

Te Reo Maori – a new sort of crisis

Just two decades ago, the Maori language was seen as facing a crisis of terminal proportions. The number of fluent native speakers was in decline, the normal transmission mechanisms that ensure the survival of any language to the next generation had largely broken down, and there was generally not the will in society to see it maintained.

We have been told that while there are still serious challenges facing te Reo Maori, the worst may have passed. Thanks to the efforts of Kohanga Reo and Kura Kaupapa, the quiet toiling of the Maori Language Commission, and a generally more tolerant public perception, the corner seems to have been turned. Statistics show a continual rise in Maori speakers for the last twelve years. Moreover, there has recently been a profusion of new books being published in te Reo – something unprecedented since the missionary presses were churning out religious texts in the 1840s.

Up to 160,000 people in New Zealand now claim to have some speaking ability in te Reo Maori, and by all estimates this figure will continue to increase into the foreseeable future.

A few officials and educationalists might pat themselves on their backs for a job well done, but it is far too early to indulge in any sort of self-congratulation. In fact, the current manner of the growth of Maori language speakers disguises new problems that have yet to be acknowledged in many cases.

The first issue relates to the devilish problem of statistics. Although there are claimed to be far more Maori speakers

now than ever before, defining exactly what portion of these are native speakers – that is, those whose first language was solely Maori – is difficult, and although anecdotal data suggests that this number is still in decline, little is spoken about it.

The flow-on from this is that as time progresses, more te Reo Maori speakers will acquire their language from people who themselves speak Maori as a second language.

This has implications for the future quality of te Reo Maori. No doubt, there will be speakers who know the grammar perfectly and have acquired a large vocabulary.

But it is in the little nuances of the language where the loss is most likely to be felt. The Tuhoe tohunga Hohepa Kereopa makes the distinction between “learning the words and learning the language”. He stresses that te Reo Maori is much more than just a lexicon. It is an inheritance of gestures, inflections, looks, and tone that have worked their way down through generations, and that are applied to the words that make the language “truly Maori”.

The alternative form – quietly decried by some kaumatua – is what has become known as “book Maori”.

Part of this present trend in the growth of “book Maori” (with a few important exceptions) is the loss of regional dialects. Recently, I was working with a translator going over letters written by a Maori politician less than 100 years ago. The politician was from Nga Puhī, but when he wrote to someone in Rotorua, he used a Te Arawa dialect and when he

wrote to a Tuhoe chief, he used their dialect, and so on.

These regional differences – all of which are accompanied by their own special idiosyncrasies – are gradually being ironed out, and replaced by a standardised form of te Reo Maori: a sort of language McDonalds might manufacture – with a completely uniform, almost sterile “product” – recognisable to everyone but fundamentally indigenous to no-one.

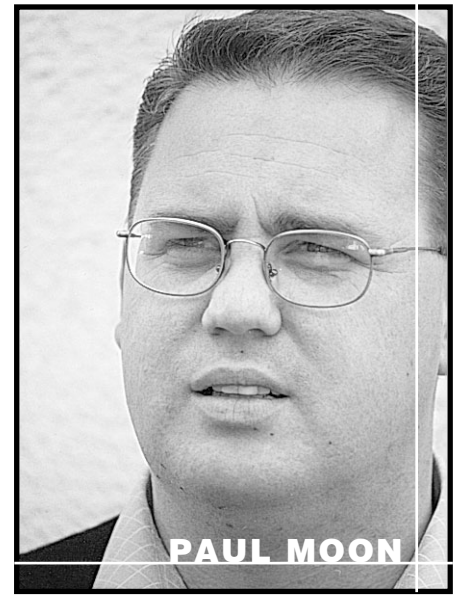
Finally, there are serious implications for the extent of te Reo Maori that the so-called “fluent” speakers actually end up acquiring. There is a high threshold for true language competency – a sort of invisible linguistic line that a person has to cross in order for them to be genuinely classed as a fluent speaker.

If this threshold is not met, then a lower standard of fluency becomes accepted. This might just seem like an issue over academic standards, but it is actually a far more elemental problem.

For example, of those 160,000 people who claim to be fluent Maori-speakers, how many of them converse almost completely in te Reo each day? Some, but surely not most. Why?

There are several reasons, but one of the main ones is that their te Reo fluency does not match their English fluency. And what is the result? Often, their te Reo gets shunted to being used as an “ornamental” language on certain, mainly formal occasions, rather than being employed as an authentic living language.

These are some of the problems, but what about the solutions? Kereopa has



PAUL MOON

suggested the first step in resuscitating te Reo Maori is for people who are learning it to ask themselves “why?” He argues it is the motivation for acquiring the language, rather than their subsequent abilities at speaking it, that really matters.

If people wish to learn for reasons that are consistent with the culture, and for the benefit of the culture, then all well and good, but if the purpose for acquisition is for some sort of novelty value, or particularly to enhance an individual's status, then he warns there are risks associated with this.

Dr Paul Moon is a senior lecturer at the Faculty of Maori Development at the Auckland University of Technology, and a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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We welcome your feedback and views.

Pacific honesty

I like what Sudesh Kissun wrote in his column about New Zealand media coverage of the Pacific (No 3, August 23, 2004). At last we have someone from Fiji who has the integrity and the guts to speak the truth. I too am a little tired of the glossy covers and sunny romantic holiday facades.

