

Della Thompson (Editor). *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, 9th edition 1995, xxi + 1673 pp. ISBN 0-19-861319-9. Oxford: Clarendon Press. Price R125,00.

Looking for clues as to why *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* is useful to us in South Africa today, I found the following in one of the preface sections titled 'English over Fifteen Centuries':

'... It is very important that dictionaries should take account of English overseas, especially as it affects usage in Britain. The process is a strengthening and enriching one, and is the mark of a living and flourishing language.' (p. xii)

On the one hand, this statement is probably designed to explain the inclusion of colloquialisms in what is historically-speaking a reference work designed for a relatively exclusive discourse community. This statement places *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* firmly in its place as relevant worldwide. It acknowledges that English is a language owned by everyone who uses it, legitimizes to some extent the existence of varieties of English which hitherto has been a somewhat thorny issue for linguistic purists. On the other hand, the quote above emphasizes the importance of influences from elsewhere which is only spoken about as being significant in regard to how it affects usage of English in England itself. It nevertheless prompts the reader to investigate the nature and extent of linguistic accommodation vs. purism inherent in the current edition of *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*. It also raises questions of ideological orientation in dictionary compilation.

It is clearly stated on the inside flap of the dust jacket that this edition reflects 'the English language as it is written and spoken in its varied styles and international varieties'.

Another disclaimer statement in 'English over Fifteen Centuries' is: 'with usage constantly changing the distinction between 'right' and 'wrong' is sometimes difficult to establish.' (p. xii) It would be interesting to investigate the nature of the distinction between prescription and description in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*. Does it lend any guidance at all on desirability of specific lexical items in specific discourse contexts?

The appearance of this publication is well-timed for the political transformation in South Africa at present and may stimulate much discussion in terms of appropriate forms of linguistic accommodation which have become common practice in South African educational institutions. Now more than ever, the debate of 'standard' vs. officially recognized varieties of English is rearing its head. While moving towards fully fledged multilingualism in South Africa and while it is not clear how 'standard' English will be defined in South Africa in the 90's, this dictionary serves as an essential source of reference. Clearly the editors view language corpus extension to include borrowings and foreign lex-

emes as positive rather than negative. This indicates to what degree it is 'normal' for communities and individuals world wide to use conformity or diversity as touchstones for asserting their degree of proximity or resistance to diverse communities and thereby to social groups.

An interesting comparison might be whether the new Afrikaans dictionaries have been equally accommodating in recent years in terms of inclusion of Anglicisms than they used to be in the 60's and 70's when concerted efforts were still made to replace each Anglicism with 'pure', 'correct' words, even if this meant having to coin them at a rapid rate. I dare say my English teachers from that era would be shocked and amazed to see that slang such as 'gonna' (an American version of 'going to') which was unclassifiable as 'real' language, now appears in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*!

C. Jeffrey (1993) in 'Standards in South African English' in the *English Academy Review* 10:14-25 discusses ways of looking at new Englishes and explains how it was documented in 1872 that the new vocabulary (under the strong influence of Dutch) was said to be 'incorrect' but 'useful' and that in future perhaps a new language might emerge. The same statement was made by Njabulo Ndebele in 1987 in his famous keynote address at the annual conference of the English Academy. A new variety of English has since emerged and is commonly known as 'Black English'. It is currently probably the most researched variety of English in Southern Africa. Prominent linguists such as D. Gough and Q. Buthelezi have focused much of their attention on its emergence. Jeffrey's article also refers to a document dated December 1909 in which is stated that from 1872 onwards a general openness to new features was prevalent, but that there was disapproval of 'corruption' of English standards.

Some comparisons between this dictionary and some of its predecessors and this dictionary and the new *Dictionary of South African English* that has been so long in the making and has appeared this year, might be useful. The first *Concise Oxford* appeared in 1911, while the first *Dictionary of South African English* appeared in 1996. This may be compared to the history of English dictionaries generally, the first of which appeared in 1604. The current *Concise Oxford* contains 140 000 meanings while the 1992 *Oxford Dictionary* and the *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* have round about 500 000 entries each. The current *Concise Oxford* reflects 15 centuries of recorded English language while the *Dictionary of South African English* reflects items recorded in the last three centuries only.

