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## REVIEW

Gordon, Elizabeth. 2008. *Finding our own Voice: New Zealand English in the Making*. Christchurch: Canterbury University Press

Cherie Connor: School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies,  
Victoria University of Wellington, PO Box 600, Wellington 6140  
<cherie.connor@vuw.ac.nz>

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*Finding our own Voice: New Zealand English in the Making* has been adapted from lectures given by Elizabeth Gordon for the Macmillan Brown Lecture series, a series which has been delivered by a number of notable speakers from Ngaio Marsh to Sir Tipene O'Regan in areas of literature and language. The resulting book, which explores the development of a unique variety of English in New Zealand, is therefore intended for an interested, general audience. While the student of linguistics is unlikely to encounter anything too surprising within its pages, it is nevertheless a thoroughly entertaining and well informed introduction to both the study and nature of New Zealand English.

The format follows the three lectures as they were given in the series, and effectively divides the book into three chapters. The first focuses on how the existence of the Mobile Unit archive, which (incidentally to its original purpose) has recordings of the first New Zealand-born speakers, contributes to our understanding of the evolution of New Zealand English. Early written accounts from various commentators noting, generally with disdain, the particular vowel sounds of New Zealanders are presented and the inadequacy of relying on these written sources alone to determine how a unique accent develops is discussed. This is all done in an informative and accessible manner, with Gordon drawing on a wide range of research and providing a wealth of interesting examples. The remarks of early commentators abound, including the man who in 1912 took the opportunity of various cultural competitions

to judge his fellow adjudicators, of whom one is accused of possessing “an inability or lack of desire to pronounce many words correctly...a poverty of vocabulary and...the most shocking nasal intonation” (p14). The inclusion of such examples serves to breathe life into the historical study.

There is a lot of material contained in this lecture and occasionally, the brevity of the explanations make connections difficult to make. For example, Gordon states that the information gathered by ONZE (the Origins of New Zealand English Project- research based on the recordings of the Mobile Unit) leads her to conclude that New Zealand English was more likely to be influenced by the variety spoken in Australia rather than beginning as a transplanted version of it. However, the evidence given for this conclusion is minimal. We are told that: in early days commentators noted the similarities in the two varieties, the Australian accent was established first, there was a frequent movement of people between the two countries, and many of the early settlers and their children arrived after having spent time in Australia. The only evidence given against the transport theory is that not many New Zealanders were Australian-born in the nineteenth century. Perhaps a little more direct explanation would benefit the reader here. In contrast, while Trudgill’s dialect development hypothesis is succinctly presented, there is a thorough treatment and application of it to the New Zealand data. It is explained in clear stages so that the newcomer is able to follow the logic comfortably. Gordon is also at pains to point out that the evolution of a unique New Zealand way of speaking English is not as neat and simple as the initial examples may suggest. In this way, she not only conveys information about New Zealand English but introduces the reader to principles of dialect studies and the pitfalls and methods of linguistic research.

In the foreword to this volume, Elizabeth Gordon mentions the difficulty of converting a script intended to be read aloud into one for written publication; and indeed, there are disadvantages. It is in this first chapter that the limitations of the written word are most notable. The contrasting accents of Hannah Cross and Mary Anne Turnbull, who are chosen to illustrate an emerging New Zealand accent, are completely lost in the written transcripts. While a more specialised linguistic publication would allow for the use of phonetic transcription, it would be inappropriate in this volume. Still, those who are interested enough can gain access through the Canterbury University Press website to the vowels of these women and many others, as the introduction mentions.

The second lecture addresses various issues in vocabulary, including

why and how innovation occurs and methods employed by the regional lexicographer. Four items have been chosen to exemplify how words are coined, whether by borrowing, semantic shift or word creation. This proves an effective means of revealing the features of distinctive New Zealand lexis as well as the nature of lexical innovation. I would have liked a little more information on one of the items, *bro'rocracy*, including the citation in which Winston Peters first used it. I was interested enough to google this neologism, and found it used in rather humourless attacks on Treaty of Waitangi claims and it would be interesting to compare this with what I imagine was a more witty and affectionate introduction. As is the case throughout the book, this chapter contains a useful mix of old and new examples, so that *hui-hopping* and *Rotovegas* get a mention alongside *coo-ee* and *bowser*. This helps to illustrate the continuity and dynamic nature of our variety of English.

