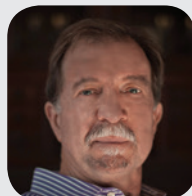


# Text editing across cultures in a multilingual society: South African English as a case study

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## About the author

John Linnegar joined us from Cape Town, where he is an Accredited Text Editor and Exco member of the Professional Editors' Group (South Africa). He has trained text editors, proofreaders, subeditors and project managers since 1999, and is the author of *Engleish, our Engleish: Common problems in South African English and how to resolve them* (Pharos, 2009).

*Constitution; koeksister; bunny chow; tsotsi; vuvuzela; just now; sharp, sharp; eish!;*

*I did buy me a jean, but I'm thinking I nogal made a mistake;*

*After the indaba, he send me the document he promise me;*

*Don't drive through the red robots without stopping; the traffic cops is monitoring you;*

*I'll be with you now-now, né;*

If any or all of these expressions sound foreign to you, then you have just been exposed to South African English (SAE) in all its diversity! These are all examples of the influence of local languages on the language. Pronunciation by non-native speakers, words adopted from their native tongues, the application of native-tongue rules of morphology and syntax, spelling, punctuation, and South Africa-specific lexicon are all illustrated here. In this paper, I attempt to illustrate the factors that exert an influence on the form and shape of English as an important lingua franca between speakers who do not share a first language in South Africa.<sup>1</sup>

SAE is a rich *banket* of many linguistic influences dating back to British occupation from the early 19th century: UK Standard English and several dialects; Dutch and Afrikaans; Malay; Indian English; French, Portuguese, and all nine indigenous official languages of South Africa (11 official languages in all). The 11 different official languages represent five different language families with limited mutual intelligibility, so the need for a widely used lingua franca is clear.<sup>2</sup>

Lexicographer Jean Branford describes SAE as 'a mixed bag ... a lingua franca among those to whom English is, and many to whom English is not, their mother tongue'.<sup>3</sup> This makes SAE a diverse, rich, colourful and vibrant language, even discounting modern external ('foreign') influences.

In this linguistic microcosm, SAE is the lingua franca (though a minority language and only the fifth most spoken countrywide).<sup>4</sup> It's the language of education, business and government. As a result, despite the fact that SAE is the world English closest to British Standard English, it is nevertheless heavily influenced (and altered beyond recognition) by its non-native users.



Because of our linguistic diversity and complexity, for English native speakers in South Africa ‘editing across (blurred) borders’ is second nature: while we model SAE on UK (as opposed to US) English (crossing other ‘borders’ by standardising on reference works from elsewhere in the English-speaking world), we editors have to understand the several Englishes written and spoken by non-native speaking authors as well as their cultural origins. Some examples are: Afrikaans-speakers, speakers of the unique dialect that is SA Indian English, and black Africans who speak isiZulu, isiXhosa (Nguni languages), Sesotho, Setswana (Sotho languages). They are all required to produce documentation in English, as are users of SAE who are heavily influenced by the idiom, syntax and morphology of the other official languages ... And from time to time we also have to ask the question, ‘Is this word “foreign” to SAE or not?’, because this will determine our editorial treatment of such words. Fortunately, we have the *Oxford South African Concise Dictionary* to come to our rescue.<sup>5</sup>

And so there’s much work to be had editing across cultural, linguistic and national borders in our country. This makes it important for us, inter alia, to understand where our writers are coming from both linguistically and culturally if we are to convey their meaning effectively through our intervention in their texts at the levels of structure, wording, meaning and presentation (spelling and punctuation)—especially in the realm of non-fiction and academic writing.

This paper explores the opportunities and challenges that present themselves to text editors in South Africa as a multilingual and multicultural society. Our challenges typically come from Afrikaans, our nine indigenous African languages, and SA Indian English.

### Roots of South African English (SAE)

As Martin Bragg points out in *The Adventure of English*,<sup>6</sup> the story of the English language can be said to reach back millennia: ‘the billion-tongued language of Modern English ... arrived’, he says (p 1), from fifth-century Friesland, became settled in what was to become England, and then became overlaid with Latin, Greek, Hebrew. So English and Afrikaans share a common root dating back 1 500 years.

