradition of the old school that taught us to be wary of abbreviations and overdone brevity in style.

In the post-war era, however, society has become inundated with associations and other bodies, the labelling of which has become increasingly difficult, with the consequence that long, explanatory names sometimes have to be invented. These in turn call for the making of acronyms which enable one to refer to such bodies without losing one's breath in the process. The following examples will explain this dilemma:

'STOPP! So you thought I could not spell *stop*? And did the interrobang after the word *stop* give you a shock?' This is not idle play with words: there is indeed a close connection between *stop* and STOPP since the acronym stands for the Society of Teachers Opposed to Physical Punishment (stop this caning!!) while the 'interrobang' is a cross between a question mark and an exclamation mark, i.e. a climax symbol to questions that one can answer only with a derisive smile, by looking daggers, with a shrug or with an expression of resignation, e.g.

'You are not perhaps suspecting me, sergeant?'

The omnivorous reader of newspapers and magazines is confronted in our day with a considerable problem. Should he fail to keep abreast with the ever-growing number of new organizations established seemingly without end, he soon finds himself an 'illiterate' ignoramus, cf. 'Both PUSH and FOE listened

with horror to the War Department's announcement of the perfection of SAM'. For heaven's sake, what is this columnist trying to say? Relax. He has taken for granted that he is writing for informed readers about well-known matters, as it is indeed so that both the *People United To Save Humanity* and the *Friends of the Earth* would be horrified if the *Surface-to-Air Missile* should happen to be used so effectively by an aggressor that it sparks off World War III, necessitating in turn the declaration of yet another scorched earth policy.

Let us revert to FOE. It is rather ironic that noble-minded persons such as the Friends of the Earth should be identified by an acronym opposite in meaning to 'friend'; but, of course, they are foes of vandals polluting the earth, therefore the acronym is extremely effective. On first coming across the word, one is apt to sit up and exclaim, 'Oh no, not another terrorist movement!'

'Will GATE officials make use of the findings of GOES or BEST?' If this is absolute Greek to you, be at ease. The questioner merely wants to know whether the officials engaged on the global atmospheric tropical experiment will be utilizing any data collected by the geostationary operational environmental standards.

One is curious to know more about the gentleman ADAM and the lady ADA who are frequently hitting the headlines. Admittedly, it might be so that a few ladies by the name of Ada have joined the movement called *Americans for Democratic Action*, but they have no connection with the gas catalyser nicknamed ADAM by industrialists. Now it so happens that ADA has some blood relations in the United States since this organization has ideas about *freedom* very similar to those of AIM, the *American Indian Movement* whose aim and purpose it is to introduce territorial segregation in parts of the country with a view to 'greater freedom for all Red Indians'.

Would you care to step into the BAR? Sorry, I can't serve you a drink here; behind that notice board you will find only the bustling offices of the *Bantoesake-administrasieraad*. The Afrikaans acronym is rather enticing, not so? But should you require something more substantial, such as extra labour for your new factory, BAR will help you. Their function is different from CORE's (the *Committee on Racial Equality*); the ideas of this committee run diametrically opposite to BAR's, as you may imagine.

'OWLS'? Your surmise is correct; we have referred to birds, but only partly. Lovers of these nocturnal birds are members of the *Okavango Wildlife Society*, and they will certainly tell you more about the wise old bird and the aims of the Society to protect him and all his feathered friends, as well as their wild friends and enemies.

Just to prove how far apart men still operate on this green planet, we refer to the case of CARE which is endeavouring to give South Africans *cleaner air and rivers* and a cleaner environment. Its New Zealand counterpart, on the other hand, stands for *Citizen's Association for Racial Equality*.

Students under the auspices of the *America-South African Study and Education Trust* no doubt have found that the opportunity afforded to them proved an ASSET to their educational advancement. The question arises: Would an *artificial-insemination-donor* feel that he has AID-ed some unfortunate woman to fulfil a cherished wish?

It is quite conceivable that the *Parked Aircraft Security System* could fall a victim to misconceptions about its acronym PASS. Didn't a guard once unwittingly give the password as he was uttering his astonishment at a questioner's enquiry about the system?

Nobody would suspect that WARD is unconnected with hospitals or patients. And yet it is so, except, of course, if an imaginative reader would momentarily be reminded of a real war situation when he reads about the *War Against Recreational Disruption*. No one would like his recreation spoilt by demonstrators, especially not while he is on holiday or on a sports tour. Although the immediate aim of PIN is not to ward off a catastrophic situation such as war on our planet, one hopes that the *Californian People-in-Need Organization* succeeds in achieving its purpose in peace time. WHO might help cinema fans to dispel their nightmares after seeing the film in which corpses are made into human food. One wonders if it is not the duty of the *World Health Organization* to prevent such demoniacal enterprises.

Not all acronyms relate as closely to the activity of the association as TEACH does, for the latter ingeniously refers to one word in the full name as well as to the full name in toto: *Teach Every African Child*. In the case of PROD one finds an almost

ironic *contradictio in terminis* since the idea behind the *Personal Responsibility and Organizational Development* programme is *not* to prod an employee to take part in any OD or MBO or MBO/R programme, but to motivate him voluntarily to make his contribution.

The Society for the Conquering of *Flight Fear* does not intend to SCOFF at the fear encountered by lovers of the sky. Society members are earnestly endeavouring to find ways and means of clearing this aeronautical training hurdle, undoubtedly bearing in mind that in the event of another world conflagration fearless pilots trained in a hurry will be in instant demand. If SALT fails, this will surely happen, but if the aims of the *Strategic Arms Limitation Talks* materialize, SCOFF need have no fear that conquering flight fear will become such a dire necessity.

The words KEW and DEW call to mind pleasant memories of early morning walks in colourful Kew Gardens with grass and foliage all wet with dew. The acronyms do not, however, have a similar beneficial effect on one's solar plexis. Compare *District Early Warning* radar line and *kinetic energy wheel*. The former carries a foreboding of imminent disaster, and the latter suggests the discomfort of too much heat generated by too much exertion!

Enough of examples — it would appear that in our day of heavy demands on the reader's time (with the consequent necessary evil of digests and condensed books) the world press has supplied itself with a handy tool in report-writing, namely the acronym. STOPP!