

BOOK REVIEW

Killing Te Reo Maori: An indigenous language facing extinction. Moon, Paul. (2018). Palmerston North, New Zealand: Campus Press. 96 pp. ISBN 978-0-9941192-6-1.

Killing Te Reo Maori: An Indigenous Language Facing Extinction is written by historian Professor Paul Moon. This review provides a brief overview of the book's contents, before outlining five aspects of the book: its peer-review status, its literature stance, its intent, its language and its contribution to the literature.

The book is organised into just four sections outside of a standard introduction, conclusion and notes section. The four sections are "The Present Condition of Te Reo Māori", "Te Reo Māori's Status Issues", "The Jubilant Monster" and "The 'Sovietisation' of Te Reo Māori". Each section blends a multitude of different topics into some shorter quasi-chapters. In the initial section of the book, the first chapter discusses Census data and the history of the Te Kōhanga Reo movement, followed by an attempt to define native speakers, and then returns to Census data again. In the second chapter, the role of second language speakers is discussed on its own. The first section concludes with a chapter on second language speakers and their apparent "accents". Organising the content in this way makes the arguments very hard to follow, and another method would almost certainly have avoided unnecessary returns to the same topics.

Section 3 is, possibly, the most interesting. Section 3, "The Jubilant Monster", asserts

Nietzsche's and Darwin's work in biological evolution in an effort to explain why languages undergo change. Here, it is claimed that evolution is "driven more by internal forces" and so "the language (and its accompanying culture) alone are responsible for its survival" (p. 56). There is a lengthy discussion around evolution and natural ecological change here, which certainly have a home in the sciences. However, as experts well know, language loss is often brought about by more unnatural players in the ring (such as language subtraction and forced assimilation, to name just two). Indigenous language loss, in particular, also exists partly because of oppressive exploitation of people and resources (Crystal, 2006, pp. 74–76; Te Huia, 2013, p. 4). Surely, anyone truly interested in language revitalisation would endeavour to fully understand language shift as a core construct of their work, but these are ignored entirely by the author.

The fourth and final section, entitled "The Sovietisation of Te Reo Māori", seems to be a "click-bait" style title. There is no further analysis of what the title actually means, but the chapter attempts to connect the economics of supply and demand, and language. It is possible the author felt this was a new conversation to have, stating that "economics is a foreign field to most of those engaged in or strategizing

about language revitalisation” (p. 68). The economics of te reo Māori has been a part of local revitalisation discussions for two decades (Grin & Vaillancourt, 1998), and the economics of language policy is also a contemporary, dedicated field of study (Gazzola & Wickström, 2016), which the author appears to have missed.

Turning now to the review. Certain key information about an academic work is useful in giving weight to the status of peer review undergone to prepare its contents. This book’s publisher, Campus Press, has no website or catalogue, and is not affiliated to a commercial address. There is no foreword or acknowledgement section, which are typical of scholarly works. A book does not need to display all of this information, but it is perhaps unusual to omit all of it. There is one brief comment of support on the back cover, which is the only indication of peer review.

The book takes an unusual literature stance. It claims to be a “clear and clinical diagnosis” (p. 9) of language health. Deep knowledge of the Māori language discipline is implied (pp. 3, 4, 5, 12), and its literature is reduced to “unsubstantiated myths, impoverished logic, and forlorn myth-making” (p. 35). Such confident assertions are coupled with the book’s claim that “there is no intention at this [book] being anything like a comprehensive analysis of the issues raised” (p. 7). It is difficult to connect the claims that the author is well versed in the literature, when an entire body of literature is dismissed. As a brief aside, the “constraints of space” are cited to justify lack of analysis (p. 7). This seems strange, given that length is an author’s prerogative in books.

The dismissal of the literature altogether means the book lacks mention of scholars who ought to be present in its discussions. For example, “Te Reo Māori as a Taonga” is debated in the book (pp. 38–43). Here, the author problematises the description of the language as “taonga”, with the varied connotations of sacredness that are inevitably attached to the language when the word taonga is used.

However, Professors Higgins and Rewi (2014) have discussed this both in academic literature (Higgins & Rewi, 2014) and in public spaces (Radio New Zealand, 2016; Victoria University of Wellington, 2015) for some time. Without acknowledging such acclaimed scholars, it is difficult to gauge just how well the author has read this field of literature, prior to dismissing it entirely.

