NEW ZEALAND ENGLISH JOURNAL

NUMBER 23

2009

SPECIAL ISSUE
The Ian Gordon Fellowship Lectures
2008

School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies
Victoria University of Wellington
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The *New Zealand English Journal* is an annual refereed publication founded (*as New Zealand English Newsletter*) in 1987. It is edited by John Macalister, and published by the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies, Victoria University of Wellington, PO Box 600, Wellington 6140, New Zealand. Copies are available for $NZ10.00 each. Overseas rates are available on request. Orders must be accompanied by payment. Correspondence may be e-mailed to john.macalister@vuw.ac.nz.

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**NEW ZEALAND ENGLISH JOURNAL**  
(formerly New Zealand English Newsletter)

**NUMBER 23**  
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Welcome to this year’s *journal*, which is a little different from usual and is the first time – to the best of my knowledge – that we have had a Special Issue. The catalyst for this was the invitation to Elizabeth Gordon to be the Ian Gordon Fellow at Victoria University of Wellington in 2008. As the Ian Gordon Fellow, Elizabeth delivered three stimulating public lectures on aspects of New Zealand English, and it is the texts of these lectures that form the heart of this Special Issue. In the first lecture, she tackles the perennial debate over standards – does “Proper Language” exist? – and in the second highlights the contribution of the Origins of New Zealand English project to our understanding of the variety’s formation. The final lecture in the series takes up the fascinating subject of language and identity.

Janet Holmes and Graeme Kennedy have also contributed an introduction to the Special Issue in which they remember Ian Gordon, the man whose generosity and foresight created the Fellowship.

It is a privilege, therefore, to celebrate the work of two people who have done so much to further our understanding of the development of New Zealand English, and to explain language matters to the world outside the university walls.

John Macalister
Editor
Recent publications

John Macalister


“I’ll write a letter to the paper” – the lay person’s view of New Zealand English

Elizabeth Gordon

In May 2007, I received an e-mail from the Christchurch Press asking me if I would write a weekly language column, following in the footsteps of the late Frank Haden. At that time I was staying in Kuala Lumpur with my daughter and her family, and the appeal of relaxing beside the pool under the palm trees in my retirement was far more seductive than the responsibility of writing a weekly language column. But my bigger concern was the prospect of following Frank Haden. His ideas about language were different from mine. For many years I’d kept a “Frank Haden file” of his Saturday offerings. I used these in my university lectures, usually challenging or refuting them. However, The Press generously assured me that I didn’t need to adopt Frank Haden’s position on language correctness and I could write on anything I liked.

I’ve now been writing the columns for over a year. In the beginning, members of the Frank Haden fan club were annoyed, and angry e-mails arrived every Monday morning. My column was appalling, and silly, and why was The Press publishing such rubbish. John Wood from Darfield wrote a letter to the editor:

I am appalled by her disinterest in standards of good English ...she discounts pronunciation, enunciation, grammar and spelling without once acknowledging the line between good and bad... Her approach is irresponsible... she reminds me of a medical practitioner so interested in the symptoms of a condition that there is a reluctance to administer a cure (The Press, 31/10/07).

Six people wrote to the paper in response to John Wood’s letter, but no one was defending me; instead, they were all concerned to point out John Wood’s erroneous use of the word “disinterest”. Whether it is negative or positive, what this response tells me is that there is a great deal of interest in language out there among lay people. Even the most critical letter will finish with some statement about how interesting and complex language is.

So I’ve now joined the august body of people in New Zealand writing in the popular press or speaking on the radio about language. When I was growing
up we used to listen to Professor Arnold Wall on the radio talking about The Queen’s English. Later, there was Max Cryer on Saturday mornings on the National programme and of course there was always Frank Haden’s column. But I would prefer to align myself with Ian Gordon, whose weekly column in *The Listener* first introduced language scholarship to the general public in New Zealand.

The letters I’ve received reveal more than just the individual complaints, queries and comments. Many of them point to their writers’ underlying view of language. So in this lecture I would like to work out what this view of language is—how lay people see English in New Zealand. I was thinking about this last year when I was attending a lecture about the theologian Professor Lloyd Geering. The speaker was talking about the way in which Geering rejected the idea of a “God out there”—the picture of God as an elderly man with a white beard somewhere in the sky—and it occurred to me that this is rather like the image of language which some of my letter writers believe in. To them, there is something called Good Language, or Proper Language or Correct Language. It exists—it’s real—and it’s out there... somewhere. It isn’t a person, but maybe it shares a cloud with God. It needs to be protected and admired; it is also supported by its own sacred texts: old grammar books, dictionaries and Fowler’s *Modern English Usage*.

So for this lecture I’ve decided to investigate this model of what I’ll call “Proper Language”, a name surrounded by big shiny inverted commas. I’m looking for that ideal language that some of my correspondents seem to believe in. What are the characteristics of Proper Language? To answer this, I needed a source of letters on language from lay people.

One of the best places to find such letters has always been the *New Zealand Listener*. So that’s where I went, looking first for those letters that appeared in the first ten years of its publication, from 1939 to 1948. I’ve also read the articles on language topics published in *The Listener* in that period. What I found was language is a topic that gets people fired up. It does now and it did then.

In the period I examined, people wrote letters to *The Listener* for several reasons. One was because they believed that broadcasting should set the standard for language use in New Zealand. If radio announcers can’t get it right, how can ordinary people cope? Others wrote letters in response to the articles about language, and *The Listener* published such articles regularly. Some people were genuinely concerned about the state of the Maori language in New Zealand. And some were also thinking about the possibility of a distinctive New Zealand variety of English.
But I’ll start with Proper Language. I think one thing that many letter writers are agreed on, both then and now, is that there is always one correct form of Proper Language and it is the duty of experts to state what this is. People are troubled by variation: “We hear ‘different to’, ‘different from’ and ‘different than’—which one is right?” they ask. And it wasn’t just ordinary people who were guilty of confusing variation in their speech. The visit to New Zealand of his Royal Highness the Duke of Gloucester set off a flurry of letters. The Duke had come for the centenary, but he had pronounced “centenary” in three different ways: centenry, centeenary and centennary (The Listener 17.12.39). If Dukes can’t get it right what are ordinary folk meant to do? Other letters lamented that people had been heard to say “oral” with a short vowel (*/ərəl/), and “choral” also. There was no question about it, said the letter writers, it had to stop. The correct pronunciation was “awral” (*/ɔrəl/), and “cawral” (23/8/40).

Frank Haden also believed in the idea of one single correct pronunciation. He insisted that “sure” should be pronounced */ʃʊəl/. If you said, “Are you shore?” (*/ʃəl/), this was an abomination. A similar distaste for variation occurs in the letters I receive: “You wrote ‘compared to’ instead of ‘compared with’—this is disgraceful.” In a few words in English there are alternatives of stress-placement and these are a constant concern: “Is it controversy or controversy, harass or harass? Please tell me which is the correct one.” In a column where I wrote that a person could say kilometre or kilo-metre I was taken to task by retired engineers, who said, “No, the word is kilometre. There are no options.”

A word which troubled a number of early letter writers was “accent”. A.H. Reed and Thomas Bracken were at war over this. Should the word be stressed on the first syllable (like “recent”) or have two syllables with equal stress? (19/7/46; 9/8/46; 16/8/46; 30/8/46; 6/9/46). And what about the people who pronounce “romance” with a stress on the first syllable? In 1941, a Richard Roe of Wadestown wrote to The Listener:

The only way of curing this evil would be for the NBS to employ specialists to listen to every broadcast, and to record every mispronunciation by speakers, actors in radio plays, and announcers, and to bring the faults to the notice of the offenders. If after a reasonable period these were not able or willing to mend their ways, their voices should cease to be heard on the air (28/3/1941).
Say “romance” and Mr Roe would have you sacked.

