

On the emergence of regional varieties of New Zealand English

Sharon Marsden

Victoria University of Wellington

1. Introduction

Despite its relatively short history in New Zealand, English has progressed from being a variety comprising a mixture of British English dialects (Maclagan & Gordon 2004; Trudgill, 2004), to being an autonomous variety of its own. It is now firmly established as the dominant and majority language spoken in New Zealand with its own New Zealand-specific characteristics. One of these characteristics, frequently noted in the literature, is marked geographic uniformity in comparison to other varieties of English. It appears that “the blending of the original British dialects (the so-called “melting pot” effect) has left behind remarkable regional homogeneity” (Burrige & Kortmann 2004: 568).

In the 21st century, despite linguistic research attesting variation in NZE in terms of age, gender, class and ethnicity, the label of homogeneity continues to stick as a consequence of “the remaining factor: regional homogeneity” (Bauer and Bauer 2002: 170). Region has not yet been identified as a factor correlated with linguistic variation in NZE.

Yet there are reasons to suspect that this may cease to be the case in the not too distant future. The first of these reasons concerns recent and ongoing linguistic changes in Australian English.

2. Australian English: A template?

Australian English (AusE) shares with NZE geographical proximity and a similar colonial settlement history, both factors reflected in linguistic similarities between the two varieties (Trudgill 2004). English in Australia has a half-century chronological advantage over NZE and it is likely that the earlier developing Australian variety provided one of the sources of input to the later developing New Zealand variety. Although details relating to the respective linguistic inputs and the relationship between the two varieties fuel continuing debate (Bauer 1994; Hickey 2003; Maclagan & Gordon 2004; Trudgill 2004), sufficient linguistic and historical similarities exist between AusE and NZE that the ongoing development of the former might be considered a template for possible future developments in the latter.

According to Kiesling (2006: 74) AusE and NZE are “at similar stages of development.” It is of some interest then, that despite the previous (and continuing, see Trudgill 2004: 21), emphases of the regional homogeneity of AusE (Mitchell & Delbridge 1965; see also commentary in Buzo 2002), attention is now turning to ‘regional descriptions’ of the variety (Horvath 2004: 642). There is growing recognition that regional differences in both lexis and phonology exist (Bradley, 2004; Bryant 1997; Leitner 2004).

Bryant (1997) has described complex lexical differences between separate areas of Australia and Bradley (2004) details a variety of regionally variable

phonological features. At least some of these differences have reached the conscious awareness of non-linguists. The palatalisation of consonants preceding the GOOSE vowel followed by /l/ (eg, *cool, school*) for example, is considered 'youthspeak' and is associated particularly with Queensland.

Studies on AusE indicate differences between South Australia, the southeast of Australia, the northeast, and Perth in the west (Kiesling 2006). Kiesling cautions that these apparent regional differences may constitute across-the-board changes spreading from one city to another. Yet it is equally possible that major urban areas of Australia constitute centres of linguistic change and are providing a source for geographically-based divisions.

In the NZE literature also, a variety of phonological changes have been described (see Gordon & Maclagan 2004; Maclagan 2000). Some recent innovations include:

- Fronted variants of dental fricatives, (ie, the use of "f" for "th") in the casual speech of lower class speakers (Campbell and Gordon 1996; Gordon and Maclagan 2004; Maclagan 2000), a feature which has been highlighted as an area for future research (Maclagan and Gordon 1999).
- An increase in the use of glottal variants of phrase-final /t/ (Docherty, Hay and Walker 2006; Holmes 1995).
- The lexical diffusion of innovative more central and unrounded realisations of the FOOT vowel, occurring primarily in the word *good* (Bauer and Warren 2004; Easton and Bauer 2000; Kennedy 2004, 2006).
- A merger of the vowels in the FOOT and THOUGHT lexical sets before /l/ reported to be more advanced in Wellington than elsewhere (Bauer and Bauer 2002).

- Diphthongisation of the GOOSE vowel (Bauer and Warren 2004). Easton and Bauer (2000: 111) suggest that “Pakeha are leading Maori speakers in the trend towards diphthongization”.

