

FEATURES

Lending an heir to some economical speech

WE FIND a lot of complaints about the increasing New Zealand habit of making pairs of words such as "sheer" and "share" sound the same. People who happen to say something like "Three chairs for our club president" within cooee of a radio or television microphone are likely to find themselves lambasted in the media for their "error", as are people who announce that they will "sit in an arm-cheer".

Why should this cause so many problems? The usual answer is that by making the two words sound the same, people are "being lazy". There is something to be said for this point of view, though the term "lazy" carries with it a very pejorative view of what is



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WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

happening. We might prefer to say that such speakers are being "economical". That is, they are making no more effort than is required by the communicative situation. "Economical", though, sounds much less judgmental than "lazy". There are a number of points to make about

such economy or laziness, though.

The first is that by the time it comes to the notice of the complaining public, it is almost certainly too late to do anything about it. There are now so many young (and even not-so-young) New Zealanders who quite genuinely cannot hear whether someone is saying "sheer" or "share", that there is little chance of getting them to make the old distinction. If you want to stop a change, you have to catch it much earlier.

The second point is that though we may know of occasional messages that have come out wrong, on the whole we do not misunderstand what the sheer-sounds-like-share people are trying to say. When Wellington Mayor Kerry Prendergast, at a ceremony for new

migrants being granted New Zealand citizenship, asks them to swear allegiance "to the Queen and all her ears" (she means, of course, "heirs") some of her audience may wonder what on earth she is talking about, but the chances of them believing seriously that she means "ears" must be small. The club president, in our opening example, is unlikely to get three chairs, but very likely to get three cheers.

The Nelson pub that put up a notice asking patrons to "beer with us" during alterations, was clearly making a joke. Of course, there are cases where genuine misunderstanding can arise, but they are relatively rare. Is something really important or rarely important? Is that a rear photograph of Edith Piaf or a rare photograph of her?

Such cases do not arise often.

Finally, consider the logic of the argument. If the real problem with "sheer" and "share" is that we are losing distinctions, we ought to be delighted when we gain new distinctions. This happens too. People for whom "groan" and "grown", "throne" and "thrown" do not sound alike, must have an advantage over the rest of us, because we can never be in doubt as to which of these words they have said. Surely we cannot maintain the idea that they are being lazy when they insert an extra sound into the middle of a word?

But such unfortunates also find themselves being told off, by precisely the same people who object to "sheer" and "share" sounding alike. So whether we

lose distinctions or not is just a smoke-screen, hiding the real basis for our judgments in such cases.

The concealed argument must be that we are not talking in just the same way as a few people in England used to talk 50 years ago. No, it is true; we do not. Neither do the people in England (though the changes that have affected their speech are not the same ones as those that have affected New Zealanders' speech). What we need to ask is, do we really want to sound like out-moded Poms? You would be scorned in the classroom, in the changing rooms or in the cafe if, as a Kiwi, you spoke like that.

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