

The Language We Use

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Abstract

Journalistic and general public reactions to a 2005 TV One documentary on New Zealand English took a largely negative view to the development of the variety. This paper considers some of those reactions and the role of linguists in providing data and analysis that might allow a more considered response.

I'm just going to have to learn to hesitate
To make sure my words
On your Saxon ears don't grate
But I wouldn't know a single word to say
If I flattened all the vowels
And I threw the 'R' away

You say that if I want to get ahead
The language I use should be left for dead
It doesn't please your ears
And though you tell it like a leg pull
I think you're still full of John Bull
You just refuse to hear

The Proclaimers, *Throw the 'R' away* (1987, Warner Chappell Music, Ltd.)

1. Introduction

Feelings run high when it comes to discussions of language, particularly when these discussions concern the extent to which a language has changed or the way in which the youth of today speak. New Zealand English is no exception. When TV One screened a documentary called *New Zild – The Story of New Zealand English* in their Documentary New Zealand (DNZ) series on May 16th 2005, the response was immediate. A number of journalistic pieces appeared in the same week, including a TV review by Jane Clifton (2005) and an article on New Zealand English, based on the documentary and with additional interview material, by Denis Welch (2005), as well as other similar pieces in local and national newspapers. Over subsequent weeks a steady flow of letters to the editor of the *Listener* continued the discussion started by the documentary and by Welch's article. The letters almost exclusively

expressed a negative evaluation of the state of New Zealand English. As pointed out by Lane (2003: 241), published letters tend to be negative reactions to other discourses. For this reason they may not be representative of general opinion, and they may indeed be the reactions of a rather narrow demographic group. Nevertheless, they clearly contribute to the public perception of a debate which in this particular instance started with a documentary that presented an overall positive view of the state of New Zealand English. In this short article I want to consider some of the reaction to the documentary and to comment on the role of linguists and educators.

Linguists are often berated for sitting in their ivory towers and failing to give advice on how people should speak. This seems particularly to be the case when discussion focuses on claims that standards are slipping. Thus Clifton claims that the *New Zild* documentary featured “laissez-faire interviewees” (with reference to the expert linguists who appeared in the documentary), that it carried a “strain of PC”, and further that “(t)he unspoken message of this programme was, it’s not okay to have an opinion against the further flattening of our vowels” (Clifton 2005). As language professionals, linguists more often than not see their role in these debates as providing analysis of how things are – pointing out that by the time people start complaining about change it is generally already too late, and possibly furnishing a projection of where change is heading. Such objectivity would be admired from other professionals, but is frequently condemned when “controversial, class and politics-ridden subjects” (Clifton 2005) such as how we speak are under scrutiny. What this objectivity – along with expert knowledge and analysis – can contribute to such discussion is a sense of perspective. It is refreshing from this point-of-view to see that linguists are now contributing regular columns on language issues to newspapers with broad circulation (Elizabeth Gordon to the *Christchurch Press*, and the ‘Watch your Language’ team at Victoria University of Wellington to the *Dominion Post*). However, even if we wanted to, I suspect we would never be able to stem the flow of complaints about how today’s youth are speaking, but we can at least provide some accurate information that people on either side of the standards debate can use to give their arguments greater legitimacy.

2. Sources of variation and change

So we should first check out what the DNZ documentary provides by way of historical perspective. Quite appropriately, Jim Mora and his team reported research that revealed that even in the 1880s, school inspectors in New Zealand were remarking on the development of an accent which differed from those in the UK, and which was becoming more noticeable in young people’s speech (see also Gordon 1983). There was even a move to import

more British school teachers to halt the progress of the change. But to little avail – soon the teachers themselves were speaking with this “colonial twang”. What this suggests is that language change has always been happening, and will happen, largely despite efforts to stem the tide. Linguists typically go beyond observing and commenting on the ubiquity of change, and discuss how it is that change comes about. One of my expert colleagues consulted by Welch points out that there is always a great deal of variability in how a given variety of a language is spoken, but that what contributes to change is that some of the variability becomes meaningful through its association with particular groups of speakers, who exploit particular ways of speaking as part of their identity. So “(t)he drivers of change in accents are all social – that is, there’s nothing particularly linguistic about it” (L. Bauer, cited in Welch 2005). So what are these social drivers of change? Mora points out that a major influence on the development of *New Zild* is that New Zealanders, through their particular way of speaking, are – consciously or otherwise – asserting a New Zealand identity. Far from cringeing, Mora points out, New Zealanders are increasingly proud of the way they sound, and are establishing an identity removed from Mother England.

