

It's Official: Maori- "The "Indigenous" Official Language of New Zealand

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Abstract:

Languages around the world are disappearing at an alarming rate. Language revitalization can help a "lesser used," "[m]inoritized," or "endangered" language be taken and returned to active use. The Maori are an indigenous population in New Zealand whose language, Te Reo Maori, is a lesser-used language when compared to English. The tremendous efforts put forth by the Maori people to revitalise their language has resulted in an increased awareness about their culture and has saved their saved their language from the brink of extinction. This research paper discusses the revitalization of the Maori language, specifically in the domains of education and the media. It also looks at the various social attitudes of both the Maori and the Non-Maori people towards the language and how that has affected the revitalization projects in New Zealand. This paper also briefly discusses whether the official status was just to recognize the language or to reverse language shift and help revitalize the language.

Keywords: Maori language, Indigenous, New Zealand, Language Revitalization, Education, Media, Official Status, Social Attitudes, Te Re Maori, Language Nests, Indigenous Language, Reversing Language Shift

Maori, or Te Reo Maori, is a language spoken by the Indigenous Maori population of New Zealand and belongs to the family of Eastern Polynesian languages. It is closely related to other Polynesian languages like Tahitian, Tuamotuan, and Haitian, particularly in vocabulary, though linguistic variation between the languages is also apparent.

The history of the Maori language has been one of considerable ups and downs in the past 200 years. In the 1800s, Maori was still the "prevailing language" up until the arrival of the white man (Winitana 1). The white man would bring with him the English language, which would eventually overtake Maori and confine it to isolated communities and populations in New Zealand (1). This dismissal, and eventual suppression, of Te Reo

Maori by the English language was, in fact, so subtle that “it took several years before the Maori community recognized the need to revitalise their dying language” (1). Thus began one of the biggest language revitalisation movements in recent years, which has since become an example to other languages in the same situation.

Te Reo Maori was given the status of official language alongside English in New Zealand with the establishment of the Maori Language Act in 1987. The language was, in fact, taken to the Waitangi Tribunal in 1985, which declared Te Reo Maori a *Taonga*, or “treasure”, that was to be protected under the Waitangi Treaty. A strong revitalisation project, and the persistent struggle of the Maori population to revive their dying language and their cultural identity, has succeeded in increasing the awareness of the language among both the Maori and the “Non-Maori” population. It has equally contributed to an increase in the number of Maori speakers in New Zealand. According to the 2013 statistics provided by the government of New Zealand, about 125,352 or 23% of Maori can hold a conversation in their language about everyday things.

In this essay, I will talk about the reason for the decline of the language, and the revitalization projects undertaken primarily in the sphere of education and the media. I will also briefly discuss the attitudes of the Maori and the non-Maori population towards the Te Reo Maori and attempt to briefly examine whether the “official status” of the language was given primarily to reverse the language shift or to “officially” recognize an indigenous as a national language alongside English.

According to Chris Winitana in *My Language my Inspiration*, within a few years of the arrival of the white man or the Pakeha, the Maori community “grasped the English language” (2). Particularly after the influx of different populations, including the British,

the Maori had to adapt to speaking the language of opportunities. English was seen as beneficial and Te Reo Maori was not passed on to further generations. Parents refused to teach the language to their children and Te Reo Maori was forbidden in schools. Winitana notes that, “[i]t was the Maori parents who pushed for their children to be taught in English in schools” (2). Native speakers refused to speak the language and the children at schools were punished if they spoke in Maori. However, we can argue that almost all minoritized languages face a similar plight and the language becomes “lesser-used” when there is a cultural shift in the attitudes of the population with respect to the language. Te Reo Maori was no different. Another driving factor in the decline of the language was the exodus of most of the population living in isolated Maori communities to urban cities, primarily after the Second World War. According to the 2004 statistics, about 84% of the Maori population had moved to urban centres due “to the lure of work and money” (3), and, as is inevitable, “in the cities, where people spoke English, Maori parents made a collective decision to use English instead of Maori” (Benton 16).

