

A grammatical comparison of the casual speech of Maori and Pakeha women in Levin

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Introduction

The notion of the existence of a distinctive, stable dialect of Maori English has long been a source of debate in New Zealand. It is often assumed that Maori and Pakeha differ in the variety of English they speak. However research in this area has yet to provide solid evidence to substantiate such a claim.

For this reason it was decided to compare the grammatical features of the casual speech of two groups of people who had the same social characteristics except ethnic background. The sample comprised five Maori and five Pakeha women of low socio-economic status, aged between 25 and 37, who had resided in Levin for most of their lives.

The survey took the form of a tape recorded sociolinguistic interview in three sections. The first was designed to elicit fairly detailed demographic information from the informants to ensure that they conformed to the social profile under investigation. The second section elicited a range of formal linguistic data for the purposes of other researchers who were involved in the study. The sole source of data for my examination of grammatical features was the third and final section of the interview, in which informants were asked questions on topics that were designed to elicit a large quantity of casual speech. This part of the interview was based heavily on Labov's recommendations (1984) on how best to go about eliciting relaxed speech.

Based on the findings from both overseas and local studies it was decided that the verb-system, and in particular the production of past-tense verb forms, should be the focus of the present study.

The interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 60 minutes in length, with the majority running close to one hour. In most cases the third

section eliciting casual speech lasted for just under 30 minutes. The Maori and Pakeha samples produced approximately 17,000 words each in this part of the interview. Once the data was transcribed I analysed it, identifying all non-standard features. These were quantified, and where applicable, were subjected to statistical testing to establish the significance of any differences identified between the groups. The test statistic employed was the standard chi-square approximation to the log likelihood ratio (see McCullagh 1987). Six major areas of variation were identified. (Greater detail of all aspects of this study are contained in the MA thesis on which this paper is based. This thesis, entitled 'A grammatical comparison of the spoken English of Maori and Pakeha women in Levin', is available from Victoria University of Wellington.)

1) Past-tense main verbs

In all cases the non-standard variant involved the use of the past participle instead of the past-tense form of the verb in question, leading to the production of such tokens as:

- (1) she *seen* it happen and she stopped and picked J. up off the bloody road [Hiria]¹, and
- (2) well I *rung* up [Kata]

where *saw* and *rang* respectively would be standard.

This is a widespread non-standard feature that was considered likely to emerge in this study. Aside from its appearance in numerous studies overseas (e.g. Labov et al. 1972, Wolfram and Christian 1976, Feagin 1979, Milroy 1980, Cheshire 1982), it was also included in Benton's 1966 catalogue (no.532) as a characteristically Maori non-standard feature. With this in mind it is strange that this use of the past participle for the past-tense form was not separately identified among the list of significantly non-standard features found in McCullum's (1978) study.

¹All the names that appear after tokens of variables in the paper are pseudonyms.

Table 1
Variation in the production of past-tense verb forms

Informants	Total past.	Pot.l Envir.t	Total			Non- std. as %
			Non- std.	Dubious		
Maori						
Hera	139	60	5	-		8.3%
Hiria	287	133	15	2		11.1%
Kata	129	81	1	-		1.2%
Rea	88	45	-	2		0.0%
Tia	185	119	4	-		3.4%
Total	828	438	25	4		4.8%
Pakeha						
Jo	169	80	1	-		1.3%
Kate	56	37	-	-		0.0%
Nan	62	26	-	-		0.0%
Sal	272	96	6	-		6.3%
Cher	138	72	1	-		1.4%
Total	697	311	8	-		1.8%

The first column in Table 1 sets out the total number of past-tense verb forms produced. The figures in the second column relate to the total number of instances where non-standard variation of the type identified in the corpus could potentially have occurred. As stated above, the non-standard variant identified involved the use of the past participle in place of the past tense of a verb. This sort of non-standard variation could only be identified with verbs that have different past-tense and past-participle forms. For this reason it was necessary to exclude any verb forms identified in the data that had an identical past-tense and past-participle form.

