

COMMENT ON ENGLISH USAGE

The following comment on the first issue this year of *English Usage in Southern Africa* appeared in *The Cape Times* (1st August, 1974). One of the editors of *English Usage* has responded to this comment. Both the original statement and the reply are reproduced below by kind permission of the editor of *The Cape Times*.

How an ou can enrich English

by
John Scott

IT WAS A GREAT relief to hear that language-mixing, unlike race-mixing, is not death to Western civilization as preserved in South Africa.

The chief editor of the Oxford English Dictionary, Mr Robert Burchfield, is reported to have said in Cape Town this week that the mingling of Afrikaans and English does not corrupt either language but enriches them both.

Remarks like "jusslike, he's a lekker ou," can now be made in the best company with the sure knowledge that the language is being enriched.

Sometimes there may be confusion about which language is undergoing the enrichment. A visitor may ask:

"Pardon me, but what did you say a moment ago?"

"I said 'jusslike, he's a lekker ou.'"

"Yes, it sounded like that. I haven't got the hang of Afrikaans yet, you know."

"It isn't Afrikaans, it's new enriched English, like uranium."

No doubt the Genootskap vir die Handhawing van

Afrikaans is watching closely in case the new enriched English swallows Afrikaans in a gulp, like the whale swallowed Jonah.

It is part of the English-speaker's mythological superiority to assume that, whatever happens to his language, it is doing the swallowing and not vice versa.

This assumption is totally believed by those who look to the SABC to save their identity. They leap out of bed in the morning and turn on the radio, to make sure they are still Afrikaners.

The compilers of a booklet, "English Usage in Southern Africa",* jump to the conclusion, for instance, that the phrase "it's vrekke" is English. Not a shade of doubt apparently crossed their minds that "it's vrekke" might more accurately be classified as enriched Afrikaans.

The same thing with "start wikkeling". Any South African schoolboy will tell you this means to "get moving", but may be undecided whose enrichment it is. Not the compilers of this booklet. They

are determined to call it "English usage".

They have listed these enrichments, with others, under the heading "Schoolboyisms". It seems to me that schoolboys are doing more to enrich the language than any other single category of person.

Schoolboys, in case the linguistically unenriched don't know it, eat "sammidges", ride on "fiet-siesles", "go goef (bathing) for skops (fun)", hate long "spraks" (lectures) and "g w a r r s" (detestable people) but like "tut okes" (good sorts).

Or a schoolboy may say: "Ag, he's a heavy ou, hey."

According to the editors of the booklet, this is "descriptive of the deep-thinker or introvert, but more closely related to the description given of one who fails to display characteristics in accordance with the norm of a particular society"

If you ask me, the editors are heavy ou themselves whose spraak needs a bit of enrichment before the language vreks.

* *English Usage in Southern Africa*, Volume 5, no 1. (University of South Africa).

The Editor,
The Cape Times.

Dear Sir,

I refer to the article by John Scott entitled 'How an ou can enrich English' in *The Cape Times* of Thursday, 1st August, 1974. The editors feel that your columnist's remarks constitute a gross misrepresentation of the present format and aims of *English Usage in Southern Africa*. The writer of your article bases his criticism of the section 'Some South African Schoolboyisms', which appears in the current issue of this publication, on the assumption that the editors 'jump to the conclusion that "it's vrekked" is English'. By 'English' he apparently means accepted or standard English. It is difficult to decide exactly how he could have 'jumped' to this conclusion, for in the first two sections of this particular issue the editors signify neither approval nor disapproval. These sections, 'South African Goal Argot' and 'Some South African Schoolboyisms', are purely descriptive; the prescriptive part of the publication is reserved for the last section, 'Current Misusages'. Deviation from the norm in schoolboy English in South Africa is presented as no more than a linguistic phenomenon. In other words, we were simply reporting on the language used by many South African English-speaking schoolboys.

The columnist also takes exception to our claim that 'it's vrekked' is English rather than what he terms 'enriched Afrikaans'. A little elementary logic brought to bear on this question would reveal that the structure of the expression is wholly English. The only Afrikaans element is the word 'vrek', and even here the ending is English. The double 'k' is, admittedly, a concession to the word's Afrikaans origin. On the whole, however, it should not be difficult in this case to distinguish between Jonah and the whale: English has unmistakably swallowed the Afrikaans verb, not vice versa. It is, moreover, difficult to imagine in what way a phrase used exclusively by English speakers could be said to 'enrich' Afrikaans.

The word 'enrich' brings me to my last point. A false premise seems to have led the reviewer into a morass of spurious inferences. It is unfortunate indeed for his argument that he should have, perhaps unconsciously, foisted the opinion of the chief editor of the Oxford English Dictionary, Mr Robert Burchfield, upon the editors of *English Usage in Southern Africa*. The belief that the mingling of the two

languages 'enriches them both' is Mr Burchfield's, not ours. The statement that English is 'enriched' by the practices reported in these two articles was never made by us. Had we attempted prescription at all, we would probably have ruled against most goal argot and schoolboy English as accepted English.

Yours faithfully,

Mey Hurter

Editor, *English Usage in Southern Africa*.