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The sexiest accent in the world: Linguistic insecurity and prejudice in media coverage of the New Zealand accent

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Abstract

In 2019, New Zealanders collectively blushed at the news that an online survey had voted the New Zealand accent the sexiest in the world. Taking a critical metalinguistic perspective, this article examines how the New Zealand accent was represented in media coverage of the survey results. Examining written and televised news items reporting on the survey, we attend to explicit discourse, in the form of direct discussion about the accent, as well as implicit discourse, in the form of images and accent performances. The survey purported to reveal how the world sees the New Zealand accent, but the media coverage more strongly reveals how New Zealanders see themselves. Behind the apparently light-hearted joking about the sexiness or otherwise of the New Zealand accent, the results provide continued evidence of linguistic insecurity, alongside prejudice towards stigmatised social variation in accent. A survey investigating how 52 university students reacted to stylised New Zealand accents in the media coverage suggests that supposedly humorous accent performances are not so funny for those who are the subject of the joke.

Keywords

Language attitudes, New Zealand accent, linguistic insecurity, social variation, media

1 Introduction

In April 2019, New Zealanders were briefly captivated by news that their accent had been voted the sexiest in the world. The evidence was unclear at best. The results came from an online survey by *Big 7*, a 'travel website aimed at millennials' (Big 7, 2019), for which no methodological details were available. Entitled 'The Top 50 Sexiest Accents in the World – Ranked', the website introduces its list and first place winner as follows:

> While top rated attractions and beautiful destinations that look great on your Instagram are valid reasons to visit somewhere, what about the people in the countries themselves? More specifically, what about all those sexy accents you can listen to while you travel? The countries with the world's sexiest accent? Here at Big 7 Travel, we're all about inspiring people to visit somewhere new. There's almost 7,000 languages in the world, with even more varieties of accents, but which is the best? We polled our readers from across the globe to find the world's sexiest accent for 2019. From lilting Welsh to the language of love, the results are in…
>
> 1st. Kiwi
> To a novice ear, the New Zealand accent might sound just like the Australian accent, but Big 7 Travel readers disagree. The 'Newzild' dialect is outrageously charming. The sexiest accent in the world? It's official.

Linguists will note the confusion between language and accent ('from lilting Welsh to the language of love') and accent and dialect ('the 'Newzild' dialect'), lack of account of variation ('the countries with the world's sexiest accent'), and the ideologically suspect undertones of 'there's almost 7,000 languages in the world, with even more varieties of accents, *but which is the best?*' (Italics ours).

Despite the dubious nature of the survey, the New Zealand media seized upon the results with gusto. Breathless journalists reported the findings, oscillating between surprise, bare-faced delight, and smugness at beating Australia. Rapturous headlines included: 'New Zealanders have the world's sexiest accent, study says' (Stuff, 2019) and 'It's official! The Kiwi accent has been ranked as SEXIEST in the world' (The Hits, 2019).

This article does not engage with the survey itself, but examines how New Zealand media sources represented the New Zealand accent in reporting the results. Using this media coverage, we ask what responses to the survey might reveal about contemporary attitudes within New Zealand towards varieties of New Zealand English. There being no research consensus on what constitutes a 'sexy accent', we treat sexiness in this context as a proxy for generalised appeal. While the theme of sexiness adds colour to the responses we analyse – for instance lending a flirtatious frisson to the discussion - we believe that the reactions we analyse fundamentally reflect responses to New Zealand accents more broadly rather than their sexiness in particular.

Our approach is metalinguistic – investigating language about language – and critical, addressing how representations of language are used in the reproduction of social inequality. This approach connects to language ideologies theory, which investigates how constructions of language further the interests of specific social groups (Kroskrity, 2000). Particularly relevant here is the standard language ideology (Milroy, 1999), which posits the existence of one correct set of norms of language use, in terms of accent, spelling, grammar, etc, and holds that all deviating forms are inferior. Although the standard language is portrayed as neutral, it is usually modelled on the speech of dominant groups (Lippi-Green, 1997). The inferior status of non-standard varieties is, moreover, patterned, forming a complex hierarchy with the national standard language at the top and other varieties taking up varying slots below (Weber, 2009). As language ideologies represent social constructions rather than truths, they must be constantly reproduced to do their work. This discursive reproduction occurs across many social domains, including the media, where 'journalists constitute a cadre of producers or senders of metadiscursive messages about speech and accent in public space' (Agha, 2007, p. 302). Media discourse is thus a key focus for critical metalinguistic research.