Column three gives the total number of non-standard tokens identified in the corpus. The fourth column indicates the number of dubious tokens identified in the data. Those classified as dubious were ultimately treated as standard. The reason for including this category was just to make the point that there were a number of cases that might in fact have been non-standard, but could not be unquestionably classified as such. It is important to realise, however, that the decision to classify such tokens as standard in the final analysis in

effect tempers any potential pattern of non-standardness that might emerge. The results regarding the number of non-standard forms are therefore conservative. The frequency of occurrence of non-standard forms as a percentage of the number of potential environments (Column 2) is given in the final column.

The incidence of non-standard verb forms is very small in both groups. Looking more closely at individual totals reveals that three Maori and one Pakeha informant between them produced all but three of the 33 non-standard occurrences identified, with one Maori informant in particular producing 15.

An interesting aspect of this particular type of variation is that it was confined to just four verbs, namely *come*, *see*, *be* and *sing*. The majority of tokens involved *come*. The tendency of certain verbs to lend themselves to non-standard manifestation was identified and discussed by Cheshire in her study of Reading English. She found that certain 'vernacular' verbs, as she termed them, were more likely to be produced non-standardly than other lexical verbs (Cheshire 1982:41). The seemingly higher frequency of occurrence of this feature in the Maori sample compared with that of the Pakeha sample was found to be highly significant. This suggests that this might indeed be a feature of 'Maori English' by virtue of its significantly higher occurrence in the Maori corpus.

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2) Present-tense main verbs.

Table 2
Variation in the production
of present-tense verb forms

Informants	Total pres.	Std.	Non- std.	Non- std. as %
Maori				
Hera	188	173	15	8.0%
Hiria	145	145	-	0.0%
Kata	124	115	13	10.2%
Rea	124	123	1	0.8%
Tia	201	201	-	0.0%
Total	782	757	29	3.8%
Pakeha				
Jo	181	179	2	1.1%
Kate	85	85	-	0.0%
Nan	55	55	-	0.0%
Sal	212	210	(2)	0.9%
Cher	154	154	-	0.0%
Total	687	683	4	0.6%

The first column of Table 2 gives the total number of present-tense verb forms identified in the corpus. This figure is a total of the number of standard and non-standard forms produced, the figures for which are given the second and third columns respectively. No dubious cases of this variable were identified. The frequency of occurrence of non-standard present-tense manifestations appears in the final column as a percentage of the total number produced.

The number of non-standard forms that were identified, though still a relatively small proportion of the total number of present-tense verb forms produced, was markedly higher in the Maori sample than in the Pakeha sample. This difference was found to be even more highly significant than that detected in the production of past-tense forms. Again, however, differences within the Maori group are evident; just two of the five Maori informants were responsible for all but one of the 29 non-standard occurrences of that group. This suggests that it is not Maori identity alone which accounts for the use of a higher proportion

of non-standard present-tense verb forms. It seems that Maori identity is a necessary but not sufficient condition associated with this pattern of usage.

The non-standard variant in all cases involved the extension of the the third person singular *-s* to other persons. All but one of these instances was in conjunction with the first person singular, leading to such examples as:

- (3) *I says* you wanna bet [Hera], and
- (4) so *I gets* home and I waited a couple of weeks [Kata].

Interestingly, the one instance of the *-s* inflection being used elsewhere was one of two tokens produced by one of the Pakeha informant. In this case it was used after the first person plural pronoun *we*, resulting in one instance in the phrase *we says*.

As with the past tense, non-standard occurrences were restricted to a very limited set of lexical environments. In almost every case the verb involved was *say*. The only other two tokens identified, both produced by one woman, involved the verbs *get* and *ask*.

It is of note that all of the non-standard tokens of this variable identified occurred in stretches of narrative, where informants tended to alternate between the simple past tense and what has been termed the 'conversational historic present' tense - 'CHP' for short (Wolfson, 1982:73). Moreover, there were no occurrences in the stretches of narrative of the supposedly standard 'CHP' form *I say*. Any alternation was between *I says* and the simple past form *I said*. Thus *says* is categorically used by the Maori group in CHP in conjunction with the first person singular subject *I*.

