PHILIPPINE JOURNAL OF LINGUISTICS
Vol. 18, No. 2; Vol. 19, No. 1
December 1986 and June 1987

LANGUAGE AND POLITICS IN NEW ZEALAND

RICHARD BENTON
New Zealand Council for Educational Research

This talk will be concerned mainly with the political and legal status of various languages in New Zealand, and particularly with moves over the last two decades to obtain recognition of the Maori language as a national or official language with the same status as English.[1]

It will conclude, however, with some remarks about another aspect of language and politics, which affects not only New Zealand, but also the Philippines and most other developed or developing countries.

I had originally intended to talk about the evaluation of bilingual education (English and Maori and English and Japanese) programmes; however, I discovered that Brother Andrew and Dr. Sibayan have been engaged in an extensive review of the Philippine bilingual education policy, and I thought that it would be a good idea to look at the New Zealand programmes in the light of the Philippine experience.

New Zealand, even more than the United States, is a nation of recent immigrants, most of whom have arrived (or are descended from people who arrived) within the last 150 years.

About 12-15% of the population are of partly or wholly Maori descent -- the Maori are a Polynesian people who migrated to New Zealand from the Eastern Pacific about 1,000 years ago. Their language is closely related to other Eastern Polynesian languages like Tahitian and Hawaiian, and, more distantly, to the languages of the Philippines.

The rest of the population is mainly of European descent, predominantly English, but including Scottish, Irish, Italian, Yugoslav, Dutch, and practically every other European nationality in greater or lesser numbers.

Since 1945, however, a substantial non-European element has been present among new immigrants. Pacific Islanders (predominantly from Samoa) now make up 2% of the total population of just over 3,000,000 and there are more people from some Pacific Island groups living in New Zealand than in their homelands. Chinese and Indian communities of long-standing have been joined by large numbers of refugees from Indo-China (per capita, more have been reportedly accepted by New Zealand than any other country), and also by individual Filipinos whose numbers have been swollen by a thriving mail-order bride industry which is causing the government some concern.

However, the "melting pot" philosophy has been accepted until recently as the natural order of things in New Zealand even more widely than in the United States of America.

It is only very recently that the assumption that English is the first and only necessary language of the nation has been seriously challenged.

In 1867 the Native Schools Act set up a system of village day-schools in Maori communities, and removed the responsibility for Maori education from the churches to the Central government. The Act laid down that the language of instruction should be English and the curriculum should be 'the ordinary subjects of English primary education'. These schools remained under the direct control of the Department of Education when a universal and compulsory system of education for the rest of the population was set up a decade later, under the administrative control of regional education boards.

[1] Prepared for a special meeting of the Linguistic Society of the Philippines, 20 February 1986.

In the "Maori Schools" some experimentation in transitional bilingual education was tolerated until the 1840's, after which the official policy required that the Maori language should not be used by teachers, and its use within the school grounds by children should be actively discouraged.

In the "Board Schools" (which a high proportion of Maori children attended from the beginning and a large majority by the time the two systems were merged in 1969), English was always the sole language used.

Maori Language was, however, recognized as a tertiary-level subject by the University of New Zealand in the 1920's. In 1931 it was made a compulsory subject for Maori students attending secondary schools on government scholarships.

It was not until the 1970s, however, that Maori became widely available as a subject for academic study in New Zealand high schools generally: partly as a result of continued political agitation by a new generation of Maori activists.

At this time, Maori was the only "political" language, apart from English.

While the agitation for the expansion of the use of Maori in the school system was intensifying, the status of other languages in New Zealand life was rapidly eroding.

The numbers of children studying languages like French dropped rapidly, from about half those taking the School Certificate examination (at the end of the third year of high school) in 1960 to less than 10% twenty years later. In most schools, the study of French, Latin, or German, was no longer mandatory in academic courses by 1970, and universities dropped their "foreign language" requirements for graduation at all levels.

