THE PERSISTENCE OF DIALECT AREAS

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Abstract

Names for the basic chasing game played in New Zealand playgrounds are regionalised. This regionalisation goes back as far as we can trace it in New Zealand, but the words which are used have changed even though the regions have not. It is concluded that the forces which brought the original dialect areas into being are still present.

In this paper, we report on a rather unusual method of data-collection for dialectological research, and on a surprising and unpredictable result.

Our basic project (funded by the Royal Society of New Zealand through the Marsden Fund) is concerned with the existence of dialect areas in New Zealand in the playground language of primary school children. We sent out questionnaires to 150 schools from Kaitaia to Bluff with year 7 and 8 students (old Forms 1 and 2, ages approximately 11 and 12 years). Teachers elicited the children's responses and recorded them on our behalf, giving multiple responses wherever appropriate. We asked about games that the children play, rhymes and fixed expressions used in the playground, words used for the expression of emotions, greetings and farewells, and other similar terms. Although we had to guess what vocabulary might be variable in New Zealand, most of the questions we asked turned out to show some variation which was

strongly regional. We also found some variation on the basis of the socio-economic status of the school, whether the school was urban or rural, and whether the school was a Catholic school or not. Our methodology prevented us from finding any variation due to ethnicity or to gender, though some of the apparently social variation may reflect underlying ethnic variation.
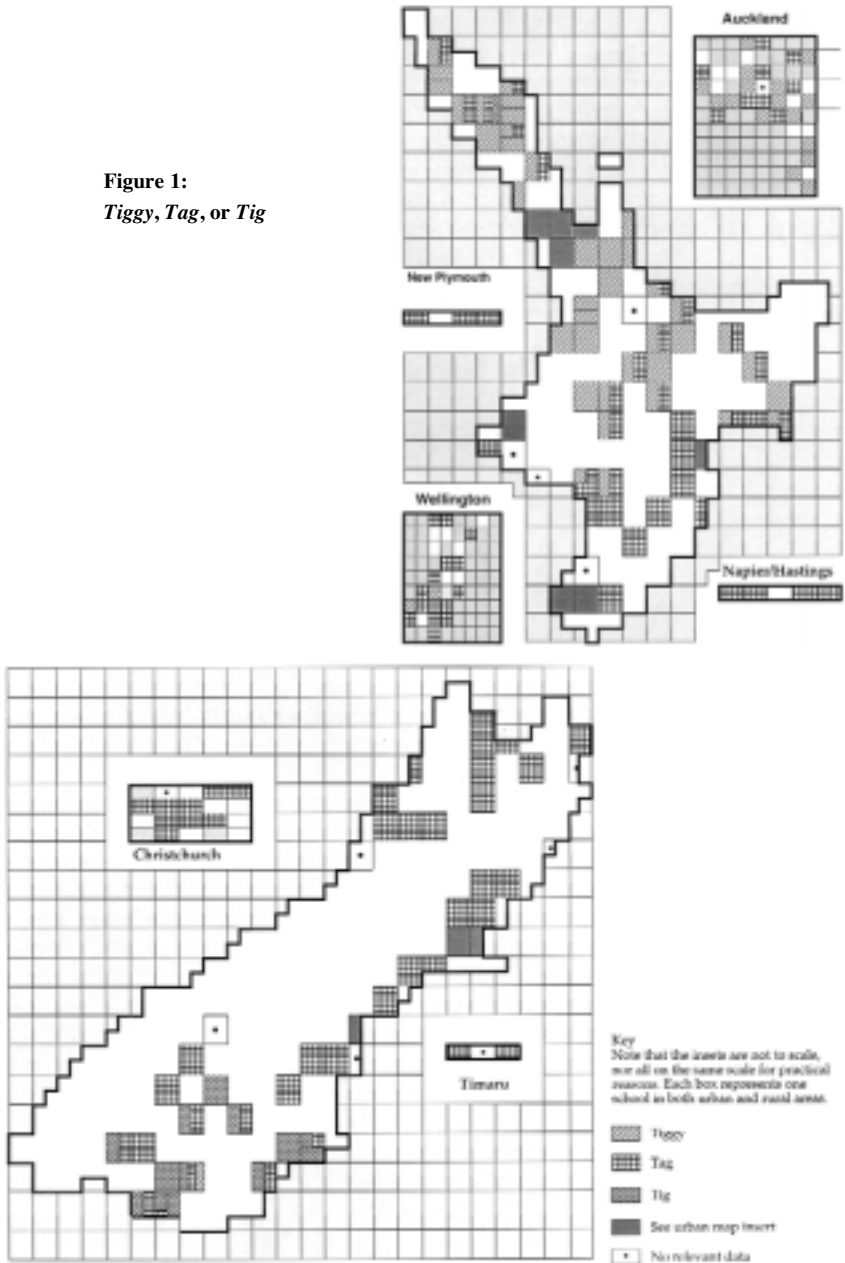
One of the robust findings from the analysis of the questionnaire is that, although there is occasional evidence of terms restricted to very small areas of the country, and some evidence that on occasion the North and South Island are distinct dialect regions, the bulk of the evidence suggests that New Zealand is divided into three main areas, which we term the Northern, Central and Southern regions (Bauer & Bauer 2000). The Northern region extends as far south as the volcanic plateau, usually but not always including Taranaki and usually but not always excluding Hawke's Bay. The Central region extends from there to south of the Waitaki river, and includes the main tourist areas in the central Otago lakes area (Wanaka, Queenstown, etc.). The Southern region is made up of the remaining areas of southern and eastern Otago and Southland. This is illustrated on the map in Figure 1 which shows the distribution of the responses to the following question:

