

Te Reo Māori: A Linguistic Overview and Historical Context of New Zealand's Indigenous Language

1. Introduction

The Māori language is the indigenous language of New Zealand. The language embodies the heritage of the Polynesian voyagers who navigated vast ocean distances and settled in New Zealand approximately 800-1,000 years ago (Sutton 1994). Sharing certain features with other members of its Austronesian language family, Māori has a number of unique linguistic features.

This research paper explores Māori's linguistic characteristics and provides a brief historical and cultural account of Māori as a living repository of indigenous worldviews.

2. Language Name(s)

Māori is also known as *te reo Māori* ('the language Māori') or *te reo* ('the language'). The name originates from a Polynesian word that means ordinary, common, or native. By 1850, Māori began using the term to differentiate themselves from *Pāhekeā* 'foreigners' (Wilson 1963).

3. Geography

Māori is spoken in New Zealand or *Aotearoa*, which is the Māori name that means 'long white cloud'. Geographically, New Zealand lies in the southerly part of the Polynesian Triangle in the Pacific Ocean. The name *Aotearoa* is believed to originate from voyagers who observed an elongated white cloud formation stretching across the horizon. Recognizing this phenomenon as a signal indicating land beneath, they exclaimed, "He ao te roa!" (McLintock 1966).



Figure 1. Divisions of the Austronesian languages (Britannica 1993)

4. Status and Population

In 1987, Māori was recognized as an official language of New Zealand, alongside English and New Zealand Sign Language. There are approximately 160,000 Māori speakers, around 80,000 of whom call Māori their first language (Lane 2018). Despite the sizable number of speakers, Māori is considered a definitely endangered language as it is no longer passed down naturally between generations (Harlow 2012).

5. Language Family and Typical Features of the Family

Māori belongs to the Austronesian language family in the Polynesian group of the Oceanic branch. The language exhibits typical Austronesian and Polynesian features such as small sound inventories, with far-flung Polynesian languages tending to have smaller inventories and near absence of fricatives and affricates (Lyovin et al. 2017), sound length distinctions, strict phonotactic rules, reduplication, distinction between inclusive and exclusive first-person pronouns, and the lack of grammatical gender in third-person pronouns. Furthermore, many Austronesian languages, including Māori, have a verb-initial word order.