The communicative (as against symbolic and political) status of Maori had also eroded. By 1979, when we completed a nationwide sociolinguistic survey of Maori language use, there were only about 70,000 fluent speakers of Maori (20% of the Maori population broadly construed). This was still far more than its nearest rivals, about 20,000 speakers of Dutch and another 20,000 of Samoan.

The same sociolinguistic factors which affected immigrant languages (causing them to disappear after the first New Zealand - born generation, more or less) had affected Maori once people started moving from predominantly Maori rural areas to the cities after the Second World War. The interesting thing about the situation at the end of the 1970's is not why Maori was disappearing as a spoken language, but why it had suddenly become the focus of a great deal of political and educational attention in contradistinction to the other languages whose speakers seemed quite contented with (and even enthusiastic about) an all-English education.

One important factor in this was the size of the Maori community: it was (and remains) far bigger than any other minority.

Another factor was the great increase in the number of Maori people who had higher education and occupied positions of influence as government officials and university professors, without abandoning their ethnic identity.

Also, there was general disillusionment with the effects of an all-English education system: despite numerous successes, far more Maori children left school without any formal qualification than did non-Maori. (High School graduation in New Zealand is not automatic; it is dependent on the School Certificate examination which has a built-in 50% failure-rate; many Maori children don't even attempt it). Abandonment of Maori development had not been compensated for by educational and economic advancement. A heightened ethnic identity had developed, however, together with the consciousness of a special status for Maori language, people, and culture in New Zealand society.

In a half-hearted attempt to placate the Maori nationalists, the government in 1974 gave token recognition to Maori in an amendment to the Maori Affairs Act which provides that

> "Official recognition is hereby given to the Maori language of New Zealand in its various dialects and idioms as the ancestral tongue of that portion of the population of New Zealand of Maori descent . . ."

and authorizes the Minister of Maori Affairs "from time to time to take such steps as he deems appropriate for the encouragement of the learning and use of the Maori language."

This was proved very soon to be as meaningless as it sounds by a series of judicial decisions stemming from appeals by a Maori activist whose demand to have cases against him heard in Maori rather than in English was not acceded to by the courts. Among other things, it was established that a 14th century English statute prescribing English (rather than French) as the language of the courts still applied in New Zealand (it was repealed in England about 100 years ago), and that Maori speakers could only demand that an interpreter be supplied if they could establish that they could not understand English. The relevant paragraph of one of the judgements shows how miserably the activist failed that test:

> In the present case it must have been apparent to the learned Magistrate, as it is to me, that Mr. Mihaka is a highly intelligent man, fluent in the English language and capable of presenting his arguments to a degree which surpasses quite a few counsel. I adhere to the view that Mr. Mihaka suffered no injustice as a result of the learned magistrate proceeding . . . without ordering translations and without seeking the service of a Maori interpreter. (Chilwell, J., 1978, Supreme Court, Auckland,: Te Ringa Mangu Mihaka vs The Police.)

Bilingual Education re-entered the New Zealand scene in 1977, with the establishment of the first official Maori/English bilingual school. This was basically a political move: even in the community where this first school was set up, only the older children were still actively bilingual. The new-entrants were almost all what the Americans would call English-Dominant. Since then, seven additional bilingual schools have been approved, several of them in areas where few parents (let alone children)are native speakers of Maori.

The growth of the "kohanga reo" (language nest) movement since 1982 has given another educational dimension to political action in support of the Maori language. There are now about 400 of these pre-school centres where Maori is supposed to be the only language used, and their first "graduates" are now entering New Zealand primary schools. The parents of these children are demanding bilingual education for their children, and at least one private bilingual school has been set up by Maori parents in Auckland (New Zealand's largest city) because of their dissatisfaction with the response of the Department of Education to their demands.

