

# **Language is Life**

## **The Worldview of Second Language Speakers of Māori**

Jeanette King, University of Canterbury

Second-language adult speakers of Māori form the large bulk of proficient speakers of the language. The engagement these adults have with the Māori language is motivated by a strongly-held worldview centered on personal transformation which enables them to engage with and maintain a relationship with the Māori language. This worldview appears to have a different focus to that held by national and tribal language planners and speakers of other indigenous languages.

One factor that languages undergoing revitalization have in common is a group of language fanatics, people who are passionately dedicated to revitalizing their heritage language. In New Zealand there are many Māori who are devoted to becoming fluent second language speakers of Māori. These people are typically involved with the teaching profession and have children who they are raising in a Māori speaking environment. These people are the necessary intermediate stage: the second language speaking generation which is needed to produce a new generation of first language speakers of Māori.

The zeal which these adult second language learners have for the language is something that they have sustained for a number of years. What motivates people such as these to become fluent second language speakers of their heritage language? Are they motivated by the idea of saving their language? Or is their motivation more personal? This paper examines the worldview of second language adult speakers of Māori in New Zealand and contrasts their perspective with that of language planners and speakers of other indigenous languages.

### **Background**

Māori is the only indigenous language of New Zealand and has been the focus of intense revitalization efforts since *kōhanga reo* (language nests) were instituted in the early 1980s. Although older native speakers have always played a key role in these revitalization efforts, much of the passion and commitment has come from a cohort of second language speaking adults. According to a recent survey, 14% of the Māori population are able to speak the Māori language well or very well (Te Puni Kōkiri, 2006, p. 5). The bar graph in Figure 1 shows by age band this group of proficient speakers of the Māori population.

The bars show that the highest proportion of the best speakers are found amongst the very oldest generations. The positive impact of immersion schooling can be seen in the increasing numbers of proficient speakers amongst the youngest generations. The line graph gives a generous estimate of what proportion of these fluent speakers are native speakers, that is, those for whom Māori is their first language. Again, the proportions are highest in the oldest and youngest cohorts. However, the bulk of the proficient speakers in the parenting and

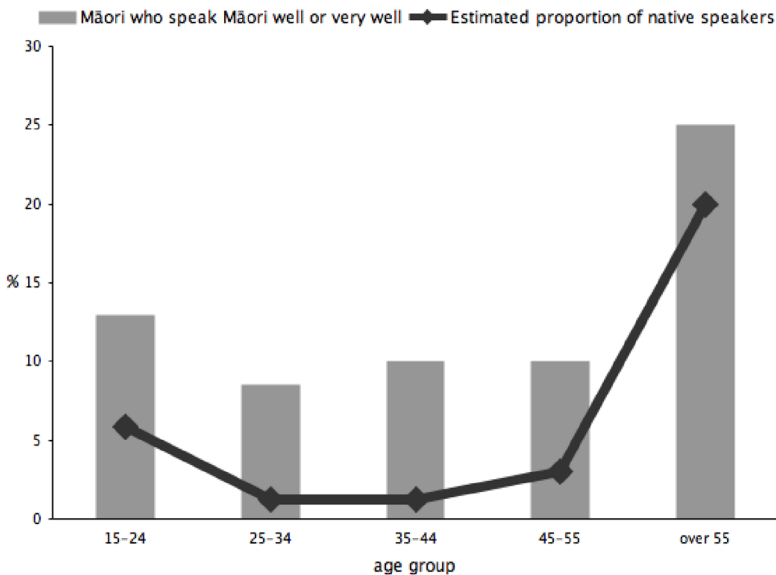
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teaching generation are second language learners of Māori. It is this key group who are the focus of this analysis.

