

Identities of an Island: How Hawaiian English Survived Through the Centuries

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On January 18, 1778 British explorer Captain James Cook aboard his ship the *HMS Resolution* accidentally came upon a new land—the coast of Waimea, Kauai. He named the island chain the Sandwich Islands, after the fourth Earl of Sandwich, Lord of the Admiralty and financier of Cook’s voyage.¹ The act of naming a land in which an estimated 200,000 to one million native peoples already lived, set an oppressive precedent for a battle of cultures that would span all the way to modern times. At the core of this battle was identity, Hawaiian versus Western versus various immigrant populations, and with the fight for a common language, a form of communication to unite the different races brought equal economic opportunity to all.

For the earliest immigrants to Hawaii, communication among workers and superiors made the work difficult due to the lack of a common language. Within the first weeks of their new life in Hawaii, the immigrants began communicating in a new language, known as a pidgin, formed to bridge their native tongues, a mishmash of different languages based first on the Hawaiian grammar system and soon after, on English. According to University of Hawaii faculty, “A pidgin is a new language which develops in situations where speakers of different languages need to communicate but don't share a common language. The vocabulary of a pidgin comes mainly from one particular language (called the "lexifier”).”² Hawaiian Pidgin, also known as Hawaiian Creole English (HCE) by linguists, has a rich history in the state of Hawaii. However, from its earliest days, Hawaii Pidgin has been threatened by desires to bring Standard English to Hawaii. Over time it became a badge of honor for many locally raised on the Islands, as well as a reason for discrimination in schools and the workplace and the target of several educational modifications. Despite pressures to eliminate Pidgin English in favor of Standard

¹ Vanessa Collingridge, *Captain Cook-The Life, Death and Legacy of History's Greatest Explorer* (Edury Press, 2003), 380. ISBN 0-09-188898-0

² Da Pidgin Coup, “Pidgin and Education,” University of Hawaii, November 1999, <http://www.hawaii.edu/sls/pidgin.html>

English, it has been kept alive by families, cultural and education advocates, and new generations of those locally born, thus, the language has remained important to social and cultural identity.

Pidgin is spoken by an estimated 600,000 people in the state of Hawaii, as well as an unknown number in the mainland United States. While Pidgin takes the majority of its words from English, it is a distinct language because the words often have words different from English. Additionally, it uses different pronunciations, sounds, and word orders. A pidgin language is formed by the need for speakers of different languages to communicate; hence, it is used as an auxiliary or second language. In Hawaii, the “p” in Pidgin is now capitalized because the second generation of Pidgin speakers and onward used it as a native language. According to Da Pidgin Coup, “When children start learning a pidgin as their first language and it becomes the mother tongue of a community.”³

While the islands of Hawaii were first populated by Polynesians sometime between 200 and 400 AD, outside contact with Europeans was not made until 1778, when Captain James Cook and his crew made what is thought to be first contact. Over the next few decades Hawaii grew into a popular area for trade. As more Europeans arrived to trade goods, the two peoples began picking up each other’s language for communicative reasons. The origins of a Hawaiian pidgin can be found during these times, especially in the early to mid-1800s as Hawaiians began taking sailing jobs on English ships. The earliest known record of a Hawaii English pidgin is found in the autobiographical novel by Captain Richard H. Dana’s *Two Years Before the Mast*, where he refers to it as the Sandwich Island language, “Now got plenty money; no good, work.

³ Da Pidgin Coup, “Pidgin and Education.”

Mamule [later] money *pau* [finished]—all gone.⁴ At this point no pidgin language existed, but this changed with the sugarcane boom in Hawaii during this same period.

