

“I’ll write a letter to the paper” – the lay person’s view of New Zealand English

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In May 2007, I received an e-mail from the *Christchurch Press* asking me if I would write a weekly language column, following in the footsteps of the late Frank Haden. At that time I was staying in Kuala Lumpur with my daughter and her family, and the appeal of relaxing beside the pool under the palm trees in my retirement was far more seductive than the responsibility of writing a weekly language column. But my bigger concern was the prospect of following Frank Haden. His ideas about language were different from mine. For many years I’d kept a “Frank Haden file” of his Saturday offerings. I used these in my university lectures, usually challenging or refuting them. However, *The Press* generously assured me that I didn’t need to adopt Frank Haden’s position on language correctness and I could write on anything I liked.

I’ve now been writing the columns for over a year. In the beginning, members of the Frank Haden fan club were annoyed, and angry e-mails arrived every Monday morning. My column was appalling, and silly, and why was *The Press* publishing such rubbish. John Wood from Darfield wrote a letter to the editor:

I am appalled by her disinterest in standards of good English ...she discounts pronunciation, enunciation, grammar and spelling without once acknowledging the line between good and bad... Her approach is irresponsible... she reminds me of a medical practitioner so interested in the symptoms of a condition that there is a reluctance to administer a cure (*The Press*, 31/10/07).

Six people wrote to the paper in response to John Wood’s letter, but no one was defending me; instead, they were all concerned to point out John Wood’s erroneous use of the word “disinterest”. Whether it is negative or positive, what this response tells me is that there is a great deal of interest in language out there among lay people. Even the most critical letter will finish with some statement about how interesting and complex language is.

So I’ve now joined the august body of people in New Zealand writing in the popular press or speaking on the radio about language. When I was growing up we used to listen to Professor Arnold Wall on the radio talking about The Queen’s English. Later, there was Max Cryer on Saturday mornings on the National programme and

of course there was always Frank Haden's column. But I would prefer to align myself with Ian Gordon, whose weekly column in *The Listener* first introduced language scholarship to the general public in New Zealand.

The letters I've received reveal more than just the individual complaints, queries and comments. Many of them point to their writers' underlying view of language. So in this lecture I would like to work out what this view of language is—how lay people see English in New Zealand. I was thinking about this last year when I was attending a lecture about the theologian Professor Lloyd Geering. The speaker was talking about the way in which Geering rejected the idea of a "God out there"—the picture of God as an elderly man with a white beard somewhere in the sky—and it occurred to me that this is rather like the image of language which some of my letter writers believe in. To them, there is something called Good Language, or Proper Language or Correct Language. It exists—it's real—and it's out there... somewhere. It isn't a person, but maybe it shares a cloud with God. It needs to be protected and admired; it is also supported by its own sacred texts: old grammar books, dictionaries and Fowler's *Modern English Usage*.

So for this lecture I've decided to investigate this model of what I'll call "Proper Language", a name surrounded by big shiny inverted commas. I'm looking for that ideal language that some of my correspondents seem to believe in. What are the characteristics of Proper Language? To answer this, I needed a source of letters on language from lay people.

One of the best places to find such letters has always been the *New Zealand Listener*. So that's where I went, looking first for those letters that appeared in the first ten years of its publication, from 1939 to 1948. I've also read the articles on language topics published in *The Listener* in that period. What I found was language is a topic that gets people fired up. It does now and it did then.

In the period I examined, people wrote letters to *The Listener* for several reasons. One was because they believed that broadcasting should set the standard for language use in New Zealand. If radio announcers can't get it right, how can ordinary people cope? Others wrote letters in response to the articles about language, and *The Listener* published such articles regularly. Some people were genuinely concerned about the state of the Maori language in New Zealand. And some were also thinking about the possibility of a distinctive New Zealand variety of English.

