

IMPROVING DICTIONARY CRITICISM IN NDEBELE*

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes approaches to dictionary criticism with a view to improving dictionary culture amongst the Ndebele of Zimbabwe. The growth of dictionary culture is partly hampered by lack of mature and informed dictionary criticism. The slow development of dictionary culture in turn affects negatively the production of informative, relevant and user-friendly dictionaries. In simple terms there is no link between the dictionary maker(s) and the dictionary user(s) other than the dictionary itself. The dictionary critic who should provide this link lacks the requisite skill to adequately help both the compiler and the user. This paper therefore advances some proposals that could be considered in dictionary criticism in Ndebele in particular and in African languages in general. In our view, an informative dictionary criticism cannot only improve dictionary use but dictionary culture as well.

Key Words

dictionary criticism, dictionary culture, dictionary awareness, dictionary use, structure, typology, text, critic.

1. Introduction

In this article a guide to dictionary criticism is proposed with a view to improving dictionary culture and awareness amongst the Ndebele¹ of Zimbabwe. *Dictionary criticism* is ‘the description and evaluation of a dictionary or other reference work, usually in comparison with others’ (Hartmann, 2001:172). The growth of dictionary culture is partly hampered by lack of mature and informed dictionary criticism. While dictionary criticism can be motivated by a number of concerns, our focus shall be that criticism aimed at or likely to be used by the dictionary compiler to improve dictionaries and for dictionary users to be better informed. By *dictionary culture* or *dictionary awareness* is meant; ‘The critical awareness of the value and limitations of dictionaries and other reference works in a particular community’ (Hartmann and James, 1998:41).

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¹ There are Ndebele people of Zimbabwe descendants of King Mzilikazi’s Khumalo and the Ndebele of South Africa who speak a related language but are not the same people.

The dictionary critic serves the same function as the literary critic is to the author, novel and reader. The views of the literary critic are respected in that the critic is perceived to be qualified to make judgments about a given literature. A literary critic operates within parameters that have been conventionalized by practice and tradition. No writer or reader would take a critic seriously who complains that there is a missing character in a story, or that a particular character should not have been included, whereas in dictionary criticism the complaints about missing words and words that should not have been included is accepted as normal criticism. Generally, dictionary criticism is inadequate or misdirected such that it becomes of no both to the compiler and user (Landau, 1989; Osselton, 1989).

Writing on the problem of misplaced criticism Bejoint says:

...the dictionary is an object that is used, almost an artifact, and it is hardly commented upon. When the criticism does speak out, it is primitive...
(Bejoint, 2000:113).

The problem is sharply felt in Ndebele where dictionary culture is relatively low and dictionary criticism is at its infancy (see Hadebe, 2004). The situation is more-or-less the same for Zimbabwe in general. This is an unfortunate situation in Zimbabwe where monolingual mother-tongue lexicography is the main focus yet there is no appropriate supporting dictionary criticism. Dictionary criticism is yet to be taken seriously and executed within specified principles. Currently, dictionaries are reviewed as if they were school textbooks or grammar books and at worst as if they are works of fiction. For example, Mberi et.al write, 'Kahari uses the tools of literary criticism to assess a linguistic edifice' (Mberi, 1997:18). Therefore, the article attempts to answer the questions with reference to Ndebele lexicography: why is dictionary criticism important? How should it be done?

2. The importance of dictionary criticism

The importance of dictionary criticism derives from the general importance of dictionaries in society and in this case the monolingual general-purpose dictionary. The

role of dictionaries in their particular societies and their roles as reference works buttress the importance of dictionary criticism. For language communities like the Ndebele, dictionaries are not only expensive to produce but are also scarce. It means that the very few that are there should be good enough and be used to the maximum. In a community with a relatively low dictionary culture, dictionary criticism, if it is properly done, may contribute to the production of better dictionaries and an improvement of reference skills on the part of users.

Dictionary criticism is part of dictionary research or metalexigraphy² and the field of lexicography in general is wanting in this aspect. The attempts to make dictionary research an academic discipline, which it is not in many countries including Zimbabwe, involves devising systematic approaches to dealing with aspects of lexicography like dictionary criticism. Being both a practical and a theoretical discipline, lexicography would benefit significantly from a well researched evaluation of reference works in general. Apart from editors' notes and dictionary prefaces, the bulk of material on dictionary research in general comes from dictionary reviews. Dictionary researchers, therefore, rely on dictionary criticism in addition to dictionaries themselves as sources of material for analysis. Dictionary criticism is relevant for the dictionary compilers, publishers, book sellers, teachers, learners and all other potential users (see Diagram A).

