

# Kiwi adults know more te reo Māori than they realize, study reveals

December 21 2020

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Principal Investigator Professor Jen Hay and co-author Professor Jeanette King of UC's New Zealand Institute of Language, Brain and Behaviour. Credit: University of Canterbury

Even when they can't speak te reo Māori, New Zealanders have a

surprisingly sophisticated knowledge of the language, newly published University of Canterbury research shows.

The UC-led team is exploring the very earliest stages of language-learning, by studying knowledge of te reo Māori held by New Zealanders who have never deliberately tried to learn the language.

Principal Investigator Professor Jen Hay, of UC's New Zealand Institute of Language, Brain and Behaviour, says people in Aotearoa are exposed to te reo Māori on a regular basis, including in songs, place names, and in speeches that open and close meetings and official events.

"This makes it an interesting case study of what can be learned, without effort or awareness, from a small amount of regular exposure to a language," Professor Hay says.

During the study, carried out with support from a \$767,000 three-year grant from the Marsden Fund, researchers found non-Māori speakers in New Zealand were able to accurately distinguish real words from highly Māori-like non-words, and they had very good knowledge of the patterns of sounds in the language—knowledge that would seem to require memories of a surprisingly large number of words.

Professor Hay says the team started off being interested about what non-Māori speakers know about how sounds are combined in te reo Māori.

They carried out an experiment in which participants had to rate how much like Māori a variety of non-words were. "Surprisingly, non-Māori speaking New Zealanders behaved almost identically in this task to fluent Māori speakers."

She says the result sent the researchers on a long journey. "We eventually figured out that that non-Māori speaking adults in Aotearoa

have implicit memories of over 1500 te reo Māori words, despite only knowing the meaning of about 70 to 80 on average. It is knowledge of these words that enables them to build up a rich understanding of the language's sound patterns."

The set of words that people have an implicit memory of without knowing their meaning is known as the proto-lexicon.

"Building a proto-lexicon is an important step in language acquisition for infants," Professor Hay says. "But, this study is the first real-world demonstration that adults can also have a large proto-lexicon of a language they are regularly exposed to."

The results have been published this week in *Scientific Reports*, in a paper called "Non-Māori-speaking New Zealanders have a Māori proto-lexicon."

Co-author UC Professor Jeanette King says for many people a proto-lexicon may remain a latent knowledge, but for those who are motivated to learn te reo, the proto-lexicon could help them attach meanings to the words they already know, fast-tracking their learning. "This should give them significant advantages over learners who have not accumulated this previous experience."

Professor King is leading a follow-up Marsden-funded study that will explore the consequences of the initial research for language learning and language teaching.

A second follow-up grant headed by Professor Hay will explore in more detail when this knowledge is acquired.

"We know that children acquire impressive knowledge about a language from small amounts of exposure," she says. "This seems to be an

interesting example of adults' brains operating in the same way. But what we don't yet know is how much exposure you need to the [language](#) to build this proto-lexicon, and whether you need to have actually grown up in New Zealand to have this [knowledge](#)."

She will be working with children, and with people who have spent different phases of their life in New Zealand, to try and understand more about how the proto-lexicon develops.

**More information:** Y. Oh et al. Non-Māori-speaking New Zealanders have a Māori proto-lexicon, *Scientific Reports* (2020). [DOI: 10.1038/s41598-020-78810-4](#)

Provided by University of Canterbury

Citation: Kiwi adults know more te reo Māori than they realize, study reveals (2020, December 21) retrieved 15 August 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-12-kiwi-adults-te-reo-mori.html>

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