Our primary data derives from an online search of New Zealand news items reporting the *Big 7* survey results. It comprises seven written articles from news and radio websites (Stuff, 2019; Newshub, 2019a, 2019b; Newstalk ZB, Mai FM, 2019; The Hits, 2019; Coast, 2019), a radio item published online (Radio New Zealand, 2019) and two television news items (Seven Sharp, 2019; Breakfast, 2019). All appeared in the two days following the survey results being released, over the course of 29 and 30 April 2019, and represent initial and likely spontaneous responses[i]. It is notable that all bar one of these (Stuff, 2019) come from broadcast sources. This may have enabled accent performances if these news items were reported live on air prior to being published on the websites, as was the case for the audio item on Radio New Zealand (Radio New Zealand, 2019). While constituting a small data set, these comprise the full set of news reports on the survey, to our knowledge. We approach this data from three analytical angles. First, we analyse explicit metalinguistic discourse about the New Zealand accent[ii], i.e. what journalists and television presenters say about the survey results and how they say it. Second, we examine implicit metalinguistic discourse (Blommaert & Verschueren, 1998), focusing on the images associated with the news articles and written and spoken New Zealand accent performances. Third, we present the results of a survey in which we played some of these accent performances to 52 university students to seek their views on which accents were portrayed and their attitudes towards these portrayals. The combined data, while deriving from a specific and limited piece of 'news', is a rich source of information on contemporary representations of the New Zealand accent in the media.

While the *Big 7* survey results purported to reveal how the world sees the New Zealand accent, the media coverage says more about attitudes to accents within New Zealand. In presenting our results, we focus on two themes that emerged throughout the data: linguistic insecurity towards the New Zealand accent and representations of social variation in accent. New Zealand is a settler colonial society, still coming to terms with the continuing effects of colonisation. Māori, the indigenous people, represent a minority ethnic group at 16.5% of the population, alongside the dominant group of Pākehā (European origin) (70.2%) and other ethnic groups, including Asian (15.1%) and Pacific (8.1%) (2018 Census)[iii]. There is variation within New Zealand English, but one accent – the 'New Zealand accent' – is popularly constructed as indexing a common national identity. Despite this, it has been the focus of extensive linguistic insecurity (Bayard, 1990, 2000; Gordon & Abell, 1990). Distinctive features of New Zealand English have been well documented (Hay & Maclagan, 2008), but they occur in a context of variation. There is limited evidence of regional variation in New Zealand English, but much social variation relating to class, ethnicity, age and gender (Hay & Maclagan, 2008; Holmes, 1997). Attitudes to social variation reflect broader societal attitudes, including racism towards minority ethnic groups. In exploring our data, we argue that behind the apparently light-hearted joking about the 'sexiness' of the New Zealand accent, the media coverage provides evidence of continued linguistic insecurity and prejudice in New Zealand.

2 Linguistic insecurity towards the New Zealand accent

Researchers began to systematically investigate New Zealanders' attitudes towards their accents from the 1980s, particularly through the work of Donn Bayard (1990, 1991, 1995, 2000). Bayard (1991) reports on a 1986 study of university students who were asked to rate various accents for variables of status (e.g. ambition, intelligence, leadership) and solidarity (e.g. pleasantness, sense of humour, likeability). The results showed that RP, the prestige variety of British English, was the clear leader in all the status-related variables, and the New Zealand accent led only in the solidarity-related variable of 'acceptability' (Bayard, 2000, p.

307)[iv]. Gordon and Abell (1990) report on a similar study (Abell, 1980) investigating the attitudes of high school students towards three New Zealand accents (broad, general and cultivated) and RP. RP again ranked higher on status variables (ambition, education, reliability, intelligence, income, and occupation). The New Zealand English examples ranked higher than RP only on solidarity variables (friendliness and sense of humour). Given that no variety is linguistically superior to another, such results likely reflect New Zealanders' attitudes towards themselves, reflecting self-conscious constructions of New Zealand compared to Britain in a colonial context. Bayard (1991) terms this self-consciousness, embarrassment and sense of linguistic inferiority 'cultural cringe'. Bayard replicated his survey ten years later to investigate to what extent 'the New Zealand cringe toward RP' was still present (2000, p. 308). He found a growing preference for American accents alongside British, but concluded overall that 'New Zealanders are still uneasy about their own voices' and 'the cultural cringe is alive and well in the New Zealand of today' (2000, p. 321). The term 'cultural cringe' has not been widely used beyond New Zealand and Australia and, beyond its association with colonialism, is not easily distinguishable from the broader concept of linguistic insecurity, which has a long history in sociolinguistics (Labov, 1972). We have therefore adopted the term linguistic insecurity in this article to refer to what some New Zealanders may recognise as 'cultural cringe'.

Research on attitudes to accents in New Zealand has waned in recent decades but we see continued evidence of linguistic insecurity in our data, in the blend of flattered, credulous, and self-deprecating reactions in the media coverage of the *Big 7* survey. The media were clearly delighted to report the results. One article began 'yesterday the whole country was pleasantly surprised by the news that the kiwi accent was voted the sexiest in the world in an online poll' (Mai FM, 2019). This news is framed as pleasant but also surprising. Another article is more defensive, stating that 'New Zealanders have long been mocked for their accents – but no longer' and 'we might come under fire for the way we say 'fush and chups', but Kiwis can now smugly claim to have the sexiest accent in the world' (Newshub, 2019a). Triumph is constructed here as overdue payback for past mockery. Other articles adopt the framing of competition and victory from the *Big 7* announcement, claiming that 'with an estimated 7,000 languages on Earth and many more accents, New Zealand's win is no mean feat' (Stuff, 2019) and 'with nearly 7,000 languages in the world, it's pretty flattering…' (The Hits, 2019). Trans-Tasman rivalry appears in a focus on comparing rankings between New Zealand and Australia, as in the observations that 'the Aussie accent, incidentally, came in at number five, those dropped or drawn-out vowels and insistence on calling the number six ''sex'' apparently making all the difference' (Stuff, 2019) and 'according to the travel website, the Kiwi accent is ''outrageously charming'' and beats out our close sounding neighbours Australia' (Newstalk ZB, 2019). The mix of self-consciousness and celebration in these discursive strategies suggest a desire to believe the 'news' about what others think of New Zealanders and their accent, hinting at linguistic insecurity.