But I'll start with Proper Language. I think one thing that many letter writers are agreed on, both then and now, is that there is always one correct form of Proper Language and it is the duty of experts to state what this is. People are troubled by variation: "We hear 'different to', 'different from' and 'different than'—which one is right?" they ask. And it wasn't just ordinary people who were guilty of confusing

variation in their speech. The visit to New Zealand of his Royal Highness the Duke of Gloucester set off a flurry of letters. The Duke had come for the centenary, but he had pronounced “centenary” in three different ways: centenry, centenary and centennary (*The Listener* 17.12.39). If Dukes can’t get it right what are ordinary folk meant to do? Other letters lamented that people had been heard to say “oral” with a short vowel (/ɔrəl/), and “choral” also. There was no question about it, said the letter writers, it had to stop. The correct pronunciation was “awral” (/ɔrəl /), and “cawral” (23/8/40).

Frank Haden also believed in the idea of one single correct pronunciation. He insisted that “sure” should be pronounced /ʃʊə /. If you said, “Are you shore?” (/ʃɔ/), this was an abomination. A similar distaste for variation occurs in the letters I receive: “You wrote ‘compared to’ instead of ‘compared with’ —this is disgraceful.” In a few words in English there are alternatives of stress-placement and these are a constant concern: “Is it controversy or controversy, harass or harass? Please tell me which is the correct one.” In a column where I wrote that a person could say kilometre or kilometre I was taken to task by retired engineers, who said, “No, the word is kilometre. There are no options.”

A word which troubled a number of early letter writers was “accent”. A.H. Reed and Thomas Bracken were at war over this. Should the word be stressed on the first syllable (like “recent”) or have two syllables with equal stress? (19/7/46; 9/8/46; 16/8/46; 30/8/46; 6/9/46). And what about the people who pronounce “romance” with a stress on the first syllable? In 1941, a Richard Roe of Wadestown wrote to *The Listener*:

The only way of curing this evil would be for the NBS to employ specialists to listen to every broadcast, and to record every mispronunciation by speakers, actors in radio plays, and announcers, and to bring the faults to the notice of the offenders. If after a reasonable period these were not able or willing to mend their ways, their voices should cease to be heard on the air (28/3/1941).

Say “romance” and Mr Roe would have you sacked.

The idea that there is only one correct pronunciation of a word can be seen in the debate in *The Listener* about two British placenames. It began with the East Anglian town Yarmouth. Should this be “Yarmith” or “Yarmouth”? Those arguing for “Yarmith” said that this was how the locals pronounced it. But, as one correspondent put it, “Should we be governed by what local inhabitants say or the fact that modern standard English is Yahr-mowth?” (9.11.45). Those opposing “Yarmith” said that the locals were wrong, and modern standard English was

“Yarmouth”—in other words it should be pronounced as it was spelt. Ludovic McWhirter of Auckland wasn’t at all impressed by the argument in favour of the “local inhabitants”. “It is time,” he wrote, “that someone pointed out that the slovenliness of English dialect and its variant forms derives either from illiteracy, or lack of adequate training in childhood in the proper use of tongue, teeth, throat and palate in articulation” (7/12/45). Ngaio Marsh then stirred the pot by complaining about the pronunciation of “Marlborough”: shouldn’t it be “Mawlborough?” she asked (30/11/45; 11/1/46). Another correspondent heard a weather report with the pronunciations “Teranaki and Mawlborough,” and asked, “Are these speakers trying to improve our language or are they just trying to overcome their own inferiority complex?” (19/7/46).

The correspondence in *The Listener* about the pronunciation of Yarmouth and Marlborough ran from October 1945 to January 1946, with 24 letters published. Was this a safe diversion from the miseries of the war? Let’s all be outraged about the pronunciation of Yarmouth. It wasn’t just the pronunciation of British placenames that made writers sharpen their pencils. People in Christchurch now might still remember the battle in the letters to *The Press* about the pronunciation of the place-name Rolleston—or should it be “Rollston?” In 1947 there was a lively exchange of letters in *The Listener* about the Northland town Whangarei, but the argument wasn’t about the first syllable, as you might expect. It was about the last syllable. Was it Whangarei or Whangaree? A.H. Reed wrote on behalf of Whangaree. Only one writer argued for Fangarei.

