

# Performance, Language Revitalisation, and Digital Technology

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## Abstract



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This article explores the role dramatic uses of digital technology play in language revitalisation for indigenous people in New Zealand. In particular it examines three illustrative examples: a film, a Māori television channel, and the use of popular websites. It suggests that Schechner's model of performance as a continuum reaching from entertainment to efficacy is a useful tool for analysing the impact of performance through technologies on language revitalisation and language learning.

## Keywords

*Language revitalisation; culture; digital media; performance studies; Māori; indigenous*

Small rubber-limbed warriors wield battle staves in ritual actions of challenge and welcome before they morph to form the logo and the name of the Māori Television channel.

A Māori Portia receives Bassanio in a house filled with ancient Pacific carvings and talks with him in the flowing poetic metaphors of classical Māori language.

A teenager receives a short text in Māori on his mobile. It is an interesting blend of real words and cryptic abbreviations. He adds a few key strokes and forwards it to two mates.

What is happening in each of these situations is an act within a drama of language revitalisation: a drama being played out simultaneously in both digital and 'real world' spaces and against a bigger drama of colonisation, decolonisation and self-determination.

We report that drama here in the hope it will be a useful addition to and extension of current research not only about processes for drama for second or other language learning, but also about how societies perform changes they seek to introduce.

### **Introduction: the context in which the language revitalisation takes place**

Māori culture is traditionally a strongly performative and oral one. The marae, the traditional communal meeting ground, is essentially a performative space where significant events in life are celebrated, such as receiving important visitors or farewelling the dead. The forecourt or marae atea is where encounters are played out: the home people and visitors are first positioned oppositionally, and gradually, through a ritual of encounter, are united. Debate inside the carved meeting house is richly oratorical and punctuated by movement and gesture. Ancestors carved on the walls listen and participate through their reminder of genealogical connections and tribal history. The dining hall is the site where food is shared to bring the sacredness of earlier encounters to a state of everyday normalcy. Here songs and dances entertain the people as they talk and eat.

The marae still operates as a centre of Māori life today, but its existence, its rituals and particularly its language have been threatened by the impact of colonisation. It is the last thirty years or so that have seen a regeneration. This has taken a number of visible forms, among them the restoration and development of marae, claims for return of land or compensation for unjust confiscations, increased strategising for self-determination, and revitalisation of Māori language and its tribal dialects.

This article examines the way a number of groups draw on the legacy of marae as a performative space in order to use the dramatic potential of digital technologies as a platform for developing identity, preserving customary values and accelerating language learning.

### **Methodological approach to the study, and position of the authors**

The examples in this discussion are drawn from studies currently being undertaken by the authors: the impact of Māori television, and a particular tribal strategy (Ngāi Tahu) for language revitalisation. It also draws on an earlier study of Don Selwyn's *The Māori Merchant of Venice* (Greenwood 2002; Greenwood 2003). The study of Māori television utilises analysis of programmes and archival texts, and a number of unstructured interviews. The study of the Ngāi Tahu language strategy draws on the personal experience of one of the writers in the development of tribal strategy and also on analysis of documents and other texts. All three studies are shaped by an approach to research that is reflective of indigenous values and intentions and is discussed below.

As authors we both relate strongly though in different ways to the project of Māori self-determination and to the specific data discussed in the cases. Lynne Harata is Māori. The tribal history of Ngāi Tahu is her history, and as a teacher educator, and tribal developer she has been an active participant in the events and strategies described. Janinka is a Czech-born childhood immigrant to New Zealand and acknowledges both Māori and European teachers in her adopted country.

