

FEATURES

Island names retain traces of original use

MAURICE MCGREAL asks why we talk about *the* North Island, but not about *the* Stewart Island. People from overseas usually give themselves away by dropping the "the", which sounds odd to most New Zealanders. New Zealanders do not, generally, say things like, "I'm going to South Island next week."

This is a matter of whether the name is seen merely as a name or whether it still retains traces of its original use as a description. In general, names do not have a "the"; we do not say "the Wellington" (meaning the city) or "the Australia" (meaning the country). Definite descriptions, on the other hand, do have a "the": "the capital

is from 1773). Stewart Island has never been a description, only a name, and so has no "the". In a similar fashion, we often refer to the university in Canberra as "ANU", while the Australians insist on the definite article, and call it "the ANU" or "The Australian National University".

All of this is fairly straightforward. The real puzzle is why there are a few names which either can or must take a "the": the Hague, the Bronx, the Sudan, the Manawatu, the Weirapa.

Renwick Wright writes to ask about sentences such as, "The England coach was happy with his team's performance", and asks why we now hear "England" rather

than "English". As he quite rightly notes, we frequently do find nouns modifying other nouns, as in "car mechanic", so why should "England coach" sound odd, and what is going on?

The usual pattern in English is to use an adjective where there is one unless there is good reason not to. So we talk about "regional government" rather than "region government", but since we have no adjective for "traffic" we have "traffic light".

However, we talk about a "trick question" because a "tricky question" would mean something else. That is a good reason for not using the adjective. In the "England" versus "English" case, we have a per-

fectly reasonable adjective, which has worked well for centuries. However, it may be that people are starting to feel that the coach for England is no longer necessarily English, and so are starting to treat the case like the "trick" and "tricky" one.

They may find support for this in the fact that we must say "the New Zealand coach" (we have no adjective in common usage). Perhaps the parallel use of the country name supports the use of "England coach".

Finally, we can distinguish between an "English teacher" (somebody who teaches English) and an "English TEACHER" (a teacher who comes from England) by the stress

when we say the words. We cannot disambiguate "English coach" in the same way, so perhaps an alternative is required.

Adrian Moonen, among other comments, says, another problem is the use of an apostrophe to indicate "is", as it is now also used for "has". This can also be very confusing. "He's a servant." Does he have a servant or is he a servant? That might indeed be ambiguous, though no more ambiguous in writing than it would be in speech, but for two things.

Mostly speakers avoid the abbreviation where "have" is the main verb and where it might lead to such ambiguity. This is not an absolute rule, but a strong

preference. Where "have" is an auxiliary verb, the usage is anything but new.

In *Cortolanus*, Shakespeare says, "I have heard it said, the fittest time to corrupt a man's wife is when she's fallen out with her husband." This certainly looks like a reduced "has", even though "hath" was still a possibility and "has" was new at that period. In any case, the recent growth of "have got" in place of the main verb "have" means the ambiguity is less likely to arise in the first place.

■ Laurie Bauer is a linguist from Victoria University. Send your questions about language to uorais@dompost.co.nz



Laurie Bauer

WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

city", "the lucky country". We keep that little "the" at the front of "the North Island", making it a description, because that is the way we have referred to the islands for more than 200 years (the first quotation for such use in *The Oxford Dictionary of New Zealand English*