

AN EDITOR AND THE INDEX OF ENGLISH USAGE IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

by Mey Hurter

English Usage in Southern Africa originated under the editorship of Professor D.R. Beeton and Miss Helen Dorner. This year sees the beginning of the consolidation of its first four volumes into a comprehensive *Index of English Usage in Southern Africa*. This seems to us to be the appropriate time to record some of Miss Dorner's recollections of their arduous task.

Questioned as to what could have prompted a major undertaking such as this, Miss Dorner replied: 'People kept enquiring'. And those who enquired present a formidable list indeed, ranging from the Department of Education to the crossword addict; from the Official Language Bureau to the nervous man about to make a speech. Neither were the queries confined to those from people in South Africa. The request for help from an accountant in the Republic would, for example, be joined on the files by that from a teacher of English in West Germany.

Soon a great deal of time was being spent in an effort to furnish the correct information. The two future editors of the *Index* found it regrettable that the results of so much valuable research should remain unrecorded and, from 1967 onwards, both enquiries and answers were duly registered on cards. This record now consists of three filing cabinets containing over 3 500 cards. In the process of recording and publishing, the *Index* has run through seven assistants in as many years. The fact that the two editors have managed to survive at all surely testifies to the toughness of academic fibre!

Three discussion programmes in the series *Talking of English* broadcast by the English Service of the South African Broadcasting Corporation in 1969 revealed that the interest of the compilers of *English Usage in Southern Africa* centred mainly upon 'the standard

and expressiveness of English in South Africa'.¹ According to the introduction of the very first issue their objectives were to provide a record of mistakes and problems common to all people using English as well as those peculiar to South Africans; to list the problems encountered by those who use English as a second or a third language; and to examine typically South African English pronunciation. At the same time guidance would be given on pronunciation and on the desirability of local speech and idiomatic variants. In subsequent issues the incidence and acceptability of words falling within a specifically South African vocabulary (e.g. biltong, dikkop, kloof) became a major consideration.

In the section 'Method and Format' of Vol. 1, no 1, of the *Index* Miss Dorner lists their sources. The list comprises some twenty-two titles, and includes authoritative dictionaries and the works of authorities on various species of fauna and flora in South Africa. The response to an enquiry would, for example, often simply be a reference to the relevant page of J.B.L. Smith's *The Sea Fishes of Southern Africa* (Central News Agency, South Africa, 1961) or to H.W. Fowler's *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (Oxford Clarendon Press, London, 1968). The editors were also offered access to authoritative works done elsewhere on English Usage. There was, amongst others, the information proffered by Professor Randolph Quirk, a linguist at the University of London, whose letter ended as follows: 'I enclose a list of our publications in which [the editor of the *Index of English Usage in Southern Africa*] may be interested'. And last, but by no means least, was the contribution of the 'man in the street', who would supply lists of mispronunciations, of the use or misuse of English, of the influence of the other languages spoken in South Africa on South African English and of his own problems.

In spite of all the valuable help afforded by their many sources, the onus of compiling the *Index* still rested upon the editors. Miss Dorner remembers the seemingly interminable hours devoted to editing and proof-reading. Then there were those lengthy periods spent in consultation by the editors, the soul-searchings, the difficult decisions, the tracing of references and origins, the verifying of opinions. There

¹ Quoted in *English Usage in South Africa*, Vol. 1, no 1, p. xxxiv.

were, for example, numerous deliberations on the vexed question of the hyphen and on the correctness or acceptability of a typically South African word. The *Index*, in fact, became an essential part of their lives. The writer of this article vividly recalls the occasion when, on approaching Miss Dorner for some desperately needed advice on Baudelaire, she found her request abruptly forestalled in this manner:

‘What is the English for a “miskoek”?’

Clearly, the *Index* was rapidly changing from a dictionary to a disease.



If the publication of *English Usage in Southern Africa* elicited rather less response than had been anticipated in some respects, the reaction of certain readers nevertheless led to an almost regular correspondence. There is the instance of the octogenarian ex-teacher of English in Bloemfontein who inveighs amusingly against the South African Broadcasting Corporation in the following terms: ‘... my efforts

to bring home to these people their amazing mispronunciation have proved abortive'. In another part of the same letter the writer scathingly refers to the said mispronouncers as 'apparently highly educated culprits'. Again, many most helpful letters were received in which certain points made by the editors were queried. Then there is evidence on the files of a somewhat lengthy correspondence between the University College of Rhodesia, the State Library in Pretoria, Miss Dorner and the University of Edinburgh regarding the meaning of the word 'achnashie'. Though all queries may not be grist to this particular mill, no query is disregarded.

Today the *Index* is listed in the holdings of the Universities of the USSR for its contribution to the study of South African English Usage; a gentleman at the University of Prague is writing a dissertation on South African English Usage, relying heavily on the *Index*; and Miss Dorner has even received a letter from an ex-pupil in Ottawa who read about the *Index* in the *South African Digest*.

On being questioned regarding her greatest wish for the *Index*, Miss Dorner promptly answered: a tape-recorder, a caravan and a year's leave to do real field work. 'That's what they do in the States, you know.' And what, she was finally asked, did she consider to be the most valuable knowledge acquired by her and Professor Beeton from their seven years' devotion to the *Index*. The reply came as promptly and as succinctly:

It does not so much matter what you know, as that you know where to find what you don't know.