

MAKHANDA EDUCATION MATTERS

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By Bridgitte Le Du

DICTIONARY UNIT FOR SOUTH AFRICAN ENGLISH UNVEILS TRANSFORMED DIGITAL RESOURCE

The Dictionary Unit for South African English (DSAE) has announced the recent launch of a revised edition of its acclaimed online Dictionary of South African English (www.dsae.co.za).



This comprehensive update, two years in the making, introduces new content and features designed to enhance user experience and deepen linguistic understanding. The release of the revised edition on 31 March 2025 solidifies the dictionary's relevance in the digital age, both locally and internationally in contexts of education, research and scholarship.

Housed in the historic St Peter's Building on the Rhodes University campus in Makhanda, the DSAE, funded by the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB), has worked to collect, document, and describe the unique variety of English that has evolved through time and is used within the diverse social and cultural landscape of South African society today. Established in 1969, the DSAE began under the leadership of Professor William Branford, Rhodes University's first Professor of English Language and Linguistics. Its initial and enduring mission was

"The continuous and comprehensive collecting, arranging and storing in a lexicographically workable form of the vocabulary of the English language as used in southern Africa and the editing and publication of the collected materials in the form of A Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles."

Professor Branford, assisted by his wife and fellow lexicographer, Dr Jean Branford, and a growing editorial team, laid the groundwork for what would become an invaluable national resource and vital custodian of English as it is written and spoken within South Africa.

In its pre-digital stages, the DSAE relied on painstaking manual processes, meticulously accumulating a vast print database of South African English words and their contextual usages totalling 300 000 index cards. This unique archive, drawing on sources ranging from early explorers' journals and historical documents to contemporary newspapers and oral utterances, formed the bedrock of the DSAE's research. A significant milestone was reached in 1996 with the publication of *A Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles* by Oxford University Press, of which 100 copies of a special edition were signed by President Nelson Mandela. This monumental work, the culmination of nearly three decades of dedicated research with input from the editors of the Oxford English Dictionary, provided a comprehensive historical record of South African English from the late 16th century up to 1995. Its editorial team was subsequently awarded a gold medal by the English Academy of South Africa.

The dictionary tracked the development of new words or new meanings of existing words as they emerged over time and illuminated the fascinating interplay of languages – including Dutch, Afrikaans, and nine Indigenous African languages – that has shaped this distinctive variety of English.

The advent of the internet in South Africa – incidentally coinciding with the publication of the first edition of the dictionary – presented new opportunities for the DSAE. Since 2004, material has been collected electronically, streamlining the lexicographical process. A major technological leap occurred in 2014 when the Unit launched a pilot online edition of *A Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles*. The pilot edition, which largely retained the look and feel of a print dictionary adapted for digital use, was an important first step in making this invaluable linguistic resource freely accessible to a wider audience.

In 2019 the DSAE published the redesigned Desktop Edition of the online Dictionary of South African English and a fully responsive Mobile Edition the following year. This marked an important step forward by incorporating modern web and mobile design and usability requirements, ensuring seamless navigation through powerful features such as filtering content by language of origin as well as numerous other subject or usage categories.



Dynamic layering of the presentation of dictionary entry content was also implemented to improve readability of entries that are sometimes thousands of words long due to their extensive evidential quotations.

The commitment to accessibility and innovation continues, with the release of the 2025 Revised Edition in March this year.

An immediately striking aspect of the new edition is the redesigned user interface. The DSAE invested in a complete visual overhaul for both Desktop and Mobile platforms, making the vast repository of South African English accessible and intuitive. This commitment to usability is crucial for engaging a wider audience, from academic scholars to everyday language enthusiasts.

