The folk linguistics of language policy: Knowing, feeling and doing Māori language revitalisation

Nathan Albury, University of Oslo

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Center for Multilingualism in Society across the Lifespan, University of Oslo.
Te Tumu School of Māori, Pacific and Indigenous Studies, University of Otago.

Post-colonial governments have commonly sought to revitalize the indigenous languages their imperialist predecessors hoped to eradicate. This is true too in the case of te reo Māori in New Zealand after its near total extermination by the British. The Crown sought to create “a monolingual, English-speaking, New Zealand” by forbidding the language in the school system and settling Māori in urban areas between Pākehā (European) New Zealanders to circumvent “the recreation of Māori social and speech patterns” (Chrisp, 2005, p. 152). Assimilationist policy made gains, and by 1979 less than 100 children nationwide were proficient in the language (Waitangi Tribunal, 2011). However, the international civil rights movement led New Zealand to embark on a programme to revitalise rather than suppress te reo Māori. After initial gains from kura kaupapa (Māori immersion education), the language base is declining again. This is despite ongoing community and government investment in the language and oscillations in policy about who it should target and why (Albury, 2014b). This begs the question of whether policy aligns with the sociolinguistic perspectives and ambitions of the community, and speaks to Canagarajah’s (2005) call to reclaim local knowledge in language policy to understand sociolinguistic dilemmas and challenges in local terms than through theories from the academy. This paper gives an overview of key findings from a PhD project that, using the folk linguistics of language policy (Albury, 2014a), investigated how a cohort of Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth in New Zealand engage te reo Māori as a sociolinguistic policy endeavour. Through an online survey using a quantitative and qualitative approach, these youth were asked to define te reo Māori language revitalisation in their own terms, such as where, why and how it happens. The survey also solicited their dispositions to key policy questions, such Pākehā participation in revitalisation, language in education, and domains of language use. Drawing on their folk linguistic knowledge and feelings, they then described the ideal sociolinguistic situation they envisage for New Zealand and proposed policy steps to achieve that. The paper concludes that these youth define language revitalisation in local terms unfamiliar to traditional scholarship, including that the language does not index Māori identity but rather a shared postcolonial Kiwi identity that schools and not homes are responsible for language revitalisation, and that oratory traditions are preferable to language standardisation.