

# Sweet as – The [ADJ + as] intensifier construction in Māori English/Aotearoa English

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## Abstract

We introduce the Waikato Māori English Conversation (MEC) corpus, which consists of 43 dyadic conversations between 49 young adults who self-recorded informal conversations with close friends, in their own homes, with no topic of conversation specified (83 hours of dialogue; nearly 800,000 words). The resulting materials are colloquial and unstructured, capturing a wider range of pragmatic and stylistic modes than is possible in a standard sociolinguistic interview. Here, we report on one such feature, the [ADJ + as] construction, for example: ‘sorry some of the questions are like **awkward as**’ and ‘that caused a **big as** drama eh’. This intensifier construction has been identified as a distinctive New Zealand English (NZE) innovation, yet little has been written about this it. However, the Waikato MEC corpus presents the opportunity to analyse the construction in a more systematic manner and to fill existing gaps in analyses of Māori English grammar.

## KEYWORDS

Aotearoa English, conversation, dialect variation, intensifiers, Māori English, New Zealand English

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

New Zealand English (NZE) is considered one of the youngest varieties of English, and among the most remote, spoken in Aotearoa New Zealand (ANZ).<sup>1</sup> It emerged as the result of British colonialism initiated in the first half of the nineteenth century and represents a settler colonial variety (Denis & D'Arcy, 2018), characterised by a number of features and patterns that set it apart within the panoply of World Englishes (e.g. Calude, 2019; Clark et al., *in press*; Gordon & Maclagan, 2001; Warren & Britain, 2000).

Among these features and arguably one of the most salient ones is the use of words borrowed from the ANZ's Indigenous language, Māori. For example, words like *kai* 'food', *aroha* 'love', *kiwi* 'flightless bird and symbol of the country and people' and *Pākehā* 'European New Zealander' (e.g. Calude et al., 2019a, 2019b; Daly, 2024; Degani & Onysko, 2010; Levendis & Calude, 2019; Macalister, 2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2008, 2009; Trye et al., 2020). Other noteworthy characteristics uncovered by morpho-syntactic analyses of NZE include the productive use of the discourse particle *eh* (Holmes et al., 2012; Meyerhoff, 1994; Schweinberger, 2018) and intensifier functions of the quantifier *heaps* (Calude, 2019).

Crucially, however, NZE is not a monolith. It encompasses various other varieties, among which is also Māori English. Māori English is the variety associated with the Indigenous people of ANZ, although it is not exclusively spoken by Māori (Bauer, 1994; Holmes, 1997; King, 1993). While the English ethnolectal repertoires of ANZ have been examined by several scholars (e.g. Bell, 2000; Benton, 1985; D'Arcy, 2010; Holmes, 1997; Stubbe & Holmes, 2000; Szakay, 2012), owing to the restricted availability of spoken data, Māori English has received comparatively less concentrated attention (see overviews in Calude, 2025; Degani, *in press*; Maclagan et al., 2008).

In this article, we introduce and analyse a new corpus of Māori English conversations, collected and transcribed at the University of Waikato (2018–2019), comprising what we believe to be the largest corpus of spontaneous spoken conversation contributed by (exclusively, self-identifying) Māori speakers of NZE. As amply argued in the sources cited above, differences between mainstream Pākehā (European) NZE and Māori English are not constitutional but rather a matter of degree and frequency, for example, borrowed words from Māori are present in both varieties but thought to be more frequent in Māori English (Holmes, 2005; King, 1995; Maclagan et al., 2008), *eh* is used widely by NZE speakers, but it is especially frequent in the speech of Māori men (Schweinberger, 2018). Therefore, the availability of large collections of authentic Māori English data is crucial for expanding current knowledge of this language variety.

Thus, our goal in putting together the Waikato Māori English Conversation (MEC) corpus was to obtain a sufficiently large sample to enable quantitative analyses (Section 3). In this initial paper, we illustrate the potential of the Waikato MEC corpus by reporting on the analysis of the intensifier construction [ADJ + *as*]. Although this construction is saliently associated with folk perceptions of NZE (Section 4.1), it has received little attention in the linguistic literature, likely owing to its scarce presence in existing corpora, a gap which the MEC corpus is able to address (Sections 4.2 and 4.3).

## 2 | MĀORI ENGLISH

This section first situates Māori English in the context of ANZ and among varieties of NZE, followed by a discussion of key linguistic features associated with it. As already noted, while the *de facto* language of ANZ is NZE, in practice, this constitutes an umbrella term that spans several, largely overlapping repertoires. The dominant 'mainstream' (Stubbe & Holmes, 2000, p. 249) variety is sometimes termed Pākehā (European) English. Pākehā English can be heard on television and radio; it is the variety taught in schools and used in newspapers as well as parliamentary debates, indexing the 'middle class European culture' (D'Arcy, 2010, p. 61) of ANZ.

In contrast, Māori English, the fastest-growing variety of NZE (Maclagan et al., 2008, p. 11), is reflective of 'the symbolic capital of *kaupapa* Māori (Māori frame of reference)' (D'Arcy, 2010, p. 61), in which the 'verbalisation of Māori

cultural concepts and world view is an essential quality' (Onysko, 2015, p. 51). Māori English is considered an ethnolinguistic repertoire (D'Arcy, 2010) and, as stated earlier, although it is largely associated with Māori, the ethnicity of the speaker is not a defining factor. In fact, not all Māori speak Māori English, and conversely, some Pākehā can be heard using it, particularly those with strong ties to Māori social groups (King, 1993, p. 34).

Examples of the emblematic indexing power of Māori English within *Te Ao Māori* ('Māori world') include its presence in the stand-up comedy routines of beloved Māori comedian Billy T. James and in the prize-winning movie *Boy*, directed by award-winning Māori film director Taika Waititi. Although obtaining samples of Māori English used to be extremely difficult, especially for non-Māori, as the shift in attitudes towards this variety has begun a process of change and its visibility has increased, it is becoming easier to obtain samples of it (Maclagan et al., 2008, p. 661).

Māori English is characterised by the presence of various features, from phonological to lexical, grammatical and discursal. Here, we include a cursory summary of features identified in previous studies and refer the reader to more detailed overviews for fuller accounts (e.g. Calude, 2025; Degani, *in press*; Maclagan et al., 2008).

Phonological features are perhaps the most salient, and these include fronted GOOSE vowels, the changing of initial /t/ towards a /d/ sound, rhoticity, High Rising Terminal uses (the latter is also associated with Pākehā English but is even more common in Māori English, cf. Hay et al., 2008, pp. 107–108). Māori English may contain a lower rate of linking and intrusive /r/ (Gibson, 2005, p. 10). Additionally, the rhythm in Māori English is considerably more syllable-timed than in Pākehā English (Szakay, 2008).

Lexical features include high occurrence of Māori loanwords, frequent uses of the pragmatic particles *you know* and *eh* and of kinship terms like *bro*, *cuz* (cousin), *sis* (sister) and *youse guys* as markers of the second person plural, distinctive patterns of quotative verbs (King, 1995; D'Arcy 2010) and distinctive uses of general extenders (Onysko & Degani, 2025). Given that Pākehā English is itself undergoing considerable change, particularly with respect to the use of Māori borrowings (Clark et al., *in press*; Trye et al., 2023), this is a timely period in which to capture authentic and large Māori English data.

Grammatically, it has been noted that Māori English may lack count/mass distinctions (Hawkins, 1972; Holmes, 1997; Maclagan et al., 2008), but this observation has only ever been instantiated by one single and much-cited example (*We collected the firewoods*, see for instance, Holmes, 1997, p. 72). Similarly, distinctive uses of prepositions have been noted (Holmes, 1997, p. 72), which equally await fuller investigation, for example, using *He came on his new car* (*on* is the equivalent of Māori *runga*, which would have normally been used in equivalent Māori sentences). Other features include past tense forms being replaced by past participles, overextensions of third person singular -s inflections and deletion of various auxiliaries, such as *have* in present perfect constructions or *be* in *going* to future constructions, e.g. *I been down the town lately* and *He going to regret that* (Holmes, 1997, p. 72). Many grammar features of this type are particularly difficult to investigate without large corpora due to their relatively low frequencies of occurrence.