These debates, I think, throw light on Proper Language. Who do you believe, the local people—those who say “Yarmith”—or something out there called Standard English where the word is pronounced as it is spelt. This, then, is a characteristic of Proper Language: it is written, not spoken. And if you have to decide which pronunciation is correct, you must always choose the one closest to the word’s spelling.

I think anyone who has ever taught phonetics to first year Linguistics students will know how firmly some students are wedded to the written form of words. Our aim as teachers of phonetics is to get students to listen to what they actually say. I used to ask my students to write the days of the week in phonetics. Some people could not be convinced that we don’t pronounce the “d” in Wednesday and that the word doesn’t have three syllables. Every year some students would insist that they really did say “Wed-nes-day.” So it isn’t surprising that many of the people who wrote those letters to the editor of *The Listener* also believe that the correct form of any word is its written form, and that a different spoken version is just the result of laziness.

This view is still strongly held by some people today. I recently heard a complaint on Jim Mora's afternoon programme on Radio NZ National about forecasters who don't pronounce the "d" in "strong winds". I too get e-mails complaining about elisions and assimilations in speech. Of course, when we are teaching students to represent spoken language, we encourage them to notice these assimilations and elisions. There are also complaints about unstressed syllables, as if in Proper Language every syllable should be strong. Hugh Brown in Christchurch wrote, "A few examples of our laziness are 'cin' for 'can', 'thim' for 'them', 'jist' for 'just', 'ti' for 'to' (*The Press* 16/7/07). He has observed that English is a stress-timed language but it troubles him. He thinks this is lazy. In Proper Language people should always say: "can", "them", "just" and "to" in their full stressed forms. "I'm just going to see if we can buy them."

In Proper Language there are "libraries" not "libries," "manufacturers" not "manafacterers", and the word is "temporary" not "tempry". In 1946 a Dunedin correspondent asked, "What hope is there for those on the lower range of the educational ladder when those at the top make use of such words as 'liberies'?" (4/10/46). Another complained, "There is an announcer who tells all and sundry that this is 2ZB Welluntun. Is it any wonder that children and adults speak so badly when we have these things drummed into our ears day after day?" (14/8/42). Other pronunciations which people complained about were "Febry", "mathmatics", and of course the countless complaints about "Noo Zillan".

But not everyone agreed with the complainers. "Student" of Wadestown wrote:

To compile a list of mispronunciations during the week seems an incredibly smug way of voicing one's disapproval. It is not, to my mind, a heinous offence that a Minister, in making a point in debate, should slip over the word "secretary" (1/1/46).

A correspondent from Westport wrote:

I am sure there are a good many listeners like myself who do not listen for mistakes in English or in grammar, but who like to hear announcers just speak as New Zealanders. A young nation will find a language of its own sooner or later and the vowels and accents will very likely change to suit (18/5/41).

The pronunciation of Proper Language is not lower class. People thought that the New Zealand Broadcasting Service had a great responsibility for improving pronunciation in New Zealand and this meant avoiding lower class variants. A man from Timaru complained about a commentary on the Auckland Cup where the announcer included such words as "heow, neow and eow." He wrote, "Surely it is

time that the NZBS formed a definite policy with regard to its announcers and commentators?" (16/1/48).

This isn't surprising. In 1939 Arnold Wall published his book, *New Zealand English: how it should be spoken*. In it he complained about pronunciations we would associate with broad New Zealand speech: "ceow" for cow, "syme dy" for "same day" and "woine" for "wine" (1939: 17–18). He describes these pronunciations as "distressing" and lists them under the heading "Essential Faults in New Zealand Speech." I'm sure this is why the Christchurch school I attended employed an elocution teacher. No lower class vowels at St Margaret's College, please!

For some writers, the pronunciation of Proper Language in New Zealand was definitely based on the speech of England. If we look at Arnold Wall's book again, we see in its preface that "this book was designed for those who want to speak good English, standard English, as spoken by the best speakers of the Old Land" (1939: 1). And you didn't argue with Arnold Wall. He was considered the authority on matters of pronunciation in New Zealand.

A Wanganui writer to *The Listener* (21/7/44) defended the English of England with a verse from Alice Duer Miller's poem, *The White Cliffs*.

