

# New Zealand English past and present: looking for the evidence

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Some years ago I attended a sociolinguistics conference in Cardiff. There were people at that conference from all over the world and they commented on the fact that there were more papers being given on New Zealand English than on any other variety of English. Janet Holmes gave the keynote address at that conference. You could say that there has been an explosion of interest in New Zealand English in the last two or three decades. Victoria University led the way with the Porirua Project. Some of us were inspired by it, and it encouraged us to begin research at our own Universities. Today I want to talk about the study of New Zealand English—looking for the evidence. But I'd be unhappy if you thought that I was dismissing the work done here at Victoria University or at other New Zealand universities. It's too important for that. Canterbury is what I know about.

I'd like to start at the beginning for all of us, with three men who were the pioneers in the study of New Zealand English. They had different methods of working—and different attitudes towards their subject. But they were there first, and their work really set the stage for what has come later.

The first was a man called Samuel McBurney. He was a Scot who was the principal of the Ladies' College in Geelong, Victoria. On the long sea journey to Australia McBurney taught himself phonetics from Melville Bell's book *Visible Speech* and A.J.

Ellis's book *Pronunciation for Singers*. When he arrived in Australia he could listen to people talking and write down what they said in an early form of phonetic transcription called Glossic (Ellis 1889: 237).

Samuel McBurney and his wife travelled around Australia and New Zealand. The ostensible reason was to promote the *tonic sol fa* singing method, but it seems that not too many people attended his concerts where he sang songs of all nations (accompanied by Mrs McBurney on the zither). His great interest was language and wherever he went he kept a notebook where he wrote down the pronunciations he heard. He sent these off to the British dialectologist Alexander Ellis, who included McBurney's information in volume 5 of his book *On Early English Pronunciation* (1889). And this is how it is available to us today.

McBurney's method of categorisation – “few”, “some”, “general”, and “many” (Ellis 1889: 237) – would raise eyebrows today, but it tells us about some vowel sounds he heard. We know that some people in Christchurch and Nelson pronounced *hand* as /he:nd/. He found several variants of the word *dance*. In Napier, Auckland and Nelson they said /da:ns/; in Wellington, Napier and Dunedin they said /dæns/. Some girls in Auckland said /dens/. McBurney said that people were pronouncing words like *city*, and *simplicity* with an /i:/ ending. He told us that people in New Zealand were saying “anythink”.

Because of McBurney's interest, we have a picture of pronunciation in Australia and New Zealand in 1887. In Christchurch he wrote to the *Christchurch Press* where he said that it was inexplicable “why there should be a general tendency as there was undoubtedly in Australia to a Cockney pronunciation” (5/10/87). He concluded that there was another type of English in New Zealand but it was difficult to define. This

comment came well before members of the general public had become aware of a New Zealand accent. The data in his tables show a high degree of variability in the towns he visited. His writings on New Zealand English have been the main source of information on 19<sup>th</sup> century New Zealand English.

My second New Zealand English pioneer was Professor Arnold Wall—though I think he would have rejected such a description, because he was very much opposed to the idea of developing what he called “a new dialect of English for this land.” Some of you might remember Arnold Wall’s broadcast talks entitled *The Queen’s English*. We were encouraged to listen to them when I was at school. He answered listeners’ questions. He was very sure of his information and he didn’t suffer fools who sent in questions which he thought were shallow or silly. Maybe part of the pleasure of listening to him was to hear these public put-downs.

Arnold Wall was an Englishman who arrived in New Zealand in 1899 to be the Professor of English at Canterbury College. He became the public face of English language study in New Zealand. He wrote newspaper columns and gave broadcast talks that were converted into books: *The Mother Tongue in New Zealand* (1936), *The Queen’s English* (1958), and *The Jeweller’s Window* (1964).

I read Arnold Wall’s autobiography for this lecture. It was called *Long and Happy* (1965). I found out that he was born in what was then Ceylon and sent to England at the age of one. He didn’t see his mother again until he was 22. He had three attempts at the matriculation examination and then worked as a schoolteacher and at a college which “crammed” students for public examinations. While doing this he also studied for a B.A. at London University; and later while working for a University Correspondence College he achieved a two year degree from Cambridge. With these

qualifications he was appointed to be Professor of English at Canterbury College in New Zealand.