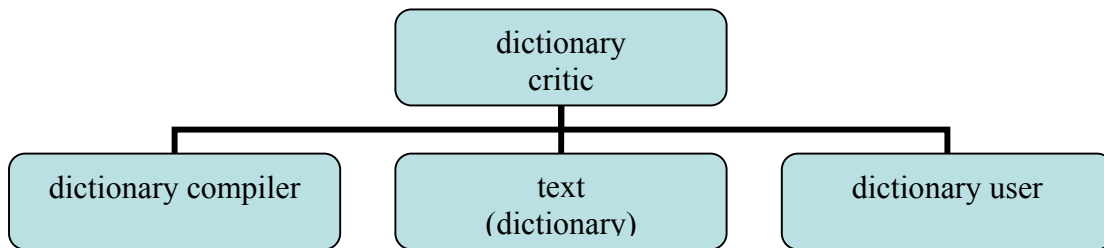
3. The role of the dictionary critic

The role of the dictionary critic cannot be appreciated unless the value of dictionary criticism is understood. However, it is not easy to see value in dictionary criticism when most of the reviews are done amateurishly with biased and misplaced criticism. Landau states that using dictionaries regularly is not enough to qualify someone to critique dictionaries. He draws parallels from living and working in buildings which does not qualify people to judge the architecture of new buildings... 'knowledge about architecture is essential for evaluating new buildings and knowledge about lexicography is essential for evaluating new dictionaries'(Landau, 1989:304).

² Metalexigraphy is the theory of lexicography as reflection on the activities of reference professionals (Hartmann, 2001:1760).

As we show in this article, dictionary criticism is an equally involving and demanding task that calls of relevant expertise. The critic has a duty to the lexicographer and to the user as well as to other dictionary researchers. Diagram A below shows the central role of the dictionary critic.

Diagram A:The critic, compiler and user



The compiler's purpose is to satisfy the user's needs through the dictionary text. The user consults the dictionary texts to satisfy reference needs. The critic through analyzing the text should assist both the user and the compiler.

4. An overview of dictionary criticism

Unlike literary criticism which is an established discipline in its own right, dictionary criticism is still haphazard and is yet to be a respected academic activity. Although dictionary criticism varies according to country, language and dictionary culture of a given community, the general tendency is that it is still undeveloped. According to Hartmann,

Anyone who has ever read (or written) a review of a particular dictionary will know that generally agreed criteria and standards for the assessment of quality and performance are still rare, if they can be said to exist at all (Hartmann, 2001:49).

For that reason whatever has been commented upon on dictionaries whether in newspapers or academic journals is taken for analysis. The publication of the first monolingual Shona and Ndebele dictionaries in 1996 and 2001 respectively was publicized in newspapers like the **Herald, Moto, Sunday Mail** and **Independent** but no review in any academic journal. For Ndebele in particular, one gets some snippets in

newspapers and some letters directly to editors³. It is unfortunate that although Kahari had seen the need for developing dictionary criticism in Zimbabwe in general and Shona in particular, he ended up immersed in the sociolinguistic intricacies that he had purported to disentangle⁴. He wrote that: ‘In this review I intend to [...] use the book as a springboard to suggest a contemporary critique of lexicography which parallels similar critiques currently underway in anthropology, history, literary criticism, political science and sociolinguistics’ (Kahari, 1996/7:1). There is still no critique of [Zimbabwean] lexicography and there are currently no academic debates on Zimbabwe’s lexicographic scene⁵.

4.1. Critical reviews

These could be in newspapers or journals. The problem with critical reviews in general so far is their lack of an agreed upon criterion, therefore they vary in focus and emphasis as well as in quantity and quality. Usually the critical reviews depend on publishers’ blurbs which are obviously biased for commercial purposes.

Following the tradition of using print media as notice-board for new publications, the publication of **Duramazwi ReChiShona** got probably the most coverage than the publicity given to subsequent dictionaries. However, there were only two critical reviews by Kahari (1996/7) and Magwa (1996) respectively. The rest were mere news reports about the publication of the dictionary and comments from excited language practitioners. Maybe the emergence of a journal⁶ of lexicography in Zimbabwe will see the accompanying rise in critical reviews.