This eagerness to believe is also evident in credulousness about the validity of the results. Phrases such as 'it's official' (The Hits, 2019) and references to 'the study' (Stuff, 2019) or an 'extensive poll' (Newstalk ZB, 2019a) inflate the reliability of the source. There are also wildly varying reports on the survey methodology. According to one article, Big 7 'polled more than 8,500 people from 60 countries across the globe' (Newshub, 2019a), while another puts the number of respondents at '1.5 million' (Newshub, 2019b). One article notes that 'the Big 7 poll was unscientific' but reports the results anyway (TVNZ, 2019). An article published a month later looks into the validity of the results in more detail – entitled 'The Kiwi accent is apparently the world's sexiest…but is it really? Stats NZ talks dirty on the validity of that poll' (TVNZ, 2019) – but this was not the initial reaction. It rather seems that as soon as someone describes New Zealanders as 'outrageously charming' all critical thinking skills evaporate and the details are, well, details.

On the other hand, the media coverage is saturated with representations of doubt. One article refers to 'our supposedly sexy accent' (Mai FM, 2019) and, in the exchange below between Hillary Barry and Jeremy Wells on the television show *Seven Sharp* (Seven Sharp, 2019), the presenters seem incapable of reporting the news without mitigating it via signals of disagreement (italics ours):

Hillary: Now an international travel site has named the Kiwi accent as the sexiest accent in the world - *I know, what a crack up*

Jeremy: *No way*, you know I know that us Kiwis find it very hard to take a compliment, *we may see our accent as being anything but sexy*

On the radio show *The Panel*, sociologist and panelist Jarrod Gilbert describes his own interpretation of the New Zealand accent as follows (Radio New Zealand, 2019):

> It sounds like we're talking underwater while we're being dragged along by our nose... I've heard heavy machinery sound sexier than the New Zealand accent.

Self-deprecation is a characteristic feature of New Zealand cultural practices and humour styles (Holmes, Marra & Vine, 2012) and the comments above can be seen in this light. They appear to signal genuine doubt, however, when seen alongside other patterns in the data.

Particularly salient is a preoccupation with reporting dubious reactions to the winning result. One article, entitled 'International backlash to New Zealand accent being crowned sexiest in world' (Newshub, 2019b), focuses entirely on disagreement with the results. Some of those reported to disagree are New Zealanders:

> Reports of the poll result surprised many Kiwis who admitted cringing when they hear it on television or in conversation.
>
> ''I'll hear a kiwi on American TV, and I'll want to vomit. Our accent is awful,'' said one Twitter user, while another said: ''I really don't think Kiwis have the world's sexiest accent because most of the world can't understand us''.

Most attention, however, is fixed on how international audiences responded to the survey, particularly Australians. An opinion piece from the Australian news site *Pedestrian* (McLeay, 2019) is quoted at length in this news item, in which the author asks readers to imagine a person with a Kiwi accent 'doing dirty talk':

> I apologise for having put you through that ordeal, but it was to prove a point: The sheer ridiculousness of a poll in which people voted the New Zealand accent to be the sexiest in the world.

Notable here is not the critical nature of the reactions reported – Twitter users and opinion writers not likely to represent a balanced sample – but that the media coverage does not propose an alternative viewpoint. Instead, the article acknowledges Flight of the Conchords star Jemaine Clement's observation that both Kiwis and Australians were 'having a tough time accepting this' and reports that 'other foreigners on social media also lambasted the results'. The article quotes the Australian opinion piece writer as saying 'no one tell the New Zealanders about (the results), it'll go straight to their heads'. If this news article is to be believed, there

seems little chance of that. Rather, the fragile ego boost delivered by the news the previous day is replaced by anxiety regarding external opinions of the New Zealand accent.

Summarising what we see here – surprise, delight, defensiveness, triumph, desire to believe, doubt, self-deprecation, and anxiety – the overall impression is of ample linguistic insecurity.

3 Social variation in the New Zealand accent

A second theme in the media coverage is portrayal of social variation in the New Zealand accent. When discussing the results of the survey explicitly, the coverage treats New Zealand accents as homogenous ('the kiwi accent'), in line with the survey itself. The journalists and radio/television presenters may have a more expansive concept of accent in mind (e.g. treating 'the New Zealand accent' as an umbrella term and recognising that there is more than one New Zealand accent), but any such awareness is not explicitly reflected in how they speak of it, where repeated references to 'the New Zealand accent' background variation. This explicit metalinguistic discourse is belied by the accompanying implicit metalinguistic discourse, which alternates between references to homogeneity and diversity. We see this in two modes of discourse in the articles: visual images and accent performances.

