

Ramson, Bill 2002. *Lexical images. The story of the Australian National dictionary*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press. Pp xvi+255, ISBN 0 19 551577
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Lexical images (LexIm) was, Bill Ramson says, at first conceived as a response to claims about the way the relationship of language and culture manifests itself in Australian English (AusE) by Anna Wierzbicka. Wierzbicka (1997) is an extensive analysis on how words reflect culture and draws untenable conclusions about a very direct link. But Ramson refrains from focusing on her Australian study and changed the focus of the book to a broad history of the *Australian National Dictionary* (AND). The book is now "about the making of a historical dictionary of Australianisms ... and about the 'lexical images' which can be created from an examination of certain combinations of those Australianisms. It seeks to demonstrate that the English language, as it has been used by Australians of European origin ..., and in particular the Australian additions to the vocabulary of English, as these are recorded in the Australian National Dictionary, provide a unique insight into the lives and history of Australians, and create a kaleidoscope of images ... that may in their turn offer interpretations of Australian attitudes and the Australian way of life." (p xi). The book is written in a very personal style by one of the leading Australian lexicographers and philologists but the claims just quoted suggest a scientific 'bias' Personal style and research create a tension to which I will return at the end of the review.

The history of the dictionary is the main theme of Ch.s One to Four; 'lexical images' are highlighted (from a quasi-theoretical angle) in Ch. Four but mainly in Ch.s Five to Nine. Ch. Ten turns to the cultural lexis of the 20th century and concludes, pessimistically, that AusE has had its day – and is now on the decline as a creative local form of English. Chapter One begins with the "Oxford tradition" in lexicography and the Oxford English dictionary; both provide the intellectual and lexicographic background of the AND. Chapter Two traces the path from the first historical dictionary – Morris's *Austral English dictionary* (1898) - to the AND (1988). The first steps towards an Australian historical dictionary were taken, Ramson explains, at The University of Sydney and (slightly later) the National University of Australia in Canberra in the 1960s. As these initiatives did not get off

the ground, the scene shifted to Macquarie University and its foundation professor of linguistics, Arthur Delbridge, who was asked to produce 'an aggressively Australian dictionary'. The *Macquarie dictionary* was not meant to be an historical one but one that was to reflect the contemporary language, emphasizing the colloquial and vulgar end of the spectrum. The *Macquarie* stalled too for a while but was rescued by Macquarie University and a new publisher (cf. Leitner 2004). Three other players came on the scene to help the historical project, i.e. the Humanities Research Centre, the Department of English and the Faculty of Arts at ANU. In 1978 concrete steps could be taken, but ups and downs succeeded each other until the AND was eventually published.

Like many books on language or national vocabularies, *LexIm* follows a tradition of writing essayistically about its subject matter. However well such recollections are narrated – and they are narrated well – the nostalgic tone may be dear to those involved in the making of the AND but makes *LexIm* difficult to appreciate as a reader interested in the national lexis of Australia's English. It is a bit absurd to be forced to learn of details like these:

"She [Joan Hughes] was a prodigious worker, expecting of others what she readily gave herself... Not a very big person, and inclined to become ingrossed in what she was doing that she doesn't notice what else is going on around her..."

We had, in our green and salad days, been a bit lax about this, often going from one cabinet to the next, leaving drawers open and cards sticking up.... But a nine-drawer cabinet ... is far from stable ... and when Joan pulled out another drawer in the top half of the cabinet, it tumbled forward on its face, spilling its contents and pinning her to the floor... But we rescued her ourselves and she ... refiled the spilt cards..." (p 58f)

Instead of such trivia, there could have been a little more analysis. Would it not have been interesting to set the claim that dictionaries and lexicographers such as on AusE are codifiers of the language against the haphazardness of funding, change of publishers and negotiating partners at the upper echelon, or time constraints? The outcome of a varied history, the AND, has after all become a cornerstone in Australian lexicography. But there are few signs of an analysis of sociolinguistic themes.