4.2. Buying guides

³ One such review was done by J. Zondo and given to editors of *Isichazamazwi SesiNdebele*. There are many such comments pointing strengths and weaknesses of the dictionary but unfortunately such vital information on dictionary evaluation is never made public as it is not published.

⁴ Kahari’s review was couched in very strong language that was perceived by dictionary editors as personal attack meant to degrade their efforts in the public eye resulting in an equally strong response. Valuable debate on dictionary criticism was lost as non-lexicographic issues were given undue prominence.

⁵ The lexicographic scene of a society is the study of the sociological conditions in which dictionaries are called for, then designed, produced, and finally used.

⁶ This article was written for the JALEX published by ALRI at the University of Zimbabwe.

Dictionary buying guides list reference works with comments on their attributes and make recommendations about their suitability for certain purposes. In Zimbabwe these are usually prepared by publishers or textbook sellers and most cases the publisher is also the textbook seller. Therefore, buying guides are mere extracts of the blurbs that would have been written by authors or publishers. Buying guides usually give the number of entries and other information found in the dictionary and they generally do not mention the weaknesses of the dictionary. For that reason, buying guides can be treated as one of the marketing strategies at the disposal of publishers and book sellers.

One would expect a buying guide compiled by a team of scholars who have no direct interest in publishing or marketing of books. That way, the buying guide would recommend dictionaries to buyers of different types stating the advantages of particular dictionaries. It is, however, difficult to get such a neutral team of assessors to recommend dictionaries to potential dictionary users. The first and only monolingual Ndebele dictionary published in 2001 was recommended to schools, colleges and to general users. In the absence of choice, the different types of users find themselves using the same dictionary.

4.3. Critical monographs

Critical monographs are detailed assessments of some or all of the design features of a dictionary in book form. In Zimbabwe the critical monograph has not been produced so far except in the form of unpublished B.A. and M.A. degree dissertations, especially in the Department of African Languages and Literature at the University of Zimbabwe. The monograph is produced when the dictionary is considered important enough that a critical analysis of it is necessary (Hartmann, 2001). The following dissertations are based on the only monolingual Ndebele dictionary – **Isichazamazwi SesiNdebele (ISN)**: Maphosa (1997; 1999), Nkomo (2003), Moyo (2003), and Ndlovu (2005). The objectivity of these monographs, if we may call these research papers, is subject to debate because so far all

the writers of these dissertations were students of the same editors of the dictionary they reviewed⁷.

It is not surprising that there is paucity of critical monographs in Zimbabwe in general and Ndebele in particular as it is unlikely to have monographs when dictionary criticism is undeveloped. Being the only monolingual Ndebele dictionary so far, the ISN has attracted interest from students of lexicography and it seems an even more serious monograph in the form of an MPhil dissertation is underway.⁸

4.4. Metacriticism

Metacriticism is simply the ‘review of reviews’ or the critical analysis of different reviews. So far there is no case of metacriticism either in Ndebele or in Shona. Not even the dissertations written so far have ventured in this very crucial form of dictionary criticism. The most probable reason being that maybe due to the paucity of dictionary criticism, it would not be easy to evaluate the criticism of dictionaries.

The response by editors of **Duramazwi ReChiShona** to a serialized review by Kahari could have qualified as metacriticism had it not been done by editors of the dictionary under review. Unfortunately, Kahari’s acerbic review was perceived rightly or wrongly as an affront to the editors of the dictionary, especially its chief editor. In turn, the editors took a swipe at Kahari’s review as part of their defense. An opportunity was missed for an academic debate on dictionary criticism as there was no third party to synthesize the two opposed views.

As dictionary criticism gains momentum as an important part of dictionary research in Zimbabwe, in turn, metacriticism is likely to improve.

4.2. Product tests

⁷ Maphosa and Ndlovu were both supervised by the chief editor of ISN, S. Hadebe
Nkomo was jointly supervised by M. Maphosa and T. Dube co-editors of ISN
Moyo was jointly supervised by L.Khumalo and T. Dube co-editors of ISN.

⁸ Ongoing Mphil research titled, ‘Dictionary Criticism: A case study of Isichazamazwi SesiNdebele’.