But where does the variability come from in the first place? In most cases we cannot say for sure, and for the purposes of most arguments about change it probably does not matter much. This is because once certain aspects of the variability have become linked with social drivers of change then it is to those social factors that the variability becomes attributed. But as experts, we can perhaps comment on some of the lay perceptions of what gives rise to variability. Take for instance Daniel Clenott of Masterton, who expounds his own theory of the origin of the New Zealand accent, namely that there are “clenched jaw/clogged throat positions [that] are themselves the result of Kiwis’ cultural habit of always speaking with a smile” (Clenott 2005). He has also heard it said that clenched jaw speech resulted from ill-fitting false teeth (see also Cryer 2002: 6). But clenched jaws hardly explain the changes in the diphthong set, particularly the more open-jawed starting point for the FACE¹ vowel, which is now more like the Southern British English PRICE vowel, so that New Zealand English *space* sounds like Southern British *spice*. Nor do clenched jaws or clogged throats explain the more open starting point of the New Zealand GOAT vowel (see also Bauer and Warren 2004b). Nor, more generally, does the ill-fitting false-teeth explanation fit well with the observation that most change is introduced by the younger members of society.

¹ I follow here the convention, initiated by Wells (1982), of using specific words in small capitals as exemplars of a particular vowel.

In another letter, David Rawson of Marlborough reckons that there is an explanation other than clenched jaw/clogged throat/ill-fitting false teeth one, namely laziness. There may be an element of truth in “laziness” as an explanation for the change of “*call* to *caw*, *world* to *weld*, and *house* to *hearse*” (Rawson 2005), since “laziness”, or “economy of articulatory effort” as linguists would probably term it, is behind many of the changes that have occurred quite naturally in languages world-wide. But clearly not all changes are attributable to laziness. For instance, the example of *everythink* for *everything* cited by Rawson as “a very lazy tongue making an inexact cessation of the all-important final syllable” not only provokes a phonetically inaccurate description from the correspondent, but also negates his “laziness” argument, since *everythink* actually adds a further consonant (with an additional burst of energy) to the end of *everything*, as is obvious to anyone thinking about the sounds of the word, rather than the letters.

3. Change and communication

A further misgiving expressed by Clifton concerning the Mora documentary is that “(w)hat was lacking ... was someone to remind us that speech is about communication” (Clifton 2005). Like many correspondents to newspaper editors, Clifton maintains that changes in our pronunciation are resulting in poorer communication. She cites as an example “the degeneration of ‘hear’, ‘ear’ and ‘fear’ till they sound exactly the same as ‘hair’, ‘air’ and ‘fare’”. There are a number of points that the linguist can make here to inform the discussion. The first is a factual one – it would appear that Clifton sees the change as affecting what is known as the NEAR vowel (the vowel in ‘hear’ etc.) rather than the SQUARE vowel (the vowel in ‘hair’ etc.), but most of the evidence accumulated by New Zealand linguists over more than twenty years shows that the merger of the vowels in these words is a move in the pronunciation of the SQUARE vowel towards that of the NEAR vowel (for recent summaries of this change, see Warren and Hay 2006; Warren, Hay and Thomas 2007). The second point is to query what is meant by the “degeneration” of a vowel. The implication is that one vowel starts off as somehow either superior or inferior to another, which is a nonsense, suggesting as it does that the vowel in *hair* is meritorious when the intended word is *hair* but not when it is *hear* – clearly the journalistic prose here is skewing us towards a particular conclusion. A third point is that if we were to remind Clifton, as requested, that speech is about communication, then we would also have to remind her that despite the changes that she refers to, young people with an identical pronunciation of *hear* and *hair* are still able to communicate with one another, even when it comes to discussions of listening or of coiffures. It is undeniably true that the merger of two vowels in these words results in some new homophones, but English was full of

