



Hawai'i Creole (Pidgin), Local Identity, and Schooling

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Guest Editor

For a century Hawai'i Creole, better known in the islands as Pidgin, has been a subject of concern among educators and the public. Attitudes toward this language have ranged from disdain to pride. It was once thought that eventually, with decreolization, Pidgin would disappear. Yet a hundred years since it was first recognized as a distinct form of speech, it remains a primary language among many in the state. To be sure, like all languages, it has changed over time. Nonetheless, its grammatical and phonetic characteristics make it distinctive and recognizable.

During the past few decades, many have recognized the crucial impact that Hawai'i Creole has had on people's identity. As Rojas and Reagan (2003) note, language is "at the heart of social life" (12) and central to self-identity, "to our sense of who we are" (6). For many in Hawai'i, Pidgin has played that role.

In this issue's first essay, "What School You Went? Local Culture, Local Identity, and Local Language: Stories of Schooling in Hawai'i," Darrell Lum begins with an introductory discussion of themes that emerge in the two short stories, narrated in Pidgin, that he includes in his essay. His stories are fitting examples of the ways in which literature can illuminate the complexities of identity formation in the context of family, friends, classmates, and teachers. In this environment, friendships and support exist alongside and intermix with conflicts, inequities, power, and resistance.

Filmmaker Marlene Booth's essay, "Learning Da Kine: A Filmmaker Tackles Local Culture and Pidgin," discusses her experiences in creating her film about Hawai'i Creole. She discusses how she came to understand the power of

Pidgin, its centrality in people's lives, and its place in defining the uniqueness of Hawai'i. As Booth discovered, understanding the "thinking behind the language" is crucial to an understanding of a people.

Hawai'i Creole is not alone as a form of nonstandard English in the United States. Others include Gullah (spoken in the Sea Islands off the coasts of South Carolina, Georgia, and North Florida), Louisiana Creole English, Appalachian English, and African American Vernacular English (Sato, 1989, p. 260). Linguists have used the terms dialects, creoles, and languages interchangeably when referring to these forms of speech (Sato, 1989; Linguistic Society of America, 1998).

The most well-known of the nonstandard languages in the United States is African American Vernacular English, also called Black English, Black English Vernacular, Ebonics, and African American English. Like Hawai'i Creole, African American Vernacular English has been the subject of much discussion and criticism, and both have been at the center of controversial school board actions (Tamura, 2002). In 1987 the Hawai'i State Board of Education attempted to ban Hawai'i Creole from the classroom. A decade later the Oakland, California school board issued a resolution in support of African American Vernacular English. Each school board action caused a firestorm of controversy. Although the two school boards, each in its own way, attempted to help its students achieve fluency in Standard English, they approached their goals differently. While the Hawai'i school board attempted to ban the nonstandard language, the Oakland school board embraced the existence of African American Vernacular English at the same time that it

sought to provide systematic efforts to help its students learn Standard English. Media commentary and public reactions expressed during the two incidents showed a general lack of understanding among many in the public about nonstandard languages—despite the substantial number of studies on them since the 1960s (e.g., Labov, 1969; Hymes, 1972; Sato, 1989; Taylor, 1998; Wright 1998; Smitherman, 2000).

As the two school board controversies show, discussion on nonstandard languages has involved two aspects—political and educational, and the political aspect has dominated public discourse. When the Oakland school board attempted, in December 1996, to help students become fluent speakers of Standard English, it created negative reactions that were whipped up by the media, who ridiculed particular statements of the school board and spread the misinformation that the board had advocated the teaching of Black English instead of Standard English (Jackson 1997; Perry 1998). The huge public outcry in this incident reflected a fear of losing cultural and social dominance to those at the lower economic levels, who were, in this case, those who spoke the stigmatized language. The central role that language plays in people's identity formation helps to explain the potency of the politics in questions of language.

On the educational side, which is the focus of this journal, many of those concerned with students' academic achievement point to marginal languages as the cause of school failure, in particular the lack of fluency in reading and writing Standard English. An essay in this issue, "Pidgin and Education," by Da Pidgin Coup, disputes this linear connection between speaking, on the one hand, and reading and writing, on the other. Written by scholars in the fields of language and language learning, the essay exposes the errors in this and other myths about Hawai'i Creole.