At your school, do children play a game with many players where one player has to run and try to touch another player while all the other players try to run away and not get touched? What is this game usually called at your school?

We have used this map because of its relevance to data to be discussed in this paper, despite the atypical alignment of Taranaki and northern Hawke's Bay in the responses to this question. The map shows that the normal name for this game in the Northern region is *tiggy*; the normal name in the Central region is *tag*; and the normal name in the Southern region is *tig*.

A sample of forms which provide support for this three-way dialect division is provided in Table 1. All of the examples are significantly correlated with the area concerned in our data, although other forms are also found alongside the forms reported. (1) is the *tiggy/tag/tig* distinction shown in Figure 1. (2) is the word used for (illegally) giving an extra person a ride on a one-seater bicycle. (3) is a term of approval, like *cool* (which is used everywhere). (4) and (5) are counting-out rhymes, for choosing a person to be in/it in tiggy/tag/tig. Although children throughout the country know the word *wiener* in (6) as a mild insult (apparently thanks to the TV programme *The Simpsons*), only in the southern Region is this term (variously spelt, and the children themselves do not agree on the etymology of the term) used for new

Figure 1:
Tiggy, *Tag*, or *Tig*

Key
Note that the insets are not to scale, nor all on the same scale for practical reasons. Each box represents one school in both urban and rural areas.

- Tiggy
- Tag
- Tig
- See urban map insert
- No relevant data

entrants to the school. The term in (7) is used to prevent 'germ(ie)s' or 'cooties' or pieces of rubbish being passed back to the giver. The terms in (8) were given as a response to a scenario in which a bicycle was damaged so much that it couldn't be ridden; *munted* was common throughout the country, but the responses in the Table were regionalised.

Table 1

	NORTHERN REGION	CENTRAL REGION	SOUTHERN REGION
1	tiggy	tag	tig
2	doubling	dubbing	doubling
3	shot(ty)		
4	ickle ockle black bottle	black foot, black foot	
5	The sky is blue how old are you	Father Christmas lost his whiskers	
6			wieners/weaners
7		pegs not back	
8	pakaru		caned

In 2000, we were interviewed on this material for an article in *The NZ Listener* (Taylor 2000). The journalist asked whether we would like to get readers to write to us with their memories about words, and we chose to ask them about this chasing game and about truce terms. Truce terms are those words which were offered in response to the following question:

[In relation to the chasing game described above:] Is there a word which you can say to show that you are not playing for a short time, for instance because you need to tie up your shoelace?

We received over 600 answers from people right throughout the country, the oldest respondent having been at primary school before 1920, the most recent having been at primary school during the 1990s. Many of our respondents gave answers from an entire family or workplace, and were obviously interested in the different answers from people of different ages or different origins. While we cannot claim that this represents a systematic survey, nonetheless we got extensive coverage of the country as well as very broad coverage of the twentieth century.