Oh English voices, are there any words
Those tones to tell, those cadences to teach!
As song of thrushes is to other birds
So English voices are to other speech.
Those pure round "o's" – those lovely liquid "l's"
Ring in the ears like sound of Sabbath bells.

One thing was certain, Proper Language did not include American English—what some referred to as "Yankee English"—and the NZBC radio kept broadcasting American programmes. Janus from Upper Hutt complained:

[T]he recorded accents of Americans grates on the ear of the average listener in this country. ...The sponsors of many of the flamboyant American serials would be assisting the war effort to a greater extent if they would use a little more discrimination (16/4/43).

Someone from Eli Bay wrote, "Our New Zealand speech is surely bad enough; it does us no good to hear worse American in the screen and radio—for instance, why is 'yeah' or 'yep' supposed to be better than 'yes'?" Not everyone hated American English. From Wellington, H.W. rejoiced in "the continued enrichment of English by the powerful American vernacular" (12/9/41). But another Wellingtonian responded, "H.W. rejoices in the debasement of our beautiful mother tongue by an admixture of

hideous Yankee slang" (26/9/1941). This writer knew about Proper Language. He went on:

England is our homeland; English is (or ought to be) our mother tongue. So let us have good English programmes and let us have New Zealand announcers properly trained to correct and pleasant speech (24/11/44).

I know from the correspondence addressed to my language column in *The Press* that some people still feel uneasy about any American influence in the language.

Judging from the correspondence to *The Listener*, Proper English was also the English of men. There was a lively debate in 1943 about whether women's voices should be heard on the airwaves. The general opinion in the 1940s was that they shouldn't and this was because there was a problem with women's voices. One piece was illustrated by Russell Clark. He showed a woman standing in front of a microphone surrounded by people pointing their fingers at her and laughing (31/12/42). Women's voices were said to be unsuitable. One man wrote, "Most women tend to produce a flat impersonal feeling on air, a lack of vocal variety." Another complained, "Nearly all women let their maternal instincts creep into their voices" (5/2/43). They also said that women broadcasters might offend people from other countries, especially from "certain Asian communities.... News or commentaries given in a female voice would be objectionable to these communities, but a male voice is acceptable everywhere" (5/2/43). A Presbyterian minister joined the debate: "I find it seldom that a woman speaker is as impressive as a man, and I do feel that women are more inclined to listen to men than men are inclined to listen to women" (5/2/43). Someone from commercial broadcasting said that there were always many objections if they "put a woman on for announcing," but this didn't apply to "talks on domestic subjects, cooking, children's care and so on which are without doubt best done by women" (5/2/43).

A topic where the issues of gender and social class intersect is found in correspondence on the use of the words "lady" and "woman." This was set off in December 1942 by someone from Auckland who signed herself simply as "A Woman." She stated that she was a woman worker and she objected to the title of a series of radio programmes, "For my Lady." She said that this smacked too much of lavender (or moth balls) and old lace. "What's wrong," she wrote, "with 'For the Women', 'About Women' or 'For the Housewife?' (18/12/1942). Answers to this letter arrived quickly. "Pakeha" from Rotorua wrote, "Let us not lose what are surely two of the most beautiful words in the English language: 'lady' and 'gentleman'." According to this writer, these terms do not apply to people who rely on money, property and fine clothes, but to people "who display the virtues that come under the heading of 'good breeding'—gentleness, courtesy, consideration for others"

(8/1/43). From Hataitai someone signed "One of them" wrote that we should "instruct our girls a little more in the decorum that befits a lady" (8/1/43).

Another characteristic of Proper Language is that it is always formal. Slang doesn't belong there. And slang was a popular subject for the letter writers. As you can imagine, during the war there was an interest in army slang—*buckshee* and *cooties*—and the new term for a private soldier, a *rookie*, a word which they said came from American films (15/3/40). Les Hobbs, father of the M.P. Marian Hobbs, wrote about slang in the forces:

There is the most common phrase of all. It is, "You've **had** it." You go down to the YMCA late for free supper on Sunday night. You rush in anxiously and say, "What about supper?" You're told, "You've **had** it." It means emphatically that supper is finished, and not only have you not had it, but you're not going to get it (14/1/44).