In 1835 the first sugarcane plantation opened, and its productivity and high profits led to the importation of immigrant laborers from several different countries. The need for a simple way to communicate to workers from Hawaii, China, Japan, Korea, Portugal, and the Philippines led to a pidgin language in a relatively short time. The language grew more complex as indentured labor grew in size and origin. Around this time, sign language known as Hawaii Pidgin Sign Language was developed, though it was supplanted in the 1940s by American Sign Language and today is nearly extinct.⁵ By the end of the 1800s, nearly 500,000 workers had emigrated from the above countries, in addition to numerous Pacific islands, Puerto Rico, and continental Europe.⁶ During this time, Hawaiian was the language used in government and schools, so the pidgin language was based on the Hawaiian grammar system and used mostly Hawaiian loan words. This pidgin Hawaiian was partly a result of white plantation owners and Chinese laborers failing to fully use Hawaiian. The role of English in Hawaii during this century, beginning with foreign missionaries building English schools helped solidify the marginalization of the Hawaiian language. When Queen Ka‘ahumanu converted to Christianity in the 1820s, the English schools grew in prestige, while the Hawaiian schools became the realm of “commoners.” As the wealthy English-speaking minority in Hawaii began quietly pushing for annexation, tuition-free English schools were established to support integration into an American-type society, and by 1896—three years after the overthrow of the monarchy—Hawaiian language

⁴ Richard H Dana, *Two Years Before the Mast & Other Voyages* (Literary Classics of the United States, 2005), 136.

⁵ Karen Wiecha, “Linguists Discover Existence of Distinct Hawaiian Sign Language,” the Rosetta Project, March 8, 2013, <http://rosettaproject.org/blog/02013/mar/8/linguists-discover-existence-distinct-hawaiian-sig/>

⁶ Kent Sakoda and Jeff Siegel, *Pidgin Grammar: An Introduction to the Creole Language of Hawaii* (The Bess Press, 2003), 5.

schools had nearly disappeared.⁷ As the native language died out, pidgin began filling the communication vacuum for immigrants. This can be argued to be the birth of a clear line between pidgin speakers and those attending the Standard English schools. This is significant because it helped insure that the immigrants and their successive family members remained “outsiders” in the growing western culture.

A major cultural shift occurred in 1875, with the signing of a free trade reciprocity treaty between King Kalakaua of Hawaii and President Ulysses S. Grant of the United States. This treaty gave favored trading rights to the US, and as a result, a large number of Americans flooded Hawaii. This corresponded with a drop in native Hawaiian numbers from over 200,000 to less than 50,000 due to disease and intermarriage.⁸ As a result, English-speaking schools began to dominate Hawaii while becoming the preferred language of the plantations. By 1890, an English-lexified pidgin began replacing the Hawaiian pidgin. By the end of the nineteenth century common sayings and patterns developed within the plantations, leading to the birth of a new auxiliary language, Hawaii Pidgin English (HPE). With this came a clear distinction between “laborer” and “privileged.”

This period was a major shifting point in the transition of Hawaii Pidgin from a pidgin to a creole, or true language. This is because the pidgin began to be used outside of the plantations due to first-generation local speakers born into the families of plantation workers. It spread through schools and other areas, becoming the first language of a large number of Japanese children. With this, a Hawaiian Creole was born. Around this same time, Chinese and Portuguese families who immigrated to Hawaii for sugarcane jobs began forming families. Rather than using

⁷ Katie Drager, *Pidgin and Hawai'i English: an overview* (*Journal of Language, Translation, and Intercultural Communication*, 2012), 61-73.

⁸ Sakoda and Siegel, *Pidgin Grammar: An Introduction to the Creole Language of Hawaii*, 3.

Cantonese or Portuguese, a lot of these parents used HPE around the household, making it a first, or native, language for many locally born children. This marked the phase of modern Pidgin.

Another factor that led to the widespread use of HPE was intermarrying between native Hawaiians and immigrants. According to the Census of 1910⁹ there were 26,041 Hawaiians and 12,506 Part-Hawaiians. This means that roughly half of the native Hawaiian population had married and had children outside of their ethnic group. With so many speakers now using HPE as a first language, it became a creole, or modern Pidgin as it is called today. Hence, the field of linguistics puts the birth of modern Pidgin sometime between 1905 and 1920. The decade of the 1920s saw the number of local immigrant born children equal that of foreign born, making Pidgin the majority language of the Hawaiian Islands.¹⁰