There is currently insufficient data on the distribution of these features across separate geographical areas of New Zealand. Nor is it possible to predict which, if any, of these innovations will become established features of NZE in the future. However, differences in the extent to which innovative features such as these are adopted by speakers in geographically distinct speech communities, are likely to play an influential role in any developing regional diversity in NZE.

The view that regional diversification in NZE is a possibility receives additional support from research on other post-colonial varieties of English (Schneider 2003). Regional diversification is now implicated in hypotheses concerning the developmental patterns of post-colonial or ‘New’ Englishes such as NZE and AusE (Bauer & Bauer 2002; Burridge & Kortmann 2004; Schneider 2003).

3. A matter of time? The development of ‘New Englishes’

The ‘youth’ or ‘recency’ of AusE and NZE is often cited as one of the main causes of their geographical homogeneity. In this regard Kuiper and Bell (2000: 12) highlight “the recency of the migration and the relatively free movement of settlers throughout New Zealand.” More recently, this preoccupation with youthful homogeneity (noted in Bauer and Bauer 2002; Horvath 2004; Kuiper and Bell 2000) has been supplemented with the recognition that “over time both physical and social distance will have the

effect of increasing regional differences in Australia and New Zealand” (Burridge and Kortmann 2004: 568). There is thus an implication that regional diversification in NZE is simply a matter of time.

Trudgill’s (2004) model of the processes of new-dialect formation in colonial situations includes: (i) initial dialect contact and mixture; (ii) accommodation between speakers and linguistic processes of koineisation and levelling, leading to (iii) linguistic convergence on an autonomous and uniform variety of English. But the ‘end point’ of Trudgill’s model may in fact mark the onset of a new beginning for such varieties. Schneider (2003) predicts a subsequent stage in the development of ‘New Englishes.’ The newly established homogeneous speech variety provides the prerequisite foundations for diversification into sub-varieties of the language.

Referring to evidence from the ONZE project, Trudgill (2004: 23) states that “in colonial situations, the development of a new unitary dialect out of a dialect mixture situation takes approximately fifty years.” Trudgill identifies 1840 to 1890 as the crucial period of European settlement during which NZE took shape and notes that public complaints about the variety are apparent from the early 1900s, suggesting an awareness of NZE-specific pronunciations from around that time.

Schneider (2003) argues that the development of English following its transplantation into a new territory is closely bound up with the identity of its speakers. It is only when the speakers of such varieties have established a stable and accepted collective or ‘national’ identity (and thus a stable and accepted collective ‘national’ language), that we are likely to witness the emergence of “new varieties of the formerly new variety ... which carry a regionally or socially indicative function” (2003: 253).

If Schneider's hypothesis is correct, then the variation apparent in AusE may well represent the emergence of smaller linguistic sub-varieties based on social group identities. 'Region' may be emerging as one of several indicators of group identity and NZE may not be too far behind in such processes.

4. Is region a factor in linguistic variation in NZE?

In a recent news clip (*One News* May 24, 2007), Allan Bell observed that features of NZE are "much more Kiwi and happily Kiwi now than they were thirty years ago." If New Zealanders are happy to speak as New Zealanders, as Bell claims, then the foundations for the construction of smaller group identities may be in place and region may be a factor that has relevance for NZE speakers.

To some extent, region may already have relevance for NZE speakers. Bauer and Bauer's (2002, 2005) study of regional variation in New Zealand school children's playground vocabulary identified three main linguistic regions on the basis of the distribution of vocabulary items such as *tiggy* (northern region), *tag* (central region) and *tig* (southern region). Smaller, individual sub-regions were also identified.

Phonological data obtained from school interviews carried out in Bauer and Bauer's study were analysed by Kennedy (2006). Despite complex interactions between region, ethnicity and class, region did appear to be a significant factor for some variables in the analysis.

Interestingly, public responses to a *New Zealand Listener* article on Bauer and Bauer's research (Taylor 2000), indicated that "regionalised names have existed for at least the last sixty years, and largely in the same regions we find today" (Bauer and Bauer 2002: 181). Although the foundations for regional identity may appear to exist, there is as yet no evidence that regional identity holds any significance for the speakers. Bauer and Bauer had insufficient information about individual informants for issues of individual or group identity to be explored.

