



## Kent Sakoda Discusses Pidgin Grammar

Kent Sakoda and  
Eileen H. Tamura

For a number of years, Kent Sakoda has been teaching at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa in the Department of Second Language Studies. His course, “Pidgin and Creole English in Hawai‘i,” is popular among students on campus. He has also taught at Hawai‘i Pacific University. Because of his expertise on the grammar of Pidgin (Hawai‘i Creole), Sakoda is a frequently-invited guest speaker.

Sakoda was born in Hanapēpē, Kaua‘i, and grew up there in the 1950s and 60s. His parents owned a garage repair shop, where they spent most of their waking hours. Sakoda recalls his youth as an idyllic time. Everyone in this small rural community knew each other and helped each other out. He and his friends spent many hours playing in the town’s park, swimming in the nearby stream, and frequenting one or the other of the town’s two movie theaters. They attended ‘Ele‘ele School, situated on a hillside overlooking Hanapēpē. Sakoda’s family lived right below the hill. Sakoda remembers the school having a courtyard and large wooden buildings with lots of greenery surrounding it. His classmates were Japanese American, Filipino American, and Native Hawaiian. Like many Japanese American children of his time, he also attended Japanese language school. And like the other youth growing up in Hanapēpē, his first language was Pidgin or Hawai‘i Creole. After graduating from the eighth grade at ‘Ele‘ele, he attended Waimea High. In this interview, Sakoda talks about his introduction to Pidgin as a subject of study and then discusses some of the basic features of Pidgin grammar.

**Tamura:** Did your teachers make you aware of the way you spoke?

**Sakoda:** They didn’t make a big thing of it, but they did “correct” us when we spoke Pidgin. For example, if we asked, “I can borrow the telephone?” using the Pidgin intonation and inflection, they would say, “Yes, you *may use* it.” Some of the kids got corrected a lot. I think I had more control over the way I spoke. I mean, I could code-switch from Pidgin to Standard English. So the teachers didn’t get after me the way they got after some of the other students.

**Tamura:** When did you first get interested in Pidgin as a subject of study?

**Sakoda:** This is a long story. After graduating from Waimea High School, I went to Drake University in Iowa. Fortunately for me, when I was there I was able to switch from Pidgin to Standard English, and so I was able to adjust rather easily to life there. At Drake I had to fulfill a requirement that I take one of three courses—language, speech, or linguistics. The speech and language courses were four-credit courses so I decided to take linguistics. Drake had no linguistics department at that time. There were just two faculty teaching linguistics, and I had no idea what the course would be like. But I ended up really enjoying the course, so I decided to major in linguistics.

I returned to Hawai‘i and enrolled as a graduate student in the Linguistics Department at the University of Hawai‘i. This was 1974, and this was when Derek Bickerton had a huge National Science Foundation grant. He and his team were collecting data from speakers of both Hawai‘i Pidgin and Hawai‘i Creole. In the 1970s there were some older

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people still living who spoke Hawai‘i Pidgin, which is the predecessor of Hawai‘i Creole. Maybe I should explain that what we refer to as Pidgin today is technically Hawai‘i Creole. “Pidgin” actually refers to a contact language. There was a Hawai‘i Pidgin during the Islands’ early plantation days, when speakers of different languages tried to communicate with each other. Hawai‘i Pidgin has largely disappeared, although some form of it emerges whenever there are new immigrants. A creole derives from a pidgin, and what people in Hawai‘i speak today is a creole that dates back to the 1910s, when the children of plantation workers developed the language from the pidgin of their parents. In the Second Language Studies Department we often use the word “Pidgin” with a capital “P” to refer to Hawai‘i Creole because Pidgin is what most people call this language. So there is Hawai‘i Pidgin, which is a pidgin, and there is Pidgin, which is a creole.

