

# Overview of New Zealand English Characteristics

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**Abstract:** English varieties as an important cultural symbol, is attracting more and more linguists' attention. To better understand special English varieties and their communicative characteristics, this article chooses New Zealand English as the research subject, and three main dimensions of New Zealand English are discussed: phonological, lexical, and pragmatic. At the end of the article, the relationship between New Zealand English and Maori language is discussed.

**Keywords:** English Varieties, New Zealand English, Maori.

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## 1. Introduction

The development of a country's language is often linked to the historical context of the region as well as its geography. Thomason (2001) thinks that "contact between languages has always been recognized as a major factor in language change". It is, therefore, necessary to relate the specific processes of English development to its characteristics when recognizing the English varieties of a region. New Zealand was a British colony and the regional varieties of English born in this country are closely associated with the colonisers from Britain. At the same time, New Zealand's isolated geography led to the production of a particular ethnolinguistic and natural environment in the region, which paved the way for the development of a unique language.

New Zealand is one of the most isolated countries in the world. Located in the southwestern Pacific Ocean, the country consists of two main islands – the North Island and the South Island – also with over 700 smaller islands. New Zealand is to the east of Australia across the Tasman Sea and is to the south of New Caledonia, Fiji and Tonga. The special and independent location has made nearly all of their residents come from elsewhere across the sea. Throughout its history, New Zealand's population and migration have roughly experienced three periods. The first people to arrive in New Zealand were the Polynesians, a people with a long history of exploration and migration that eventually made its way to the Pacific Ocean. In New Zealand, they are known as the Maori, and they called this area Aotearoa, which is now known as New Zealand. The second phase was the period when New Zealand was connected closely with Great Britain. In 1642 the first Europeans arrived in the islands was Abel Tasman, whose name was later given to the channel between Australia and New Zealand. But it was not until 1769 that Captain James Cook achieved the first communication between Maori and English speakers, and claimed New Zealand for the British Crown. Some fifty years later, with the signing of *the Treaty of Waitangi* in February 1840, New Zealand officially became a British colony. As colonization proceeded, the majority of immigrants came from Britain, Ireland, and Australia, as there were restrictive policies similar to *the White Australia Policy*, which is a fundamental immigration policy that is racially discriminatory and manifesting itself in favor of immigrants of British ancestry, in the pride of non-British white Europeans and the exclusion of people of color (Wang, 2009). There were also several Danish, German, and Italian immigrants, as well as indirect immigrants from

around the world. After the country left Britain's colonial rule, the third period of immigration to New Zealand came. This period saw a gradual relaxation of policy, with more immigrants coming from Asia. The 1961 census reported that 92 percent of the New Zealand population was European and 7 percent Maori, with Asian and Pacific ethnic minorities sharing the remaining 1 percent (Collins, 2018). However, in the 2023 Census, the total population of New Zealand was 5,228,100. Of these, 70% are of European immigrant descent, 17% are Maori, 15% are Asian and 8% are Pacific Islanders. The UK remains the largest source of New Zealand's migrant population, with around a quarter of overseas-born New Zealanders born there. The population has become more multicultural and diverse in recent decades.

A rich history of immigration has led to a wide variety of native languages in New Zealand, but as a matter of policy, there are three official languages: English, Maori, (established in 1897), and New Zealand Sign Language (established in 2007). English dominates New Zealand with a whopping 95 percent usage rate, and almost all people are proficient in English as a mother tongue or as a second language. Maori comes second with nearly four percent of the population using it. In a 1997 study focusing on Maori and Pakeha English, it is suggested that Maori may be the source of innovation in New Zealand English: it offers features that contribute to the distinctiveness of New Zealand English compared to other varieties of international English (Holmes, 1997). English and Maori are therefore the main factors influencing English in New Zealand, and in this context, the developing relationship between Maori and English needs to be considered. In brief, the Maori people and Maori language have influenced the vocabulary composition and language use of New Zealand English, although the fact that the Maori language began as a phonetic form only, and gradually acquired a written form for practical and communicative purposes with the help of several linguists and missionaries. While English brought by immigrants has brought accents from different parts of the UK, making New Zealand English may sound like Scottish and Irish in some ways.