Sociolinguistic issues are very much a part of this volume of lectures and in this chapter the influence of American English on New Zealand vocabulary is discussed, as well as the issue of pronouncing Māori words which appear in NZE. These are areas where Gordon poses questions for the reader. Should we aim to preserve New Zealandisms in the face of growing American influence? Is the anglicisation of borrowed words an inevitable linguistic process or is it a cultural slight to mispronounce Māori words? Gordon refers to research in the consideration of these issues, but ultimately leaves the reader to draw conclusions. As anyone who regularly reads the 'Letters to the Editor' pages in various New Zealand publications will be aware, these are areas in which the public is divided and the information provided in this volume may inform lively debates on the topic.

The final lecture rounds off the volume by looking at attitudes to NZE. Here, we are introduced to the strong ideas that people have, and the judgments made about people based on the way we speak. Again there is a wealth of examples. I particularly liked the quotations from Mr Andrews of Napier Boys' High School in 1910 who claimed that the emerging New Zealand accent had "uglified the young colonial's voice" and even precipitates "minor throat and chest disorders" (p80). As McArthur comments (2002: 47), "views on language are not always amenable to logic and reality". There is an interesting placement here of old and new comments. At the beginning of the twentieth century a commentator attributes the "objectionable colonial dialect" (p78) to "laziness, slovenliness and parental carelessness", and at the end of the century we have Max Cryer suggesting that many speakers, incredibly "opt for the easier way" and "abide by the principle 'it doesn't

matter how I sound, they know what I mean” (pp91-92). The similarity of sentiment displayed by these two commentators serves to remind us that while we may have come a long way in accepting our unique way of speaking, we are certainly not free of the cringe factor.

This chapter also addresses the issue of standard English, and in contrast to her open ended conclusions on vocabulary, on this point Gordon is very clear. She takes the position that while standard English, as it is written, was arrived at by accident, and though it is not intrinsically superior, it is the one that should be taught at school. People who are not exposed to standard English may be disadvantaged socially and economically. To take this position is to acknowledge that while linguists view linguistic diversity with interest, we live in a society where variation is viewed with skepticism and is a basis for discrimination. Nevertheless some readers (though not the reviewer) may want to argue that it is discrimination rather than diversity which ought to be eliminated or to reflect on what the notion of one ‘standard English’ means with the increase in people using English throughout the world. This is one of many areas which could generate interesting discussion in a language class.

That Elizabeth Gordon is an expert in her topic is obvious, yet she wears her knowledge lightly and the entire volume is written in an engaging, entertaining style. The tone has translated well from the spoken to the written form. Rather than following a traditional academic format, the arguments emerge via the introduction of examples which serve to draw in the reader. Another way that Gordon manages to be so accessible is by providing examples that readers are likely to relate to experiences in their everyday lives. Despite the readability, when I arrived at the end of this book, I realized there is a large amount of information imparted. In the first lecture alone we are exposed to the background of the Mobile recording unit, prevalent theories about the origins of NZE, the main tenets of Trudgill’s hypothesis of new dialect formation and its application to New Zealand data, and the importance of considering the influence of social factors when studying language change. Also touched on are the role of women in effecting language change and the possible role of the ‘innate language filter’ as proposed by Chambers (2002), as a facilitator of language change generated by children. The ability to convey an array of complex ideas in a comprehensible and engaging manner is a talent not to be underestimated.

Here, the telling of the story of the development of New Zealand English is an effective means not only of conveying important features of the language but also of introducing linguistic principles relating to the study of dialect

development. Of course this is not intended as a text book and doesn't include an index to aid the reader, although it does have useful reference lists. However, it discusses a wide range of research, poses interesting and relevant questions, and covers a broad range of topics. This in addition to its engaging style would make *Finding our New Zealand Voice* a great introduction to the study of New Zealand English.

## References

- Chambers, J. 2002. 'The Ethan Experience: Native phonology in immigrant offspring', in Milroy, L. (ed.) *Investigating Change and Variation through Dialect Contact*, special issue of *Sociolinguistics* 6, pp 117–30.
- McArthur, T. 2002. *The Oxford Guide to World English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.