### **Conceptual framework and review of literature**

Internationally teachers are looking to drama as a tool to facilitate and accelerate language learning. For the most part the literature addressing this field focuses on the learning of English as second language learning and other language (for example Winston & Cheung 2009; Kao & O'Neill 1998). In this article we look at the process of indigenous language regeneration. The use of performance processes in the regeneration of native language has been addressed repeatedly in the practice of Māori in New Zealand: in the 1930s Te Puea Heranagi and Apirana Ngata evolved the modern Māori concert party as a means not only of raising money to rebuild marae but also of developing a vehicle for young people to encounter and practice Māori language; in the 40s the renowned Māori orator Pei Te Hurinui translated *The Merchant of Venice* into classical Māori, the text of which was used more recently by Don Selwyn to make the film *The Māori Merchant of Venice*, discussed below. The navigation by Māori of western and ancestral performative styles has been addressed in the literature (for instance Potiki 1991; Huria 1999; Greenwood 2002; Greenwood & Wilson 2006), as has an acknowledgement that Māori and bicultural theatre play a role in affirming Māori identity and in celebrating Māori language. However, there is little or no reporting of how performative processes have been used to encourage native language revitalisation.

Also relevant to this study are concepts of performance as both entertainment and ritual and as direct theatre, and of the relationships between language, power and society.

Schechner (1988) draws a continuum of performance that reaches from entertainment at one end to efficacy at the other, and suggests that ritual occurs when efficacy predominates. Ritual is characterised by collective creativity, a participating and believing audience, a reference to some overarching spiritual realm, and productive links to symbolic time. Entertainment exists for the here and now and for fun. The audience, watches, appreciates and criticises, and creativity is individual. The difference between entertainment and ritual is not so much in any of the constituent performative elements but rather in the social group's belief in the purpose of the performance and in the ownership of the process. It is our suggestion that, in different ways, the processes in the cases we describe can be considered

from both ends of the continuum. They can also be considered in terms of direct theatre, which Schechner (1993) describes as a situation in which “large public spaces are transformed into theatre where collective reflexivity is performed” (p83). He stresses that he does not use the word theatre metaphorically, and he itemises the audience in terms of not only the participants, but also the journalists, especially television reporters, and the mass spectatorship television draws.

Interdependencies between language, culture and identity are repeatedly addressed in the literature. A seminal work in terms of the New Zealand context of indigenous language revitalisation is the Report of the Waitangi Tribunal (1986) on the Māori claim that language is a hereditary right protected by the Treaty. It collates the evidence of tribal elders, examines the unsatisfactory record of monocultural schooling in advancing the interests of Māori, and affirms the integral role language plays in vitalising and transmitting culture, in building connections between people, families, their histories and their ancestral land, and in enabling people to express their values and thoughts in ways that are consistent with their Māori identity. Such affirmations have resonances with the writings of a number of socio-linguists, such as Gee (1992) who details how a society endows its members with a ‘Discourse’ that predicates conceptualisations, values and social position as well as semantic resources.

Before discussing the cases that follow it might also be useful to provide a very brief account of New Zealand history, the loss of language as well as land through colonisation, the significance of the Treaty of Waitangi, and the growth of Māori drive towards self-determination.

### **History of New Zealand: colonisation, language loss, decolonisation**

Māori populated New Zealand over a thousand years before the arrival of Europeans. They belong to a number of different tribal groups (iwi). Most Māori will identify themselves by their tribal affiliation to a varying extent, and by being Māori. For example, although the agenda of self-determination is a pan-Māori one, the structures for achieving it in education or in health are often tribal. There is a distinct language that is Māori, but each iwi has its own dialect variations, particularly in

vocabulary and pronunciation. Similarly there is a cosmology and a value system that is distinctly Māori, although mythic stories vary from iwi to iwi.