The media coverage visually associates the (idea of the) homogenous New Zealand accent with three groups in the photos accompanying the articles. The first is internationally recognised celebrities. Articles show Jemaine Clement and Brett McKenzie of the television series Flight of the Conchords (Newshub, 2019a) and actor KJ Apa, subtitled as 'a Kiwi making it in Hollywood' (Stuff, 2019). This choice of images associates the accent's win in the survey with icons of international success. The second group is Pākehā-looking New Zealanders. Two articles feature photos of lone fair-haired protagonists surveying spectacular New Zealand landscapes (Newstalk ZB, 2019, The Hits, 2019). This implicitly references the three-way connection between language, people and land that lies at the heart of ideologies of linguistic nationalism (Woolard, 1998). The third group is women. While the celebrities are male and a man may be pictured in one of the landscape images, all other images foreground people presenting as female. These female subjects often pose in groups in festive contexts (one is subtitled 'Kiwis in London on Waitangi Day') with their arms entwined, smiling at the camera (Stuff, 2019; Newstalk ZB, 2019). They are dressed in red, white and blue, decorated with or holding national flags, with slogans like 'GO NZ' emblazoned on their clothes (Stuff, 2019; Newshub, 2019b). The caption of one image implicitly links the 'hotness' of the accent to the women pictured: 'sweet as: The New Zealand accent is the hottest on the planet, the study says' (Stuff, 2019). The articles make no explicit link between the images and the New Zealand accent, but images function as a powerful form of implicit metalinguistic discourse. Including these images alongside the textual discussion of the homogenous New Zealand accent associates the idea of a sexy New Zealand accent with people who are famous, Pākehā or female.

Performed representations of New Zealand accents are another form of implicit metalinguistic discourse. These performances, in both written and spoken form, paint a strikingly different picture to the homogeneity described above. Written representations display various forms of non-standard or marginalised New Zealand English. There is a repeated refrain of 'sweet as, bro' across the articles, and one (Stuff, 2019) starts with:

> ''Sup girl, wanna come over to my whare for a mean as feed of fush and chups?''

This phrase references several forms of social variation in New Zealand English, blending youth language features (‘sup girl’), informal language (‘wanna’), Māori lexical items (‘whare’), lexical features of Māori English (‘feed’[v]), slang (‘mean as’), and imitations of salient vowel features (‘fush and chups’).

Spoken representations in the media coverage also display stylised accents of various kinds. The most striking is a televised mashup of romantic movie scenes overdubbed with New Zealand accents, played after announcing the results of the survey (Seven Sharp, 2019). The mashup consists of six different scenes from British and American movies, including *Gone With the Wind*, *Notting Hill*, and *Titanic*. It is introduced as follows, suggesting it is intended to demonstrate the sexiness of the New Zealand accent:

> Sexy people, in sexy movies, what could possibly make it even sexier?

Of the twelve characters involved, eleven speak in a New Zealand accent, but not the homogenised accent talked about in the media coverage. Across the accent performances, we hear distinctive features in terms of intonation (the high rising terminal), vowels (raised short front vowels TRAP and DRESS, centralized vowels STRUT and KIT, distinctive diphthongs for GOAT and NEAR/SQUARE[vi]), consonants (fronting or stopping of the dental fricatives, so (ð): [d] or [v] and (θ): [t] or [f]), vocabulary (vernacular lexical items such as *choice, far* and *root*), and stress (syllable timing) (Hay & Maclagan, 2008). Overall, the video showcases a composite New Zealand accent, comprising a chaotic cluster of features associated with working class, youth, and ethnic varieties of New Zealand English, including Pākehā, Māori and Pasifika English. The *Listener* magazine later described this video as reflecting ‘the broadest variant of (the New Zealand accent), these days a sort of Lynn of Tawa meets the Māori English of the “ghost chups” road-safety commercial’ (Clifton, 2019). This characterisation – referencing comedian Ginette McDonald’s portrayal of a young working class woman in the 1980s and a 2011 television ad featuring stylised Māori English – blends the class, youth and ethnicity elements associated with the linguistic features described above.

The media coverage consistently uses stylised social variation when performing the New Zealand accent for humorous effect, the attempted humour assuming such accents are unlikely to be found sexy. This contrast is particularly apparent in the spoken discourse of radio panelists and television presenters discussing the survey (Radio New Zealand, 2019; Seven Sharp, 2019; Breakfast, 2019). They are already speaking in a New Zealand accent, but style shift to features of different social varieties of New Zealand English to convey their doubt about its sexiness. On the radio show *The Panel* (Radio New Zealand, 2019), panelist and actress Penny Ashton starts talking in her regular New Zealand accent and goes on to perform all the accents in the top ten of the survey, shifting to a stylised ‘Lynn of Tawa’ accent for the New Zealand accent at number one. The moments when presenters similarly style shift on television are highlighted in italics under the screen captures made by the authors below. On *Seven Sharp*, Hillary Barry performs the high rising terminal while making a statement, a feature traditionally associated with young women and Māori (Britain & Newman, 1992), although now frequent among a wide range of speakers of New Zealand English (Warren, 2016) (Figure 1). On *Breakfast*, Daniel Faitaua performs the fronted GOOSE vowel and eyebrow nod characteristic of Māori English and John Campbell responds with the vernacular lexical item *choice* (Figure 2). Also on *Breakfast*, Hayley Holt performs vowel realisations traditionally associated with young working class women, following the Lynn of Tawa stereotype (Figure 3). Also relevant are the facial expressions of the presenters, who appear variously bemused, amused or horrified by their own or others’ accent performances. In all cases, the presenters are clearly distancing themselves from these forms of social variation in the New Zealand accent.