An event of great importance to the spread of English as a global language occurred from 1580: in that year, Sir Francis Drake set out on his epic circumnavigation of the globe, a feat that not only changed the British worldview but also paved the way for English to spread worldwide. On its journey from the 8th to the 21st century, English—like many languages of expansionist cultures—has borrowed from scores of languages wherever Britons have made landfall.

This is the essential difference between English and South Africa’s indigenous African languages, on the one hand, and Afrikaans, on the other: like French, Afrikaans is protective and prescriptive; English, in contrast, is ‘this hungry creature’ (to quote Bragg<sup>6</sup>), acquisitive and expansive, with nary a consideration for protecting itself. And as it has expanded its lexicon and increased its global reach, so it has found it expedient to be less and less prescriptive, more and more accommodating—probably its greatest strength. Our African languages, being essentially oral until the first written forms were set down in the 19th century, have also borrowed and adapted heavily, as we shall see.

There are also some important differences between two Afrikaans dialects that affect SAE: that of the northern interior provinces (for example, Gauteng, Free State) and that of the coastal provinces, such as Western Cape and Eastern Cape. For example, besides the aspect of pronunciation, to a white Afrikaans speaker from the north the word ‘*koeksister*’ is a plaited sweetmeat that’s deep fried then soaked in syrup; to a coastal Afrikaans speaker (typically of our so-called Coloured community with its Malay roots) a ‘*koesister*’ is more doughnut-like, coated with coconut after deep-frying. The distinction—and which product you purchase—lies essentially in the pronunciation!



### Spelling challenges

The humble '*koeksister*' raises the matter of another important challenge for text editors in South Africa: spelling. '*Sister*' is derived from '*siss*', the onomatopoeic word for the sound of dough sizzling in hot fat; '*suster*', on the other hand, while sounding very similar, is the equivalent of the English '*sister*'. The ignorance around this distinction is widespread (often based on mispronunciation), so editors really have to have their wits about them!



*Koeksisters*



*Malay koeksisters*

### Spelling based on pronunciation

The way many Africans in South Africa pronounce English words based on their native-tongue sound formations (it would appear to be a peculiarly South African phenomenon not witnessed in neighbouring Botswana, Zimbabwe or Zambia), can lead to particularly odd spellings (and word misuses), especially when oral recordings are transcribed. The 'e', 'i', and 'ie' sounds are particularly problematic: short internal vowels tend to be lengthened ('bit' becomes 'beet'; 'set' becomes 'seht' or 'said'; 'legacies' as 'legasieze'); conversely, long internal vowels tend to be shortened ('fern' becomes 'fen'; 'lead' becomes 'lied' or 'lid'; 'heat' becomes 'hit').

In addition, the second syllable of polysyllabic words tends uniformly to be stressed ('constitution' becomes 'constition', for instance). Editors of transcriptions of parliamentary debates and meetings, in particular, have a torrid time deciphering the spelling contortions based on mispronunciations with which the ear is unfamiliar.

### Morphology/vocabulary

In contrast to both English and Afrikaans, the indigenous Bantu languages (Nguni and Sotho groups mainly) do not have a longstanding written tradition. They are mainly oral languages of a rural people that made quite heavy borrowings from the lexicon of the colonisers, especially the farmers who trekked into the interior of South Africa from 1836. Most Africans formed master–servant relationships with the colonisers, so it would have been in their interests also to acquire the language of their masters.

For example, the *rondavels* (or *rondawels*, a traditional circular African dwelling with a conical roof), is in itself an interesting South African English word, derived from Afrikaans (*rond*) for 'round' and Malay (*dewala*) for 'wall'. Most rural Africans lived in them until at least the seventies. They had no windows—or *ifenstile*, *ifasitele*, *lefastere* (window)—and no tables to sit at — *itafile*, *Itafula*, *tafola* (table); nor were there utensils such as forks and spoons—*ifolokwe*, *imfologo* (fork), *icephe*, *ilephula* (spoon).<sup>7,8,9</sup> So the Afrikaans words for these items were adopted (*fenster*; *tafel*; *vrk*; *lepel*) and treated according to indigenous rules for word formation and spelling.

Where English influenced morphology, we have examples of pronunciations approximate to the English such as *isipunu* (spoon), *itebhula* (table), *iwindi* (window).<sup>7,8,9</sup> These examples, and those above, are from isiXhosa (Eastern Cape), isiZulu (KwaZulu-Natal) and Northern Sotho (Free State).