It might be tempting to relegate differences between Māori English and Pākehā English to a mere contrast between nonstandard and standard varieties. However, if we consider pragmatic and semantic aspects of Māori English, these indicate that differences run much deeper. Semantic and pragmatic differences between Māori English and other NZE varieties point to divergent cultural conceptualisations (Sharifian, 2017a, 2017b), which arise from the specific post-colonial historical context which Māori English inhabits (see also Onysko & Degani, 2024, and references therein). For example, citing data from the New Zealand Stories Corpus, Degani (2017) illustrates how one salient concept, namely that of *marae* (loosely translated into English as 'meeting house'), entails a highly elaborate cultural schema for Māori English speakers; involving activities, duties and responsibilities, identities of various participants and a sense of belonging. Such elaboration appears to be absent for Pākehā English speakers.

A handful of studies have touched on how these different cultural conceptualisations are manifested linguistically, for example, projects scrutinising New Zealand workplaces have uncovered differences in how Pākehā and Māori use narrative structure (Holmes, 1998; Schnurr et al., 2007), humour (De Bres et al., 2010; Holmes, 2005) and leadership discourse (Holmes et al., 2011). However, lexical and semantic studies of this type remain 'the area where there has been least systematic study' so far (Holmes, 2005, p. 98), partly because of a lack of sufficiently large corpora of naturally occurring language interactions, and partly because capturing an authentic Māori worldview is not always

possible for Pākehā scholars. Barriers arise for Pākehā scholars either because, as outsiders of the community, they may not possess sufficient knowledge to grasp Māori worldviews, or because Māori English speakers may choose not to use Māori English with members outside their close social networks.

Finally, a note on terminology is in order here. In her discussions with undergraduate university students at the University of Canterbury, King (1999, p. 25) uncovered some unease surrounding the term 'Māori English' given its strong ethnic labelling. The preference for a different term emerged from these interviews: 'bro talk'; this itself is not without problems, given its close association with maleness and 'macho' culture. An alternative to both terms is proposed by Onysko (2015) and Degani and Onysko (2021): 'Aotearoa English'. This term has several advantages: It avoids the problematic ethnic labelling that the term Māori English entails, while still referencing the Indigenous worldview through the use of the Māori loanword *Aotearoa*. Furthermore, it also moves away from the masculine world of 'bro talk' in which Māori English-speaking women do not see themselves represented. One difficulty regarding terminology is the entrenchment of the old label (Māori English), which is inevitably more widely known.

### 3 | DATA AND METHODS: MEC CORPUS

Here, we introduce a corpus of conversational Māori English, devised, recorded and transcribed at the University of Waikato, in Hamilton (Waikato), between 2018 and 2019. The MEC corpus was envisaged as a collection of authentic modern language interactions involving speakers of NZE who identify as Māori. As discussed above, not all Māori speak the variety we now refer to as Māori English, so we cannot be sure that our data only contain Māori English samples. However, in order to allow for further insight into the types of speakers recorded, we also collected details about them through personal questionnaires, and we recorded them reading a Māori language passage, for those willing and able to provide it. In this section, we outline the data collection process and the various parts of the corpus.

Following ethics approval from the University of Waikato *Te Pua Wānanga ki te Ao* / Faculty of Māori and Indigenous Studies *Te Manu Taiko: Human Research Ethics Committee* (approved 28/03/2017, #280317), we advertised at the University of Waikato for ten volunteers, who identified as Māori (but not necessarily as Māori language speakers), who would be willing to act as 'research assistants' on the project. Their task as research assistants was to find conversational partners through their own networks who also identify as Māori and who would be willing to engage in an audio-recorded (on a mobile phone), informal conversation (no topic given) for a lengthy period (between one and two hours). We chose this method of data collection because we wanted to obtain a wide range of stylistic and pragmatic modes, compared to a traditional sociolinguistic interview approach (Wiltschko et al., 2018, p. 572). The conversations recorded form the first of three components of the corpus.

The second component of the corpus involves a questionnaire (Appendix A), which participants were asked to fill out either following or preceding each conversation (research assistants could choose what felt most natural to them). Finally, the third component consisted of the reading of a short passage in Māori, for those participants who were able and willing (Appendix B).

In accordance with our ethics application, the 'research assistants' were paid for their time and their conversational partners received vouchers as a gesture of goodwill for their help (*koha* 'donation').

In compiling the Waikato MEC corpus, we adopted an approach which allows us to draw connections between three dimensions:

1. First, a speaker's use of Māori English linguistic features as identified in previous literature,
2. Second, their social background, for example, their engagement within the Māori community, social networks, participation in Māori cultural events, such as marae visits, iwi/tribal engagement, listening to Māori language radio or television (using information disclosed in the questionnaire), and
3. Third, their knowledge of Māori language and general phonological and phonemic characteristics (as evidenced by their reading passage).

**TABLE 1** Overview of the Waikato MEC corpus.

A. Overview of corpus structure			
Research assistants	Conversational partners	Total number of minutes recorded	Total number of words transcribed
RA1 (Male)	9	1,054 min	175,820 words
RA2 (Male)	4	432 min	61,374 words
RA3 (Female)	16	1,957 min	312,060 words
RA4 (Female)	6	827 min	100,836 words
RA5 (Female)	5	412 min	69,847 words
RA6 (Female)	3	322 min	59,688 words
Totals	43 speakers + 6 RAs = 49	5,004 min (83.4 h)	779,625 words
B. Overview of all speakers			
Dyads	Number	Total number of words transcribed	Percentage of total corpus
Female-female	39	598,418 words	77%
Male-male	10	181,207 words	23%
Totals	43 speakers + 6 RAs = 49	779,625 words	100%

The final corpus resulted in 43 dyadic conversations, recorded during nearly 84 hours and comprising approximately 800,000 words; see Table 1 for a detailed corpus overview.

All speakers were between 18 and 35 years of age (we did not keep track of age, other than requiring participants to be within the desired range). Scanning the background questionnaire answers, we found that the speakers in our corpus exhibit a gender skew towards female participants; there were 10 males and 39 females. This may be linked to the fact that our 'research assistants' were themselves largely female (two males and four females).

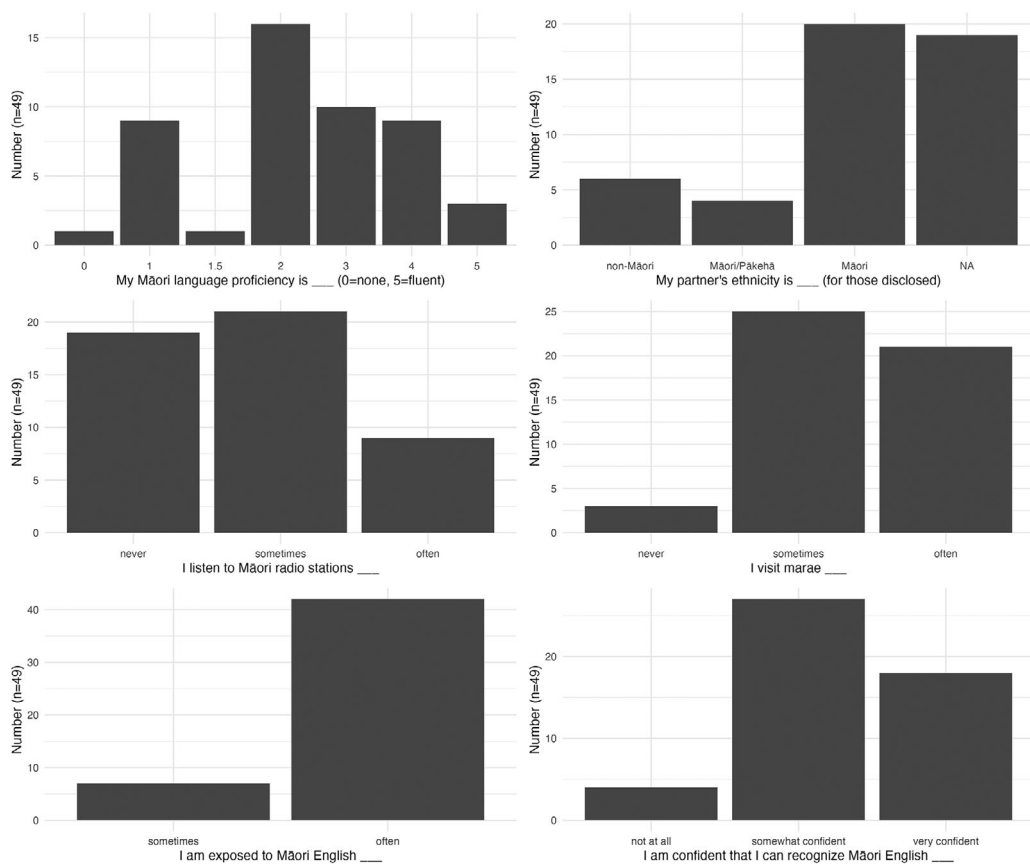
In general (see Figure 1 overleaf), most participants reported having some knowledge of Māori (only one speaker told us they cannot speak any Māori at all). When asked how confident they were in their ability to recognise different varieties of NZE ('If played a recording of a Māori person speaking English and one of a Pākehā person speaking English you would be able to tell which is which?'), most people felt very confident in this task. Only four (8%) speakers were not confident at all; most were either somewhat confident (27, 55%) or very confident (18, 37%). We find this particularly interesting as none of the participants were linguistics students or trained phoneticians, but their confidence speaks to a conscious and strong awareness of differences between Pākehā English and Māori English.