The idea that there is only one correct pronunciation of a word can be seen in the debate in *The Listener* about two British placenames. It began with the East Anglian town Yarmouth. Should this be “Yarmith” or “Yarmouth”? Those arguing for “Yarmith” said that this was how the locals pronounced it. But, as one correspondent put it, “Should we be governed by what local inhabitants say or the fact that modern standard English is Yahr-mowth?” (9.11.45). Those opposing “Yarmith” said that the locals were wrong, and modern standard English was “Yarmouth”—in other words it should be pronounced as it was spelt. Ludovic McWhirter of Auckland wasn’t at all impressed by the argument in favour of the “local inhabitants”. “It is time,” he wrote, “that someone pointed out that the slovenliness of English dialect and its variant forms derives either from illiteracy, or lack of adequate training in childhood in the proper use of tongue, teeth, throat and palate in articulation” (7/12/45). Ngaio Marsh then stirred the pot by complaining about the pronunciation of “Marlborough”: shouldn’t it be “Mawlborough?” she asked (30/11/45; 11/1/46). Another correspondent heard a weather report with the pronunciations “Teranaki and Mawlborough,” and asked, “Are these speakers trying to improve our language or are they just trying to overcome their own inferiority complex?” (19/7/46).

The correspondence in *The Listener* about the pronunciation of Yarmouth and Marlborough ran from October 1945 to January 1946, with 24 letters published. Was this a safe diversion from the miseries of the war? Let’s all be outraged about the pronunciation of Yarmouth. It wasn’t just the pronunciation of British placenames that made writers sharpen their pencils. People in Christchurch now might still remember the battle in the letters to *The Press* about the pronunciation of the place-name Rolleston—or should it be “Rollston?” In 1947 there was a lively exchange of letters in *The Listener* about the Northland town Whangarei, but the argument wasn’t about the first syllable, as you might expect. It was about the last syllable. Was it Whangarei or Whangaree? A.H. Reed wrote on behalf of Whangaree. Only one writer argued for Fangarei.

These debates, I think, throw light on Proper Language. Who do you believe, the local people—those who say “Yarmith”—or something out there called Standard English where the word is pronounced as it is spelt. This, then, is a characteristic of Proper Language: it is written, not spoken. And if you have to decide which pronunciation is correct, you must always choose the one closest to the word’s spelling.
I think anyone who has ever taught phonetics to first year Linguistics students will know how firmly some students are wedded to the written form of words. Our aim as teachers of phonetics is to get students to listen to what they actually say. I used to ask my students to write the days of the week in phonetics. Some people could not be convinced that we don’t pronounce the “d” in Wednesday and that the word doesn’t have three syllables. Every year some students would insist that they really did say “Wed-nes-day.” So it isn’t surprising that many of the people who wrote those letters to the editor of The Listener also believe that the correct form of any word is its written form, and that a different spoken version is just the result of laziness.

This view is still strongly held by some people today. I recently heard a complaint on Jim Mora’s afternoon programme on Radio NZ National about forecasters who don’t pronounce the “d” in “strong winds”. I too get e-mails complaining about elisions and assimilations in speech. Of course, when we are teaching students to represent spoken language, we encourage them to notice these assimilations and elisions. There are also complaints about unstressed syllables, as if in Proper Language every syllable should be strong. Hugh Brown in Christchurch wrote, “A few examples of our laziness are ‘cin’ for ‘can’, ‘thim’ for ‘them’, ‘jist’ for ‘just’, ‘ti’ for ‘to’ (The Press 16/7/07). He has observed that English is a stress-timed language but it troubles him. He thinks this is lazy. In Proper Language people should always say: “can”, “them”, “just” and “to” in their full stressed forms. “I’m just going to see if we can buy them.”

In Proper Language there are “libraries” not “libries,” “manufacturers” not “manafacterers”, and the word is “temporary” not “tempry”. In 1946 a Dunedin correspondent asked, “What hope is there for those on the lower range of the educational ladder when those at the top make use of such words as ‘liberies?’” (4/10/46). Another complained, “There is an announcer who tells all and sundry that this is 2ZB Welluntun. Is it any wonder that children and adults speak so badly when we have these things drummed into our ears day after day?” (14/8/42). Other pronunciations which people complained about were “Febry”, “mathmatics”, and of course the countless complaints about “Noo Zillan”.

But not everyone agreed with the complainers. “Student” of Wadestown wrote:

To compile a list of mispronunciations during the week seems an incredibly smug way of voicing one’s disapproval. It is not, to my mind, a heinous offence that a Minister, in making a point in debate, should slip over the word “secretary” (1/1/46).
A correspondent from Westport wrote:

I am sure there are a good many listeners like myself who do not listen for mistakes in English or in grammar, but who like to hear announcers just speak as New Zealanders. A young nation will find a language of its own sooner or later and the vowels and accents will very likely change to suit (18/5/41).

The pronunciation of Proper Language is not lower class. People thought that the New Zealand Broadcasting Service had a great responsibility for improving pronunciation in New Zealand and this meant avoiding lower class variants. A man from Timaru complained about a commentary on the Auckland Cup where the announcer included such words as “heow, neow and eow.” He wrote, “Surely it is time that the NZBS formed a definite policy with regard to its announcers and commentators?” (16/1/48).

This isn’t surprising. In 1939 Arnold Wall published his book, *New Zealand English: how it should be spoken.* In it he complained about pronunciations we would associate with broad New Zealand speech: “ceow” for cow, “syme dy” for “same day” and “woine” for “wine” (1939: 17–18). He describes these pronunciations as “distressing” and lists them under the heading “Essential Faults in New Zealand Speech.” I’m sure this is why the Christchurch school I attended employed an elocution teacher. No lower class vowels at St Margaret’s College, please!

For some writers, the pronunciation of Proper Language in New Zealand was definitely based on the speech of England. If we look at Arnold Wall’s book again, we see in its preface that “this book was designed for those who want to speak good English, standard English, as spoken by the best speakers of the Old Land” (1939: 1). And you didn’t argue with Arnold Wall. He was considered the authority on matters of pronunciation in New Zealand.

A Wanganui writer to *The Listener* (21/7/44) defended the English of England with a verse from Alice Duer Miller’s poem, *The White Cliffs.*

Oh English voices, are there any words
Those tones to tell, those cadences to teach!
As song of thrushes is to other birds
So English voices are to other speech.
Those pure round “o’s” – those lovely liquid “l’s”
Ring in the ears like sound of Sabbath bells.
One thing was certain, Proper Language did not include American English—what some referred to as “Yankee English”—and the NZBC radio kept broadcasting American programmes. Janus from Upper Hutt complained:

[T]he recorded accents of Americans grates on the ear of the average listener in this country. ... The sponsors of many of the flamboyant American serials would be assisting the war effort to a greater extent if they would use a little more discrimination (16/4/43).

Someone from Eli Bay wrote, “Our New Zealand speech is surely bad enough; it does us no good to hear worse American in the screen and radio—for instance, why is ‘yeah’ or ‘yep’ supposed to be better than ‘yes’?” Not everyone hated American English. From Wellington, H.W. rejoiced in “the continued enrichment of English by the powerful American vernacular” (12/9/41). But another Wellingtonian responded, “H.W. rejoices in the debasement of our beautiful mother tongue by an admixture of hideous Yankee slang” (26/9/1941). This writer knew about Proper Language. He went on:

England is our homeland; English is (or ought to be) our mother tongue. So let us have good English programmes and let us have New Zealand announcers properly trained to correct and pleasant speech (24/11/44).

I know from the correspondence addressed to my language column in The Press that some people still feel uneasy about any American influence in the language.

