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Can Te Reo Māori Survive the 21st Century? An Index-Linked Approach to Indigenous Language Revitalisation

Introduction

In 2017, I published a book called *Killing Te Reo Māori*.[1] It was not especially well received at first, with some reviewers condemning it, oddly, without ever having read the work (and admitting as much). One academic even publicly denounced the book solely on the basis that she was unable to find the website of the photographer who produced one of the images for the cover (the details were later provided to her). This sort of interminable barrel-scraping was indicative of how some critics latched onto the shadow rather than the substance of the work.

Had these critics paid attention to the text instead of pre-judging it, they would have realised that the book was not what they imagined – that is, a criticism of the language. Rather, it was a pointed critique of many of the attempts at revitalising the Te Reo – attempts that seem to be failing with depressing regularity (a fact that was confirmed in subsequent research on the topic).[2] Indeed, the regularity is such that I began making predictions every year that around Māori Language Week, a new book, a new method of teaching, or a new app would be revealed, and that it would promise to contribute – often in a 'ground-breaking' way – to saving Te Reo. I also predicted that the promotion would be

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considerable, the execution uncertain, and the evaluation non-existent. This prophecy has played out every year, and in the meantime, the erosion of Te Reo as a living language proceeds towards its terminal end.

The main solace I have taken from *Killing Te Reo* is that in the intervening five years since its publication, not even its most shrill critics have been able to challenge its arguments in any material way. This is hardly surprising, as the text was subject to two years of scrutiny by a group of experts prior to its release. However, a few more insightful readers, having come to grips with the issues addressed in the book, commented that while the critique was robust, what was lacking were any solutions. What, they asked, can be done to save the language?

It is a fair question. The trajectory of all indigenous second languages in the past two centuries has been identical – decline and disappearance,[3] with the only concessions being the persistent use in a few instances of such languages for ceremonial purposes,[4] or the appearance of a few words from the indigenous language in the language that has replaced it.[5] The reasons for this are manifold, and dealt with in *Killing Te Reo*. The purpose of this article is to answer that question: what can be done to save Te Reo? There are two preliminary points to make about this. Firstly, the uncomfortable truth is that it is far from certain that the language can be saved (the superficial metrics used to measure 'success' in its revitalisation are one telling sign of an aversion to tackle some of the underlying structural issues that the language faces). And secondly, it might be assumed that there are already a range of successful measures in place to ensure Te Reo survives. While it is certainly true that numerous programmes, apps, and strategies have been implemented to preserve the language, as I demonstrated exhaustively in *Killing Te Reo*, the claims of success do not survive hard scrutiny. If there is any chance of Te Reo being revitalised – and it is a big 'if' – then maybe an entirely different conceptual approach is needed,

and this is what is explored here. The index-linked approach is not offered as a panacea for the language's decline, or some form of meta-solution to language revitalisation. However, it does present a conceptual approach that could at the least reorient the ways in which Te Reo's survival is considered.

The Theoretical Scaffolding

There is a theoretical basis for this approach, and it is found in models of development that were devised in the 1950s and 1960s by people such as Walt Rostow and Neil Smelser.[6] These theorists, along with others, formulated ideas which they believed would assist underdeveloped economies transform into developed economies. Among much else they argued that advanced economies were a form of archetype, and that underdeveloped economies ought to take steps that would move them closer towards that archetype. Essentially, this required a degree of mirroring, which involved identifying the characteristics that made the archetype successful, and then mimicking them. The basic thinking behind this approach was that if some economies had transformed to become successful, then the traits that led to that success ought to be, and could be, replicated by those economies that wanted similar outcomes. Later this model was also applied to social and cultural development, similarly utilising an archetype as an exemplar to be imitated.[7]

There is a certain logic in this sort of approach. It relies on the notion that the archetype encapsulates the best examples of success, and in emulating the steps that lead to that success, it can be repeated elsewhere. Of course, there are other factors that need to be taken into consideration. Geographical, cultural, historic, economic, and social elements all have a bearing on the capacity to emulate the stages that produced the archetype. However, as Neil Smelser has argued,

adjustments in these areas can be made in order to assist with the process.[8]

The archetype is defined by an index of its traits. These traits, when considered collectively, make the archetype the superlative example in the relevant field, and an object of ambition for other groups in this field to aspire to. The archetype is likely to be dominant, unprecedented, technically sophisticated, larger than other groups in its category, will have greater social prominence and precedence, and often thrive at the expense of its rivals rather than existing passively alongside them.

