

IsiZulu for today

IsiZulu is widely spoken and ever-changing – so why are our dictionaries so behind the times? Now there's a new dictionary for a modern Mzansi



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OU'RE a teacher and a student raises his hand to ask what the isiZulu word for "values" is. You reach for your trusty English-to-isiZulu dictionary to find the definition, but to your alarm, the word isn't there!

This was a typical experience for many teachers and students until recently when the new Oxford isiZulu/English school dictionary was published. The most modern isiZulu/English dictionary on the market, it captures how the language has changed in the past 40 years – which is when the previous dictionary was compiled.

The user-friendly, 640-page-dictionary – which is aimed at learners' needs in the classroom – not only gives the translation of the English or isiZulu word you're looking for, but also gives example sentences to help you use the right translation. For example, the isiZulu noun for values is ubungako, and the dictionary not only gives you an example of how you would use the word in an English sentence, "Find the value of x", but it gives you one in isiZulu, too: "Thola ubungako buka-x".

The dictionary is flying off shelves. Ten thousand copies were printed and distributed and already half that number has been sold since it was released in May.

The dictionary helps learners choose the right translation and also differentiates between different groups of words in a sentence, such as the difference between the English word "table" as a noun and "table" as a verb ("to table a motion in parliament", for example).

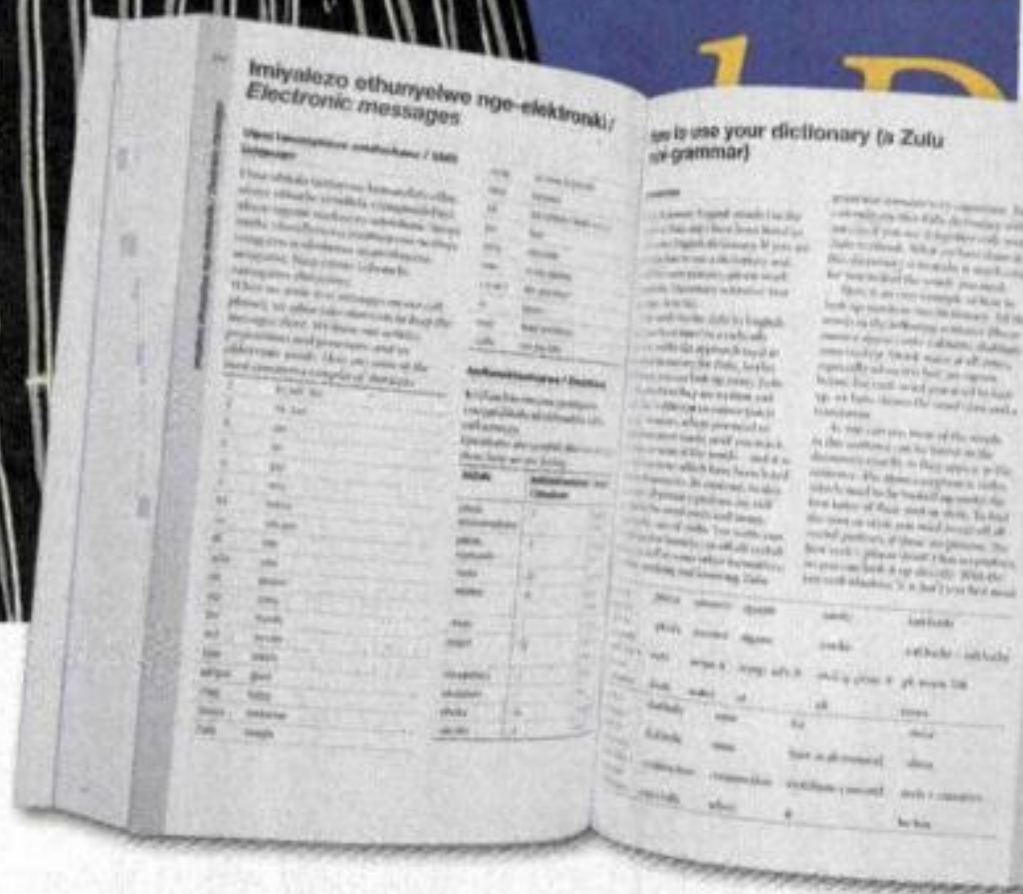
But the part of the new dictionary that has impressed translators and teachers alike is the addition of new words.

"I found it very user-friendly," says Nongcebo Vukile McKenzie, founder of the Khanyisa Development Trust, an organisation that seeks to improve access to education in rural schools.

"I like the way words are translated, categorised into different grammar formats, then explained in English and isiZulu sentences to help students understand sentence structure and to properly translate whole sentences.

"It also includes practical words that we use every day – it doesn't just focus on difficult or 'deeper' isiZulu words," she adds.

"It is so frustrating as a teacher when a



student hands in an assignment, and because their dictionary doesn't have the word cellphone in isiZulu, they write i-cellphone," says Maria Gumede, a Grade 11 teacher from Soweto.

"There is an Aids advert on TV now and you can see that the person who translated the slogan into isiZulu didn't use the correct dictionary because they translate 'Do the right thing' into 'Yenza kahle' – which is wrong! The grammatically correct translation is 'Yenza uokufanele.' I'm so glad we have this dictionary because it will really help our children to speak proper Zulu."

THE dictionary's chief compiler, Nomusa Sibiya, says making the dictionary was a tough process.

"We tried to do something that's never been done before," she says. "Some of the words proved to be very difficult to explain. For example, in isiZulu there are no degrees of comparison, such as big, bigger and biggest, so in such cases we had to put in a footnote to warn learners.