Sidney Baker, a New Zealander who wrote books about language, gave three talks on slang in 1940 which were published in *The Listener* (16/8/40). He had some interesting comments to make about those words ending in "i" like *kindy*, *cardy*, *possie*, *vegies*. Baker suggested that in slang in England the -ie suffix was used almost exclusively as a diminutive or an endearment: *duckie*, *sweetie*. But in Australia and New Zealand he could name ten or twelve terms where the addition of the suffix added the meaning, "a good or tall story, or a shrewd trick." Among them are: *fastie*, *shrewdie*, *smartie*, *swiftie*, *roughie* and *goodie*. The -o suffix on *goodo*, and *righto*, he said wouldn't find favour with purists. *Whacko* was a joyous exclamation, *scrappo* was a fight, *arvo*, afternoon and *evo*, evening. *Compo* was worker's compensation. Baker gave the following examples as authentic Australian and New Zealand contributions to the language: "*dag*, *rubydazzler*, *hangashun*, *pearler*, *stunner*, *beaut*, *snorter*, *ripsnorter*, *bosker*, *corker*, *snitcher*, *snifter*, *trimmer*, *jake*, *jakealoo*, *dinky*, *dinkiedie*, *wonky* and *batty*." He wrote that we should pay "an ungrudging tribute to the youngsters who can find such wholehearted enthusiasm for their own language."

Sidney Baker's efforts were not received with equal enthusiasm. A resident of Kelburn wrote to say that that he had listened to Mr Baker's talks and the experience was not edifying:

I am left wondering why anyone should spend so much time, energy and skill in an effort to preserve and classify a host of misbegotten verbal monstrosities that in a saner world would have been strangled at birth. Why should useful and necessary words such as *radio*, *Anzac*, *stockyard*, *candy* and *swagman* be thrust into the same category as abominations as *snorter*, *snitcher*, *wonky*, *beaut* and *stagger-soup*? (10/9/40).

I think it goes without saying that the model of Proper Language has only polite words. Someone from Milford counted five swear words in two plays on a commercial station. One play was on at 8 pm, and “even at that late hour some children might be still up” (21/7/45). Someone from Sumner in Christchurch agreed. This writer’s son was 12 and, we were told, “hangs over the radio breathlessly listening to serials”. “To please him,” she said, “I sometimes listen too.” The language was heavily loaded with words like “flaming, perishing and ruddy.” She went on:

It’s bad enough to have to put up with this kind of thing in tram and bus where men no longer seem to care if women listen to their hateful conversation—but to have it broadcast over the air, and to listen with embarrassment with one’s children, is even worse (5/10/1945).

There are some words which are banned in Proper Language. A number of writers complained about the use of the word “got”. One had even heard a university professor say, “You’ve got to fill in a card” (2/6/44). An Otago writer insisted that when she attended school the word “got” simply didn’t exist (21/7/44).

Some of the radio listeners were counters. When they heard a word they disliked, they began counting. A ZB announcer, according to one writer, used the word “definitely” eleven times in five minutes (10/11/39). (I think someone should try counting the times politicians today say, “The reality is...”.)

In the first ten years of its publication there were two subjects not related to Proper Language which appeared frequently in the Listener. One was the subject of the Maori language. Letters about Maori appeared right from the very beginning. One of the concerns was that Maori was being badly mispronounced by Pakeha, and something should be done about this. In July 1939 an announcement about a radio talk by Professor Arnold Wall was headed, “We murder Maori” and stated, “the European murders most of the Maori words he uses daily” (*The Listener* 7/7/39).

Sidney Baker joined the discussion:

The Maori language, *per se*, appeals to us as a graceful, charming speech in which few harshnesses appear. But we have only to listen to Maori vowels as spoken by Pakeha to realise how they can be mutilated practically beyond recognition, with a deftness that seems almost deliberate. Paikok for Paekakarika, or worse still Paekakareek; Wokker for Whakarewarewa, and Waimack for Waimakariri (16/8/40).