Keep it up Sudesh and go *Te Waha Nui!*

Ruci Farrell
The Howick and Pakuranga Times
Howick

More hard news

Congratulations on your current issue of Te Waha Nui and especially to your resident cartoonist. However I felt the current issue suffered from a lack of hard news and the centre spread failed to make the impact the Hikoi issue did.

As a voice for students at AUT I feel you have the responsibility to tackle the hard issues, not just to behave as a poor cousin to suburban newspapers.

Keep up the good work and I look forward to reading further issues.
Katrina Foreman
AUT

Beating suburbans

Te Waha Nui is a good read, better than many of the suburban papers I go through (and that's where I started journalism 15 years ago).

Innes Logan,
Editor, *Spasifika*
Auckland

Looking better

I have just read *Te Waha Nui*. It looks really good ... possibly even better than the last one.

Ian Stuart, Lecturer in Maori Studies,
Eastern Institute of Technology
Taradale

Good layout and cartoons

As a keen reader of your newspaper I've noticed the paper layout and quality of pictures improved dramatically since the first edition.

The front page of your second edition looked great, especially with the cartoon. I look forward to the next edition, keep up the good work guys!

Nick Thodey
Remuera

Maori coverage

It's great to read articles that promote Maoridom and give the reader an appreciation of what Maori are doing in today's society.

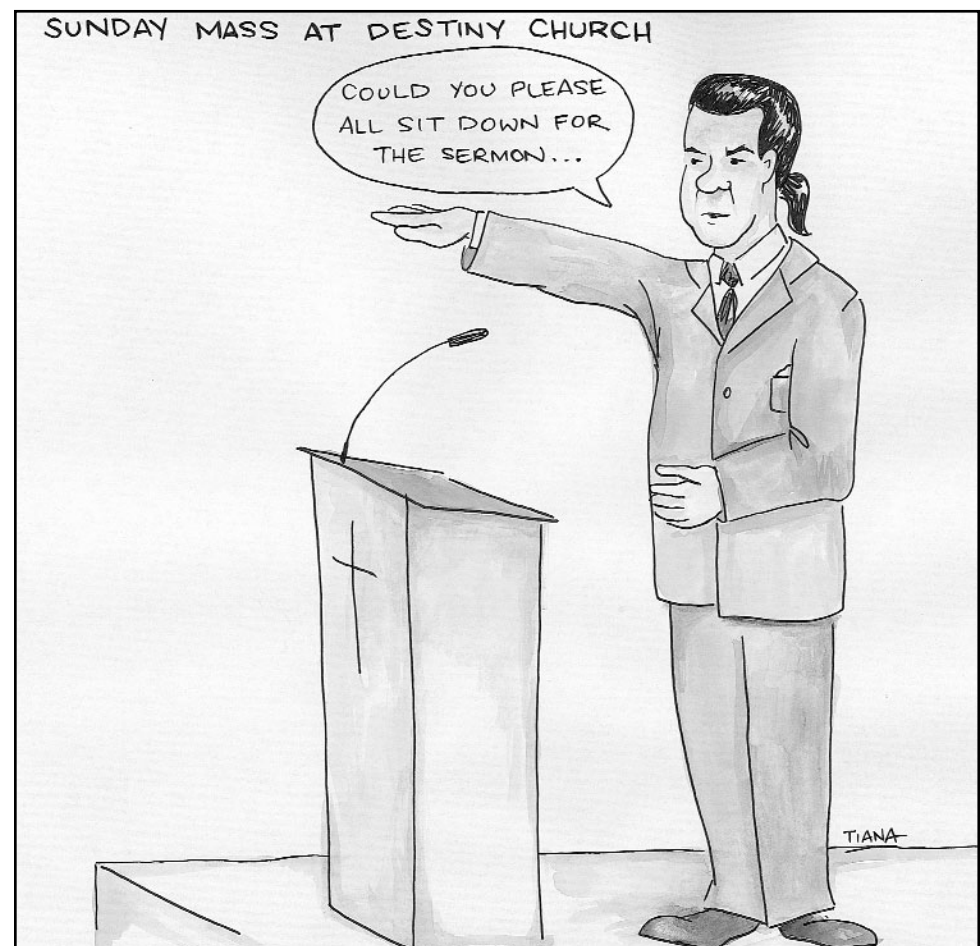
Excellent. I look forward to reading the next issue.

Kia ora.
Michelle Robin
Administrative Assistant
Deputy Vice Chancellor's Office
AUT

News laboratory

Thanks for *Te Waha Nui*. The city is definitely a good laboratory for news and features.

Divina Paredes
Staff Writer
Fairfax Business Media
Newmarket



Seriously good

Just to say how impressed I was by the recent edition. Really professional and serious journalism as well! If only they ran the *New Zealand Herald* (or *The Guardian* for that matter)!

My congratulations to everyone.

Dr Rob Allen
Dean of Arts Faculty
AUT

Impressed

I liked the layout, different typesets, and the different stories, especially the immigration feature.

I was impressed by the way you introduced the writers, cartoonist etc.

Kathy Rolleston
Mt Maunganui

Sharp look

Good to see *Te Waha Nui* again. Well done – it looks very sharp.

Gordon Gillan
Assistant Editor
Traveltrade
Newmarket
(Former *Te Waha Nui* sports editor)

OOPS!

Steve Matthews, logistics and communications coordinator for World Vision, who was quoted as a New Zealander in the article about Sudanese refugees (No 3, August 23, 2004) is in fact Canadian. This was an error in editorial production.

Sommerset's album *Say What You Want* was incorrectly titled *Say What You Mean*.