The formal act of British colonisation took place in 1840 with the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi. This had been preceded by several decades of contact with European and American whalers and traders and of growing numbers of British settlers. The history of colonisation has many common elements with other countries in the former British empire, such as Canada or parts of Africa. Such elements include loss of land, loss of language, erosion of culture, economic deprivation, social and political marginalisation. One significant difference is the Treaty of Waitangi, a contract which guarantees protection of all the rights, including ownership rights, of Māori. It delineates a promise of partnership between Crown (now usually interpreted as Government) and Māori that defines New Zealand as a *bicultural* society, in which both Māori and English are acknowledged as official languages and in which the struggles for sovereignty and self-determination are played out. (The demands for multiculturalism are also important; what is contested is the centre into which multiple cultures will be included.) Those who want to know more might read Orange (2004), Walker (1990), Kawharu (1989), Smith (1999).

Claims to the right to self-determination have never been off a Māori agenda, but they gained particular force during the 1970s and 1980s of the previous century and continue today. The struggle for language recovery and revitalisation is integral to all facets of development as cultural values and concepts cannot be separated from the language that gives them expression. Language revitalisation is not only about the socially accepted use of surface discourse but also about the currency of the world view that animates the language.

Our illustrative examples span a range of performance engagements. The first is one that is overtly located in theatre and film.

### **1. The work of Don Selwyn and *The Māori Merchant of Venice***

Don was one of the primary 'movers and shakers' in the development of Māori theatre, film and television (Greenwood 1999), and is often popularly called the

‘godfather’ of Māori theatre. He was pulled into theatre by the great Māori opera singer, Inia Te Wiata, who saw the potential of theatre to express the stories that Māori had to tell. In the 1960s the Māori Theatre Trust was formed. It demonstrated the production values of combining Māori mythology and traditional Māori performance forms with the lighting and sound technology of the modern stage. However, as the Trust gradually turned from making innovative theatre to being an ambassadorial and commercial concert party, Don broke away and engaged in grassroots productions of new Māori plays and, with a number of his contemporaries, became involved in New Zealand’s new film and television industry. He saw the potential of television “to bring much more global coverage for minority or indigenous perspectives” (Selwyn cited in Greenwood 2002).

One of his projects was the setting up of Tamaki Creative Māori Arts, a training programme for first actors and writers, then production technicians. “One of the things that struck me, being an actor and working in front of the camera was that there were not many Māori behind the camera,” he said, “and that’s what drove us to start the film school. Now it’s not an issue any more because there are so many” (Selwyn cited in Greenwood 2002). Don further commented that the shared cultural perspective brought by Māori technical crew members was integral to the success of Māori film-making. The availability of a good array of Māori production specialists is also an important factor in the current success of Māori television.

Over time the film school developed into He Taonga Productions. Using a platform of low cost digital technology, and a significant understanding of the craft, Don produced a number of cutting-edge Māori films. Among these is *The Māori Merchant of Venice*. In the 1940s Pei Te Hurinui, intrigued by both the character of Shylock and the cadences of Shakespeare, had translated the play into classic Māori language. His work can be seen as an assertion of the capacity of Māori language (then viewed by many of the colonists as a primitive language) to communicate all the nuances of a Shakespearean play. It was also a way of keeping classical language alive. Don was “totally inspired by the ability of [Pei] who hadn’t come through a Western education system but had the capacity to handle the classic English language and translate it into classical Māori” (Selwyn cited in Greenwood

2002). Unable to get a commercial backer, Don created the film with digital camera and a basement studio editing suite. It has been shown commercially around the world.

The film is a landmark in a number of ways. It records the magnificent cadences of Pei Te Hurinui's classical Māori spoken, simply and strongly, by cast of native speakers. It frames the racial tension in Shakespeare's play within the context of a cross-cultural New Zealand and provokes us to reconsider our own society. Perhaps most importantly, it challenges our understandings of what is *normal* by situating the entire action within a Māori framework, where even the immigrants, in this case the Jews, speak Māori and are surrounded by Māori visual motifs. The very act of framing a Shakespearean play within a Māori context (so that non-speakers can only access the text through short subtitles translating the Māori text into everyday English) is an interesting performance of postcolonial deconstruction. By situating the Māori world as the power-culture that assimilates exotic foreign literature it poses a reconsideration of the assimilative presumptions of a colonizing culture. Yet at the same time as it questions, it allows a celebration of the imported art within the context of traditional Māori oratory and poetry.