Judging from the correspondence to The Listener, Proper English was also the English of men. There was a lively debate in 1943 about whether women’s voices should be heard on the airwaves. The general opinion in the 1940s was that they shouldn’t and this was because there was a problem with women’s voices. One piece was illustrated by Russell Clark. He showed a woman standing in front of a microphone surrounded by people pointing their fingers at her and laughing (31/12/42). Women’s voices were said to be unsuitable. One man wrote, “Most women tend to produce a flat impersonal feeling on air, a lack of vocal variety.” Another complained, “Nearly all women let their maternal instincts creep into their voices” (5/2/43). They also said that women broadcasters might offend people from other countries, especially from “certain Asian communities.... News or commentaries given in a female voice would be objectionable to these communities, but a male voice is acceptable everywhere” (5/2/43). A Presbyterian minister joined the
debate: “I find it seldom that a woman speaker is as impressive as a man, and I do feel that women are more inclined to listen to men than men are inclined to listen to women” (5/2/43). Someone from commercial broadcasting said that there were always many objections if they “put a woman on for announcing,” but this didn’t apply to “talks on domestic subjects, cooking, children’s care and so on which are without doubt best done by women” (5/2/43).

A topic where the issues of gender and social class intersect is found in correspondence on the use of the words “lady” and “woman.” This was set off in December 1942 by someone from Auckland who signed herself simply as “A Woman.” She stated that she was a woman worker and she objected to the title of a series of radio programmes, “For my Lady.” She said that this smacked too much of lavender (or moth balls) and old lace. “What’s wrong,” she wrote, “with ‘For the Women’, ‘About Women’ or ‘For the Housewife?’” (18/12/1942). Answers to this letter arrived quickly. “Pakeha” from Rotorua wrote, “Let us not lose what are surely two of the most beautiful words in the English language: ‘lady’ and ‘gentleman’.” According to this writer, these terms do not apply to people who rely on money, property and fine clothes, but to people “who display the virtues that come under the heading of ‘good breeding’—gentleness, courtesy, consideration for others” (8/1/43). From Hataitai someone signed “One of them” wrote that we should “instruct our girls a little more in the decorum that befits a lady” (8/1/43).

Another characteristic of Proper Language is that it is always formal. Slang doesn’t belong there. And slang was a popular subject for the letter writers. As you can imagine, during the war there was an interest in army slang—buckshee and cooties—and the new term for a private soldier, a rookie, a word which they said came from American films (15/3/40). Les Hobbs, father of the M.P. Marian Hobbs, wrote about slang in the forces:

There is the most common phrase of all. It is, “You’ve had it.” You go down to the YMCA late for free supper on Sunday night. You rush in anxiously and say, “What about supper?” You’re told, “You’ve had it.” It means emphatically that supper is finished, and not only have you not had it, but you’re not going to get it (14/1/44).

Sidney Baker, a New Zealander who wrote books about language, gave three talks on slang in 1940 which were published in The Listener (16/8/40). He had some interesting comments to make about those words ending in “i” like kindy, cardy, possie, vegies. Baker suggested that in slang in England the -ie suffix was used almost exclusively as a diminutive or an endearment: ducky,
sweetie. But in Australia and New Zealand he could name ten or twelve terms where the addition of the suffix added the meaning, “a good or tall story, or a shrewd trick.” Among them are: fastie, Shrewdie, smartie, swiftie, roughie and goodie. The -o suffix on goodo, and righto, he said wouldn’t find favour with purists. Whacko was a joyous exclamation, scrappo was a fight, arvo, afternoon and evo, evening. Compo was worker’s compensation. Baker gave the following examples as authentic Australian and New Zealand contributions to the language: “dag, rubydazzler, hangashun, pearler, stunner, beaut, snorter, ripsnorter, bosker, corker, snitcher, snifter, trimmer, jake, Jakealoo, dinky, dinkiedie, wonky and batty.” He wrote that we should pay “an ungrudging tribute to the youngsters who can find such wholehearted enthusiasm for their own language.”

Sidney Baker’s efforts were not received with equal enthusiasm. A resident of Kelburn wrote to say that he had listened to Mr Baker’s talks and the experience was not edifying:

I am left wondering why anyone should spend so much time, energy and skill in an effort to preserve and classify a host of misbegotten verbal monstrosities that in a saner world would have been strangled at birth. Why should useful and necessary words such as radio, Anzac, stockyard, candy and swagman be thrust into the same category as abominations as snorter, snitcher, wonky, beaut and stagger-soup? (10/9/40).

I think it goes without saying that the model of Proper Language has only polite words. Someone from Milford counted five swear words in two plays on a commercial station. One play was on at 8 pm, and “even at that late hour some children might be still up” (21/7/45). Someone from Sumner in Christchurch agreed. This writer’s son was 12 and, we were told, “hangs over the radio breathlessly listening to serials”. “To please him,” she said, “I sometimes listen too.” The language was heavily loaded with words like “flaming, perishing and ruddy.” She went on:

It’s bad enough to have to put up with this kind of thing in tram and bus where men no longer seem to care if women listen to their hateful conversation—but to have it broadcast over the air, and to listen with embarrassment with one’s children, is even worse (5/10/1945).

There are some words which are banned in Proper Language. A number of writers complained about the use of the word “got”. One had even heard a university professor say, “You’ve got to fill in a card” (2/6/44). An Otago
writer insisted that when she attended school the word “got” simply didn’t exist (21/7/44).

Some of the radio listeners were counters. When they heard a word they disliked, they began counting. A ZB announcer, according to one writer, used the word “definitely” eleven times in five minutes (10/11/39). (I think someone should try counting the times politicians today say, “The reality is...”)

In the first ten years of its publication there were two subjects not related to Proper Language which appeared frequently in the Listener. One was the subject of the Maori language. Letters about Maori appeared right from the very beginning. One of the concerns was that Maori was being badly mispronounced by Pakeha, and something should be done about this. In July 1939 an announcement about a radio talk by Professor Arnold Wall was headed, “We murder Maori” and stated, “the European murders most of the Maori words he uses daily” (The Listener 7/7/39).

Sidney Baker joined the discussion:

The Maori language, per se, appeals to us as a graceful, charming speech in which few harshnesses appear. But we have only to listen to Maori vowels as spoken by Pakeha to realise how they can be mutilated practically beyond recognition, with a deftness that seems almost deliberate. Paikok for Paekakarika, or worse still Paekakareek; Wokker for Whakarewarewa, and Waimack for Waimakariri (16/8/40).

Several Maori writers wrote in with helpful guides to Maori pronunciation. One man wrote about the banning of Maori conversation in the native schools:

Instead of encouraging our Maori boys and girls to grow up to be bi-lingual, our authorities seem to be determined to stamp out that language of “Nga tamariki.” And how well the authorities have succeeded is beyond question. There are today hundreds of Maori children who are unable to speak or understand the language of their fathers. In fact they are ashamed to use it—truly a deplorable state of affairs. Maori parents are by no means wholly blameless. They are often careless or indifferent as to whether their children talk Maori properly, and indeed often discourage the use of the language in their homes. It is incumbent
on us then as citizens, to do our best to revive a language which is rapidly dying out (7/2/41).

As you might expect, other writers responded by saying that this was rubbish. The Maori language shouldn’t be taught in the schools for Natives because the purpose of these schools was to teach children English. Some, on the other hand, wanted to see Maori taught in all New Zealand primary schools. But they didn’t want children to learn the Maori language—they just wanted “vowel sounds, consonants and word-building” so that all New Zealand children could be able to read, write and pronounce place-names correctly (15/10/43).

There was a widely held view that Maori was an exceptionally beautiful language – more beautiful than English. And Maori had something which English lacked—it had pure vowels. And these pure vowels were used by Maori speaking English. Dr Crompton of Havelock North asked why was it that “nearly all Maoris speak better and more melodious English than their Pakeha fellow-countrymen?” (4/8/44). Thomas Todd of Gisborne believed that, “The articulation of old Maoris was perfect. Unfortunately this has been corrupted by their mixing with the slovenly inaccurate Pakeha” (6/10/44). One Avondale writer wanted Maori to be compulsory in primary schools—not for its own protection, but for the maintenance of pure English by Pakehas. He wrote:

Having given the subject some thought, I come to the conclusion that only by the practice of the Maori vowel sounds can we be saved from the twang which is fast becoming characteristic of New Zealand speech (5/11/43).

