Attitudes to NZ English

Early attitudes to New Zealand English

Gordon and Abell (1990: 21) observe that "people have been expressing opinions about spoken English in New Zealand almost from the time of the first European settlement". Their historical overview of attitudes to New Zealand English, based on early periodicals, newspapers, and the reports of school inspectors, traces the development of these attitudes as a distinctive variety of English began to be spoken in New Zealand. Whereas early commentaries from around 1880 focused on features of pronunciation associated with non-standard varieties of British English, from the 1900s people began to comment on a distinctive variety of New Zealand speech. Reactions were not generally positive. School inspectors began to warn teachers against "impure vowels" or the "colonial twang", which they attributed to laziness, bad upbringing and even poor thinking (1990: 24-25, 30). From around 1905 teachers were encouraged to engage in speech training and phonic exercises to address these 'defects' in the speech of New Zealand children, and guide books were produced, such as Professor Arnold Wall's *New Zealand English: How it Should be Spoken* (Wall 1938). But, as Gordon and Abell observe (1990: 31), "for all this effort and attention, the 'impure vowels' did not seem to diminish, but rather to increase", for this was the emergence of the New Zealand accent, and it was here to stay.

Studies on attitudes to New Zealand English

It was not until the 1980s that researchers began to systematically investigate New Zealanders' attitudes towards New Zealand English. Much of this was due to the pioneering work of Donn Bayard (e.g. Bayard 1990, 1991, 1995, 2000). Bayard (1991) reports on a 1986 study of 86 university students who were asked to listen to a range of accents, including New Zealand and British accents, and to rate them on a scale of one to five for ten traits representing a mix of status and solidarity-related variables (pleasantness, reliability, ambition, sense of humour, leadership ability, likely income, educational level, self-confidence, intelligence, likeability and acceptability). The results showed that RP, the recognised prestige accent of British English, was the clear leader in all of the status-related variables, and New Zealand English lead only in the solidarity-related variable of 'acceptability' (Bayard 2000: 307). Gordon and Abell (1990) report on a similar study (Abell 1980) that investigated the attitudes of high school students towards three New Zealand English accents and RP. The RP accent again ranked higher on all the status-related variables (ambition, education, reliability, intelligence, income, and occupation) and the New Zealand English accents ranked higher than RP only on the solidarity variables (friendliness and sense of humour).

In interpreting these results, it is important to remember that no accent or language variety is superior to another on purely linguistic grounds. Indeed, the same feature can signal prestige or non-prestige accents in different places, e.g. the presence of post-vocalic r (as in 'park') is a prestige feature in the United States but the exact opposite in Britain (see Holmes 2008:145-146). Rather, attitudes to language varieties tend to relate to attitudes towards speakers of those varieties (Lambert et al. 1960). In this way, attitudes to the New Zealand accent as compared to RP are more likely to reflect New Zealanders' attitudes towards themselves, in this case arguably self-conscious attitudes towards New Zealand as compared to Britain, originating from the colonial period of New Zealand history. Bayard (1991) terms this "cultural cringe".

Attitudes to Māori English

The link between attitudes to language varieties and their speakers is equally relevant to research on attitudes towards Māori English in New Zealand [insert link to Māori English summary here]. In several studies listeners have been asked to identify whether speakers of recorded passages of English are Māori or Pākehā, and to note down their attitudes towards those speakers (e.g. Bayard 1990, Vaughan and Huygens 1990, Robertson 1994). The results have consistently shown speakers identified as Māori were rated lower than other speakers on status variables such as education, occupation and socio-economic class, and rated higher for solidarity, particularly sense of humour (Boyce 2005: 96). These results appear to reflect negative stereotypes of Māori people rather than features of Māori English.

Attitudes to regional varieties of New Zealand English

In another vein, Neilsen and Hay (2005) investigated New Zealanders' attitudes towards (perceived) regional dialects in New Zealand. Participants from four university campuses were asked to rate nine New Zealand regions on a scale of one to five for the 'pleasantness' and 'correctness' of their speech, and to write comments on a map of the country about how they thought people spoke in each region. Although very little regional variation has been documented in New Zealand English [insert link to regional variation summary here], there was considerable variation in the ratings given to different regions. Wellington, Canterbury and Nelson/Marlborough tended to elicit high ratings for both pleasantness and correctness, whereas Northland and Westland elicited lower ratings. Auckland was unique in demonstrating reasonably high 'correctness' ratings but extremely low 'pleasantness' ratings. Comments on the maps included that Canterbury had an 'English' style of speech, and was relatively 'upper class', 'proper' or 'pretentious'; Wellington was 'official' or 'sophisticated', Aucklanders spoke 'business-speak'; Northland and Gisborne/Hawke's Bay had 'Māori influences'; and in Taranaki the speech was 'slow' and 'farmer speech'. In a familiar pattern, Neilsen and Hay note that these descriptions often "contain[ed] no linguistic information at all, but rather reveal[ed] more general stereotypes" (2005: 98-101). Participants also tended to give a region a higher rating for correctness and particularly pleasantness if it was where they grew up.

Still cringing?

Bayard (2000) compared the results of his 1986 survey of university students (Bayard 1991) to an identical survey of 271 university students in 1996-1997, to investigate to what extent "the New Zealand cringe toward RP" was still present (2000: 308). He found a number of differences in the mean scores awarded to the personality traits by the two groups, including a growing preference for American accents alongside British accents, but concluded overall that "New Zealanders are still uneasy about their own voices" and "the cultural cringe is alive and well in the New Zealand of today" (2000: 321).

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