Moreover, when asked about their perceived exposure to Māori English ('To what extent do you perceive yourself to have been exposed to Māori English, that is, English spoken by Māori people?'), overwhelmingly, participants responded affirmatively; they were either often exposed to it (42, 86%) or at least sometimes exposed to it (7, 14%).

As regards the ethnicity of their partner, most speakers reported either having a Māori partner (20, 41%) or no partner (18, 37%). Finally, with regard to their Māori community engagement, a high proportion of the speakers reported frequently visiting marae, either often (21, 43%) or at least sometimes (25, 51%). Similarly high proportions reported listening to Māori radio stations and/or Māori TV (for space reasons, we provide only the radio plots).

Taken together, this information tells us that the speakers recorded in the Waikato MEC corpus are highly present and engaged members of their respective Māori communities, often taking part in Māori cultural and linguistic activities linked to their heritage and actively involved in learning or maintaining Māori language. It is therefore highly likely that they are both able to recognise and produce Māori English.

This method of data collection has a number of advantages and some limitations. The use of 'research assistants', whose ethnicity could be ensured to coincide with the ethnic group most closely associated with Māori English use,



**FIGURE 1** Bar plot overviews of selected questionnaire responses for the MEC corpus participants.

was crucial in enabling the potential for use of authentic and natural Māori English. While the ‘research assistants’ were simply told that our aim was to document Māori English, as it was spoken at the time of data collection, we did not disclose further information of any specific features we were interested to analyse in the data, nor did we discuss definitions of what counts (or not) as ‘Māori English’. We deliberately refrained from such discussions because we wanted to ensure a wide spread of potential speakers and not influence the participant sample.

Second, our method affords us concomitantly a sufficiently large sample of data from a(n albeit small) number of participants (the ‘research assistants’), as well as a wide sample of speakers (their conversational partners). This set-up allows the investigation of even infrequent linguistic features of Māori English. Moreover, we hypothesise that Audience Design (Bell, 1984) effects are especially prevalent in marginalised varieties, such as Māori English (see also Bell, 2000). Therefore, having access to naturally occurring conversation between the same speaker and a number of different other speakers can provide a lens into how speakers might change their speech to their audience, a perspective that other corpora of NZE English (e.g., the Wellington Spoken Corpus of NZE; Holmes et al., 1998) do not provide because speakers are mostly included in single conversations.

Inevitably, the corpus also suffers from a number of limitations. First, despite our efforts, we cannot be sure that the data collected can indeed be aptly classified as Māori English. Second, we were not able to find as many ‘research assistants’ as we hoped for (only six, not ten as originally planned), and in turn, they were not able to record as many conversations as desired (some recorded as few as three instead of the planned ten). Third, the conversations recorded show a skew towards female participants. Finally, because the conversations were as natural as possible, without a given topic or interview schema, the subjects which arise in these conversations are highly sensitive, disclosing private

matters and events, which makes sharing these data—even anonymised—slightly problematic. This is both a blessing and a challenge. On the one hand, it is clear that the participants forgot that they were being recorded and relaxed into speaking about even the most sensitive of matters. On the other hand, although we have permission to share the corpus transcriptions (anonymously), in accordance with the ethics application terms, we must be careful and selective in what access we provide to other scholars in order to protect the identities of those recorded.

Having described the internal structure and components of the Waikato MEC corpus, we now proceed to a case study which showcases the potential of the data.

## 4 | CASE STUDY OF [ADJ + *as*] CONSTRUCTION

In this first study from the Waikato MEC corpus, we tackle the presence of a specific family of intensifiers. Intensifiers are interesting to consider from a variational and dialectal perspective because ‘intensifier system tolerates considerable variation’, therefore providing ‘a particularly good window on linguistic variation and change’ (Tagliamonte, 2011, p. 335). Moreover, according to Tagliamonte, intensification has been increasing over the past 30 years (ibid). Unsurprisingly, then, intensifiers have been shown to vary across dialects of English (see, for example, the large body of work cited in D’Arcy, 2015) and within NZE itself (Bauer & Bauer, 2002a; Calude, 2019; D’Arcy, 2015).

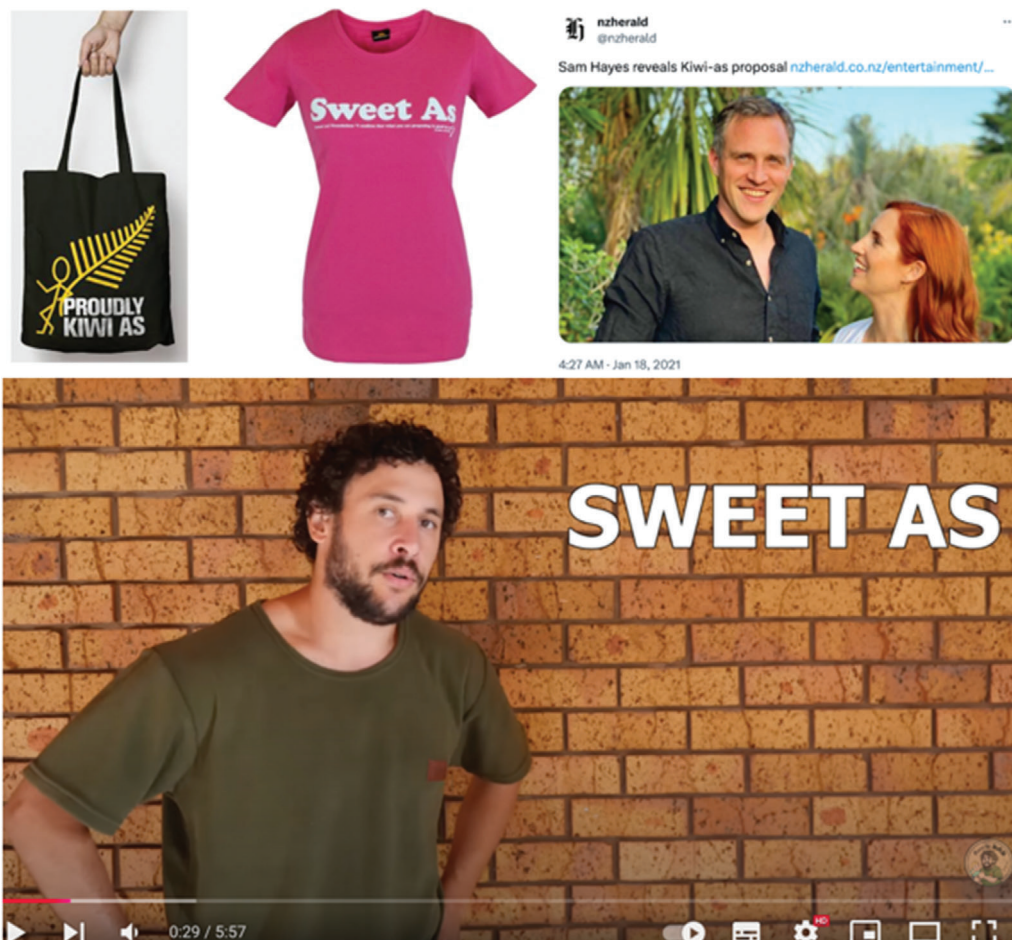
Within the topic of intensification, we analyse the presence of a somewhat baffling construction, the [ADJ + *as*] construction, involving phrases such as *sweet as*, *kiwi as* and *cool as*. This construction presents a curious puzzle: On the one hand, it is salient and familiar to lay people as a marker of NZE,<sup>2</sup> especially the phrase *sweet as*. Instances of it are leveraged by marketing teams who produce merchandise containing the phrase, see Figure 2 for examples: a T-shirt sold by the upmarket clothing brand Global Culture and a reusable bag sold by the lower-priced supermarket brand Pak’n’Save. The figure also contains a recent use of *kiwi as* in a newspaper article headline collected from a social media post by the New Zealand Herald on X (dated 18 January 2021); though interestingly the actual headline of the newspaper article it is advertising was ‘*Newshub presenter Samantha Hayes announces engagement to Jay Blaauw*’ and the article itself does not contain any instances of *kiwi as* (or of any other [ADJ + *as*] examples). The final element in the figure is a screenshot of a video on NZE slang from the viral *How do dad* series, in which Jordan Watson illustrates productive uses of [ADJ + *as*] in NZE.

