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ARTICLE (REFEREED)

## The Ebbs and Flows of te reo Māori Use in New Zealand English

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### Abstract

In this article, we associate the use of te reo Māori in vernacular New Zealand English with political alignments and transformations in Aotearoa New Zealand. The volume and direction of this lexical borrowing – from Māori into vernacular New Zealand English – is as unique as it is counterintuitive: lexical borrowing most typically involves words from dominant, majority languages being loaned into and shared with subdominant, Indigenous languages. Our contribution explores the persistent use of te reo Māori in New Zealand English. We start by offering a chronology of te reo Māori as an endangered and official language, and then review the existing scholarship on how and when te reo Māori loanwords have been incorporated into New Zealand English. We conclude by assessing the changing political space for te reo Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand, with a particular focus on new directions in language policy associated with the coalition government elected in 2023.

### Keywords

te reo Māori; Loan Words; New Zealand; English; Language Policy

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## Introduction

In this article, we link the historical flows and more recent ebbs of how te reo Māori is used in vernacular New Zealand English and public discourse to wider political alignments and transformations in Aotearoa New Zealand.

As other scholars have observed, the volume and direction of this lexical borrowing – from te reo Māori into vernacular New Zealand English – is both remarkable and somewhat counterintuitive, challenging conventional observations drawn from other languages in which the borrowing of words and phrases most typically involves terms from dominant, majority languages being loaned into and shared with subdominant, Indigenous languages. As others have noted, in the case of te reo Māori and New Zealand English, “it is quite astounding to find a situation where the words of an endangered language (Māori) are productively adopted by a linguistic giant (English), and perhaps equally surprising to find the trend remains positively increasing more than two centuries after initial contact” ([Calude & Levendis 2019](#)). Both the directionality and the persistence of this pattern call for greater attention and scrutiny, and our contribution is an offering in that direction.

The Māori Language Act (1987) recognised the Māori language as one of two official languages of Aotearoa New Zealand, the other being New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL). The English language, imported and imposed as a tool of government in the 19th century, is not an official language but it is considered to be the nation’s default language with 95% of the population identified as speaking English ([Stats NZ 2024](#)). At the same time, Aotearoa New Zealand is internationally recognised across English-speaking settler colonial contexts for the large number of Indigenous words that are used in everyday English conversation and written communications. In this respect, Aotearoa New Zealand is sociolinguistically distinct from Canada, the United States and even nearby Australia, where despite (or because of) much greater Indigenous linguistic diversity and distinct political histories, the widespread use of Indigenous words in everyday Canadian, American and Australian English is far less common. If anything, the linguistic ecology of Aotearoa New Zealand is closest to that of Hawai’i, another island nation in which a single Indigenous language (albeit also one with internal variation) is spoken and written, and where the Indigenous language – ‘Ōlelo Hawai’i – has left an indelible imprint on the variety of English spoken in the tropical North Pacific archipelago to which it is Indigenous ([Tsuzaki & Elbert 1969](#)).

After a brief background to the language itself, we review how despite the persistent linguistic oppression to which te reo Māori has been subjected, the language has remained remarkably resilient among Māori communities of Aotearoa New Zealand. Drawing on key political moments and salient inflection points, we offer a brief literature review of previous scholarly research on the use of te reo Māori in New Zealand English, and situate our research both in conversation with this foundational literature and as a further extension of it. Through an analysis of recent articles in the New Zealand press, and some recent high profile government decisions and actions, we explore and review the position and presence of te reo Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand and how the political vicissitudes of the nation have had a lasting impact on the role and function of te reo Māori in vernacular New Zealand English.

## The te reo Māori Linguistic Context

The Māori language, known as te reo Māori or simply te reo – ‘the language’ – by its speakers, is a member of the Eastern Polynesian subgroup of the Eastern Austronesian (Oceanic) language family, a genetic grouping found across Southeast Asia and the Pacific. A member of the Tahitic branch of Austronesian, te reo Māori is spoken in Aotearoa New Zealand, and is related to Tahitian, Cook Island Māori and the languages of the Tuamotu Archipelago. In addition, te reo Māori is also closely related to the Moriori language of the Chatham Islands ([Higgins & Keane 2015](#)).

Te reo Māori is the traditional, ancestral and living language of the Māori people of Aotearoa New Zealand. It boasts a vibrant community of users who speak, write and communicate in te reo using all manner of media, and has had official status in the eyes of the nation since the passing of the Māori Language Act in 1987.

As an outlying Polynesian island, Aotearoa New Zealand was one of the last of the archipelago to be settled. Recent scientific research and archaeological evidence suggest that Māori settled in Aotearoa New Zealand sometime between 1250 and 1300 AD, through intentional voyages of discovery, using the ocean currents, winds and stars to navigate and chart a course ([Lenihan 2016](#)). Since settlement, te reo Māori has developed independently of other Polynesian languages and the language currently has three principal dialect divisions: eastern North Island, western North Island and South Island Māori. South Island Māori probably derives from Eastern North Island Māori. Moriori, spoken by Moriori from the Chatham Islands, may derive from South Island Māori ([Higgins & Keane 2015](#)).