Informants appeared most likely to lapse into CHP when they were relaxed and preoccupied with recounting some incident. Whilst they were in this mode, the effect of observation on their speech was perhaps at a minimum, and the use of this variant more likely to occur. Labov identified the same sort of phenomenon in response to his 'Danger of Death' question (1966). He found that by asking the informant to describe a situation in which they had just escaped death, most informants, once they had agreed that there had been such a time, became so taken up with convincing the interviewer of the seriousness of it that they used their less monitored style of speech and produced

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a number of non-standard forms.

3) Omission of auxiliary *be* in progressive verb phrases

On the basis of overseas research, it seemed likely that the omission of auxiliary *be* to convey progressive aspect would be an interesting variant to examine, as it occurs in both Black and White speech in the United States, and in British non-standard dialects (Williams and Wolfram 1976, Feagin 1979, Milroy and Milroy 1989). Omission of this auxiliary was identified by Benton (1966: no. 524), but did not show up in the McCallum study as a variant that distinguished Maori from Pakeha school-children. In the present study, however, the omission of progressive auxiliary *be* did emerge as a variant that distinguished Maori from Pakeha speakers.

Table 3
Omission of progressive auxiliary *be*
(excluding *be going to*)

Informants	Total	Omission	Dubious	Omission as %
Maori				
Hera	33	4	-	
Hiria	30	-	2	
Kata	22	-	-	
Rea	8	-	-	
Tia	23	3	1	
Total	116	7	3	6.0%
Pakeha				
Jo	28	-	-	
Kate	15	-	-	
Nan	5	-	-	
Sal	46	-	2	
Cher	36	-	-	
Total	130	-	2	0.0%

The total production of finite auxiliary *be* to express progressive aspect is given in Table 3 above. The first column sets out the total number of cases where progressive *be* standardly occurred. Column

2 represents the occasions identified in the data on which this auxiliary was omitted. The third column gives the number of dubious cases where it was impossible to identify an omission clearly. The frequency of occurrence of this type of auxiliary *be* omission is given as a percentage in the last column.

In spite of a number of instances where it was impossible confidently to classify a token as one involving *omission*, as opposed to *phonological simplification*, seven clear omissions were identified in the Maori corpus. By contrast, this auxiliary was categorically included in the Pakeha corpus. Again this seems to provide support for the view that there may be an identifiable Maori dialect of English characterised by a higher proportion of particular non-standard forms, but it would not appear to be a dialect used by all Maori people, at least within the age range under examination here.

Table 4
Omission of auxiliary *be*
with *be going to*

Informants	Total	Omission	Omission as %
Maori			
Hera	7	3	
Hiria	4	-	
Kata	2	-	
Rea	3	-	
Tia	2	1	
Total	18	4	22.2%
Pakeha			
Jo	6	-	
Kate	3	-	
Nan	3	-	
Sal	6	-	
Cher	3	-	
Total	21	-	0.0%

The Maori group also showed a tendency to omit auxiliary *be* in the quasi-modal construction ...*be going to*..., as the figures in Table 4 indicate. Although it was not a frequently occurring construction, and

just two informants were responsible for the group total of 22.2% for this variant, the fact that *be* was categorically included in the Pakeha corpus makes the four omissions identified in the Maori corpus worthy of some consideration. It is interesting, in spite of the small number involved, that the frequency with which *be* was omitted by the Maori group was almost four times higher in the production of this quasi-modal construction than in constructions involving proper progressive *be*.

4) Auxiliary *have* in perfective constructions

As in studies of varieties of American, British and Australian English (Labov 1966, Feagin 1979, Cheshire 1982, Trudgill 1974, Eisikovits 1989), the deletion of auxiliary *have* in perfective constructions emerged as a significant feature in this study.

Following Eisikovits' (1989) subclassification of the cases where *have* was suppressed in her recent study of inner-Sydney English, it was found that this feature showed a predisposition to occur in certain identifiable environments.

In her study a small amount of *have* suppression occurred with main verbs other than *see* and *be*. No such omissions were identified in my data. It was in conjunction with the verbs *see* and *be*, and auxiliary *be* that the first sign of *have* deletion was evidenced in this study. Examples from the corpus are given below for each of these cases respectively.

- (5) yeah well you * seen him dancing eh [Hera]
- (6) see I * been through all that me- rigmarole before [Kata]
- (7) no you're not driving you * been drinking [Hera]

Table 5 presents the figures that relate to the omission of *have* before these verbs.

