

Government Services and the Revitalisation of the Māori Language: Policies and Practices

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Introduction

In this paper, it is my intention to discuss the current use of the Māori language within the New Zealand public sector as a medium of public (i.e. client) service, and to relate this to both the Māori Language Act 1987 and to the overall revitalisation of the Māori language as an ordinary means of communication. This discussion will be based primarily on the results of a survey of current Māori language policies and practices within government agencies undertaken by the Language Policy 2000 group and Victoria University in 1997, and related papers obtained from Te Puni Kōkiri under the Official Information Act. I will also make use of the results of a similar survey undertaken by the Māori Language Commission in 1994-5 on behalf of the Māori Affairs Select Committee of Parliament, and the preliminary results of the Māori language survey undertaken by the Māori Language Commission in 1995. It should be noted that I am not concerned with the language of internal administration within government agencies, or between agencies and politicians; my focus is on the Māori language policies and practices regarding language use at points of client interface with the New Zealand public.

Why focus on the public sector?

A cynic might ask — 'why focus on the public sector when the real action is somewhere else?'. In *Aotearoa*, Waite identified six core domains for the revitalisation of the Māori language: Māori homes, communities (including community meeting places), religious activities, primary schooling, workplace and the marae (Waite 1992:33). These domains are, undoubtedly, where the 'real action' is. The Māori language will live or die depending on the extent of its use in these domains. Given this situation and the need to establish clear priorities — 'judicious decisions as to what to do and when are at the heart of successful RLS efforts' (Fishman 1991:67) — discussing policies and practices for the use of the Māori language in a non-core domain such as the public sector may seem irrelevant and misguided. (RLS is Fishman's abbreviation for reversing language shift).

The importance of Māori language use in the public sector lies, I believe, in the status of the language. In order for a language to be revitalised, for people to choose to speak the language in the key domains, those people must be thoroughly convinced that the chosen language is valuable and statusful. And the presence of a minority language in a high

status environment, such as the public sector, being used in significant, meaningful ways is an important part of the language status equation. It is important to remember that, even in these days of state rollback, every New Zealander interacts regularly with government agencies in a myriad of ways. At birth, we receive birth certificates. It is compulsory for us to attend primary and secondary school, and most of us acquire driver's licenses during our late teens. Many of us also acquire passports around this time. When we start to earn, we are required to pay tax and to complete tax returns. We have to pay other fees to government agencies including New Zealand On Air (broadcasting fees) and the Department for Courts (fines etc). We are all required to complete census forms every five years. If we marry, we are required to obtain a marriage license. And so the list goes on. At present, only one of the forms related to these activities is available in Māori (the census questionnaire), and even this is a very recent innovation. It is useful to reflect, however, that at one time or another in the 20th century, all government services have been available in the Māori language.

It is often implied that the promotion of the Māori language within the public sector shifts attention away from the core domains. It is true that this can happen, and indeed, may have actually happened in other RLS movements (Bentahila and Davies 1993). However, this is not an intrinsic feature of language promotion in the public sector. We are often encouraged to see such activities as 'either/or' situations, that is Māori language promotion in the public sector is played off against Māori language promotion elsewhere (see, for example, Robertson 1997). Such activities can, in fact, be seen as 'both/and' situations, where the promotion of the Māori language in the public sector can complement and support the promotion of the language in the core domains, without distracting the key players in those domains.

Māori attitudes towards the Māori language

A question arises at this point: are Māori people (in general, the target population of activities to promote the Māori language) thoroughly convinced of the status and utility of the Māori language? The answer to this question has two parts. At the surface level, the answer is overwhelmingly 'yes'. In an attitudinal survey undertaken by McNair during 1995, 82% of Māori people surveyed agreed with the statement that

It is important for Māori people that the Māori language is supported and used more widely (AGB McNair 1995:11).

However, in a recent conference paper Ray Harlow has suggested that

Many Māori, themselves bilingual and overtly asserting positive attitudes to the language and its maintenance, in fact hold other attitudes quite strongly, but only covertly. I designate "covert" any attitudes which a person may hold, which they are not themselves aware of holding and would not assent to, I believe that the covert attitudes I want to talk about are at best

tangential to the overtly expressed attitudes and at worst contradictory (Harlow 1997:1-2).

