Struggles for the Māori language: He whawhai mo te reo Māori

Joseph Selwyn Te Rito

Abstract: This article briefly overviews the struggles to regenerate the Māori language during the period from the early 1970s to the present. On 14th September 1972, the Te Reo Māori Petition was presented to Parliament. It contained over 30,000 signatures. The event represents a major turning point in the struggle to save the Māori language from extinction. It is from this petition that Māori Language Day, Māori Language Week, and many other strategies and events to revitalise the Māori language arose. While there were many organisations involved in the struggle, this paper focuses particularly on the contributions of Ngā Tamatoa and the Te Reo Māori Society. In addition, the paper discusses the seminal research of Dr. Richard Benton; the subsequent development of Māori language in and outside the education system; intergenerational mother-tongue transmission in the home; and radio and television broadcasting. Although it is noted that surveys carried out by Te Puni Kōkiri (Ministry for Māori Development) indicate that there is a rise in the number of speakers of Māori, as well as a rise in the support by mainstream New Zealanders for the Māori language, some concerns are raised over the quality of grammar and pronunciation being used in on-air broadcasting today.

Keywords: Māori; language revitalisation; history; intergenerational transmission

Te Reo Māori Petition, 14th September 1972

In 1970 I commenced studies at Victoria University of Wellington where I joined the Te Reo Māori Society. The primary focus of the Society was to promote and revitalise the Māori language. The driving force behind the Society was Te Kapunga (Koro) Dewes of Ngāti Porou who was lecturing in Māori language and culture. Among the pakeke (elders) involved in the Society were Te Ouenuku Rēne, Hēmi Pōtatau, Mere Te Awa and Terri McIntyre. The core group of students actively involved in the Society's activities were all undergraduates. They included Cathy Dewes, Whaimutu Dewes, Pineāmine Dewes, Rangi Nicholson, Robert Pouwhare, Rāwiri Rangitauira, Miki Rikihana, Tom Roa, Lee Smith, Pia Tamahōri, and Hākopa Te Whata. There was also much appreciated support from Pākehā students like John McCaffery, Adrian van der Schaaf, Kath Stoddart and Anne Garrick.

With no marae facility available on campus, the group would meet up at the tennis pavilion to practise Māori language skills through speaking, oratory and traditional song poetry. The group would also strategise on ways to further foster the Māori language. A major activity on our calendar in 1972 was the Te Reo Māori Petition for which we conducted petition drives in the suburbs of Wellington including Karori, Lower Hutt, Wainuiōmata and Porirua/Titahi Bay.

Meanwhile in Auckland, Ngā Tamatoa, a more broadly-based group was confronting a range of political issues concerning Māori, one of which was the plight of the Māori language. It was one of the dynamic leaders of the group, Hana Jackson (née Te Hēmara), who is credited with instigating the Te Reo Māori Petition. Other members of Ngā Tamatoa actively involved in the Māori language issue included Taura Eruera, Tītewhai Harawira, Patu Hohepa, Syd Jackson, Georgina Kirby, Henrietta Maurirere, Linda Mead, Merata Mita, Herewini Murupaenga, John Ōhia, Larry Parr, Peter Rikys, Don Selwyn, Lee Smith, Patrick Te Hēmara, Walter Te Hēmara, Mahuta Tuhura, Michael Walker and Stuart Walker. Elders

involved with Ngā Tamatoa included Ruby Grey, Eruera Stirling, and his wife Mīria Stirling. Members of the Wellington branch of Ngā Tamatoa included Anita Brown, Josie Keelan, Paul Kōtare, Ted Nia, Rāwiri Paratene, Barney Pīkari, Dave Ruru, John Tahupārae, Justine Taueki, Brya Taylor, and Tiata Wītehira. Ōrewa Barrett activated the Hamilton branch while Tame Iti activated the Christchurch branch.

The people involved in the Te Reo Māori Society and Ngā Tamatoa hailed from all the tribes. Many were first generation city-dwellers, their parents having migrated from their rural villages to the cities after World War II, as part of the mass urbanisation of the time. For some of these migrant families, physical detachment often led to a detachment from the culture and language of their rural beginnings. Many people of this generation of Māori bore an unwarranted shame that was not of their own making – that of not knowing their own native tongue.

