

“Yahoo! It’s a”: Christchurch Birth Notices from 1905 to 2005¹

Jeremy Hornibrook

University of Canterbury

A diachronic study was made of birth notices in a New Zealand newspaper over a hundred years. In 1905 the style was passive, impersonal and contained what is now an archaic phrase. In contrast the 2005 notices exhibit an explosion in style and linguistic structure, the main feature being the personal and emotional content which is focussed on the baby. Also, there appears to be a change in the social significance of birth notices over a hundred years.

1. Introduction

Variation in language can be classified as according to the speaker (dialect) or the situation, called register. Register is sometimes called stylistic variation, and can involve spoken and written language. Ferguson (1994) makes a distinction between register and genre. He says that register variation is associated with “a communication situation (e.g. sports announcer talk) that occurs regularly in society”, whereas genre variation is associated with “a message type that occurs regularly in society”, such as obituaries, death and birth notices.

Montgomery (1995) gives a simple classification of register according to field (activity or subject matter), tenor (social relationship, involving features of formality and politeness) and mode (written or spoken). However, Biber’s *Situational Parameters of Variation* is most widely used. There are seven categories: I Communicative Characteristics of Participants

¹ This study was a final project in the New Zealand English course in the Department of Linguistics, University of Canterbury, in 2005. Helpful criticism from Dr. Margaret Maclagan is gratefully acknowledged.

(Addressor/Addressee, Audience); II Relations Between Addressor and Addressee; III Setting; IV Channel (written/spoken); V Relation of Participants; VI Purposes, Intents and Goals; VII Topic/ Subject.

Registers can vary widely in phonology, morphology and syntax, semantics and lexis. Semantic variations, lexical choice of words and slang all influence perceptions of formality and informality. Formal written language tends to contain a high number of nouns, attributive adjectives, prepositions and reduced relative clauses, and fewer but more formal verbs. A particular feature of written language is its use of passive voice. Biber (1988) has classified the difference between spoken and written language into four “sets”: A. Involved features; B. Informational features; C. Narrative features; D. Non-narrative features.

Most research studies on register have been synchronic, such as legal language, baby talk, advertising language, radio sports announcing, personal advertisements, and syntactic variation in newspapers. There have been far fewer diachronic studies. Biber (1995) considers diachronic studies to be important and states that “Register perspective is crucial to a complete understanding of language development and change”, and that “such [diachronic] studies are essential for a complete understanding of the processes of language standardisation, modernisation, and adaptation”.

In modern Western society announcements of significant social and personal events (Biber categories VI and VII) as a genre have traditionally been in the printed press, now called the printed media (Biber categories III and IV: written) in contrast to the newer audiovisual and electronic media. These are notices of births, engagements, marriages and deaths, known in the journalism trade as “hatches, matches and dispatches”. Even a cursory glance at contemporary birth notices in New Zealand gives an impression of an informality quite alien to an older style. Therefore, to investigate this impression, a diachronic study was made of birth notices from 1905 to 2005 in a New Zealand city newspaper.

2. Methodology

Birth notices for the month of August in the Christchurch newspaper *The Press* were obtained for the years 1905, 1955 and 2005 at the Christchurch City Library. Issues older than a year or so are stored on microfilm. In 1905 and 1955 birth notices were under “Announcements” on the front page. In 2005 they are on the inside of the last page of the sporting section. The number of death notices for

the same month was also noted (Table 2). For comparative purposes, information about live births and deaths in New Zealand for the years investigated was gathered and is presented in Table 1.

Each birth notice entry was examined for its structure in respect to: name, date, place, parents, baby (son/daughter, name), baby/mother health, thanks expressed, and additional comments.

Table 1: Births and deaths in New Zealand 1905, 1955, and 2005*

	Live Births	Deaths	Deaths/Births
1905	23,682	8,061	34%
1955	55,596	19,225	35%
2005	57,745	27,034	47%

* Source: Statistics New Zealand (Te Tari Tatau)

Table 2: Birth and death notices in *The Press* for August 1905, 1955, 2005

	Births	Deaths	Births/Deaths
1905	40	76	53%
1955	348	374	93%
2005	271	377	72%

Table 3: Basic structure of August 1905 birth notices in *The Press* [N = 40]

Name		Other Information		Mother		Baby		Mother/baby health	
Father's surname	40	Date	39	"the wife of"	40	Child's name	0	"Both doing well"	9
		Place	40	First name	1	"... a son/daughter"	20	"Both well"	1
				Maiden name (nee)	0	"... of a son/daughter"	20	"twin daughters"	1

3. Results

1905

In August 1905 there were 40 birth notices. The notices for Monday 7th August are shown in Figure 1, and the analysis of features in Table 3. There was an invariable formal structure, beginning with the father's surname, the date and the place. In every notice the mother is called "the wife of.....", and only one mother's first name is given. The child is introduced as ".....a son/a daughter" in half. The other half contain an additional preposition as ".....of a son/daughter". In a quarter there is a combined reference to the mother's and baby's health. The overall structure is passive and impersonal.

