

**Rod Nesbitt.** *First illustrated dictionary for Namibian schools*, 1993, 176 pp. ISBN 0 86848-832-1. Windhoek: Gamsberg Macmillan Publishers. Price N\$ 19,95 + GST.

### A learners' dictionary for language acquisition?

This dictionary aims to meet the needs of Namibian children in the first few years of schooling. The task is a complex one. In Namibia, the overwhelming majority of children receive their schooling through a language which is unfamiliar to them (English), so complex demands are made on the learner. Rossner (1985: 96) observes that if "the task of lexicographers is hard, the task of second-language learners is harder still when it comes to evolving a lexicon that is both optimally useful and reliable". Usefulness and reliability are at a particular premium for the Namibian pupil, obliged to use English as the language of access to learning all other subjects.

Rather ambitiously, the dictionary claims to offer 'a comprehensive word bank', encouraging children in grades one and two to move beyond learning single words to producing single sentences, and providing children in grades three and four with a real dictionary, affording them a substantial vocabulary with an example sentence to contextualise each word. The notion is that children will not only develop dictionary skills, but will also acquire reading and sentence construction skills from following the syntactic models of the examples.

To this end, the dictionary has attempted to present what Widdowson (1978: 10-12) describes as value, rather than mere signification, by providing a contextualised example of use for every entry.

Not surprisingly the obvious constraints of a dictionary of this kind and scope make it impossible to provide a full set of "contexts of situation". In most cases only one is provided. The entry for *accident*, for instance, points only to the negative connotation of the word:

accident something bad that happens.

There is no indication of the strong association with unexpectedness or chance.

Second, the simple entries which are a strength of the dictionary also act as a significant constraint. Words take on precise meanings from the context in which they are embedded, so attempts to define them in very simple terms must often be unsatisfactory. The entry for *story* rather inadequately defines it as 'true or untrue things someone tells you'. This excludes a range of common meanings. Consider the following examples taken from the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*:

She wrote a story about space exploration; a true-life love story; the story of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs; We want to hear his side of the

story; Well that's my story and I'm sticking to it; a remarkable success story; It's the same story in Britain; the story goes; Telling stories.

Third, some of the definitions misrepresent meaning.

**loaf:** a large piece of bread

**frown:** have lines on your face

**dislike:** not like, hate someone or something

are examples of this. In the case of *loaf*, no sense is given of its being a single mass of bread in the shape it has when it comes from the oven. The definition suggests a *hunk* or large slice from a loaf. The example sentence adds to the confusion:

Mother bought six loaves in the bakery

The 'unnatural' flavour introduced by both 'mother' and 'bought ... in the bakery' aside, it is unlikely that buying six loaves would be familiar practice. In the next case, *frown*, all sense of frowning as action is lost. And, in the definition of *dislike*, hate is erroneously presented as a close synonym.

The fourth problem lies in the inadequate contextualisation managed by the example sentences.

aunt the sister of your father or mother, or your uncle's wife

is simple and clear, but the 'illustrative' sentence

My aunt gives me money on my birthday

is a curious choice. It suggests (quite misleadingly) that giving money to nephews and nieces is a characteristically 'auntly' activity.

Sometimes the definitions are more difficult to understand than the words they are intended to clarify. *More* is defined as 'a larger number or a bigger amount', and *girl* as 'a young female'; *full* is defined as 'hold as much or as many as possible'; and *form* is defined as 'a printed paper with spaces to write on'.

There is a certain inconsistency as far as the development of 'language system' is concerned. Quite rightly, the dictionary makes no reference to word classes. However, although it consistently introduces definitions of noun entries with an article, the entries for the other word classes are less consistently presented. The entry for *full* given above illustrates the point with regard to adjectives. Problems arise, too, where the word may have a noun or verb function, but only one is given. In the case of *milk*, for instance, only the noun is given.

Definitions of verbs are sometimes close to paraphrase or seem imperative in form

**guess:** try to answer when you are not sure

**hear:** use your ears

**measure:** find out how big something is

The pictorial illustrations are sometimes disappointing. The 'flowers on the apple tree' are yellow and white (p. 59), the artist is seen seemingly drawing hills not a lake as is suggested in the text (p. 12), and there is little use of labelling to clarify meaning.

These criticisms notwithstanding, the dictionary makes an important contribution. It is unlikely to succeed in the ambitious goals it sets itself. However, it does offer a serviceable tool, which the users should be able to employ with increasing confidence. The 1 500 words chosen are generally very simply explained. An intelligent selection appears to have been made after careful and thorough research on the Junior Primary syllabuses and materials used in Southern Africa. The illustrations have a distinctively African flavour, placing the English words in the dictionary in a 'real-world' context.

All in all, the book is informative, robustly bound, and reasonably priced, making it a practical option.

## References

- Rossner, R. 1985. *The learner as lexicographer: using dictionaries in second language learning. ELT Documents: 120: Dictionaries, Lexicography and Language Learning.* Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Widdowson, H.W. 1978. *Teaching Language as Communication.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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