On the other hand, while the general public is well aware of the construction, the linguistic community remains conspicuously silent on both its origin and its use. We could only find three articles discussing examples like *sweet as*, namely Bauer and Bauer (2002a), and, in passing, two articles in the journal *American Speech*, by Head and Petrucci (2006) and Sowa (2009).

We hypothesise that although the construction stands out to speakers of NZE, the research community has, to date, been unable to provide thorough or detailed accounts of it because large numbers of naturally occurring examples have been impossible to collect. Another contributing factor has to do with the fact that its occurrence is primarily confined to spoken (or at least, informal) language, which is typically harder to collect, requiring more time and effort to transcribe. The Waikato MEC corpus can address this gap, and we have identified 194 examples of [ADJ + *as*] in our data (more on this in the next section), which constitutes the largest collection of such examples to date. Before we move on to present our findings, we briefly summarise the three research articles mentioned above.

### 4.1 | Background

The most comprehensive account of [ADJ + *as*] comes from Bauer and Bauer (2002a). Using questionnaire data distributed to 150 primary schools and targeting 11 and 12-year-old pupils, Bauer and Bauer (2002b) aimed to provide a comprehensive dialectal map of playground language in late 1990s ANZ. The questionnaires were given to school teachers, who were asked to report back—in as much detail as possible—the children’s answers to various scenarios



**FIGURE 2** ADJ + AS uses by Pak'n'Save reusable bags, Global Culture T-shirts, and *New Zealand Herald* headlines on X and *How to dad* video on New Zealand slang.

provided. For example, in one scenario: 'Your best friend tells you that they are having a party. This is very good news. How would you tell them you are really pleased? (Responses included forms such as *That's really cool* and *Sweet as*.)' (Bauer & Bauer 2002b, p. 246, example 3). In another scenario (Bauer & Bauer 2002b, p. 246, example 2): 'You ran onto the school garden to get back your ball, and accidentally trod on some plants. The caretaker saw you and told you how cross he was with you. Later, you want to tell Brackie what the caretaker did. What would you say?' (Responses included forms like *He got so stressed* and *He got mad as*). These examples illustrate the use of constructions such as *sweet as* and *mad as* by young NZE speakers as far as the 1990s.

Focusing specifically on findings related to the [ADJ + *as*] construction, Bauer and Bauer noted both predicative and attributive examples. Predicative [ADJ + *as*] showed up in responses from 90 of 150 schools, with *sweet as* being by far the most commonly occurring instantiation and, in fact, being the only such example in 45 of 150 schools (2002a, p. 248). In total, 19 adjectives occurred in this position: *bad, buzz, choice, cool, dumb, easy, freaky, funny, good, hard, mad, mean, neat, scary, shame, shameful, shitty, simple, tired* (2002a, p. 248). As regards the attributive position [ADJ + *as*], no attributive *sweet as* occurred in the data (2002a, p. 251), and overall the frequency of the construction in this position was considerably lower, only 10 of 150 schools listed it (2002a, p. 253). Three further trends were uncovered:

- Predicative [ADJ + *as*] occurred less than [so + ADJ] but more often than with all other adverbs, e.g. [*really* + ADJ], [*very* + ADJ], [*too* + ADJ], [*real* + ADJ] (Bauer & Bauer, 2002a, p. 251).
- There were regional preferences for [ADJ + *as*], with the North Island schools reporting a higher use than those in the South Island (2002a, p. 250).
- No school reported attributive [ADJ + *as*] uses without also reporting predicative [ADJ + *as*] ones (2002a, p. 250).

One methodological point is in order here: Teachers acted as intermediaries in the data collection process, which would have undoubtedly imposed certain limitations on the answers received, as noted by Bauer and Bauer themselves (2002a, p. 246). First, children may be reluctant to provide informal, nonstandard (or profane) answers for fear of judgement or simply because such usage would seem out of place in a (formal) school setting. Second, teachers may have also been reluctant to write down answers which they deemed less prestigious or nonstandard. These limitations aside, the rich data reported in relation to children's language from the 1990s by Bauer and Bauer (2002a) constitute the largest and most detailed window into the [ADJ + *as*] construction we have so far.

In contrast to the child-spoken data cited by Bauer and Bauer (2002a), Head and Petrucci (2006) provide examples of [ADJ + *as*] from the Wellington Corpus of Spoken NZE (WSC; Holmes et al., 1998) and quotations found in newspaper articles. Also collected in the 1990s, the WSC constitutes a nice point of comparison: It involves adult speech. Head and Petrucci (2006) locate the origin of the [ADJ + *as*] construction with *sweet as*, an expression that might be paraphrased by the adverb 'cool' (Head & Petrucci, 2006, p. 333). Despite its increased use, they state that its occurrence remains tied in with slang (Head & Petrucci, 2006, p. 333) and leave it at that. No actual frequencies of its use are provided, so it is difficult to ascertain just how widely it is used in these data and at this point in time (the early 1990s).

Finally, Sowa (2009) used Google searches in Australian English and NZE to provide non-exhaustive frequency data. The author's aim was to locate examples of commonly found adjectives within the construction, though a 'guess and check' method, which amounts to trying various adjectives and seeing what came up. What came up was (in this order): *sweet as*, *cool as*, *awesome as*, *mad as*, *sturdy as*, *easy as* and *scared as*, with *sweet as* being by far the most common (2009, p. 59). It is difficult to be sure what such arbitrary Google searches can tell us or how representative they are of individual varieties, but in sum, Sowa (2009, p. 60) concluded that 'both academically and informally, there seems to be a consensus ... [of] the productivity of the expression, allowing for many different adjectives to be used in the construction adj + as'. They went on to add that 'neither academics nor non-scholars seem to have appreciated both the growth of grammatical contexts in which the construction is used and the abundance of examples of these usages' (Sowa, 2009, p. 60). We fully agree and feel it is high time to investigate this growth in detail.

## 4.2 | Characteristics and use

Given expectations that [ADJ + *as*] has increased in frequency over time, we first document the breadth of the construction in the Waikato MEC corpus, with regard to both the adjective types which are used and their overall frequency (tokens) in the corpus.

