
ZED TO ZEE REVISITED:

NOTES FROM DUNEDIN ON THE AMERICANISATION OF THE NZE LEXICON THROUGH TIME¹

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Abstract

A sample of 104 Dunedin high school students supplied data on their use of either traditional New Zealand or American vocabulary pairs such as *torch/ flashlight* and *lift/elevator*. Results are compared with earlier studies carried out in Dunedin in 1984-85 and Auckland 1990. These comparisons suggest that acceptance of American lexical forms in New Zealand English is mediated by both change over time and regional variation.

1. Background

American influence on the lexicon of NZE has been recorded even before the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi. *Creek* in its US sense of a freshwater stream is documented as early as 1815, and *kerosene* for British *paraffin* from 1868 (Orsman 1997: 181, 404). More massive influences began with and after World War II, and with the onset of the ‘Pax Americana’ of globalisation and US media dominance (Bayard, Weatherall, Gallois, and Pittam 2001) the steady stream (or *creek*, if you will) has become a flood. There have been a number of studies devoted to the prevalence of incoming American forms in NZE (Bayard 1987, 1989, Meyerhoff 1993, Vine 1995, 1999), but only one

study has attempted to examine the question of longitudinal change through time. In 1995 Leek and Bayard published a comparative study of US versus 'traditional' NZE vocabulary among two fairly large and well-stratified bodies of informants in Dunedin (1984-85; 144 informants) and Auckland (1990; 300 informants). The study asked for informants' actual use of one or the other of pairs like *lift-elevator* and *torch-flashlight*, and then asked which of the pair was 'better English'. The lists of words used in the two studies were not identical, but 18 pairs were shared between the two studies.

We thus had studies carried out at opposite ends of New Zealand and separated in time by five to six years. In 1995 Leek and Bayard asked two questions; one of these received a fairly firm answer, but the other did not. It did indeed appear that preference for one of a pair as 'better English' was a good predictor of its being accepted for usage over the 'traditional' alternative. But our second question, on the marked preference for American alternatives in Auckland as compared with Dunedin, was unanswerable with the data to hand. Was the greater Auckland use and preference of incoming Americanisms due to the fact that the survey was carried out five or six years later than the Dunedin one, or because Auckland as New Zealand's 'Queen City' is simply more cosmopolitan and exposed to world trends than relatively isolated Dunedin? We now have a small body of data from Dunedin, collected 15-16 years after the Dunedin survey and 10 years after the Auckland survey, which sheds some light on these two questions.

2. The 2000 Dunedin high school sample

One hundred and four Dunedin High School students participated as part of an education expo for the tertiary sector, held at Dunedin Stadium in September 2000. Participation was voluntary, simply by filling out a one-page questionnaire setting out each pair of terms in context, and asking the students to circle the word they 'normally say'. It was also self-selected, in that students chose to fill out the questionnaires at the expo. Only questionnaires that listed the student's school were processed to avoid including a few interested adults in the sample. Ages were not asked for, but it is safe to assume that the students were in Years 9-13 (Form III-Form VII), or about 13 to 18 years old.

3. Results

The results from the current questionnaire are presented in Table 1, along with comparative data drawn from the Dunedin survey carried out during 1984-5 (Bayard 1989) and Auckland in 1990 (Leek and Bayard 1995). As both of these earlier surveys used stratified samples covering the entire age spectrum, sub-samples were used; these were 48 informants from Dunedin aged between 12 and 25, and 60 from Auckland in the narrower age range of 15 to 18. Thus the age ranges of the three samples do not correspond exactly, but are certainly close enough to be as generally satisfactory as other comparative studies on features of NZE (e.g., Batterham 2000, Allan and Starks 2000).

For the thirteen items common to the three datasets the mean innovative use in Dunedin in 1984-5 was 10.4%, in Auckland in 1990 18.2%, and a decade later in Dunedin in 2000 mean innovative use was 20.2%. It would thus appear that Dunedin is perhaps 10 years behind Auckland in the use of American innovations.

