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# Afrikaans, American and British Models for South African English Lexicography: Racial Label Usage\*

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**Abstract:** This article examines the treatment of racial labels in monolingual English dictionaries of South Africa. Considering past controversies regarding racist language in Afrikaans dictionaries and considering the changing role of English in democratic South Africa, we can expect that English dictionaries will be more carefully scrutinized in future for potential offence. With the boom in the South African lexicography industry, now is a prime time to reflect on the issues involved and suggest courses of action. This article places South African English dictionary traditions in a national and international context, by comparing the traditions and the roles of the languages in Afrikaans, British and American lexicographical traditions. While South African English lexicography is rooted in the British tradition, its possible evolution on the American model is demonstrated, and thus the role of the dictionary in a postcolonial community is briefly discussed.

**Keywords:** LEXICOGRAPHY, DICTIONARY, DEFINITION, SOCIAL LABELING, RACE, RACISM, ETHNICITY, ENGLISH, SOUTH AFRICA, AFRIKAANS, EPITHETS, USAGE LABELS

**Opsomming:** *Afrikaanse, Amerikaanse en Britse modelle vir die Suid-Afrikaanse Engelse leksikografie: Gebruik van rasse-etiket.* Hierdie artikel ondersoek die hantering van rasse-etiket in eentalige Engelse woordeboeke in Suid-Afrika. As polemieke van die verlede oor rassistiese taal in Afrikaanse woordeboeke oorweeg word, sowel as die veranderende rol van Engels in demokratiese Suid-Afrika, kan verwag word dat Engelse woordeboeke in die toekoms noukeuriger ondersoek sal word vir moontlike kwetsing. Met die ontploffing in die Suid-Afrikaanse leksikografiese bedryf is dit nou die regte tyd om die betrokke vraagstukke te oordink en om handelwyses voor te stel. Hierdie artikel plaas die Suid-Afrikaanse Engelse woordeboektradisies binne 'n nasionale en internasionale konteks deur die tradisies en rolle van die onderskeie tale in die Afrikaanse, Britse en Amerikaanse leksikografiese tradisies te

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vergeelyk. Terwyl die Suid-Afrikaanse Engelse leksikografie gewortel is in die Britse tradisie, word sy moontlike ontwikkeling volgens die Amerikaanse model aangetoon, en sodoende word die rol van die woordeboek in 'n postkoloniale gemeenskap kortliks bespreek.

**Slutelwoorde:** LEKSIKOGRAFIE, WOORDEBOEK, DEFINISIE, SOSIALE ETIKETTERING, RAS, RASSISME, ETNISITEIT, ENGELS, SUID-AFRIKA, AFRIKAANS, BENOEMINGS, GEBRUIKSETIKETTE

This essay contrasts the practices of and attitudes toward racial label treatment in South African English, Afrikaans, and other English dictionaries. As I discuss below, the comparison of these dictionary traditions not only lends insight into the peculiarities of South African English lexicography, but also indicates new directions that South African English lexicography may take, given similarities in the social situations of Afrikaans, American English, and South African English.

The treatment of racial labels such as **black**, **African**, **white**, **Coloured**, and **Asian** in English dictionaries for the South African market is discussed elsewhere (Murphy, forthcoming). In general, it was found that dictionaries of South Africanisms, including Branford and Branford's *A Dictionary of South African English* and the new *Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles*, capture the South African senses of racial labels and give the most insightful commentary on their usage. However, these dictionaries are not widely used by average dictionary users. Instead, the South African English market depends upon dictionaries that are either produced for the British market (such as the Oxford and Collins concise dictionaries) or derivatives of these dictionaries, such as *The South African Pocket Oxford Dictionary*. These dictionaries typically fail to represent South African senses and usage of general English words like **black** and **Bantu**.