Before he turned to theatre Don had trained and worked as a teacher. He came to see theatre and film as a more subtle and persuasive way of provoking thought and new understanding. Don perceived the advent of digital technology as a movement that could assist the development of Māori and enable Māori to speak in ways that are really Māori and to share them with not only New Zealand but also the wider world.

The next example explores the role of television as a performance of the communal space that has traditionally been created by marae.

## **2. Māori Television, and the creation of a virtual marae**

Māori Television is now in its eighth year of operation and has two channels, one of which operates as a full time 'public access' channel. Māori Television's significant difference from mainstream television is that it began as the result of Māori initiative,

is operated by Māori for Māori (in the first instance) and has an explicit agenda of supporting Māori development, and the use of Māori language.

As Māori television has grown it is also watched by an increasing number of non-Māori New Zealanders who enjoy its home-grown and relatively non-commercial focus. In this way its educational role has expanded to one of teaching all New Zealanders something about Māori language, values, perspectives and arts as well as inducting them into a view of New Zealand that is Māori-focused.

One of its key roles is the promotion and active teaching of Māori language. Its website explains: “Māori Television has been established as one of a number of important initiatives to promote and revitalise the Māori language. The aim of our channel is to play a major role in revitalising language and culture that is the birthright of every Māori and the heritage of every New Zealander” (Māori television 2011). This project takes a number of forms. There are regular short programmes where vocabulary and grammar structures are introduced and practiced much in the way they might be in a language lab. There are programmes that are completely in Māori language (usually with subtitles) that allow those with Māori language competency to practice aurally, and to experience the cadence and richness of the language as a communicative tool. Language contexts include elders recounting tribal histories, news reporting, debates on topical issues, youth programmes discussing contemporary music, sports and entertainment. There are also a number of bilingual programmes that in a range of ways reflect the way Māori speakers weave both English and Māori languages together in informal conversation. This might be an interviewer speaking Māori with an elder and then turning to the audience and recounting part of the narrative in English. Or it may be a dialogue that reflects the character of ‘Māori English’, a particular New Zealand dialect of English which incorporates Māori words that more readily capture concepts that seem difficult to express in English. The television channel acts as a vehicle of cultural reproduction in terms of both Māori language and Māori styles of expression and normalises them, not only for Māori viewers but also for the increasing number of non-Māori – in a 2009 count more than 1.5 million New Zealanders tuned in to every

month (Māori television 2009) – some of whom, turn to the channel as an escape from imported pulp serials.

Content is as important as language. For example, some items in the Māori news are the same as in the mainstream news, though they may well come with a different interpretative commentary. However, there are other items which would probably never be seen on mainstream news. They are indicative of the different ways that cultures frame their world, and in this way the channel serves to make visible a Māori sense of values. The same occurs with documentaries which may, for example, record tribal histories or dialogues with elders about an aspect of ancestral knowledge, perhaps the history of a place, the use of a medicinal plant, or the right ways to harvest seafood. At the time of its launch the chairman of the channel explained: “From its inception the board of Māori Television has held a strong view that this channel should also be a window into the Māori world, imparting knowledge to all New Zealanders” (Walden 2004).

The channel imports a number of foreign programmes. Among these are documentaries reporting the development, and particularly the language revitalization programmes, of other indigenous peoples. There are also foreign movies, with a special but not exclusive focus on films in other languages than English and those that highlight some aspect of non-Anglo cultural identity. A respected contemporary Māori scholar, Mason Durie (2001), has defined the Māori educational agenda as enabling Māori to be citizens of the global world and of a Māori world. The imported programmes situate the global world within the perspective of a Māori centre. Moreover the privileging of non-Anglo voices within this global context serves to remind viewers, Māori and non-Māori, that other discourses exist outside those that define New Zealand’s postcolonial mainstream.