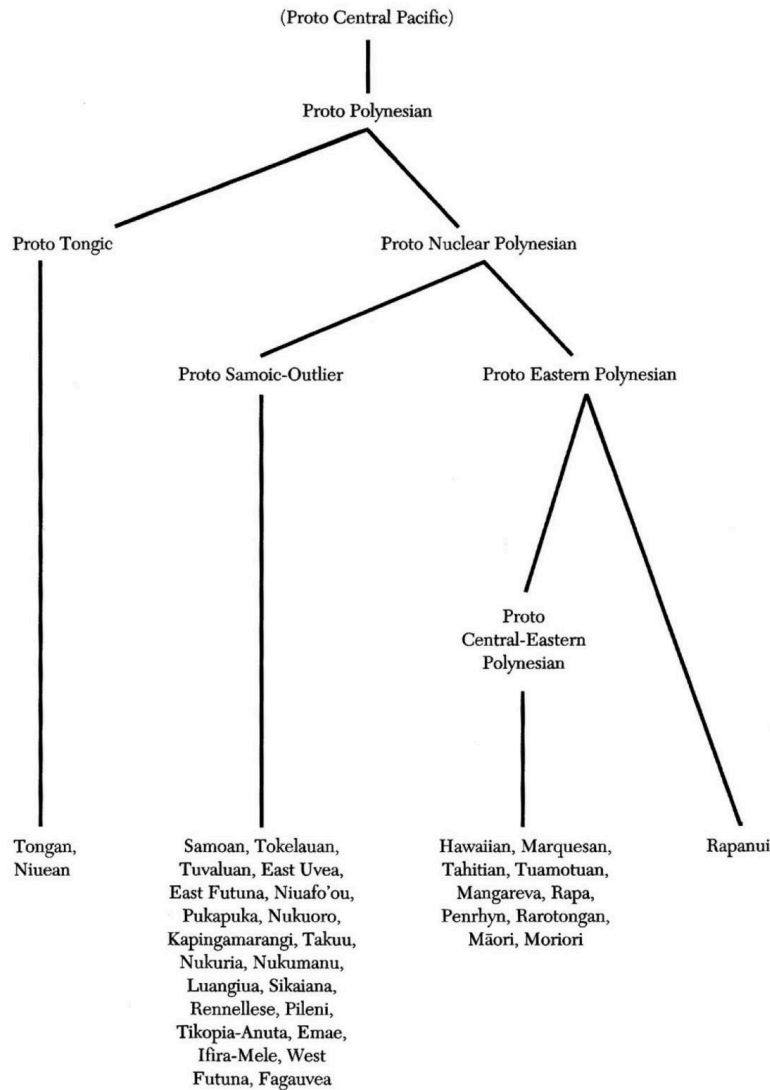


Figure 2. The Polynesian subgroup (Lynch 2018)

6. History of the Māori Language

Some scholars believe that migrations into the central area of Eastern Polynesia began around AD 300. According to Māori oral traditions, their ancestors arrived in canoes from their mythical homeland called *Hawaiki*. It is hypothesized that *Hawaiki* could be the Big Island in Hawaii, Savai'i in Samoa, Avaiki in Niue, or Havai'i in French Polynesia (Harlow 2012).

A key trend in sound changes from Proto-Austronesian to Proto-Polynesian to Māori is the reduction of the phoneme inventory, making Māori's inventory one of the world's smallest.

The small inventory is compensated by vowel length distinctions, a feature shared with many Polynesian languages.

Māori has also adapted its vocabulary to suit their environment. For example, Māori extended the meaning of *huka* ‘foam’ to include ‘snow’ and ‘frost,’ while adapting *roto* ‘lagoon’ to mean ‘lake’ since snow, frost, and lakes were more common in New Zealand than on tropical islands.

Another significant development in the Māori language came from contact with the Europeans, who introduced a variety of goods, practices, and ideas previously unknown to the Māori people. As a result, Māori borrowed many words, with modification to fit its phoneme inventory.

7. Phonology

Maori has a relatively small consonant system comprising ten distinct phonemes: /p/, /t/, /k/, /m/, /n/, /ŋ/ (ng orthographically), /f/ (wh orthographically), /h/, /r/, and /w/. The vowel system features vowel phonemes, /a, e, i, o, u/, with five long vowels /a:, e:, i:, o:, u:/ written as ā, ē, ī, ō, and ū. Vowel length distinctions give words with long vowels different meanings from short-vowel counterparts. For example, *kīkī* (‘speak’) and *kiki* (‘kick’) have distinct meanings.

Notably, Māori has no sibilants /s, z, ʃ, ʒ, tʃ, dʒ/, no interdental fricatives /θ, ð/, and no /j/ sounds although many of these sounds are common in western languages.

Table 1. Phonemes of Māori

	Labial	Dental/Alveolar	Velar	Glottal
Stops	p	t	k	
Nasals	m	n	ŋ	
Fricatives	f			h
Liquid		r		
Semivowel	w			
	Front	Central	Back	
High	i		u	
Mid	e		o	
Low		a		

Māori has diphthongs such as /ae/, /ai/, /ao/, /au/, /ei/, /oi/, /oe/, and /ou/, which are “sequences of unlike short vowels,” typically a vowel plus a higher vowel (Harlow 2012). It is not obvious as to which sequences of short vowels are diphthongs and which are heterosyllabic vowel sequences. For example, /au/ in *maunga* ‘mountain’ is a diphthong, but /oa/ in *moana* ‘sea’ is not a diphthong as *moana* has three morae (/mo.a.na/).

7.1 Phonotactics

Similar to other Polynesian languages, Māori has strict phonotactics. All syllables are open, and each syllable follows the pattern (C)V(V(V)). Based on these rules, *rangatira* ‘chief’, for instance, has four syllables: /ra.ŋa.ti.ra/.

7.2 Stress

Most Oceanic languages have penultimate stress with secondary stress on even-numbered morae from the last, but Māori has a different primary stress pattern. According to Lynch (1998):

(a) The first long vowel in a word is stressed: *maná:ki* ‘support’, *pá:tu:tahi* ‘a village’, and *matá:* ‘bullet’.

(b) If there are no long vowels, the first vowel cluster is stressed: *tamáiti* ‘child’, *táutau* ‘barking’, and *táura* ‘rope’.

