

# awhi x Āwhina

## *When is a hug not a hug?*

Despite being supportive and loving in meaning, the words ‘awhi’ and ‘āwhina’ are contentious in Māori language circles. They appear to be related, but are not necessarily so. They have come to share one meaning in recent times that they did not in the past. This has created some debate within the realm of Māori speakers. This paper explains the meanings of each word, and how language change has led them to a shared meaning. The shared meaning is problematised, so the contention can be clearly understood. The paper concludes with some guidance for the use of ‘awhi’ in the business world.

### 1. OFFICIAL DEFINITION

The official record of the corpus of the Māori language is He Pātaka Kupu. This dictionary provides several meanings for the words Awhi and āwhina. Of particular note are the physical connotations that come with the word ‘awhi’. There is a definite sense of physical touch involved with this word, where one is required to touch another object in love. Definitions (i) and (ii) involve the embracing of one’s hands around another person, while (iii) refers to animals sitting on their eggs until the hatch. Definition (iv) is much different, its dictionary reference is very new, and I couldn’t find any older uses of the word in this way. It may also be a dictionary error (they may have meant ‘awhe’, see below). Therefore, I’ve opted not to include it here in my analysis. The definitions for ‘āwhina’ are more abstract. A synonym for the word is tuarā, the spine, but the explanations revolve solely around support, as the spine does for the body. Another synonym given to this word is whakaruruhau, protector. This kind of protector could be a person, or an object such as a roof, both of which protect. There is no act of physical touch inferred with this word.

### 2. CONTENTION

The contention around these two words is that awhi is often used for help and support – ‘I will help you’ becomes ‘māku koe e awhi’. This can also mean ‘I will hug you’. This makes certain exchanges awkward. People do not use the reverse (‘āwhina’ for ‘hug’), so the words aren’t yet synonymous.

There are several components to consider in the argument of using ‘awhi’ as ‘help’:

#### (I) LANGUAGE CHANGE

A scan of pre-1900 literature found no records of awhi used for help/ support. All older instances of awhi that were found, were definitively about hugging, or animals tending to their eggs. That means using the word awhi for help is likely contemporary.

Having said that, a changing language is a living one. Language change is necessary in languages undergoing revival, and concessions will need to be made with word use. Where concessions are made depends on many factors, but the overall preference among linguists tends to be: things derived from English influence should be avoided, things developing from native language use (even contemporary native use) should be entertained. Where the contemporary use of awhi derived from matters, and we do not know yet whether this change has a base in English influence or not.

## (II) SOME NATIVE SPEAKERS USE AWHI FOR HELP

Native speakers are more likely to take issue with the word awhi being used for help than second language speakers, but native speakers also use the word in this way. With two opposing speaker views, it is difficult to say whether we should accept awhi as a word for help.

Secondly, in a real-life context, a native speaker is unlikely to even register when another native speaker uses the word 'awhi' for 'help' – it will wash over them without notice. However, a second language speaker using this word will register, and a more purist native speaker may criticise its use. This is awkward for learners and non-native speakers. I personally teach awhi/help as a quasi-error, to try and save learners from some unnecessary reprimand. It is not that I believe it is indeed an error, but I believe in trying to spare my students from negative treatment if I am able.

## (III) THE TWO WORDS COULD BE RELATED, BUT MIGHT NOT BE

It is possible that the words are related. In situations where two words were absolutely related, it might be more permissible to accept them as synonymous. Awahi and āwhina do, on one hand, appear to be related through reduplication. In many languages, parts of a word are reused again to create another word with a similar meaning (nui, nunui; iti, itiiti; kōrero, kōrerorero). Awahi and āwhina might be an instance of reduplication. However, another entirely permissible argument is that awahi and awhe are related. It is not uncommon to adjust vowel spellings in Māori to create related words (ngā, ngē, ngī, ngō, ngū are all different words for human sighs, growls and screeches). Awhe means to wrap around or encircle. Thus, 'me awhe tō tinana ki te tātua' means 'you should use this belt', this encircling with a belt is relatively similar to a hug. It might be a more sound argument that these two words are related, and awahi has no connection to āwhina. If the latter is true, it would seem unwise to accept it as a word for help, in the interests of revival.

## 3. DOES IT MATTER?

As a business term, the word awhi is totally fitting. Words are allowed to be metaphorical in their use, and as such, awhi can take a metaphorical meaning in the business world as a wraparound of support. Having said that, cautious use would involve understanding the above context, and expecting the occasional speaker to challenge its use with questions such as 'what does awhi mean?'. Speakers may also assume the business has used it incorrectly. Purists do not much like it when they themselves are wrong either, as they power dynamics of fluency comes with an assumption they're always right. This again, can be awkward and unnerving for a Māori business using the term.

Apprehension surrounding the use of this word would be normal, and that's because as speakers and learners of a language undergoing revival, everything we do with the language is political, and the politics of language bring apprehension. Since this word is already contentious, we know that, at some point, its use in a business context (which won't immediately appear to be about hugs) will probably be challenged.

## 4. WHAT TO SAY WHEN SOMEONE ASKS WHAT AWHI MEANS?

Awahi, in its most fundamental meaning, is the act of a physical embrace around another person or animal, or to describe the act of brooding, as seen in egg-laying species. Metaphorically, the word awahi can lean into meanings which engender feelings of support, embrace and whānau interconnectedness. These are some of the underpinnings this business carries within it, as a kaupapa Māori business.

VINCENT OLSEN-REEDER, AWHI 2021



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