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If you live in New Zealand, chances are you will come across words of Māori origin sooner or later, in newspapers, on the radio, in everyday conversation, or on TV.

Some of these borrowed words are so familiar we don't even recognise them as having Māori roots any more: words like *kiwi*, *pāua*, and *Māori* itself. Others still ring foreign to Pākehā ears and their meanings remain less widely known: *manuhiri*, *mātauranga* and *mako*.

Many Kiwis are aware that New Zealand English borrows words from Māori but there is disagreement among laypeople, researchers and newspaper editors about which specific words everybody actually knows or uses.

Given that the 2018 census data suggests only 4 per cent of New Zealanders speak te reo Māori, it would seem curious that many of us have learnt to recognise, if not also use, words from a language we do not speak ourselves.

There are many ways in which words from one language can find themselves in a different language, but what is common

The borrowers

LANGUAGE MATTERS

among these ways is that, at some point, they must have involved bilinguals, with some knowledge of both languages.

For instance, individuals who speak several languages may not be able to find their words in each language quickly enough in conversation, so they may resort to using words from their other languages (I sometimes use the word *coins* instead of *monede* when speaking Romanian). Or, individuals who speak the same languages may want to signal their shared common understanding of these languages by mixing them.

Interestingly, neither of these situations is likely to lead to established new (borrowed) vocabulary. And most acts of borrowing are like this. They are

nothing but fleeting momentary travels of words across language boundaries.

However, there is at least one scenario which can lead to borrowings sticking in their adoptive language: if a word is borrowed because the language in question has no native counterpart.

It is for this reason that English has borrowed *kimono* from Japanese, *algebra* from Arabic (via Spanish) and *klutz* from Yiddish. But while some words borrowed from Māori do not have counterparts in English, such as nature words (*kauri*, *rimu* and *kākāpō*), some do have such counterparts: *kai*/food, *aroa*/love, *hui*/meeting. The choice between Māori and English frequently hinges on what is socially or culturally salient.

Given all this, we are still left wondering what Māori words are doing in New Zealand English. Asking speakers

why they used a particular word is not helpful because speakers seldom really know themselves. They may come up with a justification after the fact but these explanations are not always reliable. We simply assume that we chose words solely on the basis of their meanings. Yet so much of what we do with language is not about transfer of information but about building relationships, forming alliances, signalling like or dislike, courting, joking, promising, threatening and so on.


Interestingly, within New Zealand, Māori words have a specific affiliation with Māori people and Māori language and customs, perhaps even Māori politics. Outside New Zealand, Māori words have a slightly different function: they signal an emergent variety of English, associated with an entire country, namely Aotearoa/New Zealand, and strongly differentiated from Australia.

While we cannot know for sure why certain Māori words are borrowed into English, we think a lot has to do with personal affiliation, group membership and inclusion, and with indicating a shared world-view or a perspective associated with a particular group of people. It is more about people than about meanings.

Andreea Calude wrote the popular linguistics book Questions About Language; (Routledge, 2020), edited with Laurie Bauer. She has a background in mathematics and linguistics and researches various aspects of (spoken) grammar, language evolution and New Zealand English.

5-minute quiz

1. What sporting event – the oldest in New Zealand – is held on Auckland’s Anniversary Day?
2. What is the official religion of Sri Lanka?
3. Which Australian state capital has suburbs named Glenelg, Sturt and Colonel Light Gardens?
4. What word can be preceded by top, hard and slouch?



5. Which Pacific Island got its name because it is roughly equidistant between North America and Asia?
6. What commonly used Latin phrase literally means “to the point of being sick”?
7. Complete the title of a song by Rodgers and Hart: *Bewitched, Bothered and ...*
8. What name is shared by a technology company and a record label established by the Beatles?
9. What island is home to New Zealand’s largest **tuatara** population?
10. What is the name of the bugle call that traditionally wakes soldiers at sunrise?

Answers

1. The Anniversary Day Regatta;
2. Buddhism;
3. Adelaide;
4. Hat;
5. Midway Atoll;
6. Ad nauseam;
7. Bewildered;
8. Apple;
9. Stephens Island;
10. Reveille.