The changing linguistic, social, and educational situations in South Africa predict a boom in English lexicography for a South African audience, as does the increasing computerization of lexicographical databases. Due to computerization, dictionaries for specific regions or purposes can be extracted and edited from the databases of major international publishers, and we can already see this trend with the publication of *Chambers-Macmillan South African Dictionary for Junior Primary* and *The South African Oxford School Dictionary* and the foreseen preparation of South African editions of general English dictionaries by the Dictionary Unit at Rhodes University (Penny Silva, personal communication). As a lexicographical tradition for South African English emerges, the question is whether it will mimic traditions available in South Africa or the traditions of other Englishes. Such traditions provide stark contrasts in the treatment of racially sensitive words and possible models for dictionary making in postapartheid South Africa.

This paper relies on basic work on South African English racial labels

(reported in Murphy, forthcoming) in order to compare South African English dictionary treatments of racial terminology to that in Afrikaans, British and American English dictionaries. The focus of comparison is on the inclusion and usage descriptions of racial labels. Three South African English dictionaries for adults could represent the nascent South African English lexicographical tradition: *A Dictionary of South African English*, 4th edition (henceforth DSAE, 1991), and *A Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles* (DSAE-HP, 1996), and *The South African Pocket Oxford Dictionary* (SAPOD, 1987). However, the first two of these are not dictionaries of English, but rather dictionaries of South Africanisms in English. The last is an adaptation of a British pocket dictionary, and, as a pocket dictionary, does not necessarily provide a model for standard desk dictionaries. In contrast, the dictionaries that South African English speakers actually use, are represented by the *Collins Concise English Dictionary*, 3rd edition (CCED, 1992), and the *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, 8th edition (COD, 1990). These two dictionaries are written for a primarily British audience, but are the two most popular English desk dictionaries in South Africa. Thus, they are part of the standard against which English-speaking South African consumers will measure South African English dictionaries. The remainder of this essay looks first at the indigenous model for lexicography provided by Afrikaans and then the models provided from abroad, by the British and American lexicographical traditions.

### **A South African Model: Afrikaans Lexicography**

Compared to Afrikaans lexicography, South African English lexicography is a new field. While monolingual Afrikaans dictionaries have been published in South Africa since at least 1926 (Gouws 1986), the first major dictionary of South African English (DSAE, first edition, 1978) was limited to South Africanisms, and a general English dictionary (SAPOD) was not produced until 1987 (Béjoint 1994). Lexicographical practice in Afrikaans differs from that in English to the extent that the languages hold different social positions in (and out of) South Africa, and to the extent that they reflect very different cultural and communicative norms.

Afrikaans lexicographers have been at the forefront of developing a new South African model for lexicographical policy-making. Evidence for a South African (Afrikaans) model for English lexicography comes from two recent sources: developments in AFRILEX, the relatively new association for lexicography in Africa, and an articulated policy strategy for treating taboo items in volumes of the *Woordeboek van die Afrikaanse Taal* (WAT). Lexicographical planning and policy-making are high priorities in this new model.

AFRILEX is considered relevant to the Afrikaans model since its founding sixteen-member board included no English lexicographers, and an over-representation of Afrikaans lexicographers.<sup>1</sup> The first item in the call for interest in

the formation of this association is the establishment of "a national policy for lexicography" (letter, Mariëtta Alberts and Daan Prinsloo, 10 March 1995) and in its first year of existence, the AFRILEX board pushed forward a National Lexicography Bill, whose purpose is to set up official dictionary units for the eleven official languages of South Africa.<sup>2</sup> This is in contrast to similar organizations elsewhere (such as the European Association for Lexicography and the Dictionary Society of North America), whose foremost stated aim is scholarly exchange. It is tempting to interpret the perceived need for planning as a reflection of an Afrikaner cultural rejection of ambiguity and preference for hierarchical organization, which is commonly contrasted to South African English interactional styles in the South African social psychology and cross-cultural communication literature (see, e.g., Kinloch 1985, Louw and Foster 1992).