It was possibly due to this sense of loss, that a passion was instilled in many of these people that led them on to taking political action to revitalise their beloved Māori language. During 1971-72 many of these people took part in a series of gatherings. A favourite proverb cited at the time was *'Mauri tū, mauri ora! Mauri moe, mauri mate!'* Loosely translated, it means: by standing forth one will flourish, but by sitting back one will perish. The use of the proverb became a slogan at these gatherings to encourage those in attendance into becoming involved in direct action.

One such gathering was the 'Brown Power' Conference held in Ōtaki. Another was the annual conference of the NZ Federation of Māori Students held in Christchurch in 1971 and at which I was elected as President. With the support of my peers of the Te Reo Māori Society, we held the 18th conference of the Federation from 6th - 8th May 1972 at Waiwhetū Marae in Lower Hutt. The conference patrons were The Honourable Whetū Tirikātene-Sullivan and Dr. Patu Hohepa. The conference was well-represented with delegates from across the nation, including a strong contingent from Ngā Tamatoa. This was to be the final conference of the Federation as it was subsequently discarded as a vehicle for political dialogue, in favour of a newly-named entity, Te Huinga Rangatahi (The Gathering of Youth). The reason for the change was to include Māori who were not necessarily university students. One of the items for discussion at the conference was the pending petition.

Eventually we presented the 30,000-signature petition to Parliament on 14th September 1972. The English wording on the petition read:

> We, the undersigned, do humbly pray that courses in Maori language and aspects of Maori culture be offered in ALL those schools with large Maori rolls and that these same courses be offered, as a gift to the Pakeha from the Maori, in ALL other New Zealand schools as a positive effort to promote a more meaningful concept of integration (The 1972 petition, 2003, p.2).

Over the course of events leading up to the presentation of the petition to Parliament, rangatahi (youth) had come together in the early 1970s to share their intellectual wealth. Ultimately, the actions associated with the Te Reo Māori Petition arose out of this dialogue. This youthful group was to be a seedbed of greater things yet to come. It is notable that many of the members of Ngā Tamatoa and of the Te Reo Māori Society are now leaders at the vanguard of thinking and action in the Māori world. Among them are prominent academics, activists, broadcasters, CEOs, educationists, film-makers, lawyers, linguists and scientists.

Early research on the state of the Māori language

In the 1970s, Dr. Richard Benton of the New Zealand Council for Educational Research conducted research mainly in rural Māori communities in the North Island. Among his senior

assistants were Hīria Tūmoana, Tāwini Rangihau and Lee Smith. Benton published evidence showing that the Māori language was in an extremely perilous state. In referring to his fieldwork of 1974, Benton reports:

> Approximately half the Maori population is under the age of 15 years, but in our sample, at least, only 15% of this age group were able to speak Maori. On the other hand, those aged 45 and over, only 12% of the total Maori population, accounted for 38% of all the Maori speakers (Benton, 1979, pp.23-24).

The essence of Benton's findings was that very few young people spoke the language and that it was mainly the older folk generally from the rural areas, who spoke it. The results of this survey were a catalyst for change, as for the first time, statistical data had been collected on the state of the Māori language. These results simply could not be ignored by the Government, especially in light of the Treaty of Waitangi of 1840 which guaranteed the preservation of the Māori language along with the forests, fisheries and other taonga (treasures).

The convergence of Benton's research which shows the perilous state of the Māori language; the petition calling for the introduction of Māori language into schools; and the general desire by Māori to flourish and not perish, set the scene for unprecedented changes over the ensuing years.

The development of Māori language education

Among the changes within the education system was the establishment of four pilot bilingual schools in the early 1980s. The schools selected were Ruātoki in inland Bay of Plenty, Hiruhārama on the east coast of the North Island, St Peter Chanel in Ōtaki, and Ōmāhu School on the outskirts of Hastings. I was fortunate to gain a teaching position at Ōmāhu School. It was the primary school that I had attended as a child and from which I had received an education that was almost totally in the English language. Teaching in a bilingual school was one of the most rewarding periods of my teaching career. It was a true joy to witness and be part of this major transformational phase: from being a totally monocultural and monolingual education system, to being one that embraced the very language, culture and worldview of the staff and Māori pupils as the tangata whenua (indigenous people) of this land.

