



















### 3.1 Borrowings

A significant proportion of the OED's new and revised entries for African varieties have been borrowed into English from some of the most widely spoken languages on the continent. For South African English, Afrikaans is a particularly important source for such loanwords, lending two of the oldest words in the dictionary's December 2018 update. *Deurmekaar*, first attested in 1871, is an adjective applied to something that is confused, muddled, or mixed up. The adverb *voetstoots* was first used in English in 1883 as a legal term describing the buying or selling of items in their existing condition, but nearly a hundred years later, it also began to be used more generally to describe actions done unconditionally, without reservation or qualification.

Later borrowings from Afrikaans were first seen in English in the first half of the 20th century. They include *eina* (first attested 1913), an interjection expressing sharp pain or distress, and *dwaal* (1957), a noun referring to a dreamy, dazed, or absent-minded state, frequently used in the phrase *in a dwaal*.

Other words in the OED's recent update for the English of South Africa have their roots in two of the country's other official languages — Xhosa and Zulu. The oldest of these loanwords date to the late 19th century: *amakhosi* (1857), a collective term of Xhosa and Zulu origin for tribal leaders or chiefs in traditional Nguni societies, and *ubuntu* (1860), a word signifying the fundamental values of humanity or of Africanness, also borrowed partly from Xhosa and partly from Zulu. *Ingcibi*, first used in English in 1937, is a Xhosa word for a person who performs circumcisions on young men as part of a traditional rite of passage, while the more contemporary borrowing *Mzansi*, dating from 1999, is the Xhosa name for South Africa, and for South Africans as a people.

Two years later, the OED's new additions for Nigerian English included such loanwords as the aforementioned *buka*, which was borrowed from the Yoruba word *búkà*, meaning a hut or market stall, and was itself borrowed from the Hausa word *búkkàa*, signifying a grass shed or hut. Two other Yoruba borrowings in the Nigerian update are the noun *danfo* (first attested 1973), which refers to a yellow minibus that carries passengers for a fare as part of an informal transport system in Lagos, and *tokunbo* (1990), an adjective denoting an imported second-hand product, especially a car. The latter comes from the Yoruba word *tòkunbò*, which literally translates into English as 'from overseas', and is formed by the words *ti* 'from, belonging to', *òkun* 'ocean, sea', and *bò* 'to return'.

Nigerian Pidgin is another fount of new words for Nigerian English. *Sef*, first evidenced in Ben Okri's novel *Flowers and Shadows*, published in 1980, is an adverb borrowed from Pidgin, which itself could have been an adverbial use of either the English adjective *safe* or the pronoun *self*. It is an emphatic marker added to the end of statements or rhetorical questions, often to express irritation or impatience, as in this quotation from Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 2013 novel *Americanah*: 'He could have given you reduced rent

in one of his properties, even a free flat *sef*' (Adichie 2013: 396).

Also coming from pidgin contexts is the verb *chop*, which is a common colloquial word in Ghana and Nigeria meaning 'to eat'. However, beginning in the 1970s, *chop* also developed the sense of acquiring money quickly and easily, and often dishonestly. The negative sense of misappropriating, extorting, or embezzling funds is also in the earlier reduplicative noun *chop-chop* (first attested 1966), which refers to bribery and corruption in public life. This likening of stealing money to actually devouring it is also reflected in the even earlier synonymous phrase *to eat money* (1960), as in the following quotation from the 22 August 2016 issue of Nigeria's *News Chronicle*: 'Our roads were not done. By the end of this year, you will know who ate the money of these roads'.

More recently, the OED's update for East African Englishes published in its June 2022 update is dominated by loanwords from Swahili, the region's main lingua franca. This long list of borrowings includes the oldest of the new entries in the batch, *jembe*, referring to a hoe-shaped hand tool used for digging, which is first attested in an article by Richard Francis Burton published in the *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society* in 1860. Over a hundred years later, renowned Kenyan writer and academic Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o used the same word in his historical novel *A Grain of Wheat*, first published in 1967.

One of the newest words in the East African update is also a Swahili loan: *sambaza*, a verb originally used to mean 'to send mobile phone credit to someone', but is now used more generally to mean 'to share or send something'. Dating back to 2007, the English word comes from the Swahili word *-sambaza* meaning 'to spread, disperse, scatter', and now also 'to transfer mobile phone credit'. The transmission into English of this usage with reference to mobile phone credit may have been reinforced by the use of the Swahili word in the name for a credit sharing system in Kenya, introduced in 2005.