While discrimination against Pidgin speakers had been on grounds of socio-economic status to this point, now American nationalism became a new reason to learn Standard English or remain a less-educated foreigner. The end of World War I saw a great push toward standardized English use across the Hawaiian Islands. According to University of Hawaii linguistics professor Katie Drager, Hawaiian was not the only language to face these pressures. Following WWI, efforts to close down Japanese language schools led many Japanese—the highest population on the island, to begin learning English, furthering the use and evolution of Pidgin English.¹¹

According to education historian Eileen H. Tamura,

The English-only effort was an integral part of the Americanization crusade that swept the nation during and after World War I. Underlying the crusade was the doctrine of Anglo-Saxon superiority—the conviction that American traits derived from the English,

⁹ *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910: Vol. III, Population*. New York: Norman Ross Publishing, 1999.

¹⁰ *The Pacific and Australasia* (Google eBook) Kate Burridge, Bernd Kortmann Ed. Berlin, Germany: Walter de Gruyter, 2008, 233.

¹¹ Drager, *Journal of Language, Translation, and Intercultural Communication*, 63

and that the future of American democracy depended upon the survival of the English language and the dominance of the Anglo-Saxon "race."¹²

As a territory at this time, heavy pressures fell on those living in Hawaii to acculturate into the new world power. World War One changed the world, both morally and economically, and that the United States came out of it stronger and more heroic than before was seen as proof by many that democracy was right, and with it, its culture and language. Up to this point campaigns to spread Standard English had swept the islands for reasons business success, now the language carried with it the dominant ideology of westernization with it.

As Standard English continued to gain prestige, pseudo-scientific studies of pidgin use in the schools of Hawaii fueled ideas that speakers of the creole were less intelligent due to disadvantaged language learning at home. During the 1930s the pioneering work of John E. Reinecke, a pioneer in the scientific study of contact languages,¹³ began an analysis of Hawaii Creole English which became the foundation of later linguistic study. While Reinecke sought to offer an honest assessment of the language, his belief toward HCE was that of the "English dialect of Hawaii".¹⁴ This classification would have major ramifications for the academic opinions of Hawaii Pidgin English. As most of Reinecke's were based on observation, his findings highlight the prejudices against the use of Pidgin, both in education and in a wider social context. On one hand, Pidgin speakers faced contempt from advocates of strict Standard English, who viewed Pidgin speakers as "blamable for not learning Standard English, which they

¹² Eileen H Tamura, "The English-Only Effort, the Anti-Japanese Campaign, and Language Acquisition in the Education of Japanese Americans in Hawaii, 1915-40," *History of Education Quarterly* Vol. 33, No. 1 (Spring, 1993), pp. 37-58 Published by: History of Education Society Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/368519>.

¹³ Reinecke, John E. *Language and Dialect in Hawaii: A Sociolinguistic History to 1935*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1988.

¹⁴ Reinecke, *Language and Dialect in Hawaii: A Sociolinguistic History to 1935*, 148.

are presumed to have had the opportunity to learn”.¹⁵ This bias experienced by those raised in a Pidgin-speaking household clashed with the local identity of which Pidgin was a huge part. Essays written by students at Honokaa Intermediate School in January, 1935 show a cultural resistance to what they saw as a language foreign to them. “Almost everytime I use pidgin English is because I don’t want people telling bad about me. Sometimes when I used good English some people say, I act as if I know everything or acting fresh”.¹⁶ Another student stated, “When we students use good English we are sure we will be called ‘haoles.’ And of course we hate to be called ‘haoles’ for many reasons”.¹⁷ These statements show feelings of oppression from the Standard English advocates, who believed they were acting in local students’ best interests without concern to the social and identity-related issues of Hawaii Pidgin community. It seems these policies were not observed island-wide or in all classrooms however. My grandmother, who grew up during this time, said she was never made to feel different because of the way she talked. According to her, “Pidgen was needed and used all the time. There was nothing to be shame about. Even now, even though your mother doesn’t like it, she speaks Pidgin all the time.”¹⁸

A new wave of pro-America sentiment hit Hawaii with the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December seventh, 1941, the state of Hawaii became a military zone. While there were far more Japanese American and other local Hawaii soldiers stationed on Oahu, they felt like the outsiders. According to one locally born soldier when asked about tensions, “They were on the defensive too, because we outnumbered them. But we felt so damned insecure and intimidated

¹⁵ Reinecke, *Language and Dialect in Hawaii: A Sociolinguistic History to 1935*, 176.