homophones already, and these seldom result in miscommunication.² Psycholinguistic research (see Warren et al. 2002) shows that homophonous forms such as *bank* result in the automatic activation from our mental lexicon (the dictionary in our heads) of all meanings associated with those forms, such as “side of a river” as well as “financial institution” as well as “turn a plane”. Such is the efficiency of our language processing system that we are subsequently able to use contextual information to select with great speed and facility (i.e. automatically and without conscious knowledge) from amongst these candidate meanings. So it is unlikely that a young New Zealander hearing that a car has “ear bags” is likely to suffer from a major communication breakdown. Correspondents who bemoan such changes are likely to be those for whom the two vowels in question are still different, but even these speakers will only suffer at most a temporary hiccup in comprehension. The reaction is more likely to be “I don’t like the way that sounds because it is different from how I talk”, but this often gets converted to “I don’t like the way that sounds because it impairs my comprehension.” Justifying a prejudice in this way would hardly be tolerated if the difference were one of gender, race, colour or sexual orientation, but it does seem to be more acceptable in issues concerning language. As the Proclaimers song cited at the beginning of this article points out, there are people who, no matter what our pronunciation, will continue to “just refuse to hear”.

4. Attitudes to difference

What appears to be emerging from much of the discussion of New Zealand English pronunciation is that intergenerational differences are often less well tolerated than differences between varieties. That is, older New Zealanders may be less tolerant of the pronunciation patterns that they hear from their own children than they are of those coming from overseas visitors. This may currently be particularly acute in New Zealand because of the rapid changes being seen in the New Zealand way of speaking. This results in what is at times an uncomfortable co-existence of markedly different ways of talking, so that, as Clifton points out, “a treasured word like ‘sex’ has in this country a synonym [by which she presumably means homonym or homophone] in the rough cloth bags used for collecting rubbish”. That is, younger speakers pronouncing the word *sacks* are being heard by older speakers as saying *sex*. Research suggests that listeners are incredibly sensitive to dialectal differences between speakers – they rapidly adjust their perceptual systems to accommodate such differences (see for instance Hay, Warren and Drager 2006; Warren and Hay 2006). What is only just emerging from such research is the extent to which listeners also make adjustments to accommodate to

² One estimate (Whitney 1998:209) is that one in four words of connected English prose is in some way ambiguous.

differences within a dialect community (pronunciation variation that might be attributable for instance to differences in gender, age or other social groupings. E.g. Hay et al. 2006; Johnson, Strand and D'Imperio 1999; Strand 1999).

5. The pronunciation of *women*: a case study

The pronunciation of the word *women* in New Zealand English seems to have stirred up a good deal of comment in the round of Letters to the Editor that followed the *New Zild* documentary. It is also an example which provides some scope for linguistic analysis and insight. Ian Hood of Blenheim complained that New Zealanders do not distinguish *women* from *woman*, and claims that this is “part and parcel of the Kiwi inability to pronounce a short ‘i’, of which *women* contains two” (Hood 2005). But Shirley Goodwin of Lyttleton protested that as a native New Zealander she can pronounce *women* correctly with two short “i” vowels and that “mispronouncing this word is ignorance, not inability” (Goodwin 2005). Goodwin is not alone in producing a distinction between *women* and *woman*, though she is in a rapidly diminishing minority. Recent speech data collected for the New Zealand Spoken English Database (NZSED, see Warren 2002) happen to include readings of a sentence containing the word *women* (though unhappily there were no examples of *woman*). The word was in a context that made it clear that the plural was intended (... *most women loathe their* ...). Auditory analysis of *women* from 72 speakers, evenly distributed across two regions (Wellington and Hamilton), two sexes and three age ranges (18-30, 31-45, 46-60) shows that around two-thirds of the instances sound like *woman* (Warren 2007). This is equally true of speakers from the two regions and of either sex, but is more likely for under-45s (at around 80% of cases over both groups) than for the older speakers (54%). In other words, there really is a merger going on here, and one which is pretty well advanced for all age-groups, especially those under 45.

