

WORKING IN/PLAYING WITH THREE LANGUAGES:
ENGLISH, TE REO MAORI AND MAORI BODY LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores some of the difficulties and rewards of cross cultural communication and translation, drawing on the author's long-term fieldwork experiences in Northland, New Zealand. It also examines some of the creative and subversive ways that Maori use – and play with – language.

Learning to communicate with people who speak a different language in a fieldwork situation is fraught with problems – and unexpected rewards. By necessity we begin by matching their words with ours but gradually and sometimes painfully we learn to abandon preconceptions, to pay attention to context and to recognise unexpected linkages; in short, to think in their terms.

Carrying out fieldwork on the urban Maori migration in the 1950s, I worked closely with Maori who spoke English as well as te reo Maori.¹ It gradually dawned on me that they also had a third form of communication, body language, which they used both to reinforce and to negate what they said in words. This was in many ways distinctively their own.

To begin with, I assumed that the English my Maori informants spoke was the same as mine, giving English words the same meanings that I did. That misconception was exploded in one dramatic episode.

Ani Brown was the mother of ten children ranging from twenty-year-old Rachel to a toddler. She seemed to enjoy my visits as welcome diversion from her domestic routine. One Monday she hastened to tell me, 'We had an engagement party for Rachel on Saturday night!' I felt hurt: I had thought we were on good enough terms to have been invited to such an event. But I forgot my dismay as Ani described what happened.

At 6 pm on Saturday night they received a telephone call from the uncle of Rachel's boyfriend announcing, 'We'll be at your place at 7 o'clock!' Ani's husband summoned his brothers and together they extended a formal welcome to the visitors, consisting of Tama (the boyfriend), his parents and his father's older brother. The welcome over, the latter (as senior member of Tama's whanau²) formally asked for Rachel as a wife for 'our boy', voicing the whanau's approval of the match. Rachel's eldest uncle replied that their whanau also approved and, calling the young couple in, asked them if they were willing to marry. They agreed and the two whanau proceeded to set the date and discuss wedding arrangements.

This was a far cry from the 'engagement party' I was familiar with, initiated by the couple concerned and arranged by the girl's parents to announce the engagement to invited guests. I had stumbled unwittingly on the custom known as 'tomo' in Northland, the formal negotiation of a marriage undertaken by families when a relationship is becoming serious, and sometimes even earlier. It opened up a whole new line of enquiry.

My Maori informants frequently fed me one word English glosses for key Maori words but these soon proved inadequate and I learnt to listen for the contexts of their use. Aroha, for example, is a word widely equated by Maori and Pakeha with the English love, but the two words share only part of their respective semantic fields. Scholarly Maori mentors taught me that aroha should *not* be applied to erotic love and that its primary reference is affection and loyalty to kinsfolk, especially members of one's own tribe. Waiata aroha are not lovesongs as understood by the Western world but laments for the loss of someone or something loved. In Maori company over the years I heard aroha used with particular frequency in the context of bereavement and mourning: arohanui is an appropriate way of expressing sympathy. It took me some years more to realise that aroha is also used to express gratitude (it is one way of saying 'thank you'), approval (translating the English 'I'm proud of her' or 'I admire him'), and compassion ('I felt sorry for him'), even for wrongdoers.

Contact with members of different tribes in the city alerted me to tribal variations in the meaning of some words. In most tribes tahae is a thief but among Tuhoe it simply means a young boy. One of my informants told me how he got into a fight on a Tuhoe marae when someone called him tahae. I was puzzled when I first heard Te Rarawa weavers talking about 'stripping korari'. Stripping is the weavers' term for dividing broad flax blades into strips for weaving; korari is the standard term for the flower stalk of the flax, not something that is suitable for 'stripping'. Careful listening revealed that korari is regularly used

in the Far North to describe not just the flower stalk but the whole flax bush, known elsewhere as 'te pa harakeke'.

The variation that really threw me was a purely local one. Living in the Far North community of Kotare, I heard local Maori constantly refer to themselves or others as being 'sa'. Now there is no s in standard Maori pronunciation or orthography. However, early European visitors to northern New Zealand often recorded a sibilant before words beginning with h: the name 'Hongi Hika' appears in early records as 'Shunghee Shika'. This usage was still current in Kotare in the 1950s: a farmer bearing the ancestral name Te Haukiterangi was generally known as Sau. So I hypothesised that sa was an abbreviated version of hoha, a word that expresses exasperation, often rendered into English as 'fed-up' and 'can't be bothered'. However, when I examined the contexts in which sa was used, this interpretation did not stand up. Instead I established that sa had the same range of reference as 'whakama', a word which covers a range of feelings from shy through embarrassed to ashamed and guilty. I now think it most likely that sa was a child's attempt to say shy which caught on in the inexplicable way that some words do in a family or local setting.³