Anyway, going back to Bickerton’s project, this is when I first became aware of scholarly interest in Hawai‘i Creole. I didn’t work on his project, but I became aware of Pidgin (Hawai‘i Creole) as a subject of study. My own research for my master’s degree was on children’s language acquisition.

**Tamura:** How did you begin to focus on Pidgin?

**Sakoda:** Well, in the 1970s Charlene Sato was working on a master’s degree in the Linguistics Department, and she was one of Bickerton’s students. Let me just digress here a minute to explain that Charlene, whom we called “Charlie,” later became one of the foremost scholars of Hawai‘i Creole and an advocate in spreading knowledge about it to students, other faculty, the public, teachers, and administrators in the Hawai‘i State Department of Education. Unfortunately, she became ill with cancer and passed away in 1996, in her prime. After her death, the Department of Second Language Studies established the Charlene Sato Center for Pidgin, Creole and Dialect Studies, which does research on pidgins, creoles, and nonstandard dialects.

Now, where was I? Oh, yes. Charlie was on Bickerton’s research team. Her master’s thesis was on the use of the word “go” in Hawai‘i Creole. That’s when I got to know her. Then she went to UCLA and received her PhD there. Her dissertation was on second language acquisition; it was not on Pidgin. Then she came back to Hawai‘i and was hired in the Department of English as a Second Language

(ESL)—now called the Department of Second Language Studies—where she taught sociolinguistics. One of the areas she was interested in was Pidgin.

Bickerton planned to publish three volumes from his study, and he completed two of them. The first one was on Hawai‘i Pidgin; the second one was on Hawai‘i Creole. And the third was going to look at decreolization. He never got to the third one. So what Charlie wanted to do when she returned to Hawai‘i was to work on the third volume. She wanted to look at the data that had been gathered and find the people who had been interviewed in the original study, to see whether decreolization had taken place.

At that time there were few local students who knew how to speak Pidgin and who could help in the research. Most of the graduate students in linguistics and ESL were from the mainland. So she asked me if I wanted to work on her project, and that is how I got into it.

We looked at Bickerton’s project to see who were the most basilectal speakers in the study—the ones who were the strongest speakers of Hawai‘i Creole. Charlene wanted to do a longitudinal study, so she wanted to find the creole speakers in Bickerton’s study and re-interview them. This was about fifteen years after they had been interviewed by Bickerton’s researchers, so it was very difficult to find them. Eventually we found seven speakers. I did all the interviewing. So that is how I got into studying the grammatical structure of Hawai‘i Creole.

**Tamura:** A lot of people think that Pidgin is a bad form of English. They call it sloppy English.

**Sakoda:** Because Pidgin uses a lot of English words, people think that it should be grammatically the same as English. But while English is the lexifier, providing most of the vocabulary of Pidgin, it does not provide the grammar of Pidgin. Pidgin has its own grammatical structure and its own sound system.

**Tamura:** What languages have influenced the development of Pidgin?

**Sakoda:** Hawaiian, Cantonese, and Portuguese. The Chinese and Portuguese were the first two groups who came to Hawai‘i to work on the sugar plantations, so they and the Native Hawaiians had the most influence on the development of the structure of Pidgin.

I'll give you an example of the influence of Hawaiian: word order. In Hawaiian we say, "Nui ka hale," which is, "Big the house." In Pidgin we say, "Big, da house," and "Cute, da baby." Another example is Hawaiian expressions such as "Auwē, ka nani!" which is, "Oh, the pretty!" In Pidgin we say, "Oh, da cute!"

Cantonese also influenced the structure of Pidgin sentences. In Cantonese the word "yáuh" means both "has/have" and "there is/there are." It is used to indicate both singular and plural. Similarly, in Pidgin, the word "get" means both "has/have" and "there is/there are." In English we say, "They *have* three sons." In Pidgin we say, "They **get** three sons." In English we say, "There is a student who's bright." In Pidgin we say, "**Get** one student he bright."