Table 5
Omission of auxiliary *have*
before *be* and *see*

Infor- mants	Total main verbs exclud. <i>be</i> and <i>see</i> .	Total <i>see</i>	Omis- sion	Total main <i>be</i>	Omis- sion	Total aux. <i>be</i>	Omis- sion
Maori							
Hera	3	1	1	1	-	1	1
Hiria	19	-	-	-	-	-	-
Kata	21	-	-	2	1	4	1
Rea	4	-	-	-	-	1	-
Tia	6	2	1	2	-	3	2
Total	53	3	2	5	1	9	4
Pakeha							
Jo	14	3	-	-	-	5	-
Kate	6	-	-	1	-	-	-
Nan	5	-	-	4	-	2	-
Sal	3	1	-	-	-	3	-
Cher	5	-	-	-	-	2	-
Total	33	4	-	5	-	12	-

Column 1 gives the total number of tokens found in the data involving perfective *have* with main verbs other than *be* or *see*. The total retention of *have* with such verbs made it unnecessary to include a column representing omissions within this category. Columns two, four and six give the total number of instances where *have* could have been suppressed before main verb *see*, main verb *be*, and auxiliary *be* respectively. Columns three, five and seven give the number of tokens within each of these respective categories where *have* was suppressed.

In spite of the small number of tokens of each variable identified, it is clear that in each of these environments the Maori group manifest a certain amount of suppression of perfective *have*. In contrast, there is no evidence at all in the Pakeha corpus of such deletion.

It is worth noting that, unlike the deletion of progressive auxiliary *be*, which occurred in both present- and past-tense verb phrases, perfective auxiliary *have* was omitted only in present-tense constructions. That is to say, pluperfect auxiliary *had* was in every instance included.

5) Omission of auxiliary *have* in other environments

Omission of auxiliary *have* was most marked in three additional environments. Two of these were where the verb that followed was *got*.

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The first involved the construction *have + got* as an alternative to main verb *have*, for example:

(8) all the kids out there * got respect for him [Kata]

The second involved the quasi-modal construction *have gotta*, as the following example illustrates:

(9) what you * got to pay out for a uniform [Rea]

Tables 6 and 7 below provide the relevant figures for the omission of *have* in these two constructions.

Table 6
Omission of *have* with *have got*

Informants	Total	Std.	Omission	Omission as %
Maori				
Hera	5	2	3	
Hiria	16	12	4	
Kata	12	8	4	
Rea	1	-	1	
Tia	8	4	4	
Total	42	26	16	38.1%
Pakeha				
Jo	9	7	2	
Kate	7	7	-	
Nan	3	3	-	
Sal	7	5	2	
Cher	3	3	-	
Total	29	25	4	13.8%

Table 7
Omission of *have* with *have gotta*

Informants	Total	Std.	Omission	Omission as %
Maori				
Hera	-	-	-	
Hiria	-	-	-	
Kata	7	7	0	
Rea	8	2	6	
Tia	6	1	5	
Total	21	10	11	52.4%
Pakeha				
Jo	3	3	-	
Kate	-	-	-	
Nan	3	3	-	
Sal	1	1	-	
Cher	8	8	-	
Total	15	15	-	0.0%

Table 6 shows that *have* suppression before main verb *got* was present in the speech of both groups. However, the Maori informant omitted this auxiliary almost three times more frequently than the Pakeha group. Moreover, this type of suppression occurred in the speech of every Maori informant, but in the speech of just two Pakeha informants.

Even more interesting are the figures in Table 7, relating to the suppression of *have* in the quasi-modal construction *have gotta*. In this environment *have* was omitted 52.4% of the time by the Maori group, whereas in the Pakeha group it was consistently retained.

A fourth environment in which *have* suppression was evidenced was in the use of the quasi-modal *had better*, for example:

- (10) you * better put those arms down [Hera].
 (11) I thought oh well I * better give him a quick call [Kata]

Just four tokens of this construction were identified in the corpus, all produced by Maori informants, and in each of these instances *had* was omitted. In spite of the small number of tokens cited of this construction, this still amounts to a 100% deletion of *have* in this

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environment.