Other borrowings in this batch include Swahili forms of address such as *mwalimu* 'teacher' (first attested 1884), as well as *Bwana* (1860) and its abbreviation, *Bw* (1973), a title of courtesy or respect prefixed to the surname or first name of a man. There are also expressions and discourse markers of Swahili origin such as *asante sana* (1911) 'thank you', *pole sana* (1966) 'sorry', and *ati* (2010) 'as someone said; reportedly, allegedly'.

In addition to words used throughout the region, the OED's East African update also features words unique to the varieties of English spoken in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. The lexicon of Kenyan English is represented by borrowings from a few of its many languages: for example, *kiondo* (1902) from Kikuyu and *Isukuti* (1972) from Luhya. A *kiondo* is a handwoven bag made from cord or string, now usually of sisal, with long handles or straps that can be slung over the shoulder, typical of the traditional handicraft of the Kikuyu and Kamba peoples of Kenya. An *isukuti* is a wooden drum, traditionally made from a hollowed log, which is usually hung over the shoulder and played by striking with the fingers and palms. *Isukuti* is also the name of a rhythmic, energetic traditional celebratory dance accompanied by drumming and sing-

ing, performed typically at festivals and weddings by the Luhya peoples of Western Kenya, such as the Isukha and Idakho.

Also included in this update are names of Kenyan dishes such as *githeri* (1973), a traditional central Kenyan dish consisting of boiled maize and legumes, typically beans; and *irio* (1931), a dish consisting of mashed potatoes or sweet potatoes with maize, peas, and leafy green vegetables such as spinach, typically eaten as an accompaniment to other dishes. Also newly added to the *OED* are names of traditional Kenyan home-brewed alcoholic drinks: *muratina* (1904), made from the fermented fruit of the sausage tree, also known locally as *muratina*; *busaa* (1967), made from fermented millet, maize, or sorghum flour; and *changaa* (1975), made from fermented millet, maize, or sorghum grains, a liquor so strong its production and distribution were illegal in Kenya until 2010.

As for Tanzanian English, one of the most widely known words from this variety is *daladala*, the name of a van or minibus that carries passengers for a fare as part of a local informal transport system. Dating back to 1983, the English word comes from Swahili, with *daladala* being a reduplication of *dala* 'dollar', perhaps originally as a bus driver's call. *Dala* is also the nickname of the Tanzanian 5-shilling coin, which used to be the typical fare for *daladala* minibuses.

The vocabulary of Ugandan English draws primarily from Luganda, one of the country's major languages (Isingoma 2016). Examples of Lugandan borrowings in this batch are *kaveera* (1994) 'a plastic bag, plastic packaging'; *kwanjula* (1973) 'an engagement ceremony where the families of the bride and groom formally meet'; and *nkuba kyeyo* (1991) 'a Ugandan person working overseas, especially one doing a low-paid or unskilled job' — the Lugandan phrase literally means 'someone who sweeps'. *Katogo* (1940) is another loan word from Luganda — it is the name of a typical Ugandan breakfast dish consisting of *matoke* (banana or plantain) boiled in a pot with various other ingredients. The word later developed a figurative sense, as it began to be used to mean 'a mixture or fusion of disparate elements; a mess, a muddle'.

### 3.2 Other lexical innovations

The African English word stock is characterized not just by borrowings, but also by lexical innovations based on English elements, several of which have now made their way into the *OED*. They include words formed through suffixation, such as the East African word *unprocedural* (first attested 1929), meaning irregular or illegal; or through compounding, such as *bunny chow* (1972), the name of a popular South African takeaway dish consisting of a hollowed-out loaf of bread filled with curry; *barbing salon* (1979), the Nigerian expression for a barber's shop; and *deskmate* (1850), a compound East Africans use to refer to a person who sits next to another at school.

A few of the African English words in recent *OED* updates were created by shortening existing English words, like the South African greeting *howzit?* (1918)

and the East African verb *collabo* (2008), short for 'collaborate', used especially of musicians. Another example is the Nigerian English adjective *guber* (1989), which is short for 'gubernatorial' — so Nigerians, for instance, would call a person running for governor a 'guber candidate'. Another frequently used clipping with a longer history in English is *agric*. It was originally used in American English around 1812 as a graphic abbreviation for the adjective *agricultural*, but is now used chiefly in this sense in West Africa. In the early 1990s, *agric* began to be used in Nigeria to designate improved or genetically modified varieties of crops or breeds of livestock, especially a type of commercially reared chicken that is frequently contrasted with native chicken. Two decades later, Nigerian students also started to use the word as a noun meaning agricultural science as an academic subject or course.