In *A Review of the Maori Research as the Unique Language and Cultural Identity of New Zealand*, the researchers have reviewed previous years of Maori language research and have divided the history of the development of Maori and English together into three periods based on time (2020). From 1840 to 1850, there was a willingness to borrow from Maori during the progressive colonization, when distinctiveness and independence from Britain were being emphasized, and as a

result, Maori loanwords were added to the lexicon. At this time, cultural phrases and names of plants and animals were the two main borrowing categories. For the next 90 years, during the recolonization era, when links with Britain were re-established and re-emphasized, there was opposition to borrowing stabilization. Decolonization, the third historical phase, began about 1970 and was largely defined by the break with Britain. Since the 1980s, English has resumed borrowing words from the Maori language. As New Zealand undergoes socio-economic transformation, the government is placing increasing emphasis on the revival of the Maori language and culture. It was also during this period that Maori was legally established as an official language in 1987 and recognized in official contexts such as Parliament and the courts. The 1970s are seen as the start of the modern Maori language revitalization movement. Richard Benton undertook the first New Zealand sociolinguistic survey of knowledge and use of the Maori language. The Benton Survey (1997) demonstrated the perilous state of the Maori. This seminal research is a key milestone in the history of the Maori language. R. Harlow (2005) stresses the increasing use of Maori in domains such as law, medicine, and education, such work makes an invaluable contribution to the normalization of Maori. D. Day and P. Rewi (2014) imply the decrease in the number of fluent Maori language speakers since the 1900s is intimately connected with the movement of Maori into those social, political, and economic environments where communication is always in English, such that the steady loss of Maori language speakers and the decline in the generational transmission of the Maori language accelerated after World War Two with the migration of Maori into urban areas. However, it doesn't mean Maori is vulnerable in language use. There is always a "mispronounce" conflict between local bilingual students and teachers of mainstream languages, which shows the political nature of language (Doerr, 2023).

With an understanding of New Zealand's history, it is easy to see that a discussion of New Zealand English cannot be separated from the historical development of New Zealand and the Maori language as the native heritage language. The two languages continue to interact to the day and have developed a phonemic system with its internal parameters and consistency (Watson, C., Maclagan, M., King, J., Harlow, R., & Keegan, P., 2016), but in Chapter 2 we will focus on the pronunciation differences between New Zealand English and Received Pronunciation.

## 2. Phonological Features

### (1) Substitution of one sound for another

The term "substitution of one sound for another" will be described as follows. Every sentence of each kind of substitution indicates the representative word, and some examples will be given to offer a better understanding of this kind of phonetic change. There is something to be said for the fact that these pronunciations are not the fault of a few, but a pattern that has developed by subtlety throughout the region and the nation, and serves as a recognizable feature in the English varieties.

Firstly, it is about the "dress" vowel, which means the vowel /e/ is usually replaced by /ɪ/. When pronouncing the vowel, the tongue is quite high and the lips are quite open. The word neck is sounded like *nick*, and *bread* is substituted by the sound like *breed*. When New Zealanders count numbers, you may hear *tin* instead of *ten*. The second one is called the "kit" vowel. As the tongue is quite central in the

mouth and lips are neutral, the vowel /ɪ/ is closer to /e/. For example, when you hear New Zealanders say *sex*, they may be referring to the number *six*. Other words containing /ɪ/ such as *list* and *gym* will sound close to *lest* and *gem*. Confusion and interchange of /ɪ/ and /e/, resulting in few differences in the two diphthongs /iə/ and /eə/. The words *chair* and *cheer* may have similar pronunciation, which makes the sentence "many New Zealanders sit on a chair just like they cheer at a football match" have a special rhyme. Gordon. E. and Maclagan. M. (2001) thinks that New Zealanders have a tendency to merge in pronunciation, and New Zealanders tend not to make the distinction and consider them homophonic. Last but not least, when New Zealanders spell the start vowel /ɑ:/, the trap vowel /æ/, and the foot vowel /ʊ/, there are subtle differences in pronunciation from other regions of English. These changes in pronunciation are not as recognizable as those already mentioned above. For these sounds, I think it is difficult to hear the pronunciation differences because the change in sound does not affect our perception of the words. Judging from hearing, New Zealand English does not have a very exaggerated mouth shape when pronouncing the sounds, and there is less lip and tongue movement.