So much for the problems (and rewards) associated with learning the meanings and use of *words* in another language. The third language I referred to in my title is Maori body language. In many ways this language is harder to learn than a verbal language because we so easily fail to see it. Walking down the street, a Maori friend and I passed three Maori entering a laundromat. My companion told me, 'Those are cousins on my mother's side.' 'Oh,' I said, 'why didn't you say hello?' He looked at me in surprise and said, 'But I did!' I had missed the rapid raising and lowering of both eyebrows with which Maori convey recognition. Looking back now, I realise that I started to use aspects of my informants' body language before I consciously recognised its existence. On one occasion, after spending an hour in stimulating conversation with a Maori Welfare Officer in his office in Whakatane, I realised that our eyes had not met, let alone held, for more than a fraction of our time together. Maori consider that looking someone steadily in the eyes is confrontational: in conversation they look at each other briefly from time to time but let their eyes roam in between.⁴

Perhaps the trickiest form of communication to master is silence, for silence can be used to convey very different messages. Here context supplies the vital clue. First, Maori use silence to express admiration. Usually in a meetinghouse at night there is a low hum of conversation even when a speaker is on his feet. Having fallen asleep in the meetinghouse one night, I was woken by an

electric silence as a renowned speaker held the gathering spellbound. Secondly, where Pakeha assume that silence spells assent, Maori use it to express dissent. If they agree to a proposition, they stand up and say so; if they do not agree, they remain seated in silence. Thirdly, silence is a powerful instrument of rebuke. I once saw an obstreperous speaker collapse defeated when those present in the meeting house fell completely silent and sat with bowed heads, looking at their toes. Fourthly, silence can simply mean necessary timeout. I once took a group of students to visit a *kuia* in her home in Porirua. She called us into her living-room where the senior *kaumatua* of her community sat in an armchair beside the fire with his head bowed over his walking stick. We sat down across the room and waited – and waited – and waited. Just when we were wondering if we had offended him in some way, he rose to his feet and welcomed us most warmly. He explained afterwards he had just returned from a *tangi* and needed time to work out what to say in a different setting.⁵

When Pakeha recognise and begin to use Maori words in general English discourse they frequently latch on to a single meaning, which may or may not be its most important one. When they use this limited understanding as a basis for dealing with Maori they make mistakes, mistakes that stall communication and may lead to decisions which disadvantage Maori, because Pakeha are so often in positions of power.

A classic example is the word ‘*kaumatua*’, typically glossed with the English word *elder*, with its resemblance to *elderly*. Back in the 1980s Wellington public servants organised a *Hui Kaumatua* to which they invited *kaumatua* from all over the country, setting a minimum age of 70. Haimona Snowden, one of the premier *kaumatua* of Northland, did not receive an invitation: he was only in his sixties. When I started fieldwork in the 1950s, *kaumatua* was used, in the first place, to refer to those identified as community leaders. Most of them were in their fifties and sixties, but one or two were considerably younger. I learnt that *kaumatua* refers first to the role of leader, and to age as a consequence of that role. *Kaumatua* was used, secondly, to refer to ‘the older generations’ collectively, those whose defining characteristics were grey hair and grandchildren. Because Maori generally marry and start families young, many were still in their fifties. Ironically, one of the meanings of the word *elder* in English also describes office rather than age.⁶

Similar misunderstandings centre round the word *mana*. This word occurs so frequently in English language publications that it is often left unglossed. If it is explained, it is usually given the meaning of ‘prestige’ and sometimes that of ‘power and authority’, English words most at home in secular social and politi-

cal contexts. However, for Maori at all familiar with traditional beliefs, the basic referent of mana is a diffuse, impersonal power which has its origin in the spiritual realm of Te Aomarama, flows from thence into the earthly realm and invests (indwells) people, animals, places and things: mana has a metaphysical as well as a this-worldly dimension. While they do give mana the meanings of prestige, power and authority, Maori see these attributes as secondary to and deriving from the mana of metaphysical origin. In their eyes, the prestige, power and authority that a leader commands is a consequence or product of mana in this basic sense, and is not identical with it.⁷

According to the traditional Maori understanding, mana is, like water and electricity, conceptually singular yet to be found occupying multiple locations. Individual Maori, especially leaders, have their own store of mana, which they accumulate in three main ways: directly from God or the gods, through contact with mana-possessing things and places, and passed down through the ancestors. Maori speechmakers give mana a plural form when they address their listeners with the formula 'E nga mana, e nga reo, nga karangaranga maha'. Here they are using mana metonymically, to address those in their audiences who are repositories of mana: 'You (people of) mana, you (speakers of different) tongues, you (people of) many callings'. Even though I knew this usage, it took me years to discover that the people of Kotare also used mana, in the singular and the plural, to identify the guardian animals associated with different local families, like the white shark which guided swimmers swept out to sea back to safe landing spots on the dangerous west coast. In most other iwi such guardians are known as 'kai-tiaki'.⁸

