



Can Kiwi sheilas be mates or dudes?



MY COLLEAGUE, Pam, recently told me she had been taken aback when another colleague, Meg, addressed her as “mate”. Pam considers that “mate” is a term appropriately used by men and to men in New Zealand. Meg’s usage sounded too “blokey” to Pam.

The police anti-drink and drive advertisement which comprised just two words, “mate” and “Dave”, recognised the pervasiveness of this term among young New Zealand men – the ad’s target population. A group of young men are shown drinking in a pub and exchanging just one word “mate” over and over again, but uttered with a wide variety of different patterns of intonation and stress.

“Mate” serves as a greeting, a way of attracting attention, an expression of admiration, of disbelief, a challenge and a term of congratulations, among many more meanings. When the drunk driver of a car which overturns, killing several of his mates, returns to the pub on a subsequent occasion, he is acknowledged as “Dave” in response to his greeting “mate”. The point is clearly made; the use of first name rather than “mate” effectively distances him, conveying disapproval, and signalling that he is no longer a member of the in-group.

“Mate” is thus unambiguously coded as a term used by young, male New Zealanders to express mateship.

However, a recent article in the *Australian Journal of Linguistics* suggests that my colleague Meg

may be leading the pack in this area of language use. The article reports a significant gender change in relation to the term “mate”; it seems that young Australian women are now beginning to use it too.

A survey of 698 Australians (346 women, 352 men) indicated that more than 80 per cent of men of all ages reported using “mate”. But the pattern for women was very different: while 76 per cent of women under 30 reported using “mate”, only 37 per cent of those aged over 50 did so. The over-50s considered it a “masculine” term, or labelled it as “uncultured” or “inappropriate”.

Harry Orsman’s (Oxford) *New Zealand Dictionary* describes the term “mate” as a specifically British usage and marks it as “only colloquial”, implying that using it in more formal contexts is considered inappropriate. The dictionary also notes that a survey of Kiwi adolescents from the 1950s to 1980s indicated that “mate” was then the most popular term for a friend or acquaintance, and that three times as many boys as girls “noted it as a friendship term”.

It would be interesting to repeat this survey among current New Zealand adolescents to see if the pattern observed in Australia has begun to infiltrate New Zealand – as my colleague Meg’s usage suggests. Is Meg a harbinger of things to come or an idiosyncratic eccentric? We need research to answer this question.

“Mate” is a term which also emphasises equality. This may be another reason that it has spread

so extensively in Australasia, compared to Britain, where it is used mainly among working-class men. Our aggressively egalitarian societies are kept firmly in place by the “great New Zealand clobbering machine”, as Austin Mitchell called it, together with the sharp scythes systematically applied to “tall poppies”. No other societies have a term with quite the same connotations of insistent equality as Australasian “mate”.

WHAT about “dude”? or “bro”? Many American terms have displaced British terms over the years: consider truck/lorry, movies/pictures, gas/petrol. So we should not be surprised if an American solidarity term displaced “mate”. But the connotations of “mate”, “dude” and “bro” are very different.

Someone addressed as “dude” in the US is most likely to be young, male, urban, trendily dressed and very cool; a dude displays minimum emotion. “Bro” is a much friendlier term but carries additional social and cultural meanings.

While Meg may be in the vanguard of language change as a woman using “mate” to a female colleague, there is little chance she would get away with “bro”. It is interesting to reflect on why this is so – especially since we can happily refer to a group of women as “you guys”. But then who said language was logical?

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