

## **Māori—New Zealand Latin?**

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The cynics, the pessimists, and the many so-called pundits of language revitalization have it, on their own very good authority needless to say, that the Māori language is to be the Latin of Aotearoa/New Zealand. In other words, this statement consigns Māori to being a language of ritual but not a language of every day communication or of any importance in the greater scheme of things.

In some ways, it is flattering to think that the Māori language could well be the Latin of Aotearoa because Latin is a language that has had a vast influence on English and continues to do so despite not being spoken for some centuries. However, being the person that I am, I doubt the generosity of spirit of the dominant culture, and I am certain that consigning Māori to a merely ritual function is what is really intended by the comment; it is not intended to mean that the Māori language is influencing the brand of English spoken in Aotearoa to any marked degree.

It can be stated without fear of contradiction, though, that the Māori language has had some influence on the English spoken in Aotearoa, considering that Māori words are being used in the media and have become part of every day speech. It can also be stated, however, that English has had some effect on spoken Māori, and it is a constant battle to ensure that the Māori spoken by the youth does not become English with Māori words.

Although language must change to survive, this does not mean the wholesale discarding of good traditional ways of expression and their replacement with grammatical structures that are unnatural to a native speaker's ear, yet sound so wonderful and clever to the ear of a second language learner. I am certain that the very high proportion of second language learners who exist in all our cultures will have an impact on our languages, but their influence must not be permitted to dominate, particularly if their changed forms are incorrect or have no innate wairua or ethos that emanates from the language itself. Native speakers all—to battle stations!

Māori is already a language of ritual as well as a language of everyday conversation, and no Māori function is complete without all introductory and prefatory remarks and opening rituals being conducted in Māori, whether it be the welcoming or saying farewell to guests, the discussion of issues important to the tribe, weddings, birthdays, other important social events as well as the rituals surrounding the mourning and the burial of the dead. I am certain that such is also the case within your cultures.

All members of parliament wishing to attract the attention of the Māori realize that they must have someone with them who is capable of responding in an appropriate way when being formally welcomed on to marae throughout the country and who is also capable of noting the principal points in the speeches made by the Elders. Māori members of parliament accept that they need to earn their linguistic laurels if they are to be effective Māori representatives. Many a

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political reputation has been compromised because of a lack of ability to speak Māori or to appreciate the Māori dimension.

Those of you who have been to Aotearoa and have been on to marae will realize what I am saying because you will have experienced the rituals of welcome to which I refer and will know that Māori is the dominant language in those situations. In all of Polynesia, we are, probably, the most formal when welcoming and saying farewell to guests. There are strict codes of etiquette to be observed on both occasions, and a tribe's mana, reputation, will suffer a great deal if guests are not treated as kawa, etiquette, requires. Such is still the case in the year 2000.

To return to my basic premise, from 1993-1999, we had a National government, and the Minister of Māori Affairs, a Māori himself, set up what he called four "think tanks" to address matters of great concern to the Māori. One of those think tanks was asked to have a long, hard look at the whole area of Māori education, including the place of language in the education system.

As a consequence of that think tank's being established, the following report was submitted to the Minister: *The Final Report: Māori Language Revitalization*. It was given to me to comment on, and it was during my reading of it that I encountered the statement "New Zealand Latin." The same report also stated,

Language revitalization is not an isolated phenomenon. To succeed, it must be grounded in the aspirations and values of a community whose members are prepared to co-operate with each other in making the language part of their daily lives.

This latter statement I have no problem with because it is true.

Concerning the Latin reference, however, I have to admit that, from the outset, I was angered by the implication because Latin is referred to as a "dead language." I do not accept that Māori is a dead language—far from it! We might well be struggling for our language's survival, but it is categorically and emphatically not dead as a language.

I realize that I am daring to argue against the findings of academics and respected names in the field of language maintenance and survival from around the world, but I too have my opinions, and they differ quite markedly from those of my learned colleagues.

In some ways, we are no different from any other language seeking to assert itself in a climate that is none too receptive, where many people believe that our survival as a distinct linguistic entity will be to the detriment of any so-called political and social unity. If effective change is to be facilitated, then it is we who should lie down and die rather than prolong the death throes. But as my ancestors said "engari mō tēnā!"

I do not wish to reiterate here things that you might have heard at other conferences where there have been Māori in attendance, but, suffice to say, we are resisting. Slowly, but ever so surely, we are making some headway, as I am certain all of us involved in this field are. Progress might be barely discernible in some instances, but it is progress nonetheless.

I am certain that our situations approximate each other despite our differing histories. The active suppression of our languages and many of our cultural practices by another culture, supposedly more technologically superior, reveals to us now with historical hindsight just how ignorant, arrogant, and ruthless that culture was, and still is, to have its own way despite protestations to being Christian.

I can cite many historical examples of cruelty, all in the name of Christianity, and while our history does not record the barbarous acts perpetrated elsewhere in the world, there were acts committed that guaranteed we would lose our linguistic and cultural identity if we were not on the *qui vive*.

In 1867, the governor at that time promulgated a law that stated that only schools teaching through the medium of English would be funded from the public coffers. With the gospel of education being actively preached everywhere, it was only a matter of time before the Māori language would be spoken less and less within the school precincts and then less and less in the communities that fed those schools.

The very tool that was touted to be the one that would stand everyone well in the new environment was to be the very tool that guaranteed a rapid language loss from 92% of the population that identified itself as Māori in 1910 to about 25% in 1970. Now that figure is back up to about 50% as a consequence of a language resurgence that began in the early 1970s and has accelerated since, particularly among the young educated and the urban dwellers. It is these latter demographic categories that are most actively involved socially, economically, and politically in the whole area of Māori language survival and maintenance.