The Māori alphabet consists of 15 letters, made up of eight consonants – h, k, m, n, p, r, t, w, two digraphs which represent single sounds – ng, wh, and five vowels: a, e, i, o, u. Māori vowels can be long or short. Contemporary conventions dictate that long vowels are indicated by a macron: ā, ē, ī, ō, ū. Historically, long vowels were either not marked, or were indicated by double vowels – aa, ee, ii, oo, uu – a system still used in the 2000s primarily by the Waikato people ([Higgins & Keane 2015](#)). Te reo Māori has variations in pronunciation across different parts of Māori territory. Ngāi Tūhoe pronounce the ‘ng’ as ‘n’, while Ngāi Tahu replace ‘ng’ with ‘k’. Among the Whanganui and Taranaki tribes, the ‘wh’ is pronounced as ‘w’ followed by a glottal stop. In some parts of Northland, the ‘wh’ in ‘whaka’ is pronounced as ‘h’, so that ‘whakahaere’ sounds like ‘hakahaere’ ([Higgins & Keane 2015](#)). Christian missionaries from Europe first developed te reo Māori as a written language, with the earliest record of published material in the language dating to 1815. Written Māori uses the Latin script for its orthography, a use that dates back to its adoption and standardization by Northern Māori in collaboration with English Protestant clergy in the 19th century.

Just over a fifth of the Māori population (21.3%) were recorded as speaking Māori in 2013. While the total number of Māori who spoke te reo in 2013 was recorded as 125,352, the total number of speakers, including non-Māori, was somewhat higher, at 148,395 (3.7% of the national population). The 2013 census found that 38.8% of Māori aged 65 and over could speak Māori, but only 16.6% of those under 15 could do so ([Higgins & Keane 2015](#)). As of 2015, 55% of Māori adults reported some knowledge of the language; and of these, 64% use te reo Māori at home with around 50,000 people reporting speaking the language “well” ([Stats NZ 2015](#)). According to the 2018 New Zealand population census, around 190,000 people, or 4% of the nation’s population, could hold an everyday conversation in te reo Māori. As of 2023, 7% of New Zealand primary and secondary school students were taught fully or partially in the te reo Māori medium, while another 24% were learning te reo Māori as an additional language or subject in their school curriculum ([Education Counts 2024a](#)). The 2023 census reported that the number of New Zealanders able to have an everyday conversation in te reo Māori had increased to 4.3% of the total population – at 213,849 people – an increase of 15% on the 2018 census data. We should note that this figure includes both individuals of Māori and non-Māori heritage. As of writing, we are not aware of more recent official statistics that document the total number or percentage of Māori who report speaking the language.

## A CHRONOLOGY OF TE REO MĀORI AS AN ENDANGERED AND OFFICIAL LANGUAGE

By the time Captain James Cook arrived in 1769, the relative isolation of Aotearoa New Zealand had enabled te reo Māori to evolve from its Eastern Polynesian origins, with dialectal distinctions found across the several different and distinct regions. Cook communicated with Māori through his Tahitian interpreter,

Tupaia.<sup>1</sup> Through a word list and their English equivalents recorded in Cook's journals, Jenkins & Jones (2012) have illustrated the degree of mutual intelligibility between Tahitian and te reo Māori.

The arrival of missionaries in Aotearoa New Zealand in 1814 led to the development of the first grammar book in te reo Māori, known as *A korao no New Zealand* (Kendall 1815), which was used as a textbook in the mission schools established from 1816 onwards.<sup>2</sup> Māori were quick to see the value of literacy; and while no official figures exist, estimates in the 1830s suggest that there were more literate Māori than there were Pākehā (the Māori term for Europeans) (Biggs 1968; Markham 1963). The signing of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (in English, the Treaty of Waitangi) and Aotearoa New Zealand's subsequent annexation by Great Britain in 1840 led to the creation of formal government structures. Governor George Grey introduced the Education Ordinance Act in 1847, providing mission schools with a subsidy, but only if they taught subjects based on the English curriculum which naturally included the English language. Grey was a proponent of the cultural assimilation of Māori, and it has been asserted that Grey's motives were to get Māori children into education and away from the 'demoralising influences of their villages' (Walker 1996, p. 162).<sup>3</sup>

In the 1860s, the establishment of native schools was designed to further the education of Māori, including through the compulsory use of English as a language or medium of instruction. Introduced in 1880, the Native Schools Code stipulated that English would be the language of instruction, with an exception made for junior classes, where te reo was permitted to acquaint students with the meanings of English words and sentences.<sup>4</sup> As Māori students advanced through the education system, te reo Māori usage in the classroom was increasingly reduced, in the understanding that English would become the sole language of instruction. The expectation that English would become the primary or sole language of the educational environment was extended to the domain of the playground in some schools, with verbal or corporal punishment used as a deterrent (Simon 1998; Selby 1999; Simon & Smith 2001).

