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Losing a language puckeroos your perspective

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WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

THE high-rising terminal has been discussed in these columns before. It was very apparent in Melbourne where I attended a conference recently. Sales assistants in some shops ended every utterance with a question intonation, even when they were giving me information: "Tissues are in the fourth aisle?" "That's \$4?" "Thanks?"

These were not questions but statements, despite the rising intonation indicated by the question marks. The high point for me was when the organiser declared the conference closed in typical low-key Australasian style: so I reckon that's it then? The Europeans and Americans were still waiting for more as the Australasians left.

The opening presenter at the conference was an Australian linguist who told us that he was, sadly, the only living person still able to speak an Aboriginal language that he had described and written a spelling system for. He and a fellow linguist in Hong Kong were the only speakers of another such language, and they spoke it whenever they met (which was rarely) in honour of the tribe whose language had disappeared forever. These sad stories illustrate the vulnerability of the few remaining Australian Aboriginal languages, all of which have very small numbers of speakers.

In the late 18th century there were more than 200 Australian indigenous languages – and some sources say as many as 750, though

many of these were probably dialects rather than distinct languages. Fewer than 20 of the languages survive today, and these are all endangered.

In New Zealand we have two indigenous languages, Maori and New Zealand sign language. This week we celebrate efforts to conserve Maori, a Polynesian language spoken natively nowhere else.

There are many reasons for supporting efforts to revitalise and maintain Maori – political, cultural, social and economic. From a linguistic point of view, language preservation makes huge sense – if we lose a language, we lose a different way of seeing the world, an alternative perspective on reality.

Some differences are relatively easy to understand. Maori pronouns, for example, make distinctions that English pronouns don't. The English "we" is ambiguous between "you and me" and "me and other people". For example: "Isn't it great that we are going to Vanuatu next week". Does that mean "me and my husband" or "me and you and several other friends too" or perhaps "you and me" or "you, me and your friend"? Maori makes these distinctions clear by choices between maua, matou, taua and tatou.

Another distinction a little more clumsily expressed in English is encoded in the Maori words pakaru as opposed to whati. Both words are generally translated as "broken" in English, but pakaru means "broken down" or "shattered" whereas whati means "snapped in two". This brief explanation can't do justice to the dis-

tinction, which is subtle, but the two languages deal with it differently.

Even more subtle distinctions involve a different cultural perspective. Maori people's concept of family is rather different from that of New Zealand Pakeha. The whanau extends well beyond mum, dad and the kids to include aunties, uncles and cousins at several removes in Pakeha terms.

This is reflected in the use of terms like whaea to refer both to one's birth mother and her sisters, and matua to refer to one's father as well as his brothers. One's older and younger siblings and cousins of the same sex are important in Maori culture, and each has a distinct label, which emphasises that they share a particular relationship with you, and that relative age is more significant than the distinction between cousin and brother or sister. Such linguistic distinctions indicate the social dimensions that each culture regards as significant.

When we lose a language, we lose a different way of encoding the world. Bilingual and multilingual people are blessed with alternative perspectives on reality, with richer and more diverse ways of conceptualisation. Those of us who are confined to fluency in one language need to nurture and support efforts to promote bilingualism and especially bilingualism involving our precious taonga, te reo Maori.

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■ Send your questions about language to words@dompost.co.nz