### The motivations for second language learning

Second language acquisition literature describes how learners are motivated by either integrative or instrumentive motivation when learning a second language. Integrative motivation is where the speaker wants to identify with the group speaking the language, whereas for instrumentive motivation the speaker is motivated by academic, economic or social benefit. This literature on second language acquisition (SLA) has largely developed out of the study of the acquisition of second languages by immigrant communities. Migrants typically learn large dominant languages that are spoken by the majority of the population, and this is quite a different situation from that of people learning a minority language undergoing revitalization. Accordingly, White (2006, p. 104) finds that SLA theories “fall short when examined in and applied to Native American contexts ... [and] it is unmistakable that a new way of thinking about language revitalization is necessary.” This paper aims to make some progress in moving towards finding a new theory of motivation that more accurately reflects the situation of revitalized languages.

**Figure 1. Highest Māori speaking proficiency by age with estimated proportions of native speakers**



## **Method**

The following analysis is based on interviews with 32 Māori informants, 17 male and 15 female, aged between 17 and 44. Seventeen were teachers or teacher trainees. The informants were from a range of tribal areas and a mix of urban and rural backgrounds, and the interviews were conducted between 1997 and 2002.

An earlier analysis examined the metaphors used by these informants to talk about their relationship with the Māori language (King, 2003). These metaphors allow the informants to talk about three aspects of their involvement with the Māori language: an initial state of being without the heritage language, an engagement with the language, and a continuing relationship with the language. Accordingly, we can postulate that these adult language learners need a powerful rhetoric and worldview to sustain an ongoing commitment to their heritage language. An analysis of the interviews reveals that amongst these adult second language informants their sense of ongoing commitment draws on four elements:

- a quasi-religious worldview
- New Age humanism
- connection with ancestors and Māori culture
- connection with a kaupapa Māori philosophy

The following four sections will look at these elements in turn and illustrate some of their major features with supportive evidence.

## **Quasi-religious worldview**

Māoritanga<sup>1</sup> itself has become a sort of religion. (Mead, 1979, p. 63)

Among the informants it seems that the idea of learning and being committed to the Māori language is like being committed to a religious belief. A number of informants expressed the idea that involvement in Māori language immersion situations had a spiritual dimension, and it seems that for many of them Māori language is a spiritual quest for identity, health and wholeness. For one informant, Rau, being involved in learning the Māori language opened up a new world:

*I te wā ka tīmata au i te ako i te reo, he ao anō ... te ao mārama.*  
(Rau)<sup>2</sup>

When I started to learn the [Māori] language, it was another world ... the world of light.

The quasi-religious nature of the informants' relationship with the Māori language is also revealed through their use of the word *wairua* (spirit) when talking about the Māori language:

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*He haerenga i runga i te wairua tēnei.* (Karihi)<sup>3</sup>

This is a spiritual journey.

In the following example Karihi is talking about a time when he was drinking heavily, before he became involved with the Māori language:

*Engari, nā te kaha o tōku mahi, i kore au i tipu. I kore tōku wairua i tipu.* (Karihi)

But because I was heavily engaged in that activity I didn't grow.  
My spirit didn't grow.

This quote implies that Karihi's *wairua* is now growing because of his involvement with the Māori language. In other words, the Māori language was associated with improving the spiritual aspects of his life. This description has resonances of a conversion experience, a powerful emotional and spiritual awakening, signalling a change in a person's life.<sup>4</sup>

For second language learners such as those in this study the word 'renaissance' aptly describes their experience. "Renaissance" is derived from the French word *naissance* which in turn is derived from the Latin word *nascentia*, both of which mean "birth" (Thompson, 1995, p. 1163). Renaissance therefore literally means 'rebirth.' The experience described by many of the informants of their engagement with the Māori language sounds very much like a spiritual rebirth, in that they link the Māori language with major life changes and a feeling of ongoing spiritual connection and joy. This confirms Golla's (2003, p. 3) observation, "From the point of view of the individual it must be a conversion experience, not a citizenship exercise."

