

Joyce M. Hawkins (Compiler). *The South African Oxford School Dictionary*, 1996, xxi + 551 pp. ISBN 0 19 571414 8. Cape Town: Oxford University Press. E-mail: oxford@oup.co.za. Price R44,95.

Preparing a dictionary for school children confronts the compiler with at least two problems. The first is how to simplify complex definitions, using a limited vocabulary; the second is what words to put in, and what to leave out. Indeed, how does one begin to assess what words South African school children currently live with? **Cyberspace**? No, apparently not; **ecstasy** as drug? No; **rave** as party? No again; **gothic** as a fashion statement? The only reference to gothic refers to a style of architecture "with pointed arches and much carving".

It is, of course, very easy to list words that do not appear in dictionaries, especially ones written for children. On the other hand, unless the compiler of such a dictionary has a very clear idea of what children think about, what they do, and how they react to the world around them, it is possible that the resultant dictionary may appear out of touch and out of date.

The *South African Oxford School Dictionary* has a sense of out-datedness about it. While it would be absurd to demand that a dictionary for schools should be up to date when new words are pouring into English all the time, one would hope that the world of the nineties was somehow reflected in its pages, rather than, perhaps, the world of a previous decade. The Preface delights in announcing that words like **glasnost**, **greenhouse effect**, and **ghetto-blaster** are included, describing them as "words and phrases that are considered new". Not any more, they aren't; not even when this dictionary was first published. There is no entry under **Internet**, **website**, and **interactive**, all words that have been heard in primary school halls (though there is **CD-ROM**, **mouse** and **icon**).

Then, too, there is always the question of whether to include the "rude" words of the language in a dictionary for children. Words related to matters of sex do appear, and their definitions are here as objective as such definitions can be. **Masturbate** is no longer defined with tones of judgement ("self-abuse" as my school dictionary had it); **homosexual** is defined quite simply as "attracted to people of the same sex", but **lesbian** is defined as "a homosexual woman", a definition lesbians are likely to take exception to. There are no swear words. Their inclusion is a matter for serious debate, it is true, but there is nevertheless an element of prissiness about their complete absence. Children today are so familiar with so-called swear words (like **shit** and **arse** and **cock**) that not to include them, even with a slang annotation, seems like censorship. **Bum** "a person's bottom" is annotated slang, which is laughable. The dictionary is a sanitised affair in this respect, and as such, it fails to capture fully the English South African school children are in daily contact with.

As regards the "South African" claim, there is a good spread of words of local provenance. Missing, though are **Coloured**, **Kaffir**, **Black** and **White** (the last two when used to describe race groups). Their absence again raises the question of the extent to which dictionaries for children only describe word usage — as one would hope a dictionary for adults does — or whether pre-

scription begins to play a part, together with all the attendant moral and ideological undertones. Of course such words are offensive; of course one does not want children using them. But neither of those issues should affect a dictionary compiler. And since this dictionary has little "usage" paragraphs after potentially contentious entries, like the excellent little one after *he* that clarifies the need for non-sexist language, similar usage paragraphs dealing with racism after racist terms would have been educationally sounder than merely omitting the offensive terms. There is a strong whiff of more sanitising here.

The problem of defining words with a somewhat limited vocabulary at one's disposal has been handled here with skill. The definitions in this dictionary are, for the most part, precise, accurate and clear. Eschewing complexity, though, sometimes produces definitions that are not entirely helpful. Under **Marxism** we read "the Communist theories of the German writer Karl Marx ...". This necessitates looking up **Communist**, for without understanding that word, the definition is entirely useless. The word, of course, appears under the entry for **Communism**, and so, often missed by young users of dictionaries: "a political system where the State controls property, production, trade, etc.". Naturally, such a generalisation does not give a clear enough picture of the concept, nor, indeed, does it help in further understanding the difference between Marxism and Communism. The user will be left with the assumption that they are the same. On the other hand, **ecology** is defined with simplicity and precision.

You really cannot win in compiling a school dictionary: put in certain words, and there is criticism; leave them out, and there is criticism. As a one-time teacher, my feeling about such dictionaries was, simply, not to use them. Too much is lost of the complexity and the richness of the language in the necessary compromise with simplification and appropriateness. There are no etymologies, and yet some etymologies fascinate children. There are no illustrations, and, given the massive influx of CD-ROM encyclopaedias and reference collections, dictionaries of this kind should be doing something to make themselves a little more attractive to the young mind, bombarded as it is by visuals, colour, sound and movement.

The *South African Oxford School Dictionary* is one of the better dictionaries in this category. But it needs to rethink its sanitised content, its lacklustre look, and its feel of not really being in touch with its proposed readers. Much of this is due, no doubt, to the pursuit of producing the book as cheaply as possible (no illustrations, cheap paper, no colour, space saving by omitting etymologies). But I remain uncertain as to whether there is any sound reason for its being so conservative in its content.

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