

# 'Woman's constancy'<sup>1</sup>: a distinctive zero plural in New Zealand English

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## 1. Introduction

A specific feature of some New Zealanders' speech which has become particularly noticeable in the last twenty or thirty years is the pronunciation of the plural noun *women* identically with the singular *woman*. By this change the word is transferred from one group of irregular nouns, the mutation plurals (though *woman* is an idiosyncratic item even within that set; see 2.1 below), into another irregular group, the zero plurals (though the typical zero plural, such as *sheep*, has the same written as well as spoken form<sup>2</sup>).

A striking and very public example of this new zero plural occurred a few years ago in Television New Zealand's advertisements for a record titled *Women in Rock*, a compilation of tracks by a number of different women rock performers. The title was read by the (male) voiceover speaker with the singular pronunciation clearly heard for the plural form (the pronunciation could have represented *Woman in Rock*, but

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<sup>1</sup>With apologies to John Donne.

<sup>2</sup>In fact the identical pronunciation of singular and plural of *woman* in NZE is now also being reflected in the written form. I have found instances of the plural spelt <woman> in a range of written texts including a newspaper theatre review, a computer-printed student fees form (a course on 'Women in American society' entered as 'Woman in America'), and not a few examination scripts. Teachers I have spoken to confirm <woman> for <women> as an increasingly common (mis)spelling in their pupils' work. Other NZE 'pronunciation spellings' being encountered in examination scripts include <knowen> and <shoven> (cf. Bayard 1989: 53).

The forms *men's* and *woman's* are sometimes linked by coordination in NZE in both speech and writing. A *woman's jersey* is standard usage in itself, but a sentence like 'you can knit either a dress, a woman's or men's jersey' (from a pattern produced by Crucci Wools Ltd, Upper Hutt) reflects a zero plural pronunciation of *women*.

the spelling on screen showed that the generic sense of the singular did not apply).

It is difficult to say when this pronunciation change first surfaced in New Zealand English (NZE). It does not appear to be mentioned in any books or articles about NZE before the 1970s (for example in Arnold Wall's prescriptive texts or in Turner 1966). Its omission from the extensive list of alleged errors in New Zealand pronunciation in Wall (1939:16-21) is especially significant. Nor is *woman/women* listed in any of the in-house guides to on-air pronunciation compiled by the National Broadcasting Service (in the 1930s) and by the New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation (in 1961 and 1969). Singular and plural forms are, however, included (with RP pronunciations indicated) in a revised version of the NZBC guides, issued by Radio New Zealand in 1982, implying that the zero plural had begun to infiltrate broadcasting usage for the first time in the 1970s.

The earliest reference I have found to the matter in the correspondence columns of the *New Zealand Listener* (complaints voiced there being an excellent guide to language trends) is in a letter dated October 1963. It has been a fairly regular subject for comment in letters and other pieces in the *Listener* since then<sup>3</sup>. Bayard (1985:8) reports one of his informants having had the zero plural pronunciation of *woman* 'drummed out of him in secondary school (with only partial success) in the late 1950s'. One may conclude that the widespread use of this pronunciation is a post- rather than pre-World War 2 development<sup>4</sup>.

Bayard (1987:9) estimates the present-day use of this zero plural in

<sup>3</sup> Complaints about the zero plural of *woman* are found in the following issues of the *New Zealand Listener*: 4th October 1963, p.9; 22nd December 1967, p.11; 6th July 1970, pp.43-44; 8th November 1971, pp.13-14; 3rd May 1975, p.8; 28th August 1976, p.12; 31st March 1979, p.11; 16th August 1980, p.70; 22nd September 1984, p.11; 6th September 1986, p.8; 18th October 1986, p.8; 8th November 1986, p.8. A letter from Donn Bayard in the issue of 13th December 1986, p.8, takes a non-prescriptive view.