*A rondavel (rondawel)*

The principal problem and challenge facing these indigenous languages is their relative isolation, the relatively small number of native speakers (except for isiXhosa and isiZulu) and their lack—to this day—of authoritative published dictionaries/word lists and rules of grammar and spelling of the kind that both English and Afrikaans have. Other than what missionaries who worked among local Africans compiled in the 19th century, such reference works are few and far between—a major handicap for authors and editors alike. Consequently, editors really struggle to do justice to texts in these languages, there often being disagreement about the correct prefixes or spellings, or even the morphology, of words.

These were among the earliest linguistic ‘border crossings’ between the languages of South Africa. In the ‘new’ South Africa (that is, post-1994), the situation has become more complicated for language practitioners, as code-switching and code-mixing have virtually become the order of the day. In many of our local TV ‘soapies’ and in some fiction, for instance, the characters may use more than two languages interchangeably in dialogue: English, Afrikaans and at least one of the indigenous languages (isiXhosa, isiZulu, Sesotho or Setswana). This requires text editors and proofreaders to be linguistically agile and versatile in order to ensure that the playwright’s or author’s intended meaning is conveyed correctly.

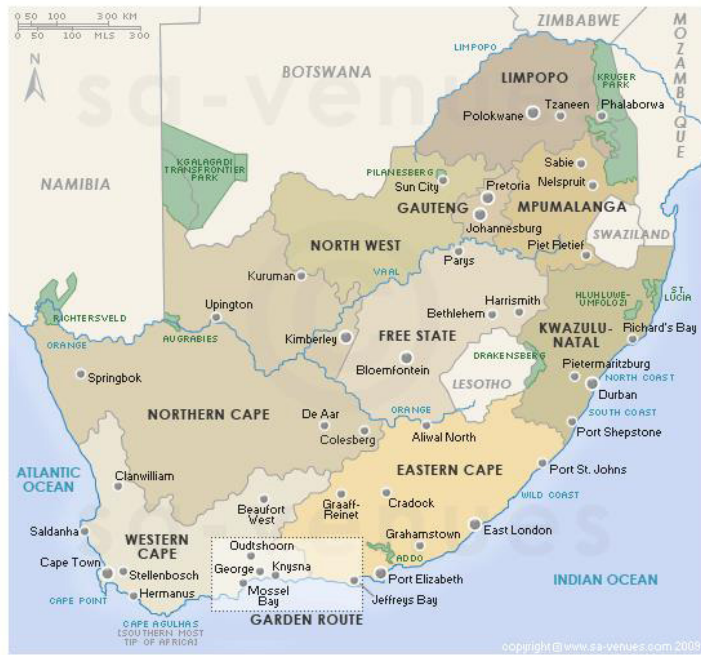
### ***Origins of the South Africa-Europe connection***

One can trace back the origins of the linguistic diversity of South Africa almost four hundred years.

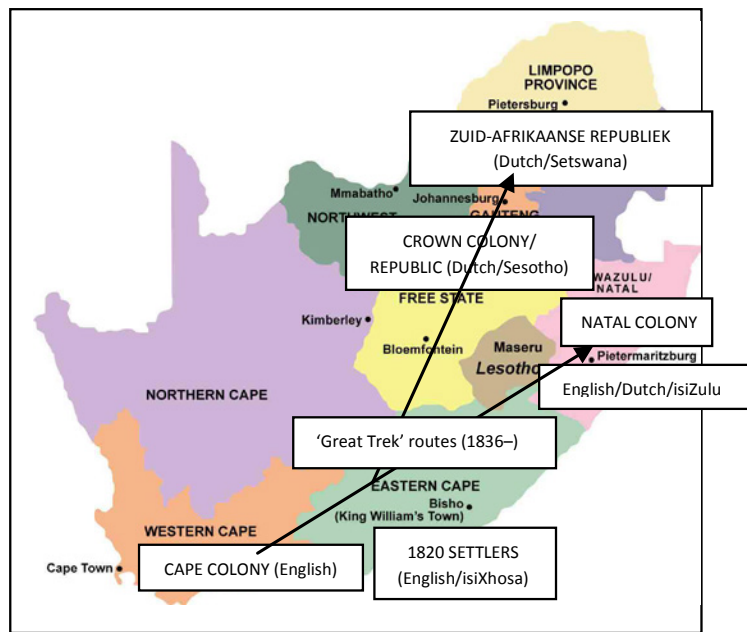
In the late 15th century, the first European explorers (Portuguese) went ashore on South Africa’s coastline. Some 360 years ago, in 1652, the representative of the Dutch East India Company, Jan van Riebeeck, arrived at the southernmost tip of Africa to establish a refreshment station for the Company’s ships bound for and returning from the Dutch East Indies. That event established the Dutch language firmly on African soil.