Design is an important component of the way Māori television presents a Māori perspective. Digital technology offers a relatively inexpensive means for creating environmental design and animation. The studio sets feature Māori motifs. One of the transformations of the cartoon warriors described earlier is to form the words “ma ratou, ma matou, ma koutou, ma tatou”, which the website briefly translates as ‘for everyone’. The sequence is about Māori branding, but it is also a digital enactment of

an important ritual of encounter and it serves to evoke resonances of the spirituality of people coming together for debate and entertainment, a sense of spirituality that is not usually connected with mainstream television.

Encounter is seen as an integral part of the Māori television agenda. There is actual physical encounter. The studios have been designed to recreate the open spaces of a marae “so that, at any time of the day or night, members of the public can view television being made” (Māori television 2009b). Frequently groups of visitors are ritually welcomed and their relationship to a programme and to the channel formally recognised. There are opportunities for any member of the public to ‘have their say’ by coming in and recording their message at Te Kokonga Kōrero, Speaker’s Corner, with the opportunity of it being screened. And of course there is virtual encounter on air. Part of that encounter is the profiling of Māori musicians, painters, sculptors, writers and other artists who might otherwise linger in the margins of mainstream media, and who now, to a greater or lesser extent, are part of the overall shape of contemporary New Zealand culture.

As Gee (1992) explains, each society endows its members with a discourse that both empowers them to communicate with each other and constrains them in what they will communicate about, and thus know. The effect of Māori television is to give power to discourses that reflect Māori values and knowledge systems. It is not simply a matter of giving them air time, it is also about presenting them as normal rather than exotic, of placing them at the centre rather than at the margins of the performance of society’s recognised discourses.

The next example reports use of popular digital technologies. It is taken from a broader language revitalisation project by Ngāi Tahu.

### **3. A tribal pop-digital strategy**

Ngāi Tahu is the tribe who asserts chiefly rights to most of the South Island of New Zealand. Traditionally the people migrated seasonally around the food sources of their region and the history of land acquisition in the South Island lead to socio-political marginalization and severe loss of the southern dialects of Māori (Evison

1993). In its recent language revitalisation programme Ngāi Tahu identified that the intergenerational transfer of Māori language as the main form of communication had not occurred within South Island Ngāi Tahu for about 80 years and in some areas for 130 years. It also identified that there were approximately only three remaining native speakers still living within the tribe that spoke forms of the southern dialect (Te Karaka, 2001).

The challenge has been to build areas within the South Island with a high enough density of fluent speakers of Māori for intergenerational transfer to re-occur and at the same time to develop and maintain links with members living in other regions (perhaps separated by the Southern Alps) or overseas. The tribe has a high number, nearly sixty percent, of its members under thirty years of age. As a result of specialist advice Ngāi Tahu's language strategy, *Kotahi Mano Kāika, Kotahi Mano Wawata* (KMK) was developed. (Translation: a thousand homes where the language is alive and transferred from one generation to another to achieve a thousand dreams and aspirations.) A particularly effective innovation has been the adoption of digital technologies.

One of the first KMK initiatives, in 2002, was to set up a website (<http://www.kmk.Māori.nz>) through which Ngāi Tahu families could access a range of language resources highlighting southern dialects. The resources could be downloaded, so overcoming the barrier of distance. The downloadable resources include a hip hop and R'n'B album for youth with a compilation of youth culture music by various Ngāi Tahu artists. Other contemporary and traditional music was produced for a wide range of age groups and was also made available on the site. The songs have downloadable MP3 sound files that can be played on many devices including iPods and PDAs. Access is free, not just to Ngāi Tahu tribal members but also to anyone who uses the site. This has proved to be a less expensive way of providing cultural learning tools than costly glossy printed books. The biggest advantage was enhanced access. The website continues to be developed over time to offer an increasing array of language learning resources for all age groups.