From an early age, Arnold Wall had a great interest in language. When he was teaching at a boarding school on a salary of £30 a year, he spent £3 7/- on an Icelandic dictionary, a subject not on the university curriculum but, as he said, "learnt by me for the sheer love of it." He taught himself Icelandic, Danish and Gothic and what he describes as "similar useless languages" which had nothing to do with the subjects he was studying for his University exams.

In New Zealand, Arnold Wall achieved a reputation as a botanist and a mountain climber, and some people admired his poetry. But his fame came from his work on language after his retirement from the University in 1931 until his death in 1966. His book, *New Zealand English: How it should be spoken* (1939), has the subtitle, "A guide to the correct pronunciation of English with special reference to New Zealand conditions and problems." And what is the correct pronunciation in New Zealand? He tells us in his preface that it is "that spoken by the best speakers in the Old Land." On the other hand, he said he didn't want to criticise New Zealand speech unkindly, because of his young students "whose speech left much to be desired, yet died gloriously at Gallipoli" (Wall 1939: author's preface).

But in spite of calling them "essential faults" or "common errors," Wall's lists of common pronunciations do give us a useful picture of New Zealand English in the 1920s and 1930s. From him we know that people were pronouncing "milk" and "silk" as "mulk" and "sulk"; "result" was "resolt." People write to me today saying they've recently noticed "rain in the elps" or "in Wallington." Arnold Wall was writing about this in the 1930s.

He commented on the centralisation of the KIT vowel in unstressed syllables: “Alice” becomes “Alus”; “it” appears as “ut” – “Is it?” becomes “is ut”. “Philip” is “Philup or even Phulup” – hinting at a change in the stressed vowel as well (Wall 1939:16). This pronunciation he said was the result of original sin: “well, it is sheer laziness, and I make bold to call it a sin in the everyday, not the biblical sense.”

Wall also commented on the /i:/ ending on words like *dirty*, *city* etc. (which McBurney had also noted): “The peculiar ee,” Wall wrote, “is almost universal, is indeed very distressing, and seems likely to resist all attempts to eradicate it” (1936:136). Arnold Wall had a good ear, and even if you don’t agree with his attitudes towards New Zealand English I think people studying this subject today should always check to see what he wrote.

The third pioneer of New Zealand English was the one who had the greatest influence on me personally. He was my university teacher at Canterbury: George Turner, or G.W. Turner. He taught the English language paper in English 1 in 1959 when I was a first year student. In a strange way my own university career followed George’s. When I was a student at University College London in 1964 I found that George had been there the year before on sabbatical leave, and had achieved a Diploma in English Linguistic Studies and the Certificate in Phonetics. People at University College spoke of him with respect and they all commented on the way George pronounced his surname with a closely rounded NURSE vowel. When I returned to New Zealand at the end of 1966 I found that George had accepted a position at the University of Adelaide and there was great anxiety at Canterbury as they had no one to teach his classes. So that’s how I filled George Turner’s position and became the stage one teacher of English language in 1967.

I remember George Turner as a careful scholarly lecturer. He didn't attract adoring young women in the front seats in the way Professor John Garrett did, but his lectures introduced me to the study of the English language. At the end of the course he gave two lectures on New Zealand English, and it was a revelation. I'd been to a private girls' school where we had elocution lessons and were taught that the way we spoke was somehow defective. Here was a university lecturer saying that New Zealand English was a legitimate variety of English.

Turner's book *The English Language in Australia and New Zealand* was published by Longmans in 1966 and it marks a major point in the study of New Zealand English. Today it is easy to be critical of this book because Turner saw Australian and New Zealand English as one variety – Australasian – with two major subdivisions. But his observations are carefully recorded. In later years, when I was in correspondence with him, I found that he'd always carried a notebook around with him and he could tell you exactly when he first heard a certain word or pronunciation in New Zealand.

