

# Regional variation in NZ English

Regional variation in New Zealand English is something of a conundrum. Although a dialect of the Southland/Otago region is well-known and documented (Bartlett 1992, 2003; Hay, MacLagan and Gordon 2008), linguists have yet to find concrete evidence of other regional New Zealand English dialects. Yet the general New Zealand public are often adamant that there are regional differences in how New Zealand English is spoken.

## *Folklinguistic evidence of regional variation*

Studies dealing with societal attitudes towards and beliefs about a language are called folklinguistic studies. Folklinguistic studies (Gordon 1997; Nielsen and Hay 2005) show that New Zealanders do tend to believe that there are regional differences in New Zealand English but, when asked to provide information about these differences, comments usually refer to characteristics of the region or the people living in the region rather than aspects of the language itself.

For example, a study by Nielsen and Hay (2005) invited University students to rate their perceptions of New Zealand English in different regions according to its 'pleasantness' and 'correctness' and to annotate a map of New Zealand with comments about speech in different regions. Although regions were rated differently, the ratings appeared to be based on stereotypes of the regions in question, rather than on any identifiable linguistic differences. People tended to rate their own region more highly for pleasantness and correctness and notes on the map mainly consisted of stereotypical descriptions such as 'official' for Wellington and 'farmer speech' for Taranaki. This inability to identify specific linguistic features that differ from one geographical area to the next stands in contrast to New Zealanders' awareness of a 'rolled', or rather postvocalic /r/, in Southland.

## *The Southland dialect*

The pronunciation of /r/ in words such as 'first' is well-documented as a feature specific to Southland and Otago (Bartlett 1992, 2003; Hay, MacLagan and Gordon 2008). In addition, Southland speakers use some distinctive items of vocabulary (such as *crib* rather than *bach*), and there are also syntactic features that appear to be specific to the Southland region (such as *Did you not?*, rather than *Didn't you?*, and *The plant needs watered*, rather than *The plant needs watering*). Since Southland has regionally distinctive features in pronunciation, vocabulary and syntax, it clearly constitutes what linguists define as a regional dialect and it seems likely that Scottish settlers in the region have played an influential role in these features having become established. But what about other areas of New Zealand? Is there evidence of regional dialects outside of Southland?

## *Regional homogeneity*

Academic research on regional variation in New Zealand English has led to an overall consensus that despite observable differences according to socioeconomic class, gender and ethnicity, the variety is geographically homogeneous. Indeed, academic descriptions of New Zealand English often highlight this regional homogeneity as a prominent characteristic of the variety. The two factors most often identified as responsible for this homogeneity are the youth of the variety and the geographical mobility of the population. For example, Kuiper and Bell (2000: 12) note: "As a result of both the recency of the migration and the relatively free movement of settlers throughout New Zealand, geographical dialects are not obvious."

Language differences take time to develop and New Zealand English is very young in comparison to British English. Furthermore, New Zealand has traditionally not been comprised of isolated groups of individuals who have had little contact with one another, but is a population that has been highly transient from the outset. It seems likely, as Edgar Schneider (2007) suggests, that from the time of European settlement, the growing New Zealand population, both Maori and Pakeha, would have been motivated by a need to learn to get along with each other and to develop a sense of unity and national identity. Schneider suggests that once this ideological national identity is established, the foundations are laid for the future development of differences at

the level of more locally-based identities (including regional differences). Over time, this facilitates the emergence of local (including regional) linguistic differences also. It is interesting in this respect that Maori as a population, whose language has had far longer to develop than English since it arrived in New Zealand, and whose speakers have a history of distinct tribal units, do indeed have well-established dialect differences (Harlow 2006) and speakers of Maori can offer examples of specific linguistic features that differ regionally and / or tribally. Also supporting this view is recent research on Australian English which, although sharing a similar settlement history and a variety of linguistic features with NZE, has a half-century chronological advantage in terms of its development. It is now becoming apparent that regional variation is developing within this variety of English. Bradley (2004) describes a variety of regional differences in Australian English vowel pronunciations. The vowel in GOOSE for example, is realised as fully back in South Australia but is a relatively central vowel elsewhere.

Time and increasing societal difference may be the keys that will eventually open the door to regional variation in New Zealand English. Recent research on New Zealand English both supports this view and provides evidence that the foundations for regional dialects are already in place.

### *Recent evidence for regional variation*

If regional variation is yet to emerge in New Zealand English, young people will play a leading role in those changes. Bauer and Bauer (2002) explored children's speech in New Zealand English by collecting questionnaire data from schools throughout New Zealand [insert link to children's English summary here]. They found regional differences in the vocabulary that New Zealand school children use, such as a northern-central-southern region split between the use of *tiggy*, *tag*, or *tig* for the name of a popular chasing game. Bauer and Bauer's research identified three main linguistic regions in New Zealand as well as several smaller sub-regions. What is particularly interesting about these results is that information obtained from the New Zealand public in response to a magazine article about the research, indicated that "regionalised names for [tiggy/tag/tig] have existed for at least the last sixty years, and largely in the same regions we find today" (2002: 181).

