

# More than just words - what goes into the latest school dictionary

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29 Mar 2018

The dictionary is and will always be an invaluable tool at school - especially bilingual dictionaries. The team that compiled the latest edition of the *Oxford Afrikaans-Engels English-Afrikaans Skoolwoordeboek School Dictionary* wanted to offer more than just basic word translations - using special techniques, they have gone a step further to incorporate the current curriculum and culture in the new version.



Fred Pheiffer

We chatted with Fred Pheiffer, the managing editor: dictionaries for Oxford University Press South Africa, about the new edition and what went into its creation...

## ■ How does the latest version of the *Oxford Afrikaans-Engels English-Afrikaans Skoolwoordeboek School Dictionary* differ from the previous edition?

Firstly, the second edition of the *Oxford Afrikaans-Engels English-Afrikaans Skoolwoordeboek School Dictionary* (called the Tweet for short) has more entries (the words with their grammatical information, meanings, translations, and example sentences). Roughly 1500 entries have been added to each half of the dictionary. As a result, the new Tweet has 30% more content.

Secondly, the Tweet is now suitable for use up to Matric for learners with Afrikaans or English as First Additional Language. Whereas previously we aimed the Tweet at Grades 4 to 9, many of the new words included apply specifically to the curriculum content of Grades 10 to 12. This makes the new Tweet like a one-stop shop: useful for most of a learner's school years.

Thirdly, we replaced most of the example sentences in the first-edition Tweet with sentences from what is called a corpus in lexicography (the practice and study of dictionary making). A corpus is a large volume of texts stored electronically. It provides statistical data about the frequency of words' usage and hence which high-frequency words the lexicographer (dictionary compiler) should focus on. A corpus is also a rich source of real-life example sentences. One of the corpora we used to make the new Tweet contains a selection of our own Oxford textbooks and prescribed literature. Hence the example sentences in the new Tweet relate to the work done in class and to the school environment and the life of teenage learners.

■ ***Tell us about the emphasis on the grammatical and structural importance of the words/translations used?***

Each entry in the new Tweet now has more grammatical information than those in the old Tweet. The dictionary shows the user how to pronounce words and where words may be hyphenated. It also shows the plurals of nouns, the degrees of comparison of adjectives, and the past tense and past and continuous participles of verbs. Since we compiled the new Tweet using a school textbook corpus, the words we included relate directly to teaching and learning done in the classroom. Furthermore, the corpus also reveals which meanings of words are the most important. Finally, only the most relevant translations were provided. We seldom showed more than two translations, so as not to confuse learners.

■ ***Cultural and gender sensitivities were of particular importance when selecting example sentences for the dictionary. Did this pose any significant issues during compilation?***

Oxford University Press SA strives to provide teaching and learning resources that are both useful and relevant to the teachers and learners of present-day South Africa. Our teachers and learners come from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. This diversity needs to be reflected in OUPSA's products, including our dictionaries. We need to understand, for example, that the majority of Afrikaans speakers are not white, and that most teachers and learners use English as an additional language. Hence Oxford's dictionary makers prescribe to the principle of plain language, and our word selection and example sentences reflect the broad socio-economic, cultural, and religious make-up of the communities the users of our products belong to. In short, we strive for inclusivity.

Example sentences include:

- "Jy spaar baie water as jy stort eerder as om te bad. / You save a lot of water if you shower rather than having a bath."
- "Aan die einde van die Ramadaan-vastyd vier Moesliems Eid. / At the end of the Ramadan fast Muslims celebrate Eid."
- "Die moderne dieet bevat te veel verfynde koolhidrate. / The modern diet contains too many refined carbohydrates."

■ ***Dictionaries are often considered "boring" - how do we start changing this perception?***

Dictionary publishers can prevent their dictionaries becoming boring by keeping up with present-day vocabulary and expressions and with, for example, new social trends and technological developments. As a rule of thumb dictionaries should be updated every five years. A new edition of a school dictionary should not only include trending new vocabulary, but also example sentences that relate to the every-day life of South African teenagers. An Oxford school dictionary should not only provide the comfort of the familiar, but also the excitement of discovering the new.

■ ***In this hi-tech era, are there any plans to launch this in an online version - say a downloadable app?***

Many of OUPSA's best-selling dictionaries have been available on CD for several years now. We are also looking at making our dictionaries accessible online and as cellphone apps, especially since a printed product has limited space, far less space than the content actually prepared during the compilation process would require. In fact, two of OUPSA's

bilingual school dictionaries, the *Oxford isiZulu-isiNgesi English-isiZulu Isichazamaswi Sesikole School Dictionary* and the *Oxford Sesotho sa Leboa-Seisimane English-Northern Sotho Pukuntšu ya Sekolo School Dictionary* are already available at Oxford Global Languages (OGL). The links are <https://zu.oxforddictionaries.com/> and <https://nso.oxforddictionaries.com/>.

However, one should bear in mind, firstly, that for many South African schools the internet is not yet readily available, meaning there is still a big demand for printed dictionaries and other learning material. Secondly, when dictionary content is accessed online, the user expects every word search to be successful. However, a school dictionary like the Tweet is not designed to be comprehensive. Rather its focus is on helping a learner to understand words he or she will encounter in the classroom, and to use those words correctly in expressions and sentences.

■ ***Will Oxford be looking to introduce the same compilation methodology into its other bilingual dictionaries, for eg. the English-Xhosa dictionary?***

All OUPSA's bilingual school dictionaries have been compiled by explaining or translating those words learners will most likely encounter in the classroom and while doing homework. Furthermore, we strive to compile our dictionaries using a defined vocabulary (3000 understandable words) and plain language. Finally, we are increasingly using corpus data to compile our entry lists and to extract example sentences from. In fact, the second edition of the Tweet is the first local school dictionary to be based entirely on corpus material, right from the start of the compilation process.

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