

Some Tips about Te Reo

“Words, words, words”

- Shakespeare, “Hamlet”, Act 2, Scene 2

While the meaningful glance certainly has its place, for the much greater part of our communication, we use words, spoken and, until modern times much less often, written - in a word: “language”.

A communicating group from a tribe to an empire will develop a language understood by all, which will change slowly over the years as the needs for expression and habits of speech change within the group. As one group becomes dominant over others, so will its language.

Thus Latin, the language of Rome, came to be spoken over an area from the borders of Scotland to the deserts of the Dead Sea, facilitated by the great system of roads built by the Romans to control their empire.

But let the empire break down, communication cease, and the processes of change within a language do their work. Within a few centuries, Latin in the speech of ordinary people had split up into perhaps two dozen distinct languages with varying degrees of intelligibility between them. In France alone at the time of Napoleon, about seven distinct Romanesque languages with numerous dialects were spoken, not counting the Celtic tongue of Brittany. Of these perhaps Occitan and that of the Languedoc, of the ‘oc’ not ‘oui’ for ‘yes’, were the most distinctive, with Catalan over the Pyrenees intermediate between it and imperial Spanish.

It was only the establishment of strong central government, of modern communications and the restored Académie Française which created standard modern French based on that of Paris while similar processes in Italy led to the Florentine language becoming the basis of modern Italian.

One dramatic example is Melanesia whose people over more than ten thousand years spread over New Guinea and more than 2000 islands to its east, the latest probably Fiji about three thousand years ago. The mountains and jungles of New Guinea, the seas between the islands and the universal practice of cannibalism served to split the people into many isolated groups and language followed its inevitable course.

By the time Europeans arrived there were reckoned to be 600 languages in New Guinea, more than a hundred in Vanuatu and seventy-odd in the Solomon islands, mostly mutually unintelligible.

The spread of people into Polynesia began somewhat later and the divergence of language consequently has been less though a glance at the instructions in Tongan, Samoan, New Zealand and Cook Islands Maori, Tokelauan and Niuean in “how to vote” pamphlets issued at our elections shows that the differences are quite considerable.

Because the best current evidence^[i] indicates that our Polynesian immigrants came from the Cook Islands area about seven hundred years ago, that is where the divergence appears to be least. “Ikoraki”, the name of a prominent Rarotongan peak and “Hikurangi” that of an East Coast mountain, show a typical change in the language of New Zealand Maoris.

And so, how did things develop in New Zealand? The rugged topography and heavy native bush of New Zealand meant that the settlements of at most somewhat over 120,000^[ii] in pre-European times were often widely separated. Given the tribal organization, endemic warfare and cannibalism between the tribes, normal social contact between them will have been even less than geographic barriers dictated though news was said to travel fast. The conditions were tailor-made for language divergence.

So what actually happened? In pre-European times language was solely oral and there is simply no way of knowing how it actually sounded. Interested Europeans recorded in writing the speech they heard and it would be a weak argument today to claim that they were wrong. One of the very first was Georg Forster, naturalist on Cook’s first voyage. In the brief encounter with the Katimamoe remnant of Dusky Sound before they were, all but one young woman, killed and eaten by a Kai Tahu war party, Forster recorded a couple of dozen of their words, mostly names for birds.^[iii] However, even though something of the language of Queen Charlotte Sound was understood by Cook and others in “Endeavour” more adept at language who had spent some time in Tahiti, that of Dusky Sound was virtually unintelligible to them.

Even in less isolated areas of Southland, Europeans who understood northern dialects well enough could not understand the language of resident Kai Tahu.^[iv]

Now first, be it noted, the sounds in any two languages are never quite the same. Hence we detect a “foreign accent” in the English of a non-native speaker and even within countries. A Yorkshireman, a Scot and a Northern Irishman speaking English sound recognizably different from a BBC announcer. Having grown up in Bluff, I have been identified by my speech as a Southlander.

Second, we should note that in New Zealand, missionaries and others writing down what they heard could differ amongst themselves when they heard different speakers and depending on their own language experience. There was no “correct” spelling. Thus when JL Nicholas in 1817 wrote “rungateeda” and missionaries chose “rangatira” one would have been as good as the other.

