

The Influence and Effects of Discriminatory Language in New Zealand

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A major area where discriminatory language occurs is where a majority and minority group or groups co-exist within a society. Such conditions exist within many countries today. In New Zealand, the native Maori people make up a little over 10 percent of the population, so are classed as a minority group. Although, a long period of war and dispute occurred during primary European contact and continued right through the colonization period, a general harmony now exists in New Zealand. However, discriminatory language is still abundant and has found its way into the common language that is used every day. Usually going unchecked, it tends to be socially accepted, even sometimes by those who may have Maori heritage themselves. It is this discriminatory language used in New Zealand, which influences thought by constructing a negative stereotype of Maori people. Within this stereotype, Maori are portrayed as primitive, dirty, lazy, intellectually challenged, having low moral values, and generally culturally inferior when compared to the dominant Pakeha (a Maori word used in New Zealand to define 'non-Maori') based New Zealand culture. Colloquial examples of discriminatory language used in New Zealand will be presented showing their effect on creating this negative stereotype of Maori people. Also, the way in which this stereotype has influenced thought in both Maori and Pakeha respectively will be discussed. It is in turn these thoughts that have subsequent effects on Maori and Pakeha relations, status and power within New Zealand society.

Ever since European contact, Maori have been regarded and referred to as 'primitive'. Scientific anthropologists such as Eldson Best (1992) have commented widely on the 'primitive' Maori culture and language. However, being a mentally and physically strong race of people, and also having an immense amount of pride in their culture, language and spiritual values, Maori have not faced some of the atrocities, which have befallen other minority groups around the world. Maori were the only indigenous people who the British could never fully conquer through warfare and were therefore resigned to making a peace treaty signed by both the crown and Maori chieftains. Maori have been able to maintain their culture and beliefs and also the Maori language, which still being used today and became an official national language of New Zealand in 1987 (New Zealand History Online, 2006). Never the less, initial literature and documentation by early colonialists described the native Maori as barbaric, uncivilized and uncultured. It is mainly from these early discriminatory assumptions, where the source of discriminatory language of Maori has come and though maybe used metaphorically today, their metaphorical meanings still remain.

Firstly, the Maori language itself was and still is to some extent under attack. Early anthropologists regarded the Maori language as 'a stone-age tongue' (Eldson Best, 1992). Even today, a common view of the language is that it has only survived to the present day, due to the increased amount of borrowing of English words or transliterations, used to bolster the Maori vocabulary. To some extent this is true. Many words that were not needed in New Zealand before Pakeha contact have been borrowed from the only other main language spoken in New Zealand and available to the Maori, that of English. However, one could argue that this is a natural process. With the non-existence of an object such as the car in New Zealand prior to European contact, a reasonable solution would be for the Maori to listen to the English word for the object and copy it using Maori phonetics, therefore producing the word 'motoka' from its English original, 'motorcar'. If this borrowing of vocabulary is what classes a language as primitive, is the English language not primitive? After all, English has borrowed extensively from such languages as French, Latin and Greek for centuries!

With the Maori Language Commission set up in 1987 the use for these transliterations have decreased due to the commission endeavouring to produce new Maori words as they may come needed based on old Maori words already in use (Maori Language Commission, 2006). An example for this is the Maori word 'araihapu' meaning 'contraception.' 'Arai' means to 'stop' and 'hapu' means 'pregnant.'

Until recently discriminatory language attacking the Maori language in New Zealand has seen such names for the Maori language such as 'Bro Lingo'. When talking in Maori it is usual to refer to the listener as your 'friend' or 'brother.' As a consequence, when speaking in English, some Maori speakers would use the equivalent 'Bro' ('brother' shortened to 'bro'). Much like in Australia one would often hear the term 'mate' used to refer to the listener or similarly 'dude' or 'man' in America. Therefore, instead of calling the language Maori, or even its' proper Maori name 'Te Reo' it is sometimes referred to in a derogatory way as 'Bro Lingo'!

Also under attack is the Maori culture. Historically labeled as a 'primitive' culture, Maori are often portrayed throughout New Zealand language as 'dirty' or 'unhealthy'. It is not uncommon for someone to race home from rugby training in a hurry to get ready for a night out on the town to 'have a Maori shower'. This entails applying aftershave, cologne or deodorant to oneself without actually taking a shower, hence masking any unwanted or unpleasant odours. Another example lies in jokes such as; "What do you call a couple of Maoris going down a hydro slide?" "A sewer!" These sorts of racist remarks help form a negative stereotype of Maori within the minds of those that hear them.