### **New Age humanism**

New Age and humanist beliefs are pervasive throughout the Western world and have had particular import on indigenous renaissance movements in the last 30 years. Despite being given the name 'New Age movement,' New Age ideas are not one coherent, stable set of beliefs but the phrase is a convenient term applied to the grouping of a number of inter-related, though also widely different groups of beliefs and practices, ranging from channelling to crystals and holistic health (Barker, 1989, p. 189). What New Age movements have in common is that they place "great emphasis upon self-knowledge, inner exploration, and the participation in a continual transformative process" (Melton, 1992, p. 173).

Two of the words associated with New Age rhetoric that have particular resonance for the informants in this study are *transformation* and *personal growth*. Transformation is associated with the LIFE IS A JOURNEY conceptual metaphor, for in this rhetoric we are said to be on a life journey throughout which we are expected to change and grow, 'growing' evoking the PEOPLE ARE PLANTS conceptual metaphor. The path and growth metaphors are pervasive throughout society and it is difficult to have a discussion on human activities without using one or both. That is, the path and growth metaphors often underpin our conceptualiza-

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tion of the world. These two metaphors are the two of the three most common metaphors employed by the informants in this study to describe their relationship to the Māori language (King, 2007). In the following quote, Rau uses both metaphors to explain that her involvement in learning Māori began with the idea of supporting her son who was in immersion education:

*Me haere au i runga i taua huarahi hoki ki te āwhina i a ia. Āe. Ka tīmata au ki te puāwai hoki.* (Rau)

I should also go on that path to help him. Yes. I also started to flower.

New Age transformation is often linked to learning through the use of phrases like “life is learning” (Lewis, 1992, p. 7-8). Informants for this study often say that their involvement with the Māori language is a life-long one:

*Āe, i whakatō i te kākano. I tahuna te ahi. Kei te kirikā tonu te ahi. Āe, te ahi kā roa, me kī, mō te reo.* (Lovey)

Yes, the seed was planted. The fire was lit. The fire is still burning.

Yes, it’s a long burning fire, let’s say, for the language.

New Age beliefs connect with secular humanism through the central idea of the focus on the inner life of the individual and the “belief that people have the answers within” (Elliot Miller cited in Basil, 1998, p. 16). It is not hard to find these sentiments articulated by Māori: “I now know the outside doesn’t matter, the substance is within” (Nehua, 1995, p. 26). This will be discussed in more detail in a later section.

### **Association with ancestors and culture**

There is almost a metonymic relationship between a language and its culture. (Ahlers, 1999, p. 137)

A heritage language is a link to the past, that is, to the ancestors and a traditional way of life. This aspect of heritage language revitalization is one that is commonly stated in the international literature and it is not surprising that it is one of the key ingredients of the worldview which provides the informants in this study with the impetus to engage with and maintain their involvement with the Māori language. For example, Te Hata credits his decision to learn the Māori language to the guidance and support of ancestral forces:

*Tērā pea ko tōku kuia, tōku kaitiaki, e kōhimuhimu nei ki ahau.* (Te Hata)

Perhaps it was my grandmother, my guardian, whispering to me.

Kyle describes the Māori language as a path linking him to his ancestors who have passed on:

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*Koirā taku hiahia, kia mōhio ai ki ā rātou kōrero. Āe, me te whai i te huarahi o ōku mātua.* (Kyle)

And that's my desire, to understand their speech. Yes, and to follow the path of my parents.

It is interesting to note here that while the informants' knowledge of the Māori language can't be credited to intergenerational transmission, the impetus and desire to learn the language can be. That is, the idea of being inspired by parents, grandparents or ancestors allows the informants to link their use of the Māori language with preceding generations. An impetus is also provided through the idea that learning the language provides a connection with those who have passed on.

A link with ancestors and culture is obviously a link with identity, thus evoking integrative aspects of SLA theory, however as can be seen from the quotes in this section, this 'integration' is often more metaphysical than corporeal.