This combination of needs for decisive and authoritative practice can be seen in a recent controversy concerning the status of racial insults in the largest Afrikaans dictionary project, the *Woordeboek van die Afrikaanse Taal* (WAT). After heated discussion at a multiracial seminar convened on the topic, the editors of the WAT released for comment an eight-paged "Policy for the Treatment of Insulting and Sensitive Lexical Items in the WAT" that was intended to represent, through compromise, the interests of ingroup, outgroup, and academic interests (Bureau of the WAT 1994). This document proposed that "racist" headwords be listed but not defined or otherwise discussed in the printed version of the WAT. (People interested in such definitions would have to contact the Bureau of the WAT for access to the unpublished electronic version of the manuscript.) The editors maintained that although the racial climate in South Africa is changing, "the inclusion of racist lexical items in the WAT would be undesirable in this period of reconciliation. Such a move would not only hinder reconciliation, but would at the same time result in greater alienation" (Bureau of the WAT 1994: 1, Harteveld and Van Niekerk 1995: 252). (The editors fail to make clear whether it is the lexicographers or the referents of the racist terminology who would be alienated by this move.) The editors received a large number of responses from local and international commentators, some of whom protested that the policy ran counter to basic lexicographical practice and that such censorship might hamper, rather than aid, reconciliation. The seventeen-paged revised policy (Harteveld and Van Niekerk 1995) differs in its treatment of "racist" words, in that a nonracist synonym is given in the printed version. Thus "wholly racist lexical items" are treated differently from other lexical items in that the definition is limited to a single near-synonym, with no semantic oppositions or citations given. Compounds or idioms containing "wholly racist" lexical items are explained, but not permitted synonyms, antonyms, references, or illustrations. The "wholly racist" words are contrasted to "partially racist" words, which are treated in greater depth. So, for example, while *kaffir* is considered to be "wholly racist", *meidjie* is considered "partially racist", since it is often used as a term of endearment (in which case, it seems that it might also be partially sexist). Throughout the policy, the editors write

as if they consider the words themselves to be racist, rather than the use (or users) of those words.<sup>3</sup> While a word may very well be taboo, as an inanimate, arbitrary thing, it cannot have racist intentions. Thus, the decision as to whether or not to include an item that is potentially insulting, is based upon outgroup usage of the term, since ingroup usage is not necessarily racist.<sup>4</sup>

Contrast with South African English lexicographical practices is evident. None of the five English dictionaries considered here have any blanket policies against printing or defining potentially offensive words, although the number of such items in any dictionary depends in large part upon the dictionary's purpose. Thus, English racial labels are included as dictionary headwords if they suit the dictionary's general criteria for inclusion (relative frequency, non-slang usage, etc.), whereas Afrikaans racial labels are required to fit an extra criterion, being noninsulting. While South African English dictionaries do label potentially insulting material as "*derogatory*" and/or "*offensive*", such measures have been deemed insufficient for the WAT.

The WAT has good reason for concern. Racially provocative language in Afrikaans dictionaries has historically caused many problems for their publishers, resulting in boycotts and book burnings (Hauptfleisch 1993) and protests from academics (e.g., Links 1991). Historically, the WAT used racist metalanguage in its definitions, for example, using the offensive term *kaffer* in definitions of compound terms like *Kafferhond*, which was defined in a 1968 volume of the WAT as "Dog belonging to a Kaffir" (Hauptfleisch 1993: 126). However, although this problem has been attended to, the continued furor and defensiveness over racist language in Afrikaans is no doubt related to the perception (in some circles) that Afrikaans is a "racist language". This sentiment stems mostly from the salient rôle of Afrikaner individuals in forming racist policies and the position of Afrikaans in the maintenance of such policies. Thus, Kinloch (1985) reports a number of studies that have shown that Black, Indian, and increasing numbers of Coloured South Africans have far more negative attitudes toward Afrikaners than toward English-speaking White South Africans. Since the Afrikaans language serves as a symbol of the Afrikaner people, non-Afrikaners sometimes consider it an inherently racist language or "the language of the oppressor" (Benjamin 1994). Resentment toward the Afrikaans language has greatly contributed to protests against racially insulting language in Afrikaans dictionaries, and sensitivity to these resentments and past and potential protests has led Afrikaans lexicographers to react supercautiously by usual lexicographical standards.