Aware that people may perpetuate myths about Pidgin because they are unaware of its distinct grammatical rules, Kent Sakoda and Jeff Siegel wrote *Pidgin Grammar: An Introduction to the Creole Language of Hawai'i* (2003). This book provides detailed structural analyses of Hawai'i Creole. In this issue, the interview "Kent Sakoda Discusses Pidgin Grammar" provides a useful introduction to some of the basic grammatical features of Hawai'i Creole with the idea that anyone interested in more detailed explanations will turn to the Sakoda and Siegel book. In the interview, Sakoda also describes the research efforts on Hawai'i Creole at the University of Hawai'i from the 1970s through

the 1990s, the important roles of Derek Bickerton and Charlene Sato, and Sakoda's introduction to the study of this language.

Despite the scholarship on Pidgin, negative attitudes remain. Thomas Yokota, intrigued by these attitudes, conducted a study that sought to understand not only what people think about Pidgin, but also why they think the way they do. He learned that, among the people he interviewed, most spoke Hawai'i Creole and, unaware of its grammar, many held misconceptions about the language. His findings point to the need to bridge the gap between scholarship and popular knowledge.

The final three essays examine Hawai'i Creole in the context of the classroom. Pedagogical issues concerning nonstandard languages have been of interest to scholars since the 1970s (e.g., Burling 1974; Fasold 1971; Shores 1972). More recent studies have demonstrated effective ways to teach students Standard English and improve their academic achievement without denigrating their nonstandard language.

In "Culturally Responsive Talk between a Second Grade Teacher and Native Hawaiian Children during "Writing Workshop," Timothy Rynkofs discusses his observations in a classroom where the teacher asked students to author stories about their experiences. To encourage students in their writing, the teacher responded with sensitivity to her students' cultural backgrounds, used a "talk-story" approach in group discussions, and allowed students to speak freely in Hawai'i Creole. Although she did not point to differences between Hawai'i Creole and Standard English, the students demonstrated that they were aware of differences, and when they wrote, it was primarily in Standard English. As a result of the teacher's attitude toward Hawai'i Creole and her approach to teaching, her students responded with enthusiasm and interest in writing.

In "Pidgin in the Classroom," Jeff Siegel advocates two types of instructional programs that have found success: accommodation programs, which use Standard English as the medium of instruction while allowing students to use their nonstandard variety in speaking and writing; and awareness programs that teach students the structure of their nonstandard variety so that they can compare it with the structure of Standard English. Siegel also discusses educators' concerns about Pidgin, and provides evidence to show that these concerns are without merit. Moreover, he shows the benefits of using Hawai'i Creole in the classroom.

Kathryn Au's essay, "If Can, Can: Hawai'i Creole and Reading Achievement," discusses the relationship between Hawai'i Creole and learning to read. She shows that speaking Hawai'i Creole is no barrier to excelling as readers and writers of Standard English. She discusses students' resistance to literacy learning, and emphasizes the role of teacher expectations in influencing students' perceptions of themselves and their abilities, and as a result, their academic achievements. She discusses the sustained school change efforts that she and her colleagues have been undertaking, which involve well-coordinated and rigorous instruction over many years, and which have resulted in impressive gains.

In closing this introduction, I would like to offer some brief comments on usage in this issue of the journal. The question is whether to capitalize the "s" in "Standard English" or not. Some authors use the capital, which suggests that Standard English is a language. Jeff Seigel, on the other hand, prefers to use the lower case so as not to "privilege this style of English." A similar range of opinion exists with respect to the creole spoken in Hawai'i: some linguists prefer to use "Hawai'i Creole" (HC), others use "Hawai'i Creole English" (HCE), while others refer to "Pidgin." The editors recognize that a range of attitudes and opinions exist on this matter among linguists and that this is reflected in the choices made by the authors. Therefore, we have treated such usage as a matter of substance rather than style and have respected the authors' choices.

I would like to thank the authors who have written the essays included this issue of *Educational Perspectives*. They have contributed importantly to the further understanding of Hawai'i Creole, or Pidgin, and its place in the education of the youth of the islands.

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