



Laurie Bauer
Emeritus professor of linguistics, Victoria University

Changes that sneak up on us

Language Matters

We are frequently told that the only languages which do not change are dead. Whether we want to believe it or not, English – as a living language – is changing.

We recognise some of the changes easily: the introduction of the word *lockdown* in the Covid context, for example, or the variation in pronunciation of the first syllable of *dynasty* so that sometimes it sounds like *din* and sometimes it sounds like *dine*.

Here are a few things which are apparently changing, some of which you may not have noticed.

We are starting to hear *much* used for *many*, as in *there weren't much people there*, and *there's too much discussions*. This is still rare, and usually only spoken, but because *a lot of* can easily be used instead of both *much* and *many*, having one expression to cover both environments is not new.

People are no longer saying *is concerned* in expressions like *As far as money, I never seem to have enough*. This is now well established, although relevant contexts are not particularly frequent.

We are gaining an apparently excrescent verb in expressions like *The point is, is that we don't know the answer*. The double *be* is now heard from presidents and the hoi polloi alike, even if grammarians are not quite sure what the function of the extra verb is.

Because, for more and more people, *prince* and *prints* sound just the same, we find that *incidence* and *incidents* sound the same, and the two get confused. As a result, we have the new plural *incidences*, meaning “more than one incident”.

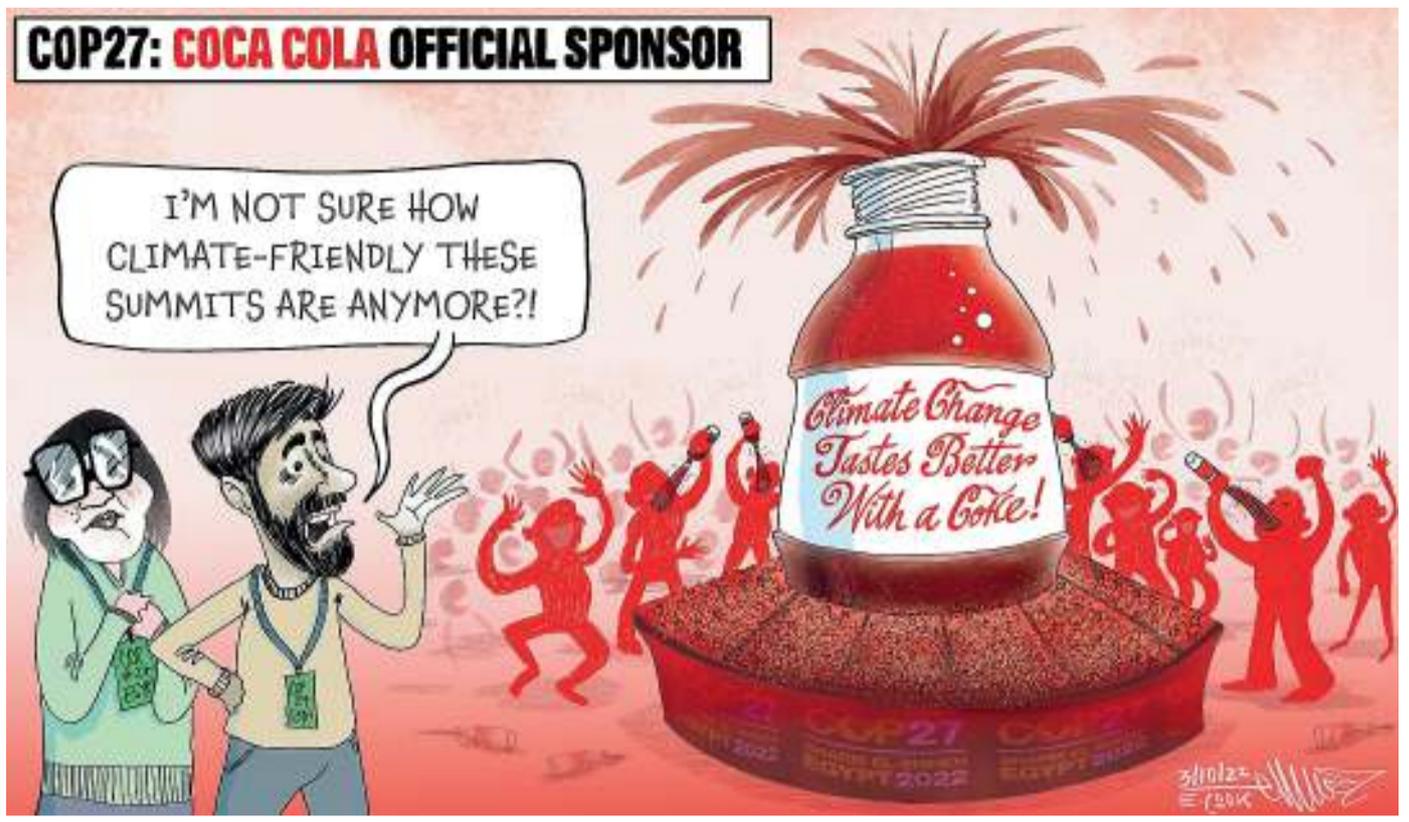
For years, foreigners have thought that New Zealanders were saying *pen* when they were really saying *pan*. But now there is a pair where New Zealanders themselves seem confused. They use *then* instead of *than*. You have to listen carefully to pick it up, because you expect to hear *than*.