By the 20th century, Māori parents who had been punished for speaking te reo Māori during their own education were understandably reluctant to expose their children to the same treatment, encouraging their sons and daughters to use English as their primary form of verbal communication and discouraging their children from learning and communicating in te reo Māori. Across the settler colonial world, from North American (Canada and the United States) to Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia, the external devaluing of Indigenous cultural and linguistic traditions had become effectively internalised by Indigenous communities who had witnessed first-hand the negative consequences associated with speaking their traditional languages and sought for the next generations to be spared the indignity that they had suffered (Turin 2020). By the early 1990s, English had started to replace te reo Māori as the predominant language spoken by those of Māori descent, a decline that was further exacerbated by heavy Māori casualties in the two world wars.<sup>5</sup> Following World War II, the rapid urbanisation of Māori communities (Meredith 2015) resulted in an estrangement from traditional tribal territories and, by association, a reduction in the use of their customary language and associated cultural practices.<sup>6</sup>

1 For further details on Tupaia, see Anne Salmond (2012).

2 This text has no English title, although the cover of the book carried the subtitle 'or, the New Zealanders First Book.'

3 Similar assimilationist tendencies were underway across the Anglo settler colonial world, with Indian Residential Schools in Canada being a particularly brutal example (see Pine and Turin, 2017, for more context).

4 This process has since been referred to as transitional bilingualism, the process of shifting from speaking two languages to speaking one, often through a bilingual education approach that urges students to transition from their native language to a second (official or national) language.

5 336 Māori died and 734 were wounded in the Māori Pioneer Battalion in World War I, and 649 Māori died and 1,712 were wounded in the Māori Battalion in World War II.

6 Meredith writes: 'The movement of Māori from their traditional homelands to the cities was among the fastest of any population. In 1926, 84% were living in rural, tribal settlements. By 1986, just under 80% were in urban centres. Such a dramatic displacement into a strange new world led to isolation and a sense of loss' (2015).

By the early 1970s, the decline in the use and wider understanding of te reo Māori and the diminishment of speakers prompted Māori activist Hana Te Hemara of Ngā Tamatoa to organise a parliamentary petition requesting that te reo Māori and aspects of Māori culture be taught in schools ([Walker 2004](#)). The petition gathered 30,000 signatures and was presented to Parliament on 14 September 1972. The Education Select Committee heard the petition and recommended that the government give it favourable consideration. As a direct result of this action and the wider political mobilization of which it was part, te reo Māori became optional in state primary and secondary schools, but only as a subject of study and critically not as the medium of instruction. And yet, te reo Māori was not always awarded the same academic status and privilege as other languages, particularly prestigious European languages such as French or Latin ([Walker 2004](#)). The impact of the assimilationist policies of the 19th and 20th centuries was demonstrated in the 1970s after a language survey identified the low number of native speakers left, leaving the future of te reo Māori in a precarious position. Without major intervention the language would become extinct ([Benton 1979](#)).

The revival of te reo Māori from the 1980s is primarily thanks to educational initiatives advanced by concerned Māori. The first of these was the establishment of Kohanga Reo (language nests) for pre-school students, the second was the development of Kura Kaupapa Māori (Māori primary schools) and the third was the further extension into Wharekura (Māori secondary schools). These three distinct yet interconnected educational programs enabled children to be exposed to te reo Māori through a fully immersive learning setting for their entire educational journey, and to operate in a pedagogical environment in which the English language is typically introduced only as a subject, and then in the first year of secondary education.

In 1986, a claim was lodged with the Waitangi Tribunal in which the claimants stressed that the Crown had failed to protect te reo Māori, and that this had negatively impacted its mana (prestige) as a taonga (ancestral treasure) ([Waitangi Tribunal 1986](#)). In linking the status of the language back to Te Tiriti o Waitangi, the Tribunal noted that the version of the Treaty signed by the majority of Māori chiefs was in their language – te reo – and that “the right to use the Maori language would have been one of the rights expected to be covered by the Royal guarantee by those chiefs who signed the Treaty” ([Waitangi Tribunal 1986](#), p. 28). In upholding this claim, the Tribunal made several recommendations, including that te reo Māori be recognised as an official language, that a Māori language commission be established to fulfil a guardianship role, and that the Government provide support for the Kohanga Reo and Kura Kaupapa Māori education programs, which had until this time been funded through a combination of modest seed grants from the government together with substantial voluntary payments from whānau (extended family), hapū (subtribes) and iwi (tribes).