My colleagues at the University of Canterbury have recently written an interesting paper on the diphthongisation of the FLEECE vowel in modern New Zealand English (Maclagan & Hay 2007). But Turner describes a similar diphthongisation much earlier and it was certainly a feature of my father's speech, and he was born in South Westland in 1901. The two developments might not be connected, but without Turner's information it would be easy to overlook the earlier occurrence which, in my view, should be acknowledged. You could say his conclusions weren't based on research as we think of it today, but they were nevertheless supported by his own detailed and numerous observations, which of course was all researchers had at that

time. I think anyone studying New Zealand English should read the works of these pioneers: McBurney, Wall and Turner.

A question which students have asked since I began teaching at the University of Canterbury was, “Where did our accent come from—why do we speak the way we do?” They must have asked George Turner too. And he said this was impossible to know. He thought it was easier to study Old Norse, Old English and Old High German than it was to find the origins of Australian English (Turner 1960). And no doubt he would have said the just same about the origins of New Zealand English. And the reason for this was of course the absence of evidence. There were no tape recorders around in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and people wrote in standardised spelling which concealed their pronunciation. For a while I accepted George Turner’s answer and that’s what I told my students.

But then I thought this was rather pessimistic. I had observed the continuing supply of letters to newspapers about language—the letters I talked about in my first lecture—and it occurred to me that there could be similar letters and comments about pronunciation in the early years of settlement in New Zealand. At that time I was on a committee of the National Library and I made monthly visits to Wellington so I could also spend time in the Alexander Turnbull Library. And there was plenty of material. There were letters and articles in the *Educational Gazette* and of course letters to the editors of newspapers. And then there are the reports of New Zealand school inspectors, which began in 1880 and which are a wonderful source of social comment. Some of the inspectors used their reports to write about the language of the children (and sometimes the teachers) they were inspecting.

My main interest was to find references to pronunciation. For those of you who are not familiar with this research I'll summarize my findings. The comments about pronunciation fall into two categories: before 1900 and after 1900. Until about 1900 there were two things that bothered people. School inspectors especially were deeply concerned about them. These were dropping of "h" and the use of -in endings instead of -ing.

The West Coast Inspector John Smith complained in 1880:

It is a common experience to find children repeating such lines as "O 'appy, 'appy 'ummin'-bird," varied by "O wappy yappy yummin'-bird." Such defects are naturally more marked in the few cases where the teachers themselves have acquired a habit of incorrect pronunciation. (AJHR H 11 1880: 4)

The Southland inspector, John Gammell, in 1883 wrote, "The initial h too is cruelly neglected in many quarters" (AJHR E-13 1883: 24).

After about 1900 those complaints disappeared. And in the case of h-dropping, it seems that they disappeared because the inspectors weren't hearing it. In 1913 William S. Austin, Inspector for Grey wrote, "The misplacing of the aspirate is hardly ever met with" (AJHR E2 1913 App. C: xxxvii).

After 1900 there was something new to talk about. From this time onwards, the notion of a newly formed New Zealand accent had become part of people's consciousness. In 1913 the Wanganui inspectors urged teachers to do their best to prevent this new development among children:



We need to be watchful lest the young people of the Dominion may be swept into a flood of faulty and impure vocalization, and the pristine purity of the sounds of the English tongue be for ever lost (*AJHR* E2 1913 App. C x).

They called it “the colonial twang” and once it was pointed out, then it seemed that everyone noticed it and started talking about it. By the 1920s there was a loud call for the government to do something about it. What was this colonial twang? What were the features that troubled people so much? At the top of the list was “heouse” or the diphthong in “How now brown cow.” Rudyard Kipling noticed this when he visited New Zealand in 1891. He wrote a story for the *Auckland Herald* called “One Lady at Wairakei,” in which he referred to “a red-faced raddled woman who talks about ‘ke-ows’ [cows]” (Kipling 1892: 27). Next in line was the diphthong in “nine” or “fine”, which they said was pronounced “noine” or “foine”. Some years later, complaints were heard about the pronunciation of “Day’s Bay” as “Dy’s By,” and later some said “go” had become “gaow”. A further source of complaint was the unstressed vowel— quite a few comments about “system” pronounced as “systum,” “darkness” as “darknuss”, and “silence” as “silunce”.

