



# He flat-ly denies that utterance



**I**N AN article on the new iPhone range in *The Dominion Post* I was cited as saying that the new technology “should be able to cope with New Zealanders’ flat vowels”.

Now, I would like to reassure readers that I did not say any such thing, or at least that I did not say that New Zealanders have flat vowels. For one, I am not entirely sure what a flat vowel is. I am aware that non-linguists (and possibly some linguists) do refer to flat vowels, and I know that this is often the case when talking about northern British English. So Yorkshire folk are stereotypically associated with flat caps and flat vowels.

I also know that “flat” is a term used in a descriptive system developed in the 1950s by linguists whose goal was to define a set of “features” that could be used to both describe and classify speech sounds.

For instance, the “v” and “z” sounds that we find in the middle of “rival” and “fuzzy” are known as “voiced” because the voice box continues to vibrate while those sounds are made. They contrast with the “f” and “s” sounds in the middle of “rifle” and “fussy”, which are “voiceless” because they do not have this vibration.

You can check this difference by putting your fingers on the front of your throat and feeling the buzzing of the vibration.

Linguists use a feature called “voice” as part of the description of these sounds – “v” and “z” have [+voice], while “f” and “s” have [-voice]. These feature labels are useful because they can also help us account for some interesting phenomena in pronunciation, such as differences in how we say the “-ed” past tense ending. So a verb ending in a voiced sound, like “buzz”, has a [+ voice] “d” pronunciation of “-ed” in “buzzed”, and a verb ending in a voiceless sound, like “fuss”, has a [-voice] “t” pronunciation of the same ending in “fussed”.

So back to “flat”. The feature “flat” was set up to describe the differences in sound quality caused by rounding or pouting of the lips and by other adjustments to the speech apparatus.

Essentially, these differences amount to a lowering of some of the higher-frequency components of vowels and other speech sounds.

So if New Zealanders have flat vowels, then New Zealand English should be plenty of rounded vowels.

It is true that many New Zealanders have a rounded version of the vowel in words like “nurse” or “bird”, and that this is a vowel which in other varieties of English is not rounded, or at least not as rounded.

But at the same time, the pronunciation of the vowel in

“good”, which is normally produced with rounded lips, is often unrounded, as reflected in the spelling “giddyay”.

But most of the vowel sounds that are typically associated with New Zealand English would not be characterised as “flat”.

I’m thinking here of the pronunciation of the vowel in “fish” (as caricatured in “fush n chups”), or the disappearance of the distinction between the vowels in “beer” and “bear”, or the differences between New Zealand English and varieties such as British English in the pronunciation of the vowels in “pan” and “pen” (where New Zealand versions are heard by Brits as “pen” and “pin” respectively).

So what was being ascribed to me when the reporter wrote about New Zealanders’ “flat vowels”?

One suggestion that has been made for the use of “flat” is that the sounds are flat in the sense of being dull or uninteresting, and that this may be more a comment about the speakers than their speech.

Not characteristics I would associate with New Zealanders. But, then, it was the reporter who used “flat”, not me.

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