A mother from Hawkes Bay thought the climate had something to do with pure vowels.

Climatic conditions of the Dominion are said to be conducive to the production of beautiful voices. We have the beautiful Maori voices as an example—with the beautiful English spoken by the well educated Maori (17/11/44).

There were also letters which are a reminder of how far we have come, like this one from Bishop Bennett, Anglican Bishop of Aotearoa, asking the authorities very politely: “Would it be possible to allot more time for the Maori broadcast? Twenty minutes a week only, for the world news and home news as well, is too little.” He also asked if there could be a summary of
Maori matters of general interest in English so that Pakeha people could be informed of interesting movements among the Maori people. His letter ends:

Of course there are bound to be difficulties, but I hope some big effort will be made by the authorities to meet the wishes of a very large circle of Maori listeners. Meanwhile, we of the Maori race are very grateful for what has been given to us already, and wish to assure the authorities that our Maori broadcast is very highly appreciated (28/3/47).

Bishop Bennett was very grateful for twenty minutes of Maori.

Another theme in the letters to the Listener is about the status of New Zealand English and the need for some kind of standard. Ian Gordon contributed to this. In 1944 he wrote an article called “The way we speak: what is standard English?” (1/9/44). By “standard English,” he is referring to standard pronunciation rather than syntax. He asks, “Do New Zealanders speak standard English? The answer is ‘No’. The second problem is, can we speak standard English? Here the answer is a very qualified ‘Yes’. ” But Ian Gordon could see the problems with this. He says you would have to start with the teachers and get rid of the irregularities in their speech, and compel them to use only English vowels, and then you would have to train the students and the training college lecturers. The alternative would be to import sufficient standard English speaking teachers.

The third problem was “Do New Zealanders want to speak standard English?” Here he says he will have to leave the answer to New Zealand born speakers. Perhaps Standard English could be preserved with small groups who can be kept in a fair degree of isolation. (He doesn’t suggest where.) He concedes that for the average person, reared in the equalitarian atmosphere of the Dominion, Standard English is something very difficult to achieve, because it is no longer the speech of New Zealand. He then asks rather tentatively whether it might be better to admit that there is a New Zealand modification of the standard, and using that as a basis, work for clear diction and easy fluency. He wrote:

A mere artificial imitation of Standard may result in that appalling genteel tongue that is heard on the lips of shop assistants in most English cities. The statement is the job for professors but the solution lies with the speakers themselves.
Ian Gordon’s statement is conservative, at times impractical, but also moderate; he hadn’t grown up in New Zealand and he accepted (a little reluctantly) the possibility of a New Zealand variety of English.

Professor Sinclaire of Canterbury University College wasn’t so compromising. He wrote:

Many women teachers despair of their pupils’ New Zealand accent. Few men seem to worry about it. Well at the risk of setting myself up as a snob or a pedant I am on the side of the women. I cannot easily reconcile myself to Professor Gordon’s view that we should, even must, accept the peculiar New Zealand modifications of English vowel sounds. I am not objecting to a dialect, but what I ask is that our speech should be manly on the lips of our men, and womanly on the lips of our women and pleasant in the ears of all (14/3/47).

I don’t want to leave the impression that everyone disliked the New Zealand accent. There were a few who came to its defence. One was J.S. Lynch of Upper Hutt. (I’d like to know more about J.S. Lynch—I’ve developed an affection for him.) He wrote,

Right from your first issue various well-intentioned writers have broken out with complaints of wrong pronunciation and bad English heard over the air. I suggest it is time these people realised that English is not spoken in New Zealand. The language we speak is New Zealandese, with its own idiom and pronunciation (16/6/44).

Of course this produced the expected angry responses. Dr Crompton of Havelock North said Mr Lynch’s letter was in “the best bantam cock style—objecting to any attempt to correct mispronunciations. He was proud of his New Zealandese—a pretty name for a pretty dialect!” (4/8/44). J.S. Lynch wasn’t giving up: “New Zealand is a nation and the language spoken (call it New Zealandese or New Zealandic or what you will) is as distinctive as Australian, American, Canadian or South African” (15/9/44).

The discussion about a standard for New Zealand English was given a focus by critics from England. There was Andrew Morrison, a speech examiner for Trinity College who gave a talk on “The New Zealand Voice” (7/11/48). He had nothing good to say about it. What were the characteristics of the New Zealand voice? Mr Morrison tells us:
... an idle tongue, a rigid jaw, atrophied labial muscles—these will account for most of the habits and mannerisms that colour New Zealand speech. As a race you are not very good at short vowels. Your long vowels tend to be placed in the wrong part of the mouth, and the things you do to the final “y” sound “Anthonee, gloree!” Casting a quick and tactful glance at your consonants, may I observe that as a whole, New Zealand tongues are idle. The “l” sound is treacherous. Your plosives too tend to disappear without trace. And just a word about the way you manhandle the name of your country. It is not a difficult name. In itself it is a lovely chain of sounds. But is it to be New Zealand or Nu Zillnd? And if so, why?

Mr Morrison’s talk was coming to an end. He didn’t have time to cover all our faults.

I have confined myself to more obvious if less pleasant features of your speech and voices—the idleness, rigidity, and nasalisation. Whether the deviations from Standard English that these generate are to remain characteristically national noises, or whether they will ultimately disappear, depends upon how much care and attention you are going to devote to speech training in education.

Not everyone was prepared to accept Mr Morrison’s criticisms. Someone from Wellington reminded readers of another visiting expert who was charmed during her tour of the Dominion by the high level of speech of New Zealanders. She thought that it was closer to standard speech spoken by educated people in London than in any other part of the world. Who was this commentator? The actress Dame Sybil Thorndike (3/12/48).

We don’t usually know if letter writers are New Zealand born, or whether they’ve come here from Great Britain. So we can’t say that those defending New Zealand English were displaying a sense of nationalism that included the language. But there is a sense that some people were also resisting the criticisms of visiting Englishmen like Mr Morrison. There were letters during the war saying how refreshing it was to hear the New Zealand voices of our service people overseas. One wrote about the New Zealand lads with “nice speaking voices and some with Honest-to-God cow-cocky voices”... “When the show started I feared a succession of educated voices. When I heard ‘Hello Mum and dad’ I was so delighted” (10/1/41). Another made the point that the average New Zealander has such a distaste for anything approaching the “Oxford accent” that he is “immediately suspicious of the reformer” (9/5/41). One wrote that the national stations have proved conclusively that New
Zealand performers, speaking our own New Zealand language, can put over programmes equal to any in the world (16/5/43).

Those people in New Zealand advocating Proper Language in the 1940s saw language as something which existed outside those who used it. It was good and pure; it avoided choice (there was always one right answer); it was written, it was formal, it was polite, it was male, and it was the language of England. And it was a matter of personal choice whether people adopted Proper Language or not. But those who didn’t adopt it were said to be lazy or corrupt. Or as Andrew Morrison the visiting speech examiner would have it, “they have vices which could become vicious”.

I think that there are people around today who have a similar model of language “out there”. They write letters to the paper and they write to me saying that our language must be protected and preserved. For them the preservation of Proper Language is the responsibility of school teachers, and also of people speaking on the radio or the television. They are especially bothered about features of spoken English and by pronunciations that don’t conform to spelling. They see language change as “sloppiness.”

But I think the model of Proper English has changed since the 1940s. You won’t hear people today saying that women’s voices are inferior to men’s or that the standard for New Zealand English speakers should be the language of educated speakers from England.

For me it was interesting to find that 70 years ago there were people writing to the paper saying that we should recognize New Zealand English as our national way of speaking and that we should accept this. There were people who saw change as inevitable, and as one wrote in 1941, there were more important things to think about than minor points of pedantry (9/5/41). In the 1940s there were people arguing passionately for the preservation of the Maori language and calling on Pakeha to make an effort to use authentic Maori pronunciations.