In 1987, the passing of the Māori Language Act resulted in several milestones, including the recognition of te reo Māori as an official language, the right to use te reo Māori in legal proceedings and the establishment of Te Taura Whiri i te Reo Māori (the Māori Language Commission). The Commission was empowered to promote and oversee language usage, including being responsible for the growth and preservation of the language. It was not until an amendment to the Education Act in 1989, however, that Kohanga Reo and Kura Kaupapa Māori started to receive funding at a level similar to other state schools. Notwithstanding this additional resourcing and welcome support from Te Taura Whiri i te Reo Māori and the Ministry of Education, the number of children attending Kohanga Reo started to plummet in the 1990s. This decline can be mainly attributed to the closure of educational programs and centres, and the difficulties that parents faced in balancing the requirements of their employment and their community responsibilities to their local Kohanga Reo (see [Waitangi Tribunal 2013](#) for further details). The Waitangi Tribunal report of 1986 was quite restrained in its recommendations, including turning down, for reasons of cost, a demand that all public documents, notices and newspapers be printed in both te reo Māori and English, and not recommending that fluency in te reo Māori be a required condition of appointment to

all positions in the civil service. Instead, the authors of the Tribunal report suggested that fluency in te reo Māori should be a requirement for only some positions and that it be a qualification to be encouraged in others (see [Sorrenson 1987](#), pp. 186–187).

Reports produced by the [Waitangi Tribunal \(2011, 2013\)](#), and a claim yet to be reported from 2024 (referred to as WAI 3327, Te Reo in the Public Sector), indicate that Māori claimants have continued to use the Waitangi Tribunal as a vehicle for highlighting the layers of injustice relating to historic Māori language policies and for pointing out the failure of successive governments to protect te reo Māori rights.

## Scholarship on te reo Māori Loanwords in New Zealand English

Borrowing and loaning lexical items is a feature of almost all, if not all, naturally-occurring human languages (cf. [Haspelmath 2009](#)). Depending on a range of intersecting factors – including but not limited to geopolitics, perceived social standing and levels of technological development – some languages borrow more words than they loan out, others loan out more than they borrow, and the remainder are split fairly evenly down the middle, giving and receiving lexical items in both directions. English is a language (really rather more of a collection of speech forms that are increasingly referred to in the plural, as “Global Englishes”, see [Baker, Ishikawa & Jenkins 2025](#)) full of borrowed words from all corners of the globe. English is also notably ‘generous’ – to be agnostic about something that can be often experienced by speakers of historically-marginalised languages as hegemonic or invasive – in loaning itself out to other languages through exported lexicon.

Contemporary New Zealand English is marked, as observers of and visitors to Aotearoa New Zealand note, by an abundance of te reo Māori words that are in general circulation and use. From greetings and welcomes, government paperwork and public signage, to menus and the names of buildings, offices and institutions – in both speech and in writing – te reo Māori has a platform, visibility and presence that is rare for Indigenous languages in settler colonial contexts. In addition, non-Māori – whether visitors to the country or Aotearoa New Zealand nationals – are welcomed and invited to use te reo in a manner that is quite distinct from other Anglo settler-colonial contexts beyond Hawai’i. By this we mean that non-Māori are encouraged to study, learn, use and share te reo words and phrases in public spaces, and are often given respect for doing so. And yet, somewhat surprisingly, given the public and highly visible use of te reo Māori in everyday New Zealand English, the scholarly conversation that has sought to make sense of this trend is relatively recent. A small number of researchers, including John Macalister and Andreea S. Calude and others, have been central to this emerging and exciting area of academic inquiry. It is to this literature that we now turn.

A relatively early scholarly article that explored the presence of te reo Māori words in New Zealand English was written by Tony Deverson. Published in 1991, in the journal *English Today*, Deverson identified the presence of lexical borrowings from te reo Māori as ‘the most unmistakably New Zealand part of New Zealand English’ ([Deveson 1991](#), p. 18). Deverson also correctly noted that the impact and reach of te reo Māori in New Zealand English was an area of expected growth and anticipated expansion. In the 1997 *Dictionary of New Zealand English*, editor Harry Orsman went on to identify the ‘ongoing bilingual interchange with Maori’ as one of a few key factors that ensured ‘the future of a distinctive written and spoken New Zealand English’ ([Orsman 1997](#), p. vii).<sup>7</sup>

Building on the formative work of Deverson and Orsman, applied linguist John Macalister designed a series of corpus studies of New Zealand English to establish the degree to which the presence of te reo

<sup>7</sup> One feature that distinguishes NZSL (New Zealand Sign) from AusLan (Australian Sign) and BSL (British Sign Language) is that NZSL includes signs for Māori words and cultural concepts. It is notable that the inflow of te reo Māori lexicon has also affected NZSL too, and is not limited to New Zealand English. Understanding this further would be a fertile area of research.

Māori in New Zealand English was an ongoing and strengthening process, and if so, how this could be effectively measured. His earliest publication on this topic, in 1999, which drew on an impressive 30-year corpus study of the *School Journals* from the 1960s to the 1990s, provided evidence of the evolving presence of te reo Māori in New Zealand English. In this foundational study, Macalister noted a shift from ‘an historical and anthropological interest to a recognition of Maori as belonging to a living culture’ (Macalister 1999, pp. 48–49).<sup>8</sup>

