

Two unrelated changes in the English of young New Zealanders

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This paper reports some early findings of a research project (funded by the Marsden Fund administered by the Royal Society of New Zealand) studying the playground vocabulary of children in New Zealand primary and intermediate schools. The aim of the research is to look for evidence of regional variation, and to consider the part played by children in language change.

The research method

One hundred and fifty schools from Kaitaia to Bluff (thus covering the country from the far north to the far south) have participated in the research to date, and we gratefully acknowledge the cooperation of the teachers and children concerned. The main data collection instrument was a questionnaire which provided scenarios and asked the respondents what they would say in such situations. In each school, at least one teacher presented the questions to a class of Year 7 and/or 8 students (Form I and II, typically aged 11-12), and recorded the responses, frequently multiple responses for each question.

Some bigger schools returned several questionnaires from different classes, and a very small number of schools sent the responses of individual students, rather than the communal responses which were expected. Where multiple questionnaires or individual responses were returned, the responses were combined on one master questionnaire before the data was entered. The study is thus based on 150 sets of data.

Collecting data from individuals would have been impractical in terms of time and money. It took approximately 15 hours to process the individual responses from one class of 25 children, as opposed to 1-2 hours for a communal questionnaire. There are also enormous problems posed by the interpretation of children's spelling. When a child writes *I don't what it*, you can deduce that the standard spelling is *I don't want it*, but if they write *My bike is caned*, you cannot tell if that represents *caned* or *canned*. The extent of this problem cannot be underestimated; consider these versions of a clapping game exactly as recorded by two children:

- 1 hama hama hai hai hamahma wie wie hama hai hama wie
hama hama hai we
- 2 hammer hammer had where hammer hammer wee wee
hammer had hammer where hammer hammer had where

15 children from this school attempted to write this rhyme. Not one used the conventional spelling for all the words. By putting together what we gleaned from all 15, and with a flash of inspiration to help, we deduced that the rhyme is:

Hammer, hammer, hard, hard,
Hammer, hammer, ware, ware,
Hammer hard, hammer ware
Hammer, Hammer Hardware

While there are lapses in the teachers' spelling from time to time, they are not of an order which inhibits interpretation. Children will also avoid writing words they don't know how to spell.

Equally important, the kind of vocabulary which the questionnaire is designed to elicit is vocabulary which is likely to be shared by all the children in a speech community. This means that all the children are likely to know the same range of terms for particular items. Since multiple responses were encouraged, it was possible for teachers to record the range offered, and to record responses from different speech communities in one school. (One teacher in a small school with a both a high and a low socio-economic group commented that the children had been really interested in and surprised by the very different responses provided by the two groups.)

No longer ashamed

The word *ashamed* has all but disappeared from the vocabulary of young New Zealanders. It has been replaced by a variety of forms using the root *shame*: young people say *I felt shame*, *I felt shamed*, *I felt shamed out*, *I felt shameful*.

There were three questions in the questionnaire which might potentially elicit *ashamed*, although this was not the primary focus of the first. These questions were:

- 31 In the finals of the speech competition, Trindy [an invented nickname for a girl the age of the respondents] forgot her speech, and made a lot of mistakes. Her Mum asks how it went. What would Trindy say?

32 When you were talking to one of the teachers, you called her “Mum” by mistake. You went red in the face and felt very uncomfortable. You want to tell your friend how you felt. What would you say?

33 You have just won your school speech competition. The Principal talks to you afterwards and tells you what a wonderful speech it was, and how proud (s)he is of you. You feel very uncomfortable about this. You want to tell your friend how you felt. What would you say?

There are only three tokens of *ashamed* in all the answers. Many other responses were provided besides the forms using the root *shame* (e.g. for Q 32, *I was embarrassed, I felt bummed out, I'm dissing my Mum, I felt like a(n) idiot/dick/dork/egg/faggot/retard*; for Q33, *I was embarrassed, I felt weird/bummaged/budget/mental/nervous, I felt good on the inside but not on the outside, it was freaky/rude/gay/crusty*) but *shame*-based responses were very common across schools, especially for Question 32. (We have coded 103 different answers to Q 32, and 89 different answers to Q 33, where many schools reported that the children had no response to the scenario. In Q 32, the responses using the root *shame* with the number of schools reporting them in brackets are: *shame* (including *shame as, so shame*) (50), *shamed out* (19), *shameful (as)* (12), *shamed* (36), *ashamed* (2), *shame-o(s)* (2), *shamed myself out* (1), *shame on myself* (1), *shameless* (1), *shames* (2), *shaming* (2), giving a total of 128 *shame*-based responses. In Q33, the responses using *shame* are *shame* (including *shame as, so shame*) (25), *a shame* (1), *a bit shamed* (1), *shameless* (1), *shamed* (10), *shameful* (5), *shamed out* (4), *shaming* (2), *shames* (2), *ashamed* (1), giving a total of 52 *shame*-based responses.)