Going back to those old letters to The Listener and reading the letters that I get today has shown me very clearly that there is a great deal of interest about language among lay people. But in the past most of those who were the perceived experts on language also promoted the model of Proper Language. Frank Haden regarded any variation from his own usage as an abomination. And he was always being confronted with abominations. These language experts presented language as a minefield for the unwary; their function was to assist troubled souls who weren’t sure what was right and what was wrong. Is it any wonder that people suffered from linguistic insecurity?
Linguists for years have been teaching students in university lectures about language and how language works. We’ve been teaching about the difference between descriptive and prescriptive rules. We’ve been showing that written and spoken English are different varieties which must be described in their own terms. We’ve been teaching about language variation and change and we’ve been showing how language is an integral part of each individual person and shaped by people around them. Here in Wellington I’m staying with my daughter and I have the pleasure of watching my 16-month old grand daughter Annabel learning to talk. The language she will use isn’t something “out there”. It’s the language she will hear the people around her using.

Perhaps too much of this description of language and discussion about its functions has just stayed inside the lecture theatres. So I am pleased that the Dominion Post and The Press have at last given linguists the chance to tell the general public about the things we’ve been teaching our students for years. In my newspaper columns I’ve been trying to explain that all language is governed by rules, but these rules are not the same as the prescriptive rules of old school grammar books. In one column I wrote about the fact that my husband and I have moved to New Brighton in Christchurch, and I can now say that I live “in Brighton” but I can also say I live “at Brighton”. People can live “in Sumner” and “at Sumner”. You hear both. But if I’d moved to Fendalton I could only live “in Fendalton,” not “at Fendalton”. I asked my readers if they could work out the rule to explain this difference. And I was swamped. People wrote things like: “I took up my pencil over the breakfast table and I tried to work it out”; “I e-mailed the question to all my family.” One even sent the question to a nephew working in Bahrain. Those who responded sent in all sorts of explanations, some more sensible than others. But for me the best thing was when one person wrote, “I haven’t had so much fun for ages.”

And looking ahead, I hope this is how people will see language. Not a Proper Language—somewhere out there—formal, written, invariable, unchanging; to be worshipped, protected and guarded at any price; not a minefield of impossible rules for the unwary, but a subject which is full of interest, which helps us to understand ourselves and the people around us and which can be fun.

References

New Zealand English past and present: looking for the evidence

Elizabeth Gordon

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 far 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 19th 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 19th 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 II 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 19th 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 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”: [ɔːvə ðɨːr wəz ə hɛʊs].

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 19th 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 19th 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 /daːns/ 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.
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 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” (/ʃtr/). 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 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 that 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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The New Zealand accent: a clue to New Zealand identity?

Elizabeth Gordon

Three years ago—at the time of the last election—a question was put to some politicians to explain about what it meant to them to be a New Zealander. That’s not such an easy question and I remember some waffly answers at the time. I think if I were asked this, part of my answer would be that we are people who speak New Zealand English—we speak with a New Zealand accent—we’re a people connected by our vowel sounds.

Four years ago, when I retired from the University of Canterbury, my husband and I spent three months living in the East End of London. We were there as family support when our son and his wife had their second child. Most days we went out with Kathleen aged 14 months in her pushchair and we spent a lot of time travelling about on London buses. From time to time we would recognise other New Zealanders on those buses. How did we know they were New Zealanders? It wasn’t by how they looked or the clothes they wore. It was by the way they spoke. What is the main thing that identifies us as New Zealanders? It’s our vowel sounds.

And it’s not just that New Zealanders can recognise other New Zealanders overseas. Here back in New Zealand, we’re good at using vowel sounds to make fine social distinctions. You might be able to pick the fact that I spent ten years of my education at a private girls’ school. I talk like the other women who were in my school class. Often (not always, but often) you can tell if someone comes from Southland; you can tell if someone is Maori.

So I say that our variety of the New Zealand accent is the most permanent indication of who we are, and where we come from. It’s therefore surprising to me that the New Zealand accent is so often overlooked by people writing about New Zealand and New Zealand history. There’s no reference to it in any of the major histories of New Zealand that I’ve read.

In 1989 two University of Canterbury academics, Bill Willmott and David Novitz, edited a book called *Culture and Identity in New Zealand*. They invited people to write chapters on relevant subjects such as Maori identity, art, the media, war, the education system, the church and so on. The book was well
underway when someone suggested a chapter on New Zealand English. It was added as an afterthought.

If the book had been about Maori culture and identity I am certain that the subject of the Maori language would have been there from the beginning. But New Zealand English isn’t under threat. We don’t have to struggle to have it represented on the media. We don’t need a special “New Zealand English language week”. So maybe the high-school girl in Christchurch had a point when she assured me that she didn’t have a New Zealand accent—the way she spoke was “normal”.

And for many of us, the way we speak is normal. It’s when we go overseas we find that people comment on our pronunciation and sometimes have trouble understanding us. A friend told me about overhearing a young New Zealand woman having trouble in a bank in London. She wanted her change in four ten-pound notes. The teller kept saying “But we don’t have fourteens.” My husband had difficulty buying a train ticket to a town called Hassocks:

“I want to go to Hassocks.”
“Which part of Essex?”
“No, Hassocks.”
“Yes, but whereabouts in Essex?”

The way we speak is “normal” until we leave New Zealand and find that we do indeed have a New Zealand accent. And when we come home we are sharply aware of the New Zealand accents of those customs officials in the airport. That’s when we think about who we are and how we speak.

If we look at the way people regarded New Zealand speech in the past, I think it can throw light on how New Zealanders at that time saw themselves and their identity. It was very much tied up with their relationship with what was then called the Mother Country. As I explained in my last lecture, we now know from research that an early version of the New Zealand accent was being used by people in some New Zealand towns as early as the 1870s, even though it wasn’t recognised as such until about 1900.

We also know that in those early years, there were many different accents heard around New Zealand. Professor Arnold Wall, who arrived in Christchurch in 1899, said that among the people he employed were people from Yorkshire, Oxfordshire, Devonshire, Scotland, Wales and Australia, all, he said, “speaking their native dialect in its purity” (Wall 1951). So it is likely that the early New Zealand accent was there, but it went unnoticed,
camouflaged by the many other varieties of English which would have been heard at the same time in those early settler communities.

By the turn of the century, however, it was a different matter, and the New Zealand accent was being heard everywhere, and coming especially from the mouths of children. Margaret Batterham, an Australian linguist, has made a study of the language used to describe the early New Zealand accent. It was “an incurable disease;” it was “vile, muddy, a blot on our national life”. There was the metaphor of crime: “the blood of the language on their hands;” it was “evil sounding, had despairing depths;” it was “corrupt, slovenly, unspeakably bad, mangled, twisted and debauched” (Batterham, 1993).

School teachers were told that children who did not speak well couldn’t appreciate good poetry, and one commentator even went as far as to say that the New Zealand accent itself was responsible for “minor throat and nasal disorders” (The Triad 10/8/1910: 37). In other words the New Zealand accent was so bad that it could make you ill.

At that time, the received opinion was that the way you spoke was completely within your own control. The new variety of English being used by New Zealand children was their choice and it was the result of laziness and bad company in the home and the street. Even so, some writers were optimistic that with the help of their teachers, the children could change and become a model for the rest of the Empire. This view was put forward by Mr R.N. Adams in some articles he wrote for the Otago Daily Times in 1904, which were later reprinted as a booklet. He wrote:

> There is no good reason to prevent the hope that in these lands of the south, where we boast of such liberal systems of education, we may in the near future be recognised as the most correct speakers of the King’s English of any in the wide Empire into which our people has developed.