In a follow-up article published a year later in the same publication – the now discontinued *New Zealand English Journal* – Macalister widened his frame of analysis and developed his argument further. Noting that the ‘use of Maori proper nouns and Maori names for New Zealand’s flora and fauna, for instance, is a practice of long-standing, which no doubt began in 1769’ (Macalister 2000, p. 41), Macalister made a case for a more nuanced awareness of Māori culture, language and society, arguing that ‘Maori have moved from relative invisibility to relative visibility, and from one-dimensionality to a more rounded presentation’ (Macalister 2000, p. 43). In short, as Macalister noted, ‘language and social changes appear to be closely linked’ (Macalister 2000, p. 44). In a key table towards the end of his article that compares his findings, and one that is worth reproducing in full, Macalister summed up the 30-year shift as follows:

Table 1. Key differences between the 1960s and 1990s corpora

1960s Corpus	1990s Corpus
words of Maori origin predominantly found in informative prose	words of Maori origin more likely to be found in imaginative prose
Maori people and culture marked as different	little marking for difference
Maori presented as historical characters	Maori presented as ‘ordinary people’
Maori portrayed as inhabiting a traditional, rural world	Maori portrayed as inhabiting a contemporary, urban world
words of Maori origin used to add ‘colour’	authentic use of Maori words
non-Maori writing about Maori	Maori writing about Maori

The table above is both instructive and revealing. Now, 30 years later in the mid-2020s, it could be quite interesting and instructive to add a third column, reviewing and assessing how the conversation has developed and into which domains of speech te reo Māori has been extended.

John Macalister’s doctoral thesis, submitted in 2003, was a 150-year longitudinal study of the presence of Māori words in New Zealand English, from 1850 to 2000. In his thesis, he identified two main trends: ‘an increase in the proportion of Maori words found in written New Zealand English, and a steep rise in recent years in the contribution of social cultural terms to this presence’ (Macalister 2003, p. 2). His findings also suggest that speakers of New Zealand English were familiar with more Māori words than had previously been suggested, both as loanwords and as hybrid lexical items containing both Māori and English elements. Macalister’s thesis makes for excellent reading and offers welcome insights into both the growth of, and motivations for, the use of te reo Māori words in New Zealand English.

The book jacket of a 2005 Oxford University Press publication, also edited by Macalister and entitled *A dictionary of Maori words in New Zealand English*, notes that the ‘influence of te reo Maori makes a significant contribution to [the] lexical vitality’ of New Zealand English’ (Macalister 2005, cover text). He

<sup>8</sup> While Māori should be written with a macron over the ‘a’, when we cite earlier research and publications that did not use the macron, we reproduce the original text unaltered.

goes on to write ‘Maori words began to enter English in 1769 after the arrival of James Cook and H.M.S. Endeavour. They continue to do so today, with an estimated six words out of every thousand in written and spoken New Zealand English being of Maori origin. These words include the names of flora and fauna, aspects of material and social culture, and new creations, as well as place and personal names’ ([Macalister 2005](#), cover text).

Macalister’s descriptive analysis and historical lexicography has laid the foundation for future studies on the impact and presence of Māori words in New Zealand English, including in unscripted spoken genres ([Wiemeyer 2016](#)), but more centrally, through contemporary and more automated corpus-based studies. More recent work in this field has seen the development of interdisciplinary collaborations with computer scientists, mathematicians and computational biologists, very often with ‘data linguist’ Andreea S. Calude as a key member of the research team. Leveraging the work of Luigi Cavalli-Sforza, according to Calude and their team, ‘the process by which Māori words are most frequently borrowed [into New Zealand English] resembles the Darwinian concept of evolutionary fitness’ ([Calude 2017](#)). They explain this as follows: ‘A desire for economy of expression can help to explain why a word like “reo” (language) is relatively more frequent than “hōhonu” (deep): “reo” is shorter than “language”, whereas “hōhonu” is longer than “deep”. The same goes for borrowings whose closest counterparts in English can only be expressed by phrases, and not single words’ ([Calude 2017](#)).

In a 2019 public-facing article, Calude and Levendis note the uniqueness of Māori loans in New Zealand English. Their observation, with which we concur, is worth citing in full:

This increase in borrowing goes against observations in other language examples. Typically, most borrowing tends to happen from the dominant language to the minority or indigenous language. However, it is quite astounding to find a situation where the words of an endangered language (Māori) are productively adopted by a linguistic giant (English), and perhaps equally surprising to find the trend remains positively increasing more than two centuries after initial contact ([Calude & Levendis 2019](#)).

A key question that remains to be answered, as Calude and Levendis observe, is whether or not these Māori words will continue to ‘stick’ in New Zealand English, and whether the lexical range and domains of use will continue to extend further.

Drawing on the concept of integration or entrenchment, the idea that ‘the stronger the entrenchment of a loanword, the less likely it is for speakers of that language to be aware of the origin of the word’, [Calude and Levendis \(2019\)](#) identify that in some contexts “it is possible to measure the degree to which an incoming foreign word settles into its new linguistic home.” In the case of Māori loans in New Zealand English, however, Calude and Levendis find entrenchment levels to be less important indicators and predictors. More important, they argue, is the way in which Māori words function as identity marking tools: “[Māori] words are not so much used for their contribution to meaning but more for their social connotations” ([Calude & Levendis 2019](#)). In an associated scholarly article in the journal *Ampersand*, Calude and Levendis provide the empirical evidence and scientific basis for their conclusions, suggesting ‘that [Māori] loanword use in NZE [New Zealand English] remains tied up with personal identity (not everyone uses the loanwords) and with language ideology (the belief that using loanwords is “useful” in English as expressed by some writers)’ ([Levendis & Calude 2019](#), p. 8). Echoing the work of Mari Jones, a prominent Welsh linguist based at Cambridge University who writes about endangered languages and their revitalization, Calude and Levendis conclude that “when threatened languages are involved, loanword use must be analysed by taking into account the wider sociolinguistic context, and in particular the speakers’ attitude” ([Levendis & Calude 2019](#), p. 9).