This was probably as far as I could have gone with written material. It gives us an idea of when the New Zealand accent was first noticed—around 1900; what people thought about it—they hated it; and what features especially bothered people—the diphthongs in “Now I say go”. But I was lucky, because I later found that there actually were recordings of some old New Zealanders. They weren’t made in the 19<sup>th</sup> century but they were the next best thing: recordings of old New Zealanders collected in the 1940s by the Mobile Disc Recording Unit of the National

Broadcasting Service. These had been kept in the Radio New Zealand Sound Archives in Timaru, and in 1989 we were given a research grant to acquire a copy of the whole archive at the University of Canterbury.

These recordings were collected between 1946 and 1948, a time when broadcasting was new and people were beginning to complain that everything seemed to be centred on Wellington. So it was decided to use recording equipment left over from the war and take this around country areas of New Zealand in a large van which became known as the Mobile Unit. The idea at first was to collect both musical items and pioneer reminiscences from the provinces. The music wasn't always very successful—I've heard some of those small town brass bands and the local women singing "Oh for the wings of a dove" — and wisely they cut down on the musical recordings. But the interviews with old people were very popular when played back over the wireless. So increasingly that is what they collected.

You could say that these were the first outdoor broadcasts made in New Zealand. The mobile unit van held the recording machine. A long cable with a microphone could be carried into buildings or out to paddocks. Some recordings were made in people's homes and you can hear the cat meow, the clock chime and the clink of tea cups (See Gordon et al 2004: 3–5). The recordings were made on 12-inch discs on an aluminium base, and because they were soft, playing back was discouraged. So those old people who were being recorded didn't hear their own voices unless their recording was played over the radio.

This archive of recordings was unusual in several ways. One is that the people who were recorded weren't chosen for their social status—they were not clergy, lawyers, businessmen or even schoolteachers. They were more likely to be shopkeepers,

agricultural labourers, road menders, or housewives. It is unusual to have early recordings of this social group. Those people recorded were chosen because of their local knowledge and their ability to tell good stories. The collection is also unusual in that it includes women. Dialect surveys carried out at this time almost always interviewed men only. The famous Survey of English Dialects based at University of Leeds used a typical informant they called NORM: non-mobile, older, rural male. In the New Zealand Mobile Unit archive there were more men recorded than women, but there are women and some of the most interesting recordings are of the women.

What access to these recordings gave us was actual data on early New Zealand English. We could now listen to what old New Zealanders sounded like—and I'm talking about some people born as early as the 1850s and 1860s. This gave us the possibility of having a recorded history of spoken English in New Zealand from the beginning of the European settlement up to the present day.

The research involved many hours of work getting this material into a state whereby it could be used for academic research. It wasn't always easy to locate whole interviews, as the recording of single speaker might be spread over several discs. (The discs were expensive so every bit of space had to be used.) The recordings had to be orthographically transcribed; the speakers had to be identified and that's quite tricky with group discussions. And we had to research their family histories before any serious analysis could be done (See Lewis 1996). This is invisible work. It doesn't appear on anyone's PBRF<sup>1</sup> record but it was essential if the data was going to be useful, and also if it would be used in the future.

From this research we learnt that the New Zealand accent must have been formed in a matter of about 20–30 years. The very oldest speakers, people born in New

Zealand in the 1850s, don't sound like New Zealanders. They sound Scottish, for example, or have English dialects. They probably sounded very much like their parents. Hannah Cross, born in Anderson's Bay in Dunedin in 1851, sounds West Highland Scots. You would have no idea she was born in New Zealand.

Some years later we found some strange mixtures. For example in "over there was a house" they might use Scottish vowels for "over" and "there" and the New Zealand diphthong shifted vowel for "house": [ɪ :v ↔ Δ□:p ω ↔ ζ ↔ ηEYσ].