<sup>4</sup> Sporadic occurrence of the zero plural earlier in the century cannot of course be ruled out. Indeed a 1911 Marlborough school inspector's report, cited in Gordon 1983:36, includes among a list of observed errors in pronunciation 'woomen' (sic) for 'women', which may perhaps be an attempt to transcribe a zero plural pronunciation. Other earlier references to this pronunciation feature may remain to be found. It may be noted that if the view taken in this paper is correct, that the zero plural of *woman* is chiefly attributable to centralisation of /I/ in NZE, then that precondition for the pronunciation change has existed since at least the beginning of the 20th century (Gordon and Deverson 1985:23-24).

## **'Woman's constancy'**

everyday speech 'at about the 80% level among NZE speakers under 40', though my own impression is that this estimate may be on the generous side. The pronunciation does not appear to be shared with Australian English (or indeed with any other regional variety of the language).

A number of different explanations for this pronunciation feature have been proposed, some from a prescriptive and moralistic viewpoint, others from a linguistic viewpoint. These explanations are reviewed in section 3 below, following a brief account of the standard form of *woman* and its historical development in section 2.

## **2. The standard form**

### **2.1 Pronunciation and spelling**

In standard English usage both pronunciation and spelling of the mutation plural noun *woman/women* are highly idiosyncratic. No other English noun has a contrast of /ʊ/ and /ɪ/ in its singular and plural forms. Further, the phonologically contrastive first syllables of *woman* and *women* are represented by means of the same spelling. There is homography here not of separate word items (as in, say, *wind* 'current of air' and *wind* 'to coil'), but in one syllable of morphological variants of the same word. The only other case of homographic representation of contrastive singular and plural vowels among the English nouns is the equally irregular *child/children*.

The plural *women*, moreover, is the only word in English in which /ɪ/ in a stressed syllable is represented in the written form by <o>. This anomalous spelling of /ɪ/ was exploited by George Bernard Shaw in his well-known facetious respelling of *fish* as <ghoti> (<gh> as in *rough*, <o> as in *women*, <ti> as in *nation*). <ghoti> is in fact entirely implausible as a spelling of *fish*, but *woman/women* (like the -ough words) certainly illustrates in extreme fashion the lack of correspondence between spelling and pronunciation for which English is notorious (though it is often overstated).

### **2.2 History**

*Woman/women* has a complex history underlying its present idiosyn-

crazy<sup>5</sup>. It began life in Old English as the grammatically masculine compound word *wif-man(n)* [wi:fman] 'female person'. The compound is not paralleled in any other Germanic language. The [f] was gradually lost during late Old English and early Middle English by the assimilation of [fm] to [mm] and later [m].

Singular and plural of this word were thus differentiated in speech at first through the vowel of the second syllable ([wi:fman], [wi:fmen]), and only later through the vowel of the first syllable. Forms with the original [i:] shortened to [ɪ] in singular and plural occur until the 15th century, giving spellings such as *wimman/wimmen*. In some dialects of early Middle English, however, the [i] was rounded to [ʊ] under the influence of the initial bilabial [w]. This change is reflected in spellings of singular and plural with <u> and with <o>, the latter a scribal device to assist legibility in handwritten texts where <w>, <m>, <n>, and <u> could be hard to decipher when used together; cf. *won, come, month* etc. Hence *wuman/wumen, woman/women*, again with no difference in pronunciation in the first syllables of singular and plural.

Eventually these two lines of development merged, and in the 15th and 16th centuries [ʊ] became standard in the singular *woman* and [ɪ] became standard in the plural *women*. This distinction was probably due less to chance than to a concern to maintain a contrast of pronunciation which was disappearing with the gradual weakening of the second syllable as the word ceased to be perceived as a compound. Thus the mutation of *-man/-men* was as it were back-shifted into the first, stressed syllable, perhaps with some influence from common mutated pairs such as *foot/feet, goose/geese*, to which *woman/women* is now roughly similar (close back vowel in singular, close front vowel in plural).

At the same time the spelling with <o> had become standardised for both singular and plural pronunciations, and was not altered to reflect their divergence (any more than many other phonological changes were accompanied by corresponding alterations to spelling). Hence in spelling singular and plural of *woman* continue to be differentiated, as they have been since Old English, through the second syllable; while in pronunciation they are now, unlike in Old and Middle English, differentiated chiefly through the first syllable.