Figure 1. High Rising Terminal (Seven Sharp, 2019)

Hillary: So those diphthongs and tripthongs and dark Ls and *rising intonation* are said to be sexier than the French accent

Figure 2. Māori English (Breakfast, 2019)

Daniel: And that is your *news*, folks

John: *Choice*

Figure 3. Working class vowels (Breakfast, 2019)

Hayley: Apparently they called it (…) outrageously charming, which when you get onto a plane if you've been overseas for quite a while and they say '*Welcome to Air New Zillund*'…it's like oh, ugh, oh

The negative reactions to features of New Zealand English identified here reflect the results of previous research on attitudes towards Māori and working class varieties of New Zealand

English. In several studies, listeners were asked to identify whether speakers of recorded passages of English were Māori or Pākehā, and to record their attitudes towards those speakers (Bayard, 1990; Vaughan & Huygens, 1990; Robertson, 1994). Speakers identified as Māori were consistently rated lower than others on status variables such as education, occupation and class, and rated higher for solidarity, particularly sense of humour (Boyce, 2005). Focusing on class rather than ethnicity, Gordon (1997) asked students to listen to a recording of a woman with a broad New Zealand accent. When asked to describe the speaker, participants saw her as being of low intelligence, low income, likely to smoke and sexually promiscuous, with a future likely occupation in the marginalised categories of 'unemployed', 'single parent', or 'prostitute'. A more recent study by Duhamel and Meyerhoff (2015) using perceptual dialectology methods indicated widespread linguistic prejudice towards Pacific speakers of English in South Auckland, which the researchers also link to class-based prejudice. We see continued prejudice towards speakers of social varieties of New Zealand English in the data presented here.

4 Audience perceptions

Researchers in critical metalinguistics might be expected to pick up on the discriminatory undertones of media coverage about accents, but audiences may respond differently. As the movie mashup was clearly intended to be humorous rather than offensive, we sought viewer reactions to the accent portrayals via a survey. We recruited current university students for the survey, to align with previous studies on attitudes to accents in New Zealand (e.g. Bayard, 1991, 2000; Gordon, 1997). As we wanted to explore ethnic differences in how the participants responded, we restricted participants to students of Pākehā, Māori or Pasifika ethnicity, reflecting the accents we identified in the video. People who had taken a course in linguistics were excluded. Recruitment occurred via posters at the universities and associated social media groups. The survey was active online between August and October 2020. Students went into the draw for a supermarket voucher as an incentive for participating.

The final participants numbered 52[vii]. In terms of ethnicity, 24 identified as Pākehā (European origin New Zealanders) (46%), 19 as Māori (37%) and 9 as Pasifika (of Pacific Island origin, including Samoan, Cook Islands Māori, Niuean, Fijian, Kiribati, and Solomon Islands) (17%). Within this group, 7 participants identified as Pākehā/Māori, 3 as Pākehā/Pasifika, 1 as Pākehā/Māori/Pasifika and 4 as one of these alongside a further ethnicity. In New Zealand demography, ethnicity questions are typically based on self-identification and allow multiple responses. Given the small number of participants, we aggregated ethnic identification for the quantitative analysis. Where participants stated more than one ethnicity, we categorised anyone who said they were Māori as Māori and anyone who said they were one or more Pasifika ethnicity (e.g. Samoan, Cook Islands, Tongan) as Pasifika. The one participant who was both Māori and Pasifika we categorised as Māori. This decision was based on tikanga Māori (Māori law), which says that if you have Māori ancestry then you are Māori. In a larger scale study, a more nuanced approach to ethnicity would be advisable.

The survey first asked the participants to watch the movie mashup and sought their general reaction (with multiple selections possible), asking if they found it funny, embarrassing, clever, annoying, or something else ('other') and to explain their reaction in a few words. The goal was to discern the level of linguistic insecurity about accent among the participants and any other reactions. An overview of the results is shown in Figure 4. Participants overwhelmingly found the video funny (85%, n = 44), followed by clever (15%, n

= 8), embarrassing (19%, n=10) and annoying (13%, n=7). Reactions in the 'other' field included cringey, cringe, tongue in cheek, satirical, and interesting. While funniness was the modal response, other responses surfaced alongside this in the comments. Linguistic insecurity was omnipresent in the participants' explanations of their reactions, in which they qualified their reactions of amusement with descriptions of the accents as 'embarrassing', 'cringe', and 'tragic':

> I think its funnily embarrassing. I dislike the use of slang. It's both embarrassing and funny because of how accurate it is to how actual Kiwis speak. (Pasifika participant)