¹⁶ Reinecke, *Language and Dialect in Hawaii: A Sociolinguistic History to 1935*, 178.

¹⁷ Reinecke, *Language and Dialect in Hawaii: A Sociolinguistic History to 1935*, 181.

¹⁸ Mae Fukunaga (Hawaii local) in discussion with the author, December 2013.

because they spoke better than we did.”¹⁹ Outside the state, local Hawaiian soldiers received honors for their service, including the all-Japanese 442nd Regimental Combat Team, whose “valor earned more than 18,000 individual citations and eight Presidential Unit Citations. Known also as the “Purple Heart Battalion,” with more than 700 men killed and 9,500 Purple Hearts, they suffered the highest casualty rate in U.S. Army history.”²⁰ Additionally, island veterans were credited for confusing the German army by communicating in Pidgin over their walkie talkies. “Hama hama tommy gun boltsu,” for example, meant “Rush the tommy gun bolt.”²¹

With the American victory in WWII came even more pressure to be “American,” meaning culturally, economically, and linguistically. As stated by renowned linguist Charlene Sato:

In was in this context [post WWII United States] that HCE was foregrounded as a marker of socioeconomic status in Hawaiian society. Being labeled a Pidgin speaker was considered by many to be a liability in the job market, associated as it was with the plantation and with the minimal intelligence assumed for necessary for manual labor...Many individuals who thought of themselves as American or who simply aspired to be the middle class made a conscious effort to suppress their HCE and their ancestral languages in favor of English.²²

This repression of native or “ancestral” language created a dichotomy of identity that persists to this day. A sort of on/off switch that the savvy of Hawaiian locals were expected to master if they wished to remain plugged into their culture while finding economic success in the Stand

¹⁹ Shioya, “The Conflict Behind the Battle Lines,” Z1.

²⁰Tara Shioya, “The Conflict behind the Battle Lines. The Japanese Americans who fought in World War II were engaged in another, private battle, against prejudice and misunderstandings,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, September 24, 1995, Z1.

²¹ Thelma Chang, “Revisiting pidgin. If it’s ‘garbage,’ so is Shakespeare,” *Honolulu Advertiser*, October 30, 1994, B-1.

²² Charlene Sato, *Language of Inequality*, Nessa Wolfson and Joan Manes (ed, Mouton Publishers, 1985), 266.

English-dominant state. This sort of dual personality requirement was two-fold. As stated in the above quote, to many, HCE carried with it deep prejudice. People felt inferior to Standard English speakers. According to Kent Sakoda, University of Hawaii Pidgin linguist and activist, “Since its development, Pidgin has been used mostly as an informal language of families and friends, and has been considered an important badge of local identity—i.e., the language of people born and bred in Hawaii.”²³ It is clear then to understand why those locals born in Hawaii could not so easily quit one method of speaking for another hailed by outsiders as the only way to find success. Examples abound of those locals born who found success in attending prestigious Standard English schools while using their native Pidgin with tact—these include Hawaii governors, Senators, and state Supreme Court justices.²⁴

From the 1960s onward the Hawaii Board of Education took up the challenge of spreading Standard English across the Island by discounting Pidgin. Schools pushed for the elimination of Pidgin use inside the classroom, going as far as printing texts for teachers offering tips on ways to keep it from speaking it themselves. Classroom that were not stratified saw an “example” being made of Pidgin speakers. Take the experience of a now 40-year-old local man of Hawaiian and Portuguese decent recounting his elementary days, “My teacher had correc me in front of da whole class. I no like talk already. She told me afta she wasn’t making fun of me. She just wanted me to understand that not everybody would understand the way locals talk.”²⁵ “This period saw an interest in standardized testing to identify deficiencies in Hawaii student’s leaning and development, going as far as claiming bilingual and Pidgin-favored students as

²³ Sakoda, *Pidgin Grammar*, 18.

