

# Pondering Pidgin

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*You hear it spoken from Honolulu to Haleiwa, from Princeville to Pahala. It's been around in one form or another for a couple of centuries, mutating with the arrival of every new ethnic group. For some language experts it's music to the ears, but for others it's a sour note in society's song. And as if Pidgin didn't have enough problems already, consider this: It really isn't even pidgin after all. 'Ass why bahd ...*



**E**ver since the Hawaiian kingdom opened its ports to seafarers from Europe and America, disparate cultures have struggled to communicate. These struggles have, over the course of some 200 years, developed into a unique synthesis of at least a half-dozen languages — a poi-dog dialect that is alternately sword and shield for the inheritors of Hawaii's plantation culture.

For some, Pidgin is the embodiment of modern Hawaii, a dialect weaned on social unity and class inequity, tolerance and xenophobia, pride and self-loathing. For a growing number of others, however, it represents a general reluctance to accept the challenges of the modern world.

"It's a way of reinforcing an inferiority complex that a lot of local people have," says former state Rep. David Hagino. "If I can't meet the challenge of the real world with these rich, tough haoles and Asians, then I'll protect myself by speaking a language they can't understand."

In modern Hawaii, Pidgin indeed functions as much to exclude outsiders as it does to reinforce the shared heritage of local residents. It's a marker of who we are — and who we aren't. For native speakers in a formal environment, the use of pidgin is an ice breaker, a recognition of commonalities. Used as an ingratiating tactic by non-native speakers, it is viewed as nothing less than condescending (and who among us hasn't cringed at some bank president's clumsy "Howzit, brah?" greeting?)

The resurrection of the Native Hawaiian language, from which Pidgin was derived, has also called into question the necessity of preserving a dialect that serves all but represents none. And so, marked since birth, Pidgin once again stands at the precipice of an uncertain future.

## Wherefore Pidgin?

What is generally regarded as local pidgin English is, in fact, its bastard offspring, Hawaii Creole English (HCE). This distinction is significant. Whereas Hawaii Pidgin English (HPE) grew quickly and sporadically between the Hawaiian people and the sea traders, missionaries and immigrant workers who shared their land, Creole was a gradual melding of the various regional dialects and standard English.

The roots of HPE can be traced to port communities in Honolulu, Hilo and Lahaina, where Native Hawaiians conducted most of their sandalwood and whaling business in the early 1800s. The maritime language practiced by English speakers in those areas was less a mutually derived pidgin than a faulty stab at Hawaiian, notes Charlene Sato, chair of UH's Ph.D. program in second-language acquisition, in an examination of Hawaii's linguistic history.

The arrival of American missionaries in the 1820s accelerated the development of a capitalist economy built around private sugar plantations. During the early days of the plantations, Hawaiians comprised the bulk of the labor force. Communication between haole plantation owners and Hawaiian laborers was carried out in an unstable, broken English.

Harsh working conditions quickly diminished the Hawaiian labor pool, forcing plantation owners to recruit new workers from China and Micronesia. These workers, about 4,000 in all, had little impact on the formation of HPE, as many Micronesians returned home and most Chinese either left the plantations or married Hawaiian women and learned the native language.

As Hawaii's sugar industry continued to grow, plantation owners increasingly looked overseas to meet their labor needs.

With each major influx — the Chinese in 1852, Japanese starting in 1868 and Filipinos around 1907 — new pools of grammar, syntax and intonation were introduced. Gradually, the pidginized Hawaiian that had developed in the early 1800s evolved into pidginized English with individual variances in each segregated immigrant community.

The crucial period for HPE formation occurred between 1890 and 1910. At that point, Sato writes, "HPE consisted of Hawaiian and English vocabulary embedded in the grammatical structure of a speaker's native language."

Sato says planters often segregated plantation housing camps according to ethnicity in an effort to discourage potentially dangerous alliances between workers. The workers went along with this arrangement because it helped them to better maintain their cultural identities. Thus, laborers were able to continue speaking their native tongue at home, with Pidgin relegated to common work areas as a secondary language.

Two ethnic groups, the Japanese and Portuguese, played a significant role in stabilizing HPE and establishing a foundation for the later development of Creole.

By 1920 roughly 109,000 Japanese were spread out across the Islands, comprising about 43 percent of the total state population. Their sheer number, coupled with their desire to maintain their own distinct language and culture, enabled the Japanese to strongly influence the developing Pidgin, Sato says.

The Japanese were a particularly cohesive group. Many laborers resisted intermarriage, opting instead for picture brides from their home country. As a community they maintained their sense of cultural identity by establishing Japanese-language newspapers and an extensive system of language schools. By maintaining their first language, the Japanese ensured that the pidgin they used in the fields conformed with traditional Japanese structures, not vice versa.

As Europeans the Portuguese occupied a different social stratum than other immigrant groups. Along with a few Hawaiians, Portuguese immigrants were called upon to work as plantation overseers, or *lunas*, effectively serving as a buffer between the planters and laborers. They played a similar role linguistically, reconciling the planter's English with the plantation pidgin, Sato says.

