

ROOFIES AND OUMANNE — IS MILITARY ENGLISH IN SOUTH AFRICA BEING GYPPOED?

By J.H. Picard

Were Dr Johnson alive today and able to visit the ‘four corners’ of the earth by Jumbo Jet, he would be astounded to hear how his mother tongue is spoken. A man whose attitude to the English of Shakespeare, Jonson and the British Army could hardly be assumed to be ‘verlig’ would, were he to visit our military units, probably wrinkle his nose in disgust and promptly return to his grave.

Yet, in doing so, he would be dismissing one very important fact: the power of a truly great language to assimilate foreign elements, adapt itself to a changing world, and still retain its identity. This is why English is still today, in spite of Britain’s international decline, a world language. The English, as Otto Jespersen put it so succinctly, ‘sat down at a banquet of languages and ran away with the scraps.’

The Hobson brothers wrote their novels in Afrikaans to catch the spirit of the South African country side. This statement may be partially true, but I do feel that, particularly in South Africa, English has adapted itself so well that even *Skankwan van die Duine* would have been equally effective in English. Many of the typically Afrikaans words have found their way into the Oxford Dictionary : Trek, veld, laager, spoor, koppie, etc.

The British military tradition in South Africa is very old. To ‘Stellenbosch’ an officer, that is to transfer him to a less responsible appointment where he would be out of harm’s way, is a typical example. South African and British soldiers have fought side by side for many years since the Boer war. The bonds are still very close; and obviously the influence of Afrikaans on our South African military English has been, and still is, profound.

More than 30 000 national servicemen are called up for service annually and within the military sphere the Afrikaans and English languages are in daily contact. Many of the new phrases and lexical items are unacceptable, it is true, but many others impart a particularly

South African colour to our local 'brand' of English and this cannot be wholly bad.

Let us go on a 'conducted' tour of some of our military training establishments to hear the language, not of the instructors, but of the soldiers themselves. The new recruits are called *roofies*, a *roof* becomes a *blougat*, when he is halfway through his course, and when he has almost completed his training period he has *min dae* and is raised to the exalted ranks of the *oumanne*. Some of the *troepies* with particularly dirty habits are adequately censured by their mates when they receive the title *vuilgat* whilst a very ugly specimen becomes a *skrik*. As regards objects and items of equipment the Afrikaans influence is even more marked : the steel locker is a *kas*, a tin trunk is a *trommel* and the mess tray or 'dixy' is a *varkpan*. The step-out uniform worn is known as *mooi-moois* while the barrackroom is referred to as *varkhok*, not derogatorily of course.

'When we go shooting, *ou swaer* (term of endearment) you will have to spend many hours in the *skietgat* and afterwards you must pick up all the *doppies* (ejected cartridges).' When soldiers check up on their personal kit, they must account for their *mosdoppies* (plastic inner helmets), their *staaldakke* (steel helmets) and their *balsakke* (kitbags). Should they fail to find everything in order, their *mammajoor* (sergeant major) gives them *storings* or 'troubles', but if everything is in order they will feel *bakgat* (fine).

Of course some 'troepies' are impatient for their period of service to end: they are then told to *vasbyt* (to hold out). Others, inter alia those who have received non-commissioned ranks – e.g. *korpies* (corporals) – are as keen as mustard and then they have *houding*. In the mornings they must *aantree* (form up) and any recalcitrant behaviour evinces the exclamation 'eksê, he's wit' or should the instructor be very popular he's a 'kop toe ou.'

During exercises there is a wealth of typically Afrikaans-inspired English military jargon in evidence : the infantry are called *bokkies* as a term of endearment, whilst the 'scorn term' is *bokkoppe* toting *ketties* (rifles). A member of the Armoured Corps is a *tankjokkie*. An officer giving a particularly poor salute *waai vlieë* whilst a useless soldier becomes a *vuiluil*. Top brass of any designation are *indoenas*, a handgrenade is a *pineapple*, a very descriptive term but perhaps not peculiar to South Africa. If a company gets orders to go, it must *laat*

wiel. An arrest is referred to as 'put him in the kas'.

Strafing by aircraft is described as *peppering*, an analogy of the Afrikaans 'pepering'. The medical officer is better known as *slagter* and the chaplain in the Air Force is a *sky pilot*. Specialist staff are often referred to as 'lang hare and dik brille' and the South African soldier's gift of improvisation in war is referred to as 'gyppeoing', a term coined in North Africa during the last war.

The expression *hardegat* refers to a most stubborn person – this is of recent coinage. But the typical South African habit of referring to motorcars or vehicles as 'cars' (*karre*) is somewhat older. In the workshops some of the technicians or *tiffies*, may feel *sterk* about their girlfriends at home and if they dream about them instead of executing their tasks, the sergeant will 'throw them with the workshop manual'.

A South African naval abbreviation SAWAN during World War II (South African Women's Auxiliary Navy) has today become a name for the female ratings in the Navy (the first A being dropped): 'SWANS'. In the Army we have already been recruiting *soldoedies* for quite a while. It is quite certain that some of these terms will find their way into South African English dictionaries in the same way as *afsaal*, *outspan*, *commando* and *vlei* have previously.

One must bear in mind that military English in South Africa is not merely a 'taal' for 'takhare' or 'backvelders', neither is it a language for 'lang hare and dik brille' or 'Indoenas'. It is a practical means of communication, spontaneously accepted and used by thousands of national servicemen. Judiciously selected, some of these 'South Africanisms' would certainly enrich South African English.