

New Zealand English: Origins, Relationships, and Prospects

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1. Origins

To northern hemisphere English speakers, the New Zealand accent is virtually indistinguishable from that of its giant Australian neighbour. But differences are there, and reflect the different histories of settlement and aboriginal relations of the two antipodean nations. Unlike Australia, which was probably settled by humans over 50,000 years ago, New Zealand was the last habitable landmass in the world to be colonised. The Polynesian ancestors of the Māori¹ arrived only at about 1150-1200 AD, several centuries after Scandinavians and Inuit arrived in Iceland and Greenland. The first English-speaking settlers arrived in Aotearoa (to use New Zealand's Māori name) in 1792; they were Australian rather than British, and were sealers from the recently established penal colony at Port Jackson (now Sydney). The trickle of settlers from Australia and Britain (and Ireland and America) increased during the early 19th century, and became a flood after British and Māori chieftains signed the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi, the founding document of New Zealand. Large-scale organised settlement from both Britain and Australia began, and by mid-century the indigenous Māori were outnumbered by the incoming Pākehā (as people of European ancestry were and are called).²

All these settlers naturally brought their own accents and English varieties along with them, creating what Canterbury University researcher Elizabeth Gordon has called a "mixing bowl" (Gordon and Deverson 1998:25-26). The primary ingredient in the "salad" was Australian, itself derived from southeastern England dialects; plus considerable input from Scottish and Irish varieties, and seasoned with the prestige of RP English. However, recent research by Laurie Bauer of Victoria University has shown that the vocabulary of New Zealand English (henceforth NZE)

can be traced back to areas all over Britain and Ireland, probably “pre-mixed” in Australia before coming to New Zealand (Bauer 2000). Even some American terms entered at this time, including “creek” in its American sense of “stream” rather than British “estuary”.

One additional very important source of NZE vocabulary, and that which makes it uniquely different from any other English dialect, is te reo Māori—the Māori language. As the North American colonists borrowed hundreds of words from Native American and First Nations peoples, so the Pākehā appropriated a large number of words to describe phenomena unknown to them. While the large Australian continent was inhabited by scattered groups of gatherer-hunters speaking over 200 distinct languages, New Zealand was occupied by a largely agricultural people speaking a single language.³ It should also be said that while the Māori were persecuted by the Pākehā settlers, they were not victimised (or even exterminated) like the Aboriginal people of Australia. This all made for a single unified source of Pākehā borrowings. Most of the Māori words coming into NZE were for plants and animals—trees like kauri, tōtora, and rimu; birds like the extinct giant moa, the eponymous kiwi, the white heron or kōtuku, and the songbird tūī; and fish and shellfish like hoki, toheroa, and cockabully (from kōkopu—a small freshwater fish). But cultural words were also borrowed, like whare nui, “meeting house”—literally “big house”; marae, “ceremonial ground”; mana, “authority”; and tapu, “sacred, taboo”.⁴ Since the Māori language is closely related to Hawaiian, Tahitian, Samoan, and the other Polynesian languages many of these words can be found all over the eastern Pacific.

2. Relationships

Clearly then, the closest dialectal relative of NZE is Australian English; indeed, in many ways NZE is descended from Australian English (although Kiwis don’t like to be told this!). South African English is also fairly close, as all three southern hemisphere countries were settled at roughly the same time. Then ties go back to southeastern England and RP. Some have tried to derive both NZE and Australian English from the Cockney accent of London, but this is a gross overexaggeration; the two accents share some features, but differ markedly in others (e.g., h-dropping and /-t-/ glottalisation in words like “butter”).