Even after the Second World War, statistics show that close to 25% of Indigenous children were well-versed in their mother tongue, and it was not until the 1970s that the revitalisation movement finally took off and the “petition for the language was placed before the parliament” to enable teaching the language in schools (Winitana 5). During these years, there was some crossover between English and Te Reo Maori with respect to trade and other government activities. However, the *Pakeha*, or the European settler population in New Zealand, increased over the years, the Maori did not see a reason to protect their language. It was evident that Te Reo Maori was dying, and its use was declining in both the public and private spheres of the community.

The revival of most “minoritized” languages starts with the teaching of the language in schools and other educational institutions and with the will of the community to start a revitalization project. Education was, therefore, an important and ideal starting point for the revitalization of Maori. However, I argue that simply concentrating on education and the teaching of the language means limiting the access to, and eventually the use of, the language in informal public settings. That is to say, the Maori population would not be using the language in public or with the Pakeha. Perhaps being a “minority”, they would become so accustomed to speaking only to each other that they would forget how to speak effectively to others (Fishman 19). An ordinance was introduced by Sir George Grey in 1857 stated that education needed to be carried out in English. This impacted the Maori language heavily since the beginning of the 1900’s.

In 1972, after the Maori Language Society’s petition was signed, the language began to be taught in schools. A number of teachers were trained since there was a serious dearth of teachers able to teach Te Reo Maori in the educational establishments. There were four training institutions that offered one-year course, so that teachers could immediately start teaching Maori in Senior Secondary schools in the region (Winitana 6); however, it was not until 1978 that the Maori realized the importance of reviving their dying language. It was the survey conducted by Benton that finally proved that Maori had to be saved (6). *Te Wharekura o Ruotoki* first opened its doors in 1896, to both the Maori and non-Maori population. It was the first bilingual school of its kind in New Zealand. Though 99% of the students enrolled are Maori, I argue that the school has encouraged students from the Maori community to invest in a bilingual education at the very least. It

helped in “the commitment of the Maori world to pulling back its language from the depths of the abyss” (7).

Another important step was to ensure that the education did not feel forced on the Maori population, who already resented their language, and to devise new and interesting language learning options to integrate the language into everyday use. Mothers and children needed to be taught their language and it was important to ensure a practical way of teaching it. The *Rakau Method*, or *Te Ataarangi*, was one such method that was invented by expert Katarina Mataira. It uses coloured rods as a teaching method and “remains highly popular to this day” due to its unique and entertaining character (Winitana 7). The classes are community-based and informal, with in an immersion environment. It was devised in this “non-threatening” and “unforced” manner so that learners and re-learners of the language would not be discouraged from learning. When the community realized that the New Zealand government and the Crown would do little to fund revitalisation projects in education, the idea of the *Language Nest* was born. The idea was for the older generation of native Maori speakers to enter the project to take part in early childhood education. It is, as Winitana calls it, “a philosophy in which a baby is fed with the milk of its language to produce a Maori thinking and speaking adult” (8). The Language Nests are primarily kindergartens where the children can learn their language in the presence of the elders in a comfortable and home-like environment. Several other “lesser-used languages” like Hawaiian have adapted this revitalisation model. According to Al Jazeera, the number of people speaking Maori has increased since the creation of Language Nests: about 25% of Maori can now speak and understand the language, and it has contributed to the rapid resurgence of the language and helped

the Maori from dying out completely. Despite this, I argue that it will take several years for the language to be used outside the school setting in a completely bilingual environment, no matter how formal or informal the learning has been made. This can be attributed to the still prevailing lax attitude of the population towards the language. However, the various revitalisation projects taken up by the Maori community have been successful in turning the tide towards the integration of the language, primarily in the minds of the new learners and the younger generation.

Three years after the Maori language was recognized as a national treasure in New Zealand, Maori found its way into the media. It is interesting to note how Maori language revival through the media was extremely difficult to undertake. Whether due to lack of funding or interest among the Non-Maoris and Maoris alike, it was not very well received until very recently. The revitalisation first started with a television program called *Te Karere*, a news service in the Maori language. However, this program failed to spur the revitalisation movement further. In 1983, the first Maori radio broadcast station *Te Upoko o Te Ika* began. Again, it was met with disdain, and the broadcasting was not very successful in bringing the community together to speak or practice the language. In 1989, the *Te Mangai Paho* was established to fund the Maori broadcasting, and more than 20 radio stations in Maori were born. This proves the significant lack of a positive attitude towards the language by the Maori and the Non-Maori population alike.