Several of the meanings Maori give to the word 'whenua' are the same as those given to English 'land': the solid part of the earth's surface in contrast to sea, water and sky, a defined piece of that surface, country, ground, and soil. But Maori also identify land under water as whenua: they do not have separate words for foreshore and seabed. In addition, they give whenua the meaning of 'placenta'. At first sight this word seems to be a homonym of whenua meaning land, a word with the same form but a quite different meaning. For Maori, however, there is a vital connection between the two: whenever possible, families bury each child's placenta in some significant spot on land inherited from their ancestors. The land/whenua is Papatuanuku, the nurturing mother of Maori cosmology.⁹

If important Maori words require several words and/or lengthy explanation in English for an adequate translation, the same applies to the translation of many English words into te reo Maori. Some forty years ago I received a

Christmas card which depicted clasped hands, one brown, one white, with the one-word caption ‘Tungane’. It was obviously meant to convey the idea of ‘the brotherhood of man’, a popular slogan at the time. The card reduced me to helpless laughter, because tungane is a word used only by females, who apply it not only to their brothers but also to all male cousins of the same generation. A Maori male uses not one but two words to describe his brothers: ‘tuakana’ for those who are older than he is and ‘teina’ for those who are younger. However, tuakana and teina cannot be translated as ‘older brother’ and ‘younger brother’, because they are also used by females to refer to their older and younger sisters. In addition, like tungane, tuakana and teina are also applied to cousins of the same generation.¹⁰ Tuakana and teina must be glossed as ‘senior and junior siblings and cousins of the same sex’. It is not surprising that many young (and not so young) Maori dispense with all three terms in favour of ‘cuzzybro’.

Let me finish on a positive note by discussing how Maori enjoy themselves playing with the languages at their disposal.

Despite wide variations in their understanding of the subtleties of te reo Maori and/or English, Maori have a lot of fun playing with the differences and similarities between them. They continually invent combinations of words from Maori and English that express home truths with a wry twist: for example, hui hopping, waka-jumper, plastic Maori, born-again Maori, iwi fundamentalist, dial-a-kaumatua, haka boogie, mana munching.

Better still, they play on knowledge of Maori and English words with corresponding meanings to make outrageous puns. Waiting in the sun for the second sitting of the hakari (climactic feast) at an unveiling, I heard a woman leaving the dining hall say to a waiting friend, ‘Great kai – they’ve got kanga wai!’ And the friend replied, ‘I know, I can hear it!’ Kanga wai is a dish of fermented corn (often called ‘rotten corn’), which smells to high heaven but is relished by older Maori. The joke hinges on the fact that ‘rongo’, the word for ‘to hear’, also means ‘to smell’.

In Wellington I used to attend weekly Maori conversation classes in the home of a Maori friend. An inventive storyteller, this friend often challenged us to decode his witticisms. It did not take us long to catch on that ‘te wahi ihu potu’ was a reference to Courtenay Place in downtown Wellington, arrived at through the French for ‘short nose’. But he had even the men in our group bamboozled when he told a long story about a football match in a place called Tohora. Because I had read more classical Maori than the others, I had the last laugh when I remembered that ‘tohora’ is the Maori name for the southern

right whale. He was telling the story of a famous rugby match when the New Zealand team played the Welsh in Wales.

Heoi ano, e hoa ma. Kia ora ra tatou katoa.

NOTES

- 1 My fieldwork was carried out in Auckland city and the rural community of Kotare, reported in my PhD thesis, and see also Metge (1964). 'Te reo Maori' is the Maori language, often shortened by Maori to 'te reo'. 'Reo' is the Maori term for languages in general.
- 2 Whanau: an extended family, typically comprising three or four generations descended from a founding couple and incorporating spouses.
- 3 Metge (1986)
- 4 Metge, and Kinloch (1978) especially pp. 10–13.
- 5 Metge, and Kinloch (1978) pp. 20–22.
- 6 'An official in the early Christian, Presbyterian, and Mormon Churches' *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary of Current English*. Oxford: Clarendon Press 1990.
- 7 Metge (1986) pp. 61–79.
- 8 The term 'kai-tiaki', traditionally applied to 'spiritual guardians', has had its meaning extended in recent years to include human guardians of resources. See Natural Resources Unit (1991).
- 9 Bird (ed) (1961) pp.1–11.
- 10 The application of the terms tuakana and teina is complicated: while tuakana is applied to older siblings and teina to younger, when it comes to cousins the terms are applied on the basis of seniority of descent, not relative age.

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