Perhaps the most revolutionary change in education in this country, however, came with the advent of kohanga reo (language nests), which were pre-school institutions where children were taught in Māori, instead of English. Not only the language was different but so was the culture. Children were taught again to view the world from a Māori perspective. High profile Māori from across the country like the Te Ariki Tapairu, Queen Te Atairangikaahu; Sir John Bennett; Sir James Hēnare; Te Aopēhi Kara and Canon Wī Te Tau Huata supported the movement from the outset and before long there was a rapid proliferation of kohanga reo across the country. The National Te Kohanga Reo Trust was established and was then led for a long period by Iritana Tawhiwhirangi. Another significant difference of kohanga reo to other pre-school educational initiatives in this country was that these learning nests were whānau-based; that is, based on the wider extended family. This meant that grandparents and parents, as well as the children, were embraced within the confines of the institution. The older folk often became the language exemplars at the site of learning, and most parents of the children began to learn the language so that they could communicate with their chidren in the home in Māori. The benefits were multiple. Furthermore, kohanga reo commenced with no government funding whatsoever. Whānau simply established their own local units and began to take their children and babies along. The choice to withdraw Māori children from the mainstream educational system was a political act for many Māori.

The development of kura kaupapa and wharekura (total immersion primary schools and high schools, respectively) and wānanga (Māori-focussed tertiary institutions) were much slower in emerging than was the case for kohanga reo. One of the major proponents of this total immersion approach to the education of Māori children was Dr. Pita Sharples. He simply set up school facilities at Hoani Waititi Marae without government funding or their 'permission'.

An intiative worthy of note for its popularity among Māori adults is Te Ātaarangi, an approach to teaching conversational Māori using cuisennaire rods in preference to text books. Key developers of this approach include Ngoi Pēwhairangi and Katarina Te Heikōkō Mataira.

The need for intergenerational mother-tongue transmission

From 21st July 2008 Māori Language Week was celebrated once again. The activities for the week were promoted jointly by the Te Taura Whiri i te Reo Māori (Māori Language Commission), Te Puni Kōkiri and the Human Rights Commission. Mr Tīpene Chris is worthy of acknowledgement for his work at Te Puni Kōkiri on Māori language development. It is also beneficial to have a supportive Race Relations Commissioner in Mr Joris de Bres – with the Human Rights Commission regarding speaking one's own language as a basic human right. Dr.Huirangi Waikerepuru stated at the 2008 Traditional Knowledges Conference at The University of Auckland on 8th June 2008 that for a Māori not to be able to speak was tantamount to that person having a disability.

The theme for 2008 was "Māori language in the home". It is a theme which aligns with the teachings of world renowned linguist, Joshua Fishman, who professes that in order for a dying language to regenerate itself, "nothing is as crucial for basic RLS [reverse language shift] success as intergenerational mother-tongue transmission" and that it is most successful with "the intimate community whose members are related to one another via bonds of kinship, affection and communality of interest and purpose" (Fishman, 2001, pp.458-459).

I am a partial recipient of intergenerational mother-tongue transmission as Māori was the first language of communication by my grandparents who raised me. I was born in late 1952 and raised in Māhia, an isolated rural Māori community on the East coast of the North Island. I am fortunate to have grown up hearing the language spoken on a daily basis in a Māori-speaking household. Despite this good fortune, I cannot claim to have acquired the equivalent high quality of language that my grandparents had acquired.

A survey by Te Puni Kōkiri for the period 2001 to 2006 shows that the percentage of Māori adults who used Māori language as a significant language of communication with their pre-schoolers, rose from 18% to 30% (Te Puni Kōkiri, 2007a, p.7). This is a very encouraging sign indeed and gives hope for the future as the whole point of Fishman's theory on reversing language shift is that the language needs to be spoken actively in the home in order to flourish. In other words, regardless of all other efforts to save the language through education and the media, the best thing that could possibly happen was that it be transmitted from one generation to the other within the home on a daily basis.

The role of the media in language change

In 1959, our family migrated to Ōmāhu, a semi-rural Māori community on the outskirts of the cities of Hastings and Napier where I had much greater exposure to the English language. At school the teachers and other children spoke only English. Meanwhile my grandparents had purchased our first radio. The local radio station was 2ZC. Suffice to say, the broadcasts were virtually all in English – both song and talk. I have clear recollections of radio programmes like 'The Archers', a radio serial based on life in an English community. Then, at 9am in the mornings at school, we would sit cross-legged on the mats to listen in to the

national broadcasts to schools. The only Māori language broadcast in those days was a five to ten minute news bulletin on Sunday evenings read by Wīremu Parker and by Ted Nēpia. Not surprisingly, English became the main language of communication for the younger members of our whānau. In retrospect, English-language radio in the 1960s in Hawke's Bay played a major role in acculturating the indigenous people to the ways and language of the Pākehā. In terms of the Māori language, English-language radio had a major part to play in the decline of the Māori language.