We surmise that NZ children learning English find an apparent conflict in the word *ashamed* between what they perceive as the indefinite article *a* and the past participle *-ed*. This analysis of the form is partially supported by the common phrase *What a shame!*, where the indefinite article does precede the root *shame*. It would appear that many children have decided that *ashamed* cannot be a correct form, since the indefinite article cannot precede a past participle, and accordingly have adjusted their output to make better apparent sense, or to conform to the grammatical rules they have deduced. Although the cause must remain a matter of speculation, the result seems very clear: *ashamed* is dying, and is being replaced by *shame* and/or *shamed* in a variety of constructions by children in New Zealand.

Pegs and bags: there and back again

1 Pegs as a truce term

Truce terms are used when playing certain games to request temporary immunity. For instance, if a child playing a game of tag/tig(gy) needs to stop playing to tie up their shoelace, they call out the current truce term, and cannot then be tagged until they agree that they are playing again.

Truce terms vary from region to region in New Zealand, and there is a large area where the most common truce term is *pegs*. It is likely that this term derives from *pax*, which a number of people who were at primary school in the 1940s and 1950s have reported was the normal term in their school days, and which is still in use in at least one school in our sample. The form *pags* is also attested in one school, and provides a probable explanation of the route by which *pax* became *pegs*: if you shout *pax*, you are likely to lengthen the vowel. However, the vowel before a voiced consonant or consonant cluster is longer than before a voiceless one (compare the vowels in *box* and *bogs*), and the children acquiring this truce term as part of their induction into the game have been led to the conclusion that the consonants at the end are voiced, as in *pags*. The form *pex* is also attested in one school, and this suggests that the raising of the New Zealand short front vowels also played a part in the change, although the precise mechanism of this change in terms of misperception and mispronunciation remains obscure. It is well attested that children rationalise what they hear to fit with what they know. The process is usually termed folk etymology or popular etymology, though the label is misleading. It is really a matter of reanalysis of the arbitrary form of a word to make it more like some known word. In the case in hand, *pax*, *pex* and *pags* would be unknown, *pegs* would be familiar. So *pegs* it has become. It is also reported in the form *pegsed*.

2 Laying claim with bags

It is traditional to lay claim to something you want by saying *I bags* (or just *Bags*), e.g. *I bags the back seat*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* confirms that this derives from the verb *to bag*, and describes the *-s* as vulgar, like that in *says I*. For many, if not all, New Zealand children, the *-s* has been re-analysed as part of the root of the verb, as shown by the fact that the universal past tense is *I bagged the back seat*. The negative is also in use, though apparently not as widely: *Bags not sit(ting) in the front*.

3 The peg-bag overlap

In the data from the questionnaire on children's playground vocabulary, there are frequent responses like the following to the question about laying claim to the back seat: *(I) pegs the back seat, Pags the back seat, I've paged the back seat*. And among the truce terms reported, we find *Bags, Bags not* and *Bagsed*. It seems that the two originally quite distinct forms have coalesced. We can hypothesise that the meaning which links them is the notion of 'safe/saved'. You call out a truce term so that you will be safe/saved from tagging. You use a claim expression to save a seat/make it safe (and both *The back seat's safe* and *The back seat's saved* have been reported as possible ways of laying claim to the seat). *Pegs* and *bags* are thus perceived as equivalent, and the similarity in form no doubt reinforces this.

4 Further complications

The two forms are also both attested in another environment: what you say to stop someone giving you (or giving you back) something you don't want. Amongst the responses to this, we have found the following, arranged in lists to highlight the comparisons:

no bags	
bags not	pegs not
bags not back	pegs not back
begs [sic] not me	pegs not me
bags	pegs
no bags back	no pegs back
	paged forever
no begs	
	pegged not back

(not to mention *bag snot* and *bags snot*, typical of the linguistic humour often apparent in the responses; for those who have not had recent contact with primary schoolers, it may be relevant to point out that, in addition to physical objects like bits of rubbish, one of the things commonly passed on in these classroom games is 'germs', 'cooties', 'goobies' etc.: if someone you don't like accidentally touches you, you can touch another person and pass on the first person's germs). The forms in the lists above are by no means the only responses: they are alternatives to things like *no backs*, *no returns*, and a host of other possibilities.

The parallels in the lists indicate the degree to which the forms *pegs* and *bags* have come to mean the same thing. However, notice that we find both

bags and *bags not*, and *pegs* and *pegs not* used in exactly the same situation and sometimes both reported from the same school! This situation has arisen because of the original differences: you could say *pax* in this situation because it made you 'safe' from receiving the object. You could say *bags not* in this situation because that claimed your right not to receive the object. But when *pax* became *pegs*, and fell together with *bags*, either the positive or the negative could be justified. This also explains why amongst the truce terms we find *no bags* and *bags not*, as well as *bags*.

5 *Where to from here?*

The process of change in this area is clearly not complete. It seems unlikely that positive and negative will continue side by side. However, it is not clear from the responses which is the more common form, or which will prevail. The process of change is no doubt also made more complex by the fact that *pegs* is not the truce term found all over the country. We are not yet in a position to look at the complex issue of the correlation between the co-occurrences of *pegs* and *bags* (and derivatives) in the three different environments in which they have been reported, especially in those areas where *pegs* is not the normal truce term. While these further investigations may provide some clarification of these issues, the process of language change illustrated by the current usage is itself of interest. Since we also have two attestations of *pigs return* (meaning 'no returns') in different areas of the country, vowel changes in these words are apparently still underway, and may lead to yet further changes.