If it is true that the *COD* only contains about 15-20% of lexical items that exist, and that entries are based on selections by editors and not necessarily by frequency of degree of usage, then the magnitude of the English language is truly overwhelming. With regard to discrepancies in types of lexemes recorded in different dictionaries of the English language, D. Chrystal (1995:119) in his *Encyclopedia of the English Language*, says:

'Discrepancies are usually caused by differing editorial emphasis. The *Oxford* has far more historical references and British dialect items than does the *Webster*, which in turn has far more local American items.'

Historical links between English and South Africa probably account for the inclusion of much South African vocabulary in the current *Concise Oxford*, where a *Webster's* would probably not contain that many South Africanisms.

A lexicon reflects aspects of vocabulary of a language, how the word is formed, its origin and shift of meaning over time, its current usage, how meanings relate to other meanings. Chrystal (1995:118) defines a lexeme as follows: 'A lexeme is a unit of lexical meaning, which exists regardless of any inflectional endings it may have or the number of words it may contain.' For the purposes of this review, I randomly chose certain words common in South African English and will describe how they are circumscribed in the *Concise Oxford*. The words are 'donga', 'Bushman', 'apartheid', 'rooinek', 'bastard' and 'linguicism'.

It is stated that 'donga' is a common word in Australia as well as in South Africa but that it has Nguni roots. This is rather puzzling as it is difficult to understand how, if it is related to a similar word in Nguni, it could possibly have been transported into Australian vocabulary, unless there is a similar foreign word with equivalent meaning.

The word 'Bushman' is constantly under contestation. There is a debate raging among academics, historians and linguists around the political correctness of the term, which is not reflected in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*. This is over and above the fact that many groups exist who have been classified in the typical South African way under one umbrella term 'Bushman'. Some of the groups are the Khoi-Khoi, the Khoisan and the Griquas, all of whom have similar but differing cultures and languages.

According to the *Concise Oxford* the word 'apartheid' which is uncontestedly a homegrown South African term, has become a general term used worldwide in reference to discriminatory policies.

'Rooinek' and 'bastard' are both words with overwhelmingly derogatory as well as racist connotations. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines 'rooinek' as "a British or English speaking South African" and does not mention the extent to which the word has persisted throughout decades of political shifts in South Africa.

In contrast to this, three uses of the word 'bastard' are listed, one of which is its use of depicting 'an unpleasant or despicable person'. What is noteworthy here is the way in which the derogatory connotation of 'bastard' is explained, while that of 'rooinek' is not. One could assign the omission of the mention of the derogatory nature of 'rooinek' to a lack of access to knowledge about the historical origin of the term and its current colloquial usage. What I am highlighting here is the vastness of the lexicographer's task in a world where the cultural politics of English worldwide are unfathomable.

'Linguicism', a term that refers to linguistic prejudice, is a word that has become quite widely spread and is sprinkled liberally in the subject literature on the relationship between linguistics and human rights in South Africa. The term is used liberally by N. Alexander and K. Heugh from the Project for Alternative Education in South Africa and also by T. Skuttnabb-Kangas, a prominent writer on multilingualism and disadvantage, based at the University of Roskilde in Denmark. Whether it is common worldwide is not clear to me, but it is not listed in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*.

This dictionary presents itself as a useful reference work for all teachers, linguists, students, scholars and all others as a tool for gauging overlap between common usage locally and usage elsewhere. This seems a useful exercise while the aspirations of South Africans generally is to be able to participate in discourse communities globally. I am not arguing for a fixed standard as such, but for the value of having knowledge of standards that are known to be influential. Informed choices, in terms of lexical items and syntax, cannot be made in the absence of good reference material. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* provides the user with a specific section at the back of the publication, titled 'Style Guide'. South African students often ask to be taught rules of English in the hope that their writing might improve. A reference work such as this provides an excellent source for self-teaching in this regard. As an Oxford publication it is internationally recognized as a 'yardstick' of good and appropriate style and a 'must' for every shelf. Computer language adds another layer of lexemes constantly changing which cannot possibly be included in print fast enough.

The extensive inclusion of loan words and foreign borrowing in this edition reflect the extent to which such borrowing and loaning of lexemes is regarded as a normal or natural process in the nineties.

It is stated in the preface that the *COD* has been reviewed 9 times, this means that it was reviewed roughly every 10 years. The *COD*'s of the future will probably be reference works on current English usage and will appear on the World Wide Web in a constant state of review rather than reference works on 'standard, pure or proper English' as they might have been seen to be in the past.

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