In the context of this article, English is the archetypal language. Its growing geographical and cross-cultural spread, along with its dominance in the digital world, trade, education, entertainment, and science, more than qualifies it for this status[9] – a status, scale, and influence that is unprecedented historically. The challenge then becomes if and how Te Reo can emulate the stages that led to English becoming the archetype, and in the process, experience a long-term, self-sustaining revival.[10]

The Index-Linked Approach to Revitalising Te Reo Māori

The index-linked approach to indigenous second-language revitalisation essentially relies firstly on establishing an inventory of those elements that typify the archetype (in this case, English). It is important to recognise at this juncture,that at an accelerating rate, English is becoming the world's language, and in the process, is displacing other languages. The extent to which English is expanding is roughly proportionate to the extent to which its competitor languages are contracting, and although the process is neither smooth nor entirely linear, the ascent of English has now reached the extent to where it can be regarded is the most

successful language in the history of humanity. It therefore epitomises the linguistic archetype.[11]

Given the overwhelming success of English as a language that is being adopted globally, the task therefore becomes one of identifying what are some of the constituent components of this success, and then determining whether any of these can be adopted by other languages in an attempt to replicate the features of this archetype. Of course, mirroring the features of the archetype is unlikely to enable an indigenous second language to meet the same level of success. Issues such as population size, geography, culture, and globalisation, all militate against any other language even approximating the status that English has achieved, as do historical and political factors extending back millennia, which make each language unique in its background and trajectory. To this extent, some of the characteristics that have made English successful cannot effortlessly be adopted by other languages.

What follows, in summary form, is a list of some of the traits that have contributed to the global ascent of English (there is no suggestion that the list is comprehensive or all-encompassing). The proposition of this paper is that this index has the potential to form a basis for modeling efforts at revitalising Te Reo. The challenge for those involved in ensuring Te Reo's survival is to determine whether there is a cultural or linguistic cost in adopting the elements on this index, and if there is, then comparing that to the cost of not adopting them. The features of the linguistic archetype include (but are certainly not limited to):

1. *No 'correct' pronunciation*

   No other major language has as diverse a range of pronunciation as English. Even within England, there are substantial variations in the way that the language is spoken (both in accent and vocabulary, and to a lesser extent, grammar). If the pronunciation of the majority of English speakers is the criterion for determining what

constitutes correct pronunciation, then the pronunciation used in India would be the standard.[12] Reference is sometimes made to concepts such as 'received pronunciation', or the Queen's English,[13] but these are numerically negligible minorities in the pronunciation landscape, and neither are they themselves fixed pronunciations.[14] The absence of the insistence that English be pronounced in one single in so-called 'correct' way has made the language much more flexible in its application,[15] and enabled it to be adopted much more widely geographically.[16] Indeed, variation of pronunciation is one of the indicators of a healthy and thriving language.

2. No cultural affiliation

Despite its name, the English language in many cases has as little cultural affiliation with the country of its origin as it is possible for a major language to have. I have visited English classes in some parts of the world where the students' knowledge of English history or culture was almost nonexistent. And yet, their proficiency in English was that the point where they were fluent speakers of the language. The fact that there is a negligible requirement for cultural understanding or affiliation enables English to be adopted by speakers who have virtually no connection with that culture. English has ended up being nomadic, adaptable, and more culture-free than any other major language.[17]

3. Not connected with identity

The rapid spread of English in areas where it is not the first language has been possible in part because it is not especially associated with a particular identity. People learn English because of the practical or functional advantages it brings (particularly in areas such as employment, and accessing various forms of entertainment), and not because it enhances the learners'

individual identity. Part of the reason for this is that for centuries, English has been the first language of more than one country (there are now around 18 states where English is the first language).[18] This has meant that the language is no longer anchored to a particular culture, and therefore, is able to be adopted in various locations without the sort for cultural ties that are attached to other languages.

4. The language is not promoted

One of the key attributes of an archetype language is that no concerted effort is invested in promoting it to potential new speakers. On the contrary, the demand to learn English, for example, exists without any major international promotional programme. Functionality is the principal driver for people deciding to learn English. This relative absence of promotion suggests that languages that are heavily promoted somehow lack the vital attributes that encourage people to learn them. If a language is constantly being promoted and encouraged, that would indicate that those responsible for such promotions have yet to come to terms with the reason why the language is not being adopted in the way that archetype languages are.

A related idea to this is that of 'preservation'. This term is used frequently in the context of Te Reo, but as with 'promotion', it is an indicative term, suggesting that the normal mechanisms of language transmission have broken down,[19] and that insufficient demand for the language is present.

5. No intrinsic status

People tend not to learn English because the language is a 'treasure', or that it is the language of their ancestors. In fact, at present, the majority of English speakers in the world have ancestors for whom English was not a first

language (for every one native speaker of English, there are three who speak it fluently as a second language).[20] The motive these second-language speakers have for learning English in almost all cases is not to protect the language's historical or cultural status. Allied to this is the fact that English does not require its learners to respect it in the same way that some people insist that indigenous second languages be respected. The lack of deference due to a language is one element that makes its dissemination that much easier.

6. *Language growth is demand-driven*
It might seem self-evident, but English has grown because there is a demand for people who speak the language. By contrast, indigenous second languages tend to grow (or decline more slowly) because there is a supply disturbance, in which people undertake lessons in the language without there being sufficient environmental demand for them to speak that language. This has implications including reduced requirements for high-level fluency, and limited opportunities to use the language.