An examination of some additional statistics tends to confirm this suggestion. There are large numbers of people studying the Māori language in immersion settings and as a subject, in a variety of institutions and at a range of levels. Furthermore, both actual numbers and pro rata figures appear to be growing annually (see, for example, Ministry of Education 1997:42-5). There is obviously massive investment in all this learning: investment in financial terms, time and human effort being devoted to the study of the Māori language. This would all seem to bode well for the future of the language. However, an examination of the actual use of the Māori language by these same people in the six core domains reveals a different picture. In the summary of the provisional results of the 1995 Māori language survey (of Māori adults aged 16 years and over) undertaken by the Māori Language Commission, it is stated that

Educational institutions such as Kōhanga Reo and Kura Kaupapa Māori have become very strong Māori language zones [i.e. domains]. However, for many children at kōhanga and kura these are the only places they ever hear or speak Māori.

The study examined the amount of Māori language that is commonly heard or spoken in a range of situations. The situations where Māori is most used are:

- the marae (36.5% of Māori speakers speak Māori most of the time in this setting),
- school (33.7%),
- church (27.0%).

The settings in which the language is rarely used are:

- shopping (63.5% of Māori never speak Māori when they go shopping),
- sport/play (49.8%),
- club/pub (40.4%),
- work (33.1%)

(Māori Language Commission 1995b).

The recent history of the Māori language in the public sector
It has been recognised for some time that the use of the Māori language in the high status setting of the public sector would have an important influence on the prestige of the Māori language in the community. In 1986, in the findings of the Te Reo Māori Claim, the Waitangi Tribunal recommended

That legislation be introduced enabling any person who wishes to do so to use the Māori language in all Courts of law and in any dealings with

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Government departments, local authorities and other public bodies (Waitangi Tribunal 1986:61-2).

Shortly after the release of the Tribunal's recommendations, the Government enacted the Māori Language Act 1987 that declared Māori to be an official language of New Zealand, established the right to speak Māori in Courts of law, and created the Māori Language Commission. Waite has noted that

[In most countries,] *languages can be "official" primarily in the following domains: (i) provision of State Sector services to the public (including communications with the public); (ii) State Sector workplace; (iii) proceedings of Parliament; (iv) legislation; (v) administration of justice* (Waite 1992:48).

The Māori Language Act 1987, however, does not define the meaning of the expression 'official language' in any way, and there have been no official regulations issued on this matter since then. As a result, the declaration of Māori as an 'official language' is more or less meaningless. There is some evidence that the Labour Government of the day did intend for official language status to be meaningful. In introducing the legislation, the Hon. Koro Wētere (then Minister for Māori Affairs), stated that

The Māori Language Commission is to be established with the specific function of advising on the implementation, policies, procedures, measures and practices, and the way in which to put into action the declaration that the Māori language is an official language (Wētere 1986:1012).

Towards this end, the Māori Language Commission published a document in 1989 entitled *[A] Blueprint for a Language Policy for Government*. This document contains many specific recommendations for activities and suggested policy options that could be actioned at a number of levels. This document has been consistently promoted to all government agencies by the Māori Language Commission. The Commission, together with the Ministry of Māori Development, also undertook developmental work on proposed amendments to the Māori Language Act 1987, drawing inspiration and direction from the Welsh Language Act 1993 and its subsequent application to the public sector in Wales. In particular, it seems that government agencies were to be encouraged to develop 'Māori language scheme[s] in order to provide a Māori language service for clients' (Fraser 1996:4-6, Anon 1996:8). However, by 1998, nothing had come of this work and 'no related briefing papers have been prepared on amendments to the Māori Language Act' (Love 1998).

Success?

How successful has the Māori Language Commission been in promoting the increased use of the Māori language in the public sector? By its own admission, by 1995 it had achieved very few meaningful results. In

reporting to the Māori Affairs Select Committee on the results of the survey that it had undertaken that year, the Commission commented on 'the very lacklustre attitude to the recognition of the Māori language as an official language of New Zealand' among government agencies (Māori Language Commission 1995a:5). The results of this survey show that, of the 87 agencies that responded, eight had substantial Māori language policies in place whereby all or part of their client interface activities could be undertaken in the Māori language. Even among these eight, services were often partial. Statistics New Zealand, for example, had developed a bilingual (Māori-English) questionnaire for the 1996 census, and had also undertaken to print the results in Māori (which it has subsequently done). The census is, admittedly, the principal business of Statistics New Zealand. Other survey work and client interface is, however, undertaken in English for the most part. Among the other agencies surveyed by the Māori Language Commission in 1994-5, 38 agencies had no policies at all or did not respond, and 39 agencies had very minimal policies that had no real impact on the delivery of core services at the points of client interface.

