

National Issues — Pākehā languaging around Te Tiriti

Mitzi Nairn

Mitzi Nairn has been involved in workshops for te Tiriti and anti-racism education for a long time. She remembers issues and campaigns, and regards herself as more of a poet and storyteller than an analyst.

We inherit the language of colonisation. The English language of the nineteenth century was highly developed to implement and sustain the rule of Britannia. It was shaped by imperialism.

English is a language which easily reflects power relations. Up-down gradients, better-worse comparisons are inherent. Sometimes very direct, sometimes nuances. I'm particularly thinking of words which are used about English men, and their partner words which are used about others, which carry value judgments. When we study us it's history and sociology. When we study them it's anthropology. We have science and knowledge while they have folklore and superstition. Law over lore.

One that I've unpacked a lot around Tiriti translations is the word 'chief/s'. The English didn't have chiefs. Conquered and colonised people like the Scots and Irish had chiefs and chieftains, as did the Native Americans and Pacific peoples. The English words of status, which I select, are 'leaders', 'authorities'.

I believe it is important to speak well of Māori, not making a big point and spelling it out, but habitual usage in passing. I've had a lot of feedback from workshop participants about how they were struck by something I said, something clicked for them. I speak of Māori scientists, engineers, generals, military strategists, midwives, boatbuilders, historians, when I'm talking about the years around 1840.

There are some questions around use of Māori words. In workshops my reservations are mainly that participants may feel it either as showing off, or worse, as showing that this is all too hard and they will never be able to get their head around a whole new language so a reason to give up hope and avoid responsibility.

English is a 'borrowing' language, the vocabulary is so huge because of adopted words. This tends to alter pronunciation – taboo, mulligatawny, Peking, Cambodia. In the case of Māori, mispronunciation is painful and in

contention. I think, however, that there are some Māori words which are best used because they are not translatable in one word of English because such translations are deceptive and essential nuances are lost. Manaaki, for example, carries both hospitality and nurture. I tell people sometimes that it's time for them to take on Rangatira and rangatiratanga as words in themselves. I think it will come quite naturally over time as people hear more Māori words and phrases used they will pick them up.

We still need some new words, but we also need to be selective in what words we use out of what is available to us.

Sources of new words:

We use existing words in a new way. We adopt Māori words. We construct words from existing components e.g. Greek bits, like mega, hyper, neo, philo (many computer terms), we use acronyms – the first letters of words in a phrase such as jafa, UNICEF. Sometimes words just turn up, presumably somebody made them up and launched them. Where did blog come from? [Mitzi had not heard of weblog.]

Using existing words in a new way is most usual e.g., politically correct. The meanings of words shift with usage, who uses them and how. Politically correct shifted quite fast to take on a negative, put-down connotation. Because of this phenomenon, words we launch are often contested until their usefulness becomes questionable, maybe no longer conveying what we started out wanting to say. Words can become co-opted and weakened, watered down.

For example, the description of Te Tiriti as bicultural. I think one reason this came up, was because of the timing. Ranginui Walker says somewhere in *Ka Whawhai tonu Matou*, that in Freire's terms Māori had spent decades exploring cultural themes. So as te Tiriti was brought into focus, it was couched in language that emphasised cultural issues. However, the bicultural language became problematic, partly because it was easily softened down, but mainly because the longer we listened to te Tiriti in our work, the more we learned that it was a political document about power and resources. We began to use 'bilateral' or 'bipartite', and

to discuss the international sovereignty assumptions that accompany treaties.

Similarly, our growing understanding of Rangatiratanga led us into other vocabulary about sovereignty, independence, autonomy, constitutional matters and so forth. People found this difficult to get our heads around, partly because until we have the language, it is hard to grasp ideas.

Compensation is a word whose repetition has shifted its meaning. It began with connotations of fair business, recompense, matters of due value and integrity. Those connotations have not stood up under the media and government deployment of them around the Waitangi Tribunal. Along with words like 'claims', 'settlements' and 'confiscation' it has taken a pounding and become tired and resented. One way we need to counter this is to spell out the content and implications to keep what is at stake in the picture. Remember how the word 'holocaust' was contested when the Waitangi Tribunal tested it out in the Taranaki Report. At this stage there isn't a usable single word for the damage and loss which those hapū experienced, so we need to keep spelling it out – 'the unfair taking over, by military force, of thousands of acres which belonged, and should still belong to them': the dispersal of hundreds of men into prison and exile', 'the destruction and disruption of families', whatever it takes even if it seems laborious.

I realised the other day that I needed to put the imperialism back into colonisation. I understand the various motivations of many of the colonists, their muddles, confusions, things that were driving them. True enough, but I was letting the impact of colonisation become softened. It is important to use words like brutality, indifference, violence, wrenching, snatching, seizing of land; intentional destruction, undermining, disruption, stamping out of language and culture.

The use of the word 'Pākehā' could be a whole workshop in itself. Someone on the previous day had called it 'a gift to Pākehā', while Rose Pere's meaning of the word to be 'of a different breath' was also noted.

Mitzi was questioned on her use of violent terms to describe colonial things. She acknowledged that this was correct, but added that at the time the British were a brutalised and brutalising country. She is simply 'telling it like it was'.

The point was made that what people know about colonisation and what people feel about it are two different things. This could be a useful distinction to bear in mind in Treaty education.

One Treaty educator participant said she's found that instead of talking about 'the English version', she simply refers to it now as 'the draft'. This gives her more time in every workshop.

Regarding the use of Māori words, another educator has found the use of '-tanga' words of assistance in Treaty workshops, as it turns a person or a thing into a concept in a helpful way.

Mitzi presented the idea that if you don't respect the people you're talking to, how on earth do you think you can teach them anything?

Additional notes by Peggy Haworth