<sup>5</sup> See more fully OED 1989, s.v. *woman* (Vol. XX, pp. 484-488).



### 3. The New Zealand zero plural

#### 3.1 The Prescriptive View

The zero plural of *woman* has attracted much adverse comment in the media and elsewhere, for example in newspaper columns and (as noted earlier) in editorial correspondence. It has predictably drawn fire from those concerned with declining language standards, those who see English as under threat from the bad habits of its users. It cannot be that zero plurals are inherently objectionable, since expressions such as *many salmon* and *six hundred* are never criticised. However, given that the New Zealand variety of English in general has encountered more disparagement than acceptance from authorities and self-appointed language-guardians, it is inevitable that a pronunciation failing to observe an established British English distinction between a plural and a singular form will confirm many people's worst fears about New Zealand speech and be roundly condemned as a mark of 'illiteracy'.

These comments by a newspaper columnist on language matters typify the conservative response to this pronunciation feature:

I have long ago accepted the fact that the average New Zealander either doesn't know there is a difference between *woman* and *women*, or is too lazy to make it.

I shuddered recently to hear an otherwise well-spoken young woman on radio speak of a retreat for battered women. But according to her the organisation was set up for the benefit of one woman only.

Never once did she say "wimm'n"<sup>6</sup>.

It is a standard prescriptive response to linguistic change to attribute it to ignorance and/or laziness. Ignorance on the one hand seems an improbable explanation here. Possibly some of those who make no distinction between the singular and plural of *woman* are not aware that others do make one, but it is more likely that most know of the two alternatives, regarding them in the same way as they do alternatives for words such as *maroon* and *basic* (to take other NZE examples) or words such as *data* and *finance* (to take other general

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<sup>6</sup>Extracted from Bruce Scott's weekly column *Take My Word*, *Christchurch Star*, 17th January 1984.

English examples). Their habit is to pronounce *women* as /wʊmən/ just as it is the habit of others to pronounce *maroon* as /mərəʊn/. What they may be unaware of, however, is the greater social stigma attaching to the former than to the latter.

The charge of laziness is equally unsound and simplistic. It also implies a more damaging moral judgement on those whose speech is under attack. Ignorance may be excusable, but laziness suggests a more wilful fault, a deliberate lack of effort in preserving an established linguistic contrast. A factor linguists prefer to call economy of effort is often present in pronunciation and pronunciation change. It seems to be a universal tendency in language, however, not confined to particular social or regional accents, and emotive description of this tendency as laziness is inappropriate. But however this tendency is described it is evidently not significant in the present case. If economy of effort were involved we might expect to find speakers not differentiating plural from singular in other nouns as well. But the change is affecting just the one word. It is noteworthy that the journalist above admits to hearing the zero plural from 'an otherwise well-spoken young woman'. There is no suggestion that it is part of a general slovenliness of language on her part at least.

Interpretation of this new pronunciation as the product of some human or moral failing (from which those who conform and complain are happily exempt) must be rejected as impressionistic and unenlightening. A disinterested linguistic approach to the phenomenon will provide more satisfactory results.

### 3.2 The spelling pronunciation hypothesis

Discrepancies between spelling and pronunciation such as in *woman* /*women* might be resolved in one of two ways. First, the spelling might be changed to match the pronunciation. Before English spelling became relatively fixed it was usual for spelling to reflect pronunciation fairly closely and to be updated as pronunciation changes made it necessary (Pyles and Algeo 1982:62). But in recent times changes to established spelling have been rare and any alteration to *woman/women* is virtually unthinkable. A child may write <wimin> for the plural of the word but this ironically must be corrected to something that is phonetically less accurate. Radical feminists in recent years have used

## 'Woman's constancy'

spellings such as <wimmin> and <womin> in an attempt to repudiate the etymological link with *man/men*, but these pose no threat to the standard orthography. Spelling reform, whether linguistically or politically motivated, makes no headway in the face of conservatism, respect for the printed standard and the perceived advantages of a stable and uniform system for English world-wide (with only minor variations). Better the devil you know...