An important factor that makes the historical *woman/women* distinction (as maintained for instance in British English [ˈwʊmən] vs. [ˈwɪmɪn]³) a likely candidate for change is that it is a rather exceptional way of marking the singular/plural difference in English, i.e. using vowel contrasts in two syllables. It is a common observation that changes in language frequently reduce the count of exceptions to the more general patterns (e.g. by analogical extension or levelling, cf. McMahon 1994: 70-74). Levelling of the *woman/women* difference would at least put the pair in line with examples like *sheep* and *fish*, where singular and plural are identical. But why would this be happening particularly in New Zealand? It may well be that other changes in

³ As given in OED online (Oxford English Dictionary, second edition, 1989), accessed 1 April 2008.

the Kiwi way of speaking are influential here, as pointed out in the following paragraphs.

Linguists would agree with Goodwin that Hood is wrong to attribute the pronunciation of *women* to a simple inability to pronounce a “short ‘i’”. Kiwis can and do pronounce a “short ‘i’” vowel (known as the KIT vowel); it is just that the New Zealand KIT is different from that found in other varieties (see e.g. Bauer and Warren 2004a: 46-7 for a description of this vowel in New Zealand English). It is in fact one of the features that sets New Zealanders off from most of the rest of the English-speaking world, and might even be considered something to be proud of. It is of course parodied in cross-Tasman comparisons of *fish and chips* as “fush and chups” (NZ) vs. “feesh and cheeps” (Australia). In fact, the New Zealand KIT vowel is remarkably similar to the schwa vowel frequently found in unstressed syllables in English (as in the second syllable of *woman*). This approximation of KIT and schwa would make the second syllables of *women* and *woman* highly similar.

In addition, the /w/ preceding the first vowel in *women* is likely to cause rounding of that vowel (Warren 2007). A perceptual result of this rounding is that the vowel also sounds like it is produced with a tongue articulation further back in the mouth, i.e. it sounds retracted, and because of this retraction and rounding it is perceptually more like the FOOT vowel than the KIT vowel. This has been a “non-standard” feature of English for some time (Hickey 2004:592). Interestingly, this influence of /w/ on the pronunciation of the KIT vowel is reflected in some 15th century spellings in Scots English with <o> and <u>, as in <wondow> for *window* and <wull> for *will* (Jones 1997: 79). In the case of New Zealand English *women*, Warren’s (2007) detailed analysis of the NZSED recordings mentioned above shows that while there is retraction of the first vowel of *women* (contributing to its confusion with *woman*), there is considerably less retraction of the first vowel in *window*. This suggests that there are other influences at play here – one may be the following bilabial /m/ in *women*, but another is likely to result from the levelling factors mentioned above. It is also worth noting in this context that New Zealand English in particular shows potential for confusability of the FOOT and KIT vowels. This is because the variety contains an “innovative value” of the FOOT vowel (Bauer and Warren 2004a: 48), the value often found in words like *good*, and reflected in the spelling *gidday*. As a result, “there is danger of overlap [of FOOT] with the KIT vowel” (Bauer and Warren 2004a: 49). Although the innovative value shows a change of FOOT towards KIT, i.e. is not in the direction we see in the first vowel of *women* becoming more like that of *woman*, the mere fact that there is some confusability of FOOT and KIT makes it unsurprising to find overlap of *women* and *woman*.

The above linguistic analysis of *woman* and *women* shows that more general linguistic trends, including changes in New Zealand English vowels, have led to the confusability of the two words, rather than “mispronunciation” resulting from either “ignorance” or “inability”.

6. Conclusion

One of the sentiments expressed in the Proclaimers song cited at the beginning of this article is that even if we can eliminate pronunciation differences between speakers of different varieties or from different social groups (“If I flattened all the vowels/And threw the ‘R’ away”), this may not remove other barriers to communication (“You just refuse to hear”). Reflecting on the journalistic pieces and letters that followed the Mora documentary, one wonders whether, even if linguists and educators wanted to and indeed were able to eliminate the pronunciation differences commented on there, communication would be improved. Our role must surely be to provide evidence and analysis that will at least lead to a more informed discussion of how and why languages change.

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