> It is certainly within the power of our schools and other educational institutions to promote a system of perfect English pronunciation in these new world states…

> It now lies with us to make our language of the future what it should be, or to neglect it very much, as we have done up to the present time. We may develop a colonialism of our own, with a variety of shades of corruption that will be as distinct from each other as have been the dialects of England, Ireland and Scotland;
or we may set up a standard of such excellence that no-one will question that it is the purest of all the Anglo-Saxon tongue. (Adams 1903: 30–31)

Teachers were told they must solve this ‘problem,’ and exercises of the lips and tongue were enthusiastically promoted. In 1925, the Minister of Education, in his preface to the Department of Education Bulletin on Speech Training, wrote, “in a democratic country such as ours it is the right of everyone to speak in the manner that marks the educated man.”

The definition of what was ‘good’ or ‘correct speech’ was always the speech of the educated man—and he was the educated man in England. Professor Arnold Wall was the guardian of the King’s and the Queen’s English in New Zealand. As I explained last week, he wrote a book called *New Zealand English: How it should be spoken*. In the preface he wrote:

> This book is designed for use by residents of New Zealand who wish to speak ‘good English’ or ‘standard English’, as spoken by the ‘best speakers’ in the old land; it is not intended for those who wish to develop a new dialect for this country…

(Wall 1939:1)

In *Whitcombe’s Graded Lessons in Speech Training*, written in 1930, the author, Dorothy Stewart, suggested that New Zealand children should take as their model “the speech of one who is so unmistakably of the elect—Sir Johnstone Forbes-Robertson, so easily accessible by way of the gramophone” (Stewart 1930: ii). In other words, a British actor. Even better, they could listen to the phonographic recording of King George V and Queen Mary, whose messages to the children of the Empire were recommended as an excellent model of speech for New Zealand children to copy (*Education Gazette* 1/10/1924: 160). But the reality didn’t match the ideal that was being promoted by the speech trainers. It never does. New Zealand children, and their teachers, would have felt stupid talking like members of the British royal family.

There was an added complication, because while people criticised the New Zealand accent, they also criticised the speech of people who tried to sound ‘better than they really were’. One of the members of the Cohen Commission on Education, which travelled around New Zealand in 1912, complained:

> What hope is there for change, when we find two of the principals of the largest secondary schools in New Zealand in giving evidence, using these expressions: ‘taim-table’ for ‘time-table’,

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This feeling persisted and was expressed years later in 1952 by Bill Pearson in his article *Fretful Sleepers*:

There is no place in normal New Zealand society for the man who is different; the boy whose misfortune it is to be sent to a snob school like Christ’s College or Wanganui Collegiate where a special dialect is taught, is immunised for life from contact with working men. He will always shy from them because he will sense their contempt for his speech.

(Pearson 1974: 6)

It’s interesting to me that some of our earlier New Zealand literary figures lambasted the New Zealand accent. Ngaio Marsh wrote many letters to the editor of *The Listener* about this. She described our speech as being “in the manner of a pianist wearing a clown’s gloves” (*Listener* 14/9/78). A.R.D. Fairburn wrote about “its wretched consonants and mangled vowels” (*Listener* 13/6/1947: 23–25). The novelist David Ballantyne in a lecture for the BBC described it as “ugly” and referred to “the harshness, the nasalisation, the monotony of our speech.” Charles Brasch complained that New Zealand children were “crippled for life by an inadequate command of their own language” (*Landfall*, March 1956).

Yet these people were New Zealand writers who had a strong sense of their New Zealand identity. I often wonder if these comments about the New Zealand language reveal underlying attitudes which could never be openly expressed. Perhaps they demonstrate the uneasy tension that existed between the sense of New Zealand’s independence and at the same time its colonial status.

Looking back at these earlier attitudes towards New Zealand speech we can say that we have now come a long way. New Zealand teachers have no interest in making their students sound like members of the British middle classes and we would consider it outrageous if they did. The old elocution teachers have been replaced by teachers of Speech Communication, concerned more with communication than vowel sounds. Is this acceptance of the way we speak as New Zealanders also a sign of a comfortable acknowledgement of our New Zealand identity? Does it mean that we are no longer the colonial cousins, insecure and ashamed of ourselves in the company of those who we fear might judge us? Can we say that the current
attitude to our New Zealand accent reflects attitudes to our New Zealand identity? I think it does. But when it comes to explaining how our New Zealand accent developed and evolved, then the question of identity becomes more problematic.

I was asked to participate in Jim Mora’s afternoon programme on Radio New Zealand National and the question of the development of the New Zealand accent came up. I explained that it was first heard in the speech of people lower down the social class ladder. One of the panel members then asked whether it had come about as a result of the deliberate efforts of school teachers who were trying to distance themselves from the British class system. Language change doesn’t work like that. I had to explain that things are never as simple as that. Most language change is below the level of consciousness. People just don’t realise it is happening. And there is so much that we don’t know about language change. We can observe its processes and describe what happens, but there’s a problem when it comes to the big interesting question, “Why?”

In our research into the origins and evolution of New Zealand English at the University of Canterbury we decided that New Zealand English was not transported here from somewhere else. So in spite of the strong beliefs of some people that it was the London dialect of Cockney carried to the Southern hemisphere, we decided that that this theory couldn’t be supported. (For a discussion of this see Gordon et al. 2004: 71–2, 219–223.)

Some of us (including me) once thought it could have come across the Tasman from Australia. (See Gordon et al 2004: 72–5.) But we ended up with the view that I discussed in my last lecture—that it was a variety which developed here in New Zealand, and which developed in a relatively short period of time, maybe in the twenty years between 1870 and 1890.

The research team looked at many other explanations for the development of the New Zealand accent but in the end we decided that there was no one single explanation. I guess you could say we sat on the fence. We said there were probably a number of factors involved and this is what we wrote in the book published on this research by Cambridge University Press (Gordon et al., 2004).

But one member of our research team, the British sociolinguist Peter Trudgill, wasn’t so reticent. He later came out with his own theory about the origin and evolution of New Zealand English. And he published this in a separate book in 2004 entitled New Dialect-Formation: The Inevitability of Colonial Englishes. In
this book, Trudgill argued that there were no social influences in the development of the New Zealand accent. The reason New Zealanders speak the way they do is simply an artefact of demography. To work out what accent would eventually emerge in a new British colony, you needed to know certain things. You needed to know where the early settlers came from in Britain, and the numbers who came from each area. You needed to know about the dialect features in those areas. With this information, you could sit in your study and predict what the end result would be—what the new New Zealand accent would be like.

So according to Peter Trudgill, it is a question of pure linguistic determinism. *The Inevitability of Colonial Englishes*, he called his book. And he showed how this worked out. I’ve rounded the figures out here, but the 1881 census gives 20% of the settlers coming from Scotland, 17% from Ireland, 7% from Australia, 1% from Wales, around 9% from other places, but 45% from England. So according to Trudgill, the English of England was the winner on the day. New Zealand English would be based on the English of England, not on the English of Scotland or Ireland. The majority would win out.

And we can then go further. When we look at where in England the settlers came from we find the majority came from the South. (In our research into recordings of old New Zealanders only one out of the 100 speakers we analysed had Northern English features.) If we continue with this exercise, and ask where in the south of England the settlers came from, then the majority came from London and the Southeast. And this is why, says Peter Trudgill, New Zealand English is a South-eastern variety of English. It’s just a matter of the numbers. And he uses the same argument for Australian and South African English. These Southern hemisphere Englishes are all South-eastern English varieties. So the fact that Australian and New Zealand English are similar, and have quite a bit in common with South African English is not because of early contact—it isn’t because people were transporting the variety from one country to another—it’s because if you put similar ingredients into the mixing bowls, then similar cakes will emerge.

