

# News Review



And the Oscar for best mix-up goes to...

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Local series 'Gaze' drenched in blood

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Sources of South Africa's distinctive English include, from left, writer Mothobi Mutloatse, poet Guy Butler, celebrated Afrikaans writer Andre Brink, novelist H Rider Haggard and outspoken commentator and writer Rian Malan. Linguists Penny Silva and William Branford were pioneers in the genesis of the Dictionary Unit for South African English at Rhodes University.

HERE is little to suggest a rational association between “aardvark” and “zef” – an animal and a counter-cultural movement – except perhaps their being distinctly South African terms. But the words have an extra A-to-Z meaning for a small team of language specialists at work on one of the country’s most comprehensive and fascinating cultural projects at Rhodes University’s St Peter’s Building. It is the home of the Dictionary Unit for South African English where, along with transcriptions of material dating back to the 1600s, a mammoth exercise to make the uniquely shaped and textured forms of South African English available online relies on two servers which staff have affectionately, but meaningfully named Aardvark and Zef. The naming is more appropriate than diehard purists may imagine, for it hints at the scale of the distinctiveness of South African English and its wayward, ingenious and constantly acquisitive – and centuries’ old – departure from the perceived norm of the Queen’s English. Aardvark is usually the first word in English dictionaries the world over. English in South Africa today is, strictly speaking, a minority language, with only about 9% of the population being mother-tongue speakers. But it is the lingua franca, and it has, through absorption,


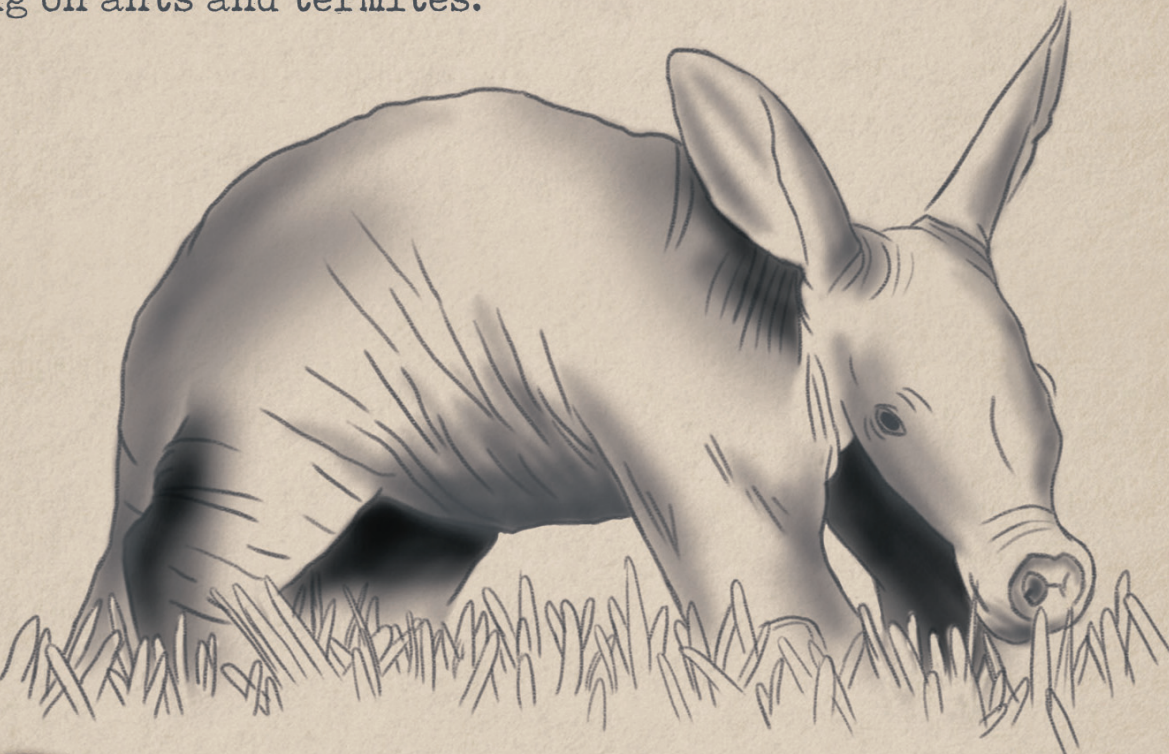
For those who love language, any dictionary is a joy