The arrival of the various immigrant groups coincided with the growth of English as a dominant language in business and education as well as the recession of the Hawaiian language. By the 1880s English had all but supplanted Hawaiian as the language of instruction, a shift that was formalized in 1894. Curiously though, the emphasis placed on standard English in the classroom did little to stem the transition of HPE into Creole.

## The Emergence of Creole

By definition, pidgin dialects are acquired or created out of necessity; they are not a person's first language. Therefore, the dialect spoken by the children and grandchildren of immigrant workers was not Pidgin but Creole. This conversion was not distinct, however, because many Hawaii-born children of HPE speakers were fluent in both Creole and their parents' native tongue. As Sato notes, it wasn't until HCE was at its peak in the 1930s that second- and third-generation offspring began speaking Creole exclusively.

During the early 20th century, second- and third-generation speakers systematized features of HPE, English and various immigrant languages. This was fostered, in part, by the "elitist, separatist language policies of the English-speaking oligarchy," Sato writes.



Tracing Pidgin's roots: Charlene Sato

PHOTO: DALE MACDONALD

Where the plantations served as a medium for the development of HPE, public-school classrooms enabled the children of immigrant laborers to standardize and perpetuate the use of Creole through simple everyday interaction. Separated from native English-speaking peers, these children used HCE as their primary means of communication.

In 1919 a team of federal investigators recommended that children be grouped in different schools according to their proficiency in English. This resulted in the implementation of the infamous English Standard system in 1924. As Sato notes, the policy had the thinly veiled effect of further stratifying Hawaii's population along ethnic lines. In its 25-year history the SE system accommodated less than 10 percent of the total student population in Hawaii; most of these students were white.

The system was eventually abandoned in 1948 following the disenrollment of some 2,000 white students at the outbreak of World War II. Ironically, the failure of the system marked the beginning of a "decreolization" process that continues today.



"Hawaii Creole English is not broken English." Noeau Warner

## The Erosion of HCE

Sato defines decreolization as "the linguistic convergence of HCE with standard English at the societal, although not necessarily at the individual, level." This is exactly what happened just prior to World War II as Hawaii's economic and political ties with the United States increased and workers migrated from the plantations to urban areas.

With higher-paying jobs in Hawaii'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.

World War II intensified the influence of English on HCE. For children of Japanese immigrants especially, "the adoption of English played a greater role in exemplifying affinity with the American way of life," Sato writes.

More and more the prevalence of standard English was viewed as an indicator of the speaker's sophistication.

With statehood in 1959 and the subsequent expansion of the tourist industry, contact with standard-English-speaking people from the Mainland increased, "exacerbating existing resentment among locals toward tourists, real-estate speculators and outside corporate investors," Sato says.

This resentment led many locals to embrace Creole as a means of promoting social unity among Islanders through the exclusion of Mainland haoles.

"Unfortunately," Sato says, "the rejection of [standard English] that accompanied the affirmation of HCE often locked many HCE speakers into the vicious cycle of educational failure, socioeconomic stagnation and political powerlessness."

That native HCE speakers continue to struggle with feelings of incompetence in the classroom and in the business world says as much about the values imposed by governmental institutions such as the Department of Education as it does the individuals' innate feelings about the language.

The DOE historically has treated HCE as a subdialect of standard English rather than an independent language deserving of special programs, curricula and materials, Sato says. Therefore, native HCE speakers who learn standard English are generally considered deficient in English rather than bilingual.

The current DOE policy on standard English states that the value of standard English "is inestimable in a society where communication receives much emphasis. In fact, society often penalizes those who do not possess standard English." However, the department does soften its stance on HCE by allowing that competence in communication should not be tied to one language. The policy encourages a "repertoire of language strategies" and flexibility based on communication situations.

"We want to emphasize standard English, but we won't denigrate students who speak Pidgin," says DOE Language Department representative Florence Wakuya.

For many, however, the policy still falls short of acknowledging fluency in HCE as a strength.

"The school system doesn't take advantage of kids' first language," says Noeau Warner, a UH assistant professor of Hawaiian language and one of the founders of the Hawaiian immersion system. "When they teach kids French, they do it through their first language. If (the DOE) used kids' knowledge of their first language to teach them standard English, the kids wouldn't get so upset. They have to realize that HCE is not broken English. It's a separate dialect with its own set of rules."

Wakuya says the department does accommodate HPE and HCE in books and other materials if they fit into an overall curriculum of linguistic or historical studies.

But even this is accepted grudgingly, according to Darrel Lum, co-editor of Bamboo Ridge Press and a participant in the DOE's Poets in the Schools program.

"There's a 'Yeah, but ...' attitude about this type of material," he says. "'Yeah, they can read it, but they won't amount to anything.'"

"The DOE has gotten much better, but basically they're still threatened by Pidgin because of what it represents. ... They know that inherent in the language is the issue of resistance. There is a natural adversarial relationship with the educational system, and I don't see an embracing of Pidgin by the DOE."