In response to these results, the Commission stated: 'It is unacceptable that an official language is treated in such an off-handed manner by agencies of state' (Māori Language Commission 1995a:5). The Māori Affairs Select Committee felt that 'the lack of recognition of Māori as an official language is of concern' (Māori Affairs Select Committee 1996:4). In reply to the Select Committee's recommendations, the Government stated that

Te Puni Kōkiri is working with several other ministries ... to develop a long term Māori language strategic plan. Such a plan would specify and coordinate present and future Government assistance to Māori in the revitalisation of the Māori language (Anon. nd. 2).

Language Policy 2000/Victoria University Survey 1997

By 1997, however, nothing had changed in practical terms. Some work at the theoretical level, on the strategic plan papers, had been undertaken (see below). However, the findings of the Language Policy 2000/Victoria University 1997 survey of Māori language policies among government agencies showed that there were still only eight agencies with substantial Māori language policies in place, although there was a larger number of respondents (n=100). It is interesting to note that only four of the 1995 agencies were still on the 'substantial' list in 1997. It is not clear whether this represents changes in actual policies and practices, or a different civil servant filling in the questionnaire. Further, in 1997, two agencies reported statutory obligations to provide Māori language services: the Department for Courts and the House of Representatives. The 1997 survey did not investigate what these things meant in practice, although intensive follow-up work is currently being undertaken by Te Puni Kōkiri with selected agencies. Among other agencies, 67 had minimal Māori language policies

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whereby the policies had no material impact on the availability of Māori language services at the point of client interface, and 24 had no (or no apparent) policies.

At this point, it is useful to briefly consider the survey's key questions, and to examine individual results.

1. *Is there any legislation or any regulations that affect Māori language use and policy in your organisation?*

Yes 24	No 76	n=100
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This relatively high response rate reflects an awareness of the Māori Language Act 1987, but little more in most cases, i.e. agencies indicated that the Māori Language Act affected Māori language use and policy in their organisation, but in most cases they did not show how. A number of agencies also pointed to the Treaty of Waitangi Act 1975, but again did not say how this affected their delivery of services in Māori.

2. *Does your organisation have an overall language policy?*

Yes 23	No 77	n=100
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A language policy need not be a written one. It can also be a matter of custom or preferred practice. In fact most of the language policies alluded to here were unwritten. They were also, for the most part, insubstantial in effect. They included token gestures such as offering Māori language lessons in work time, and ensuring that Māori words were used correctly in English texts. However there are also responses from a small number of agencies who appear to be genuinely grappling with bilingualism. Bilingual signage throughout buildings, the signalled availability of bilingual staff members, and additional payment for bilingual language skills were examples of their efforts (and illustrations of what can be achieved relatively easily).

3. *Does your organisation have any specific policies with regard to the provision of the following services in Māori?*

A *Across the counter services*

Yes 18	No or N/A 82	n=100
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B *Written services*

Yes 35	No or N/A 65	n=100
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C *Telephone services*

Yes 20	No or N/A 80	n=100
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Responses to (A) and (C) were largely to the effect that there was a staff member who could be called upon if a person came to the counter and was

unable to speak English sufficiently well to be understood. Such informal arrangements were typical of the provision of all forms of language services, and there was usually no indication as to whether people called on in this manner were remunerated for their services. With regard to (B), the most frequent response was that it would be possible and feasible to have a letter or fax translated by an outside agency or by a competent staff member if an official felt it was necessary. The reason for the high response rate is that many responses by agencies also referred to published documentation being provided in languages other than English (this was often a repetition of the response to the final question, asking specifically about published materials).

4. *Does your organisation provide any services/products in Māori?*

Yes 56

No or N/A 44

n=100

The high percentage of positive responses to this question reflects the fact that it is relatively common for many government agencies to publish at least some client-focused pamphlets in languages other than English. This is presumably because it is a relatively simple matter to put out a leaflet in several languages compared with actively offering bilingual or multilingual services in the form of a person to talk to.

The impact of the Māori language strategic plan?