Portuguese influenced Pidgin grammar, too. In Portuguese the word "para" means "for" and is used in some places where English uses "to." So in English we say, "Charles is the man to do it." In Pidgin we say, "Charles is da man **fo** do um."

Even if the Japanese were the largest of the immigrant groups, they did not influence the grammar of Pidgin, probably because they arrived in Hawai'i after the grammar had been pretty well fixed. But they did influence some of the vocabulary and expressions. For example, we say "chicken skin" here but on the mainland they say "goose bumps." And in Pidgin we say "yeah" at the end of sentences, like, "You Joe's son, **yeah**?" And, "Funny, **yeah**?"

So, as you can see, Pidgin—Hawai'i Creole—has grammatical rules. If you don't follow its rules, you are not speaking Pidgin!

**Tamura:** You co-authored a book with Jeff Siegel, *Pidgin Grammar: An Introduction to the Creole Language of Hawai'i*.<sup>1</sup> I think that this book does a great job in presenting the basic grammar of pidgin.

**Sakoda:** It has a lot of what I teach in SLS 430, "Pidgin and Creole English in Hawai'i."

**Tamura:** Would you talk some more about the features of Hawai'i Creole?

**Sakoda:** A unique feature is phonological—sounds. Even if most words in Pidgin come from English, many are pronounced differently. For example, basilectal Pidgin, or heavy Pidgin, does not include the "th" sound. Pidgin speakers use the "t" or "d" sound instead: **tink** instead of

"think," **dis** instead of "this." We say **fada** instead of "father."

Another important phonological example is intonation—the change of pitch in a sentence. A striking difference between Pidgin and English is in the intonation of yes-no questions, questions that can be answered by "yes" or "no." In American English we start with an intermediate pitch and finish with a high pitch. In Pidgin, we start with a high pitch and drop to a low pitch at the end of the sentence. For example, in English we say, "Are you a lifeguard?" We begin at an intermediate pitch and go up to a higher pitch. In Pidgin we say, "'E, yu wan laif gad?" We start high and end low.

**Tamura:** What about past tense?

**Sakoda:** Oftentimes, "wen" is used before a verb to indicate past tense. For example, in English we say, "I saw him." In Pidgin we say, "Ai **wen** si om." In English we say, "They painted his skin." In Pidgin we say, "De **wen** peint hiz skin."

**Tamura:** Anything else you want to point out?

**Sakoda:** One last thing. Let's look at negation. How do you say, in Pidgin, "I don't play cards"?

**Tamura:** I no play cards.

**Sakoda:** Yes. It is ungrammatical to say, "I not play cards." Any speaker of Pidgin knows this. In using negation, Pidgin is more complex than English, which uses only "not" or the contracted form, "n't." In Pidgin there are four negative markers—nat (not), no, neva, and nomo—and each is used in specific instances.

The guy isn't brown.	Da бага <b>nat</b> braun.
He's not going to break it.	Hi <b>nat</b> goin brok om.
I won't tell anybody.	Ai <b>no</b> goin tel nobadi.
I don't want to flunk.	Ai <b>no</b> laik flangk.
I didn't do it (past tense).	Ai <b>neva</b> du om.
They weren't listening.	De <b>neva</b> ste lisen.
There isn't any food in the house.	<b>Nomo</b> fud in da haus.
Now we don't have a car.	Nau wi <b>nomo</b> ka.

**Tamura:** Any final comments before we end our interview?

**Sakoda:** I want to repeat that there are grammatical rules in Pidgin, which are different from the rules in English. Hawai'i Creole is not a form of English. It is a language that is structurally different from English.

**Tamura:** Thanks, Kent, for your time and for sharing your expertise.

#### **ENDNOTES**

- <sup>1</sup> Kent Sakoda and Jeff Siegel, *Pidgin Grammar: An Introduction to the Creole Language of Hawai'i* (Honolulu: Bess Press, 2003).