Indeed, John Mirikitani, who dropped out of the race for the Board of Education, says students need to grasp the "more intricate" standard English in order to be competitive in the world.

"It seems to me that Pidgin hasn't developed the level of sophistication [that standard English has]," Mirikitani says. "English-language mastery correlates with getting jobs in Western society. Studies show that billions of dollars are lost because people can't get jobs due to illiteracy. It seems that if you can speak English, you can improve the economy."

"I do respect the attempt to reintroduce Hawaiian for political intents ... but I don't know if there's much utility politically with Pidgin."

Mirikitani is not alone in his perception of HCE. Parents and educators indoctrinated with the idea that the use of Pidgin indicates a failure to grasp standard English have long supported the DOE in its exclusion of the dialect. What effect such attitudes may have on future generations of native HCE speakers remains to be seen, but its impact today is nothing less than devastating, says local poet Lois-Ann Yamanaka.

Yamanaka, who earned national acclaim for her Creole-based *Saturday Night at the Paha Theater*, says native HCE speakers like herself are often frustrated and humiliated by an education system that regards them as intellectually dull.

"There is such self-loathing with these kids," she says. "It starts in the schools and filters down into the homes."

A former elementary-school teacher, Yamanaka used to encourage her students to communicate their feelings in their native dialect. "Using the language really helps them to validate their lives and their homes," she says. "When they are able to share their expe-



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**Darrell Lum: "Pidgin still exists because people find value in it."**

riences in a language that is accurate and correct to their hearing, it helps them to acknowledge that their lives are important."

Still, even those raised within HCE-speaking environments agree with the DOE's contention that in order to succeed in a changing world, mastery of standard English is a must.

"If we want to avoid becoming a Third World tourist state, we have to move forward: and in order to do that, we have to be able to speak proper English," Hagino says. "Pidgin and Creole should have been accorded more respect before, but the basis for speaking Pidgin just doesn't exist anymore."

While HCE may no longer be necessary for different ethnic groups to communicate, it does serve as a marker of the local community's social identity, Sato says.

"Creole is the language of the working class," Sato says. "It is a language that links common conditions and struggles; it crosses ethnic barriers. It remains important to people because it represents a struggle against the bourgeoisie and because it shows class solidarity."

The re-emergence of the Hawaiian language in recent years has further clouded people's perception of HCE. The return of the Islands' original language through immersion programs such as Punana Leo has polarized Hawaii's language debate, leaving HCE in a decidedly gray area.

Warner says the next few generations of Hawaiian students will probably continue to speak Creole as a second or third language. Beyond that its future is uncertain.

"As kids become more educated in Hawaiian, there won't be as much stigma on their personal identity

because they'll be speaking Hawaiian and not Pidgin," Warner says. "It's easier to identify as Hawaiian and not just local."

Sato, for one, believes that the future of HCE is relatively secure. "Up until about 10 years ago, we all predicted Creole would disappear. But this hasn't happened, despite almost complete Americanization and centralized education. ... Despite real pressures by the DOE to move toward standard English, it hasn't happened."

As established ethnic groups ascend Hawaii's socioeconomic ladder — in the process becoming more selective in their usage of Creole — they are replaced by new immigrant groups, particularly from Southeast Asia and the South Pacific. While the size and density of the current state population limits the impact these groups have on traditional HCE, the development of their own pidgin dialects helps to ensure that Creole will continue to be spoken in some fashion, Sato says.

Economic trends also may influence the population's desire to preserve its Creole heritage.

"If the tourism industry remains primary to our economy, you'll find more people holding on to the language," Sato says. "It's a system of poor pay for degrading work that employs lots of immigrants and local people who can't get better jobs. If it continues, workers will feel like they have to organize by themselves to maintain the local language — to keep the group together and separate from the outsiders."



**David Hagino: "The basis for speaking Pidgin doesn't exist anymore."**

Says Lum, "The only reason Pidgin still exists is because people continue to find value in it. It's the last thing that is representative of their lives in Hawaii, the one thing they still have control over." ■

### Pidgin Lit

Pidgin English is getting slapped around again. This professah from UH was on TV, telling how Pidgin is 'posed to be one "crude and unsophisticated form of communication." The fact is, Pidgin get many of the same usages for literary terms as English. For example:

**Theme** — "I like play on the football *theme*."

**Prose** — "Only the best surfas can compete with the *prose*."

**Drama** — "My cousin is the *drama* for UB-40."

**Appositive** — "You sure?"

"Yeah."

"You sure you sure?"

"Yeah, *appositive*."

Pidgin even uses some English words that most haoles don't even know, like *onomatopoeia* (ono-my-haupia) — "You had some dessert last night? *Onomatopoeia*, ah?" And *personification* (person-on-vacation) — for instance, if your sister take one Robert's Overnighter to Maui for the weekend, she is one *personification*. And hows about *antithesis* — as in "Go tell *antithesis* her necklace she left at our house."

Unsophisticated, ah? How ignorant can you get? If that professah no watch out, somebody going fisticate that guy's head!

*Newsleناه*

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