Of course New Zealand English isn’t exactly the same as 19th century South-eastern English. For example, people living in the South-east of England in the 19th century dropped their ‘H’s. We know that early school inspectors in New Zealand complained constantly about h-dropping—what they called “the misuse of the aspirate,” which I mentioned in my last lecture. Well, you might say, maybe those school teachers won the battle and made their pupils pronounce their h’s, because we know it wasn’t long before Inspectors were
saying that children were pronouncing their h’s beautifully. In fact, so much so, that Mr Andrews writing in *The Triad* in 1910 said:

> With regard to “h” which is so commonly misplaced in England as a sin of both omission and commission, I have never come across a boy, born and educated in New Zealand, who had any great difficulty with this refractory letter. He rather overdoes the sound, if anything, triumphing over the obstacle so vigorously that victory then becomes defeat …It would almost make the hearers think that the ancestors of the New Zealander had been dropping h’s for generations, and now he is engaged in picking them up, several at a time. (*The Triad* 10/8/1910: 37)

Mr Strachan, a Marlborough school inspector said in 1907: “The trouble with ‘h’ was less pronounced this year, and there was evidence of an organized attempt to deal with it” (*AJHR* E-1B 1907: 23).

But again, linguists know that language change doesn’t work like this. The fact that New Zealanders today pronounce their h’s, says Trudgill, has nothing to do with those teachers’ efforts. He says it is due to the figures: people from Ireland, Scotland, Northumbria, the West Country, East Anglia and other places all did pronounce their h’s. And when you put them all together—add them all up—they are in the majority. So in New Zealand the majority usage of “h” won out at the expense of the h-dropping from the south-east.

Trudgill’s theory of linguistic determinism is simple, elegant and, I think, compelling. And it fits the facts. We don’t speak with a Scottish or Irish version of English; our New Zealand accent is closest to South-eastern English. And this has nothing to do with any attempts to express identity. It’s just the way the settlement numbers worked out. Trudgill is careful to limit his claims for linguistic determinism to colonial situations where there is a *tabula rasa* – where people arrive from overseas to a place where there is no existing variety, and the new variety is formed there from scratch. He agrees with the linguist Roger Lass that linguistic change in general is not deterministic (Lass 1990: 131), and he agrees with Lyle Campbell (who used to teach at the University of Canterbury) that it is impossible for a theory to predict that a change will occur, which change will occur, and when a change will occur (Harris and Campbell 1995: 321).

There is, however, one point Trudgill makes where I’m not so comfortable. And this is with the pronunciation of “chance” and “dance”. We know from
our recordings of old New Zealanders in the Mobile Unit archive that 48% of
them said /tʃæns/ and /dæns/. That’s what my father said, and he grew up on
the West Coast. My husband’s mother and aunts always pronounced the
girl’s name Francis as /fræns/. And the boy’s name Alexander/æləkzændə/
Arnold Wall in his book, The Mother Tongue in New Zealand, published in 1936,
said that in New Zealand the short vowel sound /ə/ was more common than
the long vowel /a/ (Wall 1936: 29). And I think Professor Wall was a reliable
witness. So why don’t we say /tʃæns/ and /dæns/ today?

Trudgill’s explanation involves settlement figures. In the analysis of the
Mobile Unit speakers, 48% say /laːf/ and /paːθ/. But when the vowel precedes
a nasal they say /dæns/ and /plænt/. In the end, he says, the south-eastern and
the East Anglian pattern won out because when they are combined we find
52% saying /tʃæns/ and /dæns/. “It must have been a close-run thing,” says
Trudgill (2004: 122–3). Well, he might be right—perhaps it was a close run
ing—but just after the Second World War (when the Mobile Unit recordings
were made) we aren’t talking about a tabula rasa and a newly developed
dialect. We are talking about several generations of New Zealanders.

Today if someone says /tʃæns/ and /dæns/ they’d be associated with Australia.
I don’t know when this happened—when New Zealanders stopped saying
/dæns/ and everyone said /daːns/—it would be interesting to find out, because
both pronunciations were around in New Zealand for some decades before
there was this reallocation. And so I wonder if there’s not the tiny possibility
that the fact that New Zealanders went the way of /daːns/ not /dæns/ had
something to do with being different from Australia?

Trudgill was arguing against seeing identity contributing to the formation of
the New Zealand accent. He wrote:

Why do New Zealanders need to symbolise their identity as New
Zealanders when most of them spend most of their time, as is
entirely normal, talking to other New Zealanders? (p. 157)

Of course he’s right. But I think he’s leaving something out. At home in New
Zealand we identify far more about ourselves that just the fact that we are
New Zealanders. We can often tell if someone is old or young, male or female,
from Southland, high on the social class ladder or low, educated or non-
educated, Maori or Pacifica or Pakeha. The way we speak carries a huge
amount of social information. So how does this happen?
Linguists can describe some of the processes involved. We know about the influence of peer group pressure in primary school. I observed this with my own children when we went on sabbatical leave to England and sent our children to a primary school in London, near King’s Cross station. And it wasn’t long before the glottal stops started to appear and vowels began to change. When we came home to New Zealand they went back to their New Zealand accents almost overnight. Children have a powerful desire to fit in and not to sound different. I think this could have had a part to play in the rapid dissemination of the early New Zealand accent. In New Zealand the 1877 Education Act brought in a national system of free primary education. After this date, large numbers of children were coming together for their education. And this coincides with the period when the New Zealand accent was developing. Those who complained about the “colonial twang” always said it was worse among children.

We also know about what sociolinguists call “accommodation”—that uncomfortable compulsion some of us have to change our vowels or our intonation in the company of a person who speaks a different variety of English. If you go to Wales do you find yourself using a different intonation when you talk to the locals? Jim Bolger was famous for his linguistic accommodation, especially to speakers of Irish English. In the recent film festival in Christchurch I saw the New Zealand made documentary Trouble is My Business. It was filmed over a period of 6 months at the secondary school Aorere College in South Auckland, with the film-maker following around a teacher called Mr Peach, as he worked with some troubled students. Mr Peach addresses the camera directly from time to time speaking in a general New Zealand accent. His pupils speak quite differently: they speak Pacific Island English or Maori English, and so do their parents. But when Mr Peach is talking to one of these children you can hear the change in his pronunciation. The rhythm changes, and his vowels change. And I have been told that there is actually a difference in his speech when he is talking to Pacific Island children and when he is talking to Maori children. This is a good example of accommodation.

My son John taught history at Aorere College for three years and while he was there I noticed he developed some th-fronting. He was started to say fing for thing, and wif for with. Now he has left teaching and is a corporate lawyer, but he still says “wif”. So maybe what started as accommodation became fixed. (I should add that he has always strongly denied that there was or is any such change but there are some things mothers know about.)
There is one piece of sociolinguistic research which connects language change with identity. This was the work published in 1963 by the man who is sometimes called the father of sociolinguistics: William Labov. It was called “The Social Motivation of a Sound Change,” and it was Labov’s first major piece of research. It was pioneering work at the time because he went around with a tape recorder and actually recorded people speaking. The research is very well known to anyone studying sociolinguistics but for those who are unfamiliar with it I will briefly describe Labov’s findings.

The research was carried out on Martha’s Vineyard, an island off the coast of Massachusetts. It had a population of about 6,000 people but in the summer it was a very popular resort for the rich and famous and about 40,000 summer visitors came in. It is where the Kennedys had their holidays. A linguist had visited 30 years earlier and recorded some members of old families, so Labov was able to compare his interviews with the older material.

He found that some vowel sounds on Martha’s Vineyard were changing. In particular he noticed that in words like out, trout, house, /au/ was changing to /əu/; and to a lesser extent in white, pie, night and like, /ai/ was changing to /əi/. Labov found that the change was most evident with people aged between 31 and 45. It wasn’t so strong in older people or younger people. And he found that the Islanders were completely unaware of any changes taking place.

Change was especially noticeable in a place called Chilmark, which was the centre of the island’s fishing industry. The problem at that time was that the fishing industry was in trouble, and it seemed coincidentally that the sound changes were strongest with fishermen. So you could say that the changes seemed to be radiating out from a small group of fishermen in a particular area.

