

History of the Maori Language

Decline and revival

- 1 In the last 200 years, the history of the Maori language (*te reo Maori*) has been one of ups and downs. At the beginning of the 19th century, it was the **predominant** language spoken in *Aotearoa* (the Maori name for New Zealand). As more English speakers arrived in New Zealand, the Maori language was increasingly confined to Maori communities. By the mid-20th century, there were concerns that the language was dying out. Major **initiatives** launched from the 1980s have brought about a **revival** of the Maori language. In the early 21st century, more than 130,000 people of Maori **ethnicity** could speak and understand Maori, one of the three official languages of New Zealand.

Maori: A common means of communication

- 2 For the first half century or so of the European settlement of New Zealand, the Maori language was a common way of communicating. Early settlers¹ had to learn to speak the language if they wished to trade with Maori because settlers were dependent on Maori for many things at this time.
- 3 Up to the 1870s, it was not unusual for government officials, missionaries, and prominent *Pakeha*² to speak Maori.



Aotearoa (New Zealand)

Their children often grew up with Maori children and were among the most fluent European speakers and writers of Maori. Particularly in rural areas, the interaction between Maori and Pakeha was constant.

Korero Pakeha (“Speak English!”)

- 4 Pakeha were in the majority by the early 1860s, and English became the dominant language of New Zealand. Increasingly, the Maori language **was confined** to Maori communities that existed separately from the Pakeha majority.
- 5 The Maori language was not understood as an essential expression and envelope of Maori culture, important for the Maori in maintaining their pride and identity as a

¹ **settler**: a person who goes to live in a new country

² **Pakeha**: Maori word for people who were originally from Europe and also for the English language. Today it refers to any non-Maori.

people. Maori was now officially discouraged. Many Maori themselves questioned its relevance in a Pakeha-dominated world where the most important value seemed to be to get ahead as an individual.

- 6 The Maori language **was suppressed** in schools, either formally or informally, so that Maori youngsters could **assimilate** with the wider community. Some older Maori still recall being punished for speaking their language. Many Maori parents encouraged their children to learn English and even to turn away from other aspects of Maori custom. Increasing numbers of Maori people learned English because they needed it in the workplace or places of recreation such as the football field. “Korero Pakeha” (Speak English) was seen as essential for Maori people.

A language lives

- 7 Despite the emphasis on speaking English, the Maori language **persisted**. Until the Second World War³ most Maori spoke Maori as their first language. They worshipped⁴ in Maori, and Maori was the language of the *marae*⁵. Political meetings were conducted in Maori, and there were Maori newspapers and literature. More importantly, it was the language of the home, and parents could pass on the language to their children.

The lure of the city

- 8 The Second World War brought about momentous changes for Maori society. There was plenty of work available in towns and cities due to the war, and Maori moved into urban areas in greater numbers. Before the

war, about 75 percent of Maori lived in rural areas. Two decades later, approximately 60 percent lived in urban centers.

- 9 English was the language of urban New Zealand—at work, in school, and in leisure activities. Maori children went to city schools where Maori was unheard of in teaching programs. The new, enforced contact of large numbers of Maori and Pakeha caused much strain and stress, and the language was one of the things to suffer.
- 10 The number of Maori speakers began to decline rapidly. By the 1980s, less than 20 percent of Maori knew enough of their traditional language to be regarded as native speakers. Even for those people, Maori was ceasing to be the language of everyday use in the home. Some urbanized Maori people became **divorced from** their language and culture. Others maintained contact with their original communities, returning for important *hui* (meetings) and *tangihanga* (funerals) or allowing the *kaumatua* (elders) at home to adopt or care for their children.

Seeds of change

- 11 From the 1970s, many Maori people reasserted their identity as Maori. An emphasis on the language as an **integral** part of Maori culture was central to this. Maori leaders were increasingly recognizing the dangers of the loss of Maori language. New groups emerged that were committed to strengthening Maori culture and the language.
- 12 Major Maori language recovery programs began in the 1980s. Many **were targeted**

³ Second World War: also called World War II (1939–1945)

⁴ worship: to pray

⁵ *marae*: Maori word for a meetinghouse or a place for formal discussions

at young people and the education system, such as a system of primary schooling⁶ in a Maori-language environment.