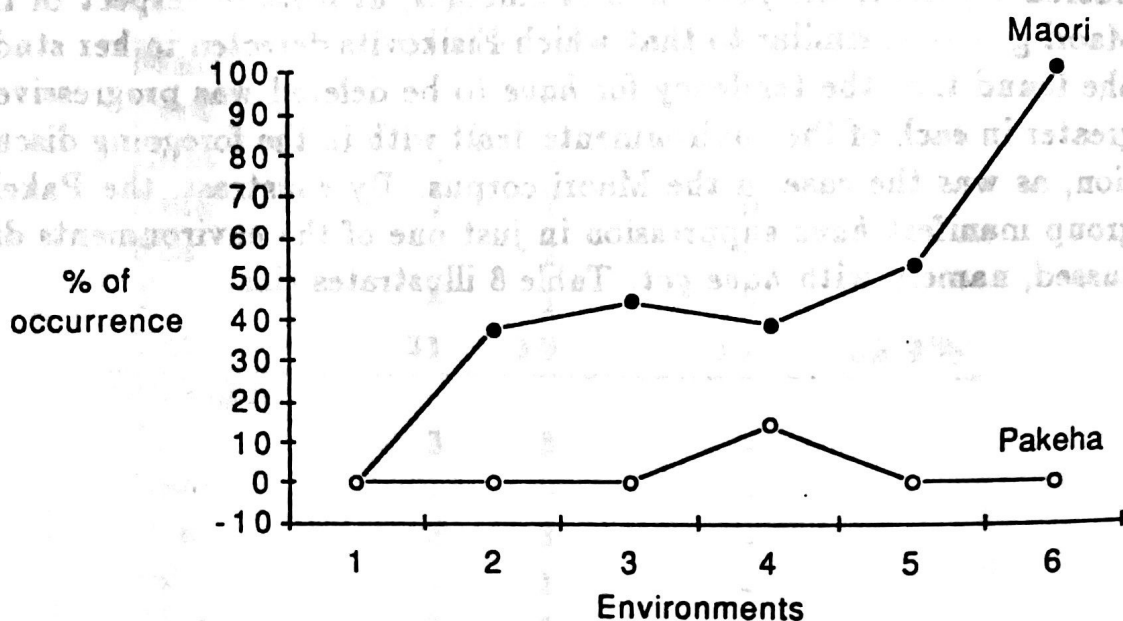
When the results for the different types of *have* suppression are considered together, the pattern that emerges, at least in respect of the Maori group, is similar to that which Eisikovits detected in her study. She found that the tendency for *have* to be deleted was progressively greater in each of the environments dealt with in the foregoing discussion, as was the case in the Maori corpus. By contrast, the Pakeha group manifest *have* suppression in just one of the environments discussed, namely with *have got*. Table 8 illustrates this.

Table 8
Comparison of *have* suppression in different environments

2pt 2pt Environment	Maori		Pakeha	
	<i>Have</i> omission	Omission as %	<i>Have</i> omission	Omission as %
1.2pt Before main verbs other than <i>be</i> or <i>see</i> .	0/53	0.0%	0/33	0.0%
2.2pt Before main verbs <i>be</i> and <i>see</i> .	3/8	37.5%	0/9	0.0%
3.2pt Before perfect progres- sive aux. <i>be</i> .	4/9	44.4%	0/12	0.0%
4.2pt In <i>have got</i> construc- tions.	16/42	38.1%	4/29	13.8%
5.2pt In <i>have gotta</i> construc- tions.	11/21	52.4%	0/15	0.0%
6.2pt In <i>had better</i> .	4/4	100.0%	-	-

The same information can be represented graphically in the following way:

Figure 1
Comparison of *have* suppression in different environments



Another issue that Eisikovits discussed relates to the status of auxiliary *have* omission as a non-mainstream variant. She pointed out that the frequency of occurrence and the salience of *have* deletion within a particular environment appeared to vary inversely. In other words with main verbs other than *see* and *be*, where *have* omission is most obvious, it occurs least frequently, and at the other end of the spectrum, with *had better*, it occurs most frequently.