The data obtained from the readers of the *Listener* confirms that the same fundamental division into three has not changed a great deal in the course of the twentieth century. We find *tiggy* and *tig* in use as long ago as the 1920s, and always in the same basic regions (*tig* is found as far north as South Canterbury, so that the *tig* area may have contracted slightly over the course of the century, but there is not much change).

Many of our correspondents would not have been surprised by this regionalisation. They assumed that the difference between *tiggy*, *tag* and *tig* derived from British variation, and correlated with the areas in which people from different parts of Britain had settled in New Zealand. There is little to support such a view. First, *tiggy* as such is not reported from Britain (it is found only in *tiggy tiggy touchwood,* which is also sporadically reported from New Zealand, and not always from the Northern region). Secondly, the origin of *tag* in New Zealand is obscure. We know that it is the general term in the United States, probably because *tag* was the normal term in Britain at the time the US was settled. It appears from the data in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, that the normal term in Britain changed from *tag* to *tig* between the period of the settlement of the US (early in the seventeenth century) and the period of first British immigration to New Zealand (early in the nineteenth century). We must postulate that remnants of *tag* remained alongside the innovative *tig*, and became the norm in the Central region of New Zealand. Although some of our English colleagues assure us that they played tag when young, this name is not mentioned in Gomme's (1894-98) survey of children's games in Britain (including Scotland), which is based on earlier written reports and on contributions from informants all round the country. We have also found some variation between *tig* and *tag* in Ireland, so there is a possibility of some extra Irish influence tipping the balance in favour of *tag* in New Zealand. *Tag* certainly did not come from a limited area in England, which is what we would expect if our readers' hypothesis were supported.

However, there is another piece of evidence which makes this hypothesis even less likely. Until some time in the 1970s, there was an alternative set of names for this game based on the root *chase*: *chase*, *chasey*, *chasing* and *chasings*. *Chase*-based terms are also found in Australia, but do not appear to have widespread British antecedents (again, for example, the name is not mentioned by Gomme 1894-98). *Chasey* is predominantly found in an area including Northland, Auckland, Waikato, Bay of Plenty, but with isolated attestations in Wanganui and on the West Coast of the South Island. At the other end of the country, in the Southern region, *chasing* was the only *chase*

name reported, but it was not reported there from children who had been in primary school after 1940. In between in the Central region, the normal term was *chasing*, although *chasings* was occasionally reported alongside it in Wellington and Nelson, and *chase* was sometimes reported alongside it in the Central region. In other words, fundamentally the same dialect regions are involved in the distribution of the *chase*-terms early in the twentieth century as are involved in the distribution of the *t_g*-terms late in the twentieth century. If we graph the distributions of the major forms in the Northern and Central regions through the twentieth century, we get the results shown in Figures 2 and 3. We do not graph the Southern region, since it is noteworthy for the lack of a *chase*-form.
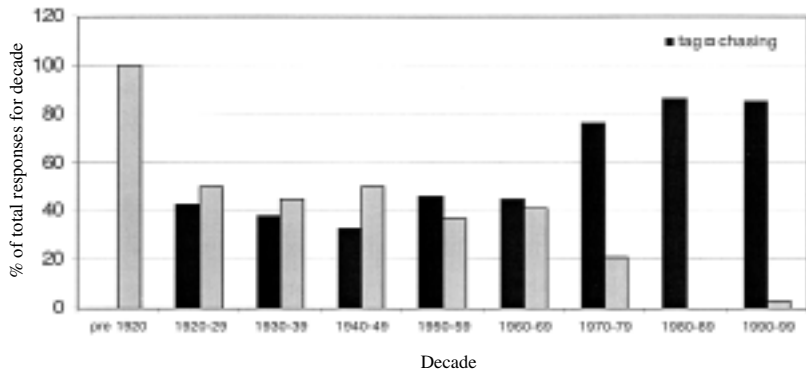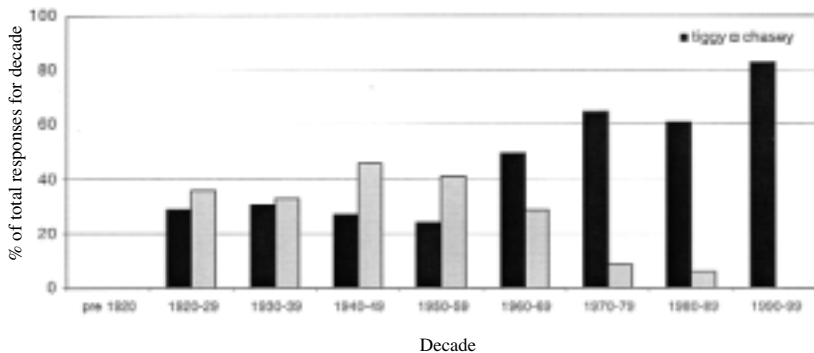