This very South African lexicographical phenomenon leads to the question: Does the Afrikaans experience make predictions for the future of South African English lexicography? Whereas Afrikaans was, until recently, the language of political power, its power is diminished in the new *status quo*, and English's status as the language of economic power only increases with the reintegration of South Africa into the world community. As the institutions associated with the Afrikaans language lose power or switch to other lan-

guages (especially English), English-medium institutions become the objects of protest. For example, since South Africa's first democratic elections, the traditionally liberal, English-medium universities were the first targets of loud and violent protests on matters including the nature of the curriculum and the racial composition of the student body and staff. Furthermore, white English-speaking liberals have repeatedly been called "racist" in the opinion pages of the popular press, call-in radio, and television talk shows. While there are still small conservative Afrikaner organizations and individuals pushing for racial separation and other racist policies, it is the English-speaking liberals whose politics are now questioned publically. As English becomes more and more entrenched as a language of education, commerce, and politics, we can expect its dictionaries to be scrutinized more carefully for words, passages, or sentiments that are potentially racially or politically offensive.

However, it seems unlikely that South African English dictionaries will be subject to the same degree of (self-)censorship as Afrikaans dictionaries. Since South Africans recognize that English is an international language (rather than a South African artifact), perceptions of English will not necessarily be based upon perceptions of South African English speakers and the institutions with which they are associated. However, with more widespread use of English dictionaries by Black people, we can expect that racial language in English dictionaries will attract more notice. And as South African English dictionaries are developed that may replace the currently popular British dictionaries, more South African racial terminology will be included in the dictionaries people use. The trend in South African English lexicography, if the (South African-edited) dictionaries of South Africanisms are indicative, is toward more explicit cautionary labeling. This signifies a move from the British style toward a more American model of usage description, to which I turn next.

### **The English Models: British and American Traditions**

South Africa and the United States are similar in the complexity of their racial relations, but different in the nature of that complexity. Both provide challenges for lexicographers, who need both to accurately reflect semantically and socially complicated words and to satisfy a dictionary-using public that is sensitive to the affective power of the words defined and the metalanguage used to define them. However, since South African English lexicography is derived from (and often situated in) the British lexicographical tradition, we can expect that dictionary treatments of racial terms will be rather different in the two cultures.

Murphy (1991: 61) found three types of problems in American racial term definitions and usage treatment:

- (a) the polysemy of racial labels is underrepresented, often to the point of contradiction in cross-referring definitions;

- (b) a white norm is sometimes implicitly assumed in dictionary definitions of racially-charged terms; and
- (c) usage notes for labels for Black Americans do not inform the reader of differences in usage among Black and white users.

As shown in Murphy (forthcoming), criticisms (a) and (b) hold for the dictionaries used by South African English speakers as well. This essay is concerned with point (c), which notes that usage information presented in dictionaries tends to assume a White user. This criticism is less apt for the South African English dictionaries and British imports used in South Africa. This relative success is caused by a relative absence of usage information and by the fact that South African English is largely a language of White people. Taking the latter point first, arguments about what people prefer to be called in English have not assumed the importance in South Africa that they have in the United States. Thus, it is not at all common in South Africa for public discourse to revolve around whether people of African ancestry should be called African or Black. For those items for Black Africans that do require cautionary labels (Native, Bantu), little differentiates White and Black usage of the terms, since they are not widely used by Black Africans. Lack of Black African interest in English language auto-ethnonyms is in part explained by the fact that those labeled usually do not speak English as a first language, but further explained by the differences in "Black" racial identity in South Africa and the United States (Greenstein 1993). In the United States, a relatively coherent "Black" group identity has formed in the past two centuries, such that Black (or a near-synonym thereof) is the primary means of racial/ethnic identity among and for a well-delimited portion of the population, which has a common language and its own set of cultural, religious, and political traditions. In South Africa, on the other hand, the "Black" group has been internally and externally divided on the basis of ethnic/language groups, such that in many contexts the Black/African identity is subsidiary to a Zulu or Xhosa or Sotho identity. A Black/African identity was important to anti-apartheid organizing and will continue to be important in the "Africanization" of business, government, education, *et cetera*. However, at a personal, intra-African or political level, ethnic identity is often primary. The contrast between the heterogeneity of the Black/African group in South Africa and the homogeneity of the Black (African-American) group in America may account for the fact that Black is more easily used in South Africa in the "non-White" sense. In the United States, where Black is strongly attached to a coherent social group, this label carries too much specific denotative and connotative information for it to be more generally used in most contexts (i.e., to include Asian Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, *et cetera*).

