

A new exploration of ongoing change in the Maori possession system

Kenneth Baclawski Jr. (*Dartmouth College*)

Numerous linguists have described the Polynesian two-class possession system, particularly as to its cross-linguistically resilient semantic bases (Bennardo, 2009 on Tongan; Wilson, 1982 on Hawaiian; Bauer, 1993 on Maori). The analysis proposed here, however, establishes that Maori (Austronesian, New Zealand) is undergoing a previously unnoticed leveling of the possessive paradigm to a single regular possessive marker. Examples (1a-b) below outline the basic distinction between nouns that are marked with A- and O-Class. Tama ‘son’ must take A-Class tāku ‘my,’ while whare ‘house’ must take O-Class tōku ‘my.’

(1a) A-Class form when possessor controls the possessee

tāku tama ‘my son’

(1b) O-Class form when possessor lacks control over possessee

tōku whare ‘my house’

While some leveled forms are acknowledged, their usage is often regarded as restricted and even inferior (Harlow, 2007). Since much of Maori linguistics centers on diachronic revitalization, this study responds to Stanford and Preston’s (2009) call to explore synchronic variation in indigenous minority languages.

This study analyzes patterns of possession encoding, using a corpus of speech data from the daily Maori language television news program Te Kaea. 20 such speakers were coded for relative age, gender, and iwi, a Maori tribal group coterminous with region and dialect group. Education and native fluency could only be reliably ascertained for the eight news anchors. Additionally, the data is also supplemented by two more detailed case studies of native speakers and compared with a sample of early 19th Century Maori texts from an anthology (Biggs, Hohepa, et al, 1990).

Results suggest that the Maori possession system is undergoing a shift away from a semantically based two-class system to a leveled one-class system with some pragmatically based variation. The sample of earlier Maori texts displays consistent two-class possession with the O-Class form used in 54% of the constructions. In contrast, for seven of the speakers analyzed, the O-Class form is used in 84% of possessive constructions, and the instances of A-Class forms are frequently emphatically marked, such as in arguments over ownership, such that tama ‘son’ may take either A-Class tāku or O-Class tōku in contrast with (1a) above. 13 speakers, all of them news anchors and politicians, though, retain the two-class distinction, with a 60% preference for O-Class forms. This lack of leveling is likely due to the teaching of two-class possession in schools as Standard Maori. This study, thus, explores a heretofore-undescribed language shift that examines important issues such as language contact and standardization, begging further research into this understudied indigenous language.