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Struggling with a trip to the Cabiddy Coast on a Sadaday



IT SEEMS that New Zealanders find phonological change in language more uncomfortable than lexical change or change in the classification of words.

Letters to editors of newspapers and periodicals deploring the sound of the Cabiddy Coast, Sadaday, Mary Christmas, and Loddo are familiar, but we are obviously more accepting of change in the new forms and uses we give to words.

The most prominent of word class changes is the use of nouns as verbs. We bookend our weekends with games of squash; we can go antiquing in Bulls; we own cars that debut life-saving technologies. Some athletes medal at the world games, while others action a protest. Nouns generously spawn adjectives. Anything and everything can be nuanced, and during stormy weather our traffic police spokespeople warn us that "People should not venture out until they can verify the roads are trafficable". Trafficable, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* attests, is rare, but obviously not obsolete as is also claimed. (We also trespass people, in accusing them of trespass.)

Certain brands and models of cars can apparently be storied – they become legends, as in "Perhaps the demise of GM's storied Oldsmobile brand is indicative of the problems" and "it's faster than the storied original Cooper S", both examples from the *New Zealand Herald's* motoring pages.

Some words have a somewhat promiscuous reputation – they reproduce by joining up with others.

Compounding two existing words

is an easy way of generating a new term, and usually the meaning is clear, with the new term containing elements of both words. Digital native is one of those, as is box-ticker. But recently researchers spotted a new cafe menu item: iwi tea. Iwi tea? Iwi tea is a large, bountiful shared teapot – enough for several people to have their own large cup. We are increasingly compounding and collocating Maori and English words, folding koha, kaumatua flat, and mental haka being some that we have recorded.

A BLEND from 2009 is bikoi, generated when protesters visited ACC Minister Nick Smith to show disapproval of ACC levy hikes, while huiette probably has no specific history and needs no explanation. It is unlikely many of these terms, along with sauvignon plonk and step-change (why do politicians use that word?) will have sufficiently lengthy lives to become dictionary entries. Usage is the criterion that lexicographers apply, and it is for that reason they collect citations, or examples of word use, as evidence of usage.

We can also create new terms by ellipsis, by shortening or abbreviating the compound terms we have created. An example is tiki tour. We have created a verb to tiki, and a noun tiki, both shortened forms of tiki tour. There is nothing criminal in taking a tiki.

Another change that we notice from the media is the use of eponyms, taking somebody's name and using it in a range of contexts.

Hence, we read of somebody having a case of the Kirwans, being Veitched, or we accuse journalists of Pilgerising an event or trend. In the former, John Kirwan's profile as a person who has suffered mental health problems lends itself to a euphemistic substitute term for depression. Veitch became a verb, too, and is actually listed in an online dictionary with the definition of beating somebody until admission to hospital is required. John Pilger, according to some critics, is guilty of sensationalism, exaggeration and innuendo.

In the *Sunday Star-Times* (March 7 this year), we read "no arrest has been made in the Haile-Sage's [murder] case. Why? Because the family has done a Kahui. Clamped up tight." We are now becoming accustomed to journalists using the family name however they will.

Adjectives morph easily into verbs, it seems. A colleague wrote that a friend "had fun at the airport belligerating Air NZ staff who were trying to stop a passenger carrying a not terribly big artwork on the flight". According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, belligerate has one known previous usage – in 1623. Its style label is obsolete. But not so, it appears. Obsolete is a dangerous label – for words (and our names) can come back to haunt us in more ways than one.

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LAST WORD

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