This contention can be further examined by looking at different possible patterns of usage present in the sample. If change was due solely to the progress of time then the following chronological pattern would be expected:

Dunedin 1984-5 → Auckland 1990 → Dunedin 2000

The change from *pictures* to *movies* is the only one strongly fitting this pattern, with *biscuit* to *cookie* and *rubber* to *eraser* showing some support. *Bonnet* to *hood* shows a non-significant trend supporting this.²

The second possibility, suggested by the mean use of innovation already reported, is that Dunedin is around 10 years behind in the use of American innovations, as represented in the following pattern:

Dunedin 1984-5 → Auckland 1990 = Dunedin 2000

There is little evidence for this, although *bonnet* to *hood* could be interpreted as such.

A third possibility is that Dunedin is somewhat immune to the use of American innovation and that Auckland shows the greater use of innovations while Dunedin has stayed constant over time:

Dunedin 1984-5 = Dunedin 2000 → Auckland 1990

	DUNEDIN (1984-5): USE	AUCKLAND (1990): USE	DUNEDIN (2000): USE	DUNEDIN (1984-5): PREF.	AUCKLAND (1990): PREF.
Torch vs. FLASHLIGHT	0	8	3	33	57
Lift vs. ELEVATOR	8	22	16	63	93
Rubber vs. ERASER	2 _a *	7 _a	18 _b	52	87
Flats vs. APARTMENTS	—	17 _b	5 _a	—	68
Zed vs. ZEE	13 _a	—	32 _b	—	—
Frock vs. DRESS	—	100	100	—	80
Jersey vs. SWEATER†	8	13	11	15	43
Boot vs. TRUNK	0	3	6	33	27
Note vs. BILL	11 _b	20 _b	3 _a	21	20
Tinned vs. CANNED Food	—	—	59	—	—
Biscuit vs. COOKIE	2 _a	5 _{ab}	13 _b	2	2
Petrol vs. GAS	0 _a	22 _b	7 _a	6	3
pictures vs. MOVIES	36 _a	82 _b	100 _c	38	65
Nappies vs. DIAPERS	4	3	4	27	47
Bonnet vs. HOOD	16	28	32	10	27
Footpath vs. SIDEWALK	4	2	7	17	23
Serviette vs. NAPKIN	44 _b	22 _a	43 _b	31	30
Fizzy Drink vs. SODA POP	—	—	3	—	—
Ice Blocks vs. POPSICLES	—	—	21	—	—
Lollies vs. CANDY	—	—	5	—	—

* Percentages not sharing the same subscript differ at $p=0.05$ using the chi-square statistic calculated on raw data; 'a' indicates the least frequent use, 'b' second least frequent, and 'c' most frequent use of the American innovation.

† The Auckland contrast was between SWEATER and JUMPER.

Table 1: Percentage of students using American innovation by sample (Dunedin 1984-5: 48 aged between 12 and 25; Auckland 1990: 60 aged between 15 and 18; Dunedin 200: 104 presumably aged between 13 and 18)

This trend is fitted by a number of changes – *flat* to *apartment*, *note* to *bill*, and *petrol* to *gas*. *Note* to *bill* even appears to show reduced usage in Dunedin across time. *Torch* to *flashlight* also shows this pattern of usage. *Serviette* to *napkin* contradicts this, however, with higher use of *napkin* in Dunedin at both time points.

Finally, exploratory analyses on the Dunedin 2000 sample using a crude measure of socioeconomic status (school decile ratings) revealed no significant pattern of correlations when controlling for between-school differences. The results instead suggested that between-school differences, that is individual school ‘cultures’, may have a stronger influence than the socioeconomic background of the schools.

4. Discussion

Although the limited data from the present survey make in-depth discussion unwise, integrating the results of the present study with previous research conducted by Bayard and Leek suggests that a number of trends are possible. Evidently the discrepancies between their two previous studies — Dunedin in 1984-5 and Auckland in 1990 — may be based in both regional and temporal differences.