> It obviously wasn't meant to be a real representation of our general accents. Was more cringe than funny though. (Māori/Pākehā participant)

> Accent is tragic so a bit cringey but kind of funny (Māori/Pākehā participant)

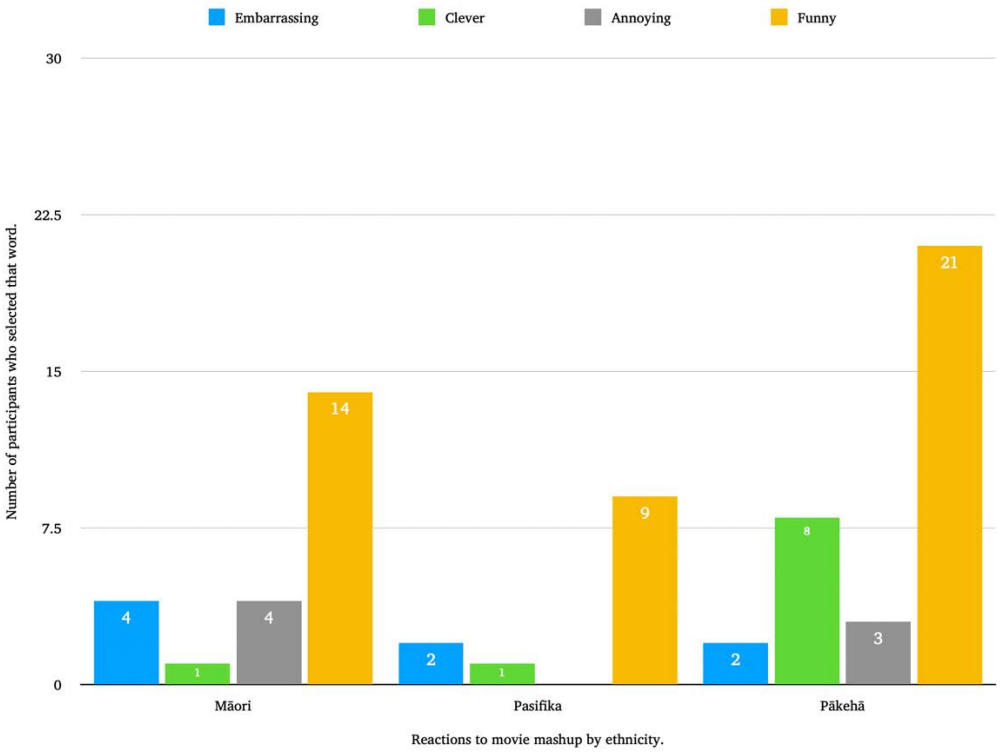

Figure 4. Reactions to movie mashup by ethnicity

Some Māori participants responded to the video more critically. Figure 4 shows that Māori participants were less likely than Pākehā to find the mashup funny or clever, and more likely to find it embarrassing and annoying. One Māori participant rated the video as funny, but added in the 'other' field that it was 'very stereotypical of a Māori New Zealand accent'. In explaining their reactions, other Māori participants made comments describing the performances as 'dumb', 'offensive', 'stereotypical', 'harmful' and 'mocking':

> Really dumb humour, even offensive. (Māori/Pākehā participant)

> At first, I found it funny. I recognised the stereotypical New Zealand accent and related to parts of it. As the video went on, I started to get a little annoyed at how overplayed

> the accents were, even though I knew it was satire. I feel like there were a few different stereotypes being represented, and that this video may be enforcing harmful ideas about certain people. (Māori participant)
>
> It wasn't a clear representation of our accent & was mocking it too much (Māori participant)

While the accent performances did not target a specifically Māori accent, it is noteworthy that the Māori participants responded in this way. As members of an indigenous minority group, it is likely that many will have encountered the negative reactions of others to marginalised varieties of New Zealand English, and it makes sense that they would be more sensitive to performances of these varieties as a result.

Next, the survey asked the participants to rewatch the video, thinking about what age, level of poshness and ethnicity they associated with the accents they heard. The goal was for them to attend to specific forms of social variation in the accent portrayals. Regarding age and poshness, they were asked to rank the speaker on a scale of one to five, from 'young' to 'old' and 'not posh' to 'really posh', respectively. They placed the accents slightly older than the middle of the age range (mean 2.8/5)[viii] and rated them as not very posh (mean 1.8/5). Regarding ethnicity, the most common response was to perceive the accents as mostly Māori and Pākehā (21), followed by mostly Māori and Pasifika (14), mostly Pākehā (10) and mostly Māori (5). Thus 40 participants (77%) heard a Māori accent in the mix, compared to 31 hearing a Pākehā accent (60%) and 14 a Pasifika accent (27%).

Figure 5 shows accent perceptions by participant ethnicity. For most response options there is not much difference by ethnicity. However, no Pākehā respondents identified the speakers as 'mostly Pākehā', while 40% of Māori selected 'mostly Pākehā'. This could indicate that both Pākehā and Māori participants were dis-identifying with the speakers. This further supports the presence of a reaction of linguistic insecurity among the participants, who sought to dissociate themselves from what they were hearing.