Then there are speakers born 20 years later who do not sound like their parents but instead sound quite like people from other parts of New Zealand. And we would say that they have early New Zealand accents. Mrs Anne Hamilton (born in Arrowtown in Otago in 1877) and Miss Mary Anne Turnbull (born in Morrinsville in the Waikato in 1875) are a great example of this development. When you listen to their recordings, you wouldn't know that Miss Turnbull's parents both came from Scotland. She doesn't sound Scottish. And Mrs Hamilton tells us that her parents came from Ireland. But we wouldn't have known this if she hadn't told us. They both sound like old New Zealanders that I heard when I was a child.

When we were doing this research we made some discoveries along the way. The most unexpected was the fact that there were speakers in earlier times from different places in New Zealand who pronounced their 'r's' at the end of a word or before a consonant—the pronunciation we associate only with Southland today. They were what we call "rhotic" and they were rhotic to a greater or lesser degree.

We, and many others also, had always believed that the Southland variety of New Zealand English where the 'r' is pronounced was because of the Scottish settlement there. But now we found that speakers in other parts of New Zealand had the same

pronunciation of 'r' to some degree. This suggests that speakers in Southland weren't unique—but perhaps because of the Scottish settlement they have retained a feature that was later lost in the rest of the country. It is true that some speakers in the North Island were only vestigially rhotic but the finding was exciting because it went against the general understanding that apart from Southland and parts of Otago, New Zealand English had always been non-rhotic.

One of the things I was interested in was to see if some of the changes that are taking place in New Zealand English today could also be found in the old recordings. There are features of present-day New Zealand English that we think of as rather more recent: the “grown/growen” variants first noted in the 1930s, the high rising terminal contour, and the vowel in “fush and chups” —first commented on in *The Listener* in 1966 by people complaining about Alison Holst's pronunciation of “fish” (3/9/66). I found that there were indeed examples of these in the speech of some of those old speakers born in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; not a large number of examples—sometimes there would be only one or two instances from a particular speaker—but they are there.

Peter Trudgill, the British sociolinguist, carried out research into the speech of people in Norwich in England in 1968. At that time he heard an unusual pronunciation of 'r' that he thought was just an oddity. When he came back in 1983 for a follow-up study he found his odd 'r' pronunciation had become widespread (Trudgill 1988). I'm sure the early manifestations in the Mobile Unit recordings of features that are common today would have been also overlooked as oddities in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

When we analysed the recordings in the Mobile Unit archive we found that there were patterns of variation not described in sociolinguistic textbooks. For example,

the same speaker in the same conversation might say /dɑːns/ and then in the next sentence say /dæns/. Sometimes they would pronounce the ‘r’, sometimes not. In other words, individual speakers were using variants of the same variable in ways that couldn’t be explained by style shifting, or the influence of social factors such as age, sex and socio-economic class. We concluded that this intra-speaker variability was a natural and integral part of the process of change and should be taken as a clear signal that change of some sort is in progress. (I recognise this in my own speech today with the pronunciation of “l” which is sometimes vocalised.)

We found that social factors could hasten or impede the new dialect formation. Take Arrowtown for example. Arrowtown began as a “canvas town”, a goldmining town, and when the miners moved on, those who stayed on—about 200 of them—included people from England, Scotland, Ireland and Australia in equal numbers, with some also from China.

It seems that the New Zealand accent appeared first in towns with such mixed populations. Almost all of our speakers from Arrowtown—like Mrs Hamilton —are the ones with the early New Zealand accents. But in other places, there are people born at the same time as Mrs Hamilton who don’t have New Zealand accents. Take the Otago towns of Milton and Kaitangata, for example. These places were mainly settled by people from Scotland. Traces of a Scottish accent persisted in speakers from these towns for two or three generations. But the New Zealand accent got there in the end. You don’t hear people speaking with Scottish accents in Milton and Kaitangata today. The make-up of the settlements could speed up or slow down the development of a New Zealand accent, but it couldn’t stop it in the end. We also found that the New Zealand accent appeared first in the speech of women, and in the speech of people lower down on the social class ladder.