More recently, Ainsworth (2004) employed a social networks approach to the investigation of regional variation in NZE. Ainsworth compared the intonational patterns and social networks of speakers in Wellington and in the dairy farming communities of Taranaki. The findings suggested that speakers' linguistic choices reflected speakers' social network membership and their orientation toward their local community. It appeared that young Taranaki females were more likely to use relatively level intonation patterns associated with speakers in the urban areas of New Plymouth and Wellington with which they had relatively high degrees of external contact. South Taranaki dairy farming men were found to use more dynamic pitch patterns typical of their elders. Ainsworth suggests that this may reflect the preservation of a local Taranaki identity.

Research on phonological variation in previously uncharted areas of New Zealand is now underway in order to explore the significance of factors such as regional identity and social networks for speakers in distinct areas of New Zealand. This research is summarised briefly below.

5. Looking for 'local talk' in NZE

The project aims to explore regional phonological variation in two geographically distinct speech communities. The city of Wellington and the town of Taumarunui in the central King Country correspond to Bauer and Bauer's (2002, 2005) central and northern 'linguistic regions' respectively. The research aims to assess the phonological evidence for the existence of these linguistic regions.

Natural speech data will be obtained from speakers in the two regions and analysed for differences in phonological variant use. Data obtained from adolescent speakers will be compared with data obtained from an older generation for an analysis of current phonological changes in the two communities. Fieldwork has already commenced in the Taumarunui community and is expected to commence in Wellington shortly.

In order to investigate in detail factors considered likely to be influential on the emergence of regional phonological differences, speakers' perceptions of regional identity, local orientation and social network membership will be taken into account alongside the more traditional social variables of age, gender and ethnicity.

An ethnographic approach is adopted in this research which is expected to yield a rich source of information about the communities in question. The overall aim is to interpret the phonological variation in these distinct communities in the context of community members' own perceptions and attitudes about their regional identity and with reference to their social network membership and local orientation. Differences between the two communities in terms of factors which are significant for speakers' variant use might then be identified.

It is possible that this research will not uncover any evidence of phonological differences which is correlated with regional identity. However, it is hoped that the ethnographic nature of the research will shed light on the social factors currently of relevance for the phonological variant use of NZE speakers in disparate communities and illuminate further the relevance and applicability of the label of 'homogeneity' in 21st century NZE.

6. Conclusion

Schneider (2003) acknowledges that there is little linguistic evidence of regional diversification in NZE at present. Yet if his hypothesis is correct, there is reason to suspect that regional diversification processes will become evident in due time. Bauer and Bauer (2002: 171-172) note that the onset of these processes were missed in Australian English due to an apparent focus of research on the homogeneity of the variety. Indeed it may not be possible to capture the 'onset.' However, NZE provides an opportunity to gain insights into the social and linguistic processes and conditions which may lead to the formation of new dialects.

References

- Ainsworth, Helen 2004. Regional Variation in New Zealand English: The Taranaki Sing-Song Accent. Unpublished PhD Thesis. Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.
- Bauer, Laurie 1994. English in New Zealand. In R. W. Burchfield (ed), *The Cambridge History of the English Language, Vol V: English in Britain and Overseas, Origins and Developments*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 382-429.
- Bauer, Laurie & Winifred Bauer 2002. Can we watch regional dialects developing in colonial English? The case of New Zealand. *English World-Wide* 23 (2): 169-193.
- Bauer, Laurie & Winifred Bauer 2005. Regional dialects in New Zealand children's playground vocabulary. In Allan Bell, Ray Harlow & Donna Starks (eds), *Languages of New Zealand*, Wellington, NZ: Victoria University of Wellington, 194-216.

Bauer, Laurie & Paul Warren 2004. New Zealand English: Phonology. In Edgar W. Schneider, Kate Burridge, Bernd Kortmann, Rajend Mesthrie & Clive Upton (eds), *A Handbook of Varieties of English*, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 580-602.

Bradley, David 2004. Regional characteristics of Australian English. In Edgar W. Schneider, Kate Burridge, Bernd Kortmann, Rajend Mesthrie & Clive Upton (eds), *A Handbook of Varieties of English*, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 645-655.

