

# Māori lexical items in NZ English

## *Introduction*

For several centuries the sole language of the country that would eventually be known as New Zealand was te reo Māori, the Māori language. But then, in 1769, H.M.S. Endeavour sailed into Poverty Bay. This marked the beginning of many changes, largely occasioned by sustained contact between two cultures and two languages, English and te reo Māori.

The first attempts at communication were often marked by gestures, incomprehension, and laughter. Gradually, however, this changed. Māori names made their way onto the pages of private journals and from there, after the Endeavour's return to Britain, into the public domain, with publications by Cook and Joseph Banks, to be followed by the writings of further late eighteenth and early nineteenth century explorers. For, in their dealings with Māori people, and their exploration of a country that was new to them, these English-speakers had the opportunity and the motivation to acquire items of Māori vocabulary. As a result, the origins of New Zealand English can be traced to the language contact situation that arose in 1769 with the arrival of Captain James Cook and his crew aboard the Endeavour. And while New Zealand English has a number of distinguishing features, it is the lexical influence of te reo Māori that most distinguishes New Zealand English from other varieties of English.

## *When did Māori lexical items enter New Zealand English?*

The Endeavour sailed away, but the return to normalcy for Māori was temporary. More expeditions from Europe followed and in their wake came commercial adventurers. Sealers were operating from New Zealand by the 1790s; whalers came and went too. A small number of escaped convicts from the Australian penal colony crossed the Tasman, with some establishing themselves with Māori tribes. And in 1814 Samuel Marsden founded the first mission station in New Zealand, in the Bay of Islands. A European, English-speaking presence in the country was well and truly secured.

In terms of language behaviour at this time, English-speakers had little choice but to learn sufficient of the majority language to communicate successfully. For some, such as the sealers and whalers who acquired common-law Māori wives, this may have meant developing an idiosyncratic pidgin; for others, and particularly for the missionaries with their goal of converting Māori to Christianity, this meant learning the Māori language. Inevitably, Māori words crept into their English language use. The journals and letters of Jane and William Williams, missionaries on the East Coast of the North Island, provide a rich illustration of this process (see e.g. Porter, 1974).

Following the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840 and the beginning of systematic colonisation, the demographic balance began to change with the result that, by the 1860s, te reo Māori had become the minority language in New Zealand. In terms of the development of the Māori lexical presence in New Zealand English at this time and later, a 'take – give' hypothesis has been proposed (see e.g. Bartlett, 2002). Essentially, the argument goes, English-speakers 'took' Māori words from te reo during the colonial period whereas in recent decades Māori-speakers have 'given' Māori words to English-speakers. While there is a certain elegance to this hypothesis, it does not withstand scrutiny.

A more convincing explanation of the entry of Māori words into New Zealand English is offered by Belich (2001)'s conceptualisation of New Zealand history post-1840 as occurring in three phases, for the entry of Māori words into the lexicon does appear to have paralleled these phases. During the progressive colonisation phase (roughly 1840–80), when difference and independence from Britain were being emphasised, there was an openness to borrowing from Māori with a resulting addition of Māori loanwords to the lexicon. The main types of borrowing at this time were names of flora and fauna and cultural terms. For the next 90 years, during the recolonisation phase (1880–1970), when ties with Britain were being re-established and re-emphasised, there was a resistance to, or at least a stabilisation of, borrowing. The third historical phase, decolonisation, began around 1970 and was in large part defined by 'the disconnection from Britain' (Belich, 2001, p. 426) following Britain's entry into the European Economic Community, as it then was. This has been a time of growth in the Māori word presence in New Zealand English.

### *How often are Māori lexical items used in New Zealand English?*

If Māori words are the most distinctive feature of New Zealand English, it seems reasonable to ask how frequently they occur. Two studies in the late 1990s (Kennedy & Yamazaki, 1999; Macalister, 1999) provided similar answers about the frequency of Māori words in contemporary New Zealand English – Māori words accounted for roughly six out of every one thousand tokens. A later study (Macalister, 2006a), looking at change in the Māori word presence over the period 1850 – 2000, showed that this presence had not always been as high, but that it had gradually increased. This study also suggested that the Māori word presence would increase further.

