

The Children’s Playground Language Project

In 1999-2001, in a project funded by the Royal Society of New Zealand through the Marsden Fund, a questionnaire was sent to 150 primary schools throughout New Zealand in an attempt to find out the words that New Zealand children use in a number of situations: for greetings and farewells, in playing games in the playground, in expressing feelings, and so on.

When we devised the questionnaire, we had no idea which questions (if any) would provide evidence of regional variation. To our surprise, most questions produced at least some data which was regionalised. This suggests that New Zealand is not linguistically uniform, which has important consequences for children and teachers who move from one region to another.

The division which was most strongly supported by the data was between the Northern area of the North Island and the rest of the country. The southern fringe areas of the Northern Region, Taranaki and Poverty Bay (usually Northern) and Wanganui and Hawkes Bay (usually not Northern) all show some signs of dialect mixture, which is to be expected in border areas. To a lesser degree, the Southern region, covering Southland and South and East Otago, is also distinct. The lake resorts of Central Otago are usually excluded from this Southern region, and show the features of the Central Region, which extends from Wanganui and Hawkes Bay down to the Waitaki River. The map shows these three main regions. However, other sections of the data support a division between the North and South Islands. Putting these two divisions together, we suggest that there are four main dialect areas in NZ: the North; the lower North Island; the north and centre of the South Island; the far South. Examples of the differences we found were these:

	Northern	Central	Southern
chasing game	Tiggy	Tag	Tig
2 riding one bike	doubling	dubbing	doubling

	North Island	South Island
creeping up game	Statues, Freeze	Creep up (on) Granny
can’t immediately “get” back the person who just “got” you	Can’t tag your master	Butcher

Within the Northern and Central regions, there seem to be certain sub-regions: mostly they show the features of the larger regions they belong to, but they have a small number of features special to themselves. The sub-regions which emerged from this study are Western Northland; Eastern Northland; Auckland city and environs; Central North Island (from the southern fringe of Auckland city down to southern Taranaki, the southern fringe of the volcanic plateau, and across to Poverty Bay); Hawkes Bay and Wairarapa; Wellington and environs (an area extending up through the Manawatu and as far as the southern edge of the volcanic plateau); Nelson-Marlborough; West Coast; Christchurch; Timaru and the Central Lake resorts. A few expressions are restricted to even smaller areas. Truce terms (what you say to demand a short period of “time out” during a game) were often found only in highly restricted areas: Auckland: *gates*; Taranaki: *twigs*; Wellington: *fans*; Nelson-Marlborough: *tags, tax, taxes*; Southland–Otago: *nibs*. Most other regions had *pegs*.

One of the reasons for the Northern Region being so strongly different from the rest of the country appears to be the size of the Maori population in that region. It is clear that the English of children who are ethnically Maori has a considerable impact on the language of this area. Forms which are principally Maori are much more likely to be widely used through all social strata in this area than in other parts of the country.

Often we found that an expression was much more common in one particular region than in others. These forms contribute to a different overall linguistic “flavour” in each of the main regions. Some examples are:

- Counting-out rhymes: *The Sky is Blue* was found in the Northern Region
Father Christmas lost his Whiskers was found in the North Island section of the Central Region
Ickle Ockle Black Bottle was more common in the Northern Region
1 potato was more common in the South Island
- In the Northern area, *First the worst, Second the best* is most likely to be followed by *Third the golden eagle*. An alternative used largely by North Islanders is *Third the Nerd*. Children in the Central and Southern Regions (and thus the South Island) are more likely to say *Third the golden princess*.
- *Shot(ty)* as a word of approval was more common in the Northern Region than elsewhere. *Da bomb* as a term of approval was much more common in the North Island than the South.
- *Giddy* as a greeting was much more common in the South Island than the North. *What’s up?* was more common in the North Island than the South, and *Howz it?* was reported only by North Island schools.
- A person with no friends is called a *nif* in Christchurch, an *OTL* in Auckland, a *rej* in the East of the North Island, and a *reject* or a *loner* everywhere.
- The construction shown in *sweet as* is much more likely to occur with adjectives other than *sweet* in the Northern Region than elsewhere.

Thus there are likely to be differences in what children call things depending on which of these areas they live in. That in turn means that children who move from one region to another will have a significant learning task when they move if they are to fit into their new school. The further they move, the greater the linguistic differences that will be encountered. Some of the words which show variation are the names of basic playground games, but there are also likely to be differences in the words which children use to express feelings, and also in the range of senses of certain insult words.

