

Homogeneity, Heterogeneity and New Zealand English

Laurie Bauer
Victoria University of Wellington

Abstract

What does it mean for a variety of language to be 'homogeneous' (or 'uniform') and what does it mean for it to be 'pure'? Do the linguistic theories that guide our understanding of new colonial varieties of English really fit what we know about the development of New Zealand English and what we can deduce about the development of New Zealand English? This speculative piece considers the ways in which the myths and the theories may not match as easily as we tend to assume.

Everybody knows that Australasian varieties of English are surprisingly homogeneous. At least, that is what we are repeatedly told:

Australian speech is remarkable for its comparative uniformity.
(Mitchell & Delbridge 1965: 11)

The homogeneity of Australian English is remarkable.
(Turner 1972: 121)

What seems to be the pre-eminent characteristic of these two forms of English [AusE and NZE] is their overall uniformity.
(Eagleson 1982: 427)

...the overall homogeneity of the language [NZE]
(Burridge & Mulder 1998: 38)

or more specifically:

There is remarkably little regional variation within New Zealand itself.
(Hawkins 1973: 3)

Das Englische in Neuseeland ... kaum regionale Unterschiede aufweist [English in New Zealand shows hardly any regional differences; my translation].
(Hansen et al 1996: 169)

Yet everything we have learnt about variationist linguistics in the past forty years says that this cannot be right. Languages are not homogeneous: they are sites of vast numbers of small differences which allow speakers to distinguish between various social groups within the society – regional as well as social. That New Zealand is no different from any other society in this regard has been shown time and time again (see, e.g., Bayard 1987; Holmes et al 1991; Ainsworth 2004).

So what is going on? Even if we assume that all of the citations given above are referring to regional rather than social variation (and while this is explicit in some of the sources, it is not obviously true of all), why does New Zealand English have a reputation for homogeneity which analysis shows to be erroneous? What do terms like ‘homogeneous’ or ‘pure’ mean in this kind of context? And what does this show about the linguistic or social situation in New Zealand?

To think why New Zealand English should be seen as homogeneous, we need to consider the kind of English that people arriving in New Zealand were used to. In Britain there was, in the late nineteenth century or early twentieth century, so much regional variation, that it did not seem much of an exaggeration for the fictional Henry Higgins in G.B. Shaw’s *Pygmalion* (Shaw 1914: Act I) to be able to claim:

I can place any man within six miles. I can place him within two miles in London. Sometimes within two streets.

In any country where this can be true (even in fiction), the fact that it might not be possible to pinpoint the origins of a speaker accurately, even within a hundred miles, is, of course, ‘remarkable’. In terms of the history of New Zealand, things are less remarkable.

The Maori settlement of New Zealand has been on-going for over a thousand years, and there are regional varieties of Maori within New Zealand which, while not allowing the kind of precision of which Higgins boasts, nonetheless would allow Maori speakers to be placed regionally. The Anglophone settlement of New Zealand, on the other hand, is of far briefer duration with 1840 usually cited as the date of the arrival of Anglophones and their culture. Those English speakers who first arrived were not uniform in their pronunciation of English. There were Scots and Irish; there were Devonians and East Anglians; Americans visited as sealers and whalers. Gordon et al (2004) give a picture of how much variation there could be in even a small community. And while immigrants from particular British ports

may have been landed in particular New Zealand ports (a) the port of embarkation cannot be taken to imply that those embarked there all spoke the variety current in that port and (b) the new immigrants did not long remain in the port where they landed, but spread widely through the country. The process whereby this leads to a mixed dialect in subsequent generations has been well canvassed in the literature (e.g. Trudgill 1986, Gordon et al 2004) and is not the focus of this contribution. However, there are some things to say about it.