A number of the African English entries that have recently been documented in the OED are for words that have developed meanings specific to the region. One notable example is *K-leg*, earliest seen in 1842 in British English, but now used mostly in Nigerian English. It is another term for the condition of knock knees, as well as a depreciative name for a person affected with this condition, whose inward-turning knees often resemble the shape of the letter K. It is of such widespread use in Nigeria that by the early 1980s, it had also acquired a figurative meaning — a *K-leg* can now also be any sort of problem, flaw, setback, or obstacle.

Also in Nigerian English, a *gist* (1990) is a rumour, and *to gist* (1992) is to gossip; and something described as *qualitative* (1976) is excellent or of high quality. In East African English, the noun *tarmac* (1982) is also used as a verb meaning 'to walk the streets looking for work; to job hunt'; a person who is *pressed* (1958) needs to go to the bathroom, while a *stage* (1965) is a bus stop or a taxi rank. In Kenyan English, a *biting* (1997) is a bite-sized piece of food, a small snack, appetizer, or canapé; while a *merry-go-round* (1989) is an informal cooperative savings scheme, typically run by and for women, in which each participant regularly contributes an amount, and the whole sum is distributed to the members in turn. *To shrub* is to pronounce or write words in another language in a manner that is influenced by one's mother tongue, and a *shrub* (2008) is a word pronounced or written in this manner. *To shrub* and *shrub* are colloquialisms chiefly used with reference to English or Swahili words pronounced in a manner characteristic of another Kenyan language. In Ugandan English, *to cowardize* (2003) is to act like a coward or to lose one's nerve, while *to extend* (2000) is to move from one's position so as to make room for someone else.

African Englishes also have their share of idiosyncratic phrases. In South Africa, a non-committal, resigned, or ironic 'whatever' is expressed as *ja well no fine*, pronounced quickly, almost as one word. In Uganda, *well done* (1971) is used as a friendly greeting or salutation, especially when encountering a person at work or in a state of activity; *you are lost!* (2013) is also used as a greeting, or in response to a greeting, in a manner similar to 'long time no see'.

### 3.3 Semantic fields

Schmied (1991: 82, 84) gives the natural and built environment, food, people, and clothing as semantic fields in which Africanisms often occur. This is reflected in the OED, as many of its newly recorded and revised African English entries belong to these domains. Table 2 shows some examples from the dictionary for each of these areas of meaning.

**Table 2:** Examples of African English entries in the *OED* belonging to commonly occurring semantic fields

Semantic field	Word	Date of first quotation	Variety	Definition
Food	<i>bunny chow</i> , n.	1972	South African	a South African dish consisting of a hollowed-out loaf of bread (or part of a loaf) filled with curry, typically sold as take-away food; a serving of this
	<i>chapo</i> , n.	1993	East African	a thin pancake of unleavened wholemeal bread cooked on a griddle
	<i>mandazi</i> , n.	1937	East African	a small cake consisting of sweetened dough fried in oil, usually triangular in shape and typically eaten as a snack or as an accompaniment to other dishes; (as a mass noun) these cakes collectively
	<i>nyama choma</i> , n.	1980	East African	roasted or grilled meat
	<i>sarmie</i> , n.	1970	South African	a sandwich
Clothing	<i>buibui</i> , n.	1929	East African	a traditional garment worn by Muslim women in East Africa, typically a long black gown with a black head covering that leaves only the eyes or face exposed

	<i>kanga</i> , n.	1895	East African	a type of cotton fabric printed with designs in bright colours, typically in squares or rectangles featuring a border on all four sides, and used especially for women's clothing; a piece of this fabric, often worn as a shawl or wrap
	<i>kanzu</i> , n.	1870	East African	a long, loose-fitting white tunic worn by men
Environment	<i>banda</i> , n.	1908	East African	a hut or shed with a thatched roof, used typically as a rest house or shelter for travellers
	<i>boma</i> , n.	1860	East African	a barrier formed from thorny branches or wooden stakes, used for defence against attacks by enemies or wild animals; a fence, palisade, or stockade
	<i>duka</i> , n.	1912	East African	a small neighbourhood store selling a variety of goods
	<i>spaza</i> , n.	1988	South African	a small, unregulated and unlicensed grocery shop in a township, usually run from a private house
	<i>tembe</i> , n.	1860	East African	a rectangular house with mud walls and a flat roof
People	<i>district surgeon</i> , n.	1829	South African	a doctor appointed by the government to fulfil specific functions in a particular district; (now) spec. a police surgeon or forensic medical examiner
	<i>ingcibi</i> , n.	1937	South African	among Xhosas: a man who performs circumcisions on young males as part of the traditional initiation ritual symbolizing passage into manhood