²⁴ Tonouchi, Lee A. *Living Pidgin. Contemplations on Pidgin Culture*. Kane’ohe, Hawaii: Tinfish Press, 2002, 43.

²⁵ John R. Rickford and Suzanne Romaine, ed, *Creole Genesis, Attitudes and Discourse: Studies celebrating Charlene J. Sato*, Philadelphia, PA: John Benjimen Publishing, 1999. 295.

“retarded in the use of English”.²⁶ As the decades passed however, the wording of anti-Pidgin efforts by school administrators softened, but the opinions of the language remained the same. As stated by the Hawaii Department of Education in 1970, “Hawaii Island Dialect (HID) is a respectable, useful tool of communication for its speakers. But because it has a limited range of coverage and usefulness in terms of educational, social, and economic considerations, those who speak HID exclusively need to learn to speak Standard English as well”.²⁷ My mother grew up during this time and recalls the stigma against speaking Pidgin. To this day she believes using it in public is a sign of lower-class people. She said, “Pidgin speakers are only successful in Hawaii. They can’t do well anywhere else. Even your Pidgin writers you like to study, I don’t know why. They all need a second job because they can’t live off the little money they make with their Pidgin writing. If you go to a job interview speaking Pidgin you probably won’t get it.

In response to outside attacks on local’s language and culture, during the late 1970’s a sort of Pidgin renaissance occurred in media and short fiction. Local sketch comedy found a strong audience with stars such as Andy Bumatai and Frank De Lima. Both artists went on to create TV shows or write comic plays using Pidgin. The Bible was translated into Pidgin, which sold 60,000 copies. When asked why the group of writers decided to undertake the translation, they responded, “Jesus Christ, he fo everybody. He not jus fo da peopo dat talk English. God not one haole, you know.”²⁸ Another successful book written in Pidgin during this time was *Pidgin to the Max*, written in 1980 and with 200,000 copies in print.

By the next decade, Pidgin English and its speakers once again found itself under the scrutiny by school boards. In an effort to formally ban the use of Pidgin in the classroom, the State Board of Education received heavy criticism from Pidgin advocates ranging from native

²⁶ Smith, Madorah Elizabeth. “The English of Hawaiian Children.” *American Speech* 16: 24, 1942

²⁷ Smith, *American Speech*, 3.

²⁸ How Come Dey Make Da Pidgin Bible? “Da Hawaii Pidgin Bible,” <http://www.pidginbible.org/>

Hawaiians, to Caucasians, parents, teachers, and numerous cultural groups.²⁹ While the Board reversed the policy, the reasons for debate were left unsatisfied. For members of the Board of Education such as Mako Araki, the goal was never to eradicate Pidgin, but to make sure that students became thoroughly bilingual. In stating his reasons, he claimed, “Our job [as educators] is to empower people—English is the language of power. A major reason for this renewed interest in Standard English was the booming tourism across the islands. While Pidgin speakers and cultural advocates claimed efforts to diminish Pidgin went hand in hand with wanton development and an influx of outsiders, many businesses in Hawaii claimed that they simply could or would not hire Pidgin speakers due to tourists’ inability to understand conversations with locals. Another Board of education member, Francis McMiilen stated, “Wherever he or she goes, he or she presents a better appearance and is received more readily if they can present and articulate their ideas in standard English.”³⁰ Therefore in 1987, the year public opinion trumped education policy was a turning point for widespread Pidgin advocacy, which gradually grew into acceptance. From this episode grew a Pidgin revival that affected the performing arts in the form of Pidgin plays. Short stories and novels written in Pidgin found a wide readership across Hawaii, and even on the continental US. Hawaii universities began to recognize HCE as a legitimate language, if not a rich source of cultural history and heritage.

For the historiography HCE, it has only been seriously studied since the late 1970s, so records on the existence of HCE are rare. This is compounded by the fact that HCE has received little attention from scholars outside of Hawaii makes for a nearly non-existent body of scholarly material outside of the linguistic field. However, there are major themes or popular opinions throughout the history of Pidgin, beginning with the first generation of native Pidgin speakers. In

²⁹ Sakoda, *Pidgin Grammar*, 18-19.