What is evident from this preceding list is that the elements that have contributed to the archetype of language success could be applied to Te Reo, but that there would be a cultural opportunity cost in the process. Emulation of the archetype would require some sort of trade-off that might be considered to be too costly culturally, and there is no clear-cut formula for navigating such issues.

However, while voluntary concessions would at least be a topic for debate, there are some aspects of an archetype language that most indigenous second languages will probably never be able to match in the foreseeable future. When considering the index-linked method in its totality, the following elements on the index of the archetype appear unattainable for Te Reo:

1. Access to globalised knowledge and entertainment

A 2020 report by the European Parliament revealed that several European languages face digital extinction.[21] That is, their presence and use in the digital environment is small and receding. Increasingly, English – as the world's archetype language – is dominating the online environment. The challenge for an indigenous language is in attempting to match this degree of saturation. To date, no one has devised a solution to this challenge, and it may be that there is no practical means of competing with the dominance of English in globalised knowledge and entertainment, particularly online.

2. The self-perpetuation of success

The more that English advances towards becoming the language of the world, the more reason there is for non-English speakers to learn it. Over time, economies and societies adjust to the need to have English incorporated in their daily activities, and both formal and informal infrastructures evolve to assist in the spread of English in areas where it is not yet a first language. As the benefits of speaking English accrue and become more evident, the rate at which the language is acquired accelerates. And crucially, this cycle of perpetual success occurs at the expense of other languages. Again, the challenge for advocates of Te Reo is how to establish a presence for the language in an environment where non-English languages are being squeezed out.[22]

3. The function of a lingua franca

One of the reasons that English is displacing other languages around the world is its function as a lingua franca,[23] that is, a common language used by people whose native languages differ from each other. From the 1810s to roughly the early 1840s, Te Reo was the lingua franca in New Zealand.[24] It was the common language that

enabled the indigenous population and the settlers to communicate. As the settlers numbered under one per cent of the total population of the country in this period, communicating in Te Reo was a natural solution to the problem of populations in the same geographical space speaking different languages. However, demographic changes are particularly significant when it comes to the use of a lingua franca, and by the 1840s, as the settler population increased, English began to supplant Te Reo as the common language of the country – a shift that commenced when the settler population rose to about two percent of the overall population of New Zealand. This was not a process that was initially enforced or legislated for, but one that was a natural linguistic evolution. Demographically, the conditions will not return to the point where the fluent speakers of Te Reo make up a sufficient majority (history would suggest over 98 per cent of the population) to allow it to become a lingua franca once more. And this is before consideration is given to the extent to which international linguistic trends exercise enormously more influence over the country than was the case in the early nineteenth century.

4. Vocabulary size

The Oxford English Dictionary contains around 171,000 words. In comparison, some dictionaries of Te Reo have around 20,000 entries.[25] Te Reo's vocabulary has been increasing, but this has been effected largely through the process of transliteration, which, ironically, signals that strength of the English archetype. An indigenous alternative to mass-transliteration has not yet been devised.

5. An international language

It is self-evident that languages are either increasing or decreasing in the number of speakers that they have. One

of the key factors that contributes to a growing number of speakers is the internationalisation of the language.[26] English is spoken fluently in more countries than any other language. For Te Reo to meet this criterion in the index, it would similarly have to have an international reach. At present, there are too many significant factors militating against this possibility. This imposes an additional burden on the survival of any language, but particularly one where there are so few speakers from the outset. The consequence is that the effort to learn to speak Te Reo fluently would be undermined to the extent that it can only be used as a means of common communication in New Zealand.

6. A non-ethnic language

As has previously been mentioned, the majority of English speakers are not English and neither are they European. English is not connected to a particular ethnicity. By contrast, the vast majority of speakers of Te Reo are Māori.[27] This suggests that in order for Te Reo to experience some form of meaningful revitalisation, it would have to be fluently spoken by a significant percentage of non-Māori. To date, the anecdotal evidence suggests that the percentage of non-Māori who are fluent Te Reo speakers is negligible.[28]

Conclusion

The importance of an index-linked approach to indigenous language revitalisation lies in the potential advantages that arise from mirroring those traits that have led to the ascent of other, archetype languages, particularly English. It offers a roadmap to follow if a non-archetype language is even going to approximate the sort of success that the archetype language has achieved. However, there are potential shortcomings with this approach. In particular, the index is never absolutely

complete, and so it could be that other elements might be added to it that affect the possibility of replicating the patterns that the archetype language has displayed – either for better or for worse.

Overall, though, this approach to language revitalisation has utility because it relies on a strong empirical foundation. So much of the literature relating to indigenous second-language revitalisation dwells on what people 'should' do in relation to learning a language. This makes the arguments for the language's survival partially moral or ideological in complexion, which historically has never been successful in reviving an indigenous second language. By contrast, the index-linked method focusses on what might be possible rather than what is desirable, and for that reason alone, deserves consideration as an approach to encouraging indigenous second-language revitalisation.

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