(c) If there are neither long vowels nor vowel clusters, the first vowel is stressed: *támariki* ‘children’ and *hóro* ‘fast’.

In other words, the general hierarchy of syllable stress is as follow:

$$(C)V_iV_i > (C)V_iV_j > (C)V$$

For example, $r\bar{o} > roa > ro$.

7.3 Loanwords/ Borrowed Words

Due to language contact, Māori has borrowed many English words and modified them to fit its phonetic inventory. For example, /r/ and /l/ are merged into /r/, while consonant clusters are reduced to a single consonant and word-final consonants have vowels added.

Table 2. English to Māori Loanwords

English to Māori	English to Māori
'bag, bank' pēke	'letter' reta
'bridge' piriti	'milk' miraka
'goose' kuihi	'light' raiti
'card' kari	'farm' pāmu
'pen' pene	'bell' pere
'book' pukapuka	'horse' hōiho
'church' hāhi (no sibilant; use /h/ or /ti/, /ri/)	'December' tīhema
'cheese' tīhi	'Spain' Peina
'spoon' pūnu	'German' Tiamana
'shoe' hū	'George' Hori
'shirt' hāte	'Jonathan' Honatana
	'Annabella' Anapera

8. Morphology

8.1 Reduplication

Like in many Austronesian languages, reduplication is a common linguistic feature in Māori, often adding plurality, intensity, repetition, or diminutiveness to the base word.

Plurality: Vowel lengthening is a form of reduplication. For example, *wahine* means 'woman' while *wāhine* means 'women'. Reduplication can also indicate repeated actions: *paki* 'slap' becomes *pakipaki* 'applaud'.

Intensity: Reduplication can emphasize intensity. For example, *pai* means 'good' while *papai* is 'very good'. *Kimo* 'blink' becomes *kikimo* 'keep the eyes closed'. Additionally, *hāereere* 'wander about' comes from *haere* 'go'.

Reciprocity: Duplication can indicate reciprocity. For instance, *piri* ‘cling’ becomes *pipiri* ‘cling together,’ while *patu* ‘hit’ becomes *papatu* ‘hit each other’.

Weakening: Interestingly, reduplication can also weaken the meaning. For example, *wera* ‘hot’ becomes *werawera* ‘warm,’ *pango* ‘black’ becomes *papango* ‘somewhat black,’ and *whero* ‘red’ becomes *whewhero* ‘reddish’.

8.2 Active/ Passive Voice

Māori has relatively limited inflection primarily involving number and verbal voice.

With a high usage of passive constructions, Māori verbs are inflected for passive voice using suffixes, including *-Cia*, *-ia*, *-ina*, *-na*, and *-a*.

Table 3. Sample Active-Passive Forms

Active	Passive	English Meaning
patu	patua	‘to hit’
korero	korerotia	‘to speak’
inu	inumia	‘to drink’

The thematic consonants, C, have received considerable attention by scholars, some claiming that they are unpredictable (Jones 2008). Some scholars suggest that “the thematic consonants are lexicalized with the rest of the stem” and the active form is derived from an elision of the last consonant of the stem (Jones 2008). However, Jones (2008) claims that the suffix can be determined by morphological and phonological characteristics of the active forms, and recent efforts have used computational approaches to predict passives in Māori (Sakunkoo 2024).

8.3 Number and Pronouns

Māori has plural forms marked on pronouns and determiners rather than on nouns themselves. Harlow (2012) identifies eight nouns with plural forms (generally having the antepenultimate vowel lengthened). Other nouns in Māori do not change their form to indicate plurality.

Table 4. Māori Nouns with Singular and Plural Forms

Singular	Plural	Meaning
wahine	wāhine	‘woman, wife’
tangata	tāngata	‘person’
matua	mātua	‘parent’
tuahine	tuāhine	‘sister of man’
tuakana	tuākana	‘elder sibling of same gender’
teina	tēina	‘younger sibling of same gender’
tipuna	tīpuna	‘grandparent, ancestor’
tamaiti	tamariki	‘child’

Māori pronouns distinguish singular, dual, and plural forms, as well as inclusive and exclusive first-person, but lack gender distinctions.