The place of birth is shown in Table 4. In 1905 nearly all births were at home. There is a relatively large number of birth notices from country areas compared with Christchurch city. Also there was a relatively small number of birth notices (Table 2) compared with death notices, suggesting that in 1905 birth notices may have had a high social significance. Birth notices were relatively infrequent and seemed to come mainly from farming areas, which may have implied land ownership and higher social status.

Figure 1: Birth notices from *The Press* (Christchurch) on Monday, August 7th, 1905

BIRTHS
<p>WHALE – On August 5th, at Mrs. King's Nursing Home, the wife of Mr. Seth R. Whale, of Goldsmiths' Hall, a son; both doing well.</p> <p>BAKER – On August 3rd, at Mrs. Welsh's Nursing Home, Medbury, the wife of T. Baker, Esq., Brooksdale, Hawarden, of a daughter; both doing well.</p> <p>ENGLAND – On July 24th, at "West Hoe," 33 Chester Street, the wife of R. W. England, jun., of a son.</p> <p>McFADDEN – On August 3rd, at Blen-</p>

heim, the wife of J. McFadden, of a
daughter; both doing well. Timaru
papers please copy.

**Figure 2: Some of the birth notices from *The Press* (Christchurch) on Tuesday,
August 2nd, 1955**

BIRTHS

BELL – On August 22, at “Calvary”, to
Betty and Ron Bell, a son.

BENJES – On August 19, at Rangiora,
to Christine and Lester Benjes – a
daughter. Both well.

BLOK – On August 22, 1955, at their
home, Clifton Hill, to Nellejet and
Frans Blok – a son. Both well.

CATTELL – On August 22, 1955, at
the Maternity Annex, Hutt Hospital,
to Mar-jorie and David Cattell – a son.
Both well.

CLEMENTS – On August 21, at
Calvary Hospital, to Barbara and Bob
Clements – a daughter.

DEAKINS – On August 19, at
“Calvary”, to Margaret and Harold
Deakins – a son.

1955

Some birth notices for Tuesday August 2nd are shown in Figure 2. The analysis is in Table 5. A similar structure to that of 1905 remains, beginning with the father’s surname and the date and place of birth. However, the parents are now usually mentioned by their separate first names. The formal “.....wife of.....” persists in 17 notices. The mother’s maiden name (“nee.....”) is now mentioned in a quarter. The baby is always referred to as “..... a son/daughter”, but the baby’s name is given in only three notices. In 75% mother/baby health was

mentioned, usually as “Both well” or in more detail for sad events. There were no additional expressions of thanks.

The overall structure remains formal (passive voice), but with details of both parents’ names and the mother’s and baby’s health some personal features are appearing.

The 1955 birth notices show that nearly all babies were born in hospitals (Table 4), with home births being rare. There are nearly as many birth notices as death notices, suggesting that they have become a more universal custom.

Table 4: Place of birth from *The Press* birth notices for August 1905, 1955, 2005

1905					Total	
Christchurch city		Country		Other New Zealand/Overseas		
20 (16 at home)		15 (context implies home)		5	40	
1955						
Christchurch city		Country and other South Island		North Island and Overseas	Not stated	
197 (Three home births. All others stated or implied hospital birth)		125		24	2	348
2005						
City hospitals	City, not stated	Other South Island	Other New Zealand	Overseas	Home	
147 (54%)	68 (25%)*	23	17	13	3	271

*Where not stated the likely place, implied from the context, was a Christchurch city or other hospital. Therefore, approximately 80% were in Christchurch hospitals.

Table 5: Basic structure of August 1955 birth notices in *The Press* [N = 348]

Name		Other Information		Parents		Baby		Mother/baby health	
Father's surname	346	Date	346	"the wife of"	17	Child's name	0	Not stated	87
		Place	346	Mother and father first names	224	"... a son/daughter"	347	"Both well"	254
				Maiden name (nee)	97	"Twins. A daughter and son"	1	Details**	7
				Formal variations*	10				

*For example "to the Rev. P. N. And Mrs Wright"

**For example "a son (stillborn)"

2005

In August 2005 there were 271 birth notices, with 150 having pictorial embellishments. They display an enormous change in stylistic, linguistic and social complexity, which precludes just a simple contrast with previous years. However, in Table 6 the basic elements are summarised. In the majority there is a single surname, but in a fifth there are two family names. Reference to the mother's maiden name ("nee") persists. The date of birth is nearly always given and the place of birth is usually given.