Between 1980 and 1984 three attempts were made by members of the then opposition Labour Party to confer more extensive legal recognition of the Maori language. These were all defeated by the National Party administration of Sir Robert Muldoon. But when the latter called for a snap election in 1984, the Labour Party included a promise to give full official recognition to Maori in its election manifesto. The Labour Party won the election, but it has run into trouble with its own supporters who tend to be more ethnocentric in language matters than the theoretically more conservative Nationalists), and from government officials who fear that the bureaucracy could not cope with a second official language. A draft bill was prepared before the end of 1984, but it had not been published or presented to Parliament as of December 1985.

Meanwhile, however, another group of activists, the Wellington Maori Language Board (which had been set up with the assistance of the Department of Maori Affairs in 1981),brought a claim before the Waitangi Tribunal in 1985 seeking full official recognition for the Maori language in all government controlled or sponsored enterprises, including education, public radio and television broadcasting, the conduct of public business, and in the courts.

The Waitangi Tribunal is a judicial body to hear claims and to propose appropriate remedies concerning alleged infringements of the Treaty of Waitangi, by which the Maori chiefs transferred the administration and government of New Zealand to the British Crown in 1840, in return for certain guarantees protecting their institutions,lands, and fisheries. The Maori Language Board's claim alleges that the Crown is obliged to protect and foster the Maori language, and its manifest failure to do this constitutes a breach of the terms of the treaty.

The claim was supported by a wide range of Maori and other groups, including the International Commission of Jurists. The hearings extended over a total of four weeks in June, October and November 1985, and itis highly likely that the Tribunal's report

(expected shortly) will support the claimants. A favourable judgement would give the government little choice but to begin to implement its election policy.

At the same time, the semi-official New Zealand Maori Council has formed a corporation which has applied for a warrant to operate New Zealand's third television channel. One of the aims of the corporation would be to provide extensive Maori language professional broadcasting to help counteract the almost total absence of the language on television.(Two years ago after much agitation and political pressure, one of the two existing stations agreed to air a five-minute news broadcast in Maori at 5.55 p.m. daily; this is still the only regular Maori-language television programmed). The Maori Council became a serious contender for the warrant when the publicly-owned Broadcasting Corporation of New Zealand agreed to provide all the technical support and equipment they needed. However, there are powerful commercial interests competing for the warrant, and it is known that influential groups within the government support the idea of at least one private-sector commercial channel for the country. If they do not get the warrant for the third channel, it is almost certain that the Maori Council will campaign vigorously for control of one of the two publicly-owned channels.

Many Maori people regard these measures as a last-ditch attempt to save the Maori language from extinction. They base their claims for massive public support for the language on their status as *tangata whenua* ("people of the land" - a concept similar to that of *bumiputra* in Malaysia), and on the guarantees of the Treaty of Waitangi.

There is considerable (although by no means universal) support for the Maori position in other segments of New Zealand society, for with the growth of a New Zealand, national identity has come a search for symbols of that identity.

One of these obviously is language, and as the only language unique to New Zealand, Maori is ideally suited to fill this vacuum. Government officials and cabinet ministers frequently begin formal speeches with a few Maori phrases, and even television announcers use Maori greetings as a matter of course. In 1974 the Minister of Education issued an instruction for all schools to include "elements of the Maori Language" in the curriculum, and Sir Robert Muldoon's National Party successor made it compulsory for all primary school teacher trainees to have 80 hours of Maori language instruction during their 3-year course.

So far, however, most of these moves have been token. Many children now know how to count from one to ten in Maori, but few have become proficient speakers as a result of what they have been taught in school. Hence, the demands for a radical change in educational policy regarding the Maori language which have followed the establishment of the "language nests."

Some Pacific Island groups are belatedly seeking some recognition of their languages as subjects in the primary or secondary school curricula, but so far are ambivalent(at most) about the prospects of bilingual education. Like most immigrants, they are desirous that their children master the language of power, and questions of culture and identity take second place.