In terms of lexicon, much NZE slang and idiom is shared with and usually derived from Australian; “bush” (forest) and “cocky” (farmer; from “cockatoo”) first appeared across the Tasman Sea. In terms of phonology, the major perceived difference is the /ɪ/ vowel in “fish and chips”. In Australian this is very high—almost /i/—so Kiwis hear Aussies saying “feesh and cheeps”. In NZE the same vowel is very centralised, approaching /ə/, so Aussies accuse Kiwis of saying “fush and chups”. There are other differences; the NZE /ɜ/ vowel in “bird” is fronted and rounded so it sounds like a Scandinavian ö or ø, while it is less rounded and further back in Australian. The /æ/ and /e/ vowels in “bat” and “bet” are even higher in NZE than they are in Australian, so northern hemisphere English speakers tend to hear a Kiwi pronunciation of “pat” as “pet” and “pet” as “pit”. A fair number of Australians pronounce words like “dance, chance” with an “American-sounding” /æ/ vowel rather than the usual NZE /a/. There is one area in New Zealand where the /æ/ vowel is common in such words: the province of Southland at the southern end of the South island. This is the only clearly defined regional dialect area in the country, and is also distinguished by the famous “Southland R”: a post-vocalic /-r/ used by what is now a shrinking number of Southlanders, shrinking because it draws comment from other Kiwis rather like the West Country /-r/ does in England (Bayard and Bartlett 1996). These features originate from the large number of Scots and Irish settling there in the 19th century, but appear to be vanishing in the overall “mixing bowl” of general NZE.

3. Attitudes

In any case, by about 1900 a distinctive New Zealand accent was coming into being, and almost immediately began to draw critical comment from self-appointed guardians of “pure speech”, or *prescriptivists*, as linguists call them. The NZE accent was described as harsh, raucous, and totally unsuitable for performing Shakespeare (as if Shakespeare had somehow spoken RP, which didn’t develop until 200 years after his death!).

Such criticism continued apace right up into the 1950s, and produced a fairly massive “cultural cringe” on the part of Kiwis about the way they talked. Much attention was devoted to training in speaking “good” English, as spoken by the best speakers at “Home” (as Britain was called here until recently). Newsreaders on radio and television were carefully trained to use only

the RP accent; NZE voices were not tolerated. New Zealand has undergone massive social change since I immigrated here from America in 1970. These days RP is a rarity in the broadcast media, and most newsreaders employ accents in the middle or upper register of the broad-general-cultivated accent range which occurs in both NZE and Australian accents (for a broad Australian accent, think of “Crocodile Dundee”!). Beginning in the mid-1970s, large numbers of American programmes began to dominate New Zealand television, followed in the mid-1980s by popular Australian ones like “Neighbours”, “Home and Away”, and the like. Under the free-market principles of the New Right governments running New Zealand from 1984 to 1999, New Zealand programming was neglected as “too expensive”, until by 1997 less than 20% of programmes featured a New Zealand voice (Bayard 2000:322).⁵

Much of my research since 1986 has been devoted to investigating what Kiwis think of their own vis-à-vis others’ accents: in particular comparisons of NZE with Australian, North American, and RP. The attitudinal evaluation questionnaire techniques of social psychology revealed the usual high rating of the prestigious RP accent in traits like class, income, and occupation, followed quite closely by the North American voice.⁶ In the normal course of events, the local accents would receive the highest ratings in other traits like friendliness, sense of humour, and kindness, but such is not the case in New Zealand. Kiwis tend to rank their own voices fairly low in these and other traits, and instead prefer American or even Australian voices, despite the greater acceptance of NZE in the media. This tendency has been detected over and over again, using a wide range of subject groups and two distinct sets of voices employing the various accents (e.g., Bayard 1990a, 1991, 2000; Bayard, Weatherall, Gallois, and Pittam forthcoming).

4. Prospects

It seems apparent that NZE is in the process of abandoning its traditional orientation toward RP as the prestige model; this is demonstrated in the pronunciation of words like “lieutenant”, “schedule”, “clerk”, and “Z”. When I came here 30 years ago, almost all Kiwis used the “BBC” pronunciations, “leftenant, shedyule, clark”, and “zed”; now 70-90% of university students pronounce the first three American-style, while “Z” has become “zee” for almost 40%. So the question is: will NZE be able to establish itself as a relatively independent dialect, as Australian, Scottish, and American have

done, or will it simply replace the RP prestige model with an American one? All indications are that the latter is in fact occurring (Bayard 2000, Bayard et al. forthcoming), at least in terms of lexicon, idiom, and even syntax (“gotten” is spreading here); this reflects a worldwide trend, in that globalisation of the economy—in particular the media—has meant that the influence of American language and culture is rapidly assuming world dominance in non-English speaking nations from Sweden to Thailand as well as throughout the Anglophone world.

