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The word *the* is such an inoffensive little word that it is hard to see why it should cause problems at all. But it does.

There is a big difference between *Do you like coffee?* and *Do you like the coffee?*. Some languages, such as Finnish and Russian, have nothing corresponding to *the*, and speakers of those languages have difficulty learning how to use *the* in English, but even those of us who have learnt another language which does have a word we translate as *the* will know that it is not always used in the same way as the English word is.

Here I want to consider the way *the* is used in place names. All names, including place names, are definite, whether they have a definite article *the* or not: *Auckland* and *The Hague* both refer to equally definite locations. But in most cases, phrases with *the* are fundamentally descriptions, while those without it are names.

The Friendly Islands is a description of the islands, and *The Isle of Man* contains some extra information to tell it apart from other isles, such as *The Isle of Wight*. *Stewart Island*, in contrast, is a name. The



Stewart Island, above, has no "the". Yet The Isle of Man and The Isle of Wight do. KATE EVANS

used to be called *The Solomon Islands* (and still is on the door of their high commission in Wellington) is often called *Solomon Islands*.

Why wouldn't it be like *The Shetland Islands*, *The Cook Islands*, *The Channel Islands* or *The Canary Islands*? There seems to be no linguistic reason for the omission of *The* in *The Solomon Islands*, though Britannica says its *the* was officially dropped in 1975 – perhaps in the lead-up to independence.

There is less reason for the omission of *The* in *The Chatham Islands*. Yet RNZ National's forecasters seem less and less inclined to use it. Even less explicity, they have apparently decided that *Central High Country* is the name of a particular area of the North Island and not just a description, and use it with no *the*. Perhaps, to make up for this, TVNZ's *Breakfast* has started to insert a *The* in Cook Strait, which is a name, and so does not need any *the* at all.

It was once the case that you could tell visitors to New Zealand because they said *North Island* and *South Island* instead of *The North Island* and *The South Island*. Even this shibboleth is no longer sacrosanct. New Zealanders now use both. The language is changing as people in the public eye omit or insert *the* at the fancy of the speaker.

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The in places

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trouble with this explanation is that definite descriptions merge into names when they are used as labels for places.

New Zealand is unusual in having a number of such labels which we can choose, apparently at random, to use as names or descriptions. *Otago* is a name (we cannot have *The Otago*) and *The West Coast* is a description (we cannot have *West Coast* without a *the*). But we can have *Waikato* or *The Waikato*, *Hawke's*

Bay or *The Hawke's Bay*, *Wairarapa* or *The Wairarapa*, and nobody knows why or can point to any distinction.

This variation is unusual. Perhaps the best we can say is that some place names come with a *the* and some come without it, and you just have to know which is which. But it sounds weird if you start using the wrong one.

Which is why it is so odd to hear some of these expressions routinely misused in our broadcast media. For example, what

Viewpoint

Bloomberg Slow down on nuclear diplomacy

Views from around the world. These opinions are not necessarily shared by *Stuff* newspapers.

After the killing of Iran's top nuclear scientist last week, President-elect Joe Biden is coming under renewed pressure to quickly resume negotiations with the regime. He should slow down and proceed with caution.

Biden has long since telegraphed his desire to resuscitate the nuclear deal that Iran agreed with the US and others in 2015. Since President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw from the agreement in 2018, Tehran has accelerated its enrichment of uranium and built up its stockpile to alarming levels. Now the regime is threatening to end international nuclear inspections unless Biden lifts key sanctions within weeks of taking office.

Biden would like to turn the clock back, and can expect a chorus of approval from the other signatories of the deal if he does. At the other end of the spectrum, Israel and many of Iran's neighbours are signalling their anxiety.

Resuming dialogue no doubt be politically expedient for Biden. But he should be mindful that the trick to diplomacy is often in the timing. There's little purpose to opening negotiations before next summer, when Iran's elections produce a new president.

Diplomacy with Iran is the smart course for Biden. But rushing into another flawed deal won't help anyone.

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