Legislating for change

13 Efforts to secure the survival of the Maori language stepped up in 1985. In that year the Waitangi Tribunal⁷ heard the Te Reo Maori claim, which asserted that the Maori language was a *taonga* (a treasure) that the government **was obliged** to protect under the Treaty of Waitangi. The Waitangi Tribunal agreed with the Maori and recommended a number

of laws and policies. In 1987, Maori was made an official language of New Zealand.

14 There are now many institutions working to recover the language. Even so, the decline of the Maori language has only just been arrested. There is a resurgence of Maori, but to survive as a language, it needs enough fluent speakers of all ages as well as the respect and support of the wider English-speaking and multi-ethnic New Zealand community.

⁶ **primary school:** elementary school, starting at about age 5 and continuing until age 12 to 14

⁷ **Waitangi Tribunal:** a court created to honor the Waitangi Treaty of 1840 between Great Britain and the Maori people. Under the treaty, the Maori accepted British rule, and the British agreed to treat the Maori fairly.

MAIN IDEAS

Tip for Success

Making an outline of the main ideas helps you read actively. You can use subheadings to organize your ideas.

Match each subheading with the correct main idea on page 36.

- ___ 1. Decline and revival
- ___ 2. Maori: A common means of communication
- ___ 3. *Korero Pakeha* (“Speak English!”)
- ___ 4. A language lives
- ___ 5. The lure of the city
- ___ 6. Seeds of change
- ___ 7. Legislating for change

PREVIEW READING 2

In his book *When Languages Die*, linguistics professor K. David Harrison examines the traditional knowledge that is lost when a language becomes extinct (that is, when nobody speaks it anymore). What knowledge do you think is lost “when languages die”?



Read the book excerpt.

When Languages Die



K. David Harrison,
Associate Professor of Linguistics

- 1 What exactly do we stand to lose when languages vanish? It has become a cliché¹ to talk about a **cure** for cancer that may be found in the Amazon rain forest, perhaps from a medicinal plant known only to local shamans² (Plotkin 1993). But pharmaceutical companies have spared no efforts to get at this knowledge and in many cases have **exploited** it to develop useful drugs. An estimated \$85 billion in profits per year is made on medicines made from plants that were first known to **indigenous** peoples for their healing properties (Posey 1990).
- 2 An astonishing 87 percent of the world’s plant and animal species have not yet been

identified, named, described, or classified by modern science (Hawksworth & Kalin-Arroyo 1995). Therefore, we need to look to indigenous cultures to fill in our vast knowledge gap about the natural world. But can they **retain** their knowledge **in the face of** global linguistic homogenization³?

- 3 Much—if not most—of what we know about the natural world lies completely outside of science textbooks, libraries, and databases, existing only in unwritten languages in people’s memories. It is only one generation away from extinction and always **in jeopardy** of not being passed on. This immense knowledge base remains largely unexplored and uncataloged. We can only hope to access it if the people who possess and nurture it can be encouraged to continue to do so.
- 4 If people feel their knowledge is worth keeping, they will keep it. If they are told, or come to believe, that it is useless in the modern world, they may well **abandon** it. Traditional knowledge is not always easily transferred from small, endangered languages to large, global ones. How can that be true if any idea is expressible in any language? Couldn’t Solomon Islanders talk about the behavior patterns of fish in English just as easily as

¹ **cliché**: a phrase or saying that has been used so many times that it no longer has any real meaning or interest

² **shamans**: traditional healers or medicine men

³ **homogenization**: a process in which everything becomes the same

in Marovo, their native language? I argue that when small communities abandon their languages and switch to English or Spanish, there is also massive disruption of the transfer of traditional knowledge across generations. This arises in part from the way knowledge is packaged in a particular language.