In the product tests approach one or more dictionaries are subjected to careful examination against a set of agreed criteria. The rationale being that if the purpose of criticism is to evaluate the good as well as the bad design features of a dictionary, then a canon of objective criteria is needed to assess quality (Hartmann, 2001:50). This approach is yet to be adopted for Ndebele or any linguistic community in Zimbabwe in general. The benefit of this approach is that an agreed criterion for assessment is established. The evaluation of a dictionary is therefore not based on the critic's taste and caprice.

Notwithstanding these obvious advantages of this approach it has been criticized for some shortcomings. For example, it is not easy to subject dictionaries to the sort of testing that is appropriate for other consumer products like electric gadgets or cars. Questions have been raised on how customer satisfaction can be adequately measured for dictionaries, more-so for those with low reference skills like most Ndebele users are.

5. Approaches to dictionary criticism

Osselton (1989:229) says the criticism of dictionaries 'reveals a surprising lack of interest in general principles, with incidental sniping taking the place of any real exploration of the intentions with which the works being criticized had been set up' This largely because critics do not have clear guidelines as to what to look for and the justification for doing so. Although some guidelines (see Landau, 1989) have been suggested it would seem that dictionary critics in Zimbabwe either ignore these guidelines or find them inapplicable. Before proposing some methods to evaluate Ndebele dictionaries, we shall first briefly discuss one approach by James McMillan.

McMillan devised the following criteria with three categories namely; 'quantity of information, quality of information and effectiveness of presentation' (Landau, 1989:306). Quantity of information refers to 'number of entries, number of definitions, number of new terms, frequency of use of subject field labels, synonyms, etymologies, etc'(Ibid.,306). It is crucial to note that this category would be more applicable to a general-purpose monolingual dictionary than to a terminological dictionary, for example.

Similarly, the issue of number of entries and number of new terms should be addressed in reference to the aims of the dictionary and the level of the targeted users.

By quality of information is meant: ‘accuracy, completeness, clearness, simplicity, and modernity’ (Ibid.,306). All dictionaries are by necessity supposed to adhere strictly to these features of quality of information. These qualities are therefore expected in every dictionary and critics should check on them.

In effectiveness of presentation the aspects covered include: alphabetization, placement of etymologies within entries, ordering of definitions, pronunciation system, typography (Ibid.,306). Effectiveness of presentation is crucial to the usability of the dictionary. It is of no value to have a dictionary rich in entries and definitions and examples but all these poorly presented and therefore difficult to access. We might add also that consistency is a key feature in effectiveness of presentation. Whatever style of presentation is adopted in the dictionary, it should be consistent and critics should check on that too.

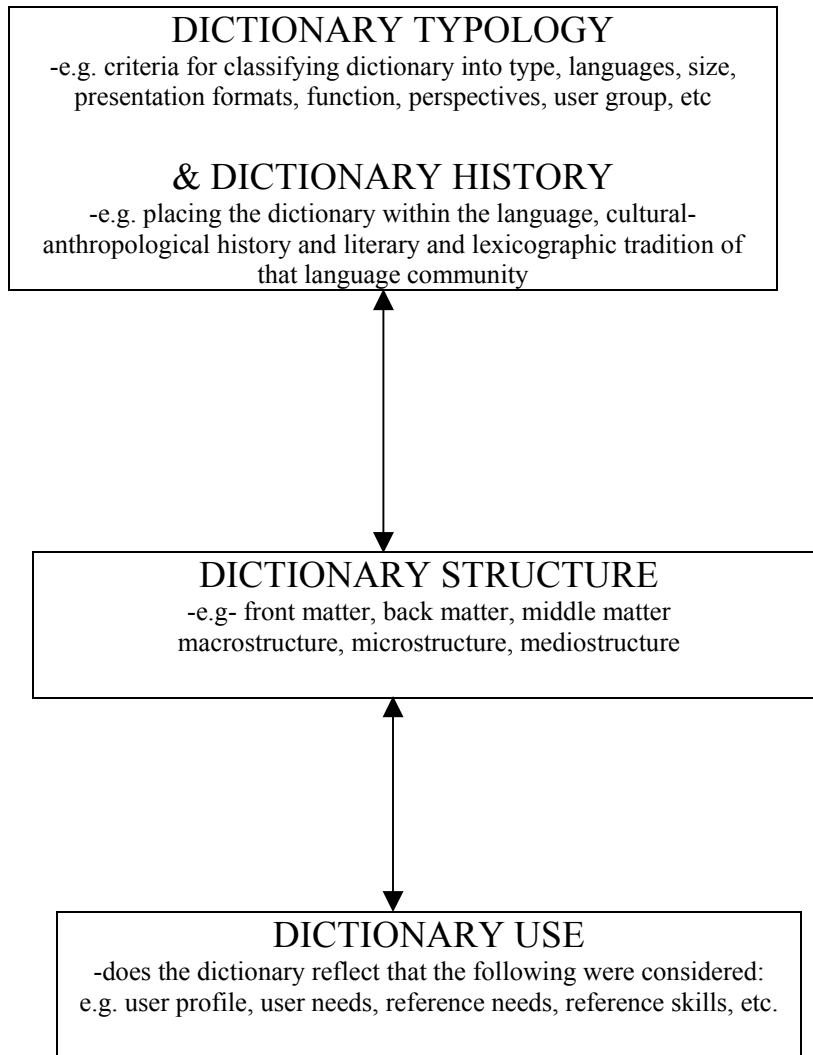
MacMillan’s standard criterion includes the assessment of front matter, illustrations and back matter. Other standards of comparison include year of publication, the number and quality of scholars serving as consultants, the number of pages, number of printed characters in the volume, the average number of printed words per entry, and the inclusion of a specific set of new terms (Landau 1989:306). The number of entries or pages should be treated with caution as these features do not automatically translate to good or quality work.

