

FEATURES

Hypocoristics – visiting relatives in Palmie for Chrissie

LANGUAGE has been described as a wild creature that grows and changes untidily as people use it and New Zealanders and Australians are known for having their own way of mucking the Queen's English, "untidily".

In a letter to the *Listener* this year, Radio New Zealand host Jim Mora was taken to task for his use of informal pet names or hypocoristics. The irritated listener wrote "I am fed up with 'Palmie' for Palmerston North, 'Chrissie' for Christmas and 'the baka' for Wharfedale Island. Jim Mora does not sound like us. But perhaps Mora goes sound like us. Using hypocoristics is a part of the Kiwi character of establishing or bestowing an informal identity on a place, a person, or a process. Whether we like it or not, the West-



Dianne Bardsley
WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

pac Stadium is now known to all as the Cake Tin, and many of us will feel that there is more colour and character in that than in the use of a sponsor's name.

A 21st century development has been the use of hypocoristics in less personal and informal circumstances than their previous use, in the domains of skiing, surfing, and fishing, terms like Pags for Raglan.

Gassy for Gisborne, or Cardy for Cardrona are commonplace, and we all had pet names for the various schools with which we are familiar, so perhaps it is not unexpected that we should extend the use of these terms more widely.

Whatever his age, Barry has become Bazza, Murray is Muzza. We might knowingly eat Eggs Benny in K Road, or drink a savvy in Remmets or a chardle at The Mount with Bankie or Bondy. The difficulty is, of course, that for visitors or new speakers of English, the narrative "We met Macca in the swamie at the Keg in Kume" requires some translation.

Does punctuation really matter? In 2003, Lynne Truss wrote *Eats, Shoots and Leaves: The Zero Tolerance approach to Punctuation*, was a surprising best-seller. We probably all have our favourite examples of howling punctuation errors, and for many of us, as Truss points out, it's tough being a stickler for punctuation these days. One almost dare not get up in the mornings.

In response to the pursuit of correctness elucidated by Truss and her disciples, the internationally known linguist David Crystal has an answer in a newly published book *The Fight for English: How language pundits ate, shot, and left*.

To Crystal, the "zero tolerance" approach to language is deeply flawed, and he argues for a less prescriptive attitude to language usage and language change. He points out that there have always been critics of usage, there have always been sticklers, and not one of these has managed to persuade others that his or her way is right.

Crystal looks at issues such as appropriateness, claiming that we all need a linguistic wardrobe from which we can pull out and use various items to fit the occasion. But what about the issues of clarity and consistency? And was the concept of "correctness" had its day?

THIS year the New Zealand Dictionary Centre at Victoria University celebrates its 10th anniversary. Established in association with the publication of the late HW Orsman's award-winning *Dictionary of New Zealand English* in 1977, the centre maintains a database of distinctive New Zealand English words and usages, and is the principal centre for the conducting of research in New Zealand English vocabulary.

Orsman's work continues with the support of electronic media, including the use of corpora.

Since 1997, 25 New Zealand dictionaries have been compiled and published by the centre, in association with Oxford University Press. Editorial, resource materials for school research projects in New Zealand English are also prepared at the centre. Similar dictionary research centres are maintained in Australia, South Africa, England, Canada, and the United States in association with Oxford University Press, so that staff at Victoria are in contact with lexicographers around the world.

A volunteer reader scheme in which sharp-eyed word-hunters contribute words and citations, or questions about origins or usage, is maintained.

Any readers who are interested in joining this scheme should contact the Director, New Zealand Dictionary Centre, Victoria University of Wellington, P O Box 600, Wellington, by telephone 04 463 5044, or by e-mail: nzdc@vuw.ac.nz

THE TEAM

Beginning today a team of four linguists from Victoria University's School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies will bring a weekly language column to *The Dominion Post*. The first column is by Dianne Bardsley, who has compiled and edited New Zealand dictionaries for Oxford University Press, and contributes to international dictionaries of English.