A standout new feature that truly sets this Revised Edition apart is the inclusion of audio pronunciations. Moving beyond traditional phonetic transcriptions, which have been retained, users can now click to play over 3900 studio recordings of South African English words. Crucially, these recordings often provide multiple variant pronunciations for each headword, reflecting the rich tapestry of cultural and regional variations within South African English. This is an unparalleled phonetic dataset that makes use of South African voices from a range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, offering an authentic audio record that is particularly valuable for language learners and those seeking to study the nuances of South African speech and phonological structure.

Beyond aesthetic and functional enhancements, the new edition also includes over 100 new words from a wide range of subject domains, such as:

SPORT	shibobo, diski
LAW:	Aquilian liability, cession
MUSIC	amahubo, boereqanga
POLITICS AND HISTORY	the struggle, struggle credentials
FOOD AND DRINK	chakalaka, walkie talkies, papsak
CULTURAL TERMS	ekasi, boerewors curtain, after tears
Everyday life and colloquialisms	load shedding, fong kong, makoya, eish, tsek

These additions at once reflect contemporary usage and highlight the dictionary's role in documenting the sociolinguistic shifts and cultural expressions unique to South Africa. Updates have also been made to existing entries, adding more recent citation evidence from the DSAE's vast corpus of online citations, and reviewing the status of words previously classified as unassimilated into English, confirming that they now reflect current usage. Furthermore, as part of the preparation for the release of the 2025 Revised Edition, language names as used in the dictionary were updated to reflect post-democracy officialisation (e.g., IsiZulu instead of Zulu). Likewise, place names now align with official designations from the South African Geographical Names Council.

The launch of the revised online Dictionary of South African English underscores the profound relevance of a dedicated dictionary of the South African variety of English in the context of education and research. South Africa is an unusually multilingual nation, and while English serves as a language of instruction and communication, its lexicon is shaped by unique historical, cultural and social contexts and influences from the country's other official languages. In this regard, the online Dictionary of South African English supports and facilitates:

Cultural and Linguistic Identity: It validates and formalises the unique vocabulary, expressions, and pronunciations that are integral to South African identity. For learners, seeing their everyday language (ekasi, magwinya, eish) in a scholarly dictionary fosters a sense of belonging and cultural pride, encouraging engagement with language learning and the recognition of South African English as a formalised variety far richer than slang and colloquialism alone.

Contextual Understanding: General English dictionaries typically follow a concise, less descriptive model, often lacking the specific cultural, historical, and social context necessary to fully understand many South African English terms. The online Dictionary of South African English provides this vital context, offering insights into the origins and evolution of words like ubuntu, voetstoots, or imbongi, which have significance within the South African landscape.

Enhanced Comprehension: Students frequently encounter South Africanisms in their textbooks, prescribed literature and media resources. A dedicated dictionary ensures they can accurately interpret and utilise these terms, improving their reading comprehension, writing skills, and overall communication effectiveness.

Support for Bilingual Education: Many South African schools promote bilingual education, and the online Dictionary of South African English, especially with its marked representation of loanwords and culturally specific terms, serves as an invaluable tool for navigating the overlap between English and Indigenous Languages within South African English today.

Development of Critical Language Skills: The historical dictionary model encourages students to reflect on their own developing linguistic environment, to develop a deeper understanding of lexicography, etymology, and a greater awareness of the dynamic nature of language itself. This cultivates critical thinking skills about language use and variation.

In a multicultural and multilingual landscape striving for inclusivity and relevance, the online Dictionary of South African English is more than just a collection of words; it is a cultural and pedagogical resource, equipping South African students and scholars with the tools to confidently navigate and interpret their unique linguistic world. The DSAE's commitment to continuous innovation ensures that this essential resource remains at the forefront of language documentation and education in the country.

The DSAE continues to serve as a vital source of information on South African English for researchers and the public, participating in conferences and contributing to academic journals, reinforcing its role as a cornerstone of linguistic scholarship in South Africa. Today, the DSAE remains a vibrant centre of research, ensuring that the dynamic and ever-evolving nature of South African English is meticulously documented and celebrated for generations to come. The dictionary is open access and available at dsae.co.za.