Coverage is a problematic issue and reviews have a tendency to look for some words and review negatively should those words be absent regardless of the possible reasons of their exclusion. The MacMillan guide is a useful basis for dictionary critics and it is flexible enough for critics to adapt it according to need. The criterion proposed below for Ndebele dictionaries could be used in conjunction with McMillan’s approach or with any other approach. The important thing is that dictionaries should be evaluated systematically and using set criteria.

6.0. Proposals for Dictionary Criticism in Ndebele

As dictionary criticism cannot be arbitrary there is a need to establish criteria for it, especially for Ndebele whose dictionary culture is relatively low. Below is an outline of some issues to be considered in dictionary criticism, especially monolingual dictionaries. The areas of focus can be conveniently divided into form and function. On form we mean the dictionary as a text and function relates to the purpose or intended purpose of the dictionary. The dictionary as a text has a history that influences both the form and function of the dictionary. Dictionary criticism should include dictionary typology, history, structure and use, as shown in Diagram B below.

Diagram B: Focal Areas in Dictionary Criticism



6.1. Dictionary typology

The dictionary must be analyzed within the limits and confines of its typology. It would be a misplaced review that treats a bilingual dictionary as if it were monolingual or a specialized one as if it were a general purpose. Typology is important because it relates to the purpose of the dictionary, the history of dictionaries in that given culture as well as the structural aspects of the dictionary.

For Ndebele, a general purpose dictionary, for example, is targeted mainly to mother tongue speakers of the language. The selection of entries and their treatment

should reflect the assumed knowledge in the community. Also the grammatical information to be included is governed by the purpose of the dictionary as well as its type and targeted users. A critic should be familiar with general expectations of a dictionary type under review. For instance, a diachronic dictionary will of necessity give different grammatical information to a synchronic one. In dictionary criticism, drawing comparisons from other dictionaries is not only unavoidable but desirable as well. However, only dictionaries of the same type should be compared. Currently, Ndebele has a bilingual dictionary (Pelling, 1966) and a monolingual general purpose dictionary (Hadebe et al, 2001) while two specialized dictionaries one for linguistic and literary terms and the other musical terms are ready to go to print. The critic of Ndebele dictionaries can therefore not draw from any Ndebele dictionary when it comes to comparing dictionaries in terms of typology, except from Zulu (refer to 6.2). Comparisons can be made with Shona dictionaries and to some extent English ones.

6.2 Dictionary history

The critic of Ndebele dictionaries should appreciate the history of Ndebele lexicography. Dictionaries are works that reflect their epochs and bare the imprints of the ideological and moral values of a given community at a given time. Writing on the importance of dictionary history, Hartmann stated that:

Most dictionaries have forerunners, and all have imitators: an understanding of the historical foundations of dictionary-making is therefore one of the preconditions of further progress in academic lexicography (Hartmann, 1986).