If you imagine State Highway 1 in the North Island as a straight line, Kaitaia is at one end and Wellington at the other. In between, we find Hamilton. So Hamilton is *between Kaitaia and Wellington*. Similarly, if I worked for the university from 1979 to 2014, then I worked for it *between 1979 and 2014*. But increasingly, people say that I worked for it *between 1979 to 2014*. That is *between ... and* and *from ... to* are mixed together in a syntactic blend.

Think how you would pronounce *tsetse fly*, *tsunami* and *Sri Lanka*. Not very long ago, there was only one way to pronounce each. *Tsetse fly* was pronounced with an initial *tet*, *tsunami* was pronounced with an initial *s*-sound, and *Sri Lanka* was pronounced as though written *Shri*.

The reason is simple: native English words do not allow *ts* or *sr* in initial position, so English speakers found ways to avoid these problems. Now, it seems we care less about fundamental English patterns, and we more frequently pronounce these words with initial *ts* sounds and initial *sr*. This is driven by the spelling, and also by wanting to pronounce foreign words as they are pronounced in the original language. Yet we still pronounce *Paris* with a final *s*-sound (unlike the French) and talk about *Venice* rather than *Venezia*.

You may find some of these changes incomprehensible, you may think they are good or bad, they may annoy you, or you may not even have noticed them. It is typical that we do not notice a linguistic change until it is well advanced, by which time it cannot be undone.



Iran protests are lessons for liberal democracies



Donna Miles
Iranian-Kiwi writer based in Christchurch

On the last weekend of September, more than 80 cities worldwide held rallies in solidarity with protesters in Iran. The ongoing women-led protests – the largest Iran has seen in years – started after the death in custody of 22-year-old Kurdish woman Mahsa Amini, arrested on September 13.

Mahsa was arrested for her bad hijab – failing to wear her hijab properly – by Iran’s morality police, tasked with upholding the theocratic government’s hijab law. This law requires women to cover their hair and wear loose-fitting clothing in public.

Any engagement with the morality police is absolutely terrifying, especially when it results in arrest. There are many stories of torture, humiliation and sexual harassment of women in custody, which is why, when stopped on the street, women do their utmost to resist arrest.

As a young woman living in Tehran, I was stopped by two morality policemen on the street for having nail polish on. I will never forget how terrified I felt and how humiliating the whole experience was. But I was lucky because I was let off with just a long lecture about the importance of piety in upholding revolutionary values. Like most women in my situation, all I took away from that lecture was stored resentment towards religious fundamentalism and a determination to fight patriarchy with every bone in my body.

Unfortunately, Mahsa Amini was not so lucky. She was dragged away in a van and was dead three days after her arrest. Details of her death are disputed by the Iranian government, which denies she was beaten and claims she died of a heart attack.

For Iranians, the leaked hospital photo of Mahsa in a coma was enough to release 43 years of pent-up anger against a regime that has locked up and executed thousands of dissidents. Every day since her death, many brave young women and men have taken to the streets in protest.

The most common slogan being used in the protests inside and outside of Iran is simply: “Woman. Life. Freedom.” This slogan, often

chanted in Kurdish and Farsi, has become a manifesto for the demands of Iranians for democratic change. It is reported it first emerged on a note written by Kurdish woman Shirin Alam Hooli, a political prisoner in Iran, who had it on a wall next to her prison bed. She was executed in April 2010.

In Rojava Kurdistan (in northern Syria), women have been at the forefront of the struggle for democracy and gender equality. As my Kurdish author friend Behrouz Boochani put it, women in Rojava are already manifesting the ideals of “Woman. Life. Freedom” as they put equality front and centre. The Rojava revolution is often called the “most feminist revolution the world has ever witnessed”.

Iran has a long history of feminist struggle against fundamentalism. As far back as the middle of the 19th century, feminist scholar and poet Fatimeh Baraghani, known as Tahirih, a Baha’i woman, in an act of protest against women’s oppression, took off her veil during a prominent meeting of men. At the time, even looking at a woman’s shadow was regarded as a sin. Tahirih’s actions and words eventually led to her murder.

Today, the slogan “Woman. Life. Freedom” is shouted, everywhere, as loudly by men as it is by women. This unity in purpose, in what is essentially a feminist movement, is something the liberal democracies in the West are still struggling with. In the West, feminism is still regarded, by many, as either obsolete, or against men. For the protesters in Iran, there is no doubt that securing women’s rights will lead to liberation for everyone.

Another significant element of the Iran protests is their diversity and the inclusion of ethnic minorities. Baluchis, Kurds, Arabs, Turks and all other ethnic and religious minorities are coming together under the same progressive slogan because they believe that the fight to uphold the principles of equality is the only way to end the suppression of their culture, language and economic rights.

Liberal democracies in the West often underestimate the importance of upholding the rights of minorities as an essential element of a healthy democracy.

Lastly, protesters in Iran have recognised the toxicity and dangers of fundamentalism and dogma. In the West, the damaging ideological dogma of neoliberalism is responsible for a remarkable variety of crises, from the financial meltdown of 2007-08, to today’s cost of living crisis.

It seems to me the best way to uphold democracy and equality everywhere is to follow the same principles guiding protesters in Iran: “Woman. Life. Freedom”.

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