We do not need to carry out any great statistical surveys to be convinced that not every locality in New Zealand had the same mixture of immigrants in it: the same percentage from Scotland and England, the same percentage from east and west, north and south, and in similar social roles. But if we do want figures, Gordon et al (2004) have done some actual surveys from e.g. Milton and Arrowsmith which prove this to be true. To the extent that a mixed dialect is a predictable amalgam of the input dialects as claimed by Trudgill (2004), with majority forms from the founders being adopted at each point in the system where there was variation, the new mixed dialect should be different in different locations round New Zealand. This conclusion would be strengthened rather than the opposite by Gordon et al's (2004) demonstration that some of the settlements in New Zealand were settled by relatively homogeneous groups of immigrants, where the majority forms would be forms from one local type of British English.

Yet in general terms our experience of travel in New Zealand is different: travel 200km and the chances are you will not be able to hear from the accents of the locals where you have ended up. If our ears are accurate in this regard (see below), it implies – as do the general descriptions of the development of New Zealand English – that all these tiny regional varieties were levelled out in the development of a greater New Zealand variety. One way in which this might have happened is that the population was extremely mobile, and accommodated over larger and larger areas as people travelled. Certainly, there were a large number of mobile people, but farmers, by their very profession, are tied to the land they farm, and might be expected to form the core of their communities, and New Zealand is (and even more so, was) a country of farmers. A less controversial scenario would be that the mobile part of the population passed the emerging standard around, and it was picked up by the people in the individual communities and then spread within the communities from there, as appears to have occurred with Northern playground language in and around the Southern town of Bluff (Bauer & Bauer 2003: 9). This still does not explain how members of the small communities knew which features to emulate, especially since the travellers would not all have had New Zealand accents.

As well as the theory that the output of dialect mixture could, in principle, be determined relatively deterministically, we have another theory which seems to suggest that we should find a host of local varieties in New Zealand. That is the notion of the founder principle (Mufwene 1996), which has been widely accepted as explanatory in the development of Creoles and other mixed varieties. According to this principle, the varieties used by the earliest settlers in a new situation have a disproportionate influence on the form of the mixed variety which eventually emerges.

Yet the only feature which is regularly cited as arising from this kind of domination of the founders is the so-called “burr” in Southland, the non-prevocalic /r/. This is widely assumed to be a remnant of the original Scottish settlers of the region (see e.g. Bartlett 1992, Gordon & MacLagan 2008: 66). Yet if this is the case, the relationship between the original settlers’ version of English and the current dialectal version is by no means simple. First, it should be noted that not only the Scots pronounced a non-pre-vocalic /r/, but so did the Irish and large numbers of the English settlers. Accordingly, there must have been several models of [r]-sound to adopt. Second, we know (Hay & Sudbury 2005) that most of the relevant people were not fully rhotic, that is, they did not pronounce every possible non-pre-vocalic /r/, though as far as we know there was no general pattern as to which potential /r/s they actually pronounced. And finally, if it was the Scots whose pronunciation was defining, why should the /r/ sound be pronounced in modern varieties in precisely the environment that the Scots did not have, namely after the NURSE vowel. The Scots do not have a single vowel spanning all the words pronounced with the NURSE vowel in modern New Zealand; rather, depending on their geographical origin, they have two or three vowels, one in words like *fern*, *alert*, a second in words like *fur* and *word*, and for a few a third in words like *bird* and *fir*. In other words, the most widely cited example of these two theoretical principles in New Zealand English does not look, upon closer consideration, like a very convincing example.

There could be other examples, but we do not know about them. Ainsworth’s (2004) study of the intonation of Taranaki and Wellington Englishes shows differences between the two areas, but we do not know when the differences arose. Kennedy (2006) found some minor, but possibly surprising, regional differences in other areas, but in most instances there is nothing to show that they are long-established in the regions. The evidence for the lack of variation elsewhere is essentially negative; although some people report differences (Gordon 1997), nobody has been able to pinpoint any consistent differences in pronunciation between different parts of New Zealand. Such negative evidence does not mean that there are no regional pronunciation variants in New Zealand. It suggests that any that there are can be considered to be

relatively minor, and are not distinct enough to stand out from the range of mainstream New Zealand variation as being clear local variants.