- 5 Consider Western !Xoon, a small language of Namibia (the exclamation mark is a click sound). In !Xoon, clouds are called “rain houses.” By learning the word for *cloud*, a !Xoon-speaking child automatically gets (for free) the extra information that clouds contain and are the source of rain. An English child learning the word *cloud* gets no information about rain and has to learn on her own that rain comes from clouds.
- 6 Languages package and structure knowledge in particular ways. You cannot merely **substitute** labels or names from another language and hold onto all of the implicit, hidden knowledge that resides in a taxonomy, or naming system. Still, each language and indigenous people is unique, and language shift takes place at different speeds and under very different conditions. Can we then predict how much traditional knowledge will successfully be transferred and how much will be lost?
- 7 Some scientists have tried to do just that. The Bari language (1,500–2,500 speakers) of Venezuela was studied by linguists who asked how much knowledge of the plant world was being lost and how much retained. The Bari live in a close relationship with the rainforest and have learned to use many of its plants for food, material goods, medicine, and construction of houses. One scientist found that the loss of Bari traditional knowledge corresponded with decreasing use of forest resources and a **shift** from the traditional hunter-gatherer lifestyle, along with a shift to speaking Spanish. His conservative estimate of the rate of knowledge loss should be a **wake-up call** to all: “I estimate that the real loss of ethnobotanical⁴ knowledge from one generation to the next may be on the order of 40 to 60 percent.” (Lizarralde 2001).
- 8 This is a dire⁵ **scenario**: Bari people who have limited connection with the forest have lost up to 45 percent of traditional plant names. Similar patterns of knowledge erosion may be observed among indigenous peoples all around the world as they undergo a cultural shift away from traditional lifestyles and languages.
- 9 Some researchers offer hope for the persistence and resilience of very basic forms of traditional knowledge. A study by anthropologist Scott Atran (1998) tested residents of Michigan on their knowledge of local animals. He concluded that elements of folk knowledge persist even when people have been schooled in modern scientific classification.
- 10 Though folk knowledge may persist in modern cultures, we are also losing traditional knowledge at an alarming rate. This loss is accompanied by a severe reduction in number of species and range of **habitats**. Perhaps future technologies hold enough promise that humanity will be able to survive without making use of this accumulated ecological knowledge. Perhaps we will grow plants in greenhouses and breed animals in laboratories and feed ourselves via genetic engineering. Perhaps there are no new medicines to be found in the rain forests. All

⁴ **ethnobotanical**: describing customs and beliefs about plants and agriculture held by a group of people

⁵ **dire**: very serious; terrible

such arguments appeal to ignorance: we do not know what we stand to lose as languages and technologies vanish because much or even most of it remains undocumented. So

it is a gamble to think that we will never use it in the future. Do we really want to place so much trust in future science and pay so little attention to our inherited science?

Tip for Success

In Reading 2, the name(s) and year in parentheses form a citation. Citations tell you that an idea comes from another source. You can look in the publication's references list for full information about the source.

References

Atran, Scott (1998). Folk biology and the anthropology of science: Cognitive universals and cultural particulars. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 21: 547–609.

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Plotkin, Mark (1993). *Tales of a Shaman's Apprentice*. New York: Viking.

Posey, Darrell A. (1990). Intellectual property rights and just compensation for indigenous knowledge. *Anthropology Today* 6(4): 13–16.

MAIN IDEAS

Each statement summarizes the main idea of a paragraph in Reading 2. Write the paragraph number next to the statement that summarizes it.

- 7. 1. As the Bari people become divorced from their surroundings and their language, they lose a lot of traditional knowledge.
- 2. 2. Some traditional knowledge survives even in modern societies in the United States.
- 3. 3. Scientists could find new treatments for serious diseases from plants that only indigenous people know about.
- 4. 4. Information can be lost in translations from indigenous languages.
- 5. 5. We should not trust science to replace the knowledge that is being lost in indigenous communities.
- 6. 6. Indigenous people know more about many plant and animal species than scientists.
- 7. 7. This pattern of knowledge loss exists all over the world.
- 8. 8. If information is always lost in translation, is it possible to measure how much traditional knowledge is being lost?
- 9. 9. Traditional knowledge is in danger of disappearing if we do not encourage the people who hold it to preserve it.
- 10. 10. In some languages, words contain extra information about the things they describe.