Ch. Four, unintentionally, comes close to what a reader would have expected. It compares the *Dictionary of New Zealand English* (1997) with the AND (1988) and makes one clear point: Lexicographers set the rules of data collection and classification, they decide on what words and information goes into the dictionary and, as a result, it is them that decided on the kind of image a dictionary may project of a national culture:

"the mere fact that a lexicographer determines what should be included and what excluded entails an exercising of authority on an unprecedented scale, in that it requires a subsequent determination as to what should be included in, and ex-

cluded from, a body of knowledge that the preagmatic user of a dictionary would come to regard as 'the foundation of a national language and culture.'" (p 84)

The lexicographer's role is of course pre-determined by whatever arrangements have been made with the publisher, the funding bodies etc. on what the dictionary was to be like. The AND, for instance, excludes many of the technical terms of fauna and flora. These domains come up when AusE has coined fanciful words or compounds starting with 'native' as in 'native dog' for dingo or when loan words from indigenous languages are used. There are hundreds of both types. But the resulting cultural image, i.e. of measuring the 'new home' by the standards of the 'old home', gets overemphasized if the technical words are left out. Instead of looking at the theme of potential bias, we learn of Ramson's personal impact: "I fulfilled a 'safety-net' role, or tried to, because, as always, there simply wasn't enough time to do everything I felt necessary." (p 68).

As lexicographers are exerting that influence, the lexical images that a dictionary projects of a culture are bound to be biased. The comparison of the AND with the DNZE is informative. Ramson explains that the AND's policies were much more restrictive than those of the NZE counterpart – so that the impression that NZE would have been more 'productive' is wrong. One cannot compare the two dictionaries 'on the quick' – despite OUP's stringent guidelines. And that is, incidentally, another important factor when one thinks of dictionaries as codifiers of a language (variety), viz. variations in the interpretations of guidelines.

Ch. Four had already begun with a closer look at some of the lexical fields or onomastic domains of AusE. Ch.s Five to Nine add considerable detail, dealing with the language of the landscape and topography, occupational terms, the finding a place as a settler, the words borrowed to refer to indigenous weapons, tools, social practice, to refer to them, etc. Ramson looks at the nature and texture of the lexis and the cultural images they may project on the basis of two methodological principles. The first was chosen in Ch. Four where the NZE dictionary was compared with the AND. Here, Ramson, just 'surfing' the dictionary and picked up what he found interesting. In Ch.s Five and Six, entitled "Waste Land to Wonderland" and "Good man de Queen", respectively, he uses a thematic grouping of items by chronological stages of some fifty years. That approach highlights, he says, the attitudes of speakers towards the language across time. During the first fifty years (to around 1830) the notion of terra nullius developed and one talked of 'crown land' (1789) and 'waste land' (1804; really an Americanism) as well as, confusingly, of 'waste lands of the Crown' (1826). (The concept of waste land was important, incidentally, when reserves were set up there and when colonial governments created the office of the 'protector' of Aborigines.) These fifty years produced terms for settlement and location, the movement 'up the country', the perception of the landscape, classification of land as 'wood' or as 'bush', etc. The second fifty years (to nearly 1890) creates more words for the exploration of 'the opening up of the country' and occupational terms. The third fifty years (to nearly

1940) cover Federation in 1901 and the years of World War I and those leading to the second war. They (should) cover the early years of Aboriginal activism, but this he sees only in the final fifty years.