Calude has continued to develop scholarly partnerships in service of exploring different dimensions of the impact and presence of te reo Māori loanwords in New Zealand English. In a 2020 article in the

journal *Corpus Linguistics and Linguistic Theory*, co-authored with statistician Steven Miller and evolutionary biologist Mark Pagel, Calude and their collaborators take a ‘quantitatively balanced approach to modelling loanword use...illustrat[ing] the complex interaction between linguistic and sociolinguistic factors in such language contact scenarios’ (Calude et al. 2020, p. 29). In a more recent collaboration published in the *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*, Calude and their co-authors use networks and hypergraphs to explore Māori loanwords in New Zealand English. Using a topic-constrained corpus, Trye, Calude, Keegan and Falconer (2023) show that: ‘(i) Māori loanword types tend not to occur by themselves in a text; (ii) infrequent loanwords are nearly always accompanied by frequent loanwords; and (iii) it is not uncommon for texts to contain a mixture of listed and unlisted loanwords, suggesting that NZE [New Zealand English] is still riding a wave of borrowing importation from Māori’ (Trye et al. 2023, p. 461). Most recently, Burnette et al. (2025) report on a study, using task cards, that investigated how well loan words were recognised by children aged 8 to 12 years. It appears that older children were able to recognise more loanwords than their younger counterparts. Also of interest in this study was children’s sociolinguistic ability to identify peer group members who used or did not use loanwords.

As will be apparent from the above summaries, the introduction and use of Māori loanwords in New Zealand English have received some attention from a small number of scholars, both in New Zealand and beyond. Their methods have been broad, and have involved analysing historical publications and contemporary unelicited speech, and combing through large corpora of textual material (including tweets). Missing from these important and often very rigorous analyses, however, is a socio-political dimension – namely the wider frame of language policy and politics in Aotearoa New Zealand, and in particular, a discussion of how legislation, changes in government and political realignments have created both opportunities for and exerted pressure on the use of te reo Māori in New Zealand. It is to this that we now turn.

## The Changing Political Space for te reo Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand

After its recognition as an official language in 1987, the usage of te reo Māori became more prominent as it was incorporated into education, media (print, broadcast and social), cultural facilities, names of crown agencies and government departments. The latter included the introduction and adoption of bilingual names by government departments, educational institutions and public-facing agencies providing social care and support. Such names became more visible from the 1990s onwards, and have continued to be applied as new entities emerged. However, the incorporation, inclusion and extension of these names have not been supported or welcomed by all New Zealanders, with expressions of dissent voiced in both social and traditional media spaces.

In 2023, this dissent found a voice as Aotearoa New Zealand experienced a shift in political power through the election of a conservative coalition government consisting of the National, New Zealand First, and ACT parties. In the preceding six years, when Aotearoa New Zealand had been led by a left-leaning national government, the use and visibility of te reo Māori had accelerated in both public and private sectors across the country. This powerful linguistic expansion could be seen through higher levels of enrolment in Māori language courses by adult learners, as shown in Table 2 below.

It is noteworthy that while Māori ethnicity enrolment figures increased by exactly 50% over the 9-year period enumerated, European ethnicity enrolments more than doubled. There are many possible ways to make sense of the increase in enrolments, including a growing interest in preserving New Zealand’s unique Indigenous language and cultural heritage, learning tikanga Māori and kapa haka (performing arts), further developing language skills for employment opportunities and/or as affirmative expressions of an individual’s

Table 2. Formal and Informal enrolments in te reo Māori courses (post-secondary school)

Ethnicity	2014	2018	2023
Māori	14,335	18,370	21,475
European	10,360	17,375	23,400
Pacific Peoples	1,275	1,815	3,045
Asian	1,210	1150	2,445
Other	605	840	1,375
Total	24,095	33,740	40,895

Based on data from [Education Counts \(2024b\)](#). 'Tertiary enrolments in Te Reo Māori language courses, and other languages'.

Māori identity. At any rate, it is beyond doubt that over the last decade, te reo Māori experienced a surge in interest and attention, alongside an efflorescence of language-related activities, programming and policy.