Quite a number of the early missionaries were from the English social class which dropped its “h’s” thus Maoris learning English would naturally imitate them. Hone (or John) Heke was said to be one of them.

Third, be it noted, written Maori was a construct of Europeans, not Maoris. **So no Maori either then or today has any better authority to proclaim the spelling of any Maori word than anybody else.**

By the year 1840, northern missionaries had developed a reasonably consistent spelling of the speech of northern Maoris amongst whom they worked.[\[v\]](#) When the highly experienced and competent Henry and Edward Williams[\[vi\]](#) translated Hobson’s final English draft of 4th February that was the spelling they used. It is instructive to look at their text of the actual treaty document which, it appears, remarkably few people who claim to be experts actually do.

They even went as far as to transliterate Hobson’s name and rank as “Wiremu Hopihana he Kapitana i te Roiara Nawi” - overdoing it indeed in my view! Their word for “land” which appears several times is “wenua”; not a “whenua” nor a “wh” anywhere in sight![\[vii\]](#)

Even more instructive is their transliteration of “February” to “Pepueri”, the month when the treaty was signed and dated of course.

Now why should this be? There is no sensible reason why the Williams should have avoided using an “f” in their text, nor “wh” for any sound approximating that in English “when” and “why” in Ngapuhi speech. The reason must be simply that they did not exist.

An “f” does exist in some island languages. Fanaofo is one of the Tokelau Islands. “Fale” or “fare” is the word for a house, rendered “whare” in Maori but sounded as “warre” in the Wanganui heartlands. While “f” may have persisted in some Maori dialects, it was clearly dropping out of use. One reason, as Jean Jackson pointed out,[\[viii\]](#) was that women with tattooed lips could not

pronounce it.

So “wh”? Well, maybe. In the Taranaki dialect, a “w” could be followed by a glottal stop as in some island languages, [ix] rendered in writing with an apostrophe (e.g. Ma’a Nonu), so the name of the cult boss of Parihaka would be rendered best by “Te W’iti”. Meka Whaitiri is an MP; Jimmy Waitiri was my Bluff classmate. Is one right - the other wrong?

As for the Wellington locality: not “Kaiwharawhara” but “Kai-wara-wara, Kaiwara, and Kaiwarra (the most used) all appear in the records.” [x] It was “Wakatu” not “Whakatu” for Nelson [xi], “Wangaree” for “Whangarei” and “Wangaroa” to Hone Heke in a letter to Henry Williams, on 1st December 1847 - the list goes on and on.

But a “wh” pronounced “f” as observed so conscientiously by most radio and television announcers today? It becomes increasingly obvious that this is nothing but a latter-day invention of pseudo-scholars.

Nothing has stopped the Geographic Board scattering “wh” in all sorts of placenames. Koiterangi, scene of Stanley Graham’s notorious 1941 rampage, they have renamed Kowhitirangi. Rangiaohia, scene of the monstrous lie of an 1864 church-burning, is now Rangiaowhia. Can it be seriously suggested that in writing the names of these places settlers omitted an “f” sound?

While there is perhaps a case for standard spelling of the mixture now decreed to be “Te Reo”, there is no valid case for it in placenames but evidently that is paramount in the minds of Geographic Board bureaucrats. In their arrogant decision that Wanganui should become Whanganui, they contemptuously ignored the wishes of 80% of the residents who voted on it that its name should remain unchanged. So it is now “Fonganui” on the airwaves.

There are harbours and inlets in the coastline of New Zealand, named simply by Maoris as “long harbour” in the local dialect. Some are Wangaloa, Akaroa, [Little] Akaloa, and Whangaroa, while Lyttelton harbour was Whakaraupo - showing dialectical variants which have not yet fallen victims to Geographic Board diktat. Westhaven Inlet has not been so fortunate, being now decreed to be Whanganui Inlet.

So, elsewhere, less interference and more respect for what the settlers actually heard - the dialect of the local Maoris - should, I suggest, override bureaucratic uniformity. While the “ng” sound developed in the north, it only rarely replaced “k” south of the Rakitata River, with weak final

syllables often clipped off. The Otago Heads village as I heard it was the “kaik”, not “kainga”; an elderly Karitane woman of Maori descent spoke of “kaio” trees, not “ngaio”.