Several Maori writers wrote in with helpful guides to Maori pronunciation. One man wrote about the banning of Maori conversation in the native schools:

Instead of encouraging our Maori boys and girls to grow up to be bilingual, our authorities seem to be determined to stamp out that language of “Nga tamariki.” And how well the authorities have succeeded is beyond question. There are today hundreds of Maori children who are unable to speak or understand the language of their fathers. In fact they are ashamed to use it—truly a deplorable state of affairs. Maori parents are by no means wholly blameless. They are often careless or indifferent as to whether their children talk Maori properly, and indeed often discourage the use of the language in their homes. It is incumbent on us then as citizens, to do our best to revive a language which is rapidly dying out (7/2/41).

As you might expect, other writers responded by saying that this was rubbish. The Maori language shouldn't be taught in the schools for Natives because the purpose of these schools was to teach children English. Some, on the other hand, wanted to see Maori taught in all New Zealand primary schools. But they didn't want children to learn the Maori language—they just wanted “vowel sounds, consonants and word-building” so that all New Zealand children could be able to read, write and pronounce place-names correctly (15/10/43).

There was a widely held view that Maori was an exceptionally beautiful language – more beautiful than English. And Maori had something which English lacked—it had pure vowels. And these pure vowels were used by Maori speaking English. Dr Crompton of Havelock North asked why was it that “nearly all Maoris speak better and more melodious English than their Pakeha fellow-countrymen?” (4/8/44). Thomas Todd of Gisborne believed that, “The articulation of old Maoris was perfect. Unfortunately this has been corrupted by their mixing with the slovenly inaccurate Pakeha” (6/10/44). One Avondale writer wanted Maori to be compulsory in primary schools—not for its own protection, but for the maintenance of pure English by Pakehas. He wrote:

Having given the subject some thought, I come to the conclusion that only by the practice of the Maori vowel sounds can we be saved from the twang which is fast becoming characteristic of New Zealand speech (5/11/43).

A mother from Hawkes Bay thought the climate had something to do with pure vowels.

Climatic conditions of the Dominion are said to be conducive to the production of beautiful voices. We have the beautiful Maori voices as an example—with the beautiful English spoken by the well educated Maori (17/11/44).

There were also letters which are a reminder of how far we have come, like this one from Bishop Bennett, Anglican Bishop of Aotearoa, asking the authorities very politely: "Would it be possible to allot more time for the Maori broadcast? Twenty minutes a week only, for the world news and home news as well, is too little." He also asked if there could be a summary of Maori matters of general interest in English so that Pakeha people could be informed of interesting movements among the Maori people. His letter ends:

Of course there are bound to be difficulties, but I hope some big effort will be made by the authorities to meet the wishes of a very large circle of Maori listeners. Meanwhile, we of the Maori race are very grateful for what has been given to us already, and wish to assure the authorities that our Maori broadcast is very highly appreciated (28/3/47).

Bishop Bennett was very grateful for twenty minutes of Maori.

Another theme in the letters to the *Listener* is about the status of New Zealand English and the need for some kind of standard. Ian Gordon contributed to this. In 1944 he wrote an article called "The way we speak: what is standard English?" (1/9/44). By "standard English," he is referring to standard pronunciation rather than syntax. He asks, "Do New Zealanders speak standard English? The answer is 'No'. The second problem is, can we speak standard English? Here the answer is a very qualified 'Yes'." But Ian Gordon could see the problems with this. He says you would have to start with the teachers and get rid of the irregularities in their speech, and compel them to use only English vowels, and then you would have to train the students and the training college lecturers. The alternative would be to import sufficient standard English speaking teachers.

The third problem was "Do New Zealanders want to speak standard English?" Here he says he will have to leave the answer to New Zealand born speakers. Perhaps Standard English could be preserved with small groups who can be kept in a fair degree of isolation. (He doesn't suggest where.) He concedes that for the average person, reared in the equalitarian atmosphere of the Dominion, Standard English is something very difficult to achieve, because it is no longer the speech of New Zealand. He then asks rather tentatively whether it might be better to admit that there is a New Zealand modification of the standard, and using that as a basis, work for clear diction and easy fluency. He wrote:

A mere artificial imitation of Standard may result in that appalling genteel tongue that is heard on the lips of shop assistants in most English cities. The statement is the job for professors but the solution lies with the speakers themselves.