	<i>non-indigene</i> , adj.	1907	West African	belonging to an ethnic group considered not to be indigenous to a par- ticular area
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Another semantic field that is of particular significance to Africa has to do with street food. In Nigerian English, there are at least three words indicating a roadside restaurant or street stall that sells local fare at low prices. One of them is the aforementioned *buka*, while another is *bukateria* (first attested 1980), which adds to *buka* the *-teria* ending from the word *cafeteria*. An even more creative synonym is *mama put*, from 1979, which comes from the way that customers usually order food in a *buka*: they say 'Mama, put ...' to the woman running the stall, and indicate the dish they want. The word later became a generic name for the female food vendors themselves — Nobel Prize-winning Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka notably includes a Mama Put character in one of his works.

The informal transport systems that emerged in Africa's huge, densely populated cities such as Lagos and Dar es Salaam have also necessitated lexical invention. Apart from the previously mentioned Nigerian *danfo* and Tanzanian *daladala*, there is also the Nigerian *okada* (1993), the term for a motorcycle that passengers can use as a taxi service. The name is a reference to Okada Air, an airline that operated in Nigeria from 1983 to 1997, and its reputation as a fast yet potentially dangerous form of transport, just like the motorcycle taxi.

Tanzania's contemporary music scene is represented in the OED by *Bongo Flava* (2003) and *singeli* (2015). *Singeli* is a Tanzanian style of fast-paced electronic dance music, combining elements of hip-hop with influences from East African popular music such as *taarab* (1969), a form of music originating in Zanzibar. *Bongo Flava*, another style of music from Tanzania, fuses elements of American hip-hop with influences from reggae, R&B, Afrobeat, dancehall, and traditional East African forms of popular music, and features lyrics in Swahili or English. *Bongo* (1993) is a nickname for the city of Dar es Salaam — *bongo* being the Swahili word for 'brain' or 'intelligence', something one needs a lot of in order to thrive in the most populous city in Tanzania.

#### 4. Conclusion

As can be concluded from the many lexical examples given throughout this article, African speakers of English have long adopted the language and adapted it as a means of expressing their own identity, culture, and experience. Yet despite this, their performance in English continues to be unfairly judged based on exonormative norms set by more prestigious varieties such as British and American English.

It is hoped that the OED's continuing efforts to document the lexicon of African Englishes can play a part in changing this deficit view of these varieties.

As explained earlier in this paper, African English entries in the OED undergo the same thorough and comprehensive research process that all entries in the OED go through before publication. By providing all of this high-quality historical dictionary data for African English words, the OED offers proof of the longevity and stability of these words, and by extension, the longevity and stability of African Englishes. This data can also be used by other researchers to undertake different kinds of historical and lexical investigations of these varieties.

In addition, recording African English words in a dictionary, especially an authoritative historical dictionary such as the *OED*, is a highly visible way of recognizing the valuable contributions that African Englishes have made to the development of the English lexicon. As Nigerian writer T.J. Benson commented to Reuters in January 2020 in reference to the OED's then newly published Nigerian English update (Ukomadu and Carsten 2020), 'I think this (recognition) is empowering for lots of us writers and for everyday people, because at the end of the day it ties back to identity and how we perceive ourselves and how we express ourselves'.

## Endnotes

1. Oxford Languages is the department of Oxford University Press that is home to the *Oxford English Dictionary* as well as a wide range of dictionaries and lexical datasets for English and other languages.
2. The OED's World English Hub can be found at <https://public.oed.com/world-englishes/>. It has individual pages for East African English, Kenyan English, Nigerian English, South African English, Tanzanian English, and Ugandan English.
3. Information on the OED's upcoming webinars, as well as recordings of its past webinars can be found at <https://public.oed.com/webinars-and-events/>. A recent webinar relating to African Englishes is 'Mama put in the OED: World Englishes and the *Oxford English Dictionary*', featuring Kingsley Ugwuanyi, the OED's consultant for Nigerian English.
4. All recordings from the Oxford World English Symposium 2022 can be found at <https://public.oed.com/world-englishes/oed-symposium-2022/>. The Symposium features three presentations on African Englishes: 'World Englishes and context-based ELT in Nigeria' by Joy Onyemaechi of the University of Abuja, 'South African English and OUP Southern Africa' by Phillip Louw, formerly of OUP South Africa and now Editor-in-Chief and Executive Director of the *Woordeboek van die Afrikaanse Taal*, and 'Ugandan English' by Bebwa Isingoma of Gulu University.

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