Tree ferns were “bungies”, not “punga”. When we boys carried out mock battles with flax sticks, they were “keladdies” not “korati”, though when I asked a Maori elder at Rapaki in Lyttelton Harbour for his choice he could not understand either!

Again, we have more accurately “Wakatip”, not “Wakatipoo” and a dominant peak near Nelson, scene of several murders by the Burgess gang, was “Mokotap” to the locals, brown and white alike, but now decreed to be “Maungatapu”. “Aoraki” mercifully overtook “Aorangi”, being applied in their ignorance by the Geographic Board pundits to Mount Cook but never its Maori name. As A.P. Harper found out and quite specifically reported,[\[xii\]](#) there were no Maori names for the remote peaks where they did not go and “Aoraki” was the name of the fluffy white clouds which frequently cover them.

Two more different spoken languages than English and Maori it would be hard to find. English has many more sounds - voiced consonants - “b,d,j,z,zh”; diphthongs - or compound vowels and even triphthongs - “our” as in “flour”. Many words end in consonants and multi-syllable words are accented. Maori has none of these features.[\[xiii\]](#) And so, for people whose first language is English, their pronunciation of Maori words will inevitably depart from any “pure” form. I heard once a Hokitika man with the good Maori name of Maui pronounce it “M-a-u-i” - actually a very pleasant sequence but nothing like most people would say it - another barrier Te Reo has to face. But it works both ways! An elderly Wanganui River woman talked to me of “Ranana” - “London” to you and me.

The language of a Stone Age people had no words for the many complexities of modern civilization. Indeed this lack was already starkly evident in 1840 when Maoris had no words for “sovereignty” and “possession” - so the missionary-coined words “kawanatanga” and “rangatiratanga” were used in the Treaty of Waitangi - providing endless opportunities for people with devious intentions to twist it. With no word for “library” in a culture which had no books, Christchurch City Council, obliged to put “Maori” labels on everything, chose “kete wananga”, derived, I suppose, from “wisdom basket” - cute, eh? Other libraries - other words.

Transliteration is another technique - “tiriti” for a start. With all public buildings required to have “Maori” titles we find artificialities like “kaporeihana”, “kanihera” and “pirihimana”. The nearby supermarket is decorated with signs saying things like “pikitete”, “waina” and “kawhe”[\[xiv\]](#) Accepting, as is decreed, that “wh” must be pronounced “f”, as an exercise try working out what these words are supposed to mean. Does anybody seriously believe that they will be used in normal conversation? Some recent enthusiasts are reported to have added many thousands of words to the

Maori vocabulary, presumably using this process – surely an exercise in futility?

One Apanui Ngahiwi of the Maori Language Commission wrote: “In fact, it is a taonga protected by article two of the Treaty of Waitangi because that is exactly what the Maori Language Act 2016 (section 8 (g)) says it is. The act creates a partnership between Maori and the Crown for the revitalisation of te reo Maori. It recognises te reo Maori as the foundation of Maori culture and identity and that the lives of iwi and Maori are enhanced by knowledge and use of the language.”[\[xv\]](#)

Now, there is no such thing in the Treaty as a “partnership” while in 1840, “taonga” meant simply material property. That Maori speech needs such gross distortions of the truth shows what dire straits it is in.

We should be wise enough to learn from the experience of others – the Irish for example. Following independence from Britain, the Irish Government made strenuous efforts with considerable expense to extend the use of Gaelic and it became compulsory in schools but almost nobody uses it and the Gaeltacht, the supposedly Gaelic-speaking region, is shrinking fast. In 1953 I heard people freely speaking Scots Gaelic in Ullapool but in four visits to Ireland, I heard it spoken only once – by schoolgirls rehearsing their homework. Even in the remote Aran Islands, supposedly a Gaelic stronghold, its use is declining. With the young listening to English-speaking radio and TV stations, that becomes their preferred language.

We may feel some sadness at the decline of the historic Gaelic language but the hard fact is that the prime purpose of language is communication and people will inevitably use the most useful language for it. We may feel the same about that increasingly artificial language Te Reo, but Gaelic and Te Reo will inevitably become ornamental languages like Latin – OK for a few school mottoes and the like and little else.