Ian Gordon's statement is conservative, at times impractical, but also moderate; he hadn't grown up in New Zealand and he accepted (a little reluctantly) the possibility of a New Zealand variety of English. .

Professor Sinclair of Canterbury University College wasn't so compromising. He wrote:

Many women teachers despair of their pupils' New Zealand accent. Few men seem to worry about it. Well at the risk of setting myself up as a snob or a pedant I am on the side of the women. I cannot easily reconcile myself to Professor Gordon's view that we should, even must, accept the peculiar New Zealand modifications of English vowel sounds. I am not objecting to a dialect, but what I ask is that our speech should be manly on the lips of our men, and womanly on the lips of our women and pleasant in the ears of all (14/3/47).

I don't want to leave the impression that everyone disliked the New Zealand accent. There were a few who came to its defence. One was J.S. Lynch of Upper Hutt. (I'd like to know more about J.S. Lynch—I've developed an affection for him.) He wrote,

Right from your first issue various well-intentioned writers have broken out with complaints of wrong pronunciation and bad English heard over the air. I suggest it is time these people realised that English is not spoken in New Zealand. The language we speak is New Zealandese, with its own idiom and pronunciation (16/6/44).

Of course this produced the expected angry responses. Dr Crompton of Havelock North said Mr Lynch's letter was in "the best bantam cock style—objecting to any attempt to correct mispronunciations. He was proud of his New Zealandese—a pretty name for a pretty dialect!" (4/8/44). J.S. Lynch wasn't giving up: "New Zealand is a nation and the language spoken (call it New Zealandese or New Zealandic or what you will) is as distinctive as Australian, American, Canadian or South African" (15/9/44).

The discussion about a standard for New Zealand English was given a focus by critics from England. There was Andrew Morrison, a speech examiner for Trinity College who gave a talk on "The New Zealand Voice" (7/11/48). He had nothing good to say about it. What were the characteristics of the New Zealand voice? Mr Morrison tells us:

... an idle tongue, a rigid jaw, atrophied labial muscles—these will account for most of the habits and mannerisms that colour New Zealand

speech. As a race you are not very good at short vowels. Your long vowels tend to be placed in the wrong part of the mouth, and the things you do to the final “y” sound “Anthonee, gloree!” Casting a quick and tactful glance at your consonants, may I observe that as a whole, New Zealand tongues are idle. The “l” sound is treacherous. Your plosives too tend to disappear without trace. And just a word about the way you manhandle the name of your country. It is not a difficult name. In itself it is a lovely chain of sounds. But is it to be New Zealand or Nu Zillnd? And if so, why?

Mr Morrison’s talk was coming to an end. He didn’t have time to cover all our faults.

I have confined myself to more obvious if less pleasant features of your speech and voices—the idleness, rigidity, and nasalisation. Whether the deviations from Standard English that these generate are to remain characteristically national noises, or whether they will ultimately disappear, depends upon how much care and attention you are going to devote to speech training in education.

Not everyone was prepared to accept Mr Morrison’s criticisms. Someone from Wellington reminded readers of another visiting expert who was charmed during her tour of the Dominion by the high level of speech of New Zealanders. She thought that it was closer to standard speech spoken by educated people in London than in any other part of the world. Who was this commentator? The actress Dame Sybil Thorndike (3/12/48).

We don’t usually know if letter writers are New Zealand born, or whether they’ve come here from Great Britain. So we can’t say that those defending New Zealand English were displaying a sense of nationalism that included the language. But there is a sense that some people were also resisting the criticisms of visiting Englishmen like Mr Morrison. There were letters during the war saying how refreshing it was to hear the New Zealand voices of our service people overseas. One wrote about the New Zealand lads with “nice speaking voices and some with Honest-to-God cow-cocky voices”... “When the show started I feared a succession of educated voices. When I heard ‘Hello Mum and dad’ I was so delighted” (10/1/41). Another made the point that the average New Zealander has such a distaste for anything approaching the “Oxford accent” that he is “immediately suspicious of the reformer” (9/5/41). One wrote that the national stations have proved conclusively that New Zealand performers, speaking our own New Zealand language, can put over programmes equal to any in the world (16/5/43).