In total, we found 194 instances of [ADJ + *as*], which contained 95 distinct adjective tokens (in fact, not all tokens are actually adjectives, as will be discussed in due course), see Table 2 (for more information please see [Supplementary Information](#)). While 70% of the adjectives (66/95) occur only once in the construction, the remaining 30% of the adjectives (29/95) occur multiple times. Most of the adjectives reported by Bauer and Bauer (2002a) show up in this list too. While *sweet as* still dominates, it is no longer the only recurring [ADJ + *as*] combination.

The table also shows polarity (positive, negative and neutral) interpretations for the adjectives used multiple times in the construction. Given previous claims that the construction occurs in informal discourse, we wanted to check for any particular skew in intensity. We discovered a preference for positive adjective tokens (also eliminating the unclear and irrelevant examples:  $\chi^2 = 32.37$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.005$ )<sup>3</sup>, as shown in Table 3.

**TABLE 2** Exhaustive list of the adjectives identified in the [ADJ + *as*] construction in the MEC corpus.

Adjective	Frequency	Polarity of adjective		
sweet	22	positive		
cool	17	positive		
mean	17	positive		
big	9	positive	neutral	
happy	5	positive		
hearty	4	positive	neutral	
hot (sexually attractive)	4	positive		
close	3	positive	neutral	
dumb	3			negative
good	3	positive		
safe	3	positive		
shit	3			negative
thick	3	positive	neutral	
white	3		neutral	
angry	2			negative
awkward	2			negative
busy	2		Neutral	
crazy	2		Neutral (?)	
easy	2	positive		
fit	2	positive		
flash	2	positive		
funny	2	Positive	neutral	
keen	2	Positive		
loud	2	positive		negative(?)
nice	2	positive		
skinny	2		neutral	
tired	2			negative
ugly	2			negative
young	2		neutral	
Used once				

best, bestest, black, botchy, broke, bullet, cheap, chirpy, choice, chubby, cold, corrupt, crafty, creepy, dark, dizzy, drunk, embarrassing, fair, fine, fluent, fob, full, fun, green, hard, hōhā [Māori loanword: 'boring'], huge, hungry, ideal, jealous, long, mad, Māori, nosy, old, open, outgoing, packed, Pākehā [Māori loanword: 'European New Zealander'], pregnant, proficient, purple, quiet, rude, salty, shady, sick, silent, small, soft, solid, stalker, stink, stoked, stoned, straight, stressed out, tiny, tired, trash, trendy, weird, whakamā [Māori loanword: 'shy'], yum + one unclear example

Similar to Bauer and Bauer (2002a), we found both predicative and attributive uses of adjectives in sentences containing [ADJ + *as*]. In (1), the person who is deemed likely to have a baby next is (predicatively) described as 'hearty as into the church'. Note that here, it is difficult to replace 'hearty as' with 'very hearty' (\*very hearty into the church). Similarly, in (2), the baby is described as having 'a big as smile on his face'.

**TABLE 3** Polarity of adjectives identified in the [ADJ + as] construction in the MEC corpus.

Polarity	TYPES	TOKENS
always positive	37	95
always neutral	23	44
always negative	30	39
unclear	7	7
not relevant (discourse functions)	4	9
Total	101 adjective types (94 unique but some were used with varying polarity)	194 adjective tokens

**TABLE 4** Grammatical function of the [ADJ + as] construction in the MEC corpus.

Grammatical function	Frequency	Percentage	
Attributive position	154	80	
Predicative position	(no modifiers)	30	15
	with prepositional phrase	10	5
Total	194	100	

## (1) Predicative use of [ADJ + as]

A: wait I reckon he's gonna be the next one to have a kid eh

B: eh

A: I reckon

B: but <unclear word> isn't she like **hearty as** into the church

A: yeah oh well but

B: they're not meant to be up to anything until they get married

## (2) Attributive use of [ADJ + as]

A: oh look at his perfect little face

B: mm did you see the one of him and Aaron and he's got a **big as** smile on his face

A: oh no not yet <pause> oh look at that <laugh>

While most uses of [ADJ + as] in our corpus are indeed predicative, roughly 15% of constructions are used attributively, see Table 4 ( $\chi^2 = 66.99$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.005$ ).

Turning to the structure and function of [Adj + as], we find that certain instances of *sweet* are fixed rather than compositional (\*very sweet). In these cases, its function is one of agreement and solidarity (see 3), often being used to close the topic of discourse and wind down the conversation, as in (4).

(3)

A: oh my gosh you know what scared me? my mate's like um messaged me last night saying that oh we're coming over for um their sister's fortieth like holy shit they're getting into that zone of like pushing forty

B: <laugh> **sweet as** <unclear word> nothing oh I'm gonna get to ninety

A: pushing forty and then I get the bloody oh well life doesn't start till forty life doesn't start till forty oh yeah okay way to make me feel better

(4)

B: oh wait are you nineteen?

A: yeah yeah

B: shit don't look it

A: I got a little while to go but yeah sweet

B: **sweet as** alright chur my bro

A: <unclear word> see ya see ya

B: oh you're all good [end of recording]

While *sweet as* stands out from the other examples with respect to its discourse management function, many of the [ADJ + *as*] constructions analysed are compositional and bear referential meaning. In (5), not only do we have *tired as* but also an intensified version of the construction, *fricking tired as*. The speaker uses the [ADJ + *as*] phrase as an intensifier, highlighting how tired they are, and further emphasising this with the modifier *fricking*.

(5)

B: yeah oh that reminds me I need to take his name off the waiting list at

A: yeah yeah

B: that other place well <unclear words>

A: yeah I'm **fricking tired as** man I'm drinking a coffee

B: <laughs>

In other cases, the [ADJ + *as*] construction is embedded inside a larger constituent, as in the earlier example *hearty as into the church* given (1), or in example (6), *happy as with myself*, which consist of a complex phrase containing [ADJ + *as*].

(6)

B: like you're so confident and bubbly now which is amazing you know

A: yeah like I'm **happy as** with myself but I wasn't as confident—and I think my confidence maybe even just being in a relationship helps coz you're not chasing to please anyone you're just being yourself but also just knowing that like [...]

Finally, the adjective used in [ADJ + *as*] is not always gradable, for example *pregnant as* (7) or *ideal as* (8). These constructions are interpreted as 'being in the final stages of pregnancy' and 'being optimal', respectively. At the other extreme, this adjective can occur with double marking in the (nonstandard) superlative form *bestest as*, see (9). Moreover, there need not be an adjective involved at all. The construction *bullet as* in (10) is structurally best described as [N + *as*], yet semantically, it functions as [ADJ + *as*] because its interpretation might be paraphrased by 'very much bullet-like'.

(7)

B: oh my god I was still pregnant thenA: YES <laugh>

B: **pregnant as**

A: coz the the mum still works at <unclear words> eh

B: yes I think so

(8)

A: it's like not many people who do my degree get to actually use it like

B: yeah yeah

A: but I've been able to use both of my degrees so it's like it was **ideal as** for me

B: yes yeah

(9)

A: but she has to sleep in the same room as her I'm like oh you two drive me crazy from

The minute you wake up you are fighting to the minute you go to sleep they have little um little times when they're **bestest as** friends they're doing things but

B: yeah

A: but that lasts five minutes

**TABLE 5** Discourse management function of the [ADJ + *as*] construction in the MEC corpus.

Discourse management function		Frequency	Percentage
Mid-turn		106	55
Turn transition	turn-finally	68	35
	turn-initially	16	8
	turn-initially = turn-finally (the turn only contains the [ADJ + <i>as</i> ] construction)	4	2
Total	194	100	

(10)

A: turns over like oh shit you're an egg and I was going I can just imagine some of these drama queens they really wanna kick my head in but they'll go ahhhhh

B: <laughter>

A: oh I miss <unclear name> oh fucken **bullet as** yah cunt

B: <laughter>

A: they'll probably go yah fucken gave me a crack yah bastard

Within the larger discourse, we note two main discourse positions where the [ADJ + *as*] construction is likely to occur. They can be found mid-turn, expressing referential meanings of heightened emotive content, as exemplified earlier in (8) and below in (11). Alternatively, they can occur turn-initially or turn-finally, often being used as discourse management markers, for instance, to take or concede the floor, as in the earlier example (4) and example (12) below. Overall, [ADJ + *as*] constructions occur in roughly equal proportion mid-turn and at turn transition points, see summary in Table 5 ( $\chi^2 = 1.67$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = 0.20$ ).

