

The Language of Indigenous Others: The Case of Maori in New Zealand

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Denise Egéa-Kuehne has raised a number of important philosophical questions concerning language, indigenous languages, and language rights. In this shorter comment I wish to extend her paper by commenting on the one indigenous language about which I do know something. I am a New Zealand-born descendent of Scots and Irish stock. They had first been colonized by the English and were further though differently colonized in the early colony of New Zealand. In turn, settlers of mainly British descent colonized the *tangatu whenua* or Maori.¹ Under those conditions, as a colonial like Jacques Derrida, I may therefore have something philosophically to offer on language rights of minority and indigenous people.²

Derrida's position on *my language*, as explicated by Egéa-Kuehne, is that the language which I speak as a "first" language is not mine. It is certainly not a private language in Wittgenstein's sense but nor is it something which is mine, which I originated or created, but something which was *imposed* upon me. In this sense then language is always potentially alienating and colonizing. The Other, the colonizer, demands an imperialistic monolingualism, but that is ultimately impossible because of this alienating feature.³ For Derrida, meaning is always deferred and based upon what is *not*, rather than what is, and one can no longer rely upon any logocentric stability of signs.

Rather than confront Derrida explicitly on the issues of the imposition of language I will suggest that in the situation of New Zealand a Wittgensteinian notion of language and some concept of self and Other which is not confrontational and alienating may be more forthcoming. Wittgenstein and Derrida have much in common: a rejection of certain kinds of philosophizing; a rejection of metaphysics; a favoring of the contingent over the necessary; the existence of limits to philosophy. In Wittgenstein's case, philosophy could only describe, but as not everything could be said, certain things had to be shown. In the case of Maori a Wittgensteinian approach to philosophy offers some insight, if not resolution, of problems identified by Egéa-Kuehne, I believe.

The position of the *tangata whenua* in New Zealand in 1999 is different from indigenous people in North America. First, Maori signed a Treaty with Queen Victoria in 1840, which purported to respect certain rights over their *taonga* or "treasure" (including language and culture), and while this has only resurfaced legally since WWII as a potent force for Maori in their attempts to regain sovereignty over resources, language, education, and culture, it is nevertheless a basis for addressing wrongs in a number of areas. The Treaty of Waitangi Tribunal advises government on various disputed resources and rights, and major reparations and compensations to Maori have occurred. The Maori language is now legally recognized as a *taonga* and as an official language in the courts, in advertisements for

positions. This has been very difficult politically for both Maori and *pakeha* (that is, those of European descent). If this represents progress for the colonized, the status of Maori language, and of the education of Maori, has been another matter.

With regard to a claim relating to *te reo Maori*, (that is, the language of the Maori) the Waitangi Tribunal did not accept that Maori is just another one of a number of ethnic minority groups in our community. By virtue of a treaty made with the Crown, the *tangata whenua* of New Zealand have a special status. The Tribunal (as part of its statutory obligations) argues for an interpretation of the Treaty of Waitangi, based on readings of Maori and English versions, that the language is a *taonga* (officially declared to be so since 1987) and that the Crown, in terms of Article II of the Treaty, guaranteed its protection. In a review of submissions heard in relation to this claim the Tribunal states: "It is clear that the Maori language in New Zealand is not in a healthy state at the present time and that urgent action must be taken if it is to survive."⁴ Indeed, much of the evidence presented and heard by the Tribunal makes it clear that the education system is responsible for this "unhealthy" state of affairs; that "Judged by the system's own standards Maori children are not being successfully taught, and for this reason alone, quite apart from a duty to protect the Maori language, the education system is being operated in breach of the Treaty."⁵

After listening to the (State) Department of Education's response to these criticisms, the Tribunal asks: "How can it be that the Department's philosophy and practice in educating children accords so closely with the aspirations and desires of the Maori people as described to us, and yet the results of its application be the object of such trenchant and bitter criticism?"⁶ There is a history to this sorry story.

