

**P.A. Mbenzi and O.N. Iithete.** *English-Oshindonga Dictionary for Primary Schools*, 1st edition 1996, iv + 97 pp. ISBN 99916-37-33-8. Windhoek: Out of Africa. Price N\$39,90.

## 1. Introduction

I cannot over-emphasize the critical importance of this book.

Although the above statement by Tshali Iithete in the preface of this dictionary might be considered as somewhat extravagant, it is without a doubt true that the dictionary does make a valuable contribution to the language learning aids available to primary school learners and teachers in Namibia. Since English is the only medium of instruction in government schools from the junior secondary phase onwards, it is vital that learners should have a reasonable command of the language by the time they enter grade 8. This dictionary works towards this aim, as is stated in the preface:

The dictionary provides a solid first start in building up a strong English vocabulary and eventually grammar.

With this purpose in mind, the dictionary does have certain shortcomings, the removal of which would greatly extend the usefulness of this work, even into the junior secondary phase. Some of the shortcomings, together with the dictionary's strong points, will be highlighted briefly in this review.

## 2. Front matter

The front matter of the dictionary consists of a preface and three paragraphs on how to use the dictionary, both in Oshindonga and English.

The dictionary is described as "a useful tool in acquiring basic skills in English". The usefulness of the dictionary as the said tool may however be questioned, since no explanation of the English (or Oshindonga) grammar, however simple, is found in the front matter or anywhere else in the dictionary. It should be kept in mind that Oshindonga as African language and English as Germanic language differ significantly on syntactic and morphological levels. This fact makes it imperative that any bilingual learner's dictionary that contains these two languages as language pair should also contain some description of the grammars of the two languages, since the acquiring of language skills requires a great deal more than the mere acquisition of a collection of lexical items in the target language.

### 3. Macrostructure

According to the compilers the lemmas are chosen from "the most commonly used words in everyday English". In some cases the method of selection of lemmas is not clear, especially when one bears in mind that the dictionary "should never be used alone, but always together with and in nurturing an understanding of other subjects such as History, Science, Geography, etc." An example is the incomplete representation of a highly relevant semantic field for the primary school learner, namely that of arithmetic: while the lexical items *add* and *divide* enjoy lemma status, the lexical items *equal*, *minus*, *multiply*, *plus* and *subtract* are not taken up in the macrostructure. In the same way the lexical items *circle* and *rectangle* are taken up as lemmas and given Oshindonga equivalents, while the lexical items *square* and *triangle* are not to be found as lemmas in the dictionary. Another example that illustrates the incomplete representation of a semantic field, is the presence of lemmas such as *fifteen*, *fifty* and *nine*, while lexical items such as *eight*, *seven*, *ten*, *twenty*, *twenty-five*, etc. are absent. In some cases simple opposites are not included as lemmas: *wife* is present as lemma, while *husband* is not; *hot* and *warm* are presented as lemmas, while *cold* is not. These discrepancies place a question mark over the criteria used to select lemmas for this dictionary. The recognition of semantic fields and lexical relations, however elementary they might be, plays an important role in acquiring language skills. Where these aspects are not realised in a dictionary aimed at providing such skills, the learner is deprived of valuable aids in attempting to reach his/her goals. This issue will be taken further in the review of the microstructure.

An aspect of the dictionary which certainly places a great handicap on its use to acquire language skills in English, is the fact that it is unidirectional, i.e. only English-Oshindonga; it does not have an Oshindonga-English section. This most probably makes the dictionary only useful for decoding purposes, i.e. for use by Oshindonga-speaking learners to understand English texts. The dictionary has little or no encoding value. It will be impossible for a learner to find an English equivalent for a certain Oshindonga lexical item in the dictionary, which makes it impossible for a learner to use the dictionary effectively, if at all, to construct English texts in any way. Taking the stated aim of the dictionary into consideration, this is probably the most serious deficiency.