(11)

A: that's yeah

B: Atlanta's got my dream hair bro I tell ya Jean's got **thick as** hair

A: thick oh nice though but straight like

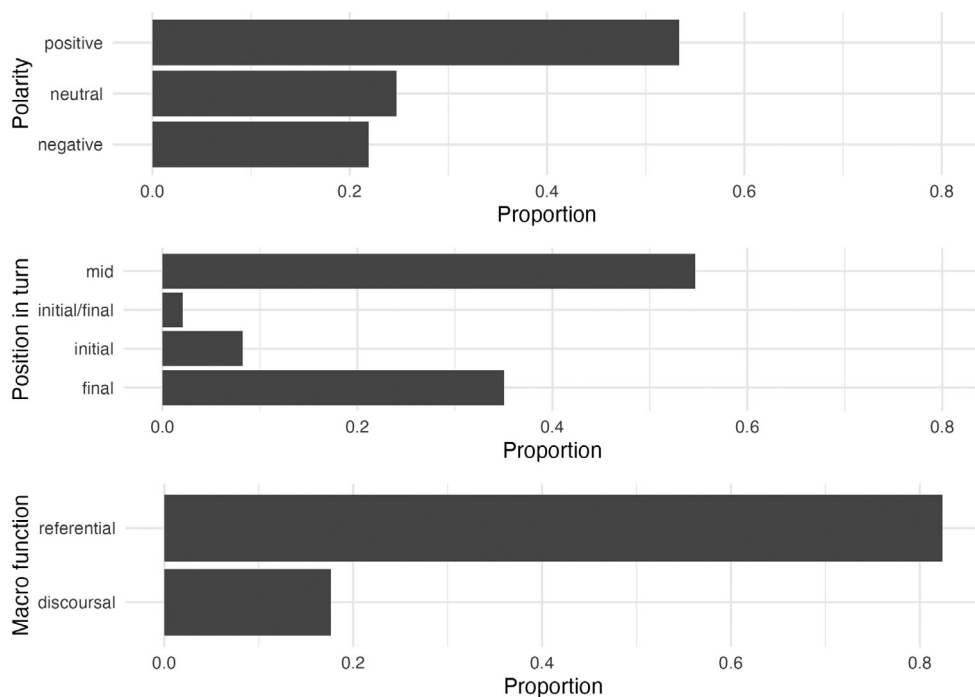
B: yeah

(12)

A: sorry what was the time again twelve if it's coz I have to go

B: oh quarter past

A: oh yeah I have to go sorry cuzzie



**FIGURE 3** General summary of properties of the [ADJ + *as*] construction in the MEC corpus.

B: cool as ooh can I just get you to do one more thing

A: yeah okay

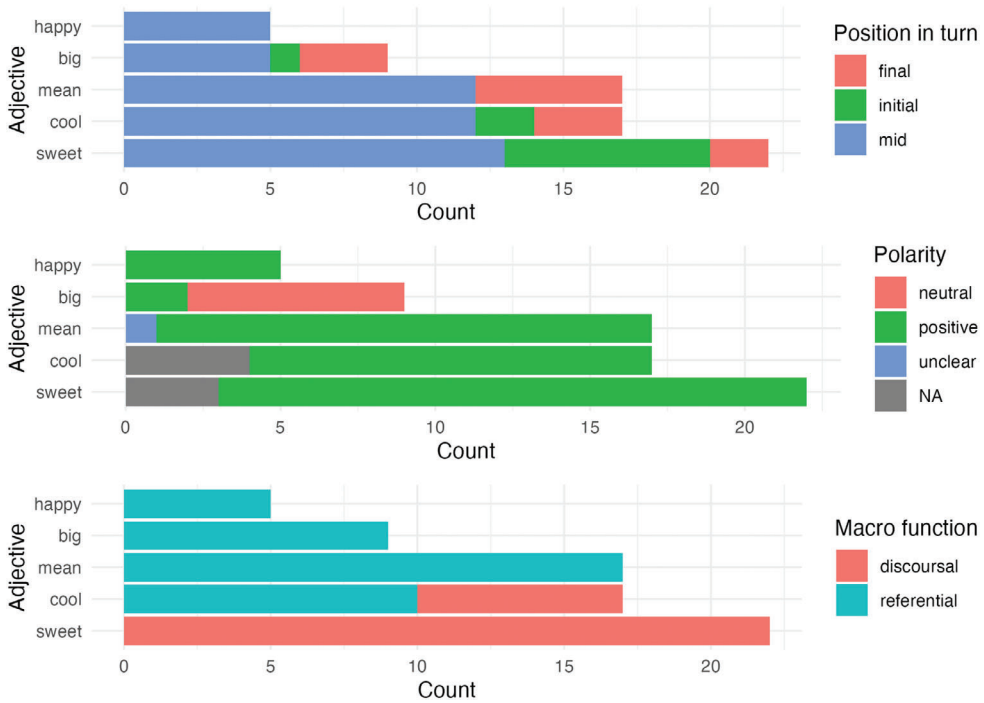
Looking at the discourse management functions in more detail, we can distinguish various sub-uses. The [ADJ + *as*] construction might be used to manage the discourse by winding down the conversation as in (4) ‘sweet as alright chur my bro’, or changing the topic, as seen in (12) ‘cool as ooh can I just get you to do one more thing’.

Most [ADJ + *as*] constructions are used referentially (159/194 ~ 81%), and only a few have a discourse function (34/194 ~ 18%). To be precise, it is only the most frequently occurring adjectives which occur in this discourse management role, adjectives like *sweet (as)*, *cool (as)*, *mean (as)* or *big (as)*.

As an interim summary, the main characteristics of the [ADJ + *as*] construction are summarised in Figure 3. Most constructions have positive polarity, occur either mid-turn or at turn-finally and have referential functions. Looking across the most productive adjectives, that is, those used five or more times in our data (*sweet*, *cool*, *mean*, *big* and *happy*), we find that these same distributions hold across individual adjectives too, see Figure 4. In other words, they also have predominantly positive polarity and occur mid-turn or turn-finally. One slight difference between these and general [ADJ + *as*] patterns comes from their function, especially for *sweet as* and *cool as*. *Sweet as* is only exclusively used as a discourse management tool, and *cool as* shows a split between referential and discursal functions. In contrast, *happy as*, *big as* and *mean as* are used exclusively in referential roles.

One final consideration is the speaker dimension. Do some speakers use more instances of this construction compared to others, and how might this use correlate with trends in their self-reported measures of exposure and awareness of Māori English? We begin by looking at individual speakers.

Most (though not all) speakers used the construction to some degree, generally once or twice. Additionally, RAs used the construction at least once. This is partly expected given that they contributed significantly more words than