In less than 180 years of European contact with the metropolitan language, English, *te reo Maori* has suffered a massive depletion. Measures affecting the ecology of *te reo Maori* have included the introduction of a new *lingua franca*, and its selection as the official language; the introduction of new media, especially writing and print technologies; the introduction of "hostile" education policies; and the sanctioning of foreign naming practices. Accordingly, *te reo Maori* has endured a dramatic reduction in the size of its speech community and profound changes in its language structures, domains, and functions. The full extent and direction of these changes have yet to be understood in detail. While, for instance, we know that *te reo Maori* as an oral language was reduced to English alphabetic and syllabic forms and Maori culture, therefore, exposed to writing and print technologies early in the colonising process, we do not know the wider implications of these changes, the deeper effects of the shift from acoustics to optics, from sound to visualisation, in Maori as primarily an oral culture. Not only did the missionaries fail to create literacy in Maori — the main use of literacy was in letter writing rather than in reading — but in their desire to christianize Maori through reading the "divine" word, failed also to equip them to negotiate their rights, land purchase, confiscation and dispossession, an area that really mattered to them.⁷

While we do not know the deeper effects of writing and print technologies in Maori as an oral culture, or the possible effects of electronic writing in the Mode of Information, we *do* know the effects that education policies have had on the Maori

language, and matters Maori. The effects have been disastrous, and the policies largely “hostile.” The history of policy toward education of the Maori people in New Zealand has been ethnocentric in its approach, based on unexamined assumptions of the cultural superiority of the *pakeha* which has extended as much into related issues of research and evaluation as it has into policy making.

The history of policy can be seen in a number of clearly discernible successive phases: an “assimilationist” approach to race relations which predominated up until the late 1950s; a focus on a policy of “integration” implicitly based on a notion of “cultural deprivation” during the 1960s and early 1970s; followed by a transitional period where emphasis was shifted from “cultural deprivation” and “the problem of the Maori child” to a concept of “cultural difference” which emphasised *pakeha* tolerance of *non-pakeha* culture; and, finally, an attempt to formulate a “multicultural” policy with the attendant notion that “cultural diversity” should be valued. Most recently, there have been some signs that we are moving into a policy era of “biculturalism,” mostly as a result of Maori initiatives, with the introduction of total immersion schools at all levels where education is *by* Maori, *for* Maori and *in* Maori, and with a number of bicultural schools. Whether these policies succeed is, however, another matter.

New Zealand English differs from metropolitan “mother” English, and its particular distinctness is indicated by the large number of Maori words which have entered “English.” In general these have retained their original meanings and would not be meaningful to British speakers. Nor do they translate simply or adequately into English. The Wittgensteinian point here is that language is open and creative and is not just simply cast in the languages of oppressor and oppressed.

However, much of what Egéa-Kuehne records in her paper on the need of indigenous minority groups to adopt the language of the colonizer, while still retaining their own different language and culture, applies in New Zealand. But in the resurgence of culture and language by Maori, in their increased representation in the national House of Parliament, and in their newly acquired strength from hard won reparations through the adoption of the language of the colonizer (especially in the Courts), there has been renewed talk of sovereignty and calls for *Maori* Sovereignty. The notion of sovereignty used by many is far from clear: is it sovereignty over *taonga*, is it sovereignty over all things Maori, is it joint sovereignty over the nation, or is it total sovereignty by Maori over New Zealand instead of the established Crown? The concept of sovereignty, as it was in the 1840 Treaty, remains cloudy if not disputed. The debate recently was not helped at all by Minister of Justice, Sir Douglas Graham, saying that the notion of Maori Sovereignty in the fourth sense above was impossible because what Sovereignty *meant* was political sovereignty, and the Crown was the only legitimate sovereign. This concept of Sovereignty, to be found in the Treaty, has strong roots in Thomas Hobbes. Graham, a man who almost single-handedly had done so much in the Treaty negotiations, was unfortunately to assert the concept of sovereignty of colonization.