The English language arrived in the then Cape Colony effectively from 1806, when a British colonial administration replaced Batavian (Dutch) governors.<sup>4</sup> Almost 20 years later, the first wave of British settlers arrived in the colony; two decades later again, another wave of English speakers arrived in the territory known as Natal, which became a Crown Colony.<sup>4</sup> A variety of dialects were spoken within these two main English-speaking communities. The history of South Africa from that time until 1910 was essentially one of competition for hegemony over the southernmost part of Africa between the Dutch- and the English-speaking communities. (The Africans were mainly incidental to this.)





South Africa, its provinces and its neighbours



South Africa showing Cape Colony, Eastern Cape, Natal Crown Colony, two republics and routes of the Great Trek

In 1925, South Africa having been a Union for 15 years, Afrikaans was elevated from the status of *'kombuistaal'* ('kitchen language', or the language of lowly servants) to an official language of South Africa. It gradually replaced Dutch as a spoken and written language. Until 20 years ago, it shared with English the status of official language of South Africa, but was the de facto dominant language of administration, politics, education and business from 1948 to 1994 (almost half a century). In academia, too, Afrikaans flourished and became entrenched, especially with the establishment of Afrikaans-medium universities around the country. As a result of its dominance—it is now the second most spoken language in South Africa—its effects on SAE and English generally have been profound.



Much has been done to shore Afrikaans up post-1994, now that it shares official language status with 10 other languages and English is de facto in the ascendant as the lingua franca.

### **Examples of the influence of Afrikaans on SAE**

Among Afrikaans-speakers, the typical errors committed in English usage (and for which text editors have constantly to be on the lookout) are:<sup>10,11</sup>

**Netnou/nou-nou = ‘just now’.** In England (and presumably also Australia), ‘just now’ refers to an event in the immediate past: ‘He was here just now, but he’s disappeared.’ In SAE, under the influence of the Afrikaans adverb ‘netnou’, it is used to mean in the immediate future, or in an (indeterminate) while: ‘I’ll be with you just now, madam.’

**‘Afrikaans comma’:** used conventionally to separate the parts of sentences that contain finite (or main) verbs: ‘*Sommige mense wat Engels aanleer, vind dat hulle dit maklik kan bemeester.*’ The equivalent—correct—structure in English is: ‘Some people who learn English find that they master it easily’ (without the comma after ‘English’).

**Dit = it, they:** used for both singular and plural—‘*Dit is reg*’ (That/It is correct) and ‘*Dit is my kinders*’ (‘Those/These are my children’), which is often translated as ‘It is my children’ or ‘That is my children’). This usually results in a glaring lack of concord.

**Is = is or are, which leads to a lack of subject–verb concord in English:** ‘*Hy is siek*’ (‘He is sick.’); ‘*Hulle is laf*’ (‘They are crazy’). The result of this lack of plural-singular distinction in the Afrikaans verb ‘is’ tends to be that ‘is’ is used in English where the plural ‘are’ is intended and ‘has’ is used in place of ‘have’: ‘My friend have three children. They is all boys.’

**Send/sent:** Because the final ‘d’ and ‘t’ sounds both approximate the ‘t’ sound, Afrikaans speakers tend to experience difficulty with the simple past tense form of ‘send’, spelling it as ‘send’ instead of ‘sent’: ‘I *send* you an email yesterday.’

**Verbs used incorrectly,** based on Afrikaans usage (‘*leen*’ means both ‘lend’ and ‘borrow’): ‘Borrow me your pen, please.’

**The infinitive** form of verbs used instead of the gerundive form: *We look forward to see everyone at the event* (We look forward to seeing everyone at the event).

**Singular noun forms** (pant, scissor, spectacle) instead of plural (pants, pair of pants; scissors; pair of spectacles) where the plural form is required in English. These are all singular nouns in Afrikaans: ‘*Ek het vir my seun ’n broek/sker/bril gekoop*’ (I bought my son a trouser/scissor/spectacle).