Māori have been highly political in their struggles to save their language. In 1985, a claim was lodged with the Waitangi Tribunal. It was headed by Huirangi Waikerepuru and others including Whatarangi Winiata and Piripi Walker of Ngā Kaiwhakapūmau i Te Reo Incorporated (Wellington Māori Language Board) and the NZ Māori Council. The claim was that the Crown had breached the Treaty of Waitangi in failing to protect the Māori language as a taonga (treasure). Recognition of this failing resulted in the passing of the Māori Language Act in 1987, whereby Te Taura Whiri i te Reo Māori (Māori Language Commission) was established and Māori recognised as an official language of this country. Sir Kīngi Ihaka, Dr. Tīmoti Kāretu, Dr. Patu Hohepa and Erima Hēnare have each led the Commission, with the long-serving support of Māori language experts like Mate Kaiwai, Dr.Wharehuia Milroy, Anita Moke, Ngāhina Te Uira and Mīria Simpson.

The late 1980s and early 1990s also saw the advent of Māori language radio. The first battle was to secure radio frequencies for use by Māori. Claims for radio frequencies by Sir Graham Latimer for the NZ Māori Council, and Huirangi Waikerepuru for Ngā Kaiwhakapūmau i te Reo Incorporated were denied by the Minister of Communications. These claims were ultimately appealed before the Privy Council but were unsuccessful. Despite this failure, the judgement enabled Māori to access broadcasting frequencies and assets. Māori took the initiative and began to set up tribal radio stations in the regions despite the lack of availability of government funding to do so. Some of the first radio stations to be set up were the urban radio station, Te Upoko o te Ika which was based in Wellington; and tribal stations Radio Ngāti Porou and then Radio Kahungunu. During the early 1990s government funding became available through NZ On Air and soon thereafter some 20 Māori radio stations were established. Initially there was a battle with Government who preferred to have a single national radio station to minimise costs to the public purse. Due to the intense desire of Māori to maintain their regional dialects and to broadcast local content and cultural knowledge, the Government's agenda was not achieved. Stations were each granted establishment costs in the vicinity of $100,000 and annual operational funding in the vicinity of $300,000. Many of these stations have been in operation now for about 20 years and it was only in the last year or so that an increase of their funding has occurred. This funding is disbursed to Māori radio and television via the funding agency, Te Māngai Pāho.

Radio has been a god-send for Māori language, despite Fishman's theory of intergenerational mother-tongue transmission in the home. The communal style living in large extended family groupings of 3-4 generations in the household, inclusive of grandparents and great grandparents has become increasingly rare with the urbanisation of Māori and the development of the nuclear family unit. This phenomenon has resulted in a severe loss of language exemplars in the home in the form of elders. The advent of Māori language radio has helped to bring the sound of the language as spoken by our kaumātua back into our homes.

In reflecting on the role of English-language radio in the acculturation of Māori to the Pākehā way of life and to the English language, it is notable that Māori have used the same technology to their advantage in response i.e. to re-acculturating Māori back to their own culture and language.

The advent of English-language television has had a similar effect to radio – in over-riding the Māori language in the early days since the 1960s; and in revitalising it again more latterly.

After years of minimal Māori language programming on mainstream television, the national Māori Television Service was established as a stand-alone entity in 2004. On many accounts, the television service has been successful and generally regarded favourably by mainstream New Zealanders, which is important in order to maintain the funding stream from central Government.

Issues of language quality

The percentage of fluent speakers of Māori plummeted to a low point of 8% in 1996 (Te Puni Kōkiri, 2008, p.10) but by 2006 it had risen again to 14% (Te Puni Kōkiri, 2007b, p.iv). While this is an encouraging trend, it behoves us to ensure that the quality of grammar and pronunciation is maintained at a high level. It is noticeable that the grammar used both on television and radio, particularly by the more youthful presenters often has errors. The wrongful use of the 'a'/'o' forms for example, has the ability to convey a message that is totally the opposite to what was intended. Here is an example: 'te kohurutanga a te wahine' and 'te kohurutanga o te wahine'. The first phrase refers to the murder *by* a woman; and the second refers to the murder *of* a woman. One can imagine the ramifications of getting this message confused in a news broadcast by the incorrect use of the 'a' or the 'o' form.

While it is pleasing to see attractive television presenters, the prerequisite for Māori language presenters should certainly be the highest standards of grammar, pronunciation and fluency. Training in these aspects of communication would naturally be complemented by training in other broadcasting competencies along with practical experience as a matter of course. To learn a language properly can take a life-time; yet the craft of broadcasting can be learnt quickly.