**FIGURE 4** Properties of the most frequent adjectives ( $n > 5$ ) in the [ADJ + *as*] construction in the MEC corpus.

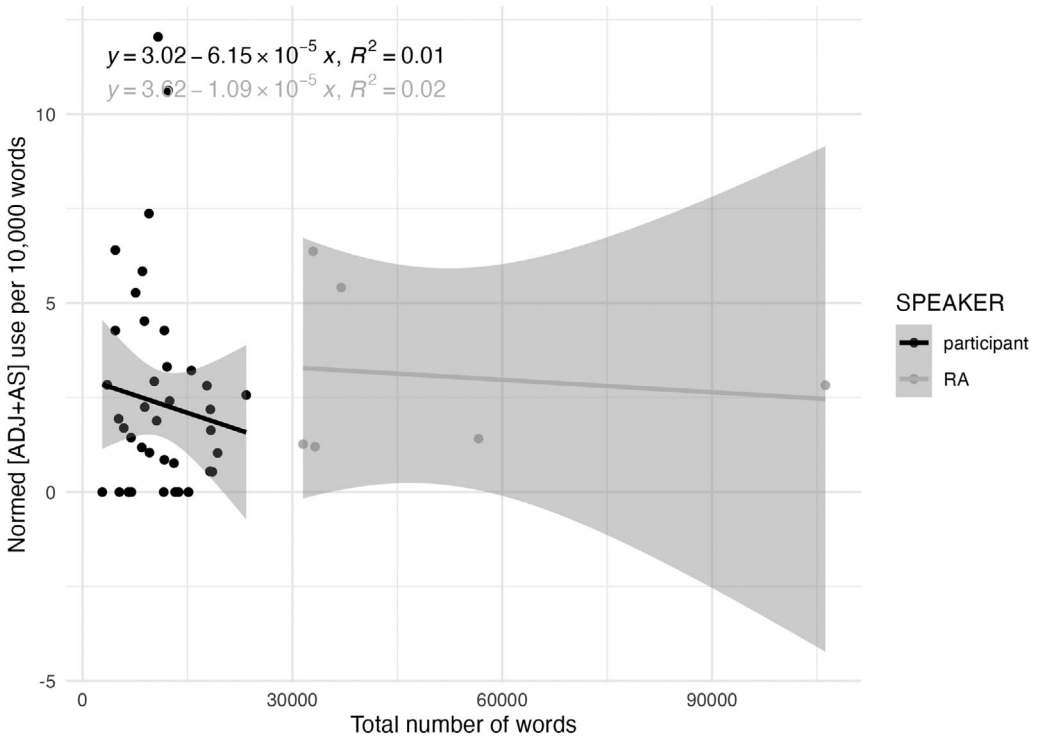
all other speakers, being part of several conversations. But, interestingly, they were not the most prolific users overall. Calculating a normed value of [ADJ + *as*] per 10,000 words can help normalise the production counts across speakers (Figure 5). As might be expected given the highly referential function of the construction, it is not the case that just uttering more words will necessarily lead to increased uses of [ADJ + *as*]. In fact, some of the speakers who contributed the highest normed counts uttered only very few words (fewer than 15,000 words). Therefore, it is likely that [ADJ + *as*] is heavily tied in, not just with informal discourse but also with personal preference or idiolect.

Next, we compared speakers' self-reported exposure to Māori English against their normed use of [ADJ + *as*], and we found that those who reported higher exposure rates tended to also use the construction more frequently (Figure 6). However, this trend is only weakly supported, and we would caution against overinterpreting it (not least because most speakers self-reported high levels of exposure to Māori English, and there was no real low-exposure group for comparison).

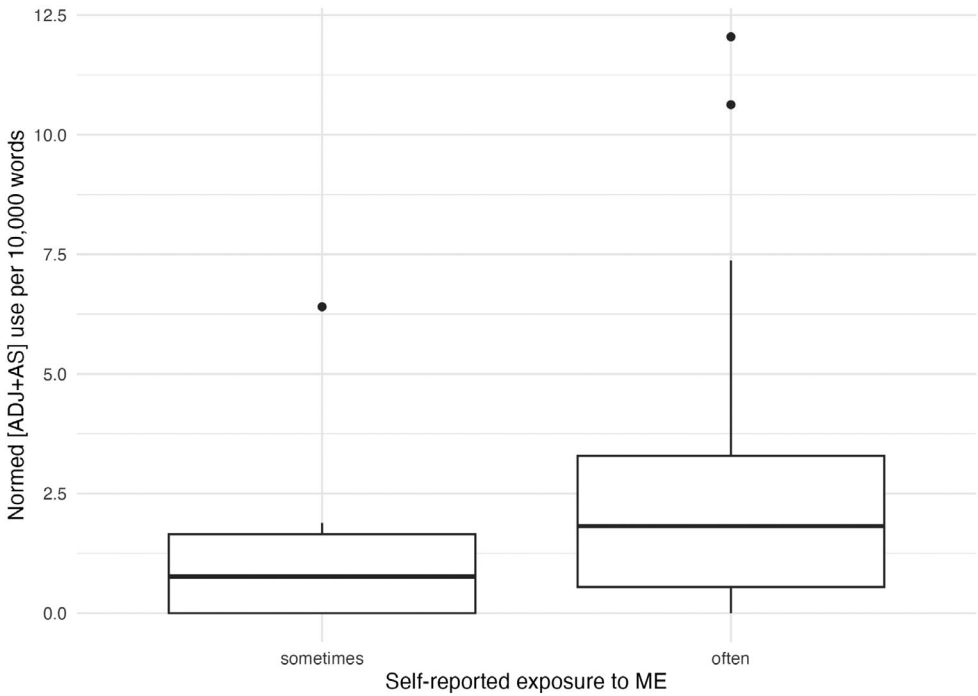
Finally, we probed the relationship between confidence in recognising Māori English and use of the [ADJ + *as*] construction (see Figure 7). This time we see an inverse relationship between self-reported confidence levels in recognising Māori English and the uses of [ADJ + *as*]. Those speakers who seemed unconvinced that they would be able to reliably identify Māori English also used a higher number of [ADJ + *as*] constructions. We note, however, high variability in the somewhat confident group and the presence of outliers too; so this plot may not provide conclusive answers.

## 5 | DISCUSSION

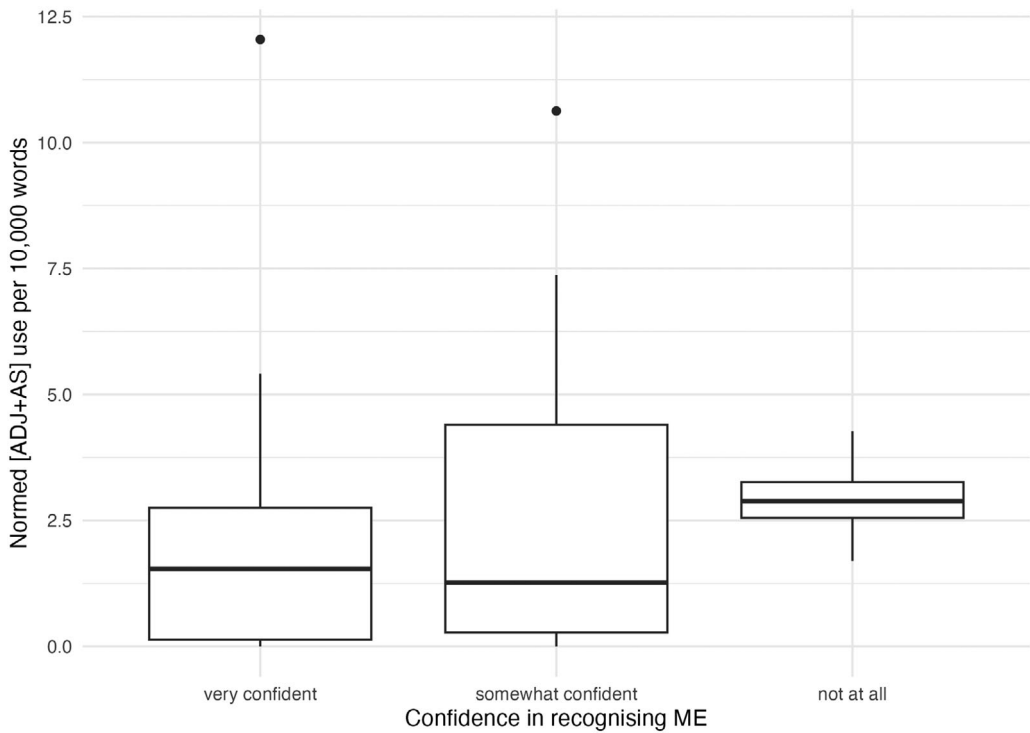
Summing up the findings of the case study presented here, the Waikato MEC corpus shows widespread and productive use of the [ADJ + *as*] construction in Māori English. The corpus is the first, to our knowledge, to demonstrate the use



**FIGURE 5** Relationship between speakers and use of [ADJ + as] in the MEC corpus.



**FIGURE 6** Relationship between self-reported rates of exposure to Māori English and use of [ADJ + as] in the MEC corpus.



