



The Dominion Post
17/06/2009
 Page: 5
 Features
 By: Paul Warren
 Region: Wellington
 Circulation: 94598
 Type: Metro
 Size: 298.04 sq.cms
 Frequency: MTWTF--

A real case of different strokes for different folks



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WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

I HAVE been asked a number of times to give advice on the question of whether we should use "different" with "to", "than" or "from". The trouble is, the more I mix with speakers from different backgrounds, the less certain my instincts become. I recall feeling quite strongly about this, but my views are probably now different to/than/from the beliefs I once held about which preposition is "right".

History does not help us a great deal, as a range of prepositions have been used with "different" over the centuries. For instance, the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives citations with "to" and "from" dating from the late 16th and early 17th centuries, together with "unto", "against" and "with". "Different than" is somewhat later, and seems at first to have been used mainly to avoid more cumbersome constructions such as "different from that which", before becoming more widespread.

Various authorities – often self-proclaimed authorities – have argued more forcefully for "from" than anything else. I have seen it argued for instance that, because the "di-" in "different" means "apart", and we say "apart from", then we should say "different from".

Others claim that, because we say "different from", it is logical that we should say "different from". A counter-argument to this appeal to logic is that other related verb-adjective pairs do not share the same preposition, such as "accords with" and "according to".

As with so many linguistic options, the choice of preposition depends on a number of factors. One is the formality or style of language being used. A rather blunt measure of formality is to compare speaking and writing. On the whole, "different from" is used more in writing than in speech, at the expense of the other two forms.

Estimates based on language corpora

(collections of written and/or spoken language, transcribed and organised so that they are easy to search) have "different from" in around 90 per cent of cases in written texts, compared with around 69 per cent in speech.

Another factor is the dialect of the speaker/writer. While they both prefer "different from", the big difference between American and British English is in the relative usage of the other two forms. In both written and spoken material, the British prefer "different to", while Americans tend towards "different than".

This is most marked in the patterns for spoken language – British English has 27 per cent "different to" but only 4 per cent "different than", while American English has less than 1 per cent "different to" and 30 per cent "different than".

Where does New Zealand practice stand in relation to this? Current usage from an internet search (undertaken on February 4, 2009) shows that web domains with the .nz suffix have 59 per cent "from", 35 per cent "to" and 6 per cent "than".

"Different to" is clearly preferred over "different than", which is also found for .uk domains – 51 per cent "from", 35 per cent "to", 14 per cent "than". However, the web as a whole (therefore including, one would assume, a large amount of text from American domains, and with a sample size 36 times bigger than the combined .nz and .uk domains) gives 67 per cent "from" usage, with just 9 per cent "to" and 24 per cent "than".

Of course, there is no guarantee that everything appearing on the .nz portion of the net is written by Kiwis, or that texts on .uk domains are all from British writers, but the pattern seems to support the New Zealand usage being more like the British than the American.

So the safest advice – or at least a recommendation that has the weight of current practice behind it – is probably to say that you should use "different from", especially in written text.

If you are really itching to use something different from "different from", you could identify with New Zealand's more British than American heritage by saying "different to".

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