These old recordings are like gold. And they've shown us that the New Zealand accent was around well before 1900. It's just that people didn't recognise it until about 1900. And this has also been a useful finding. The sociolinguist William Labov, when he was in New Zealand, said that once people begin to notice a sound change, you can be pretty certain that it has been around for many years and is well entrenched. Our recordings tell us just that; we know the New Zealand accent was around in the 1870s and 1880s, but it took about 20 to 30 years before people started to notice it—and complain about it.

Our analysis of these recordings of the old New Zealanders meant that we could now compare the results with the information from the written records: those school inspectors' reports and letters to the editor. How accurate were the complaining writers? The answer seems to be that they were accurate.

I think one of the problems with people who write letters to the paper about language is that many are often passionate and intemperate and so it's tempting to say that some of them are also stupid. However, the results of the analyses of spoken data show very clearly that the emerging patterns of speech correspond well with the things people were saying in their letters and reports. It is a good lesson to me not to dismiss grumpy letter writers out of hand.

Research into the old speakers in the Mobile Unit archive kept us very busy at the University of Canterbury but we didn't neglect the changes taking place in spoken New Zealand English today. We've had a lot of luck. We were lucky to find the Mobile Unit recordings. We have also been lucky that we are living at a time when New Zealand English has been undergoing a fairly dramatic sound change. When I

began teaching in 1967 a few students said they couldn't tell the difference between the vowel in "ear" and the vowel in "air." I thought this was odd as I make a clear difference in my own speech. But the next year more students told me the same thing. So we realised that there was a merger taking place—what is called the EAR/AIR or NEAR/SQUARE merger. And people have been studying this here at Victoria<sup>2</sup> as well.

In 1983 at Canterbury, Margaret Maclagan and I set up a small research project into the EAR/AIR merger using 14 year-old pupils in four Christchurch schools: Linwood High School, Riccarton High School, Christ's College and St Margaret's College. It ended up as a longitudinal study that we continued for 15 years (See Gordon & Maclagan 2001). Over the period of this research project we were able to present strong evidence that the diphthongs in EAR and AIR have merged in New Zealand English. Today you can expect to hear that people "sheer" sheep and "sheer" their lunch with their friends, and "Ear New Zealand" is a national treasure. The sound change is well represented in the names of Christchurch hair salons. You need the sound change to make sense of *The Look Hair Studio*, *Hair we R*, and *Why Not Hair*. I'm still surprised when people write to me at *The Press* saying that they have recently noticed this change; it has been around for a long time—another example of changes occurring long before people notice them.

This research project taught us that language change is complex and at times can seem unpredictable. For example, when we began our study we found that in 1983 the EAR/AIR merger was greatest at Linwood High School, a low decile secondary school, with 34% of the subjects making the merger. But five years later, when we went back to that school, only 11% made the merger. As with our work on the origins of New Zealand English, we found that the process of the change wasn't



always straightforward and it didn't always go the way we expected. I had an example at my own dinner table when my son—then about 9—was recounting a story about a medieval knight who had broken his spear and had to go back to the castle, John said, “to get his ‘spear spear’.” My 15 year old niece said, “That’s not how you say it.” I asked her how she would say it and she replied, “He went back to get his ‘spare spare’.” Today the merger is moving inevitably towards my son’s “spear spear”.

Other research at Canterbury has been done on recordings of present-day New Zealand English. In 1994 we began teaching a stage three class on New Zealand English. It had about 30 students each year. As part of their class work the students had to collect recordings for a balanced sample: men and women, older and younger, lower class and middle class (See Maclagan & Gordon 1999). In every year since then, students have added more recordings to this collection, which we’ve called the Canterbury Corpus. There are now over 300 speakers providing samples of at least half an hour of casual conversation as well as readings of a prepared word-list. This has given us a good source of data to look at the current state of New Zealand English.