Let us move on to another, much-quoted, early assessment of the kind of English spoken in New Zealand. McBurney (1887) says of the English in New Zealand that it, “as a whole, is purer than can be found in any given district at Home”.

What can he mean by ‘purer’? One thing that he might mean is ‘closer to a notional standard’. That would make a great deal of sense, since one of the things that was presumably absent from the speech of the youth of New Zealand by the 1880s was any of the strongly marked regionalisms which would have allowed Henry Higgins to find his way round England. Even the early stages of producing a New Zealand variety of English would ensure that very few New Zealand-raised children would have maintained the northern back vowel in the STRUT lexical set (so that *love* becomes [lʊv]) or the south western voicing of initial fricatives (so that *fox* becomes [vʌks]). However, McBurney does not just say ‘purer than at Home’ but ‘purer than in any given district at Home’. If ‘pure’ is to be interpreted as ‘closer to a norm’, then McBurney seems to mean that there is not as much variation away from the standard in New Zealand as one might expect in Britain. The point is presumably that the British standard accent (now called RP or Received Pronunciation, although that term was not in use in McBurney’s day) can be heard anywhere in Britain, and variation away from that standard, ‘in any given area’, is variation towards the local dialect. In New Zealand he found no evidence of the local dialect, and felt that a whole dimension of variation was absent here.

In other words, the much vaunted purity of New Zealand English and its ‘remarkable’ homogeneity are, I would suggest, the same phenomenon, namely the lack of clearly distinct and widespread local regional varieties with low prestige.

Why should such regional variation be missing? I think there are two factors at work here.

The first is the sociology and mythology of the period. This was during a period in which the settlement of New Zealand was seen as the opening up of a new country (new to the Anglophones, that is), and the establishment of a new colony (probably not at the period a new country) which reflected the best of the old country. Part of this reflection of the best was a linguistic reflection, and the best was probably more a case of avoidance of the worst

than of any imposition of the (socially perceived) best. If part of the mythology of the new colony was the equality of all settlers, this was to be reflected linguistically as well as in terms of social interaction, and it was thus helpful to the mythology to claim a uniform variety of English. This must have been even more important for the soldiers during the two world wars, where identity as a New Zealander would have been emphasised – there being nothing like a good war to stimulate nationalism. They may not have considered the matter overtly, but they would have wanted to sound New Zealand rather than as though they came from Gisborne or Oamuru.

The second factor is a linguistic factor. People coming from Britain knew what to look for to define a person's origins in Britain; but they knew that in New Zealand those phonological markers were no longer meaningful: someone with an Irish accent could just as well come from Kerikeri as from Invercargill. British regionalisms were no longer relevant in the New Zealand context. However, speakers and listeners of the day had nothing to replace this with. If there were local regional accents in New Zealand in the 1880s (as surely there must have been), the markers of those accents were not salient to the population. They could not be used by the general New Zealander to predict anything about their interlocutors, and would thus have been ignored. It must also have been the case that during the early years of settlement, such markers as there might have been were so swamped in the sheer amount of phonological variation to be heard in the community (as such a large proportion of the population would have had a non-New Zealand accent) that it would have been doubly difficult to perceive what was relevant. Only once the native-born population becomes socially dominant (presumably some years after the number of New Zealand-born children outnumber the immigrants, which is in about the 1880s) does it become possible to think of listening for markers of New Zealand regional origins.

But even then, we can note, New Zealanders still do not really know what to listen for. Rather we have got used to listening for clues to ethnic identity (although we may have difficulty in specifying what clues we actually respond to). The so-called 'Southland burr' has achieved some kind of salience – though it is not clear what makes it salient, when it became salient, or even why this feature should be more salient than say /hw/-retention, or final voicelessness in *with*. There seems to have been a period when the use of the TRAP vowel in words like *dance* was largely a South Island pronunciation, but this is seen as a shibboleth for Australians, not for South Islanders. So what makes something salient is really an open question. Work by Ainsworth (2004), Kennedy (2006) and Marsden (2007) may start to give us robust clues, and in another fifty years or so it may be that the myth of homogeneity (or

regional homogeneity) will no longer fit the ethos of the times, we may be more willing to accept evidence of regional diversity in accent.