English is the international language.[\[xvi\]](#) I have taught English to Tibetans, Poles, Czechs and Ni-Vanuatu – all eager to learn it. As I write (17th March 2017), a granddaughter of mine is en route to Colombia to teach English at a Spanish-speaking school.[\[xvii\]](#) North of the Arctic Circle, Norwegian schoolboys come to meet the coastal steamers to practice their English on the tourists aboard.[\[xviii\]](#) Tune in to BBC TV or Aljazeera and you will find people speaking in English – a Mexican, a Pole and a Gambian in one bulletin I noted. The coat of arms of Uganda bears the words “For God and my Country”.[\[xix\]](#) From India to Namibia it is understood almost everywhere and the Chinese, no fools, are becoming very proficient in it. We can be thankful that English is the normal native tongue of the New Zealand-born. Parents who “immerse” their children in Te Reo instead play a cruel trick on them to advance their own agenda. Excellence in English should be a prime objective of our schools and that is the place to spend taxpayers’ money.

Bruce Moon

Nelson

17th March 2017

(With minor additions, 20/21 January 2018)

[i] While there is compelling evidence of earlier settlers in New Zealand, their origin is a matter of debate and their language submerged and forgotten in pre-European times.

[ii] For a careful estimate of 127,000, see John Robinson, "When two cultures meet", Tross, 2012, ISBN 1 872970 31 1

[iii] Forster's list and much other fascinating detail is given in "Dusky Bay", A. Charles Begg and Neil C. Begg, Whitcombe and Tombs, 1966

[iv] Maoris from south of the Waitaki River were generally emphatic in their preference for "Kai Tahu" over "Ngai Tahu", the more common form in the north. Note too that "Waitangi" is the northern form of "Waitaki".

[v] Missionary Wohlers on Ruapuke Island in Foveaux Strait chose to use the northern written forms of Maori words even though they did not represent accurately the southern speech. Scots' choice of standard written English even though their own speech was decidedly different is an exact parallel. Earlier, Scots spelling had been highly variant as shown vividly by the 1888 diary of a Scots kinsman of mine.

[vi] Edward being considered "facile princeps" or "easily best" by Hugh Carleton, Henry's biographer

[vii] We may compare "tangata whenua" with Moriori "tchakat henu"

[viii] In a telephone conversation with me

[ix] "Taranaki War 1860-2012 Our Legacy - Our Challenge", an exhibition in the Nelson Provincial Museum in 2012-3. (Note the date '2012'! What was the Taranaki Provincial Museum which constructed the exhibition alleging with that? One Kelvin Day who was responsible wrote to me on 20th December 2012 saying: "there is no such thing as one true history". Well, well. Isn't "true history" is an account of what actually happened!)

[x] Ian Wards, "The Shadow of the Land", Department of Internal Affairs, 1968, p. 218 f/n

[xi] *ibid.*, p.219

[xii] A.P. Harper, "Pioneer Work in the Alps of New Zealand", 1896, pp 10ff.

[xiii] A former member of the Maori Battalion with whom I worked on a construction site in 1951 told me that it was easy learning some Italian. The structure of Italian and Maori has similarities.

[xiv] A few of the examples around Nelson

[xv] Ngahiwi Apanui, Letter, "Dominion Post", 18th February 2017

[xvi] Many Maoris of the colonial period thus saw the importance of their children becoming fluent in English. See for example the 1876 petition of Wi Te Hakiro and 336 others that "[T]here should not be a word of Maori allowed to be spoken in the [native] school". Much is made by some today of the corporal punishment of children caught speaking Maori, ignoring the fact that in those unenlightened days it was applied for all breaches of school rules.

[xvii] With a B.Sc. in mathematics from Melbourne and six months as a school exchange student in Madrid, she is a bright young woman though I do wonder how well her Castilian Spanish will go down in darkest South America. As she lands there in Cartagena, where in 1585 Thomas Moone, Drake's favourite captain and a remote relation, received a mortal wound, I have warned her to be careful!

[xviii] Myself amongst them

[xix] The country in which, incidentally, my Father's brother lies buried.