In addition, popular digital technologies have been seen as a way to persuade still unengaged groups in the tribe about the importance of language revitalization as a

key to revitalizing Ngāi Tahu culture and identity (Te Aika, 2004). *Generation Reo* (<http://www.generationreo.com>) was developed from the strategies used by chain email campaigns in which people receive messages, read them and then send them off to their friends. This chain email strategy was tested over one weekend in 2006 and had 900 hits and became the forerunner of the larger Generation Reo campaign (Tarena, 2009). Ngāi Tahu celebrity voices are used in the campaign and help pull on tribal 'heartstrings' to encourage tribal members to participate.

A promotional DVD was produced in 2008 for parents about raising bilingual children. Families were interviewed and featured in the DVD talking about issues about raising children speaking Māori in the Ngāi Tahu dialect. Only a limited number of DVD's were produced, and so in another initiative to reach the masses the DVD video was put on *Bebo* and *You Tube*, as well as the main *Generation Reo* website. This redistribution of the DVD content has reached wider audiences who continue to engage with the video and write their own reactions and thoughts about it through blogs and commentaries on *Bebo* or *You Tube*. In this way these e-learning approaches aimed to blend in with the learners' family life and provide cross-generational access to digital technologies.

It is now fast becoming a trend among young people of Ngāi Tahu to place personal and family pictures and narratives on the *Bebo* website as a way of communicating among each other and of establishing links with relatives overseas. Sometimes they will write in Māori, and sometimes in the blend of English and Māori discussed earlier. The process may be considered as participation in popular culture, but it can also be construed as participation in sites of cultural construction in which young people activate the language they are learning and reconnect with relations from whom they have been separated by the modern tribal diaspora. In this way it can be read as a performance of identity.

Among further suggestions for further developments on the website is a wikipedia of ancestors to help regenerate knowledge of genealogy connecting descendants with their notable ancestors, and to helping them learn more about the traditions of the ancestors, and so bringing the past into the present (Tarena, 2009). Access to the words and living traditions of ancestors is one of the distinguishing features of a

marae: it is not only the living who meet there, the living are accompanied by their ancestors and their links through their ancestors to each other, to the land and to the wider cosmos.

### **Performance through digital technologies**

Our proposition in this article is that it is the performative nature of the engagement with the digital technologies described that creates a context and a means for communal language revitalisation and individual learning.

At the entertainment end of the performance spectrum, texting, *Bebo* and *You-tube* are fun, immediate and allow individual creativity. At the same time they are educative in that they allow participants to be spect-actors, both watching the action and become actively joining in it, acting and reflecting on the overall performance at the same time.

At the efficacy end of the spectrum, the digital tools allow the performance of a communal ritual enacting not only what it means to be Māori today but also the struggle to create a strong, resilient and self-determining Māori society of the future. They are an enactment of the Ngāi Tahu tribal pepeha or guiding mantra: Mō tātou, ā, mā kā uri a muri ake nei; for us and the generations to come. Language and the cultural concepts that underlie language are a core part of that enactment.

In addition, the engagement of the tribe, and particularly its young people, in the active process of communicating through cyberspace becomes a form of direct theatre, played out for the rest of the world to watch and take notice of.

In the ways we described earlier both Māori television and Don's film also operate at each of these levels.

Traditional tribal land-based marae, which once again are strong throughout New Zealand, also operate within those three performative roles. They are direct theatre in that they perform collective reflexivity of Māori cultural values and of Māori self-determination. They are sites of efficacious performance through rituals that impose times and spaces of sacredness, and that remove sacredness and restore normal

everyday behaviour. They are sites of performance for entertainment both to delight visitors and to punctuate and flavour serious debate. And along the length of the spectrum they are sites where performance serves a number of educative and healing functions. In the cases we have described digital technologies build virtual marae where they play out some of those functions in both real and cyberspace.

Māori are the indigenous people of New Zealand.

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