Although a quarter retain mother/baby health as "Both well" there is a new emphasis on the baby. A quarter now mention that the baby is a new brother or sister for one or more siblings, and for nearly as many the birth is described as "the safe" or "the speedy arrival of.....". In 77% thanks is expressed to midwives or doctors. In a small number of notices there is thanks to families or family members, including "whanau". In 30 there were additional emotional comments (e.g. "A gift from God").

In 1905 and 1955 the passive structure was a social convention. Newspapers probably did not allow any variation. The 2005 notices exhibit an expansion and variability of structure and style, as detailed in Table 7. However, there is a new "predominant structure", namely ".....announce...." and "....to announce....."

with the latter accompanied by adjectives which , in descending frequency, are: “delighted, proud, pleased, happy, excited, overjoyed”, occasionally with intensifiers “absolutely” and “very”.

The second common structure is “.....welcome....”, followed by “...congratulate...” A minority of notices display humorous innovation in structure and language. Examples of 2005 birth notices are displayed in Figure 3.

In the new active “announce” form the announcement is usually by two parents (Christian names), but a quarter are by the parents and named siblings. Some are by siblings alone, by grandparents, two families, by a single mother, or by two women. The names and notice structure no longer convey the automatic assumption that the parents are married.

In 2005 the vast majority of births were in hospitals (Table 4). Although the number of live births in New Zealand in 2005 was equivalent to 1955 (Table 1), the proportion of birth notices to death notices was less (Table 2), suggesting that birth notices have become less of a social convention and more of a spontaneous gesture.

Table 6: Basic structure of August 2005 birth notices in *The Press* [N = 271]

Name		Other Information		Mother/baby health		Baby		Thanks expressed	
Single surname	214	Date	264	“the safe arrival of ...”	58	Child’s name	270	To staff ∅	208 (77%)
Two surnames	57 (21%)	Place	203	“the speedy arrival of ...”	9	Weight	202 (75%)	To families or family members f	18
						Baby description #	50		
Mother’s maiden name (nee)	72 (27%)	Additional comments *	30	Other information **	15	“A brother/sister for ...”	76		
				“Both well”	25				

*For example “Welcome to our world little man”, “Drambuie all round!”, “A gift from God”.

**Including pre-maturity (10), post-maturity (1), death (2), twins (2)

#Typically expressions of affection such as “our little bundle of joy”, “their very special girl”

◇For example, “Special thanks to [midwife], you were awesome”

fFor example, “... to all our whanau supporters”

Table 7: The new structures and additional features of August 2005 birth notices in *The Press*

"announce/to announce"		212
Adjectives	delighted	64
	thrilled	50
	proud	35
	pleased	25
	happy	2
	overjoyed	1
Intensifiers	absolutely	3
	very	1
Opening exclamations in predominant structure notices *		7
Pictorial embellishments		150
Predominant structure announcement by		
	Two named parents	140
	Parents and one or more siblings	58
	Siblings alone	3
	Grandparents	6
	Two families	2
	Mother alone	1
	Two women	1

*Actual instances are: "Yahoo!", "Subdivision has occurred", "Bold and brave....", "Happy Mondays", "Proud Parents", [Samoan poem], and "The Wilson brothers have arrived".

Figure 3: Examples of birth notices from *The Press* (Christchurch) in August 2005

Figure 3a Predominant structure *announce/to announce*


CLYNE — FOOTE — Ayleath and Lee are delighted to announce the birth of their daughter, Imogen Elizabeth, on August 3, 2005, at St George's Hospital, London. A little sister for Samuel. All well.

Figure 3b: *Welcome* structure

Kelvin and Yolanda welcome, with much love, their precious daughter, Zoe Victoria (3425gm) on August 6, 2005. Thanks to family, friends, staff at Christchurch Women's Hospital, Burwood Hospital and Debbie Sheridan.

Figure 3c: Exclamatory phrase in a predominant structure notice

WEBSTER

 **A SPORTING WEE BOY**

YAHOO! Scott and Leisa are thrilled to announce that they have a son, Matthew James (7lb 5oz), who entered their lives on Friday August 5, 2005, at 2.03 p.m. A wonderful wee brother for Ashley. Many thanks to Barb Harwood and staff at St George's Hospital.