If the shared practices, beliefs and ethos of a culture are predominantly acquired through language; then the language has the ability to influence thought and therefore behaviour. Thus the assumption can be made that discriminatory language like those mentioned above can also influence thought. Language within New Zealand, which can be deemed discriminatory or containing racist undertones, can be found in many arenas-media, politics, education, literature and also at more local levels such as colloquial speech within the community. It is therefore through these arenas that this negative Maori stereotype is portrayed and enforced, therefore having an effect on the social interactions between cultures in New Zealand. Within common everyday conversations between New Zealand people many examples of this discriminatory language against Maori people exist.

Laziness is not a common trait among Maori. Conversely those who work with Maori people find them on the whole very hard working and willing to get stuck in to get the job done. Partly due to a high unemployment rate for Maori, Maori people are often seen to have nothing to do, or too much free time. Throughout New Zealand discourse we can hear phrases such as "Are you running on Maori time?" 'Maori time' refers to a lack of punctuality. For example, when told to turn up for work at 8am, one running on Maori time may arrive at work at 9am or 10am! This infers that Maori are on the whole loose with punctuality or maybe do not place such an importance on punctuality as their Pakeha counterparts. This obviously would have a serious impact on the attitudes of employers when hiring Maori employees, thus not helping the Maori unemployment situation!

Since European contact, there has been a tremendous amount of theory concerning the intellectual capabilities of Maori people. Best (1992) yet again describes the native mind as 'primitive' and 'inferior'. "You dumb Maori," is an example of racist language supporting the idea that Maori on the whole are intellectually challenged. In education and media circles Maori have been historically connected with a high drop out rate and low achievement in New Zealand schools. Often the Maori race itself is blamed for this – it is easier to denounce Maori as intellectually challenged as a race, than question the fundamental teaching processes and pedagogies within New Zealand's mainstream education. Taking education into their own hands, Maori have proved mainstream education wrong, by breaking away and forming total immersion schools. Although still adhering to the New Zealand national school curriculum, Te Kohanga Reo (kindergarten), Te Kura Kauapapa (elementary school), Te Kura Tua-rua (secondary school) and Te Whare Wananga (universities) teach children solely in the Maori language and also use pedagogies tapered to how Maori children learn best. This has resulted in great success producing many Maori doctors, lawyers, teachers and high socio economic status based vocations, which were traditionally occupied by Pakeha. Therefore the metaphor 'dumb Maori' is one that maybe losing its truthfulness, but if still widely used could be accepted in general as being truthful (Lycan, 2006).

The conception of Maori having low moral values is not surprising considering the amount of racism contained in such New Zealand jokes like "What do you call a Maori driving a limousine?" "A thief!" This joke insinuates that all Maori are of low Socio-economic status and thus their incomes would not sufficient enough to justify buying a limousine, hence they would have to steal it! Congruent with this, the saying, "If you lend something to a Maori, you'll never see it again!" supports this thought. If this is true, the item may not have been stolen, but it has been kept until when it is needed by someone else. Within the whanau (family, extended family or large group of close friends or relatives) structure of Maori society, resources are not owned by individuals, but by the family or tribe. This way of thinking is important to Maori and even goes as far as to include the sharing of tribal land.

An item lent to a person will be kept, until the time when another member of the whanau wishes to use the item. Within the Pakeha culture, possessions are owned individually, and if lent are generally returned after use. Thus, having completely different cultural rules regarding ownership, the Maori are considered disrespectful if they do not return items, which have been borrowed. Hence the negative stereotype is again supported, with the outcome being that Maori are labeled as thieves. In actual fact they may have genuinely thought very highly of the owner and included the owner as a member of their whanau! Therefore they were merely waiting for the time when the owner wanted the item back.

Through racist language within New Zealand, the Maori culture is seen as inferior to the Pakeha culture. Examples such as, "Just do a Maori job." used when fixing or making something. Although a good job is not specifically labeled a Pakeha job, a 'Maori job' implies work that is shabby, not as good, second rate, quick and easy or 'not ideal, but will work.' This shows how New Zealand language portrays Maori and their culture to be not as good or second rate when compared to the Pakeha culture. Politicians and the media also talk about the futuristic renaissance of the Maori culture. This type of language implies that at present, Maori culture is dead and that it needs to be revived. Those listening to this type of language have taken the meaning, whether consciously or not, that the Maori culture is in a dire state and needs help to survive. Maori culture, however, is very much alive but is seen as inferior and overshadowed by the 'superior' Pakeha culture. The media has an enormous ability to shape the thoughts of a vast amount of people as many regard what they have been told by the media as fact. It is here that the media needs to be careful with the type of language they use.

