

The challenge of the macron

During last week’s celebration of te reo, I mulled on macrons, the little dash that goes above some vowels in Māori to indicate they’re voiced long.

I had no knowledge of these sensible modifications until late in life, mainly because some genius assured me the vowels in spoken Māori all get the same emphasis.

Realisation that was wrong dawned at Urenui Marae one day when I took a group of journalism students to stay and did a short address in te reo during the formal welcome.

One of the kuia approached later, congratulating me on my command of her language and suggesting an improvement: words like “tīī” and “kākā” had drawn-out vowel sounds, she said, as indicated by macrons.

I had the good sense not to voice my immediate reaction, which was to wonder what pronunciation had to do with the meringue-based French sweet treats I’d seen on TV cooking shows.

But a little research confirmed macarons have nothing to do with macrons, a form of written modification used by a surprisingly wide array of languages.

Despite Māori achieving the status of New Zealand’s second official language in 1987, we didn’t see much of macrons in our written language, both formal and media, until about a decade ago, with perhaps the biggest breakthrough coming during Māori Language Week in September 2017, when *Stuff* introduced macrons as a standard feature of its content.

I’ve tried to use them since my gentle lesson at Urenui in 2001. When my book on Taranaki’s waterways was published by Puke Ariki in 2014, I was grateful for the efforts of museum anthropologist Gary Bastin, who made sure macrons were present and correct among the publication’s 130,000 words.

Adding them hasn’t been particularly onerous, depending on the topic. Some pieces I write though, especially those with historical content, have dozens of Māori words, and not being fluent in te reo I usually have to check for macrons in AUT University’s online *Māori Dictionary*.

If one is required, it’s a matter of hitting the “insert” key, then “symbol” and finding the appropriate macroned vowel.

It gets more difficult if the word is a proper noun – a place-name or the name of an iwi or person. The *Māori Dictionary* usually doesn’t have those, so my next port of call is *Stuff*, where I search news stories posted since mid-2017.

That process got a bit challenging recently when I compiled a 25,000-word document with hundreds of Māori references, so I asked for help from she who knows much about computers. Lin found a set of Microsoft Word instructions that involved adding both a Māori keyboard and a Māori language option to my Word armoury.

It seemed simple – but it didn't work. At one stage, I found everything on my PC screen was in te reo, which proved something of a challenge to exit.

I asked Microsoft. I got a robot first, which didn't know the difference between macrons and macros. Then a person tried to help. Unable to resolve anything, he asked permission to “remote” in to my PC, a weird experience that sees your mouse darting around the screen.

He did all the same moves I tried, with the same futile result. After about an hour, he apologised for being unable to help and signed off.

I emailed Dennis Ngawhare, someone I respect as being without peer in the field of Māoritanga and te reo. He sent me a link to a *Stuff* story posted in 2017 that set out detailed guidelines for adding macrons. It seemed easy, automatic almost.

Lin and I both tried to follow it, and had some success, especially with our iPads, on which you merely hold down the vowel key and get to choose a macron version.

My PC has been less co-operative. In the end I created a special dictionary of macroned words for it, but there has been a strange downside – now I can't use the automatic spell-checker as I type because it puts a red line under every word except Māori ones. No matter what I do to indicate I want the NZ English dictionary to prevail, nothing changes.

And there lies the point: given Māori has been one of only two New Zealand official languages for decades, isn't it time Microsoft created a real NZ English-Māori choice that combines the two.

While we're at it, let's add a few to English so sports people know how to pronounce “offēnce” and “defēnce”.