

# When warriors become worriers

**A**LAN DUFF used an effective play on words in calling his 1999 book for children *Duffy's Once Were Worriers*, building on the success of his earlier *Once Were Warriors*. Perhaps this word play works better in New Zealand than elsewhere, given a sound change that appears to be emerging.

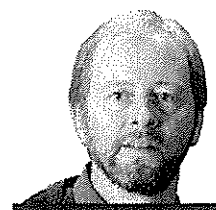
In an e-mail, Celia van Vliet wrote of "an increasing trend to change the pronunciation of the letter 'o'". It is not any "o" that she is concerned about, but specifically the "o" in "worry", which used to rhyme with "flurry" but increasingly is now heard with the vowel in "lorry". I too have noticed "worriers" sounding more like "warriors".

In addition, "warriors" is sometimes pronounced as "worriers", though this seems to be less common. Celia suggests that the latter may be an accurate description of the league team, though it is probably not the intended one. Sean Plunket recently stumbled over this on National Radio (when talking along the lines of how "the Warriors must now be worried").

Several factors might be at play here. For one, the vowel sounds involved are quite similar. In fact, many linguists working on both New Zealand and Australian English have commented on the overlap in pronunciation of these vowels, that is, the vowels that we might expect to find in words like "jug" and "jog". And in many English dialects you will hear either the "jug" vowel or the "jog" vowel in "constable" or "Coventry".

In the case in question, spelling may also play a role, particularly for "worry" rhyming with "lorry". "Worry" is an example of what reading researchers have called a "heretic", a word that does not follow the regular spelling-to-pronunciation relationship that is found in the majority of words with the same spelling pattern. (They call this regular pattern the "consensus".)

A frequently cited heretic is "pint", which on the basis of spelling you might expect to rhyme with "hint", "lint", "flint", etc, but which heretically does not. As an aside, there are also "hero" words which have a regular spelling-pronunciation relationship, in defiance of the habits of the "gang", which have the same spelling but an irregular pronunciation. For instance, for speakers of many English varieties "spook" is something of a hero because it keeps the long "u" pronunciation normally found with "oo" spellings (as in "moon"), while the gang



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has a shorter vowel pronunciation ("look", "book", "hook", "took").

On the basis of spelling-sound correspondences in English, the most likely predicted pronunciation for the spelling pattern "-orry" would be the one we find in "lorry" and "sorry", making "worry" a heretic against this consensus.

It might at first seem that "worry" is not a heretic in the same league as "pint", because there is a much more limited group of regular words (just "lorry" and "sorry"). But we also need to consider how often speakers are exposed to the different pronunciations. The frequency with which the word "sorry" is encountered may have an impact on the strength of the connection between the spelling and pronunciation. One survey of spoken English lists "sorry" as having more than six times the frequency of "worry".

Another factor influencing the pronunciation of "worry" is the effect that a preceding "w" sound has on a vowel. One of the probable influences on the pronunciation of "women" as "woman", as noted in an earlier column, is the tendency of a "w" to make a following vowel sound like it is produced further back in the mouth.

This can result in the first vowel of "women" sounding more like the first vowel in "woman", in some English varieties. It would similarly result in a more "jog" like vowel in "worry", the vowel in "jog" being further back in the mouth than that in "jug". A similar "backing" effect often results from a following "r" sound, as in "worry".

While we are often unsure about why sound changes take place, we can sometimes take an educated guess at some of the factors behind these changes. In this case, it looks like "worriers" becoming "warriors" might be the result of a gang of effects influencing a heresy in diction.

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