These examples of racist language in New Zealand have therefore influenced thought already by creating this negative stereotype of Maori people. However the connotations of this must go deeper. By constructing this negative stereotype, racist language in New Zealand ultimately effects thought differently in both Maori and Pakeha and those who are of both Maori and Pakeha descent. It is this difference in thought, which is reflected in Maori-Pakeha relations and their social behaviour towards one another.

In creating this negative stereotype of Maori, racist language has really hit home to its victims, severely affecting thoughts and beliefs. It is these negative images conveyed by racist language, which are often accepted by the Maori minority group. This therefore leads to a low self-esteem, a low self-image and therefore low achievement (McKenzie, 2003). The use of racist language in New Zealand, theoretically leads to bigger implications for Maori such as the current educational crisis which, in turn, prevents Maori children from succeeding educationally and ultimately keeps Maori at the low end of the socio-economic scale. Culturally, also, Maori have suffered due to discriminatory language in New Zealand. A negative stereotype has led to thoughts of embarrassment of the culture and thus led to an abandonment of the culture and its language by some Maori people. Hume (1993) refers to this phenomenon as the Cultural Cringe, where the Maori start to dismiss their own culture as inferior to the dominant culture and accepting the status quo.

For Pakeha, however, things are different. The negative Maori stereotype created by racist language has benefited Pakeha by reaffirming their status as the hegemonic or dominant group. Statistically Maori are doing poorly, educationally, politically and economically, compared to their Pakeha counterparts therefore there is no threat to the Pakeha stronghold on power. Although many Pakeha may disagree with racist language in New Zealand, the consequences are not detrimental or punishing enough to individually initiate change in the way they, their friends, family or others use this language. Latting (1994, p 465) agrees "...speakers who ideally oppose racism or sexism may justify use of other terms without conscious intent to dehumanize, although listeners may indeed feel derogated. Challenging the continued use of such language, then, becomes a formidable task." Using racist language and forming stereotypes of Maori help the hegemony discriminate against the minority when the dominant group feels its power is in jeopardy or they start to feel inferior. Therefore Pakeha thought is positively influenced by racist language about Maori and the negative Maori stereotypes it portrays. Allowing such language and stereotypes to continue, effectively teaches emerging generations to discriminate against the minority therefore assuming the cultural reproduction of the Pakeha hegemony.

Here lies the age-old question of what comes first, the chicken or the egg? To create and use this discriminatory language, the negative stereotype must already be well founded in the thinking of the users. However, this is not always the case. New people introduced into the culture who have not had the chance to form a negative stereotype, or any stereotype may hear and reproduce the language without fully comprehending its meaning or the effects of its use. In New Zealand, immigrants to the country may not have a negative view of Maori people but find themselves, be it consciously or un-

consciously, using discriminatory language to fit in to the culture or even for the lack of better words to use. Depending on the circles in which they socialize, they may be subjected to this discriminatory language more often, thus building the negative stereotype without even talking to or meeting a Maori person! The onus is on the individual to find out the truth so that they do not wearily or unwearily contribute to the negative stereotype (Lara, 2004).

Peterson and Coltrane (2003) believe that knowledge of the target social groups culture can facilitate a sense of what is appropriate language to use in the appropriate situations. In New Zealand, is the proper information and knowledge about Maori people and the Maori people's culture being properly conveyed to Pakeha? If adults have a particular view, it is reasonable to assume that they pass these views to their children. If these views are misinformed, and a negative stereotype is created, then the view is passed on in such a way. Therefore the views are instilled into the next generation, ultimately keeping the cycle alive (Multicultural Center, 2006). One of the best mediums for conveying this knowledge outside the home, especially to the next generation is through the education system. A closer examination of New Zealand's mainstream education could reveal whether educational programs and institutions hold any such inadequacies in what knowledge about the Maori people is conveyed or how it is conveyed. Also the education system current policies and programs used to foster positive intercultural and race relations may need to be reviewed (Multicultural Center, 2006).

It is evident that language, culture and society can affect each other in a negative way. These affects are cyclic and feed upon each other so that it is impossible to know where the cycle begins. Through discriminatory language in New Zealand, a negative stereotype of Maori in general, has formed, thus not only thought, but also New Zealand culture and society as a whole has and is still being influenced by such language. For Maori this contributes to a negative self-image, low achievement, low socio-economic status and also an abandonment of the Maori language and culture by some. For Pakeha, discriminatory language and the negative Maori stereotype has a positive influence on thought by ensuring that the Pakeha remains the dominant, hegemonic group. Now that certain discriminatory language can be identified, perhaps of more importance may be deciding how to attack the cycle. Should it be attacked at the point where language influences thought or attack the stereotypes in an effort to alter the use and connotations of the language? Basically, should we attack the chicken or the egg?

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