Those people in New Zealand advocating Proper Language in the 1940s saw language as something which existed outside those who used it. It was good and pure; it avoided choice (there was always one right answer); it was written, it was formal, it was polite, it was male, and it was the language of England. And it was a matter of personal choice whether people adopted Proper Language or not. But those who didn't adopt it were said to be lazy or corrupt. Or as Andrew Morrison the visiting speech examiner would have it, "they have vices which could become vicious".

I think that there are people around today who have a similar model of language "out there". They write letters to the paper and they write to me saying that our language must be protected and preserved. For them the preservation of Proper Language is the responsibility of school teachers, and also of people speaking on the radio or the television. They are especially bothered about features of spoken English and by pronunciations that don't conform to spelling. They see language change as "sloppiness."

But I think the model of Proper English has changed since the 1940s. You won't hear people today saying that women's voices are inferior to men's or that the standard for New Zealand English speakers should be the language of educated speakers from England.

For me it was interesting to find that 70 years ago there were people writing to the paper saying that we should recognize New Zealand English as our national way of speaking and that we should accept this. There were people who saw change as inevitable, and as one wrote in 1941, there were more important things to think about than minor points of pedantry (9/5/41). In the 1940s there were people arguing passionately for the preservation of the Maori language and calling on Pakeha to make an effort to use authentic Maori pronunciations.

Going back to those old letters to *The Listener* and reading the letters that I get today has shown me very clearly that there is a great deal of interest about language among lay people. But in the past most of those who were the perceived experts on language also promoted the model of Proper Language. Frank Haden regarded any variation from his own usage as an abomination. And he was always being confronted with abominations. These language experts presented language as a minefield for the unwary; their function was to assist troubled souls who weren't sure what was right and what was wrong. Is it any wonder that people suffered from linguistic insecurity?

Linguists for years have been teaching students in university lectures about language and how language works. We've been teaching about the difference between descriptive and prescriptive rules. We've been showing that written and

spoken English are different varieties which must be described in their own terms. We've been teaching about language variation and change and we've been showing how language is an integral part of each individual person and shaped by people around them. Here in Wellington I'm staying with my daughter and I have the pleasure of watching my 16-month old grand daughter Annabel learning to talk. The language she will use isn't something "out there". It's the language she will hear the people around her using.

Perhaps too much of this description of language and discussion about its functions has just stayed inside the lecture theatres. So I am pleased that the *Dominion Post* and *The Press* have at last given linguists the chance to tell the general public about the things we've been teaching our students for years. In my newspaper columns I've been trying to explain that all language is governed by rules, but these rules are not the same as the prescriptive rules of old school grammar books. In one column I wrote about the fact that my husband and I have moved to New Brighton in Christchurch, and I can now say that I live "in Brighton" but I can also say I live "at Brighton". People can live "in Sumner" and "at Sumner". You hear both. But if I'd moved to Fendalton I could only live "in Fendalton," not "at Fendalton". I asked my readers if they could work out the rule to explain this difference. And I was swamped. People wrote things like: "I took up my pencil over the breakfast table and I tried to work it out"; "I e-mailed the question to all my family." One even sent the question to a nephew working in Bahrain. Those who responded sent in all sorts of explanations, some more sensible than others. But for me the best thing was when one person wrote, "I haven't had so much fun for ages."

And looking ahead, I hope this is how people will see language. Not a Proper Language—somewhere out there—formal, written, invariable, unchanging; to be worshipped, protected and guarded at any price; not a minefield of impossible rules for the unwary, but a subject which is full of interest, which helps us to understand ourselves and the people around us and which can be fun.

References

Wall, Arnold 1939. *New Zealand English: How it Should be Spoken*. Christchurch: Whitcombe and Tombs.