6) Negative Concord

In this corpus all the cases identified of negative concord involved the use of two negatives in a clause and can thus be classified more specifically as 'double negatives'. Although negative concord has been shown to occur in a number of linguistic environments in studies of both Black and White American speech (Wolfram 1969, Feagin 1979), in this study it was confined to negative clauses involving a verb, and an indeterminate such as *any* or *ever*. The non-standard form in all cases involved attaching a negative to both the verb and the indeterminate. The following are examples of double negatives from the data:

(12) he doesn't look nothing like those plastic pictures you see in the

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books [Tia]

(13) you can't fucking do nothing to me [Hera]

(14) I'm not saying nothing [Hiria]

(15) you shouldn't never have attitudes like that [Hiria]

Table 9
Comparison of 'double negative' production

Informants	Std.	Non-std.	Non-std. as %
Maori			
Hera	0	2	-
Hiria	3	2	-
Kata	3	1	-
Rea	3	0	-
Tia	1	3	-
Total	10	8	44.4%
Pakeha			
Jo	2	0	-
Kate	2	0	-
Nan	8	0	-
Sal	5	0*	-
Cher	1	0	-
Total	18	0	0.0%

Table 9 compares the frequency of occurrence of double negatives in the speech of the two groups. The first column for each group represents the total number of standard negatives of this type identified in the data. The second column gives the number of non-standard double negatives identified in the corpus. Unlike past- or present-tense verb forms, the variable in question here does not have a naturally high frequency. This is reflected in the relatively small number of tokens of the variable identified in the data.

It can be seen that the Maori group produced 18 tokens of this variable, eight of which took the non-standard double negative form. It is of note also that all but one informant contributed to this total. Although the small incidence of this variable must be kept in mind, the non-standard double negative occurred a substantial 44.4% of the

time in the Maori corpus.

By contrast no double negatives of this type were identified in the Pakeha corpus. The asterisk next to Sal's name in Table 9 refers to two tokens of non-standard negative constructions that she produced that stand apart from the others:

(16) and he said + lady there ain't no other way to park is there [Sal]

(17) there ain't nothing to see inland [Sal]

The first is a quotation and was excluded on that basis alone. Although the second is not a direct quotation, Sal noticeably changed her voice to produce it, as if to mark it as 'different' from her ordinary speech style. Moreover, it is clear from other parts of the interview that she enjoys mimicking different speech styles. For these reasons these two cases were not included in the analysis of double negatives. The frequency of occurrence for this variable in the Pakeha corpus is thus 100% standard. It seems fair to conclude that negative concord, in the form of the double negative, might well be a distinctive feature of Maori English.

Conclusion

It is clear from the data that there are a number of significant grammatical differences in the casual speech of the Maori and Pakeha women who formed the basis of this survey. Some qualify as such on the basis of their significantly higher frequency of occurrence in the Maori corpus. The use of the past participle for past tense, the overextension of the *-s* present-tense ending, and the suppression of auxiliary *have* with *have got*, can be classified as significant features of this type. Other features occurred exclusively in the Maori corpus. The suppression of auxiliary *have* in all other relevant environments, the omission of *be* with *be going to*, and the use of double negatives, were of this nature. Moreover, the consistently higher frequency of occurrence in the Maori corpus of the features in question provides a cumulative indication that the speech of the Maori and Pakeha groups is different. In terms of reliability, it is notable that in respect of five of the eight variables described in this paper the number of tokens is greater than 30. This is considered, by Leslie Milroy (1987) at least, to

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be a reliable number of tokens for most grammatical variables. With the knowledge that all social variables except ethnicity were strictly controlled, it follows that the differences identified are likely to be a result of the different ethnic backgrounds of the two groups. However, the fact that the Maori group was still producing a greater percentage of standard variants of most of the variables analysed, and that not all individuals within the group produced tokens of every significant feature identified, makes it necessary to qualify any such claims. A more appropriate conclusion might be that there are indications in the data of a distinctive variety of Maori English, but that its users might be distinguished not only by their ethnicity, but by one or more accompanying factors that have not yet been identified.

One conclusion that can be confidently drawn from all this is that it is an area of social dialect research in New Zealand that requires further investigation before more definitive remarks can be made on the possible existence of a distinct dialect of Maori English. In the meantime, however, the grammatical evidence from this study suggests that the possibility of a variety of Maori English certainly cannot be dismissed.

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