Some words are so widespread that they will be acceptable anywhere in the country, while others are much less likely to be known in a new school. Children moving schools would do well to avoid the things which were newest in their old school, as these are less likely to be accepted in the new school. Everywhere in the country you could call something you like *cool* in 1999; words like *awesome* and *wicked* were much less

widespread; words like *primo* and *shot(ty)* were found in some regions only. The same is true of basic greetings: *Hi* and *See ya* were reported almost universally; *Catch ya later*, and *What's up?* were much more restricted in their occurrence. The migrating child would be wise to use more neutral terms until they find out what is in use in the new school.

Some customs also differ apparently randomly from one school to the next (or even within a school between different groups). One of the most noticeable instances of this was the customs associated with saying the same thing at the same time as somebody else. Some form of jinx operates in most of the schools we surveyed, but the words used, the penalties incurred and the rules for the clearance of the jinx are certainly not standard. A “personal jinx” in one school may mean that only the person instigating the jinx can clear the jinxed person; in another school, that may be called a “master jinx”, and any person may be able to clear a “personal jinx”. The clearance procedure may require someone to say the jinxed person’s name, or to say the “whole” name, or to say the name 3 or 5 (or more) times, or it may require the jinxer (specifically) to do any of these. The penalty may be that the jinxed person gets hit if they talk while under a jinx, or they may be hit once for each word said, or be hit a specific number of times. A particular school will have its own “rules” (unwritten, and changing arbitrarily over time). A child from another school has no way of knowing the rules in advance, and may incur the wrath of the locals by making assumptions about how jinxes work which are in conflict with the current rules in the new school.

In addition to a great deal of regional difference, the data showed a lot of social differences, too. This was particularly noticeable in fields such as greetings and farewells, where there were a lot of expressions which correlated highly with either low decile or high decile schools. Even more importantly, there were some words which were found primarily in low decile schools in one part of the country, but were much less strongly associated with low decile schools in another part. Children who move around the country may give a false impression of their socio-economic background by using such words, and as a result, suffer unexpected consequences. Teachers who move need to be aware that they may make inappropriate judgements about children’s backgrounds on the basis of such forms. Amongst the words in this category are the farewell “Later” and the address term “Bro”. In the Northern part of the North Island, these are only marginally more common in low decile schools than in high decile schools, but in the Central Region, both are strongly associated with low decile schools. Both were rare in the Southern Region.

There was plenty of evidence that children continue to use expressions which are traditional long after their impact has diminished, or even become obscure. A good example of this conservative language tendency is the fact that almost all schools reported that at least young children still say “First/Last back to the classroom is a rotten egg”. Most children today will not have experienced a rotten egg. The Wellington truce term *fans* can be traced back to the 1400s in Britain! On the other hand, *Third the nerd* is a good example of innovation. Not only is the extension of the chant beyond *Second the best* apparently largely a New Zealand innovation, but the use of *nerd* to rhyme with *third* must have arisen since 1950, when it appeared in a Dr Seuss book. However, we did not perceive any patterns in the environments where conservative or innovative forms would appear.

One of the most striking features of the language we elicited in our questionnaire was the enormous gulf between the language of the playground and the language of the classroom for the majority of children. This is not just a matter of “editing out” the swear words, although that is a significant feature of much of the language of the playground. For many children, it is likely that the language of the classroom is a foreign language when they first meet it. It will take almost as much effort for them to learn the language of the classroom as to learn French, and they will be expected to do it without formal tuition. That is a sobering thought. For example, they don’t use the word *ashamed*, but say things like *I felt shame*, or *I was shamed*. *Very* was rare in the data we elicited, being replaced by *so* or *really*, or *as* (i.e. the children rarely say things like *very cool*; they say *so cool*, or *really cool*, or *cool as*).

The language reported showed a high degree of creativity: there was lots of evidence that children play with language. This is not necessarily the kind of creativity recognised and rewarded in the classroom, but it shows a degree of linguistic awareness and an enjoyment of language jokes which is there to be tapped if the teacher knows how. Many children said that if they got all the answers to a maths test correct, they would say *All-righty*. This is clearly a pun, and typical of the linguistic jokes they enjoy. Such jokes are even better if they infringe taboos or invoke “gross” ideas, like *bag snot* as an alternative to *bags not*.

It is also clear that children’s playground language has considerable implications for students who do not have English as their first language. Many of the words which are commonly used by children interacting with each other in the classroom and playground will not be taught by ESOL teachers. Yet for the non-English speaking child, this is important vocabulary. They need to know expressions like “cool”, “sweet”, “it sucks”, “munted”, “nerd”, or they will not fit in linguistically. In many schools those with non-native English socialise with each other, and not with the locals. One of the reasons for this is almost certainly linguistic: they do not talk the same way as the locals, and so do not fit with them socially. Because they have all learned the same kind of ESOL English, they fit linguistically with each other. Their failure to socialise with local children deprives them of one of their most valuable contexts for learning NZ English, and their only natural context for learning these playground expressions.