### NEW GOVERNMENT, NEW DIRECTIONS IN LANGUAGE POLICY

Since 2023, the National Party's dependence on the support of ACT and New Zealand First to form a coalition government has had a negative impact on te reo Māori and its position, role and status in government affairs. In its coalition document with National ([New Zealand Government 2023](#), p. 9), it was agreed that the New Zealand First Party would identify two critical policies concerning te reo Māori that the New Zealand First Party wanted to see addressed. These policies were to "ensure all public service departments have their primary name in English, except for those specifically related to Māori" and "require the public service departments and Crown Entities to communicate primarily in English – except those entities specifically related to Māori" ([Te Kawa Mataaho 2023](#))

In line with te reo Māori being recognised as an official language of the nation, most public service departments and agencies had already adopted a bilingual name, with the te reo title usually representing the functions of the department rather than being a direct translation from the English, e.g. the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade / Manatū Aorere<sup>9</sup> or the Inland Revenue Department / Te Tari Taake.<sup>10</sup> The liberal use of such te reo names in mass and social media felt unwelcome to some, however, and was experienced as discordant for those who were unfamiliar with te reo and who claimed to be unaware of what departments or functions were being referred to when these names were used. In keeping with the Coalition Agreement, some government ministers have since issued directives to their departments to revert to their English names, especially those that had become known by their Māori titles, most notably the New Zealand Transport Agency (Waka Kotahi) and Health New Zealand (Te Whatu Ora). Other agencies, like Kainga Ora (Housing and Communities) and Oranga Tamariki (Ministry for Children), have had their names protected, as these names are used in the foundational legislation that established them. Despite these ministerial directives, so far there have been only minor changes to how Māori names in government circles are referred to in the media, and there have been few if any changes in the everyday language habits and behaviours of New Zealanders. This reinforces the long-held truism that language standards emerge primarily through use, not through edict. The second te reo Māori policy noted in the Coalition Agreement,

<sup>9</sup> Manatū Aorere means the 'Ministry for those who fly away [or travellers]', which does not fully represent the important role the Ministry has in ensuring that Aotearoa New Zealand fulfills its diplomatic obligations and participates in international affairs.

<sup>10</sup> Te Tari Taake translates as the 'Tax Office'.

namely the one that directs departments to communicate primarily in English, has attracted less attention than the naming policy. Any changes in convention in this area have been more subtle, such as deleting Māori greetings from emails or official correspondence.

In the course of preparing this manuscript, there have been additional and interesting developments in how te reo Māori is being represented in government and the public sector. In June 2025, the Minister for Family Violence Prevention announced that she was both discarding the Māori name (Te Puna Aonui) of the Executive Board that advises her in favour of their legal name “Executive Board for the Elimination of Family Violence and Sexual Violence” and disestablishing Te Pūkotahitanga (the Māori advisory board) in favour of an advisory board that would also be representative of other cultures. In response to the minister’s announcement, members of Te Pūkotahitanga stated publicly that they had requested the return of the two name – Te Puna Aonui and Te Pūkotahitanga. These names had been officially gifted, but not for use as cheap branding assets, and members of Te Pūkotahitanga no longer had confidence that the Crown was honouring its responsibilities associated with the using the names in a respectful manner ([Ensor 2025](#)).

While the insistence by members of Te Pūkotahitanga that these gifted names be returned received less media coverage than the Minister’s decision to rename and restructure the groups advising her, it serves as a powerful signal that Māori are willing to take action to ensure that te reo names are not used as a smokescreen (or as language-washing) by agencies who, in their evaluation, are not acting in a good manner. In July 2025, the Minister of Internal Affairs announced that she had instructed her officials to change the order of how languages are represented and used on New Zealand Passports, which currently shows te reo Māori first and thereafter English. Although this change is unlikely to come into effect until 2027, it underscores and reiterates the Coalition Government’s determination to ensure that English is prioritised over the use of te reo Māori. As the coalition is only in the second of its three-year term, we may anticipate that it will introduce other initiatives that relate to the promotion of English before the next general election in 2026.

A further domain signalling a change in policy is that of decisions made by the New Zealand Geographic Board concerning place names. The mandated role of the board is to “give places and features official names, approve place names that are unofficial, change place names, for example by correcting spelling, and review Crown reserve names” and also “to provide advice on place names that are part of cultural redress in Treaty of Waitangi claim settlements” ([New Zealand Geographic Board n.d.](#)). Even though the board proposed changing misspelt Māori place names to their correct spelling, including the use of macrons or double vowels that recognise dialectal variation and preference, these proposals were declined by the Minister for Land Information. In one instance, it was proposed that the toponym Petone (a suburb of Hutt City near Wellington) be changed to Pito One (its original Māori name) – a proposal which had the backing of local iwi and the Hutt City Council – but even this proposal was declined by the Minister. The New Zealand Geographic Board also advises the Minister for Treaty of Waitangi Negotiations on place names relating to provisions for cultural redress in Treaty settlements, which are gazetted once they have received government approval. The Board’s 2023/2024 Annual Report notes that despite the Board providing advice on 45 name changes during that year, none of these have yet become official.