How is this issue on Sovereignty to be resolved? How is the concept to be construed in any genuine bicultural settlement? How are practices and concepts to

be reconciled? Clearly the reassertion of a Hobbesian version of Sovereignty is to revert to a colonizing view of the Other which will only perpetuate alienation. That practices and concepts differ, and that power resides in one signatory to the treaty rather than another, does not mean that agreement on practices is not possible, and that recognition of the other as not being alienating is not possible. Yet the dilemma seems to be that the powerful signatory to the Treaty also controls the language and in Wittgenstein's sense the rules for the application of the concept of sovereignty. But from a Wittgensteinian position it does not mean that the rules of the "grammar" of "sovereignty" are written in stone and are unchanging and immutable.⁸ From Wittgenstein's position that the rules are in order if they work, to Saul Kripke's view that the rules are always contestable and provisional because they only say how the concept has been used and not how it is to be used, it is clear that insofar as language is wedded to a form of life and is the obverse of a form of life, rules can be changed.⁹ Indeed Wittgenstein's own use of "rule" was to shift the notion of a rule and cause immense misunderstanding.¹⁰

But in order to get two different language users to agree on how to use a term like "sovereignty" in a different manner, there must be some concept of self and the other that permits an interchange which is not power laden, manipulative, and dependent upon some notion of language use which is either universal and liberal (Rorty), or that of the scientific community (Dewey), or that of a community of (competent) language users (Habermas). It must recognize difference *explicitly*, but also recognize a form of communality. Thus, language is not mine but shared and one is initiated into it without it being imposed, or at least imposed so that it is closed off. Nor is a concept of self in which the Other is always potentially alienated (the early Sartre and Derrida) of much help. Wittgenstein, and the Hegelian resolution of the master/slave dichotomy and the recognition of the other as necessary for the identity of the self (as in Simone de Beauvoir, *She Came to Stay*, and the later Sartre in, for example, *The Critique of Theoretical Reason*), for example, seem to me a more "helpful" philosophical approach to the "resolution" of these difficulties. From Wittgenstein we get little help either on the notion of the self.¹¹

But for Wittgenstein we must act. So in the case of sovereignty we need to get the signpost "sovereignty" in order so that we can act and follow the signpost, without colonizing or imposing, while at the same time maintaining and respecting differences.

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1. The Maori are the indigenous people (*tangata whenua*) of New Zealand.

2. See James D. Marshall, *The Treaty of Waitangi, Educational Reforms and the Education of Maori*, Monograph no.1, (Auckland: Research Unit in Maori Education, The University of Auckland, 1991). Michael Peters and James Marshall "Te Reo O Te Tai Tokerau: Community Evaluation, Empowerment, and Opportunities of Oral Maori Language Reproduction," *Future Directions: Report of the Royal Commission on Social Policy*, vol. 3 (Wellington: Royal Commission on Social Policy, 1988), 703-44.

3. Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other or the Prothesis of Origin*, translated by Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

4. E. Durie, E. Taihakurei, G.T. Latimer, and P.B. Temm, *Finding of the Waitangi Tribunal Relating to Te Reo Maori* (Wellington: Government Printer, 1986), 15.
5. *Ibid.*, 46.
6. *Ibid.*, 43.
7. McKenzie, D.F. *Oral Culture, Literacy and Print in Early New Zealand: the Treaty of Waitangi* (Wellington: Victoria University Press with the Alexander Turnbull Library Endowment Trust, 1985), 32.
8. Michael Peters and James Marshall, *Wittgenstein: Philosophy, Postmodernism, Pedagogy* (Westport, Conn.: Bergin and Garvey, 1999).
9. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford:Blackwell, 1953) and Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Languages* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).
10. See, for example, R.S.Peters, *Ethics and Education*, (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966), in which rules are associated with authoritative and authoritarian pronouncements.
11. Peters and Marshall, *Wittgenstein*, chap. 3 and 4.