The first option therefore seems closed, in the present case as in others. The alternative, which is more viable, is to change the pronunciation to match the spelling. Speech is not as fixed as writing, and if writing cannot be made to conform to speech, speech may well be made to conform to writing. This more recent trend has been responsible for 'spelling pronunciations', which have become especially common in the 20th century. Well-known examples where pronunciation has been modified under the influence of the written form include *waistcoat*, *forehead*, *often*, *grindstone*, and place-names such as *Shrewsbury*. These words are now mostly spoken as they are written, that is without elisions, weak syllables etc., so restoring the correspondence between spelling and pronunciation ('phonetic spelling') which had been obscured by historical sound-changes. Long and unfamiliar words encountered first or chiefly in writing are now very likely to be given a spelling pronunciation.

Spelling pronunciations are increasingly common in all varieties of English, but they have been noted as particularly characteristic of Australian English (AusE) and of NZE. (Mitchell and Delbridge 1965: 50-52; Bauer 1986:252-253). For example, in many words unstressed syllables with /ə/ or /ɪ/ in British English have full vowels in AusE and NZE: compare RP /ɪŋkəm/, /pə'trɪt/, /vəkeɪfən/, /mæɹəθən/ and NZE /ɪŋkəm/, /pə'treit/, /veikeɪfən/, /mæɹəθɒn/. The influence of the written form is also seen in Australian and New Zealand pronunciations of words such as *extraordinary*, *interesting*, *medicine*, without any elision of unstressed vowels.

Two previous linguistic discussions of the origin of the zero plural of *woman* both interpret it as a spelling pronunciation. In the now discontinued *Listener* Language column Ian Gordon argued that some New Zealanders 'have abandoned the standard pronunciation (of *women*) in favour of one based on the look of the word in print'<sup>7</sup>. And

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<sup>7</sup> *New Zealand Listener*, 11th August 1984, p.53.

in the course of his discussion of the social distribution of the zero plural of *woman* Donn Bayard accepted Gordon's explanation as 'a convincing one' (1985:8).

This is certainly not a spelling pronunciation of the usual kind, however. Spelling is not made markedly more phonetic by the pronunciation change, since /ʊ/ spelt <o> is almost as rare as /ɪ/ spelt <o>, nor does the pronunciation restore full vowel quality in the unstressed syllable. Ian Gordon cites the word *forehead* as a parallel to the zero plural pronunciation of *women*, but the spelling pronunciation in the former is motivated by the multiple analogy of the two morphemes *fore* and *head*, which are in frequent use both as discreet word items and as constituents of many compounds (*foretaste*, *skinhead*, etc.). If the written form is a factor in the development of a zero plural of *woman* a single analogy only is operating, that of the word's singular form. The change to an invariant plural here resolves the inconsistency of pronouncing the same letter differently in grammatical forms of the same word. Interestingly, the regularity the word *woman* displayed before the 15th century, when the first syllable had the same pronunciation in both singular and plural, is reintroduced in NZE.

The influence of spelling cannot be discounted as a contributing factor in the development of an identical pronunciation for *woman* and *women*. The written form may indeed suggest that the same pronunciation is required for the stressed syllable in both forms. However, it is unlikely that this is in itself a sufficient explanation of the new plural pronunciation. It is doubtful if change of vowel quality in the stressed syllable of a core vocabulary item of high frequency could be effected by the influence of spelling alone. Since the change appears to be confined to NZE speakers, it is natural to consider the possibility that the change is phonologically motivated, by characteristics of the NZE accent, rather than, or at least as well as, orthographically motivated.

### 3.3 Effects of the NZE accent

In NZE the substitution of /wʊmən/ for /wɪmɪn/ is a less radical change than it would be in RP, for example. The reason for this is the centralisation of /ɪ/ which is recognised as a distinctive characteristic of the general NZE accent. Bauer (1986:236) describes /ɪ/ in stressed

## 'Woman's constancy'

positions as 'very central and open in comparison with other varieties of English', and Trudgill and Hannah (1982:19) refer to the phoneme in NZE as 'a central vowel in the region of [ɜ ~ ə]'. In a broad NZE accent /ɪ/ may be sufficiently open to overlap with /ʌ/, a pronunciation conveyed in spellings such as *fush* 'n *chups* and satirised in Arnold Wall's 'duttu' on 'Phullus and Phullup' (1964:138-139).

