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Difficult times for dictionaries

I was shocked when, on a recent search for some obscure facts about French words, I ended up using the online edition of the Trésor de la langue française (The treasure of the French language – the most comprehensive dictionary of modern French) and discovered that since it was completed in 1994, no further work has been done on it. (Fortunately, the Robert French dictionary is kept up-to-date.)

It made me very glad that a similar fate has not overtaken the Oxford English Dictionary, which is (at the moment) regularly updated online.

To give you some idea of what this means, the following are just a few of the words which the Oxford English Dictionary has added since the year 2000: alt-right, Anthropocene, anti-vaxxer, Brexit, burkini, click and collect, Covid, crowdfunding, e-cigarette, to Facebook, fat-shaming, gig economy, glamping, hashtag, mansplaining, neurodiverse, parkour, paywall, podcast, selfie, to unlike, virtue signalling.

Similar neologisms are now not recognised in France's TLF. And when we add new meanings of old words, the problem expands.

The difficulty for dictionary writers and publishers is the internet. Dictionaries with free access are now easily available online, and people expect to be able to discover what they want to know free of charge. If publishers have no income from an online dictionary, they cannot afford to pay lexicographers (who specialise in writing dictionaries) to keep dictionaries up-to-date.

I have friends who were made redundant because it was getting unaffordable to employ teams of lexicographers. In fact, the commercial position is worse than that, since it costs just to keep a dictionary available online. Since 2012, there has been no-one whose job is to trace new New Zealandisms.

In principle, dictionaries can be made available on CD or for download as well as online, or put behind paywalls, and people can be charged for that. But I have bought major dictionary CDs which have become unusable as the operating systems for computers have changed. The idea that the new electronic age keeps material available is a myth: the information has to be continually reformatted to remain available.

The one exception to the general rule that print dictionaries are a dying breed seems to be dictionaries for language learners.

These contain specialised information on grammar that first-language speakers don't care about, but do not have particularly extensive word-lists. Even these dictionaries are having to accommodate to the new electronic environment. And new translating dictionaries are no longer as common as was once the case, as Google Translate and other similar programs take over the field, sacrificing detail and accuracy for ease of access.

Does it matter?

People who play Scrabble and do crosswords will think it does. Lawyers who want to know how to interpret the law and how to write new laws will think it does. Anyone interested in the way languages change and develop will think it does. Novelists, poets and translators who want to use language carefully will think it does. Anyone who wants more than a superficial attempt at a meaning and a single spelling for a word will think it does. Scholars of the future who want to trace the language and the changes in culture that are embodied in the language will think it does.

In times of economic adversity, influential cultural items can no longer get the financial support they need. Let us hope the dictionary is not on the way to becoming a cultural fossil.



Ardern embodies the very essence of Kiwiness



Donna Miles

Iranian-Kiwi columnist and writer based in Christchurch

It was the day the controversial UK Home Secretary Suella Braverman had used the words “swarms” and “invasions” in describing refugees. My English friend, Penny, was furious about it.

“They have no decency and no sense of fair play”, she said. “All they think about is how to enrich themselves and their friends,” she continued, fuming about the Tories, their dehumanising language, and the way they had completely wrecked the country.

But it was what she said next that will always stay with me: “It is really hard to live in a country whose leaders don't reflect your values.”

Hearing the comment, I immediately thought how lucky we have been to be led by an amazing woman whose values reflected our own.

I left my own home country of Iran precisely because its new revolutionary leaders did not represent my values. Arriving in New Zealand, nearly 20 years ago, I soon noticed, as all newcomers to this beautiful country do, the unmissable Kiwi values of fairness and empathy.

To me, these values are the very essence of Kiwiness and the reason behind the popularity of our prime minister, both at home and overseas.

It was empathy that guided her compassionate response to one of the most shocking and cruel acts of terrorism the world has ever seen. And it was her sense of fairness that guided her to do everything possible to successfully protect the many Kiwis who were most vulnerable to the deadly effects of Covid.

While Boris Johnson in Britain was talking about taking it “on the chin” and letting Covid rip through the population, and while Donald Trump was espousing the benefits of injecting bleach, Jacinda Ardern was telling us to behave like we have Covid to protect “others”. And we all listened to her because we trusted her at the time when trust in politicians was at its lowest worldwide.

We felt safe and reassured that incredibly tough decisions were being made by someone who genuinely cared about people and their wellbeing.

It is easy to trust someone who puts “others”

first, who is capable of communicating clearly, and who is demonstrably intelligent and capable.

All this came incredibly naturally to her, because she was acting on her internalised values, her Kiwiness. She never put a foot wrong because she was not role-playing. She never looked awkward because she was not upholding a false image. She was being herself: kind, compassionate and hardworking. She genuinely cared to do the right thing and always did her best.

To me, that is Kiwiness: you do your best.

And she did all this with utmost humility. Her humbleness was also a familiar Kiwi trait.

I come from an Iranian culture that encourages assertiveness and self-confidence, and although this has its good points, it can also easily spill into arrogance and hubris.

I have always been impressed with the humbleness of most Kiwis and saw the prime minister's lack of ego as a welcome contrast to the over-inflated and insufferable egos of other world leaders, such as Johnson and Trump. It was all these qualities that endeared our prime minister to many New Zealanders and to the world.

I recently returned to New Zealand after a seven-month visit to London. I can't tell you how many times, during my trip, the very mention of New Zealand would, almost automatically, generate comments like: “You have a very nice woman prime minister”, or “wish we could have her as our leader”.

Having said all that, it has to be acknowledged that many people in New Zealand and overseas are not fans of Ardern; some even despise her.

The push for co-governance, the Covid mandate, the prolonged lockdowns and some extra burden on businesses and landlords have all played their part in creating this great hostility and, in many cases, pure hatred towards Ardern.

But notice that in all of these cases, there is an element of “me” and “my privileges” that stand against the “common good”.

This does not mean that individual grievances are not valid. Many have suffered a great deal and are continuing to suffer. The Kiwi sympathy must also be extended to them and “common good” also requires that we refrain from marginalising people through dismissal.

As Ardern's premiership comes to an end, we must remember that nobody is perfect and that she got enough of the big calls right.

Our prime minister has been a global beacon, providing New Zealand and the world with a gold standard in courageous but empathetic leadership. She did this during some of this country's darkest hours. I thank her for everything she has done, for embodying Kiwiness.

“She never looked awkward because she was not upholding a false image.”