

## A knack that's giving offence

What's wrong with 'Naki? Apart from the cultural insult caused by playing around with a Māori name, there are things nobody has been brave or silly enough to mention.

The word is too close to “knacker”, whose usual meaning is the old English one related to being “knackered” or wrecked, had it, bugged, no use any more. Old horses were sent to the knackers yard. Steptoe and Son's junk business was a version.

If you went to school in the 50s and 60s, knackers also had another, less polite application related to the male genital area. It was often used to refer to a particularly painful knock in sport if a ball hit below the belt.

For cricket, where a fast ball in the knackers might reduce the chances of a male player producing offspring, there was that useful invention, the box. It protected the knackers from harm, although not altogether from pain, depending on the speed of the errant cricket ball.

Of course, TV sports commentators these days don't refer to knackers when a player goes down and rolls around in agony in rugby, but those of us with an experienced eye know full well which part of the nether regions has been struck.

So, apart from being offended on behalf of Māori when I returned home to Taranaki and heard thoughtless locals joyfully employing the 'Naki word as though it was cool, I felt physical pain, a resonance from those times when some event had resulted in severe distress.

School bullies would go for them as a last resort, when it appeared a puny pupil like me might actually win a playground scrap. A lightning grab and hold could end the fight in their favour before you could get the tears out of your eyes.

Until recent times, shortening Māori place-names was a thoughtless pastime, a convenience. On road trips with parents we passed through places referred to as “Kwiti” (Te Kuiti), “Orkra” (Oakura), “Odahoo” (Otahuhu), “Whytra” (Waitara), “Teekawata” (Te Kauwhata), “Marnui” (Mahoenui), “Tongaproot” (Tongapōrutu), “Towmranui” (Taumarunui), “Tatramack” (Tataraimaka), “Rahooter” (Rahotu), “Cowpock” (Kaupokonui), “Wonga” (Whangamomona) and “Hara” (Hāwera).

Back in my childhood, nobody seemed to care that we routinely butchered what is a beautiful language. Even today, some people look at me a second longer than necessary if I make an honest attempt to pronounce Māori place-names accurately.

I was a slow learner. As a working journalist, I was required to get such things right when it came to the written word, but my speaking them revealed a lazy tongue and a lazier attitude.

It wasn't until I went teaching journalism in 1987 and took students to stay on marae that I noticed when you're talking about more than one marae, the word doesn't have an “s”.

In Māori territory I learned many things about the language and how to respect it and most important, how to pronounce its words. Kuia were firm but gentle instructors.

I can still remember a trip down to the Waiokura Marae near Manaia, where we enjoyed the hospitality and loving care of Josie Bigham, and where Whanganui Māori politician Ken Mair advised on how to pronounce Taupo.

It's simple, he said: “Think of your toe and then the word ‘poor’, put them together, and you have Taupo.” Apart from some of the weather people, most TV reporters and presenters still struggle with it to this day. That suggests most Kiwis aren't really trying very hard.

Actually, the education system is sorting the pronunciation problem. Most kids and young people know how to say Taranaki properly, understand the effects of macrons on Māori words, respect the feelings of others. In another generation, the thoughtless transgressions of us baby-boomers may be a thing of the past.

Meantime, there's a smallish elephant in the room for about 15 Taranaki companies whose names come up when you do a Google search on "Naki". Will they change? Doubt it. Not until customers drop off or people start mentioning it to them, which I can't imagine happening just yet...except in mock outrage.

New Zealanders can be stubborn about such things. If we sense somebody is trying to force something on us that runs counter to traditional practice, we'll resist.

I get that, and sometimes wonder if the modern requirement for organisations to acquire Māori names helps much. It's a commendable gesture, of course, but most older Kiwis will be bemused by Te Tari Ture o te Karauna and relate instead to "Crown Law".