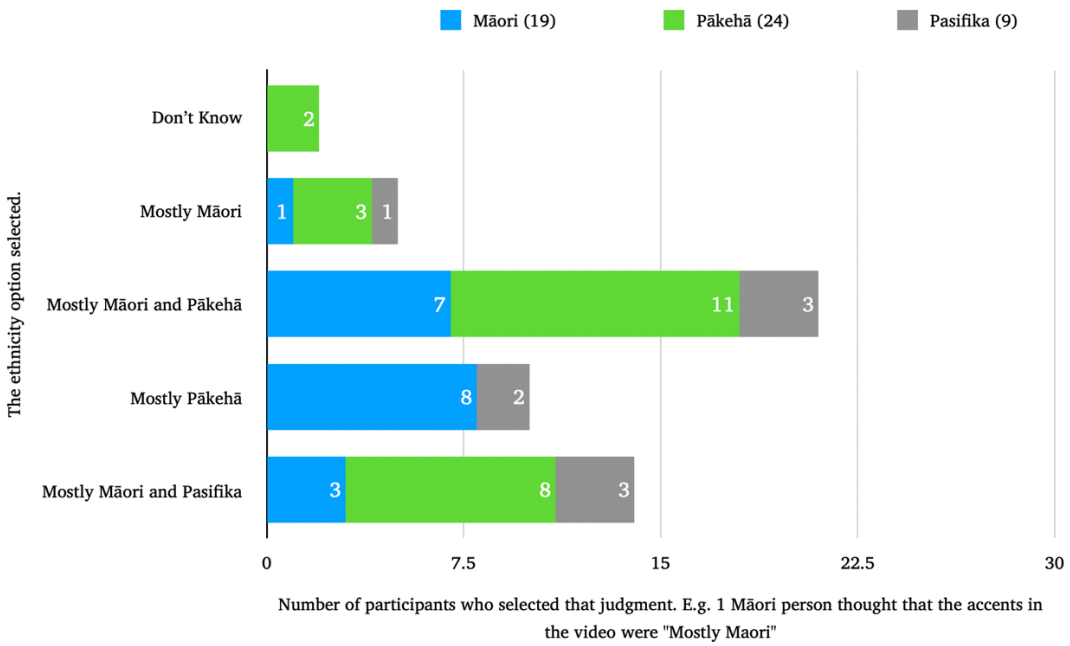

Figure 5. Perceived accents by ethnicity

The presence of linguistic insecurity relating to some forms of social variation in accent in these results is interesting, as previous research has tended to associate linguistic insecurity with an international comparison. In Bayard's work, New Zealanders were shown to 'cringe' over standard New Zealand accents in comparison to standard British or American accents, for instance. In the present case, linguistic insecurity appears to operate both at this international level (as we saw in section 2) and at a more differentiated level, whereby certain social varieties of New Zealand English elicit their own form of linguistic insecurity. Such reactions might be exacerbated by the movie context at play here. The movie industry is culturally associated with the USA and most movies included in the mashup are American movies. If viewers potentially already construct the New Zealand accent as inferior to a US accent (Bayard, 2000), in this case the inferiority trigger may be even stronger, as it is not standard New Zealand accents that are used but stigmatised social varieties, thereby amplifying linguistic insecurity.

Finally, the survey asked if participants had any further comments on their reaction to the accents. The goal was to elicit comment on social variation, having had their attention drawn to this. Most participants had no further comments but, among those who did, a familiar distinction between ethnic groups emerged. More Māori participants now raised the discriminatory implications of the stylised accents, which they identified as having 'stereotypical', 'poor/dumb' and 'less sophisticated' associations in relation to Māori and Pasifika people:

> They're the more stereotypical accents, the ones you think of when you think of the 'kiwi' accent- especially regarding Māori and/or Pasifika. (Māori participant)

> Had to think about it. It definitely plays on poor/dumb tropes about Māori. The inclusion of some obviously Pākehā voices (although they probably also are like 1980's rural accents) gave it a little more balance (Māori participant)

> I noticed the Māori accent the first time watching, and felt it was using what would be considered a "lower class" Māori accent for humour and that the video portrayed some of the characters as less sophisticated because of the word choices and accent. (Māori/Pākehā participant)

> Sounded like white people trying to sound Māori. (Māori/Pākehā participant)

Only one Pākehā participant commented along similar critical lines, stating that:

> The use of accents affiliated with Māori and the level of asserted intelligence in what they said etc is worrying. Stereotyping. Similar idea of being "simple" evident in some Pākehā accents but creates different cultural connotations (Pākehā participant)

One further Pākehā participant raised the ethnic profile of the accents, in this case not to criticise it but to claim it made the video funnier:

> I initially didn't associate them with Māori or Pasifica accents until I listened back but found them to be exaggerated making it funnier (Pākehā participant)

Overall, the survey confirmed our expectation: that viewers would pick up on the implicit prejudice underlying the accent portrayals only if it directly targeted them. Pākehā participants might perceive the accent portrayals as awkward or embarrassing but, except for one, not discriminatory or offensive. In contrast, the written comments of over a third of Māori

participants expressed the view that the video reproduced troubling stereotypes about Māori, suggesting they interpreted the accent portrayals as a form of racism mediated via language[ix]. This difference in reaction between Māori and Pākehā participants raises the question of whether the attempted humour in the video targets a middle-class Pākehā in-group who are encouraged to laugh at the language practices of an out-group of other New Zealanders. If so, this would fit the widespread pattern of language ideologies in the media representing the interests of dominant groups, thereby supporting the reproduction of sociolinguistic inequalities (Johnson & Milani, 2010).