become distinctively local in flavour and content. After all, who but a South African could understand the following: “A black diamond drives out of his home in a gated community, turns on a tickey to avoid the bergie loitering outside, and then puts foot to meet his wife – a kugel from Jozi – at their pondokkie on the coast, which she’s zhooishing up to make into their holiday home.” This illustration comes from Dictionary Unit (DSAE) director Jill Wolvaardt’s launch presentation in November 2010 for the publication of the *Oxford South African Concise Dictionary*. For those who love language, any dictionary is a joy – but one of the most extraordinary lexicons, now merely a click away, is the DSAE’s online version of *A Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles*. It is a dictionary not merely of words and limited examples of their meaning, but a compendium of their usage, origin and evolution over time. The more than 1.7 million words of text underpin about 4 600 main entries documenting the development of regional English usage in southern Africa since the late 17th century. The grand sum of 14 700 word forms,



## Aardvark

- a nocturnal badger-sized burrowing mammal of Africa, with long ears, a tubular snout, and a long extensible tongue, feeding on ants and termites.



Sparrman J 1786 p 270

This animal [the berg-varken] must not be confounds with the aard-varken, or earth-pig, which, probably, is a species of manis ... /

The card index bearing the first reference to 'aardvark' - by the Swedish botanist Anders Sparrman, in 1786 - commonly the first word in English dictionaries the world over.

Graphic by Devon Daniels

# SA English as you have never seen it

If you've never thought of reading a dictionary, a brief browse of the treasure trove at <http://dsae.co.za> could change your mind, writes **Michael Morris**

reflecting liberal borrowings from other South African languages and many others around the world, are richly illustrated in no fewer than 44 000 bibliographically documented quotations. The work provides a history of words, their etymologies (or origins), variant spellings, compounds, derivatives and phrases. Here, we encounter South African English sources as diverse as British explorer William Burchell, pictured left, and contemporary writer Mothobi Mutloatse; Scope magazine – famed for its risqué stars-on-nipples nude shoots of the 1970s – and 18th century Swedish botanist Anders

Sparrman; early African nationalist and writer Sol Plaatje, pictured right, swashbuckling adventure novelist H Rider Haggard and straight-talking writer and cultural observer Rian Malan. Weekend Argus – along with a host of other print titles – features, and in the top 100 sources, no less. Perhaps the most important – and, at times, almost unnerving – principle at work is that this is a descriptive, not prescriptive, lexicon; it tells us how South African English has and is being used, rather than how it ought to be. There is no squeamish politesse – the wit and inventive wisecracking, the outright abuse and shameful

offensiveness is all here. It is an exercise in unabashed honesty and rigour. Yet, there is arguably some room for comfort; as the entries are chronological, we can see how far we have come in the language we use to talk of one another. Until recently, though, access to these insights and treasures of South Africanness was limited to those who could afford to buy the 1996 Oxford University Press edition of *A Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles*. This landmark work, edited and produced in Grahamstown under Penny Silva, was the culmination of 25 years’ research. The DSAE

was originally established in 1969, pioneering figures in its development being Professor William Branford, and his wife, Jean Branford. By 2005, the printed product of their work was out of print. In the internet age, however, the realm of possibility is vastly expanded. And, at St Peter’s Building today, managing editor Tim van Niekerk, associate editor Bridgitte Le Du and systems development assistants Jason Spencer and Richard Slater, are presiding over a project to make the encyclopaedic research on South African English not only accessible online, but user-friendly, too, and