The solution to this is not a simple one. It would not necessarily be easy or even appropriate for an ESOL teacher to teach these children to say “It sucks” for anything they don’t like. (Yet that is what their English-speaking peers will say.) Much of this sort of language is used by children **because** it is not used by adults. It thus needs to be learned from other children. But because these non-English speaking children frequently do not socialise with their NZ peers, they do not have the opportunity to learn them. It might be worth appointing a “peer tutor” for such students, and helping these peer tutors to become aware of the sorts of language which they need to teach.

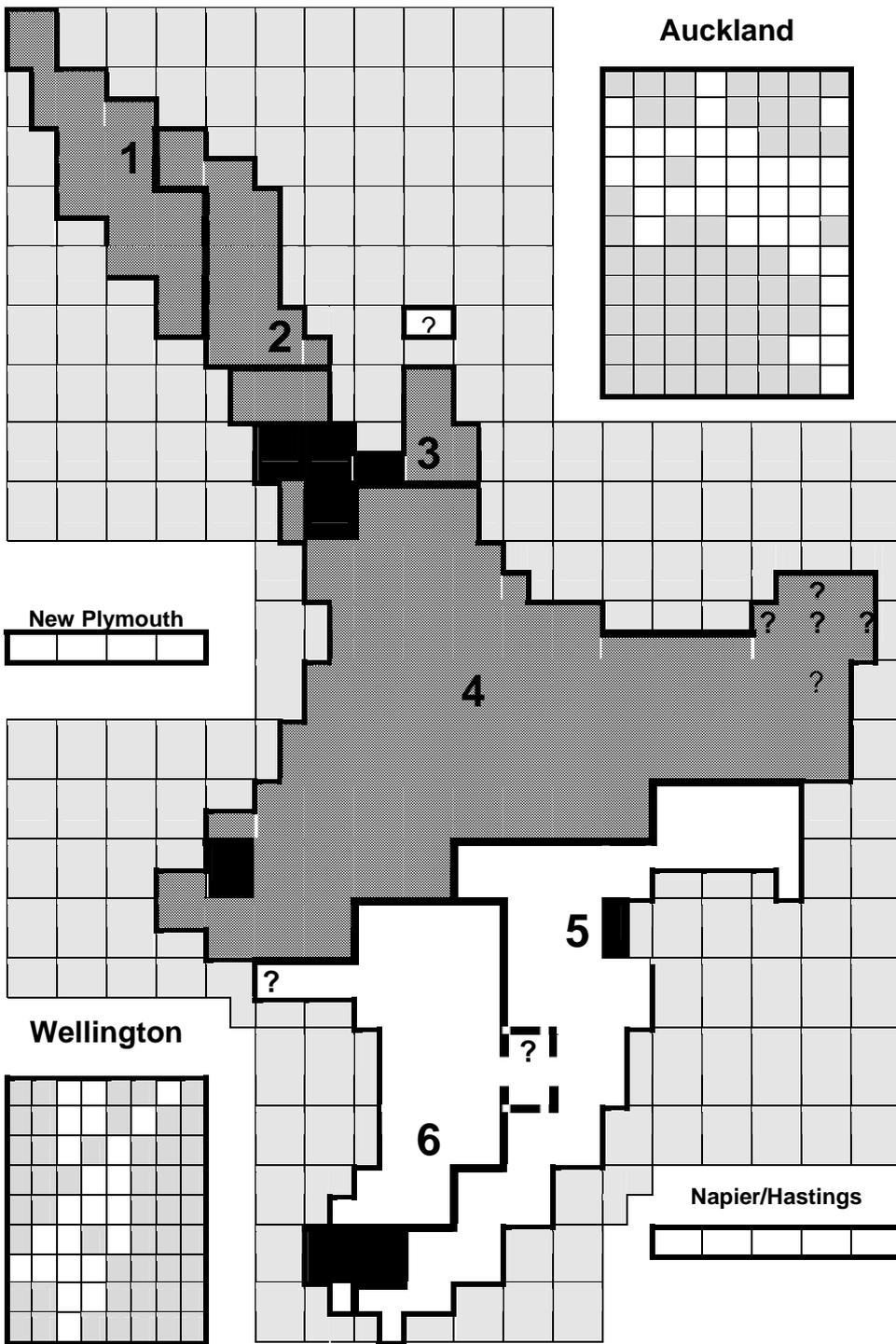
On a lighter note, the school visits revealed that many children believe that daddy longlegs spiders are the most poisonous spiders in the world, and that the only reason people are not regularly killed by them is that their fangs are too short (or weak) to penetrate human skin. Te Papa’s spider expert assures us that this is not the case! Perhaps the daddy longlegs would make a good topic for science, and this widely-held belief could then be counteracted with some facts!