Lexical differences alone are insufficient to claim that New Zealand English regional dialects exist. However, interviews were also carried out with children at some of these schools and this data has been analysed by Kennedy (2006) for evidence of regional differences in phonology (differences in pronunciation features). Kennedy found several indications of regional variation. For example, the use of a postvocalic /r/ following the vowel in NURSE was not only a feature associated with the Southland dialect (as noted above), but was also used by children in the far north of Northland and in South Auckland, but not in other areas. Kennedy's results showed complex patterns of variation in which ethnicity, social class and region appeared to be interacting and it is difficult to unravel these interactions because schools were surveyed as a whole and there was little information about individual participants (such as their ethnicity or regional background). But the variation found in this study may indeed indicate the onset of the more localised differentiation that Schneider (2007) has predicted for NZE.

Further evidence of this comes from a study by Ainsworth (2004). Ainsworth compared the intonation (or pitch) of NZE for speakers in Taranaki dairy farming communities and in Wellington. Taranaki speakers (females in particular) who had more contact with speakers in the urban areas of New Plymouth and Wellington had a tendency towards a more level intonation pattern associated with the Wellington speakers. The young, South Taranaki dairy farming men appeared to use relatively dynamic pitch patterns more typical of their elders. Ainsworth (2004) suggests that this may reflect the preservation of a local Taranaki identity. Unfortunately, we cannot be sure that these results reflect differences specific to Wellington and Taranaki, rather than a more general (i.e. NZ-wide) difference between rural and urban style speech.

Research in progress (Marsden 2007) is attempting to unravel some of these complicated issues by comparing NZE in two relatively similar rural towns in two separate regions of New Zealand. The regions correspond to the main *northern* and *central* regions that were identified in Bauer and Bauer's study. Data has been collected from students at two schools with highly similar

characteristics and this data will be analysed for evidence of regional phonological differences. In order to be able to distinguish between differences associated with socioeconomic class, ethnicity, and gender on the one hand, and differences associated with region on the other, the data was purposely collected from schools with the same decile rating. It includes data from both males and females, and from young NZ-ers of both Maori and Pakeha ethnicity. In addition, since both schools are in similarly rural areas, differences that do not appear to be related to either ethnicity or gender are more likely to have a regional basis. This study also takes into account the attitudes of the participants towards their local area in order to investigate links between particular phonological features and the amount of loyalty and sense of belonging that individuals express towards their local area. The results will be reported on this website when available.

Certainly, if we were to compare New Zealand English with British English, where regional differences are well-established and well-known and are often a source of jocular abuse among the Brits themselves, it can be argued that New Zealand English lacks regional dialects. However, regional variation may exist in New Zealand English at a level that is just beginning to emerge, or which has so far been too subtle to be noticeable. Research on regional variation in New Zealand English to date has not been comprehensive enough to provide clear evidence either for or against the existence of regional differences. Time, and more thorough investigation and comparison of linguistically uncharted areas of New Zealand will allow the true picture of regional variation in this youthful variety of English to emerge.

## **References**

- Ainsworth, Helen 2004. Regional Variation in New Zealand English: The Taranaki Sing-Song Accent. Unpublished PhD Thesis. Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.
- Bartlett, Christopher 1992. Regional variation in New Zealand English: the case of Southland. *New Zealand English Newsletter* 6: 5-15.
- Bartlett, Christopher 2003. The Southland variety of English: postvocalic /r/ and the BATH vowel. Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Otago.
- Bauer, Laurie and Winifred Bauer 2002. Can we watch regional dialects developing in colonial English? The case of New Zealand. *English World Wide* 23 (2): 169-193.
- Bradley, David 2004. Regional characteristics of Australian English. In Edgar W. Schneider, Kate Burridge, Bernd Kortmann, Rajend Mesthrie and Clive Upton (eds.). *A Handbook of Varieties of English*, pp. 645-655. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Gordon, Pamela 1997. What New Zealanders believe about regional variation in New Zealand English: a folklinguistic investigation. *New Zealand English Journal* 11: 14-25.
- Harlow, Ray 2006. *Maori: A Linguistic Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hay, Jennifer, Margaret MacLagan and Elizabeth Gordon 2008. *New Zealand English*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Kennedy, Marianna (2006). Variation in the Pronunciation of English by New Zealand School Children. Unpublished MA Thesis: Victoria University of Wellington.
- Kuiper, Konraad and Allan Bell (2000). New Zealand and New Zealand English. In Allan Bell and Konraad Kuiper (eds.), *New Zealand English*, pp. 11-22. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Marsden, Sharon 2007. On the emergence of regional varieties of New Zealand English. *New Zealand English Journal* 21: 64-72.
- Nielsen, Daniel and Jennifer Hay 2005. Perceptions of regional dialects in New Zealand English. *Te Reo* 48: 95-110.

Schneider, Edgar 2007. *Postcolonial English: Varieties Around the World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sharon Marsden  
PhD student (Regional variation in NZE)  
School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies  
PO Box 600  
Wellington New Zealand  
[sharon.marsden@vuw.ac.nz](mailto:sharon.marsden@vuw.ac.nz)