An interesting part is Ch. Six on the contributions from Aboriginal languages. Their stock of words is collected in Ramson/Dixon/Thomas (1990) but Ramson expands the concept somewhat when he says that he includes words of English origin "but with meanings specific to an Aboriginal context" (p 129). We learn of names for the 'first' Australians such as *Australian*, applied first to Aborigines (1814), then to whites (1822). Generally speaking, Aborigines were referred to as *natives* (1770-), *blacks*, *blackfellows* and *blackies*, and by other derogatory terms. Americanisms too occur such as '*squaw*' (1837), '*negro*' (1845) or from the Pacific, '*cannibal*' (1838). We learn that names of weapons, of dwellings and domestic tools abound during the first fifty years. The so-called 'caring' or protection period is dealt with in detail. The term 'Protector' is discussed but its racist connotations ignored. I pass over the rich assembly of data here and remaining chapters to come to general points.

One may have theoretical reservations in many cases. Why is 'native' an Australianism, in the first place? Why are 'black' or 'negro'? They certainly are not Aboriginal contributions. Are they then the words of English origin with a specific Australian cognitive, denotative or referential 'meaning'? All of them have been used for the dark-skinned local populations in America, Africa, the Pacific or Australia throughout colonial times. The only justification for treating them as Australianisms one can see is that they 'refer' to Australian Aborigines. But if Ramson means by 'Australian meaning', acts of reference (a pragmatic dimension), would one not have to include as an Australianism the word 'local' in expressions like 'local discussion', used to refer to debates taking place in Australia? The situation is, of course, different with Aboriginal loans, which have an Australian etymology, or words like 'shicer', which is a German loan word with an Australian sense development (it is a name for an 'unproductive gold mine'), etc. Ramson fails to be clear about the concept of Australianism and other terms.

The final chapter, Ch. Ten, concludes on the future of AusE:

"There is ... every indication that the creativity that attended Australia's discovery and exploration is finished, that the raw material [of the language] will be the same here as elsewhere, that globalisation will prevail, and the other factors mentioned above will play a role in reducing the annual Australian output of neologisms." (p 243)

"The *AND* is a monument to a nation at a particular phase of its history. What separates us from that phase is a great gulf which grows ever deeper, and from the other side of which we will never see more clearly than we do now." (p 247)

The tension between localization and globalization is a major problem in and for all varieties of English. Ramson sees that tension but overlooks the fact that it was there for most of Australia's history. The language of the law, of medicine, of mechanical

engineering, etc., has never undergone any level of localization – in Australia, in India, etc. The problem here is that past research has limited itself to the localization of English and ignored the language of these international domains. The common law, the plain English movement have not and do not have local vocabularies – except standard terms like 'condominium' for 'owner-occupied flat', etc. Often research overemphasizes the role of AmE (today) but that language had been international all the time. Leitner (2004) covers some ground regarding the global pressures and the use of 'non-national' forms of English during the 19th century.

A final point regarding the claim that the lexis of the *AND* and the one discussed in *LexIm* brings out cultural images of the nation. The choice of headlines is illuminating since Ramson sometimes uses them to suggest dominant images. Thus, "A people who need care" and "a deeper understanding?" (both Ch. Six) are, we are to understand, such images. Do they? The caring period was, as it turned out, a time of extreme racism, killings, exploitation and a policy of segregation. That is not discussed and Ramson fails to highlight the opposing trends in whatever he believes to be images. Headlines like "Weapons and implements" (p 139), "Black gentry" (p 138) or "Occupational terms" (several times) certainly do not project images. They may, if at all, draw attention to a dominant interest of the colonizers in some area. Are we at the end of this book clearer about the relationship between the lexis of a language (variety) and culture than Wierzbicka (1997) has told us?

As I said at the beginning, *LexIm* is a very personal story of a dictionary. It compares with Arthur Delbridge's article "The making of *The Macquarie*" (1985), which is, fortunately, one might say, a lot briefer. *LexIm* is rich in data, but, given its length of 255 pages and its goal of relating language and culture, one cannot avoid the conclusion that it lacks analysis and is uncertain about what images the *AND* throws up of Australia's culture over the past two hundred years. It is perhaps best read as a personal story and be entertained by the excellence of style, the pace the author is able to create as the *AND* was moving forward.

References

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