

# Origins of NZ English

There are three basic theories about the origins of New Zealand English, each with minor variants. Although they are usually presented as alternative theories, they are not necessarily incompatible.

The theories are:

- New Zealand English is a version of 19th century Cockney (lower-class London) speech;
- New Zealand English is a version of Australian English;
- New Zealand English developed independently from all other varieties from the mixture of accents and dialects that the Anglophone settlers in New Zealand brought with them.

## *New Zealand as Cockney*

The idea that New Zealand English is Cockney English derives from the perceptions of English people. People not themselves from London hear some of the same pronunciations in New Zealand that they hear from lower-class Londoners. In particular, some of the vowel sounds are similar. So the vowel sound in a word like *pat* in both lower-class London English and in New Zealand English makes that word sound like *pet* to other English people. There is a joke in England that sex is what Londoners get their coal in. That is, the London pronunciation of *sacks* sounds like *sex* to other English people. The same joke would work with New Zealanders (and also with South Africans and with Australians, until very recently). Similarly, English people from outside London perceive both the London and the New Zealand versions of the word *tie* to be like their *toy*.

But while there are undoubted similarities between lower-class London English and New Zealand (and South African and Australian) varieties of English, they are by no means identical. For example, many lower-class Londoners, at least in the last century, pronounced *off* to rhyme with *dwarf* and *cloth* to rhyme with *forth*. While you can still hear such pronunciations from a few older New Zealanders, those pronunciations have never really been dominant in New Zealand. So the idea that New Zealand English is a straight borrowing from London, is not very likely.

Is there any other information which might support this idea? Not a great deal. But there is one kind of vocabulary item which is associated very strongly with Cockney English in Britain and which is also found in New Zealand: that is rhyming slang. A few pieces of rhyming slang have become extremely widespread in general British English. The expression *let's have a butcher's* for 'let me have a look' is one such, and the expression *to blow a raspberry* meaning 'to make a rude noise with the lips showing disapproval'. *Let's have a butchers* is an abbreviated form of *let's have a butcher's hook*, and *butcher's hook* rhymes with *look*, so that *let's have a butcher's* means 'let's have a look'. Similarly, *raspberry* is a short form of *raspberry tart*, which rhymes with *fart*, which is what it means. Rhyming slang is also found in New Zealand, though rarely as exuberant as the London variety. Relevant words include *babbling brook* 'cook', *butcher's hook* 'crook, angry', *chunder loo* 'spew', *pen and ink* 'drink' and *septic tank* 'Yank, American'.

A variant of this theory sees New Zealand English as originating in East Anglia rather than in London, but similar points apply.

## *New Zealand as Australian*

Although all New Zealanders think they can tell the difference between a New Zealander and an Australian from the way they speak, actual tests show that this is not reliably the case. Certainly, people from Britain generally have great difficulty in hearing any difference between the accents of Australia and New Zealand (and that of South Africa). But there is more evidence than just the pronunciation to suggest that New Zealand English might have come from Australia.

First there are a number of words which are common to Australia and New Zealand and not known elsewhere. Some are clearly Australian in origin, like the greeting *coo-ee* and the use of *maimai* for a hide. Although most New Zealanders now think of *cobber* as being an Australian term, for many years it was used currently on both sides of the Tasman. Other such terms are *big bikkies* 'large

sums of money', *bludger* 'person who lives off the efforts of others', *corker* 'good', *old identity* 'local character', *marching girl* 'member of a team of formation marchers', *stoush* 'fight', many of them now rather old-fashioned.

As well as these words, there are words which came into Australian and New Zealand Englishes from British dialects. The surprising thing about these words is not that they are found, but that so many of them are found in both varieties. It cannot be coincidence that so many words, from so many distinct origins in Britain, should be common to the two varieties. Such words include *dinkum* 'real', *fossick* 'hunt around', *hogget* 'sheep aged between one and two years', *slater* 'woodlouse' and *spell* 'break from work'.

While more recent vocabulary items tend to divide Australia and New Zealand rather than uniting them, there is enough evidence of vocabulary sharing from the early period to support the notion that New Zealand English and Australian English were once a single variety. There is also demographic evidence, in that most trade from New Zealand went through Sydney, and the time between Wellington and Auckland by sea in the early days was greater than the time between either of those New Zealand centres and Sydney. Since Australia was settled by Anglophones earlier than New Zealand, we normally call the single variety that was shared between the two 'Australian English', though 'Australasian English' might be a better label in the early days of New Zealand settlement.

### *New Zealand English as an independent variety*

The idea behind this theory, sometimes termed the 'mixing-bowl' theory, is that when people speaking different varieties of British English are put together in a single place, a new local variety distils out of the variation. This notion has been developed by the ONZE team, and is discussed on another page.

If we accept this theory, then we have to accept two further points. The first of these is that the similarities between the pronunciations in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa arise from the similarities in the mixtures of people who settled the three colonies; the differences arise from the differences between the three groups of colonists and the differences in the contact situation with other peoples that arose in those colonies. Furthermore, the similarities (and differences) between these southern hemisphere colonial Englishes and Cockney English probably arose in the same way, since London had attracted large numbers of people from other areas of England in the period before the settlement of the southern hemisphere colonies. It is difficult to know just how much credence to give to this. The original settlers in Australia were the convicts and those in charge of them, while the original settlers in New Zealand were largely upper working-class or lower middle-class, and we might expect these two populations to be rather different. On the other hand, many of the convicts were convicts because hunger drove them to crime in England, not because they belonged to an underclass of habitual criminals.

The second point we have to accept is usually termed the 'founder effect' (following Mufwene). The idea is that early settlers in any place have a greater influence on the eventual form of the variety which emerges from their coming together than later comers to the same place. While it is not entirely clear how to interpret this in the New Zealand context (who are the founders and who are the later comers?), we can say that the fundamentals of the New Zealand accent were set by about the 1890s, when the majority of Anglophones in New Zealand were native-born. Those fundamentals may have been set earlier, but certainly not later. That does not imply that there are not later changes: clearly there are. But if it is true that there were more people from the North of England who came to New Zealand in the 1950s than had come prior to that date, they would not have had an effect on New Zealand English proportional to their presence in the 1950s; what would have mattered was the number of northerners here before the 1890s. Again this notion is difficult to evaluate, but we certainly have no clear evidence which might lead us to want to dispute it strongly.

### *Conclusion*

So perhaps the most likely conclusion is that New Zealand English arises largely from the mixture of Englishes brought in by the early settlers to New Zealand, with Australia providing rather more influence on that mixture than might otherwise have been the case because of the amount of contact there was with Australia in the early days of settlement.

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