



Revolution in African dictionaries

NELSPRUIT - Over the past 20 years, a revolution has taken place in English dictionary making. Now this has been carried over into dictionaries for the African languages by Oxford University Press Southern Africa.

The revolution in English lexicography has been the use of corpora: vast databases of real text, gathered from novels, newspapers, government documents and recorded speech, that can be analysed and searched electronically.

Making a dictionary using a corpus or corpora means that a dictionary maker can identify how often a particular word is utilised by users of that language and they can see how they use it.

Knowing how often a word is used helps lexicographers decide whether to include it in the dictionary. If a word is very frequently used, it should probably be in a dictionary for schoolchildren. But if not, it should be in a dictionary designed for adults only.

Knowing how people use a particular word is important to lexicographers. It means they can include examples of how words are really used, showing less confident users of the language how to employ it correctly.

Nearly all good dictionaries in English are now based on research in corpora, but this hasn't been the case with dictionaries for African languages. Oxford University Press Southern Africa has been working with a team of experts over the past two and a half years to develop the first dictionary for an African language to be based on a corpus. The team included mother-tongue speakers of English and Northern Sotho and other experts.

"This new Northern Sotho includes example sentences in both English and Northern Sotho. Our research has shown that teachers value these example sentences very highly," says publisher Ms Megan Hall.

Ms Mamokgabo Mogodi is the main compiler for the Northern Sotho section.

This dictionary is also the first for Northern Sotho to focus on the needs of learners at school. It includes about 300 key words from the school curriculum (with bilingual definitions), a guide to pronunciation, a specially written mini-grammar, sample *emails and letters* - and help with writing SMSes.

Managing director of Oxford University Press Southern Africa, Ms Lieze Kotze says, "We are very excited to have published a dictionary that is so accessible and easy to use."

Enquiries: Amanda van der Merwe on 021-596-2300 or email amandavandermerwe@oup.com or visit www.oxford.co.za