The history of Ndebele like that of Ndebele literature in general is entwined to that of the Ndebele as a people. That history reflects the formation of the Ndebele nation and the perennial question on whether Ndebele is part of Zulu. It should be noted that the teaching of Ndebele continues to rely on Zulu books and Zulu dictionaries continue to be reference books for Ndebele.

Another significant aspect is cultural history as it relates to dictionaries. Dictionaries have to be analyzed within the cultural context of their time. In that way,

dictionary compilers and their dictionaries are placed into a particular tradition. According to William Craige:

Each definite period of the language has its own characteristics, which can only be appreciated when it is studied by itself, and which are necessarily obscured when it merely comes in as one link in the long chain of language as a whole (Bailey, 1990:1437).

Knowledge of the history of dictionaries is also useful in analyzing a given dictionary taking cognizance of the historical development of a particular genre. The factors that led to the development of bilingual dictionaries in Ndebele are different from those that influenced the rise of monolingual dictionaries, for example. A critic who is blind of the genre-specific history cannot appreciate the constraints in the compilation of that dictionary under review. It is partly due to this oversight on the part of critics that dictionaries have been faulted for what has been perceived as lack of innovation. This relates to the issue of genealogical history.

Through an understanding of the genealogical history of that particular type of dictionary being reviewed can assist the critic in appreciating the relationships and links between that particular dictionary and its predecessors. Dictionary compilers have often been accused of copying or to use Landau's expression; 'successful acts of piracy' (Landau, 1989:35). The critic should know where to draw the line between plagiarism and similarity of dictionaries of the same type. What could easily be declared as plagiarism in other literary works may be treated as normal in lexicography. This, therefore, calls for a knowledgeable critic to be able to dictate cases of plagiarism in dictionaries. Plagiarism is prevalent in dictionaries.

6.3 Dictionary structure

The criticism of aspects of dictionary structure is the most prevalent although it is generally done inadequately. *Dictionary structure* refers to the design features of a dictionary (Hartmann, 2001:173). A complete evaluation of dictionary structure should look into all the formats and component parts of the dictionary and how they relate. It is not helpful for instance to evaluate the presentation of entries without considering the cross referencing system and the examples and illustrations. The strength and weakness

of one component of a dictionary resonate to other parts or components of that dictionary. A balanced dictionary addresses in a systematic manner issues that relate to macrostructure, microstructure and mediostructure⁹. Dictionary criticism should therefore show the relationship or lack of it of the component parts of a dictionary.

The criticism should establish the relationship between different components of the dictionary on one hand and on the other relate this to the type of dictionary, purpose of dictionary and user needs and reference skills. 'Knowledge of dictionary types enables the user to know what to expect in a particular type of dictionary. Knowledge of dictionary typology may assist in the understanding of dictionary structure' (Hadebe, 2004:94).

6.4 Dictionary use

Considering the resources expended on dictionary compilation in terms of time, money, labour, intellectual and technical, it is imperative that dictionaries should be put to maximum use to compensate for the huge costs of their production. Actually, the economics of dictionary production dictate that there should be a need and a justifiable one to engage in such an expensive and labour intensive and time-consuming venture like dictionary making. Dictionaries cannot be compiled by those who just want to spend their free time on something leisurely and relaxing. Neither can dictionaries be compiled after one's retirement like autobiographies or memoirs. Although it seems so obvious that dictionary use is primary in the motivation behind its compilation, historically dictionary compilers had little knowledge let alone interest in the dictionary user. Thus, the dictionary user came to be referred to as the 'unknown quantity' or the 'familiar stranger' (Hartmann, 2001). Similarly, dictionary criticism followed the tradition and concerned itself less with dictionary use. The dictionary users are primary in both dictionary compilation and criticism as: 'all dictionaries are motivated by and judged against the lexical needs of those who consult them' (Hartmann, 1985:9).

Dictionary criticism should incorporate the user perspective. The user perspective investigates reference skills and reference needs of dictionary users (Hartmann, 2000:11,

⁹ This refers to cross referencing.

2001:81; Béjoint, 2000:140; Svensén, 1993:13). The *user perspective* in lexicography is a user-driven approach to dictionary-making and research. *Reference skills* are ‘the abilities required on the part of the dictionary user to find the information being sought’ (Hartmann and James, 1998:117), while *reference needs* are ‘the circumstances that drive individuals to seek information in reference works such as dictionaries...’ (ibid:116).