### 4. Microstructure

Each article consists of a lemma in bold print, one Oshindonga translation equivalent in italic print, and an example sentence in English containing the lemma, followed by its Oshindonga translation containing the Oshindonga translation equivalent. Some articles also contain graphic illustrations after the example sentences. In cases where the lemma has more than one polysemic value, they are clearly distinguished by the numbering of the respective trans-

lation equivalents and the providing of example sentences at each polysemic value.

#### 4.1 Polysemy and hyponymy

Translation equivalents of polysemic values of lemmas are generally indicated successfully by clear numbering to distinguish between different values. This practice is also explained in the front matter in the section on "How to use this dictionary", and it will make the young learner aware of the fact that certain words may have more than only one meaning.

The value of the dictionary as language reference work could however have been increased greatly if word classes were indicated for all polysemic values. In this dictionary the user is fully dependent on the example sentences to find out if the equivalent presented is the one he/she is looking for. In this way the lemma *answer* is given the following translation equivalents:

1. *yamukula*
2. *eyamukulo*

The first equivalent is the equivalent for *answer* as a verb, while the second is the equivalent for *answer* as a noun. This is however not indicated. The user must work through the example sentences to find out which equivalent is applicable. If the user e.g. knows that he/she is looking for the Oshindonga equivalent of the noun *answer* in the dictionary, he/she would simply have to look for the polysemic value which is indicated as a noun, provided that word classes are indeed indicated. In this case the user would then immediately realise that he/she does not have to study the first polysemic value any further, because it is indicated as a verb; he/she can proceed to the next equivalent without spending any more time on eventually irrelevant information. Primary school learners should have some knowledge of word class by the time they are in the senior primary phase, therefore the argument that word-class indication would complicate dictionary use for the learner does not hold water. In fact, the learner might realise that knowledge of word class makes his/her dictionary enquiries easier, while it also refines his/her skills in using reference works in general.

The negation by the dictionary of homonyms could seriously affect its value as language reference work. An example which illustrates this is the handling of the lemma *row*. According to the editorial system of the dictionary, three polysemic values are ascribed to the lemma. However, the three identified values are not polysemic values of the same form, but rather three homonymic forms. The form of the value presented as second polysemic value (*row* meaning "disagreement or noise") is in fact pronounced differently in English from the (identical) forms of the other two values: [rau] vs. [rou]. This information is completely lost to the learner, and if the teacher does not draw

the learner's attention to this difference, the learner might be confused when he/she is later confronted with different pronunciations for what is to him/her the same word. It is clear that the dictionary has failed to provide adequate language skills to the learner in this respect. It is therefore important that the dictionary should also make the appropriate homonymic distinctions where applicable. The way in which this is done (especially in a primary school dictionary) may still have to be considered, but the idea is that the learner should understand that homonymic forms are not related in terms of meaning (and origin) and sometimes pronunciation.

#### 4.2 Example sentences

The compilers of this dictionary have laid down a very sound principle, i.e. to provide example sentences for all translation equivalents presented in the microstructure. However, example sentences should have definite functions — they should not only be there for the sake of example sentences. Most importantly, especially in a dictionary which aspires to provide a basis for language-learning, example sentences should be grammatically absolutely correct. Unfortunately this is not the case in this dictionary. The following example sentences, extracted from the microstructure, contain grammatical errors:

"My grandmother told us a story about a huge giant." (lemma *giant*; tautology)

"Many men have a beard." (lemma *man*; subject-object correspondence)

"He looked at his watch to see how late it was." (lemma *watch*; instead of "... to see *what time it was*")

Apart from the above errors, example sentences can, in the absence of a grammar description, assist the user in providing clues as to the existing differences between the two languages involved, thereby helping in the acquisition of language skills. But the guidance of the teacher in this is essential. This makes this dictionary not only a reference work, but in fact a language work-book. The full potential of the dictionary can only be realised if it is actively used in (language) teaching, and not only used as a book a learner is referred to if he/she does not understand an English word.

With polysemic lemmas example sentences can be used effectively to guide the user (learner) in choosing the correct polysemic value and therefore the correct translation equivalent for the given discourse situation. The following extract from the dictionary illustrates this point:

##### **open**

##### 1. *egulula*

Please **open** the door!