### **Adherence to a kaupapa Māori philosophy**

Joshua Fishman concludes from observing language revitalization initiatives in many parts of the world that successful efforts are “**Invariably Part of a Larger Ethnocultural Goal**” (emphasis in original, 1991, p. 18). He writes, “Reversing language shift is basically not about language, certainly not *just* about language; it is about adhering to a notion of a complete, not necessarily unchanging, self-defining way of life” (Fishman, 2000, p. 14). Thus, it is not surprising that similar aims are expressed as part of Māori language initiatives in New Zealand. Indeed, one of the aspects of the powerful worldview articulated by the informants in this study is revealed in their stated adherence to kaupapa Māori (Māori philosophy):

*He mea nui tērā ko te wairua kia eke ki runga i te kaupapa.* (Karihi)

That's a really important thing, having the spirit to get on board the kaupapa.

The informants describe the Māori language as being an integral part of the kaupapa Māori philosophy. This sentiment is expressed by Piringākau who is talking about how others are aware of the philosophy of the Māori language immersion teachers' programme he is part of:

*Mōhio tonu rātou ki te kaupapa o tēnei kaupapa. Ko te reo* (Piringākau).

They really know the philosophy of this kaupapa. It's the language.

Through the 1990s academic articulation of kaupapa Māori has emerged from two disciplines: educational theory and research methodology.<sup>5</sup> In these forums kaupapa Māori is linked with aspirations for Māori sovereignty, as illustrated in this definition of kaupapa Māori by Graham Smith:

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- the validity and legitimacy of Māori is taken for granted.
- the survival and revival of Māori language and Māori culture is imperative.
- the struggle for autonomy over our own cultural well being, and over our own lives is vital to Māori survival. (Smith, 1992, p. 3)

Kaupapa Māori is an important part of the worldview of the informants but, for them it is not a worldview primarily focused on social change. Instead the informants have a more personalized perspective. The next section contains a more detailed investigation of the individual focus of the informants.

### **Individual focus**

Besides needing a strongly articulated and forceful worldview, as discussed in the previous sections, another aspect of the informants' experience is that it has a highly individualized focus.

Since the informants were being interviewed about their experiences in becoming a fluent speaker of the Māori language, we might expect that the emphasis in their words will be on themselves and their own experience. However, even when invited to talk about a wider language revitalization perspective, the informants tended to bring the conversation back to themselves. They were more comfortable talking about their own experience. The following translation of a quote demonstrates that the focus for newly-fluent adult speakers of Māori is primarily on themselves with a secondary focus on their family and students:

That's how my desire for my language grew. It began with me, you know, quite selfish, at the beginning.... So, now, and before, I didn't think about the Māori speaking group within the wider Māori population. I think, who are they to me? They aren't anything to me. But, my students and my friends, they are the most important people to me. (Anaru)

Anaru feels no responsibility to a wider grouping. His focus is on the immediate circle of people important to his life. To him the Māori language is 'my language', something that he relates to personally. The Māori language has a role in his life, but he does not presume to express that he has a role in regard to the Māori language. Or, in other words, the Māori language is more important to Anaru than he feels he is to the Māori language.

Eighteen of the informants were asked whether they felt that they were part of a language revitalization movement. Although twelve informants ostensibly answered 'yes' to this question, in general their responses show they were hedged or diffident in their answers. I could get very few informants to wholeheartedly agree that they felt part of a 'movement' that was solely focused on language revitalization:

*Kāore au e whai ki tētahi 'movement.'* (Rau)  
I'm not following any 'movement.'

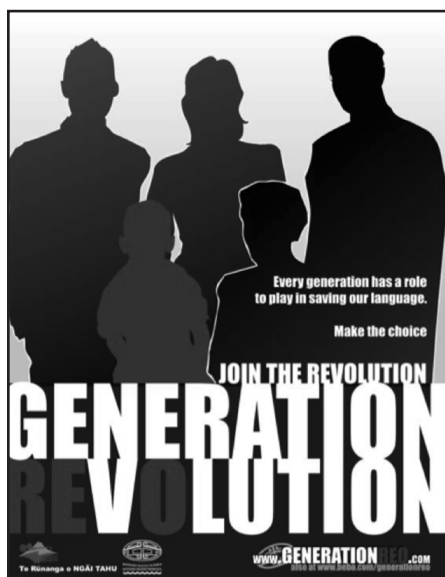
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The worldview of these adult language learners is based on their experience as individuals, which is not surprising in a context where the language is spoken well by 65,000 speakers. In other words, these individuals do not feel directly responsible for saving the Māori language, but they do feel that the Māori language is their personal salvation.

