The Dominion Post, Wellington
18 Jul 2012, by Laurie Bauer

Opinion, page 11 - 269.60 cm²
Metro - circulation 81,718 (MTWTF--)

ID 154571171

The things we are required to say in order to be understood in English

Laurie Bauer
WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

THE celebrated Russian linguist Roman Jakobson once wrote that languages differ not in what they can say, but in what they must say.

The first half of that is pretty amazing: it implies that whatever you say in one language you can translate into any other language. This is the basis on which languages like Navajo have been used during wartime to transmit messages that the enemy must not see. This is useful where no code can be used, as the number of speakers of such languages available to the other side is expected to be small, and it will take too long to find out what is being said.

Well, you might think, what is surprising about being able to say in one language what you can say in another? Part of what is surprising about it is that there are many stories about languages having "untranslatable" words in them. The reason that we borrow expressions from French such as laissez-faire, je ne sais quoi and bistro, or from Maori words such as marae, kuia and tohunga is that we do not have any term in English which quite matches the implications of those words. Carlyle's suggestion of mischief-joy to translate German "schadenfreude" never caught on because it doesn't quite seem to cut the mustard in English.

The other side of this is perhaps less surprising, although we don't think of it very often. If you speak English, and you say "I saw my cousin yesterday," you do not have to specify whether the cousin was male or female. If you try the same thing in Italian, you have to say cugino "male cousin" or cugina "female cousin" and so you have to specify the sex of the cousin. In the plural, there is one form if all the cousins are female, but another if they are either all male or of mixed sex.

The language Tariana is spoken on the border between Brazil and Colombia. In that language you must indicate, for any sentence, your degree of commitment to what you are saying, or your source of evidence. So in Tariana you cannot say, as we would in English, "A jaguar killed a man" without saying how we know this is true. In Tariana there are four possibilities:

(1) A jaguar killed a man (and I know because I saw it);

(2) A jaguar killed a man (and although I did not see it, I have the evidence of my own senses to back up my assertion – I heard roars and screams, for instance);

(3) A jaguar killed a man (and while I did not see it or hear it, I deduce that it must be the case. perhaps because I came across a pool of blood on the forest floor);

(4) A jaguar killed a man (and I know this because I was told).

The way of distinguishing these different possibilities in Tariana is not as elaborate as I have made it sound: it is all done through the choice of an affix to be added to the verb. Nevertheless, for any piece of information you are obliged to give your evidence.

You might think that English has no such exotic pieces of information that have to be included whether you want them there or not, but it does. One example is that we always have to state whether just one or more than one object is involved (with a very few minor exceptions like sheep and fish): we have to decide whether to say cat or cats, university or universities. We need this even when it is obvious: "There are eight universities in New Zealand." In some languages such information is optional, deduced from context, or (as is typically true in Maori) not shown on the noun but shown by other means. Speakers of other languages might think English very odd in requiring such redundant information.

Laurie Bauer is a linguist from Victoria University.

Languages like Navajo have been used during wartime to transmit messages.