So the question Labov asked was why was this happening? Why were the fishermen changing? Did it start from one man and then the others copied him? And why would the wider population of a place like Martha’s Vineyard start talking like a small group of fishermen? Labov found some more interesting things. The fishermen didn’t suddenly start using a new pronunciation; they were actually exaggerating a tendency that was already there. In fact the supposedly new pronunciations were actually very conservative old fashioned pronunciations—they were the pronunciations which would have been heard on the mainland of America in the 18th and 19th centuries.
Labov knew that 30 years earlier the people of Martha’s Vineyard had been changing to the Mainland speech. Now, 30 years later, they were going back to this much older pronunciation. So why was this happening? His answer involved the rise in popularity of the Island as a tourist resort. The fishermen in Chilmark—a very tight knit conservative group—were those most opposed to the incursions of the summer tourists. They thought they themselves represented the good old Yankee values: hard work, thrift and so on, unlike those they saw as the lazy rich summer visitors. Labov called this the “social motivation of a sound change”.

When I first read Labov’s research on Martha’s Vineyard, it came as a revelation to me. It doesn’t mean that people deliberately changed—like people paying for elocution lessons. The change he described was below the level of consciousness, but it was caused by social factors. It was caused, Labov said, by the need of speakers to assert their identity in the face of another clearly identified group of people. When I read about this I thought it might be a clue to understanding about the New Zealand accent and New Zealand identity.

But there are fashions in sociolinguistics as there are in other places, and today Labov’s research on language change on Martha’s Vineyard doesn’t feature in accounts of language change. People don’t talk about identity and change. If you do talk about this you can expect to be strongly challenged. And even Labov himself seems to be distancing himself from his own research. In 2001 he wrote:

> The Martha’s Vineyard study is frequently cited as a demonstration of the importance of the concept of local identity in the motivation of linguistic change. However we do not often find correlations between degrees of local identification and the progress of sound change.

> (Labov 2001: 191)

**So today we don’t mention Martha’s Vineyard and social motivations of sound changes. And we don’t hear it cited in relation to New Zealand English. People are looking for other explanations. But I’m going to stick my neck out here and say that I think this is a pity. I’m retired and retirement has made me bold. I think we should think about language and identity.**

Of course it would be silly to suggest that early New Zealanders deliberately changed their vowels to assert some kind of national separateness. As I keep
saying, language change just doesn’t work like that. The fishermen in Chilmark and the other residents of Martha’s Vineyard had no idea that their vowels were changing. But the important thing about the language change on Martha’s Vineyard is that it differentiated one particular group from the others. The identity of the fishermen and the rich summer visitors on Martha’s Vineyard was marked by a language contrast.

I think that it is this notion of contrast which is important. A sense of identity needs contrast. It is the contrast we become aware of when we leave New Zealand and we find that other people speak differently from us. It is the awareness Janet Frame described in her autobiography The Envoy from Mirror City. When she first went abroad she found herself “already undergoing the change forced on every new traveller and accompanied by examining not the place of arrival but the place of departure” (1985: 5).

It was during the Women’s Movement in the 1970s that we became aware of women as an identifiable group. That was a completely new experience for me. In the past women had been scattered through the community, usually living in pairs with men, but now women were given a separate identity which could be discussed and described. But to do this required women to be seen in contrast to and often in opposition to men. That’s a diversion, but to me this is how identity is constructed. But if you think of groups in our society that have an especially strong sense of identity you’ll find they are usually in a minority.

One of our students, Chris Bartlett, did his PhD at the University of Otago on the language of Southland (Bartlett 2003). He found that older speakers pronounced their ‘r’s in all appropriate environments: in horse, cart, letter, nurse. The middle-aged speakers were varied. Sometimes they pronounced the ‘r’ and sometimes they didn’t. The younger speakers retained ‘r’ only on the NURSE vowel. They said horse and cart without the ‘r’, but purple shirt, third term, fern birds with the ‘r’. However, Chris found that in Invercargill the ‘r’ seemed to be coming back in the speech of young people, especially young women, and not just on the NURSE vowel.

This sounds to me as if it could be the Martha’s Vineyard effect. I remember talking to teachers from Southland in the 1990s who told me that when they did their teacher training they were told to get rid of their Southland accents if they wanted to be teachers. Later this became a source of sadness to them. My own students from Southland used to tell me that they were embarrassed by their Southland accent, and that students in Christchurch teased them about it. Maybe Chris Bartlett’s findings are a reflection that young people in
Southland are now feeling differently about their Southland identity. Their use of the older form of Southland English could be subconsciously demonstrating this. So although we can’t prove that an initial sound change was set in motion by a quest for identity marking, I think that once the changes have developed, they can become emblematic.

I have a radio recording of six young Maori speakers who were interviewed in 1958. They were being asked about what it was like to move to Auckland from the countryside. Only one of them could be identified as speaking English with a Maori accent, and even that was very slight. In the 1990s I was keen to record Maori accented English and I found that I couldn’t do it. I would hear young Maori people speaking with a different rhythm and different vowels and I would think, “Great! Today I’ll capture Maori accented English.” But as soon as I appeared with my tape recorder they began to speak with general New Zealand accents. So we could say then that speaking English with a Maori accent was stylistic: the young Maori could move in and out of it.

But I think things have changed today. People who have done research into this variety of New Zealand English tell me that for some young Maori it is now their mother tongue. They use it all the time. I’m sure this would be the case for those young people recorded at Aorere College in South Auckland in the documentary I’ve referred to. I’m sure for those young Maori students it is the way they speak all the time. We can hear plenty of Maori accented English today. Listen to some of the Maori sports men and women. Listen to Maori TV.

So is speaking Maori accented English part of the construction of a Maori identity today? We have come a long way from the time when children were accused of having a horrible colonial twang, from the time when—at my school anyway—there were hopeless attempts by the elocution teacher to make our vowels sound like those of posh people from England. New Zealand accents are heard on the radio and TV, even on the concert programme. Earlier radio announcers used a pronunciation guide based on Daniel Jones’ *Pronouncing Dictionary of English*. They had special speech lessons. Those days are past. We have Simon Dallow, not Philip Sherry.

But as I’ve tried to argue, the way we speak doesn’t only reflect the fact that we are New Zealanders. It reflects the fact that we are particular New Zealanders; we live in multi-dimensional space where age, gender, race and class also have a bearing. And if people aren’t saying nasty things about New Zealand English in general today, some are still quick to criticise some of its
varieties. Ginette Macdonald has made her name with her caricature Lyn of Tawa. We fall about laughing at the speech of this lower class New Zealand woman. Why do we find this so funny? People don’t choose to speak like this; for some New Zealanders it is their mother tongue. And we’ll also laugh at representations of upper class cultivated New Zealand speech. So while I agree that we need to be careful about making causal connections between the development of a variety and identity factors, once the variety is established, then it seems to me that matters of social identity do become important.

When we listen to the speech of individuals we can see how social factors influence their speech. I had an honours class where the students were required to record and analyse the speech of three members of the same family. One student recorded three sisters; two sounded very similar and one sounded quite different. The similar ones went to the university and both worked in law firms in Christchurch; the third sister, the one who sounded so different, worked in the pub at Haast in South Westland.

In the 1970s we had a young girl living with us, rejected by her parents because she was pregnant. She had attended an elite private girls’ school as a boarder from the age of 7 to 15 and I know what girls at that school sound like because I once went to the same school. But she spoke with a broad New Zealand accent and had a wonderful command of non-standard syntax: “I seen it”, “I done it”, “What do yous think?” She spoke like the country town boys whose company she liked to keep.

Language and identity is a fascinating subject and I’m glad I was asked to give these lectures on the Ian Gordon Fellowship. I’ve been working on New Zealand English for many years and thinking about it for many years, but this fellowship has made me go back to an aspect of the subject I once thought was just too difficult. I don’t think I have the answers, but I’m sure that the language we speak is not just an asocial construct based on demography even if that’s how it began. The way we speak tells people who we are and where we come from and where we want to belong, and that’s important—it is part of our identity.

References