Having assessed the dictionary being reviewed in terms of its typology, history and structure, the critic should relate it to the potential user’s needs and reference skills. The design features of any dictionary should be made to suit not only the type of that dictionary but should enhance its accessibility to its users. The textual structure of dictionaries is peculiar and therefore dictionary criticism should advise the compiler while also teaching the user how to exploit to maximum the contents of the dictionary. The compiler should investigate the dictionary culture of the community and adjust the dictionary to suit the needs and skills of the users. The critic should similarly make the same investigation and judge the dictionary according to its usability to its users. It is no use complaining about perceived omissions when in fact the potential users are unlikely to ever need that particular piece of information.

The critic of Ndebele dictionaries faces challenges because at present there is no research on the users’ profiles, needs and skills. According to Hadebe:

Ndebele dictionaries compiled in the past and being compiled t present, have not been and are not based on prior research on user needs and reference skills. Such research to establish user needs would not yield much, considering the low standards of reference skills amongst speakers (Hadebe, 2004:102).

Hadebe advocates for the teaching of dictionary skills in Zimbabwean schools starting with teaching teacher trainers (Hadebe, 2004). He argues that through the formal acquisition of dictionary skills the reference skills could be improved and then reference needs could be established. The critic should be part of the effort towards improving dictionary skills and the general dictionary culture. As the middleman between the compiler and the user, the text and the reader, teacher and the students, the critic should guide and inform. The critic of Ndebele dictionaries should at the same time play the role of an educationist, cultural advisor, literary scholar and gate keeper of the philosophical, moral and literary tradition of the Ndebele people.

6.5 Summary of points on dictionary criticism

The following are some of the suggested questions that the dictionary critic could pose in the process of evaluating Ndebele dictionaries:

- What type is the dictionary?
- How many languages are used and why?
- What is the targeted user group?
- What are the reference needs and reference skills of that user group?
- What features place the dictionary within the Ndebele/Zulu lexicographic tradition?
- What criterion was used for choice of entries?
- How representative are the entries?
- How were problems of alphabetization dealt with?
- Have the Ndebele orthographic conventions been adhered to?
- Which defining formats were used and to what effect?
- How were examples chosen?
- When, how and why was cross-referencing used?
- What grammatical information is included and why?
- What other information is included?
- Are definitions simple, clear, unambiguous for the targeted users.
- Is there harmony amongst the components of the dictionary like the macrostructure and mediostructure?
- How effective is the access structure?
- Are bibliographical sources acknowledged?
- What space-saving techniques were used and their effectiveness?
- Does the dictionary reflect Ndebele way of life and history? How does it do that?
- In which way is it a contribution to the Ndebele language?
- How does it fair as a reference book?
- What are the weaknesses/strengths of the dictionary as a text?
- What are the weaknesses/strengths of the dictionary as a linguistic and cultural artifact?

The above questions are some of the several possible questions that can guide the critic in reviewing Ndebele dictionaries in particular or any other African languages dictionary in general. The questions are leading pointers to issues relating to the dictionary as a text and its use. Above all, the critic should be firmly grounded in the literary and lexicographic tradition of Ndebele/Zulu and should be familiar with the current trends in

dictionary-making in general. Dictionary criticism is inevitably comparative. The critic should be able to draw from lexicographic experiences and trends elsewhere without losing focus of the Zimbabwean lexicographic scene.

7. Conclusion

It has been shown in this paper that improving dictionary criticism is one significant way of improving dictionary making on the part of lexicographers and dictionary using skills on the part of users. In summative, an improvement in the dictionary criticism in Ndebele will invariably improve dictionary culture amongst the Ndebele. The growth of dictionary culture, in our opinion, depends on and is shaped by dictionary criticism. The slow development of dictionary culture in turn affects negatively the production of informative, relevant and user-friendly dictionaries. An informed dictionary critic provides the essential link between the compiler and the user. This article, therefore, proposed a method for the criticism of Ndebele dictionaries in particular and African languages dictionaries in general. The method is flexible and is only a guide to criticism in order to come out with balanced critiques that will be useful to users and lexicographers alike. That way, dictionary criticism can improve dictionary culture.

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