Figure 3d: Novel constructions

JACKSON — Forget the Big Mac, the Whopper or the McChicken, there is now a new combo in town. Brodie (2) now has a beautiful little sister Elise Brooke Jackson, born August 3, 2005, 8lb 6oz. The speedy arrival required great work by the drive thru staff of Yvette Giles, Dr Jim and everyone at the prof unit at Christchurch Women's Hospital. Camille (nee Stricke), Al, Brodie, Elise and PJ wish to thank everyone for their support, especially Heather Gran, Nana and Granddad (Chief Baby Sitters).

4. Discussion

Comparison of Christchurch birth notices over a hundred years reveals a dramatic evolution in their style, reflecting significant social changes. In 1905 New Zealand was a British Colony, becoming a Dominion in 1907. British customs and style were reflected in most aspects of life. Marriage was patriarchal, and a woman's role implicitly defined. Dalziel believes that "pioneer conditions reinforced women's familial role and gave positive value to a feminine, maternally based identity" (1977, cited in Bunkle, 1980). The 1905 birth notices had a traditional formal structure, expressed in the passive voice. The notice was listed under "Announcements", effectively in the reduced form "It is announced that.....", beginning with the father's surname, followed by date, place, "the wife of", the child and the formulaic "both doing well" in some. Linguistically the unique feature was that half of the notices had an additional preposition to make what is now an archaic phrase, i.e. ".....of a son/daughter".

During World War II (1939 - 1945) "women entered the waged workforce in unprecedented numbers" and it was wondered whether this would "lead to permanent change in women's work and women's status?" but "a short answer

will do: no..... marriage became more romantic, the Great Mother's Mutiny ended, and a baby boom, 1945-1970, was on" (Belich, 2001). By 1955 the basic structure of birth notices had not changed, apart from the introduction of personal details such as parents' first names and the mother's maiden name, but not the name of the baby. Sad events were in formal language. Marriage of the parents was implied.

In contrast, from 1955 and 2005 there have been profound social changes which can be briefly summarised as: the revival of the women's movement, contraception, legalised abortion, enhanced remuneration and career choice for women, more equality in matrimonial law, delayed marriage, and higher maternal age for the first child. In 2005 birth notices convey an explosion in their social information, style and linguistic features. In 1905 the Addressor (in the Biber classification) was, by implication, the father. By 1955 it was the father and the mother. In 2005 the announcement can be by persons other than the parents. In earlier birth notices the Addressee was, by implication, the community at large. Now it may be to a specific "family and friends".

Syntactically the main feature of the 2005 notices is that they are in the active voice. "Announce" and "welcome" may be accompanied by emotional adjectives. There may be opening exclamations (Figure 3) or even poetry. The name of the baby is now universal, and the description of the baby can include endearments, often with colourful use of metaphor. Thanks is expressed to staff associated with the birth, and even for the modern assistance of the Fertility Clinic. Additional expressions, in general, imply an attitude of gratitude and joy. The fundamental new feature of the 2005 birth notices is their personal and emotional content.

According to Biber's involvement versus informational scale the earlier informational style has evolved to an involved style. Ferguson (1968) has commented that the register range of a language is one of the most immediate ways in which it responds to social change, and that the difference between a developed and an undeveloped language is its ability to modify register. This diachronic study of New Zealand birth notices has demonstrated such an evolution in one particular genre of New Zealand English.

5. Summary

The study of Christchurch birth notices over a hundred years has revealed a transformation in linguistic structure from a strict passive formula with little personal content to a uniquely personal announcement of diverse structure, now including Maori and other languages.

References

- Belich, James. 2001. *Paradise reformed. A history of the New Zealanders from the 1880s to 2000.* Auckland: Penguin Books
- Biber, Douglas. 1988. *Variations across Speech and Writing.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Biber, Douglas. 1994. An analytical framework for register studies. In Biber and Finegan (eds)
- Biber, Douglas. 1995. Registers, dialects and variation. In D. Biber *Dimensions of register variation.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Biber, Douglas and Edward, Finegan (eds) 1994. *Sociolinguistic perspectives on register.* New York: Oxford University Press
- Bunkle, Phillida. 1980. The origins of the women's movement in New Zealand: The Women's Christian Temperance Union 1885 - 1895. In Phillida Bunkle P. and Beryl Hughes (eds), *Women in New Zealand Society.* Auckland: George Allen & Unwin
- Dalziel, Raewyn. 1977. 'The colonial helpmeet'. *The New Zealand Journal of History* 11: 112-123
- Ferguson, Charles. A. 1968. Language development. In J.A. Fishman and C. A. Ferguson (eds), *Language problems of developing nations*, 27 - 35. New York: John Wiley
- Ferguson, Charles. A. 1994. Dialect, register and genre: working assumptions about conventionalisation. In Biber and Finegan (eds)
- Montgomery, Martin. 1995. *Introduction to language and society.* London and New York: Routledge