### **Language planning**

In New Zealand there are two groups which undertake language planning: government (through Te Puni Kōkiri and Te Taura Whiri i te Reo Māori) and tribes, through various tribal groups. These language planners are well versed in the international literature on language revitalization and are aware of the role that each speaker plays in the ultimate success or otherwise of revitalization efforts. In recent publications there are indications that these planners are either unaware of the internalized worldview of second language learners (as described above) or wish to augment this worldview with a wider sense of responsibility. For example, a recent government report commenting on a study of newly-fluent adult speakers of Māori, noted that “some participants appeared to lack urgency and appreciation of their role in Māori intergenerational transmission” (Chrisp, 2005, p. 177). The implication here is that it is important for second language learners to have this wider focus.

One tribal group that is determined to raise the awareness of speakers is Ngāi Tahu which aims to have 1,000 Māori speaking homes in their tribal district by 2020 (see [www.kmk.maori.nz](http://www.kmk.maori.nz)). One of their latest developments is a website which has very useful and supportive information on creating an immersion environment in the home (see [www.generationreo.com](http://www.generationreo.com)). In conjunction with the website a series of advertisements have also appeared in the tribal magazine *Te Karaka*, one of which is shown below.



This advertisement is clearly aimed at encouraging tribal members to speak Māori by pointing out the importance of having a sense of responsibility to the language. The advertisement implies that this sort of moral imperative is the most effective way of encouraging a sustained commitment to the Māori language. However, this assumption is open to question, given the results of the analysis with the key target group, presented above.

Obviously language planners are concerned about the future of the language and want to stress the value of the language and the role the speaker has in revitalizing it. They are



naturally more focussed on the language and what the speaker can do for it, rather on what actually motivates the speaker. However, it is unclear whether invoking a moral imperative towards the language which the speaker may not share may be as effective as appealing to more internally focussed motivations already held by the speakers.

### **North American situation**

What motivates second language speakers of Māori seems to differ from the motivations of second language speakers of North American languages. In an informal survey<sup>7</sup> of second language speakers from a range of (mainly) North American languages the most common reason given for learning a heritage language was a feeling of responsibility towards the language. Nine of the 16 respondents gave responses of which the following is typical: I am learning my language “because of my feelings of responsibility to the language, to its continuance, to my people, to the coming generations and to my ancestors.”

Conversely, in similar informal surveys amongst my Māori language students, I have been unable to get anyone to respond in a similar manner. This discrepancy could be explained by the fact that those representing the North American languages surveyed were teachers and tribal language planners and keenly aware of their role in revitalizing their language. However, while this indeed may affect the results to some extent, it is worth noting that all but two of the languages in this informal survey have fewer than 10,000 speakers and six are moribund. This suggests that the size of the language speaking population may be having an effect on respondents’ motivation. That is, the fewer people who know and are learning the language the more the learner is motivated by a beneficial effect on the language (as in the North American situation), and that conversely, the more people who know and are learning the language, the more the learner is motivated by a beneficial effect on the individual (as in the situation with Māori). That is, the size of the language speaking population may account for differences in a more externally or internally focussed motivation. These differences may also be partly explained by the fact that language activism in New Zealand occurred earlier than it did in North America and is focussed on one language rather than a large number of languages.

As with the Māori informants, integrative reasons for learning the language were also important. The second most frequently stated reason for learning a heritage language was to do with identity (‘if we don’t speak Xaayda then how can we say we are Xaayda people’) or culture (‘if we lose our language our heritage and culture would cease to exist’).

