

# INTRODUCTION

South African English need not regard itself as an inferior off-shoot, but to maintain a standard of expressiveness and accuracy, it must be aware of its possibilities and its shortcomings. This is the role that the compilers of the *Index of English Usage in Southern Africa* hope to fill. Our function is not to present ourselves as the unbending pooh-bahs of 'proper' usage; it would be totally wrong to make South Africans so self-conscious about their language habits that they lose the desire to express themselves. Our task is to assist in keeping the English language alive in this country, and to help enquirers wherever we can. The present journal, which will be issued twice a year, serves to introduce the tentative findings of the *Index* staff to a wider public. Every response — critical, constructive, supplementary — serves to make our work more searching and more comprehensive.

It may be asked what kind of activity we envisage. The widest possible within our terms of reference: we shall consider everything that affects English usage in this country. We are concerned with words and expressions that add to our command and range of English, words derived, for example, from languages such as Dutch-Afrikaans, the Bantu languages, and Portuguese. There are, of course, many dubious acquisitions, acquisitions that represent little other than illiteracies or vulgarisms in any reputable English, and we are recording these. South African English has also developed words and expressions that cannot be attributed to the presence of another language: the elements are completely English, but their application is uniquely our own. Certain accepted English terms have also been applied with a meaning peculiar to this country, and part of our function is to indicate whether this peculiarity represents a gain or a loss.

The scope of the *Index*, and of this ancillary journal, is further indicated in the transcription, on pages xxxix, of Programme 3 of a set of discussions included in the series *Talking of English*, presented last year by the South African Broadcasting Corporation.

The following is the notice that appeared when we began work on this project some years ago:

'In the Department of English work has begun on the compilation of an *Index of English Usage in Southern Africa*, which, it is hoped, will one day provide a service similar to Fowler's *Dictionary of Modern*

*English Usage*, Partridge's *Usage and Abusage*, and Barzun's *Modern American Usage*. Initially the Index will be compiled on cards, but eventually we plan to prepare it for publication in book form.

The compilers have five objectives (though when work begins in earnest further aims no doubt will present themselves). We hope to provide:

1. A record of mistakes and problems common not only to English-speaking South Africans, but to all people using English (we shall try not to duplicate the work of Fowler and others);
2. A record of mistakes and problems characteristically South African;
3. A record of problems encountered by people for whom English is not the first language (with particular reference to Afrikaans-speaking people, and those using one of the Bantu or Indian languages);
4. A list of departures from Standard English pronunciation, characteristic of South Africans, or enjoying wide currency in South Africa;
5. Some guidance in overcoming mistakes and problems; guidance in matters of pronunciation; and some judgements on the desirability and efficacy of local speech and idiomatic variants.

To make the *Index* substantially effective we require the co-operation of anyone interested in English in this country; we hope to find correspondents in every part of the country. Any problems or mistakes, any variants or regional eccentricities, should be noted and sent to Miss Helen Dorner, Department of English, University of South Africa, P.O. Box 392, Pretoria.

'The compilers, in turn, will be happy to try to answer questions about usage, (a) by referring to the Index, and (b) by undertaking research on behalf of enquirers.'

Local vocabulary and idiom (point 5) have, in the course of our preliminary research into this project, emerged as subjects of endless ramification. The emphasis here is also on defining the desirable and undesirable aspects of our usage. We do not in any way want to diminish the effectiveness of English as an international and highly respected language, but though we shall fight to preserve the standards of the English that came to us from England, we must also give

recognition to the linguistic adventurousness that has always characterised this language, and indeed has made for its universality, its versatile adaptation of itself to different geographic and social conditions: in future issues we may be able to include brief articles on major variants such as 'Australian English' and 'Indian English'. And we should be foolish were we not to recognize that we live in the vast shadow of that phenomenon called 'American English', though here again we shall not show any fear of this idiomatic giant.

*The Dictionary of South African English*, a lexical-historical enterprise, is being undertaken under the direction of Professor William Branford of the Institute for the Study of English in Africa at Rhodes University. We are working in close conjunction with Professor Branford and his team, and we hope to be able to report on aspects of his project in future issues of *English Usage in Southern Africa*.

Our investigation has been substantially furthered by a generous grant from the Human Sciences Research Council. The present journal is the result of a special grant from the Council of the University of South Africa. We wish to express our thanks to both these bodies.

D.R.B

H.D.