The reality of the situation in New Zealand today, however, is that the majority of Māori youth have not been recipients of intergenerational mother-tongue transmission. The fact that they are not necessarily emulating the language spoken by their grandparents' generation is not the fault of youth. For radio and television presenting therefore, the highest possible standard of spoken Māori is necessary, for the provision of good role-modelling of the language to the listening audience.

One approach to help develop good use of grammar and pronunciation is through the consistent use of daily archival recordings of kaumātua. These recordings are excellent learning resources and may be used for the following series of exercises: transcribe the recordings; read the transcriptions aloud along with the voice of the recorded kaumātua; translate the transcriptions into English; and analyse the grammar.

The vision for 2028

In 2003, the Government revised their Māori Language Strategy with the vision that by 2028, the Māori language would be widely spoken (Te Puni Kōkiri, 2007a, p.3). Consequently the results of a survey into attitudes towards the Māori language conducted from 2001-2006 (Te Puni Kōkiri, 2007b) are very encouraging. Some of the key findings may be summarised as follows:

- Māori adults with some degree of proficiency at speaking Māori, rose from 42% to 51%;
- 80% of non-Māori agree that Māori people speaking in public, is a good thing; and
- 70% of non-Māori agree that the Government's decision to fund the Māori Television service is also a good thing; a rise from 51% in 2001.

To achieve the 2028 vision however, more New Zealanders would need to learn the Māori language. With the strong support shown by non-Māori for the language, perhaps the time has come to provide Māori language as a choice within the curriculum of all primary and secondary schools. It is not uncommon overseas for children to learn more than one language. There is no doubt that learning another language increases intellectual capacity, as it helps open the mind to an additional view of the world.

There are now many positive indicators for the Māori language. They include advancements in the area of information technology which will continue to push the Māori language out into the international arena and cyberspace. The surveys show a great increase by Māori in the use of Māori language in e-mails. Microsoft has developed a Māori language version of some of its products and on 23rd July, 2008, a Māori language version of Google was launched. At the time of writing, another significant event is the coming launch by Te Taura Whiri i te Reo Māori on 1st September 2008 of its latest product, *He Pātaka Kupu – te kai a te rangatira*, a monolingual Māori language dictionary. The recent events are timely in that 2008 is the International Year of Indigenous Languages.

The nature of these recent developments bode well for the future. The efforts and struggles of the Māori language activists of the 1970s; of subsequent Māori language revitalists; of whānau, hapū and iwi; of non-Māori supporters; and of Government, have not been in vain and are starting to pay off. We have reason to look forward with optimism but there is no room for complacency.

Conclusion

In reflecting on the events of the past thirty-six years concerning the struggles to save the Māori language from extinction, it is evident that a tremendous amount of progress has been made. Benton's research (1979) was very timely and provided hard evidence for the policy-makers that the Māori language was endangered. This work provided much impetus and validation to the language activists and revitalists to challenge the Government and Crown over their legal obligations to protect the language under the Treaty of Waitangi.

While the focus in this article has been on groups such as Ngā Tamatoa, Te Reo Māori Society, Ngā Kaiwhakapūmau i te Reo Māori and the NZ Māori Council, it is important to recognise that there have been many other un-named individuals and organisations involved in the battle to save the Māori language over the decades. For the articulation of a Māori Language Strategy and the vision for 2028 that the Māori language will be widely spoken, we must acknowledge governmental organisations like Te Puni Kōkiri and Te Taura Whiri i te Reo Māori.

Since 1972, there has been much progress in Māori language development in schooling, in the media and in the home. While there has been a decline in the pool of aged native speakers, and a decline in the quality of Māori language in some quarters, recent surveys on the state and health of the Māori language show that there is reason to be optimistic, though not complacent. The number of Māori speakers continues to increase steadily as does the acceptance of and support for Māori language by non-Māori. Overall, the struggles for revitalising the Māori language have been most successful and have provided a firm foundation for an exciting future.

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Joseph Te Rito (Rongomaiwahine, Ngāti Kahungunu) is leader of the Knowledge Exchange Programme of Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga (Centre of Research Excellence) hosted by The University of Auckland. Dr. Te Rito is also Chairperson of Radio Kahungunu and former General Manager of Te Reo and Tikanga Māori for the Māori Television Service.

E-mail: j.terito@auckland.ac.nz