

Book for all seasons

by John Tucker

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“SHAME!” said the editor’s secretary for the umpteenth time that morning.

This time I was ready. I opened “A Dictionary of English Usage in Southern Africa” (by D.R. Beeton and Helen Dorner, just published by the Oxford University Press) to page 155 and put it in front of her. “Read that”, I said, pointing to column two. The entry reads:

“Shame! – the interjectional phrase, ‘Shame!’ (or ‘For shame!’) is ‘You should be ashamed of yourself!’ and should not be used in the sense of ‘How sweet!’ or ‘How sad!’ when expressing admiration or compassion; probably used in South Africa because of the influence of Afrikaans ‘Siestog!’ which means ‘What a pity!’; however it appears that the word ‘shame’ in the latter sense is not peculiar to South Africa; in the novel by J.B. Priestly, ‘Victoria’s Heyday’, in an account of a visit by Jane Carlyle, the wife of Thomas Carlyle, to the Tax Commission in 1855, a sentence reads, ‘Feeling in a false position I stood by myself at the window and thought “shame” (as children say).’”

“All that about me?” asked the editor’s secretary when she’d finished. “Shame!”

Principle

Well, you can’t win them all, which seems to be the principle on which Professor Ridley Beeton, professor of English at the University of South Africa, and Miss Helen Dorner, a lecturer in the department appear to have worked in compiling this volume.

Regular readers of the *Pretoria News* will remember that almost the first word about this learned project appeared in this newspaper about seven years ago and there have been numerous articles since reporting progress.

For their part “Beeton and Dorner” (and the colleagues who have worked with them) have published twice-yearly volumes of the “Index to English, etc, etc” paving the way for this unusual and fascinating dictionary.

As the blurb says, “it lists vocabulary, idiom and pronunciation used by English speakers in South Africa (Robin Malan please note); there are many words and phrases common in South Africa that are not known elsewhere and the way in which these ... are used is sometimes unique to the area”.

Guidance

Where the winning and losing comes in is that “this dictionary (again quoting the blurb) does not stop at merely giving the derivation of words – it offers guidance as to the acceptability or otherwise of the vocabulary and usage listed”.

In other words, not all the words listed here are good South African English. Those which are acceptable are followed by a plus sign and those rejected by a cross (x).

Among the winners (and how I wish I could list more) are: “Greek shop”, for cafe; “gramadoelas”, for wild, inhospitable, backward region of the country (but not “gopse” meaning much the same thing); “Ikeys, Maties, Tukkies and Witsies” for certain university students; “stywe pap”, which needs no explanation; “uhuru”; “takhaar”, perhaps with thoughts of Oom Schalk Lourens and Herman Charles Bosman’s Marico stories in mind; “Berg”, for the Drakensberg; and “tameletjie”, which would have pleased my mother, who came from the Cape and never lost her taste for this special toffee made of butter and sugar; it can also mean a flat slab of dried fruit, I see.

Losers include “Gats, gits gonna and sis!” – nuff sed about all of them. “Gammat”, too, goes by the board because it is a derogatory term for a coloured or person of Malay origin, and “twak” and “stryddag” also fail to make it. But I can’t understand why “eikona” is rejected when “sakabona”, “sakabula” and “tula” all get in.

Another of my favourites is “fuffie slide”, which is listed simply as schoolboy slang with no opinion given one way or the other.

But there is no mention of a common South African failing – using “if” when “whether” is intended.

I go along with “Beeton and Dorner” on vogue words like “escalate”, “finalise” and “viability”. – I’ve heard them often enough – but we cross swords on two others.

The entry under “advisor” is ambiguous. It says: “often incorrectly spelt ‘adviser’ x; notice, however: ‘advisory’+”. Is that intended to mean that “advisor” is right and “adviser” wrong? Sorry, I still spell it “-er” and the Concise Oxford Dictionary goes along with me. If we are both wrong, I leave it to the COD; I’m too set in my ways to change now.

Abortive

The other word is “aborted”, which is “incorrectly used for ‘abortive’”, say Beeton and Dorner. They quote a phrase about an “‘aborted’ moon mission”. Sorry, I think the word is correct as it was used, not as Beeton and Dorner would have it. The COD agrees that “abort” means to miscarry, which is what the moon mission did; it didn’t fail, which would have been abortive.

I had great fun with the book as you can see. Get a copy yourself and you’ll find it every bit as fascinating. You’ll come back to it again and again.

EDITORS’ NOTE:

1. The appearance of ‘Advisor’ – as a recommended spelling – in the Dictionary was no more than the work of a complicated gremlin. The following was the original (and correct) ruling which appeared in *English Usage in Southern Africa*, Vol. 1, no. 1, June, 1970, p. 3:
 adviser: often incorrectly spelt ‘advisor’ x; notice, however: ‘advisory’+
2. The correct phonetic notation of the village ‘Irene’ should also be noted: irénē.
3. The following amended entry has been decided on by the editors of the Dictionary, in the light of the response of readers:
 Coolie(ii) n, Hind, x
 S.Afr Ind, not necessarily a labourer or menial; not applicable to S Afr Chinese; the word has a derogatory connotation, & as it tends to give offence should be avoided