*Egulula omweelo alikana!*

2. *eguluka*

This door is **open**.

*Omweelo ogwe eguluka.*

Although the indication of word class at each Oshindonga equivalent would certainly have made the choosing of the correct translation equivalent easier, the example sentences here clearly demonstrate the use of the first equivalent as a verb, and the second as an adjective.

## 4.3 Illustrations

Like example sentences, illustrations should be used in dictionaries for specific purposes, and not merely for decoration. In the case of a translation dictionary for primary schools it may be argued that illustrations are essential for language-learning, but then those illustrations used in the dictionary, too, must be chosen with great care. Together with the great potential of illustrations in such dictionaries comes the risk of actually damaging the language-learning process with the careless handling and placing of illustrations. In the *English-Oshindonga Dictionary* this risk might unfortunately turn into actual loss in some cases. The use of some illustrations might create confusion in the mind of the young learner of English. In more than one instance the example sentence refers to a person of one gender, while the following illustration shows a person of the opposite gender. Some examples are the following:

"My grandfather walks with a cane", while the accompanying illustration shows a grandmother (lemma **cane**).

"He uses chalk to write on the blackboard", while the accompanying illustration shows a female teacher (lemma **chalk**).

It should be expected that the learner will associate an example sentence in the dictionary with the accompanying illustration. The use of illustrations in dictionaries like this one should therefore as far as possible complement the example sentences in order to assist in the language-learning process. Illustrations should not only be seen as additions to information presented in the dictionary article, but also as applications.

In at least one instance the print quality of an illustration makes it virtually useless, namely at the lemma **plough**: the actual instrument cannot be distinguished against the dark background.

A great deal of information is lost to the language-learner because illustrations have no annotations. At the lemma **plant**, for example, reference is made to *trees*, *bushes* and *flowers* in the example sentences, and an illustration of each is added. However, the learner may become confused as to which English word refers to which kind of plant. Annotations with translation equivalents would practically rule out this possibility.

Some semantic fields are only partially represented by illustrations. Again, the semantic field of arithmetic serves as an example. At the lemma *add* the illustration material consists of a sum ("4 + 4 = 8"), which is a fine contribution to conveying the meaning. However, at the lemma *divide*, no illustration is provided. (In fact, the meaning of *divide* is not represented in its arithmetic sense, which further deprives the dictionary of supplying means to effectively acquire language skills.) Similarly, an illustration of a rectangle is found at the lemma *rectangle*, while there is no illustration of a circle at the lemma *circle*.

Illustrations which make up a lexical field (e.g. illustrations of rectangles, triangles, circles, etc.) could have been placed together at one encapsulating lemma or superordinate (e.g. *figure*) with annotations. Reference could then be made to this lemma at the lemmas constituting the particular subordinates. In this way semantic relations could effectively be used in providing means for language-learning.

When paging through the dictionary, one realises that all illustrations are computer-generated. This has seemingly placed a limit on the collection of illustrations the compilers could choose from for use in the dictionary. One almost gets the impression that fitting illustrations were not searched for for given lemmas, but rather that place in the dictionary was searched for for available illustrations.

## 5. Perspective

One of the compilers rightly states that "a dictionary does not have to be overloaded with linguistic information and, should this occur, it should be made as simple as possible so as to ease the understanding of the target users" (Mbenzi 1996: 318). One should, however, distinguish between *overloading* and *effective use to reach the aim of a dictionary* of linguistic information. Equally valid is certainly the view that the total negation of linguistic information in a dictionary can cause the dictionary not to realise its aim.

The *English-Oshindonga Dictionary* is a valuable contribution to language learning materials in Namibia, and certain improvements will definitely bring it closer to its aim.

## Reference

Mbenzi, P.A. 1996. Review of *English-Kwanyama Dictionary*. *Lexikos* 6: 318-319.

Herman L. Beyer  
Languages Department  
Swakopmund Secondary School  
Swakopmund  
Namibia