Figure 2: Central region: *tag* and *chasing*

Figure 3: Northern region: *tiggy* and *chasey*

Note that the 100% *chasing* response for before 1920 in Figure 3 is misleading, since it is the response of a single individual, and note also that the values plotted there do not include *chasings*, which would increase the numbers slightly until the 1960s. Note that in both regions we have a cross-over point in the 1950s or 1960s. We do not know why *chase*-names declined and *t_g*-names increased, or why the change happened so consistently across the country: that is possibly a question for sociologists and educationalists rather than a question for linguists. What is striking is the replacement of one dialectally restricted word by another dialectally restricted word without any great change in the dialect areas involved. The fact that parallel, but clearly independent, changes took place in both the Northern and the Central region at roughly the same time is a phenomenon which cries out for explanation, but none suggests itself: the obvious answer, that it was influenced by some supra-regional force such as TV or the school curriculum labels, cannot be correct, since this would have led to the same term being implanted in both areas, not different ones. This would seem to show that whatever forces had established the original dialect areas (and some of these at least are clearly geographical), they were still at work in the later twentieth century.

As well as words for the chasing game, our *Listener* respondents told us their truce terms. Again we can compare the results they provided with the results from our questionnaire.

Questionnaire results showed a much more splintered set of responses, with much smaller dialect areas than for *tig/tag/tiggy*. For example, *twigs* was restricted mainly to Taranaki, *fans* and *flicks* to the Wellington region, *tax/tags/taxes/taxis* to Marlborough/Nelson, *nibs* to Otago/Southland. The default term outside these small areas is *pegs*. Even today, informants sometimes had difficulty with the relevant question, and did not appear to recognise the situation as one for which they had an expression. This was even more true as we went back in time. Relatively few *Listener* respondents at school before the 1930s had a truce term.

It is clear that to the extent there was a general answer to this question for earlier generations of New Zealanders, the word used was *pax*. Notice that this is unlikely to have be brought in directly by the people who used it in Britain, since there, Opie & Opie (1959: 152) say of *pax*: 'The usual term in private schools and school stories, "pax" is group dialect not regional dialect.' People who attended private schools were not, on the whole, those who immigrated to New Zealand; the New Zealand use of the term probably comes from the literary convention. English and Scottish regional forms such as *barley*,

crosses, *keys*, *kings*, *scribs* do not appear in our data at all. By the 1980s, *pax* in New Zealand has virtually always changed phonetically so that the usual rendition is *pegs* (with a number of close variants including *pags*, *pegsed*, *pads* and *bags* [sic]). It is still the most widespread term. But we find that the current truce term in the Southern region, *nibs*, has been the norm in Otago/Southland and only in Otago/Southland ever since the 1940s; we find *fan(s)* in the greater Wellington area, and only there, as far back as the first decade of the last century; we find *tax* in Nelson/Marlborough as far back as the 1930s. The term *gates*, which in our questionnaire data was reported almost exclusively from Auckland, was earlier used over the whole of the Northern region. We have some anecdotal evidence that it may survive today in rural areas at least, but have no firm evidence yet to support such a claim.

So what we see here is the survival of minor dialect areas, despite the potentially nationalising force of radio and television and despite the larger dialect areas which suggest a wider sharing of playground terms. These small dialect areas seem to be strongly resistant to the incursion of *pegs*.

We do not understand the switch from *chasey/chasing* to *tag/tig(gy)*. While the gradual replacement of one term by another is not problematic, the temporal alignment of the change in different dialect areas strikes us as unusual and as requiring an explanation which we cannot provide. What we do see in this data, however, is the persistence of dialect areas. Dialect areas from the 1920s are still dialect areas in the 1990s, even though the actual words used may have changed in the interim. This suggests that even in a country where the homogeneity of language has long been commented on, there are robust dialect divisions. The dialects we have commented on are distinguished in terms of playground vocabulary; the next question is whether the same areas show differences in adult vocabulary, phonetics/phonology or grammar. Discovering that would require a completely new research project.

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