Notwithstanding the Coalition’s focus on increasing the role and prominence of English, and decreasing the visibility and traction of Māori, te reo continues to be used in everyday life and vernacular interactions. The relevance and prominence of te reo Māori is identifiable in many ways, not least through the inclusion of 47 new words from New Zealand English being admitted into the Oxford English Dictionary in 2023, many of which are of Māori origin and which refer to Māori beliefs and customs, as well as wider Indigenous concepts relating to community and kinship ([Salzar 2023](#)). While these words are distinctly Māori in origin, their inclusion in the Oxford English Dictionary and in other authoritative lexical reference books and sources have helped them come to be classified as distinctive elements of New Zealand English. The English language does not normally include macrons, and by contrast, Māori does not accommodate

the use of consonants or plural marking at the end of words. Given these distinctive linguistic features of each language, it will be fascinating to track whether the continued inclusion of loan words from te reo Māori and their modification and relexicalization as they are absorbed into New Zealand English might result in changes to how these words are represented and written, in either or both languages.

## Conclusion

Self-appointed language purists and those who pit themselves against the use of te reo words in New Zealand English rail against the degradation of English, and what they perceive to be a ‘woke’ ideology of linguistic inclusivity that itself has become hegemonic and unassailable. In some cases, such activists even suggest that they are supporting the integrity and uniqueness of Māori in their objection to its wider use and integration into New Zealand English. Using disparaging epithets like ‘Manglish’ to describe an imagined hybrid language that is a weak admixture of English and Māori, they advocate a kind of linguistic segregation with each language staying in its own lane and operating in separate silos, all in service of avoiding unwanted mixture (See [Gates 2022](#) and [Adams 2022](#) for more on such positions). ‘Māorification’, in such thinking, is only ever a derogatory term ([Maorification 2014](#)), even if others have gone on to use the term in a more expansive and enlightened manner (See [Cairns 2020](#)).

This priggish attitude about mixture reminds us of Dr. Seuss’s *Sleep Book*, in which he outlines – in an ostensibly child-friendly manner – the existential anxiety that underlies fears of interracial partnership and miscegenation. Mixture (whether of languages, people or – in this allegorical telling – juices) creates anxiety and disruption, and should be avoided at all costs:

A moose is asleep. He is dreaming of moose drinks.  
A goose is asleep. He is dreaming of goose drinks.  
That’s well and good when a moose dreams of moose juice.  
And nothing goes wrong when a goose dreams of goose juice.  
But it isn’t too good when a moose and a goose  
Start dreaming they’re drinking the other one’s juice.  
Moose juice, not goose juice, is juice for a moose.  
And goose juice, not moose juice, is juice for a goose.  
So, when goose gets a mouthful of juices of mooses  
And moose gets a mouthful of juices of geese  
They always fall out of their beds screaming screams  
So, I’m warning you, now! Never drink in your dreams.

([Dr. Seuss 1962](#), pp. 51–52).

As the first language of Aotearoa New Zealand, te reo Māori is rooted within the natural landscape and is intimately tethered to the historical imagination of what it means to be from and live in this land. As further Treaty settlements are confirmed, Māori place names will continue to replace colonially imposed names in English or will, at the very least, come to have dual status with them. While this will surely upset language purists and English-first activists, the process will likely withstand political interference as Treaty settlements have a longer shelf-life than governments, which come and go.

In this contribution, we have reviewed the history of the use of te reo Māori words and terms in New Zealand English, identifying key historical moments and the wider social trends of which they are part. Each settler colonial context is both similar to and distinct from others, and Aotearoa New Zealand is no exception, and home to its own linguistic realities. Other than Hawai‘i, however, we know of no other nation in which an Indigenous language has received such a high degree of visibility and traction within the

English language. While at the time of writing (mid-2025), the New Zealand government appears quite focussed on reducing both the operational and symbolic space occupied by te reo Māori,<sup>11</sup> the wider ecology of language revival, revitalization and reclamation in Aotearoa New Zealand remains strong, in large part thanks to the unwavering advocacy and commitment shown by generations of Māori language warriors, educators and champions, and some notable pākehā allies.

In *The Language Warrior's Manifesto: How to Keep Our Languages Alive No Matter the Odds*, Ojibwe scholar and author Anton Treuer writes 'language revitalization is nothing short of a pathway to liberation. When we shake off the yoke of colonization, we no longer have to be defined by that history. We don't become decolonized. We become liberated – unconquered' (Treuer 2020, p. 168). The story of te reo Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand offers a compelling case for how a traditional and Indigenous language can establish a role in modern society in ways that are increasingly distinct from how Indigenous languages are being mobilised and revitalised in Native North America, and in the process, become a source of collective pride for a diverse, modern and multicultural nation, and not only an identity marker for a particular community. The late Anna Gibbs was one of Anton Treuer's language teachers and great mentors. She shared a proverb with the author, which he in turn has shared with us in his book: 'every time they tried to bury us, they didn't realize that we were the seeds' (Treuer 2020, p. 168). The enduring and growing use of te reo Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand is a living manifestation of that truth.

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<sup>11</sup> The situation is not dissimilar in the United States, after Trump's proclamation of English as the official language of the nation. See [Turin and Perlin \[2025\]](#) for an analysis of this executive order.

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