### **Discussion**

We have seen that the second language speaking Māori adults in this study do indeed have a powerful worldview, one that allows them to move from a state of being without Māori language to one where this becomes an important and ongoing focus of their lives. We have also seen that there is an individualized perspective to the informants’ experience, one that differs from others also

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involved in the language revitalization process, such as language planners and speakers of other languages being revitalized which have smaller numbers of speakers. The experience of the Māori informants can be encapsulated in the phrase ‘personal transformation.’ Each of these two words relates back to the two aspects explored in this analysis, in that the powerful worldview of the informants largely revolves around the concept of a ‘transformation’ experience and the focus on the individual can be encapsulated in the word ‘personal.’

This analysis suggests a number of pointers towards a more appropriate theory of second language motivation with regard to heritage languages:

1. **Language fanatics are important.** Successful second language speakers of heritage languages can invariably be described as ‘language fanatics.’ Such fanaticism is not a factor amongst migrant communities learning a language of wider communication. In order to be a fanatic you must have a strong worldview.
2. **Cultural identity is an important motivator.** The strong worldview of second language speaking adults is, in all cases, motivated by aspects of identity. This has different aspects to the integrative motivation cited in SLA literature as is often expressed through reference to ancestors and spiritual aspects of the heritage language rather than day to day integrative aspects.
3. **Internally or externally focussed motivators.** In addition to identity, second language speakers will be motivated by either a strong sense of responsibility towards the language (in the case of language planners or those from languages with a small number of speakers) or by a strong internally focussed worldview (in the case of those from a language with a relatively large number of speakers). Accordingly, both internal and external motivators need to be considered.

For language planners, both in New Zealand and overseas, the message is that it is important to research in-depth locally to accurately determine the parameters of each local situation because “viewing language shift from the individual motivation perspective is crucial to the understanding of language shift” (Karan, 2000, p. 74). This is particularly important when trying to determine the most effective promotion strategies to encourage language use amongst the target population.

The newly-fluent Māori-speaking adult has a key role in intergenerational transmission as parents, and often the teachers, of the children being educated in the Māori language schooling system. The results suggest that strategies for fostering their participation in language revitalization may benefit from emphasizing their experience of being empowered and transformed spiritually and emotionally through their involvement with, and use of, the Māori language. That is, instead of focussing on what these adults can do for the language, it may be more effective to focus on the benefits for the language learner and speaker in speaking Māori for such an approach would reinforce and endorse the informants’ experience.

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In returning to the title of this paper we have seen that indeed language is life for staunch second language speakers of Māori. These people are ‘language fanatics’ who are dedicated to becoming fluent speakers. In order to maintain such a long-term goal they have a strong worldview where the Māori language is their life. It is these second language speakers and their worldview which will ultimately give life to Māori and other heritage languages.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The Māori way of life, Māori culture.

<sup>2</sup>Informants have been given pseudonyms. Most of the interviews were conducted in Māori. The English translations are the author’s.

<sup>3</sup>For ease of identification, key words are bolded in the quotes.

<sup>4</sup>Several of the informants, including Karihi, had become involved with learning Māori language through alcohol and drug recovery programs. Cultural reclamation through recovery programs is an area worthy of further investigation.

<sup>5</sup>For articulations of kaupapa Māori in educational theory see Bishop & Glynn, 1999 and in the area of research methodology see L.T. Smith, 1999.

<sup>6</sup>Te Puni Kōkiri is the usual term for the Ministry of Māori Development (<http://www.tpk.govt.nz/en/>) and Te Taura Whiri i te Reo Māori is the Māori Language Commission (<http://www.tetaurawhiri.govt.nz/>).

<sup>7</sup>Many thanks to participants who attended my paper at the 15<sup>th</sup> Annual Stabilizing Indigenous Languages Symposium held at Flagstaff, Arizona, May 1-3, 2008. Respondents included 16 second language speakers of 13 languages [including Hawaiian and Tokunoshima (Japan)].

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