



Science world a confusing minefield of words with multiple meanings



Dianne Bardsley
WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

WORDS vary widely in the extent to which they convey a general or specific meaning or label a specific referent, and it is in science that we are likely to find most specificity. The naming of some of our indigenous flora and fauna reflect specificity but little uniformity. There are 35 genera of indigenous New Zealand orchid, consisting of over 120 species, some yet to be named, and for non-botanists the names of these small plants present a study in themselves.

As plants, they are principally non-conformist, as are their names. From Ahipara in the Far North to Stewart Island, from alpine habitats to the coast, from scrub or forest floor to wetland, being either rare and endangered or flourishing, these tiny and mysterious flora capture wide interest.

Some are saprophytes, some are parasitic, forming partnerships with fungi, some have flowers opening only in sunshine, while others trap insects, and this variation in habit and habitat is closely followed in their names.

While some orchids have Maori names, such as peka-a-waka, piripiri, raupeka, and winika among the perching orchid forms, by far the majority have been given names in English. Greenhoods are the insect-trappers and these are known by such names as bearded, kauri, midget, nodding, snail, swan,

shrimp-flowered, trowel-leaf, and winter greenhoods. Other species are categorised broadly according to animals or plant names – there are potato orchids, spider orchids, onion orchids, gnat orchids, leek orchids, bird orchids, beak orchids, and spiral orchids or ladies' tresses. The sun orchids, so-called because they will only open their flowers in full sun, are highly differentiated as dotted sun, maikaika, maikuku, pink sun, spotted sun, and swamp sun orchids.

Piripiri, as well as being the name of a perching tree orchid, is known more commonly as a name for the indigenous burred acaena genus, several species being known as bidibid, biddy-biddy, biddi-biddi, biddi-bid, and other variations, all of which are alterations of piripiri.

The name has also been given to an epiphytic shrub, one of the Pittosporum, a shrub of the genus Haloragis, and a filmy drought-resistant Hymenophyllum fern. Piripiri is also the name of a hut in the Ruahine Ranges, a school in the King Country, a settlement near Dannevirke, and overseas it's the name for the African red devil chilli pepper. Polysemy is a linguistic term which represents the extent to which a single word holds a number of distinctive, but often related, meanings. Piripiri is obviously one of these, but there are many others in Maori.

Maori terms are also being used widely in the agricultural and pastoral domain, particularly

in the naming of cultivars of fodder crops and grasses, which can lead to confusion for the uninitiated. When reading “we installed a new tank on the tama” or “the tama has grown beyond expectations”, we expect to see a boy or young man (tama) on the scene. Tama is the name given to a locally bred cultivar of ryegrass.

English also has a host of examples of polysemous words, the most common of which is likely to be “good”. The Oxford English Dictionary defines good as “the most general adjective of commendation, implying the existence in a high, or at least satisfactory, degree of characteristic qualities which are either admirable in themselves or useful for some purpose”. Known to have served English well since before its appearance in written records of 800AD, the word has reproduced itself in many guises and contexts since. It has been adopted in slang and colloquial compounds and phrases as well as standard usage. Its meanings range from beneficial, devout, successful, brave, reliable, healthy, moral, virtuous or well-behaved, honourable, attractive, high born, positive, desirable, straightforward, accommodating, kind, and gracious. A useful word, but not one for the scientist.

Dianne Bardsley is the director of the New Zealand Dictionary Centre at Victoria University's school of linguistics and applied language studies.