**FIGURE 7** Relationship between Māori English awareness and use of the [ADJ + as] construction in the MEC corpus.

of [ADJ + as] in this English variety, showing the presence of many different adjectives and more tokens and types than found previously in any other data. The adjectives identified vary in many respects: Some occur with positive polarity, others with negative polarity; some are gradable, others are not; some are not even adjectives at all (but in fact nouns); some occurrences occur in predicative positions, others in attributive positions. These findings firmly place the construction as a feature of Māori English.

Despite this variation, one unifying feature of the [ADJ + as] examples identified is their colloquial use, both in regard to grammar (recall the use of the double superlative marker in *bestest as*) and in regard to meaning, for instance expressions like *mean as* can refer to someone who is powerful or impressive, *soft as* to someone who is naïve and inexperienced.

At the same time, we note that the construction is potentially undergoing a split in its function between two macro-uses, one referential, namely describing a speaker's evaluation or stance towards a person or event, and one discursal, namely winding down the topic, showing active listening and encouragement or simply signalling agreement and solidarity. It is noteworthy that the examples which have a discourse management function are non-compositional phrases, for example, *sweet as* and *cool as mean as*, and contain only the most frequently occurring adjectives (in this phrase).

We do not think this link between frequency and function is accidental, but, in our view, it arises from the entrenchment of the phrase as a discourse organisation tool once sufficient tokens (or exemplars) have been used. We hypothesise that once sufficiently frequently encountered, a given instance of the construction becomes stripped of its internal compositionality and meaning and gets co-opted for discourse management functions (following a typical pathway of grammaticalisation; see Hopper & Traugott, 2003; Traugott, 2008). More data are needed to substantiate

this claim, but we hope to have shown that Māori English provides a rich source of [ADJ + *as*] uses, and it is therefore a good candidate for future investigations of this hypothesis.

One important question to ask is, what is the origin of this construction? Where did Māori English get it from, and at what point in this trajectory did its function begin to branch out in this way? We know that [ADJ + *as*] was being used in the early 1990s NZE already from the WSC, but perhaps not as widely used as we see here (Head & Petrucci, 2006). In our own search of the WSC, we identified only a handful of examples (containing several instances of *sweet as*, and one use of each: *boring as*, *healthy as*, *pissed as*, *thick as*, *skinny as* and *sick as*). We also know that children were reported to use it in the late 1990s (Bauer & Bauer, 2002a). But how far back does this use go?

NZE research is fortunate in having access to a corpus of early NZE speakers, the ONZE corpus (Fromont & Hay, 2008; Hay et al., 2008). This corpus contains recordings of interviews conducted with New Zealand speakers born in the 1800s–1900s (also known as the *Mobile Unit*, comprising 204 speakers), New Zealand speakers born in 1890–1930s (*Intermediate Archive*, 114 speakers) and New Zealand speakers born between 1935 and 1985 (*Christchurch Corpus*, 849 speakers). We found only two instances of [ADJ + *as*] in ONZE, both involving the adjective *sweet*. Neither of the two early collections, the *Mobile Unit* or the *Intermediate Archive*, had any examples of [ADJ + *as*]. The two examples were identified in the *Christchurch Corpus*. The first example, (13), comes from a speaker born in 1953 who self-identified as a non-professional male, and the second example, (14), was produced by a speaker born in 1980, self-identifying as a professional female. Although they contain the same adjective, the two uses are different in that the first one constitutes a predicative use giving an assessment (the boy will be ok), whereas the second one functions as a discourse marker expressing agreement (something like 'OK'). The ethnicity of these speakers is not known.

(13)

an stay with them an we know what it's like being immediate family living with Michael an he'll probly be sweet as a nut for the first month or two but after that I would say that he'll be uh a **sweet as**

(14)

we went past her you know just a a little bit and then she came back I was like oh **nah sweet as** and it was it was awesome and I think—the other part of it was Matthew the boy that I

Nevertheless, the important point here is that there is no evidence that early speakers of NZE used [ADJ + *as*], not even *sweet as*. The first instances of the construction appear in the speech of the 1990s, *sweet as* is likely to be the very first instance and the most probable source for the construction is a comparative phrase of the type [ADJ + *as* + N], such as *sweet as honey* or *sweet as pie*, which was subsequently ellipited to a reduced *sweet as* phrase, and eventually spread to other adjectives in this form. While we cannot be sure and this is just conjecture, what we can observe over time is that the construction is being used as a productive feature of Māori English, and it is likely expanding both in use, in regard to types and tokens, and function. Future work could fruitfully investigate the presence of the [ADJ + *as*] construction in other varieties of English, to check whether the characteristics uncovered here match the uses and features found elsewhere.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

This article introduces the largest, manually collected and transcribed corpus of Māori English/Aotearoa English—the MEC corpus. These data comprise dyadic spontaneous unplanned conversations involving 49 speakers. All participants self-identify as Māori, and they are all largely involved in *Te Āo Māori* ('The Māori World') in some form or other. With a total of just under 800,000 words, the Waikato MEC corpus provides a rich resource for investigating Māori

English, a variety that remains elusive but, at the same time, is believed to be the fastest-growing variety of NZE. We use this opportunity to conduct an initial analysis of the data, namely of the [ADJ + *as*] construction. The 194 examples extracted from the Waikato MEC corpus constitute the largest inventory of [ADJ + *as*] samples to date, and the findings suggest the construction is expanding in various ways. It involves the use of various adjectives and occurs at various points within a conversational turn. Notably, the most frequently occurring [ADJ + *as*] instances are becoming used, not as evaluating expressions, providing the speaker's stance or description of an event or person, but as discourse management tools, used to wind down the topic of conversation or to express agreement. These findings suggest that [ADJ + *as*] constitutes a feature of Māori English. It is hoped that this corpus will help increase the understanding of Māori English/Aotearoa English and continue to inform ongoing research in this area.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Aotearoa is the Māori term for New Zealand (originally used to only refer to one of its islands, but in modern times, it has become the preferred Indigenous name for the country as a whole).

<sup>2</sup> One reviewer suggests that this construction may also occur in Australian English, providing as an example the Australian TV show title 'Black *as*'.

<sup>3</sup> We could not detect any statistically significant trends with regard to type frequency for adjective polarity (eliminating unclear and irrelevant examples:  $\chi^2 = 3.27$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p = 0.195$ ).

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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## Appendix A

### Background Questionnaire for Participants

Instructions: Please circle as appropriate

**Question 1.** What iwi are you from \_\_\_\_\_

**Question 2.** If you have a partner, their ethnicity is:

Māori                      Pākehā                      Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Question 3.** How well do you speak Te Reo Māori?

0                      1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
(none)                      (basic)                      (fluent)

**Question 4.** How often do you listen to Māori radio stations? (e.g. Radio Tainui)?

never                      sometimes                      often

**Question 5.** How often do you watch The Māori Television or other Māori TV programmes?

never                      sometimes                      often

**Question 6.** Do you ever visit a marae?

never                      sometimes                      often

**Question 7.** People you spend most of your time with (friends, colleagues etc...) are:

Māori                      Pākehā                      Pasifika                      Other

**Question 8.** In general, to what extent do you perceive yourself to have been exposed to Māori English (that is, English spoken by Māori people)?

never                      sometimes                      often

**Question 9.** How confident would you be that if played a recording of a Māori person speaking English and one of a Pākehā person speaking English, you would be able to tell which is which?

very confident                      somewhat confident                      not confident at all

**Question 10.** Do you speak any other languages well?

NO                      YES (if yes, please provide details) \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B

### Reading List (Māori sentences)

1. Ka pūmau tonu taku aroha ki a koe.
2. He wāhi punanga tērā.
3. Kei te tunua te kūmara me te kānga e tana tāne i te pō nei.
4. Pēnei tō mahi i te tīmatanga o te kēmu whutupōro.
5. Kīa pono, koirā tōna tino tūmanako.
6. E ai ki tēnei pānui, kua tae mai ngā pene pango ki te tari.
7. Kei te kimi te manu i tana kumu.
8. 'Haere mai ki konei'—i kī mai taku whaea.
9. I pinea tana waewae i te peka hinga.
10. Kua whati taku kōnui.
11. I pīnaki atu te one ki te wai.
12. Kāore e kemo ngā kanohi, titiro tonu mai.