5 Conclusion

This article has reported on New Zealand media coverage of a survey which rated the New Zealand accent the sexiest in the world. The survey was scientifically dubious but, as we have shown, the media coverage of it was significant. Our analysis of explicit and implicit metalinguistic discourse, alongside audience perceptions of the coverage, highlights several patterns in representations of the New Zealand accent in the context of a media event.

Regarding attitudes towards social variation in accent, the results reflect longstanding stigmatisation of non-standard varieties of New Zealand English, in a pattern reproduced in language situations across the world. The presenters featured in our data would likely be unaware of the racist and classist undertones of what they probably took to be humorous and/or harmless portrayals of social variation in the New Zealand accent, but these undertones did not go unnoticed by the viewers targeted by this humour. This reflects a broader pattern of low awareness of the implicit prejudice hidden in attitudes towards language in New Zealand. It is important to make this prejudice visible in order to encourage people to reflect on the implications of their common-sense understandings of language and the very real effects of these on others.

If linguistic prejudice is a depressing but unsurprising finding of this research, more surprising perhaps is the continued prevalence of such a high degree of linguistic insecurity about the New Zealand accent more generally, both within the media coverage and among the participants of our perception survey. While the *Big 7* survey results are untrustworthy as evidence, it would not be surprising if people abroad did appreciate New Zealand accents, given generally positive associations with New Zealand internationally. Indeed, a much more robust survey of British attitudes towards 34 accents of English found the New Zealand accent rated highest of all non-British accents, especially in terms of social attractiveness (Coupland & Bishop, 2007, p. 79). New Zealand accents are much more present in the New Zealand media than in decades past, and New Zealanders are more visible on the world stage. Why, then, does linguistic insecurity remain so strong?

We can understand this by looking at the two themes of the results in connection with each other. Linguistic insecurity and linguistic prejudice have often been investigated separately but, by looking in detail at a single media event, we can see them intertwined within an overarching standard language ideology (Milroy, 1999). Linguistic insecurity is understandable in the context of a hierarchy of world Englishes in which the (imagined) homogenous standard New Zealand accent is still constructed as inferior to (imagined) standard British (and/or American) English accents. This homogeneous New Zealand accent is, however, still constructed as superior to more marginalised varieties of New Zealand English, such as those associated with Māori and working class speakers, enabling some New Zealanders to ‘cringe’ upwards and discriminate downwards. An area that could be fruitful to research is that of layers of linguistic insecurity, particularly the internalised stigma that may

lead members of minority groups to exhibit higher levels of linguistic insecurity towards social variation in New Zealand.

There has been no detailed research on linguistic insecurity or attitudes towards New Zealand English in general for quite some time[x]. Through close analysis of one media event, we hope to have shown that this remains a fertile area for research. Twenty years on from Bayard's research, his observations remain relevant: it appears that 'New Zealanders are still uneasy about their own voices' and 'the cultural cringe is alive and well in the New Zealand of today' (Bayard, 2000, p. 321). Further investigation of language attitudes in New Zealand from a critical metalinguistic perspective would be a valuable step towards uncovering the everyday prejudice and insecurity buried within what New Zealanders say about how they talk. One hopes this will eventually open the door to New Zealanders becoming proud not just of their own accent but of the sexy accents of all New Zealanders.

Notes

[i] As we will see, an article published one month later takes a more critical approach.
[ii] We will often use the term ‘accent’ when discussing attitudes and the term ‘variety’ when taking a linguistic perspective.
[iii] These add up to more than 100% as respondents can select more than one ethnic group.
[iv] An anonymous reviewer familiar with the recordings notes that the New Zealand male speaker in Bayard’s first recording read poorly, which may have influenced his low placing on all scales except friendliness.
[v] We do not consider this term to be exclusive to Māori English, but like many features of this variety, to be more frequent among speakers of Maori English than among speakers of other varieties (Holmes, 2005)
[vi] This description of vowels uses the key words developed by Wells (1982) which represent the vowels of Received Pronunciation and their realisations in accents of English throughout the world.
[vii] The recruitment process was disrupted by COVID-19 quarantine regulations, causing the universities to have restricted access for some of this period, which likely accounts for the smaller number of participants than might otherwise have been the case. Due to the small numbers, we use descriptive statistics to explore patterns in the data. The data size still allows for determining patterns and making comparisons.
[viii] This may be due to the participants being somewhat young themselves, as university students, though we did not ask them for their age.
[ix] There was no clear pattern for the small number of Pasifika participants.
[x] Nielsen and Hay (2006) and Duhamel and Meyerhoff (2015) are instances of perceptual dialect studies. These have an attitude component but focus principally on folk perceptions of regional variation in New Zealand.

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