**Plural forms:** apostrophe is used in Afrikaans (*ouma’s, foto’s, agenda’s*), but not in English (grandmas, photos, agendas). Afrikaans speakers tend to use the apostrophe in all plural forms ending in a vowel.

**Direct/literal translations:** ‘*aksie*’ = ‘action’ (but it should be ‘act’ or ‘step’ or ‘initiative’ or ‘campaign’); ‘*konsep*’ = ‘concept’ (but it should be ‘draft’); ‘*instansie*’ = ‘instance’ (but it should be ‘institution’)

**Adjectival forms where adverbial forms are required:** ‘She sings so beautiful’ instead of ‘She sings so beautifully’; ‘They played fantastic well in the finals’ instead of ‘They played fantastically well in the finals’.

**Compounds (Afrikaans—‘samestellings’):** To a much lesser extent than in English, in Afrikaans there is a strong tendency to compound words that describe a single concept. ‘A station of the rapid rail’ (three words) would more likely be ‘*’n snelspoorstasie*’ in Afrikaans (literally, a ‘rapid rail station’). When Afrikaans speakers apply this convention to their use of English, it can lead to some really awkward/unnatural constructions: ‘A

strategic change attempt' (instead of 'an initiative to implement strategic change') derives directly from the Afrikaans term '*strategiese veranderingsaksie*'; 'concept legal draft' (instead of 'draft legislation') derives directly from '*konsepwetsontwerp*'.

**First person placed before second person:** '*Ek en jy moet gaan swem*' (literally, 'I and you must go swimming'); 'Me and my sister listened to music together'. In contrast, in English, the 'other' is always placed first: 'You and I must go swimming.'; 'My sister and I went shopping.'

**Prepositions used incorrectly idiomatically:** 'The bank rate increased *with* twenty per cent' instead of 'The bank rate increased by twenty per cent'; 'He threw Mary *with* the ball.' Instead of 'He threw the ball *at* Mary'; 'He's returning *on* popular demand' instead of 'He's returning by popular demand'. These examples concerning prepositions all illustrate the interference of Afrikaans idiomatic usage in English usage.

Typical of Cape Flats English (strongly influenced by Afrikaans idiom<sup>11</sup>) in the Western Cape province are the following:

- The *-d* and *-ed* endings are usually clipped off the ends of past participles such as *minced*, *curried*, *pickled* and *sundried* when they qualify nouns, with the result that, even in print, we see examples such as: *mince meat*, *curry beans*, *pickle fish* and *sundry apricots*.
- The 'auxiliary' verb *did* has become fairly entrenched in many a statement (not necessarily for emphasis), as in 'I *did* go to the disco last night' ('I went to the disco last night').
- The reflexive pronoun *myself* is often replaced with the first person singular pronoun *me*: 'I did go shopping and I did buy *me* a dress.' ('I went shopping and I bought myself a dress'). This is probably due to the influence of the Afrikaans '*my*', which can mean either 'my' or 'myself'.
- The singular form of nouns tends to be used for the normally plural forms in English, especially where the singular is used in Afrikaans: 'I tried on a *trouser* first and then a *jean*—'I tried on (a pair of) trousers and then (a pair of) jeans', from Afrikaans '*Ek het eers 'n broek aangepas en daarna 'n jean*').

### **Development of SA Indian English since the arrival of the Indians in South Africa 150 years ago**

Another special—delightful—dialect within our borders is SA Indian English.

South Africa's Indian community first entered the country as indentured labourers on the sugar-cane plantations in a subtropical region of southern Africa known as Natal (now the province of KwaZulu-Natal). It is the traditional homeland of the amaZulu people, members of the Nguni group of the Bantu peoples that migrated to southern Africa from Central Africa. At the time of the Indians' arrival (1861), Natal was a British Crown Colony.

Thanks to apartheid—which separated people socioeconomically according to race—the Indian community has been quite isolated since its first forebears arrived, not only from other linguistic and cultural groups in South Africa, but also from its roots and contacts back in India. South African Indian English has therefore developed as a unique dialect with borrowings not only from regions within India from which the first labourers were drawn, but also from Afrikaans and isiZulu (an Nguni language based in Natal).