This is reflected in the apparent tendency for Scandinavian students of English to switch from the RP accent they have been taught to an American one. Kirk Sullivan (Umeå University) and I have embarked on a study testing this apparent preference for American accents by employing the accents and voices used in an earlier survey (Bayard et al. forthcoming) of attitudes of Kiwis, Aussies, and Americans toward the three accents they represent plus RP voices from Britain. This new study will involve surveying high school and university students in Sweden, Finland, Germany, and England. A preliminary experiment already carried out at Umeå indicates very high ratings for American voices in traits like likeability and pleasant accent, and ratings almost as high as RP for others like income, self-confidence, and leadership (Bayard and Sullivan 2000a, 2000b). Similar trends are apparent in Holland (van der Haagen 1998) and doubtless in many other nations, reflecting a worldwide *Pax Americana* (Bayard 2000).

However, at least the NZE phonological system is probably fairly secure from American influence, although changes in it are most assuredly taking place. Chief among these is the indigenous merger of /iə/ and /eə/ diphthongs, so that “ear” and “air” merge as “ear”. There are also incoming phonological shifts from both American English (voicing of intervocalic /-t-/ in words like “city” and “latter”) and British English (glottalisation of word-final /-t/ in “get”, “bet”, etc.; see Bayard 1990b, 1999; Holmes 1995).

But NZE’s future as a distinctive dialect seems to depend mainly on its relationship with the indigenous Māori language. Like many aboriginal languages, Māori was under severe threat through much of the twentieth century, but a renaissance began in the 1970s, and now many Pākehā as well as Māori are studying the language and valuing it as something unique to New Zealand.⁷ Anyone watching New Zealand’s millennium celebrations (noon on New Year’s Eve in Scandinavia) could not help but be impressed by the overwhelming Māori content of the ceremonies: from

prayers on the Chatham Islands to performances of haka (action dances with chanting) to Kiri Te Kanawa singing Māori songs, the input was almost wholly Māori. Māori expressions and words are becoming more and more common in NZE; for example, the 1999 election produced the new idiom “waka jumping” (waka = “canoe”) to describe MPs who changed party allegiance after being elected. Māori borrowings into NZE these days usually reflect cultural aspirations and moves toward biculturalism: rangatiratanga, “sovereignty”; kaupapa, “strategy, agenda”; tikanga, “custom”; and Māoritanga, “Maoriness”. As the Pākehā majority continues to shrink (from 90% in 1970 to 69% in 1996) in relation to Māori and other ethnic groups in New Zealand such as Samoans, Tongans, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Koreans, it is inevitable that more and more Māori vocabulary and idiom will enter NZE, and this can only be a good thing, enriching our language and hopefully pointing the way toward a bi- and multicultural future for Aotearoa New Zealand.

Suggestions for further reading:

Gordon and Deveson 1998 provides a good undergraduate-level introduction to NZE, and summarises much recent sociolinguistic research; a cassette illustrating the various accents discussed is also available. Bayard 1995 offers a brief introduction to linguistics and sociolinguistics, but concentrates on aspects of New Zealand society such as racism, sexism, and national identity as these are reflected in language behaviour and attitudes. Bell and Holmes 1990 and Bell and Kuiper 2000 are collections of articles devoted to specific research on NZE, and Orsman 1997 is a comprehensive and scholarly dictionary of NZE. *Te Reo* (“language”) is the journal of the Linguistic Society of New Zealand, and contains many articles about NZE.

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Donn Bayard was born in 1940 and raised in Chicago, USA; he studied anthropology and linguistics at Columbia University and the University of Hawai‘i, and immigrated to New Zealand in 1970. After carrying out considerable archaeological fieldwork in Thailand and Laos he began full-time research into the sociolinguistics of NZE in 1984. He is currently an Associate Professor in the Anthropology Department of the University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand.

Notes:

¹ Macrons mark long vowels in Māori, so ā, ē, ī, ō, ū are pronounced like Swedish *a, e, i, å, o*.

² See Bayard 1995 Chapters 3 and 6 for concise histories of Māori and Pākehā settlement of New Zealand.

³ Albeit with considerable dialectal variation.

⁴ For examples of the hundreds of Māori words now occurring in NZE, see Orsman 1997; I do not italicise Māori words because the language is not considered foreign in New Zealand.

⁵ The election of a centre-left government in 1999 should improve the amount of New Zealand content, possibly by the introduction of an Australian-style quota system.

⁶ A Canadian voice in this case, but Kiwis can't usually tell the difference between a Canadian and an American accent.

⁷ Since 1987 Māori has been a legal and official language of New Zealand.