Other literature peculiarities are present. International scholarship is presented as if to be true of, and written about, te reo Māori. A discussion on second language speakers of Māori as “imposters”, “deceivers” and “language cheats” (p. 31) draws on the work of Professor Ingrid Piller (2002; cited as ‘L. Piller’ by the author). She is well known internationally, but does not work with te reo Māori or minority languages of the world. It is also unclear exactly what the words imposter and deceiver are suggesting, since Piller (2002) points out that in these instances, “no deceit is involved” (p. 198). Secondly, as a broad, international text, Crystal’s (2000) seminal *Language Death* and supposed comments about te reo Māori failures piqued the interest of the reviewer (p. 10). The book cites that, according to Crystal, “various stocktakes carried out of speakers of Te Reo Māori frequently tend to omit policy” (p. 10). Inspection of *Language Death* found the source hardly mentions the Māori language, except for minor glosses on pages outside of those given in the book, which cite different topics entirely. Using international literature to support very local arguments makes those arguments difficult to support, given there is a plethora of more relevant scholarship available.

The book’s intent is unclear. There is an early claim the book “is certainly not an attack on Te Reo Māori” (p. 2). It is, apparently, an “assault on some of the entrenched themes and approaches associated with attempts to revive the language” (p. 2). It is unclear exactly what “themes and approaches” are under attack, as they are not defined or mentioned elsewhere in those words. Māori language

“revitalisationists” are described as “snake-oil salesmen (and women)”, and “apocryphal cockroaches” (p. 6). Whoever that community is would certainly be a target, though they are not defined by the author. Such zealous reduction from academics is rare, and I wonder what this “assault” intends to achieve. Additionally, the author states the book is “no exercise in academic revisionism” (p. 5), so it is theoretically possible the book is not intended as an intellectual, scholarly contribution. Even so, I do wonder how this marries with such a scholarly intention as a book, written by an academic, in an academic style. It also seems decidedly revisionist, since so much of the content appears without substantiation, and so outwardly refuses to engage with the literature.

The comment regarding academic revisionism is particularly interesting to consider when pitched with the claim that the “immediate spur for the book” was the author’s own academic colleagues, and their “website dealing with aspects of the revitalisation of Te Reo Māori”, where the research is allegedly “parody” (p. 2). Clearly, the academic community are a target for this book. However, the URL reference provided as evidence does not exist and there is no analysis of its content by the author, so it is simply not possible for the reader to corroborate any claim of parody. Two quoted spelling errors from the website are all that is provided to the reader as evidence of improper scholarship. One of those errors appears to be a discretionary comma. These aspects all seem very contradictory and quite overstated, and so, I am still unsure about the exact intent of the book.

This book contains many editing oversights of its own. The cover excludes a macron on Māori. A census is claimed to have been previously completed in the year “2026” (p. 13). The letter “o” written with a macron is redundantly italicised in the word “Kōkiri” (p. 16). There are erring phrases, such as “no long being learned” (p. 24) and “to forge a peace” (p. 39). A possessive suffix is frequently added to “Te Reo

Māori’s” (p. 17, 34, 62, 72). American and British English spelling are interchanged at will, such as “strategizing” and “revitalisation” (p. 68). An irrelevant letter “c” is present in “some c what” (p. 78). Promoter is incorrectly written as “promotor” (p. 74). Occasional oversight is admissible but so many in one text is unfortunate. This is especially the case here, given this book hangs so much on two minor spelling errors (mentioned in the previous paragraph).

The book obstructs critique, stating it “will certainly be seen by some in the ‘industry’ as a sort of apostasy which deserves denouncement and contempt” (p. 6). Why this guard is written in the very text of the book is unknown, so long too before anyone could have read it well enough to form an opinion. Interestingly, while obstructing criticism, the book also claims to blow the whistle on “Te Reo Māori revitalisationists” who “do not have a monopoly right to deliberate on the fate of the language, and neither do their labours afford them immunity from scrutiny” (pp. 6, 7). No evidence is provided in the book to show this is the belief of such a community. I am unable to reconcile the book’s objection to an unverified statement about immunity from criticism, and the gesture towards claiming that liberty for itself.

“Historians are no more qualified than anyone else to make prophecies” and “the question of whether Te Reo Māori can be saved demands an informed response” (p. 77). For the few points raised here, this prophecy of killing te reo Māori might not be as informed as it contends to be. Māori language academics, too, are absolutely qualified to explore the field freely, as well as determine the scholarly value of contributions to its literature. This external entry, perhaps, will have its uses, such as teaching the evaluation of critical thought, and the politics of academic voice in literature.

Glossary

kōkiri	attack, assault, champion, promote, advocate, lead
taonga	precious, an heirloom to be passed down through the different generations of a family, protected natural resource
te reo Māori	the Māori language

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