at a scale of detail that would be unthinkable large in print. The noun trek, for instance – first used in English contexts in the early 19th century (and subsequently assimilated into general English), carries 11 main senses and is more than 5 000 words long. Some exceptional entries are longer. Van Niekerk told Weekend Argus: “The current focus is on a thorough adaptation of the dictionary for online presentation. Since the span of coverage is extensive, from the 17th century to the 1990s – and within that date-range entries give detailed treatment of South African English that no other dictionary comes close to matching – we have made the first edition available online with a basic user interface, as a first step.” He added the online edition “is, in important ways, a departure from the print version’s publishing model” – it is free, something that would not have been possible in the print-publishing era. “This also means the project is independent of publishers’ commercial imperatives, and we have greater freedom to experiment with entry presentation strategies. “In design terms, dictionary entry presentation in print versus electronic media are at opposite poles, not merely because the one is ink on plant fibre and the other electrons moving behind glass. “The print medium is static and condensed; electronic presentation needs to be dynamic, and readable under distracting conditions. So, in the print edition you can cover the entry for abba (‘carry a child on one’s back’) with a credit card, whereas the full display in the online edition takes up the bulk of the main presentation window. “The main concern of the print design was to save space so as to reduce printing costs. In the online medium... the print-era strategies (condensing entries using typographical symbols and other contractions) need to be reverse-engineered and replaced with new layered, relevance-based presentation strategies. “For dictionaries with shorter entries this is less of a problem, but in a historical dictionary with substantial quotation examples these new strategies are a basic requirement in making the users’ experience more comfortable and relevant. This, along with additional searching, filtering and visual browsing functionality is what we are currently working on as part of a general dictionary research collaboration with other universities.” Van Niekerk described the current online version as a “pilot edition”. The first stage of a “greatly enhanced desktop online version” would be available from the end of this year. There was also a mobile version, and, in Germany, University of Hildesheim MA candidate Elisabeth Lemke was working on “a prototype version of an Android app”. In a paper presented at the recent Digital Humanities Association of Southern Africa conference in Stellenbosch, Van Niekerk and Le Du noted that the biographically annotated design of the database “gives it historical, cultural and to some extent literary dimensions across a wide historical span”. “The depth and range of content encoded in this dictionary, combined with the possibilities presented by the digital environment, allow this reference work to be transformed from the traditional concept of a dictionary as an extended wordlist to a linguistic, cultural and encyclopaedic inventory.” This is the implicit promise of the opening proposition on the dsae.co.za site: “Explore the history of words from afak to zozo, aikona to yebo...” And they really do seem perfectly ordinary English words, to us.

## SA English continues to flourish

SOUTH African English has been long in the making, as the following additions from contemporary quotations reveal. Entries quoting 16th and 17th century sources include assegai, dagga and dubbeljie. Among the sample from 18th century sources are aardvark, atjar, baviaan, buchu, pictured below, doek, Karoo, kerie, naartjie and stoep. From the next century, we get dagga-rooker, donga, Fingo, frikkadel, hlonipha (reverence or respect), imbongi, pass law, and umkhonto. And, from the 20th century, honorary white, Jozi, cheesa, eina, freedom song, gogo, hensopper, immorality, matchbox, recuse and ubuntu. In percentage terms, the 19th century (19.4%) and the 20th (78.8%) have delivered the bulk of indigenous contributions to South African English.



## Do you praat English?

AFRIKAANS is the main contributor to South African English (39.8%), but the origins of words are extraordinarily diverse, ranging from isiZulu (6.3%), isiXhosa (5%), Khoisan languages (2.4%) and Sesotho (2.0%) to Setswana (1.7%), Malay (1.2%), Latin (1%), Portuguese (0.9%) French (0.8%), German (0.5%) and Arabic (0.4%). The list goes on, however small the influence, to include Hindi (0.3%), Yiddish (0.2%), Urdu (0.2%), Siswati (0.2%), Spanish (0.2%), Tamil (0.1%), Swahili (0.1%), and Hebrew (0.1%), among others. Thereafter, there’s still a host of minuscule but nevertheless verifiable influences, ranging from Scottish, West Indian and Jamaican varieties of English to Algonquian, Aztec, Berber, Chinese, Czech, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Russian, Sanskrit, Serbo-Croatian, Sudanese, Thai and West Flemish.