Table 5. Māori Personal Pronouns

	Singular	Dual	Plural
1st Inclusive		tāua	tātou
1st Exclusive	au	māua	mātou
2nd	koe	kōrua	koutou
3rd	ia	rāua	rātua

9. Syntax

9.1 Word Order

Like many Polynesian languages, Maori is predominantly Verb-Subject-Object (VSO).

Ka patu koe i te pōro.

TENSE hit 2SG OBJ DET ball

‘You will hit the ball.’

In the sentence above, the particle *i* marks the object.

While Māori is typically a VSO/VSX language, it can have a VOS or SVO structure:

I patua te pōro e koe.

PST hit-pass DET ball AGT 2SG

‘The ball was hit by you.’

In this passive VOS form, *e* marks the agent/subject of the action.

9.2 Negation

Negative words appear at the beginning of their clauses and are typically followed by the subject phrase, making the sentence SVO.

Kāore au e haere ki te marae.

NEG 1SG TA go to DET courtyard

‘I will not go to the courtyard.’

Kāore ia i te mōhio ki tēnā waiata.

NEG 3SG TA know OBJ DET song

‘S/he does not know that song.’

9.3 Tense/Aspect

The *i* particle marks ‘past,’ while *kua* marks ‘perfect’. For progressive, *kei te* and *i te* are often used. The marker *ka* indicates a verbal phrase without an inherent tense; *ka* can also suggest a future tense or copy its tense from the preceding clause. For imperatives and wishing, *kia* is often used:

Kia ora!

TA healthy

‘Be healthy!’ (greeting)

9.4 Possession a/o

Possessors are marked by *a* or *o*, preceding the possessor. For example,

te waka o Hori

DET car/canoe P George

‘George’s car/canoe’ or ‘car/canoe of George’

Although A/O choice has been described as “a significant challenge for linguists, teachers, and learners” (Trye et al. 2024), there is a general agreement that the notion of control plays a significant role: possessors who lack control take the *o* marker, while *a* is used when the possessor has control or is dominant in the relationship. For example,

ngā tamariki a te matua

DET.PL children POSS DET.SG parent

‘The children of the parent.’

te matua o ngā tamariki

DET.SG parent POSS DET.PL children

‘The parent of the children.’

A recent study of Māori tweets suggested that the A/O alternation might be slowly disappearing as *o* is increasingly used in place of *a* (Trye et al. 2024).

10. Cultural or Religious Aspects

Beyond its linguistic attributes, Māori is a cultural repository of fascinating traditional wisdom. Without modern tools, Māori navigators could read waves and swells and deduce direction. Furthermore, Māori's unique cultural views are reflected in their spatial and temporal terms: *raro* means both 'north' and 'down', while *runga* means 'south' and 'top'. The 'past' *mua* is 'front,' while *muri* means 'future' and 'behind'. For the Māori, they have before them their forebears whereas the future is behind because it cannot be seen (McKay 2003).

11. Language Vitality/ Endangerment

The twentieth century witnessed a precipitous decline in the number of Māori speakers, driven by political, economic, and cultural forces. By 1975, only 5% of Māori schoolchildren could speak Māori. However, through a revitalization movement that emerged in the 1980s, Māori is experiencing a revival. The proportion of New Zealanders who can speak Māori rose from 6.1% in 2018 to 7.9% in 2021 (Miller 2024). Despite a significant improvement from previous decades, the language continues to face challenges such as intergenerational transmission.

12. Writing System and Its History

The Māori writing system is alphabetic with Latin alphabet. Māori was originally an exclusively oral language. In 1820, two Ngāpuhi rangatira, Hongi Hika and Waikato, collaborated with a missionary, Thomas Kendall, traveling to England to work with Professor Samuel Lee. Their effort culminated in the publication of the book *A Grammar and Vocabulary of the Language of New Zealand*.

13. Links to Video Samples

Disney Australia & New Zealand. "Moana Reo Māori 2 | Teaser Trailer." *YouTube*,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cJHRxReah68>.

"Māori Song." *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lgtunj6v7IA>.

14. Conclusion

This paper provides an account of the Māori language covering a historical overview and linguistic analysis. Despite revitalization efforts, continued support and study of Māori are crucial in ensuring that this extraordinary language continues to thrive and serve as a vibrant bridge across generations.

[Word Count: 1981]

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[Word Count: 1981]