The most active interest in bilingual education outside the Maori Community has come from the Japanese community in Wellington who managed to persuade the New Zealand parents and the Department of Education to set up a school within a school for the children of Japanese businessmen, so that they could spend part of the day studying the regular Japanese curriculum in Japanese, and join the New Zealand children at other times (e.g. for art classes) and in the playground. The New Zealand children would have the chance to study Japanese. Interestingly, although it had no children of Maori descent on the roll, this school also developed a special Maori language programme partly as an alternative to the Japanese, as a group of parents belonging to a particular religious group did not want their children studying a "pagan" language -- Maori was acceptable to them as a Christian and New Zealand tongue.

For Maori/English bilingual schools have also become the focus for a political struggle over control of the management of the schools and of the content of the curriculum. Many Maori communities are now asserting the right to select the teachers, as well as to decide what should be taught, in their local public schools. This has led to complex and ongoing negotiations between the teachers' unions, the Department of

Education, and various Maori groups – and has caused considerable debate in union and official circles about how far this assertion of local control of formal education should be permitted to go. The extent and complexity of the problem becomes apparent when it is realized that over 20 percent of New Zealand children of primary school age are of Maori ancestry, because of the difference in age-structure between the Maori and non-Maori populations.

So, language has become a highly political matter in New Zealand, and is likely to become more political yet once the judgement of the Waitangi Tribunal on the claim for official recognition is made public.

However, there is another political dimension to the use of language which does not involve any particular language, and which affects New Zealand, the Philippines, and probably every other country in the modern world. This is the destruction of language through the adoption of what George Orwell termed "New Speak" in his prophetic book *Nineteen Eighty-Four.*

I don't have a New Zealand example at hand, so I will use a Philippine one instead. It's the first few paragraphs of a report which appeared on page 1 of the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* on Thursday 13 February this year.

> Who masterminded the Javier assassination?
>
> This question loomed larger yesterday than on Evelio Javier's assassination Tuesday in front of the Antique provincial capitol building as charges and counter-charges flew high and thick from the rival camps of incumbent Governor Enrique Zalvidar and Antique MP Arturo Pacificador.
>
> After coming in on a private jet from Antique Tuesday night, Governor Zaldivar told a hurriedly-called news conference in Makati he has "reason to believe Pacificador mastermined the killing." So do he says, the people of Antique.
>
> In a press statement issued Wednesday, Pacificador accused Zaldivar of having masterminded the slaying.
>
> Pacificador said "The killing of Javier conveniently eliminated a potential Unido rival of Zaldivar in the coming party nomination for the position of official Unido governor candidate in Antique in the forthcoming local elections."

These categorical statements cannot both be true, and yet both are presented by those who made them as if they were certainties. One at least is presented as a statement of belief, but one which there is "reason" to hold. Nonetheless, if seems highly likely that at least one of these protagonists is knowingly making an unfounded allegation. The question is, which one?

It is frequently said jokingly that one should never believe a politician. The joke ceases to be funny, however, when deliberate lying and distortion become routine. This is an abuse of language which will very quickly subvert the whole social order.

It is serious enough when hypotheses are presented as established facts. The philosopher Chuang Tzu pointed out over 2000 years ago that:

> The true sage regards certainties as uncertainties; therefore, he is never up in arms.
>
> Men in general regard uncertainties as certainties; therefore, they are constantly up in arms. To accustom oneself to arms causes one to fly to arms on every provocation; and to trust to arms is to perish. (Ch. Tz. xxxii)

How much more serious when what is presented as certain is not merely uncertain, but known by its author to be false.

If such a state of affairs is tolerated in any aspect of public life, it is likely to invade all aspects of public life. We cannot expect social science, including linguistics, to long remain immune from this disease.

So it seems to me that linguists also have a political and moral duty, to defend the integrity of language; not by flying to arms, but by resisting the temptation to make debating points, and by taking advantage of any opportunity they may have to help their fellow citizens, not just their fellow scholars, distinguish between the probable and the spurious.