So, while racial items like Black may not be as controversial in South Africa as in the United States (and thus not require so much usage notation), the situation described above leads to the hypothesis that ethnic terminology

for Black/African groups (e.g., (ama)Zulu, Basotho) assumes greater importance in South Africa and South African English dictionaries. However, since all of the African ethnic terminology is borrowed into English from cultures with much shorter written histories, the possibility of usage conflict (and consequent offense) is diffused. Firstly, the referents of the ethnonyms have traditionally had little stake in English, its orthography, and especially its dictionaries. Secondly, the orthographic history of the Southern Bantu languages is quite short and varies in standardization. Literacy (and literariness) in these languages is not as well-established as in a language like English. Thus, the cultural attachment to orthographical forms (especially in terms of capitalization) is slighter than in a language with a longer history of standardized orthography, literary language, and general literacy. As language policies, general literacy, and postapartheid racial/ethnic identities evolve, mismatches between Bantu language labels and their borrowed counterparts in English may lead to offense and protest, and thus the English language dictionaries will be required to take a more consciously prescriptive role in ethnic label orthography. This may already be under way. On the University of the Witwatersrand campus, posters advertising matches between the Wits and AmaZulu football clubs have been defaced in order to "correct" the capitalization of AmaZulu in various ways (with attendant commentary on white peoples' ignorance of African languages). On a larger scale, proposals by Neville Alexander that the orthographies of the Nguni and Sotho groups of languages be regularized (in order to aid in the administration of 11 official languages), have been met by uproar that "the government wants to take away our languages and their individual characters". This is fairly ironic, considering that the diverse orthographies of the indigenous South African languages were largely the work of white missionaries and academics and therefore represent appropriation of the languages for the benefit of Europeans' goals, not indigenous (or necessarily linguistically logical) aims.

General English dictionaries for the South African market, coming from the British lexicographical tradition, include fewer prescriptions regarding usage and less encyclopedic information than American dictionaries (Béjoint 1994). Similarly, their audiences differ, in that Americans are widely perceived to grant dictionaries more influence and greater status than the British do (Quirk 1973). So for this reason as well, bias in usage labeling is less pernicious in South African English dictionaries than in American dictionaries, simply because they contain less usage labeling and less is expected of their treatment of usage. Read (1986) and Algeo (1989) suggest that the American tradition's deviations from the British tradition reflect the United States' postcolonial identity. Depending upon one's perspective, prescriptivism and encyclopedism in American dictionaries can reflect either Americans' linguistic and intellectual insecurities or their belief in (and practice of) socio-economic mobility (or, perhaps a combination of these). British dictionaries, in a sense, have fewer prescriptive controversies to arbitrate, since the "standard" language in Britain is

better defined and highly accessible and recognizable. The United States, however, tolerates and supports a wider range of "standard" forms, including regional "standards". So, when attempting to speak "standardly", Americans are subject to more contradictory standards than the British, and thus may require a dictionary to settle these controversies. The prescriptive tradition in American dictionaries can also be traced to the postcolonial need to assert a national identity through a nationally distinguishable language.

