

On intensity and duration of language contact: A comparative study of word-final plosive reduction levels in 19th century Maori and Pakeha New Zealand English

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The colonial history of New Zealand provides a pertinent example of language shift from a local, indigenous language to an exogenous transplant variety. Until the 1840s, New Zealand was almost exclusively Maori-speaking, and few European settlers resided in New Zealand in the early 19th century. Today, in contrast, New Zealand is “an unusually monolingual country, since ... languages other than English are largely inaudible” (Kuiper & Bell 2000: 13). The (socio)linguistic situation of New Zealand has consequently witnessed an almost complete reversal within the last two centuries, in that it has evolved from an exclusively Maori-speaking to a quasi-exclusively English-speaking community.

This paper examines the historical dimension of language contact in this Southern Hemisphere setting. It investigates some of the earliest recordings of English as spoken by indigenous Maori, thus representing the first known forms of English as a second language in New Zealand. The data come from the archives of the *Origins of New Zealand English* (ONZE) project, which contains recordings of more than 250 people born in New Zealand between 1853 and the late 1890s. To date, ONZE-related research has concentrated on the speech of white (Pakeha) New Zealanders with the aim of identifying processes involved in dialect contact and koinéisation (Gordon et al., *fc* 2004). The present paper, in contrast, reports on some selected findings of a quantitative analysis of 19th century Maori English, namely of consonant cluster reduction levels in a total of ten New Zealanders (four Maori and six cohort Pakeha, to allow for a comparative analysis), all born between the early 1860s and 1889. It argues that Maori and Pakeha English were ethnolinguistically divided in the late 19th century, and that the two varieties differentiated themselves (at least in part) by features that originated as L2 learning processes. This claim is based on the finding that earlier forms of Maori English had significantly higher amounts of word-final plosive reduction in diagnostic prevocalic environments (both in monomorphemic items, e.g. *he works in a **pos**' office*, and in bimorphemic ones, *she **walk**' out five minutes ago*). This suggests that consonant cluster reduction in such environments originates in substratum influence and phonological transfer from the indigenous Maori language, which lacks syllable-coda clusters (Bauer 1993), and not in adaptation and accommodation processes to the speech of white New Zealanders (a similar conclusion with reference to centralised/raised KIT vowels is offered in Bell 1997). On the other hand, ethnolinguistic differentiation was not persistent; a comparison of the findings presented in this paper and data from 20th century New Zealand English (Holmes & Bell 1994) shows that Maori and Pakeha English have converged considerably since about 1900 (“CCR is one vernacular feature which is not ethnically significant per se in [20th century, DS] New Zealand English”, Holmes & Bell 1994: 76). This is of importance for the duration and ultimate outcome of language contact and shift, and the present paper speculates on as to why ethnolinguistic differences were non-persistent in New Zealand.

References

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