

The Maori language may be alive - but it is not well

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I wrote recently about the role that is being played by English in killing off indigenous languages around the world. I pointed to the Pacific as an area where English is doing some of the greatest damage, and I singled out the Polynesian languages, Hawaiian and New Zealand Maori, as being particularly endangered.

Mr Oldfield from Acle then kindly wrote to the EDP to assure me that I could stop worrying about Maori; and his letter was published under the heading "the Maori Language is Alive and Well".

I wish that that was true; but sadly it is not. The Maori language is alive. But it is not well.

A language is only truly alive if it has native speakers and if those native speakers can pass their language on to their children naturally in an environment where they can use the language on a normal basis in their everyday lives. A language which has no native speakers is dead. And a language which is losing its native speakers is dying.

Mr Oldfield points out - perfectly correctly - that some schools do teach Maori. The language is employed to an extent on TV. And Maori words are used



■ The Maori language is dying out like so many others, says Peter Trudgill.

Picture: WAYNE DROUGHT/AP

in New Zealand English. But the 2013 census showed that only 14pc of adult Maoris can speak Maori well. So the sad truth is that only about 2pc - one in 50 - of the population of New Zealand today are fluent speakers of the indigenous New Zealand language.

Even this 2pc seems set to decline because things are not moving in the right direction: 39pc of Maori over 65 report being able to speak the language, but this is a substantial drop from 53pc in 1996. Amongst Maori children aged five to nine, only 17pc can speak Maori compared to 22pc in 1996. And anyway, very many of these child speakers speak something

which is not really Maori. They have grown up speaking English as their native language. They have learnt Maori through educational programmes. And their "Maori" often consists of sentences containing Maori words but using English grammatical structures.

Mr Oldfield's contention that English is more likely to die out than Maori is very wide of the mark. There are no monolingual Maori speakers left in New Zealand. The majority of Maori are monolingual English speakers; and the number of Pakeha (European origin) Kiwis who can speak Maori fluently is extremely small.