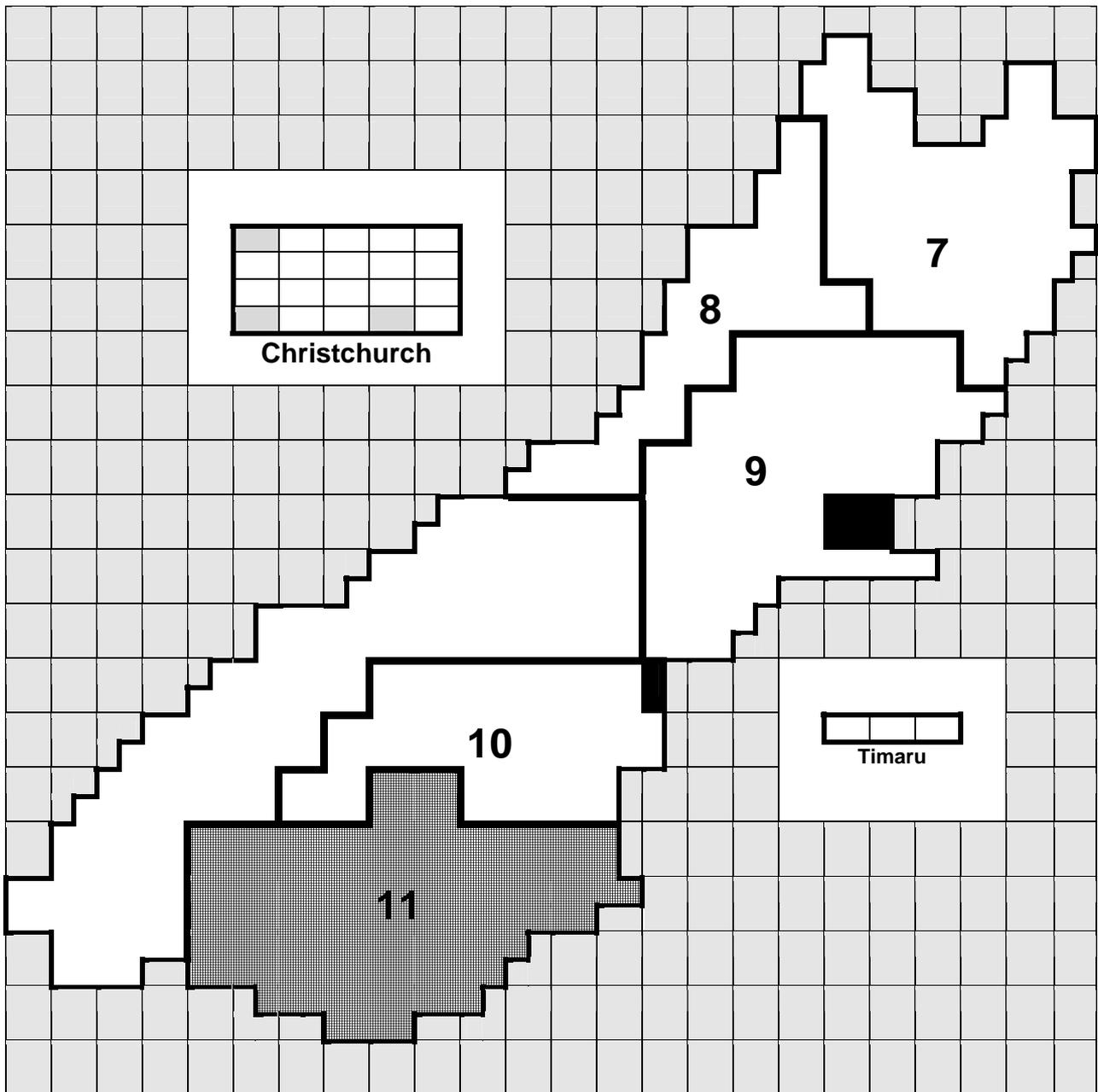
More information

A full discussion of the project and the results it provided can be found in Bauer, Laurie & Winifred Bauer 2003. *Playground Talk: Dialect and change in New Zealand English*. Wellington: School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies, Victoria University of Wellington

In addition, a great deal more information will be available by following links from this web-site: <http://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/research/Playground/index.aspx>

Map of Main Regions and Sub-Regions





Note: The boundaries shown are very approximate: clearly we do not have participating schools on all boundaries, and are also constrained by the gridlines. They assign all participating schools to the appropriate region, but nothing further should be read into them. Urban areas in insets belong to the surrounding region.

Main Regions:

The Northern Region (trellis shading) comprises sub-regions 1, 2, 3 and 4.

The Central Region (no shading) comprises sub-regions 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10.

The Southern Region (grid shading) is equivalent to sub-region 11.

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