In December 1997, the Government agreed to five Māori language objectives as part of an overall strategic plan to revitalise the language, and asked various agencies to prepare individual strategies to give practical effect to these objectives (Love 1998:1-2). One strategy will focus on the Māori language in the public sector, and some policy work has been done in this area by Te Puni Kōkiri. They have prepared a paper entitled *Māori language policy: public and private sector activities and options*. In this paper, it is recommended that officials

- a. *seek more details on good practice models identified in Te Reo Māori: Policies and Practices in Government Agencies and disseminate this report;*
- b. *prepare for Ministers' consideration, guidelines to assist Government departments (those listed in Schedule 2 of the State Sector Act) in preparing and implementing their own Māori language policies and plans;*
- c. *prepare guidelines so that they are also of assistance to Crown agencies, SOEs, local government and private companies, should they wish to become more active in promoting the use of the Māori language;*
- d. *prepare options for monitoring progress with the provision of Government services in the Māori language, and promotion of the use of the Māori language in the public sector, possibly as part of the Māori Language Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (MLMEF);*

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- e. continue to investigate the feasibility of bilingual traffic signs and road markings, and monitor progress, possibly as part of the MLMEF;*
- f. continue to liaise with private companies and SOEs which are promoting the use of the Māori language and record progress, possibly as part of the MLMEF (Love 1998:6).*

At first glance, these proposals appear encouraging. I have two principal criticisms, however. First, much of this work has already been undertaken, often by Te Puni Kōkiri itself, over the last 12 years since the Te Reo Māori claim. Will officials make use of the work that has already been done? Why has it taken so long to reach this point? My second criticism centres on the 'soft' nature of the proposals. In every case, officials will be asked to 'seek information', 'provide guidelines or options', 'investigate feasibility' or to 'liaise'. This will require officials to undertake research and shuffle papers, thereby creating the facade of action. However, none of these activities require any kind of on-the-ground action. They will not make any immediate or mid-term difference to the provision of state sector services to Māori-speaking clients. Crown agencies, State-Owned Enterprises and local government authorities will be provided with guidelines '*should they wish to become more active in promoting the Māori language*' (emphasis added). Organisations owned by the Government and in receipt of tax-payer monies and rate-payer monies have an obligation to provide Māori language services. It should not be considered as merely an option.

The next steps?

The results of the 1994-5 survey undertaken by the Māori Language Commission and the 1997 survey undertaken by the Language Policy 2000 group and Victoria University provide clear and consistent evidence that the use of the Māori language within the public sector is minimal, despite the passage of the Māori Language Act in 1987 and subsequent activities. There has been an attempt to strengthen the legislation, along the lines of the Welsh Language Act 1993, that seems to have disappeared. Proposals for further work on providing Māori language services have recently been prepared by Te Puni Kōkiri. These appear to call for the repetition of earlier work with no firm outcomes identified

All of this, I believe, sends a loud and clear message to Māori, every time that they interact with government agencies in any way: 'your language has no status here. We do not value it, and we do not invite you to use it'. This must detrimentally affect the status of the language in the minds of these people, and ultimately the actual use of the language. Despite massive investments in Māori language education by Māori and the Government, and despite overtly stated positive attitudes towards the language, Māori people are not using the language widely in the core domains identified by Waite. Part of the reason for this may be that Māori lacks status, that Māori people do not really perceive it as a viable mechanism for communicating

in modern New Zealand. This impression is surely reinforced by the almost complete absence of the language from the high status domain of the public sector. It is useful to remember also that the issue is not that these services cannot be delivered in Māori. Throughout the early years of this century, all government services of the day were available to Māori in Māori. The issue is that government agencies — despite the official status of the Māori language — choose to do nothing.

It would in fact take relatively little effort or spending to increase the capacity of the typical government agency to provide Māori language services to clients. Furthermore, with planning, any costs could be spread across a number of financial years. There would be one-off establishment costs for capital items such as signs, badges advertising the services, stationery templates and so on. Thereafter, all costs would be for maintenance or restocking. There would be some staff costs, but Māori speaking staff would be doing agency work that had to be done anyway. And as Waite pointed out:

Nor does institutional Māori-English bilingualism imply universal bilingualism within the public service. A bilingual institution is one which has the capacity to offer its full range of services in English and Māori, not necessarily one in which all employees are required individually to operate in two languages. What is required is a core of Māori-English bilinguals (Waite 1992:44).

This information is not new. As I noted earlier, the Māori Language Commission *Blueprint* was published in 1989, and has since been widely promoted. There is a discussion of the Māori language in the public sector in *Aotearoa*, published in 1992. There is research into successful overseas models (Fraser 1996). So government agencies cannot argue that a lack of information or advice has hindered their efforts so far. What is required is the will to act, and willingness to plan for the provision of these services. And this, for the most part, is what is lacking from the New Zealand public sector.

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