³⁰ Donna Reyes, “Pidgin. School board, other educators have their say on its place in the schools,” *Honolulu Advertiser*, September 28, 1987, A5.

1919, federal investigators determined that Hawaii schools should separate students based on their Standard English abilities. This led to the infamous English Standard system in 1924. While the supposed goal was to stratify youth by ethnic line to better teach them customized English instruction, it was found that over its 25-year period only 10% of the population was served, most of which were white.³¹ The next decade saw linguistic pioneer John E. Reinecke begin to collect research on Pidgin speaking youth in schools, though it was done in a savagist way that considered Pidgin to be nothing more than broken English. This led the popular academic opinion that Pidgin is not a language, but an English-speaking deficiency. This prejudice exists to today. Linguists including Charlene Sato claim the next attack against Pidgin occurred in the late 1930s-early 1940s by the speakers themselves. According to Tsai, “With higher paying jobs in Hawai‘i’s newly diversified economy, Japanese, Chinese and Portuguese workers laid the foundation for an emerging middle class – a class that quickly learned the importance of downplaying its Pidgin heritage.”³² With the pro-Americanism of World War Two and the increase in tourism brought by statehood in 1959, “resentment led many locals to embrace Creole as a means of promoting social unity among Islanders through the exclusion of mainland haoles.”³³ During this same time, University of Hawaii English and speech professors helped fuel discrimination against Pidgin, “With ears trained to hear Standard English, they heard Pidgin not as a different language variety but as English that came up short. They used the term lazy language and the adjectives ungrammatical, faulty, sloppy, and slothful.”³⁴ Elizabeth Carr, a mainland speech expert at this time took an understanding view of Pidgin as a useful tool of community and culture, still considered it faulty English. Therefore, “In sum, the new, more

³¹ Michael Tsai. “Pondering Pidgin.” *Honolulu Weekly*. 4 January, 1995.

³² Tsai, “Pondering Pidgin.”

³³ Tsai, “Pondering Pidgin.”

³⁴ Da Pidgin Coup, “Pidgin and Education.”

scientific terms for Pidgin, less loaded with character assassination, still portrayed the language as trying to be English and failing.”³⁵ From the 1960s onward each decade has seen heavy anti-Pidgin efforts from school administration and politicians, followed by expressions of Pidgin in media, art, and literature. Only very recently has Hawaii Pidgin began to receive true academic attention, including a 2000 Ford Foundation summit for emerging Asian Pacific leaders in the arts where Hawaii Pacific University Pidgin Professor Lee Tonouchi.³⁶ The reality of Hawaiian Pidgin is that until very recently it has received very little attention outside of the state, and within in the state until about the 1970s, the language was seen as a ticket to a low-class existence.

Hawaii Pidgin language is a key part of the Hawaiian local identity, and despite outside pressures to eliminate or diminish it, it has remained an integral tool of communication. It has been kept alive by families, cultural and education advocates, and new generations of those locally born. The pidgin was born of the need for Western traders to communicate with Hawaiians, but truly became a pidgin during the earliest days of the sugarcane plantations, when immigrants from around the world came in waves to seek employment. As the immigrants created families, the pidgin grew into a full-fledged creole, which linguists have named Hawaii Creole English. As the Hawaiian language fell to a push for English across the islands, the basis of Pidgin shifted from Hawaiian to English. With the end of WWI came a linguistic interest in HCE, though it rested on the belief that it was a hindrance to local speakers and therefore something to correct. Pidgin was hardest hit following the Second World War, when American culture became the ideal. Tensions grew as the local identity became more whole in unified in the face of outside encroachment. This was the foundation for a cultural Pidgin renaissance

³⁵ Da Pidgin Coup, “Pidgin and Education.”

³⁶ Tonouchi, *Living Pidgin*, 18.

which conflicted with political aims at reducing Pidgin use in favor of Standard English. By the 1980's the controversy had not ended, but with each attack, the local identity grew stronger, and with it, its language.

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