

The colonisation of the colour pink: Berlin and Kay's basic colour terms in historic and modern Māori

Abstract

All languages have basic colour terms: the fundamental categories of colour that are irreducible. Māori, the language of the indigenous people of New Zealand, demonstrates an instructive case where drastic innovations in colour terminology took place while conforming to Berlin and Kay's Colour Hierarchy. We demonstrate how and when Māori accrued new colour terms to replace existing terms in its immediate ancestor, Proto-Eastern-Polynesian, and eventually adapted pre-colonial words for the colour terms (except for the colour pink) to match the English colour categories. Two specific foci are (i) how Māori's colour categories evolved before and after Europeans' colonisation of New Zealand and (ii) how Māori's colour system was affected by the grass-roots revitalisation of the language after decades of overwhelming language shift. While Contemporary Māori is at the final stage (Stage VII) of Berlin and Kay's hierarchy, as is English, the evidence is that Māori was at Stage IV pre-colonisation, possessing only five native colour categories. Surprisingly, all five categories accrued new terms following the Polynesian settlement of New Zealand, demonstrating a case of rapid change within 500 years. The adoption of definite colour names for the eleven English language basic colour terms appears to be very recent (within the last 20 years), when levelling of pre-existing variants has also taken place. To date, there is still no consensus on what some of the terms should be. The evolution of Māori's colour categories thus constitutes an illuminating case of how colonisation-induced language contact may impact the basic vocabulary of a language.