Some of these features we are looking at have been around for some time, like “grown/ growen”, and the vocalisation of “l”, where people use a vowel instead of the consonant in words like “feel”, “children”, “milk”, “railway”. We have early letters of complaint about this. We are now hearing it in the name “William”, or “will you”.

But there are also changes that people aren’t commenting on—well, not yet. At present there are two sounds changes going on in New Zealand English that are

clearly represented in the Canterbury Corpus but no one is writing letters to the paper about them. One is the loss of “th”, or what we call “th-fronting”. More and more people are saying “wif” for “with” or “muvver” for “mother,” “fing” for “thing”. I would predict that in 50 years—shall I be safe and say 100 years?—New Zealanders won’t use “th”. But this change is still below the level of consciousness. It will be interesting to see when the complaints begin.

Another sound change is the affrication of the consonants “dr” or “tr,” “st” or “str”. A student told me that her mother pronounced the word “tree” but she herself said “chree”. If you want to hear a sound change in its purest form listen to the way John Key says “str” in “Australia” or “strong” (/Str/). I predict this is what New Zealand English will sound like in the future but no one is commenting on it yet.

I retired in 2004 and was replaced by Jen Hay (a Victoria graduate). She has taken the research much further. She and others have been working on techniques for connecting the sound files to the orthographic transcriptions. She has employed a group of enthusiastic students to time-align the written transcriptions. What this means is that if I want to listen to a spoken utterance of one of our speakers I can now click on a passage in the written transcription and hear the voice saying it at the same time. Because the written transcription can be displayed at the same time as the sounds are played, it is much easier to carry out phonetic and phonological analysis. The data is now also being used also to search for grammatical features. The possibilities are amazing.

Since I retired I’ve observed some of those carrying out research using our data collections. And I’ve found the technology useful myself. A letter writer to *The Press* was complaining about the demise of the word “fewer” in New Zealand English.

Every supermarket in Christchurch invites people with 12 items “or less” to join a designated queue. When I was responding to this letter I was able to go to the database and pull out every example in the Canterbury Corpus of “less” and “fewer” used by speakers born between the 1930s and 1980s. In 150 hours of recorded conversation there were only two examples of “fewer” and over a hundred of “less”. Of course some of the latter were in the phrases “more or less” or used with non-countable items, but there were many with countable nouns: “less hours”, “less picnics”, “less boys”, and so on. So I could write my newspaper column on this topic with evidence from our database. If there are only two examples of “fewer” in 150 hours of conversation, and so many more instances of “less”, it is no wonder that children and others aren’t using “fewer” — they’re just not hearing it. But think how long it would take if I had to find each example on 150 hours of tape-recording.

The people who went out with the recording devices with the Mobile Unit were using a new technology. They could never have guessed how useful these recordings would be for people doing research into the New Zealand accent 60 years later. When I began my research into New Zealand English I used a reel-to-reel tape-recorder. And I wrote up results on a typewriter. And I thought I was so much more advanced than George Turner with his notebook.

Today the possibilities for research have gone beyond my imagination. I think we will be able to learn more about the human brain and its ability to perceive and understand language. It might even help us to understand the “why” of language change. In a way my dream of providing good data for research into New Zealand English has come true, and it is being taken far further than I ever thought possible. Postgraduate students are coming to Canterbury from overseas to work on the New Zealand English data. The word is out.

I do, however, have a concern about people extracting the specific data they want and studying it and presenting it (as they now can) without ever actually listening to those old people and hearing their stories. For me, language research is more than just analysing, counting, and doing statistics. For me the research is about the English used by my grandmother born in North Canterbury in 1862, my grandfather born in Ross in South Westland in 1870; it's about the language of my parents, my school friends, my children and now my grandchildren.

When we listen to our recordings we are listening to more than sequences of vowels and consonants. We're listening to human beings—to New Zealand English speakers— and isn't that what the study of New Zealand English in the past and in the present is all about?

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<sup>1</sup> Performance Based Research Fund [Ed].

<sup>2</sup> Victoria University of Wellington, where the lectures were delivered [Ed].