It would still be a few years before the notion of Maori language promotion through the media became well accepted. Many other initiatives, like the Aotearoa Television network, were put forward but failed to last longer than a few years. Gradually, during the 1990s and the 2000s, the New Zealand government began targeting

youth by broadcasting youth programs. Therefore, the government and the media worked together to bring about awareness of the language and its dire need for revitalization. Al Jazeera states that the television channels and radio broadcasts influenced more than 21% of the Maori youth who have since started speaking Maori. Therefore, although it has taken a considerable amount of time for the media to cooperate with the government, it eventually succeeded in contributing to the revival of the Te Reo Maori.

Rawinia Higgins and Poia Rewi, in their article “Right Shifting: Reorientation towards Normalization”, describe the ZePA model, which explains how the population in New Zealand has reacted in the past with the respect to their language (22). They explain that there are three major states: zero, passive, and active, wherein zero means absolutely no reaction from a section of the population. Therefore, “those in the zero are dismissive and resistant to acknowledgement for the Maori language” (23). The individuals or larger communities that come under zero are the most blatantly indifferent towards the language and are not concerned whether Maori is a part of their constitution. It is also possible to question with this point whether the concept of complete bilingualism could function in a zero society. That is to say, if there are communities that are completely indifferent to the second official language, and who do not see either the need to speak or even acknowledge that language, bilingualism would be difficult to attain in the context of New Zealand as a whole.

The second state is that of a passive spectator. Passive includes those who are “receptive to the Maori language yet have no proficiency in the language whatsoever” (Rawinia Higgins and Poia Rewi 23). “They are accommodating of the language” and acknowledge it as a part of their society (23). I believe that this includes a number of

non-Maori populations along with a few Maori who have yet to actively participate in the revitalisation movement. However, this group has supported the presence of the language, and, therefore, the community, and has helped achieve the status that Maori has attained in their community. The third state is that of active speakers who “actively strive to advance the Maori language in all arenas” (23). This could include anyone, though primarily those from the Maori community who seek to promote the language in all spheres and ensure that resources are available in the language for anyone wishing to use them.

All three types of communities exist alongside one another in New Zealand, and the public attitude is neither completely for nor against the Maori language. Do we, therefore, need new and consistent methods of language revival so that every citizen can acknowledge, recognize, and participate in the revitalization of Maori? If yes, then Maori still has a long way to go. However, it is also evident that the community and the government have successfully implemented one of the largest and most influential revitalisation movements and have contributed to the increased numbers of people willing to speak Maori.

Therefore, the question we need to ask is whether the official status of the Maori language has made any difference on how it is perceived in society? Is granting an ‘indigenous’ language the status of an official and national language enough to revive a dying language and to give it give it official and sufficient recognition?

I argue that the official status of the language has no bearing on the current situation of the Maori language. According to recent statistics, it can be seen there is a significant decrease in the numbers of speakers of Maori in New Zealand. Certain

communities still believe that Maori has “no future” and that it is a language that should “remain in the past” (Rawinia Higgins and Poia Rewi 26). Is it simply due to the fact that Maori is an indigenous language? I agree with Stephen May when he states that, “minority languages are just carriers of tradition or historical identity. Minority languages will eventually come to be seen as delimited even by native language speakers” (27).

I believe that this is the reason perhaps that Te Reo Maori has official status in the country: to glorify the past history and tradition. Even in the courtroom, the law does not permit the submission of documents in the Maori language. Moreover, there is an ever-growing need for translators and interpreters both inside the courtroom and outside, thereby making the actual need for the language redundant.

I believe that it is important to bring the revitalisation movement to the people. Maori and Non-Maori alike should be included in policy-making for the revitalisation of Maori. It would be wiser for the Maori community to focus not just on their community and the recognition they give themselves. It is also important to include the *Pakeha* in celebrating as well as contributing to the Maori language, culture, and identity. If every New Zealand citizen recognizes the need to revive a dying culture, the language would not remain “lesser used” for long. Although the number of Maori speakers has decreased after the “Maori boom” in the 1980s and 1990s, 80% of Maori youth, and about 70% of non-Maori youth, agreed in a large scale survey that the language should be made compulsory in schools to enable a higher proficiency for all children. It is important that the people and the government allow its integration into society because Maori language is a matter of public and national policy, not just something for the Maori homes.

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