There are also pronunciation variability that is not unique to New Zealand proper, but is influenced by immigration and demographic factors. In the article on the characteristics and cultural traits of New Zealand English, Wang He refers to the influence of Australian English, English from southern England, and regional Scottish English (2018). The geographical location and military alliance between New Zealand and Australia have allowed for a degree of close interaction between the two countries, resulting in Australian English having a significant influence on New Zealand English in many ways. For example, the diphthong /aɪ/ is pronounced closer to /ɔɪ/, accompanied by a nasal sound. When New Zealand was a British colony, its population was largely based on immigrants from the British Isles, so New Zealand English had the same trap-bath sound distinction as British English. This feature differs from American English which is dominated by /æ/ between /ɑ:/ and /æ/.

### (2) Non-rhotic (r-less)

This feature means that /r/ is not pronounced when it is located at the end of a word and before a consonant and it is only pronounced when it is located before a vowel. For example, in words such as *car*, *bird*, *card*, and *butter*, /r/ is not pronounced like in American English. However, both linking /r/ and intrusive /r/ are present. If the final /r/ is immediately followed by a vowel then /r/ is pronounced in both varieties. An example of intrusive /r/ is listed as follows. Words like *paw* and *pour* are both pronounced in the r-less variant as /pəʊ/, but *pouring* and *pawing* are both pronounced as /pɔːrɪŋ/, in which situation the word is not spelled with an r, but is pronounced with an /r/. As for linking /r/, the sound always occurs when reading a phrase or sentence. Thus the /r/ in *car* and *car lock* is not pronounced, but in the phrase for a car it is. And it sounds like "fo-ra-ca" in New Zealand English. In this phrase, both of the special phonology of /r/ can be found which makes it easier for us to understand in comparison.

## 3. Lexical Features

In terms of lexical features, New Zealand English inherited both words from native and external settlers alike. Period settlers brought old rural vocabulary from the English dialect into New Zealand, and some obsolete usage was inherited and used to this day. The word *shed* being used as a verb indicates

getting rid of something you don't need or want, or naturally dropping something. But New Zealanders often say, "A farm dog sheds a group of sheep" to let the dog *separate* the sheep. The word *spell* now means to form a word with the letters in the correct order, while in New Zealand people may use this word to express the meaning of "to fallow". For example, farmers *spell* their paddocks. Here the meaning of the word *spell* is probably similar to doing something that someone else would usually be doing, especially to allow them to rest. There are also words commonly used in New Zealand that have become rare and obsolete expressions, even though they do not differ in British understanding. When we say "the hunter sooled on his dogs when faced with a wild pig", *sool* means calling a dog to bite. This usage is perhaps common in some literature, and its use in real life will be unfamiliar to most native English speakers. In Zhuang's research, there are also a number of historically distinctive English words that have survived in New Zealand English, and there are hundreds of such words in New Zealand English (2019). *Cavel* in "West coast miners still take part in a cavel" refers to the allocation of favorable mining positions to miners by lottery, and it retains the meaning of the word formerly used in Yorkshire, England.

At the same time, faced with a completely unfamiliar natural environment, early New Zealand settlers easily chose to adopt language directly from the Maori language to describe the unique flora and fauna of the region. In the process, Maori words were gradually incorporated into English and enriched its vocabulary. Macalister (2007) summarizes five types of borrowing processes in Maori: direct borrowings, loan translations, semantic loans, hybrids, and neologisms.

If the form and meaning of the words are both derived from the Maori language, then this method is known as direct borrowing. The term *kiwi* not only refers to the endemic New Zealand tailless bird, which has a long bill, short wings, no tail, and is flightless. Capitalized *Kiwi* also refers to New Zealanders. *Pohutukawa* refers to a kind of evergreen tree of the myrtle family, producing red-flowered silver leaves. The *kakapo* refers to a species of parrot that is endemic to New Zealand. *Waka* ['wɑ:kə] is a traditional Maori war canoe, now built for ceremonial occasions and *Whare* ['hʊəri] is a house or building for domestic or communal use. In addition to biologically unique terminology and local specialties, there are a number of widely used expressions taken from the Maori language. The word *Maori* itself originally meant "common, ordinary" and was used by early settlers to refer to the indigenous people and their language. *Pakeha*, on the other hand, was used to refer to white people, especially New Zealanders of European ancestry. The dominant white race in New Zealand. This would cover anybody of Anglo-Celtic origin (England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales) and, as the integrated, Northern Europeans (Scandinavians, Germans, and Dutch), white Americans, Canadians, and South Africans. These two terms, and the cultures and languages they refer to, are widely used in various studies and are highly representative.