In the meantime, even if we think we know what 'homogeneity' and 'purity' mean, and even if we have come a long way in our understanding of how New Zealand English developed, we should still be challenging some of the accepted wisdom on the subject, because we do not yet seem to have an entirely coherent picture of what happened or how the reality of the New Zealand experience reflects the theories of language mixture.

References

- Ainsworth, Helen 2004. Regional variation in New Zealand English: the Taranaki sing-song accent. Unpublished PhD Thesis, Victoria University of Wellington.
- Bartlett, Christopher 1992. Regional variation in New Zealand English: the case of Southland. *New Zealand English Newsletter* 6: 5-15.
- Bauer, Laurie & Winifred Bauer 2003. *Playground Talk: Dialects and Change in New Zealand English*. Wellington: School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies, Victoria University of Wellington
- Bayard, Donn 1987. Class and change in New Zealand English: a summary report. *Te Reo* 30: 3-36.
- Burridge, Kate & Jean Mulder 1998. *English in Australia and New Zealand*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- Eagleson, Robert D. 1982. English in Australia and New Zealand. In Richard W. Bailey & Manfred Görlach (eds), *English as a World Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 415-438.
- Gordon, Elizabeth & Margaret MacLagan 2008. Regional and social differences in New Zealand phonology. In Kate Burridge & Berndt Kortmann (eds), *Varieties of English 3: The Pacific and Australasia*. Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 64-76.
- Gordon, Elizabeth, Lyle Campbell, Jennifer Hay, Margaret MacLagan, Andrea Sudbury & Peter Trudgill 2004. *New Zealand English: its origins and evolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gordon, Pamela 1997. What New Zealanders believe about regional variation in New Zealand English. *New Zealand English Journal* 11: 14-21.
- Hansen, Klaus, Uwe Carls & Peter Lucko 1996. *Die Differenzierung des Englischen in nationale Varianten*. Berlin: Schmidt.
- Hawkins, Peter 1973. The sound patterns of New Zealand English. *AULLA XV: Proceedings and Papers*. Sydney, 13.1-13.8.
- Hay, Jennifer & Andrea Sudbury 2005. How rhoticity became /r/-sandhi. *Language* 81: 799-823.
- Holmes, Janet, Allan Bell & Mary Boyce 1991. *Variation and Change in New Zealand English*. Project report to the Social Sciences Committee of the Foundation for Research, Science and Technology. Wellington: Victoria University Department of Linguistics.
- Kennedy, Marianna 2006. *Variation in the pronunciation of English by New Zealand school children*. Unpublished MA Thesis, Victoria University of Wellington.
- Marsden, Sharon 2007. On the emergence of regional varieties of New Zealand English. *New Zealand English Journal* 21: 64-72.

- McBurney, S. 1887. Colonial pronunciation. *The Press* [Christchurch] 5 October, p. 5.
- Mitchell, A.G. & Arthur Delbridge 1965. *The Pronunciation of English in Australia*. Revised edition. Sydney: Angus and Robertson.
- Mufwene, Salikoko 1996. The founder principle in Creole genesis. *Diachronica* 13: 83-134.
- Shaw, G.B. 1914. *Pygmalion*. Reprinted in *The Bodley Head Bernard Shaw*, Vol IV. London: Bodley Head, 1972.
- Trudgill, Peter 1986. *Dialects in Contact*. Oxford and New York: Blackwell.
- Trudgill, Peter 2004. *New Dialect Formation: The Inevitability of Colonial Englishes*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Turner, G.W. 1972 [1966]. *The English Language in Australia and New Zealand*. Second edition. London: Longman.