### *What types of Māori lexical items are used?*

Most of the Māori words used in NZE are proper nouns, e.g. the names of places, people, organisations, and the word 'Māori' itself. On one level these may seem unimportant, but in actual fact these words can provide interesting insights into the on-going evolution of NZ society. As an example, an analysis of Māori personal names reveals that one hundred years ago Māori were seldom referred to by surname in newspaper reports, whereas non-Māori invariably were; social inequality offers one explanation of this phenomenon.

Not all Māori words are proper nouns, however, and the non-proper noun words can be divided into three categories, although other approaches are certainly possible (cf. Kennedy & Yamazaki, 1999):

- flora and fauna
- material culture; i.e. words referring to tangible and visible manifestations of Māori culture
- social culture; i.e. words referring to non-material aspects of a culture, such as actions, concepts and relationships

The flora and fauna and the material culture categories appear to be relatively stable, and consist of words that are either established or inherited in the NZE lexicon, whereas there has been significant growth in the social culture category over recent decades and this is expected to continue in the foreseeable future. These relatively recently added words sometimes excite comment; with the Māori words that are either well-established in the lexicon or inherited from one generation to the next – a word like 'kiwi' for example – speakers are often not consciously aware of the word's origin.

### *How many Māori lexical items does the average speaker of New Zealand English know?*

When discussing the contribution of te reo Māori to the New Zealand English lexicon, there has been a natural interest in gauging the size of the average New Zealand English speaker's Māori word vocabulary. Dictionaries, while providing a window on the growth of that component, do not provide a reliable guide to vocabulary size as they may include technical, specialist and redundant words which are unlikely to be in general use. Furthermore, dictionaries do not provide a consistent picture. For example, *The Dictionary of New Zealand English* (Orsman, 1997) contained 746 headwords of Māori origin, by Kennedy and Yamazaki's count (Kennedy & Yamazaki, 1999), whereas *The New Zealand Oxford Dictionary* (Deverson & Kennedy, 2004) had rather fewer, although still more than 600 such entries according to its promotional material. If dictionaries are unreliable and probably exaggerated guides in this respect, then a more modest figure is likely. Deverson (1984) proposed 40 to 50 words other than place names as the size of an average New Zealander's Māori vocabulary, which estimate was repeated by Gordon and Deverson (1998) and endorsed by Bellett (1995). This figure refers to the size of an individual's passive vocabulary, rather than an indication of Māori loanwords in active use. Based on a survey of familiarity with Māori words among senior secondary students in 2002, these figures were judged to be conservative and a higher range of 70 – 80 words was suggested (Macalister, 2006b). At the same time, however, it was proposed that this would represent 'the loanword vocabulary with which school leavers enter adult life' and that this loanword lexicon would be 'likely to increase with age, and with increased exposure to loanword use' (ibid, p. 121). The implementation of the same survey questionnaire with older speakers provided some support for this contention (Macalister, 2007).

### *How will knowledge of Māori words change in the future?*

It is difficult to predict how any language will develop, but all the indications are that the presence of Māori words in New Zealand English will increase in the years ahead. Māori words are likely to be used more, and new Māori words are likely to enter the lexicon, principally from the social culture domain. This was suggested by Macalister's corpus-based study (2006a), and similar results have been found by other researchers. Drawing on television news broadcasts in 1984 and 2004 rather than written text, de Bres (2006) found no increase in the frequency of Māori lexical items although she did note 'increasing use of non-morphologically assimilated Māori lexical items, the introduction of new Māori lexical items and the now common use of Māori greetings' (ibid, p. 32). A study of the treatment of thirteen Māori words in four New Zealand newspapers from 1997 to 2004 found that '[t]he words that have an increased or steady frequency are all social culture word types' (Davies & Maclagan, 2006, p. 96). In a limited investigation of Māori words found in job advertisements, words that would be classified as belonging to social culture, Westbrook (2007, p. 43) found that his respondents generally held 'positive attitudes towards the use of terms from te reo in English' and concluded that this would likely lead to more Māori words becoming 'well-established in the common knowledge of New Zealanders in the future.' It should be pointed out, however, that this expectation that growth in the Māori word presence in New Zealand English will be driven by social cultural types is not new; more than thirty years ago Ryan (1977, p. 366) predicted that 'the lexis from the societal area will very soon obtain a greater place in literate New Zealand English', although he was aware that 'this may still be some years in the future.'

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