Use of American innovations is generally less in Dunedin than in Auckland, and in some cases it seems that Dunedin is keeping to the original New Zealand usage more than Auckland; where change is occurring in Dunedin, this is happening later than in Auckland. There are exceptions to this rule, and it is possible that these may be explained by sampling differences. The present study contains only teenagers, whereas the Dunedin subsample used here includes informants in their early 20s (mean age of the 48 is 20.3). That *movies* (relative to *pictures*) was universally preferred in the present study may be a function of the younger demographic. This could potentially explain the increased use of *hood* (for *bonnet*) in the present study. The rising use of *cookie* (in relation to *biscuit*) may be in part due to the start of production, and exceptional popularity, of the ‘Cookie Time’ biscuit. The high use of *napkin* in Dunedin at both time points would perhaps suggest, not necessarily American influence, but the existence of some lexical differences by region (as with words for *tag*; Bauer and Bauer 2000). Further investigation of regional variation could include the genesis of the new meaning of *sifting*, and novel terms such as *mare*³ in Dunedin’s student culture.

In 1989 Bayard discussed the possibility of ‘change from above’ and ‘change from below’ occurring in vocabulary along the lines originally proposed by Labov for sound changes (Bayard 1989: 32-33). These were defined as changes possibly viewed as prestigious coming in more or less consciously,⁴ with preference figures notably higher than use figures (*elevator*, *flashlight*, *eraser*); and ones apparently being introduced less consciously and with lower prestige, as evidenced by use percentages being much higher vis-à-vis preference figures (*gas*, *dollar bill*, *sweater*). We can see examples of these two general patterns in words like *elevator*, *eraser*, *movies*, *trunk*, and to some extent *sidewalk*; all would appear to be changes from above, with greater preference figures in 1985-85 and increased use figures in 2000. As possible examples of change from below we have *cookie*, *hood*, *napkin*, and *sweater*. It is puzzling that use figures for *gas*, *dollar bill*, and *flashlight* have actually declined in the interval between the two Dunedin studies. The Auckland data published in 1995 allowed us to postulate that a general relationship was present between greater preference and a later increase in use figures, and the above examples from our present data seem to support this relationship; but note that there is of course no ‘precise predictive ratio between changes in preference and usage’ (Leek and Bayard 1995: 120).

The motivations behind such lexical shift are of course another matter, and one which was addressed in Vine’s recent study (1999). Her data is derived from a small sample of 30 female informants, of whom only ten aged 20-29 approach the age range of the present study.⁵ Vine feels that Leek and Bayard’s 1995 study implies ‘that people will only adopt American terms if they are unaware of the term’s origins’ (1999: 13). Her research rather suggests that ‘speakers are frequently oblivious to the origins of terms’ (loc. cit.). This is in fact precisely the point Leek and Bayard make (1995: 123); in Bayard’s experience, informants were often unaware of which item of a pair was British and which American, even when a dislike of ‘Americanisms’ was expressed. There is no doubt about a covert fondness for the North American accent, as documented in almost all accent evaluations carried out in New Zealand (Bayard 2000; Bayard, Weatherall, Gallois, and Pittam 2001; Vornik 1999). However, the whole question of motivation for the changes discussed here is beyond the scope of this paper, and clearly requires further investigation.

Finally, further research should perhaps focus on simultaneous sampling in different regions around New Zealand, enabling more accurate distinction between temporal and regional variation. This brief study suggests both factors are important.

Notes

- 1 Green carried out the coding and the analysis of the questionnaires; Bayard devised the list and is responsible for the more general sections of the paper. We both thank Catherine Waite, of the Otago Anthropology Department, for suggesting the study, and for designing and collecting the questionnaire.
- 2 Significance was determined using the chi-square statistic calculated on the raw data.
- 3 *Sifting* is aimless or subversive wandering; *mare* is an unfortunate or undesirable event.
- 4 In at least some cases (*elevator*, *eraser*, *apartment*) the Latinate appearance of the word may well have an influence.
- 5 Similarly, Meyerhoff's 1993 study is based on a sample of 60 working-class Māori and Pākehā (NZ European) informants, but only 20 were at all comparable with the three samples discussed here, and they were older (20-29) (Meyerhoff 1993: 235).

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