Bryant, Pauline 1997. A dialect survey of the lexicon of Australian English. *English World-Wide* 18 (2): 211-41.

Burridge, Kate & Bernd Kortmann 2004. Introduction: Varieties of English in the Pacific and Australasia. In Edgar W. Schneider, Kate Burridge, Bernd Kortmann, Rajend Mesthrie & Clive Upton (eds), *A Handbook of Varieties of English*, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 567-579.

Buzo, Alex 2002. Reggie Vee is alive: Regional variation in Australian English. *Quadrant* 35: 68-71.

Campbell, Elizabeth & Elizabeth Gordon 1996. 'What do you fink?' Is New Zealand English losing its 'TH'? *New Zealand English Journal* 10: 40-46.

Docherty, Gerry, Jennifer Hay & Abby Walker 2006. Sociophonetic patterning of phrase-final /t/ in New Zealand English. Paper presented at the Eleventh Australasian International Conference on Speech Science and Technology, University of Auckland, New Zealand, Dec 6-8. Retrieved on 10th December 2006 from: <http://www.assta.org/sst/2006/papers.php.html>

Easton, Anita & Laurie Bauer 2000. An acoustic study of the vowels of New Zealand English. *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 20 (2): 93-117.

Gordon, Elizabeth & Margaret A. MacLagan 2004. Regional and social differences in New Zealand: Phonology. In Edgar W. Schneider, Kate Burridge, Bernd Kortmann, Rajend Mesthrie & Clive Upton (eds), *A Handbook of Varieties of English*, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 603-613.

Hickey, Raymond 2003. How do dialects get the features they have? On the process of new dialect formation. In Raymond Hickey (ed), *Motives for Language Change*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 213-239.

Holmes, Janet 1995. Glottal stops in New Zealand English: An analysis of variants of word-final /t/. *Linguistics* 33: 433-463.

Horvath, Barbara M. 2004. Australian English: phonology. In Edgar W. Schneider, Kate Burridge, Bernd Kortmann, Rajend Mesthrie & Clive Upton (eds), *A Handbook of Varieties of English*, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 625-644.

Kennedy, Marianna 2004. Vowel movement, vowel duration and regional variation: Another adventure in the vowel system of New Zealand English. Unpublished honours paper, Victoria University of Wellington.

Kennedy, Marianna 2006. Variation in the Pronunciation of English by New Zealand School Children. Unpublished MA Thesis: Victoria University of Wellington.

Kiesling, Scott F. 2006. English in Australia and New Zealand. In Braj B. Kachru, Yamuna Kachru & Cecil L. Nelson (eds), *The Handbook of World Englishes*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 74-89.

Kuiper, Konraad & Allan Bell 2000. New Zealand and New Zealand English. In Allan Bell & Konraad Kuiper (eds), *New Zealand English*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 11-22.

Leitner, Gerhard 2004. *Australia's many voices: Australian English - The national language*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Maclagan, Margaret 2000. Where are we going in our language? New Zealand English today. *New Zealand Journal of Speech-Language Therapy* 53-54: 14-20.

Maclagan, Margaret & Elizabeth Gordon 1999. Data for New Zealand social dialectology: The Canterbury corpus. *New Zealand English Journal* 13: 50-58.

Maclagan, Margaret & Elizabeth Gordon 2004. The story of New Zealand English: What the ONZE project tells us. *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 24 (1): 41-56.

Mitchell, Alexander G. & Arthur Delbridge 1965. *The Speech of Australian Adolescents*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson.

One News 2007. "Kiwi accent has become stronger", One News, TVNZ, May 24th. Retrieved on 25th May 2007 from: <http://tvnz.co.nz/view/page/1148759>

Schneider, Edgar 2003. The dynamics of new Englishes: From identity construction to dialect birth. *Language* 79 (2): 233-281.

Taylor, Rowan 2000. "Child's Play." *New Zealand Listener*, October 14: 26-27.

Trudgill, Peter 2004. *New-dialect formation: the inevitability of colonial Englishes*. New York: Oxford University Press.