

The mid-twentieth century saw a large migration of New Zealand Māori away from rural areas. In 1945 75% of Māori were rural dwellers, whereas by 1975 75% of the Māori population were urban dwellers. An immediate consequence of this was the loss of people with whom individuals could speak the Māori language. A previous acoustic analysis examined the impact of this movement by comparing the vowels of two older rural Māori speakers born in the 1880s with two younger urban speakers born nearly 100 years later (Maclagan et al, in press). This analysis showed that the older L1 speakers kept the Māori short/long vowel pairs separate in both quality and quantity. The extent of the quality difference between the vowel pairs was unexpected, because the only quality distinction that has been noted in the literature is /a/ ~ /a:/ (Bauer, 1993). By contrast the younger L2 speakers made very few qualitative distinctions and even the quantitative distinctions had decreased. These findings suggested that quality distinctions were changing first, followed by quantity, a finding relevant to vowel mergers and near mergers.

The current presentation examines the process of the move to the city by identifying what happens to the vowel sounds of speakers caught up in this move as young adults. To do this, we acoustically analyse the vowels of four L1 Māori speakers born in the 1930s and 40s, who moved from rural areas to cities during their early adult life. These four speakers behave differently from each other. While all four maintain quality distinctions between some short/long vowel pairs, they vary in the extent of the quantity differences. No-one maintains both quantity and quality differences between all five vowel pairs as the 19th century speakers did. These results suggest that the increasing similarity of the Māori short/long vowel pairs is not a simple case of quality change followed by quantity change, but rather, the change is happening on a vowel by vowel basis, with differences between speakers in which pairs approximate first.

In studies of NZE history and mergers, (Gordon et al, 2004; Maclagan and Gordon, 2003), speakers caught in the middle of changes in progress were found to exhibit extremely variable behaviour. We suggest that these Māori speakers are showing similarly increased variability, with variability decreasing for the younger speakers analysed earlier. More data should determine whether quantity or quality differences decrease first over time and also whether similarities between the long/short vowel pairs observed in the young speakers are maintained.

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