



# ‘Nurse’ and ‘bird’ are clues to your identity



**Janet Holmes**

**WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE**

**T**HANKS to her parents, my friend Anthea is a lucky bilingual. She recently bent my ear about a topic that is a constant source of irritation to those who have invested a large amount of time and energy in learning a second language well: Why do linguists seem to take the view that anything goes?

Anthea’s parents came to New Zealand from Germany as adults in the 1950s and never managed to acquire a New Zealand accent. Their English always provided clues to their origins – mainly small variations in pronunciation, since their English grammar was quite standard and their English vocabulary extensive. But far from being proud of these feats, Anthea’s parents bewailed the fact that they could not “lose their accent”.

When questioned about her attitude to her parents’ accents, it emerged that the accent Anthea really admired was something close to British English RP or Received Pronunciation (which one of my students relabelled “Real Posh!”). Anthea was critical of her parents not because they did not sound like speakers of New Zealand English, but because they did not sound like Princess Anne or her daughter, Zara Phillips.

Anthea is one of many New Zealanders who still orient to British English as the gold standard. Interestingly there are many other countries – such as Singapore – where people have similar attitudes. Other countries take American English as a model. Our Masters students who have taught for many years in South Korea, for instance, describe how there they are required to model American accents.

When my son was teaching in an after-school programme in South Korea, he was told to change his New Zealand accent to an American accent or the

parents would complain. He astutely selected a couple of salient features of American English – pronouncing “r” in words like “car” and “bird”, and pronouncing the ‘t’ in the middle of “butter” as a “d” – and that was enough.

From the point of view of a socio-linguist, such behaviour is bizarre. Attitudes to language are based on social prejudice rather than features regarded as inherently better or worse linguistically. There is nothing linguistically superior about pronouncing or not pronouncing “r” in “burr” or “bird”. Or in pronouncing or not pronouncing “h” at the beginning of “hotel” or “herb” for that matter.

On the east coast of the United States, pronouncing “r” in “car” is still regarded as posh and an indicator of social status. In the south of England, it is regarded as evidence of lack of education and a rural background (Somerset, for instance). In Southland, pronouncing “r” in words like “nurse” and “bird” is a sign of local identity. According to the research being undertaken by Sharon Marsden, one of our PhD students, pronouncing “r” in such words is spreading and can be heard in young people’s speech in the North Island too. So, I was not surprised when the young woman at the supermarket checkout said to me on Saturday, “Have you got your caRd”. I asked where she came from. “Tawa” she answered.

This “r” pronunciation seems to be spreading. The modern linguist’s job is not, as many people think, to prescribe correct usage and tell everyone what they should and should not say. Rather it is to describe what is happening in current usage, to capture variation and new usages, and document change in progress.



**The Dominion Post**  
**07-Dec-2011**  
**Page: 5**  
**Opinion**  
**Market: Wellington**  
**Circulation: 84047**  
**Type: Metro**  
**Size: 276.34 sq.cms**  
**MTWTF--**

We all have our values and beliefs, of course, and it is sensible to identify them. So, as the speaker at our recent book launch (the book was *Q and Eh*) accurately noted, most people are aware that I am not at all sympathetic to sexist language. But that does not mean I cannot document current sexist and non-sexist usages – and happily note that non-sexist usages are currently winning out.

Most linguists have value-laden views about certain aspects of language, but as long as they declare their values we can assess the chances that these are an influence on linguists' observations about the way language is always changing in endlessly interesting ways.

**Janet Holmes teaches sociolinguistics at Victoria University.**