Conversely, Bauer (1986:239, and see also 233) also refers to a 'degree of centralisation' in NZE /ʊ/. In the accents of most New Zealanders, then, there is a centralising tendency in two directions which brings /ɪ/ and /ʊ/ much closer together than they are for an RP speaker. Thus, even for those NZE speakers who continue to contrast *woman* and *women*, there will normally be less articulatory distance between the stressed vowels of the two forms than there is for the British English speaker.

Coupled with this is the regular NZE (and in this case AusE) centralisation by which RP /ɪ/ is replaced by NZE /ə/ in unstressed syllables such as the second syllable of *women*. We may compare for example RP /wɪkɪnz/, /fəʊldɪd/, /tæksɪz/ and NZE /wɪknəs/, /fəʊldəd/, /tæksəz/ (*taxes*). Hence RP /wɪmɪn/ (so *OED* 1989), but NZE /wɪmən/ (so *Penguin Tasman Dictionary* 1986)<sup>8</sup>. Thus, if the singular and plural of *woman* are distinct for NZE speakers, it is normally only in the first syllable, not as in RP in the second as well. With centralisation in both syllables, the resultant pronunciation of *women* is [wɪmən] or [wəmən], which are not far removed from the pronunciation of the singular, especially where a centralised variant of /ʊ/ is found in the latter.

It may be argued, then, that any tendency towards identical pronunciation of *woman* and *women* is encouraged by general features of New Zealanders' speech which blur the distinction anyway and make it less perceptible to hearers. If you hear little contrast, you may make little yourself, and eventually none at all. This process is now complete for a good number of NZE speakers. That the change in the accented syllable of *women* is not found in AusE may be explained by the sharper distinction maintained in that accent between /ɪ/ and /ʊ/; in AusE /ɪ/ is typically closer and more forward than in RP (Mitchell

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<sup>8</sup> Trudgill and Hannah give the following transcriptions of the analogous form *Philip*: RP [fɪlɪp], AusE [fɪləp], NZE [fələp]. 'For very many New Zealanders there is thus no contrast between /ɪ/ and /ə/.' (1982:19).



and Delbridge 1965:34-35), giving for example what is caricatured as 'feesh' rather than NZE 'fush'.

Before accepting Ian Gordon's explanation of the zero plural of *woman* as a spelling pronunciation, Bayard (1985:8) does consider the possibility that the pronunciation may have developed 'as a by-product of /I/ centralisation'. The possibility is rejected, however, on the grounds that backing of /I/ to /U/ seems to occur in NZE only before a following /l/, so [mʌlk], [ʃʊldrən]; and because it is not found in other forms in which there is a preceding labial (\* /swʊm/ for *swim* e.g.). However, this seems to overlook the influence of the singular pronunciation of *woman* on the plural. The present specific case involves the interaction of pronunciations in two forms, rather than any combinative change in just one. Phonetic contrast between singular and plural of *woman* has been lessened in NZE to the point where merger of the two is a natural and predictable consequence.

It is significant that some of the prescriptive complaints about *women* have referred to the near identity rather than the complete identity of singular and plural pronunciations<sup>9</sup>. This seems to suggest that the change from clearly distinct to fully identical pronunciations has occurred in gradual stages in NZE rather than in the single shift implied by the spelling pronunciation argument.

### 3.4 Reinforcing factors

A number of constructions occur in which the singular *woman* has an implicit plural reference; these may be contributing to the growing adoption of the unchanged plural pronunciation in NZE.

For example, singular forms such as *woman* may occur in English after numerals and the quantifier *all* in NPs (sometimes hyphenated in the written form) functioning as embedded premodifiers in larger NPs. For example, one can have a *two(-)horse race* or a *ten(-)point programme*, and an *all(-)woman crew* or a *four(-)woman committee*, and so on. Such constructions probably had no bearing on the original pronunciation change, but they may have assisted and still be assisting in consolidating the zero plural in NZE. It may be hard to convince

<sup>9</sup> For example Eric Bradwell in the *Listener*, 18th October 1986, p.8, refers to 'that perennial horror, the plural of *woman* pronounced in a similar manner to the singular of the word' (my italics).

