

Kiwi Quacking



As the highly educated English student that you are, you have probably, at some point in your academic career, thought along the lines of Dutch as being an ailment of the throat rather than an actual language. Such fleeting thoughts pale in comparison to what New Zealanders are confronted with on a regular basis.

Speech

According to Lindsay Perigo¹ “[t]heir mangled vowels and muddled consonants make swine sound educated”; and “they don’t talk; they quack”. One person who feels offended by other English speakers like Perigo is Hannah (with the charming YouTube username *stopbeingcrap*). In her video “Being Proud of My New Zealand Accent”² she speaks about Britons being unable to understand her name even after she spells it out, and about Americans wondering where she comes from but not grasping a word she is saying. Perhaps non-native speakers are at an advantage here because TV dumps us in an accent salad bowl—not unlike New Zealanders, in fact—but I would not be able to say for sure. I *can* say that I understood every word Hannah uttered, which makes me wonder if New Zealanders really “mess up” their vowels that badly.

The New Zealand accent being a blend of accents from almost all over the United Kingdom, Australia, and with a dash of Maori, it is hardly surprising that its vowels sound somewhat peculiar. A fair warning: I hope you remember your phonemes. While Australian “fish and

chips” may sound like having happy vowels, New Zealanders have moved the other way to a close-mid central sound, /ə/—a development that started with the lack of distinction between the KIT vowel and the schwa. Meanwhile, the TRAP vowel shifted closer to cardinal vowel [ɛ], which explains Hannah’s frustration concerning her name. In other words, as quoted in the second edition of *World Englishes*, “they will call *lady lidy*”³. Further, the Origins of New Zealand English project found that the NEAR and SQUARE vowels had already undergone merging among their older informants, allowing words such as “here” and “there” to rhyme. This trend has passed down to younger generations as well, eradicating the phonemic distinction almost entirely.

As for Hannah’s fascinated Americans, there is an explanation too. While New Zealanders distinguish between such vowels as “*mishap*” and “*bath*” like in southern England, they do tend to flap their intervocalic t’s, rather like Americans and Australians.

Additionally, one Kiwi journalist, James Robinson⁴, upon his return from England, found himself wondering if Kiwi people always talk as though they are having a back-and-forth tennis match of rhetorical questions. Several studies have suggested explanations for this high rising intonation contour, which has been present in New Zealand and Australia at least since the 1960s. Firstly, and subject to much dispute, is the theory that women as well as lower-class and less powerful

¹ Perigo, Lindsay. “Kiwi Accent Killing the News.” *Stuff*. Fairfax New Zealand Limited, 17 Jan. 2013.

² Hannah R. “Being Proud of My New Zealand Accent.” *YouTube*. YouTube, 23 Nov. 2011.

³ Melchers, Gunnel, and Philip Shaw. *World Englishes*. 2nd ed. Great Britain: Hodder Education, 2011.

⁴ Robinson, James. “The NZ Accent: Burden or Badge of Honour?” *Stuff*. Fairfax New Zealand Limited, 8 Aug. 2011.

people use it; secondly, it may simply be part of casual conversation, for example to ensure the addressee is listening or to indicate that the story is not yet finished (CEEL)⁵.

New Zealanders may feel the accusatory glances from such people as Perigo scorch their “barbarian” vocal cords, yet they can rejoice in the knowledge that their accent is not criticised on all foreign soil. In a BBC survey⁶, Kiwi was rated as the most prestigious non-UK accent. Plus, it scored quite well in terms of attractiveness. Hannah and news reporter Lisa Glass⁷ will appreciate this survey result. Glass is proud of her accent: In One News’s coverage of a study showing an increase of Kiwi in media over the past thirty years, she stresses this pride by ending with “Lisa Glass, One News” in an exaggerated New Zealand accent.

Lexicon

Because of Maori influence, the lexicon of New Zealand English can be quite exotic-looking. This is especially true of words relating to nature—be it plants or animals—native to New Zealand and Australia, and in fact many such terms have been adopted into Standard English. To name a classical example we have the kangaroo, of course; and *kurrajong* means “tree” (*English Around the World*⁸). However, the *Dictionary of New Zealand English* lists many other terms as well, such as greetings—*kia ora* for “hello” and “goodbye”—and other everyday vocabulary like *kuia* for “old or senior

woman” and *whakapapa* for “family tree”. Such words are used increasingly without glosses in an attempt to reclaim a piece of the native culture.

The *Dictionary of New Zealand English* also identifies words of which the meaning differs from that of Standard English, like *bush* meaning “wilderness”. Further, some words may function differently in a sentence. Whereas in London you might say farewell to your friends when returning to the Netherlands from a student exchange, in New Zealand you would simply farewell your friends.

While in the past, new vocabulary tended to trickle in via Australia, in recent years coinages have been travelling directly to New Zealand. Whereas Australia has adopted quite some American vocabulary, New Zealand has remained somewhat less influenced by the United States, possibly because it no longer relies on Australia for new input as much anymore. Both Australian English and New Zealand English distinguish themselves from these influences, however—not only through allowing Maori and Aboriginal vocabulary, but also through replacing “shall, should” with “will, would”. If a Briton asks, “Shall I clear the table?” the Kiwi equivalent might be “Will I clear the table?”

If you ever happen to visit the *whenua* (“land, country”) of the Kiwi people, I hope this introduction to New Zealand English will help you avoid Hannah Situations. At the very least, you will be able to *skite* (“boast”) that you now know a few Maori words. On that note I farewell you, as it is high time I had a *smoko* (“tea or coffee break”).

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⁵ Crystal, David. *Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011.

⁶ Newstalk ZB. “Survey: Kiwi Top English Accent Not in UK.” *The New Zealand Herald*. APN Holdings NZ Limited, 12 Oct. 2009.

⁷ Perigo, Lindsay. “Kiwi Accent Killing the News.” *Stuff*.

⁸ Schneider, Edgar W. *English Around the World: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010.

For an additional list of sources used and consulted see: www.the-angler.org/languageacquisition/