The other four borrowings do not play a major part in the formation of the vocabulary of New Zealand English, but they are still of interest for study. English speakers may directly translate Maori words into English. This kind of technique is called loan translation with the words from Maori and English having corresponding translations. *Marea*, a physical place that is central to tribal and family identity and self-awareness,

is just named a meeting house in English, as it is a place where family members gather to celebrate, mourn, entertain and deliberate. The semantic loan is a way of giving new meaning to existing English words. When a completely new flax plant was discovered in New Zealand, linguists chose to give a new meaning directly to the existing word *flax*. In specific cases, the flax itself specifically refers to flax produced in New Zealand. The situation is rather similar: when one mentions porcelain in the world, the audience tends to associate it with Chinese porcelain; when one mentions porcelain in the Chinese province of Jiangxi, the audience will recognize that it refers specifically to porcelain from Jingdezhen in Jiangxi province. A hybrid word is a combination that is partly from Maori and partly from English. The Maori word functions as a modifier, highlighting the regional and ethnic nature of the word's meaning, while the English word is essentially central, allowing the user to instantly understand the basic meaning of the word in an unfamiliar context. For example, when we read the word *Maori bread*, we recognize it as a food that is unique to the Maori people and similar to bread. When none of these four methods can be reasonably generalized, neologism occurs, where English words are used to give direct names to local things. In English, such words are *fantail*. An indigenous kind of bird is named "fan-tailed finches" because they like to open their tail feathers to form a semi-circular fan.

When Chen studied the lexical features of New Zealand English, he found that these Maori words play an important role in authentic expressions (1998). For example, *kotuku* is a rare heron, so New Zealand English uses as rare as *Kotuku* to indicate the degree of rarity. *Maori dog* is a dog that was introduced by the Maori but is now extinct in New Zealand. It is evident that in a society where two languages coexist, the interpenetration and integration of the two languages is occurring at all times. The Maori vocabulary that has entered the English language has enriched its expressiveness and given New Zealand English its own identity. At the same time, language is a precious historical artifact that bears witness to and preserves the details of nature and culture.

## 4. Pragmatic Features

### (1) Supersonic segment characteristic

There is always a high-rising terminal in New Zealand English, which is also known as Australian questioning intonation, as the feature is extremely outstanding in the two countries. If you listen to the sentence "she is 19 years old" with an Australian or New Zealand accent, you would think they were asking you "Is she 19 years old?" High-rising terminals may have the effect of attracting the listeners' sustained attention, softening the tone of voice and eliciting feedback from the listeners. This phenomenon is more common in the lower social status groups of young women, Maori English and Australian indigenous English speakers. High-rising terminal was one of a number of characteristics that Lakoff (1975) believed made up women's language and contributed to the appearance of ambiguity and diffidence. However, Britain (1992) reported in a bigger study that young people, particularly young women, are the most regular users of HRT but found no significant association with class. He thought it was more effective to think of it as a positive etiquette marker used to assist find common ground.

As what is researched in Bronwen's article, the use of high-rising terminals is not a formulaic norm, and merely a reflection of people's social or courtroom position. Whether it will also apply to other communities remains to be seen

(2007). Power has been associated with high-rising terminal intonations in some way. High-rising terminal is a common discourse device in New Zealand, especially for negative and positive politeness. How to understand this particular supersonic segment characteristic requires us to judge it in context.

#### (2) The Use of an “eh” pronunciation

The “eh” pronunciation is very popular among New Zealanders. Naturally, this phrase is quite slang and is not used in written language. Even though they know how to use it, some of the more “educated” individuals avoid using this word in order to avoid falling into the “social decline” abyss. In general, *eh* is used more by younger people than older people, more by men than women, and more by Maori than white New Zealanders (Schweinberger, 2018). Maori males and young white females are the two groups that use *eh* most in New Zealand (Meyerhoff, 1994).