Perhaps the most revolutionary developments in the language resurgence situation in our country have been *kōhanga reo* (pre-school total immersion centres, of which there are some 750 or so at present) and *kura kaupapa* (total immersion schools from Grades 1-12). There are some 80 or so schools that have been licensed, and there are more in the pipeline waiting licensing from government. *Kura kaupapa* permit children who have been in *kōhanga reo* to continue their education in Māori and then to continue on to university, where most Māori departments teach principally through the medium of Māori. Theses written in Māori at the Master's level may be submitted for acceptance by examining bodies. The University of Waikato in Hamilton was the first to do so in 1978.

However, as *The Final Report* alluded to earlier states:

Nevertheless, schools cannot revitalize a language without the support of the home and a neighbourhood where it can be passed on as a mother tongue from one generation to the next, and used naturally within each generation as well.

Furthermore, teachers at all levels need to be good because, as the report states,

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incompetent teachers can do tremendous harm which becomes very difficult to remedy after the fact. There can be no compromise on quality in teacher education and this includes linguistic competence in the language or languages which are to be used in the classroom.

On 1 August 1987, Māori was declared to be an official language of Aotearoa, along with English. Under that piece of legislation, the Māori Language Commission was established. One of its principal tasks was to promote the language as an every day language as well as to take some responsibility for lexical extension. Since its establishment, over 10,000 new words have been coined. More need to be created, however, as the world continues to change so rapidly.

All the initiatives referred to earlier are government funded, but, as we all know, that funding could well disappear should governments so deem it. While governments have come and gone, there has been much to criticize, but also much to laud, for there are always brickbats where one might also find bouquets.

As a point of interest, it should be noted that *kōhanga reo* came into existence because of the Elders around 1980. They were concerned at what they perceived to be a rapid rate of language loss, and they wished to arrest it—hence, the pre-school total immersion centres. The four principal tenets of the *kōhanga reo* movement are:

1. Total immersion in the Māori language.
2. Whānau decision making, management, and responsibility.
3. Accountability, culturally and administratively.
4. Ensure the health and well being of the children in *Kōhanga Reo*.

The many Elders who created this initiative are no longer with us, but their legacy continues to flourish.

Although one might applaud or even envy these many initiatives, there is a crucial factor that needs to be acknowledged, which is the question of speakers. It seems so obvious, in fact, almost insulting to you, to state that, for any language to survive, it must have speakers. No matter what initiatives might be achieved, if apathy and lethargy continue to be rampant, then no language will survive.

As current parlance would have it, “you’ve got to walk the talk.” In other words, mere rhetoric will do nothing, but action will do much. Needless to say, this is a homily and a sermon I preach at every gathering of Māori I attend because it is naive to believe that political structures will guarantee language survival. Their role, as I see it, is only to provide us with the wherewithal to achieve our objectives because we know better than they do what we want and need with regard to our languages. If political climates were more receptive, then so much the better. I consider making the political climate receptive to be a crucial role of government.

However, much more fundamental is that each of us must take up the cudgels on behalf of our own languages because no one else is going to care as much as

we do. It is more than mere sentiment that drives us; it is the acknowledgement that we are our languages, and our languages are us. They are fundamental to our ethos, to whoever or whatever we are. Hence, our reason for attending a conference such as this: to be with like-minded people who do not need reams of explanation to appreciate where we are coming from and who afford our egos that little morale boost so that we are rejuvenated and ready to face the next challenge. As a young second language learner once stated: “Here’s our language: it has value; it has substance; it’s about one’s identity.”

It is for all the foregoing reasons that I, categorically, will not accept that Māori will become the Latin of Aotearoa/New Zealand. It is, after all, my language and my culture that gives my country its identity on the world stage and that makes it the unique country that it is. Yet the truth of the matter is that if we are not vigilant and if we continue to let the powers that be tell us how we should maintain our languages rather than the desire of the heart of each of us, then, as sure as eggs are eggs, our ultimate destiny will be that of the Latin language—dead: not forgotten, but no longer spoken.

The question we all need to ask ourselves is: Do we have the right to deprive generations yet unborn of the rich, cultural legacy to which they are heir? We, too, could well have been a deprived generation if it had not been for each of us here assembled, and we know how our own lives have been enriched because of our having access to that rich cultural and linguistic heritage bequeathed to us by our ancestors.

I have no doubt that each of us feels the same no matter what the country, no matter what the language, and that is why we persist, even if the odds seem stacked against us. As a proverb from my own tribe states, “iti rearea teitei kahikatea ka taea.” The rearea (bellbird) is one of the smallest birds in the forest, yet it is capable of reaching the top of the kahikatea, the tallest tree in the forests of my tribal territory.

What this tells us is that all our efforts, no matter how small or minimal, are better than no effort at all, and, if that effort is sustained, we should reach those great heights—the survival of our languages.

Against the greatest odds, our languages have survived thus far, and it should be our avowed intent for those languages to survive into the next millennium with a better bill of health. Is that a dream? I think not. For we should never forget that hope is stronger and more productive than despair.

Though this millennium has just begun, it is my fervent prayer that all our languages should continue to thrive in spite of the pessimists, the cynics, and the academics. I am certain it is your prayer too, and so I say in conclusion: Fighters for language survival, I salute you all.

Tēnā anō rā koutou katoa.