While South African English lexicography hails from the British tradition, the similarities between the South African and American situations are enough to predict that South African English lexicography will move toward a more prescriptive or at least cautionary style. This prediction is based on several facts. First, a "standard" South African English is increasingly recognized. Thus, South African English dictionaries may take the rôle that American dictionaries have had in promoting a new "standard". Furthermore, South African English stands to have more than one standard, based on ethnic varieties of English, particularly the forms Black South African English used in the political domain. (See De Klerk 1996 and particularly Wright 1996.) Second, South Africa is a nation in social transition, and thus its communicative styles are changing. As Chick (1991) discusses, South African English conversational styles are shifting from the deference-based system of British culture to a solidarity-based system, the communicative style most closely associated with Americans. The solidarity system is an escalating and unstable type of system. Thus, underlying assumptions about proper linguistic behavior may be shifting such that these assumptions will be reflected in dictionary style. Third, opportunities for social mobility in South Africa are shifting rapidly in the postapartheid climate. Greater mobility is especially afforded to nonnative speakers of English, who can be expected to increasingly demand dictionaries that serve their needs in mastering "standard" South African English. These needs may be served by the advanced learner's dictionaries that are due to recent innovations in the British lexicographical industry, but these needs might also be served (especially in integrated educational institutions) by general use dictionaries with a more prescriptive mission. As suggested above, nonnative speakers' increased access to South African English and its dictionaries will likely create more interest among these speakers in the ethnonyms that describe them in South African English.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, South African English and its lexicography are in a state of flux, and thus new demands will be made of South African English dictionaries and their treatments of racial labels in the near future. Changes in racial label presentation, definition, and usage labeling are required in large part because of the changing demography of English speakers. As South African educa-

tional, political, and commercial spheres become more and more integrated, the racial/ethnic make-up of (educated) English speakers in South Africa becomes more diverse. This diversity, in turn, has two relevant implications. Firstly, as more of the referents of the various racial labels become speakers of English, they will have more interest and stake in the words that English uses to describe them (and which they, then, use to describe themselves). Secondly, the diversity of the English-speaking population will result in a more diverse dictionary-using population. Thus, South African English dictionaries will be expected to reflect a wider range of perspectives toward the words and language therein, or else risk economic (and social-political) consequences. However, the predictions made here, that racial labels in English (and their treatment in dictionaries) will become more controversial as English is more widely used, may be overstated. The political and economic situation in South Africa may not support active linguistic controversies when so many other controversies must be resolved in a new (and economically troubled) democracy. However, naming controversies do exist in South Africa (*viz.* **Bantu/Sintu** and the capitalization of **Coloured**), and shifts in identity, such as are forced by current efforts toward nation-building, will continue as the new South Africa and new South Africans reconcile with the past and move toward the future. Since labeling is a (if not *the*) crucial step in identity formation, it seems that it will only increase in importance in the coming years.

## Notes

1. Although AFRILEX is an international body, the 1996 board included six South African scholars and publishers of Afrikaans, five scholars of African languages from South Africa and three from neighboring states, and two employees of the National Terminology Services (responsible for all 11 official languages). No lexicographers working primarily on English are included, and few of the South African board members work at English-medium institutions.
2. The South African nationalistic focus of what purports to be an African organization has caused some consternation among non-South African (and even some South African) members of AFRILEX, but much of this frustration is not expressed to the Board, which seems to assume that South African interests are the interests of the organization as a whole.
3. Thus, the policy document (which is largely composed of justifications for the policy) makes such invalid arguments as "Highly advanced technical language can not insult anybody, therefore nobody needs to be warned against its use. Racist terms are always hurtful, therefore dictionary users should indeed be warned against its use." (Harteveld and Van Niekerk 1995: 254). People can indeed be insulted by technical language (the history of **Bantu** provides evidence — see Khumalo 1984), just as people can be affectionately referred to by "racist" words.
4. This policy, then, is subject to the same criticism as usage labels in American English dictionaries, which, as Murphy (1991) points out, are based on the assumption that the language

user is White. Thus, the treatment of words like *kaffer* in the WAT are made without consideration for their ironic and sometimes affectionate ingroup use observed by the author in Johannesburg. The same phenomenon is seen for items such as *nigger* in American English, and while the reclamation of such taboo terms is more prevalent in the United States now, the opportunity for such use may increase in South Africa as the distance from apartheid times increases. Certainly, while the "racial" sense of *Bantu* is listed as "offensive" in many dictionaries, ironic and jocular use by ingroup members does occur, especially when poking fun at the attitudes or policies of White South Africa. While ingroup users of these words are taking advantage of their taboo status, they are not identifying themselves as racist by using the words.

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