Vine and Marsden conducted a study on the use of *eh* particles in the workplace in 2016. Previous research has linked this discourse marker to young working-class speakers in informal contexts and as a marker for Maori within groups. This one study found that *eh* was most often used by both subjects to construct their leadership profile, but all used *eh* in subtly different ways for strategic interaction purposes. *Eh*’s speech particles provide a useful linguistic resource for constructing values of togetherness and solidarity in workplace settings. The absence or reduced use of *eh* establishes a serious and businesslike stance, so speakers rarely use this language particle in the workplace or public.

In *Politeness and Impoliteness in Ethnic Varieties of New Zealand English*, researchers find the extension of the distinctive pragmatic particle *eh* to new domains (Holmes, Janet & Marra, Meredith & Vine, Bernadette., 2012). In the past, linguists thought of the frequent use of the casual *eh* tag to emphasize speakers’ attitudes in daily life. The pragmatic particle *eh* indexes an informal, friendly stance and it is common in casual interaction in New Zealand English. However, there is evidence of *eh*-usage even in formal meetings of his senior management team. An analysis of the pragmatics of New Zealanders’ conversations can help identify how Maori socio-cultural values influence Pakeha practices, thereby revealing what socio-pragmatic norms characterize New Zealand society as it develops in the context of mixed discourse patterns.

## 5. Conclusion

In general, an understanding of New Zealand English varieties cannot be separated from an understanding of the historical, human and geographical context of New Zealand. Whether phonological, lexical or pragmatic, the characteristics of New Zealand English have been shaped by a combination of factors. The unique natural environment and isolated geographical location have allowed many rare species to be absorbed directly into the English vocabulary in the language of the Maori people. Immigration, mainly from Britain, and previous exchanges between New Zealand and Australia have influenced the pronunciation characteristics of New Zealand English. The interaction between Maori and Pakeha contributed to the formation of New Zealand’s exclusive linguistic norms. Maori, the indigenous language of New Zealand, is one of the most well-known endangered languages. Over the last 150 years, Maori have been steadily displaced from domains of New Zealand interaction, and English has taken over its functions. English is the everyday

language of trade, social interaction, commerce, government and education in New Zealand. It is worth noting that the most distinctive feature of New Zealand English as the national variety is the large number of Maori words and phrases related to indigenous Maori cultural traditions, many of which have become part of general New Zealand culture, the flora and fauna of New Zealand, along with place names. The Maori people constitute about 15% of the New Zealand population, which is predominantly made up of people of European origin. Considering the long and profound relationship between the Maori language and Maori people and English speakers and English-speaking society, it is recognized that the Maori research is the unique language and cultural identity of New Zealand.

At the same time, it cannot be ignored that the Maori language is also being influenced by English. In *Sound Change in Maori and the Influence of New Zealand English*, researchers take speakers who are bilingual in Maori and New Zealand English as examples, examining the relationship between sound change in Maori and New Zealand English (Catherine, Margaret, Jeanette, Ray, & Peter, 2016). There is some evidence that both New Zealand English monophthongs and diphthongs are impacting the Maori diphthongs, but so too are the Maori monophthongs. This is another way of saying that languages interact with each other in communication. As urbanization progresses, more and more New Zealanders are choosing to learn English and abandon Maori in order to facilitate work and integration into society. It cannot be said that the language is at a healthy peak, but bilingualism should be encouraged, thus upholding the bicultural principles on which New Zealand was founded (Reese, E. et al., 2018). It is important to study the English varieties, but it is even more important to focus on the ecological relationships between languages.

As international communication grows, countries other than the UK and the US that use English as an official language are coming into the public eye. International communication means not only proficiency in vocabulary and grammar, but also a practical study of cultural and social backgrounds. Without an understanding of the characteristics of a country’s English varieties, misunderstandings will inevitably arise when using the language. Studies about pragmatic characteristics (Degani & Onysko, 2024) and picture-promoted narrations (Onysko & Degani, 2024) of New Zealand English enrich the understanding of New Zealand English and reveal the interactive relationship between language and culture. Therefore, a purposeful study of English varieties is necessary for most learners and users of English. Besides, this paper uses New Zealand English as a model for the study of English varieties, summarising the characteristics and causes of New Zealand English from a variety of perspectives, including history and immigration. This not only deepens our understanding of the relationship between language and society, but also provides a reliable and sound perspective for future studies of English varieties. We should always keep an eye on the development and changes in English as it spreads, so that we can better understand and use the language, and observe trends in language flux.

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