South African Indian English has acquired well over a thousand distinctive items,<sup>12,13</sup> at least in informal speech, including adopted words from Indian languages: *thanni* (a card game), *dhanian* (coriander) and *isel* (flying ant); and adaptations of many native English words: *proposed* (engaged), *future* (husband/wife-to-be) and *cheeky* (stern), for example.<sup>1,12,13</sup> But the most notable feature of this variety is its syntax, including:

- reduplication: *fast-fast* ('very fast'), *different-different* ('many and different');
- rhetorical use of question-words: Where he'll do it! ('He certainly won't do it!'), *What must I go?* ('Why should I go?').
- pronoun omissions: *If you got, I'll take. Where you bought?*
- tag questions: *He came there, isn't it?*
- end-placed verbs: *Customer you got.*
- relative clauses: *Who won money, they're putting up a factory next door* ('The people who won money are putting ...').
- postpositions: *Durban-side* (near Durban), *afternoon-time it gets hot* ('in the afternoon it gets hot').
- final use of some conjunctions and adverbials: '*She can talk English but.*'; '*I made rice too, I made roti too.*' ('I made both rice and roti').

### **Influence of African languages on SAE**

**The use of the feminine third person singular pronoun** (she), usually, for either males or females, because the indigenous languages do not have the same pronoun distinction (only nouns are used to indicate gender). As a result, in English, 'he' and 'she' are used indiscriminately: for instance, 'The policeman, she came and took a statement from me.'

The tendency to **use the present continuous verb form** when the simple present is meant for a statement of fact or a habit. For example: '*I am having* a house in Bryanston.' Instead of 'I have a house in Bryanston.'

The tendency to **place emphasis on the incorrect syllable in polysyllabic English words** (usually the second syllable): circumstances; deficit; **dett**ermined. This makes comprehension and transcription difficult at times, meaning that the text editor has to be extra vigilant when intervening in such texts.

**Elongating conventionally short internal vowel sounds and shorting conventionally long internal vowel sounds in English.** This tendency can affect the received meaning of sentences, often leading to misinterpretation and misunderstanding in public forums, where oral presentations have to be transcribed: 'He must **asset** himself more **determinedly** if he wants to succeed as a manager.' ('assert' was intended); 'He was **banned** during the protest last week.' ('burned' was intended).

The **incorrect use of prepositions**, usually an unidiomatic choice: 'Please ask *to* him ...' ('Please ask him ...');

The **use of 'very much'** as an adverbial phrase intensifier: 'I am *very much* glad for the opportunity ...'

### **Uniquely South African English words that will not translate well internationally**

A multitude of words that are uniquely South African do not translate well beyond the country's borders.<sup>5,13</sup> Text editors therefore have to ensure that if a publication is intended for a wider audience beyond our borders, or to foreigners within them, these words have to be either substituted or explained. Examples include:



*Bantustan*: territory set aside by the apartheid government for black South Africans

*bioscope*: cinema; a British word that has survived in South Africa but died out in Britain, but which is still heard among members of the older generation

*braai(vleis)*: barbecue

*bunny chow*: a hollowed-out half-loaf of bread filled with meat or vegetable curry, as a takeaway

*donga*: a dry watercourse, gully

*eish!*: an exclamation used to express a range of emotions, including surprise and annoyance, and derived from the *Tsotsitaal* (an Afrikaans-influenced township patois, originally a form of slang used by criminals) of the 1990s

*go well/stay well*: a leave-taking greeting and its response, from Nguni *hamba kahle* and *sala kahle* respectively

*indaba*: an important protracted meeting

*konfyt*: a fruit preserve (compare the Dutch *konfijt*, French *confiture*)

*né*: not so

*pants*: meaning ‘trousers’, not ‘underpants’ (the British meaning)

*robots*: traffic lights

*sharp, sharp*: an exclamation of approval, acceptance or agreement; an informal greeting at meeting or parting (post-1994)

*tik (tik-tik)*: methamphetamine

*tsotsi*: a black urban criminal

*vuvuzela*: a long, straight plastic horn, chiefly used by spectators at soccer matches.

Understandably, then, in a multilingual society such as South Africa’s, where ‘historical, racial, tribal and political factors have combined to produce a sociolinguistic situation of stunning intricacy’<sup>1,7</sup> and where the borders between English and the languages living cheek by jowl with it are often blurred, the normative and text-linguistic challenges that face the editor of English-language texts are as stimulating and fascinating as they are great.



*Bunny chow*

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