

Simple word has heaps of meaning

Jamie Morton science

How much Watties you want on your fish 'n' chips? Heaps, bro. Hey, how was that Shihad gig last night?

Yeah nah, heaps good, eh man.

In New Zealand, it's a word heaps of us use every day – but a Waikato University researcher tracking its evolution from noun to adverb says it has become much more than just a staple of Kiwi vernacular.

Dr Andreea Calude, a senior lecturer in linguistics, said “heaps” now signified an attitude – and even acted as a glue to build social cohesion.

Her new study was inspired by her British-born husband, who was struck by the way she used the word heaps.

A check of all the uses she could find in databases confirmed her feeling that New Zealanders used the word differently from other English speakers, although, unsurprisingly, there were some similarities with Australians.

The word “heap” is centuries old. Its inclusion in Old English likely stemmed from the West Germanic “haupaz” and may be linked to the Old English “heah” or “high”.

“It was used as a noun or naming word to denote a particular shape – people talked about organising objects in a heap – but it also has an organised feel to it, unlike closely related nouns like pile,” Calude said.

“It’s like a particular constellation – a heap of hay, or a heap of clothes.”

Its meaning evolved to the point where it wasn’t shape that was important, but the quantity of items within it.

It was now common around the world to hear phrases such as heaps of money, heaps of people, or heaps of stuff.

But Kiwis took it even further.

“If we’re talking about things like ‘how much did you sell the car for’, you’d say, ‘I sold it for heaps’. We just leave the ‘of money’ out, because it’s understood from context,” Calude said.

“We also get examples like ‘I learned heaps’, but what exactly it was that you learned is a little more vague.

“And then it can get to ‘she loves him heaps’, but heaps of what? It basically becomes latched on to the verb.”

New Zealand also stood out for adopting “heaps” for uniquely idiomatic expressions, such as giving an embarrassed mate or a rival rugby team heaps.

“At the moment, it’s more widespread in speech than in writing, which is often the way, because speech drives change in language.”

But in time, she expects it to become fully incorporated into our written language.

Beyond language, she said, the word had heaps of social value.

“We don’t realise how important it is for cohesion. It tells people, ‘I’m a Kiwi, I’m not an outsider, you can trust me.’”



10 KIWI-ISMS

A quick guide for confused tourists

Togs

Elsewhere called swimmers, bathing suit, swimming suit or swimming costumes.

Dairy

The local corner shop or superette. Elsewhere a company that supplies milk and milk products, or grouping of milk-based products such as cheese and yoghurt.

Tramping

Known as hiking everywhere else in the world.

Munted

Meaning broken or ruined, “munted” was voted Word of the Year by blog website Public Address in 2011.

Bach

Short for bachelor pad, and referring to family holiday homes.

Wop-wops

A place in the middle of nowhere.

Ta

An abbreviation of “thank you”.

Suss

In other countries, “suss” means to attempt to work something out, such as “I’m going to suss things out”. However, in New Zealand it also refers to someone who is looking suspicious. For example, “They look a bit suss.” See also: “dodgy”.

Sweet

Something good, or cool. “Shall we go to the beach today? Yeah, nah?” “Sweet as.”

Eh

Pronounced “ay”, eh is popularly added to the end of sentences when expecting a response rather than asking a question. “Wow, it’s really hot today, eh?”