## *'Woman's constancy'*

someone with the zero plural pronunciation that while, say, *all woman crew* is grammatically sound, *all 'woman' cry* is 'incorrect'. Forms such as the former may seem to provide a model for and to legitimise those such as the latter.

More significant in the spread of this change among NZE speakers may be expressions in which the generic singular *woman* is used, for example *woman's intuition*, *woman's role in society*. In speech such phrases are easily taken to have implied plural reference, perhaps leading to the use of /wUmən/ as plural in other contexts by analogy.

A specific case of potential confusion between singular and plural reference occurs in the name of the mass-circulation magazine *The New Zealand Woman's Weekly* (compare *The Australian Women's Weekly*; it is often difficult to remember which country's magazine contains the plural form!). The NZWW is a magazine (obviously) for New Zealand women, and the title when spoken may well be misinterpreted as incorporating the plural form. The presence of such ambiguity in the name of a New Zealand 'institution' with a high public profile over many decades may be no small factor in reinforcing the new zero plural pronunciation.

## 4. Conclusion

Of the two linguistic explanations of the zero plural of *woman* discussed above, /I/ (and /U/) centralisation in NZE seems to me the more likely candidate for the primary cause of the change than spelling pronunciation, though spelling and usage of the word do need to be considered as associated factors in the establishment of the invariant plural among a good proportion of general NZE speakers. Attributing the change to characteristics of the NZE accent has the major virtue of explaining why the zero plural has developed in New Zealand and apparently nowhere else to date. If it were purely an example of spelling pronunciation, its appearance as well in AusE at least, and perhaps elsewhere too, might have been expected.

The debate in New Zealand on the merits or otherwise of this new zero plural will no doubt continue. Prescriptivists are unlikely to accept the linguist's non-censorious account of the feature, as they are less than well disposed in the first place towards the features of the

NZE accent that have been responsible for the change<sup>10</sup>.

A conservative argument against the constant *woman* that is linguistic rather than moralistic is that the loss of distinction between the singular and plural in speech is a potential cause of miscommunication. A similar argument is sometimes voiced in the case of the merging of the centring diphthongs /iə/ and /eə/ in general New Zealand speech. But misunderstandings as a result of homophones and homographs of longer standing in English are few in practice. Ambiguity is more evident in language out of context than in it. Communication in a language that already tolerates groups such as *pore*, *paw*, *poor* and *pour* is unlikely to be seriously threatened by the addition of one more word with an unchanged plural pronunciation. A refuge for battered /wʊmən/ (cf. 3.1 above) will not be understood, except by the perverse, to mean a refuge for one woman only.

There need be no concern in conservative ranks that the new pronunciation of *women* will provide a model for the same changes in other words of similar form. *Woman/women* is a unique case, providing the only grammatical contrast in the language that was at risk to the change that has occurred. There is no prospect of analogous change in words such as *Philip* and *cricket* (i.e. to \*/fʊləp/ and \*/krʊkət/), because no comparable grammatical variants of those words exist to exert influence on their pronunciation as the spoken form of *woman* has on that of *women*.

It is clear that despite strong disapproval in some quarters the zero plural of *woman* is here to stay in NZE. The journalist quoted earlier admits as much in his first sentence. Whether it is yet the pronunciation of 'the average New Zealander' might be disputed. However, where it is heard from 'well-spoken' young women and men on radio and television, it may be necessary to revise assessment of it as a incorrect and uneducated form. Only time will tell whether this pronunciation variant will make further inroads still into general and even cultivated New Zealand speech<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Another *Listener* correspondent, C.E. Thatcher (22nd September 1984), attributes the zero plural to 'an inability to pronounce the short "i"', thus spotting the influence of the NZE accent while claiming 'It's easy to correct'.

<sup>11</sup> The first lexicographical recognition of the zero plural pronunciation came in the revised edition of the *Heinemann New Zealand Dictionary* (1989:1330).

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