



Shifting language ideologies and the perceptions of Hawai'i Creole among educators at the university level in Hawai'i



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ABSTRACT

Ideologies about language have burdened Hawai'i Creole (HC) with a social stigma such that it has been considered inferior to English and inappropriate in public domains of society. Recent efforts at language activism within Hawai'i, however, have attempted to raise awareness in support of HC as a viable language. In light of this activism, this study reports interviews with 18 faculty members at a university in Hawai'i and finds, in contrast to earlier survey research that noted predominantly negative attitudes toward HC, mostly positive views about HC's place in education. With many interviewees remarking that HC should be treated as its own separate language and that it should occupy a position equal to English in the university and also in society, the findings are discussed in regards to the possibility of a shift in language ideologies in Hawai'i and the role of language activism in promoting such a shift.

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Introduction

This study reports the results of interviews with university educators in Hawai'i that were designed to gain insight into the effects of shifting language ideologies on the language known as Hawai'i Creole, or Pidgin, as it is most commonly called by residents.¹ We work throughout this study with the definition of language ideologies put forth by Jourdan and Angeli (2014:266) as “culturally shaped attitudes about the nature of language, the way it should be used (i.e. when, where, and by whom), the value of particular languages and linguistic varieties, their origins, and their future.”² Language ideologies greatly influence the language choices made by individuals and they also factor deeply into decisions at a collective and even national level, decisions which often reinforce a linguistic hierarchy that can advantage speakers of one variety of language at the expense of speakers of others (Silverstein, 1979; Woolard, 1998). An apt example is what has been termed “standard language ideology”, in which underlying beliefs about language help create “a greater power construct” (Lippi-Green, 1994) that leads to the designation of one way of speaking as the “official” or “standard” language in a particular society, thus investing those languages with prestige while subordinating other ways of speaking as “unofficial” or “substandard” (Lippi-Green, 1994, 1997; Milroy, 2001; Siegel, 2006).

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¹ Throughout this study, we will employ the term Hawai'i Creole in order to emphasize that it should be perceived as a language in its own right. Relatedly, we will refer to the language commonly known as Standard American English as just English so as to avoid any value judgments that it should be treated as ‘the standard’.

² Jourdan and Angeli (2014) draw greatly from the work of Makihara (2004) and Kroskrity (2000) in constructing this definition of language ideologies.

Research on language ideologies has emphasized that they exist in a plurality, that is to say, a community may be undergirded at any one time by not just one but rather a number of beliefs about language (Field & Kroskrity, 2009; Kroskrity, 2000, 2009). Likewise, research has noted that language ideologies may change over time as the socio-political contexts in a community evolve. For instance, Jourdan and Angeli (2014) describe how the independence of the Solomon Islands in 1978 resulted in “new language ideologies” that began to realign the hierarchy that had traditionally given more prestige to English than to the locally created creole language known as Pijin. Similarly, Makihara (2004, 2007) found in Rapa Nui the breakdown of an ideology of “colonial diglossia” in which Spanish, the language of the people from Chile who annexed the land, was seen as dominant over the Rapa Nui language. The political successes of a local indigenous movement helped shift the language ideology and allowed for the rise of Rapa Nui syncretic language practices.

In terms of studying language ideologies and how they may shift over time, Hawai‘i offers a site of interest because of an emerging sociopolitical climate that has seen a renewed focus on Hawaiian identities and traditions, including language. The Hawaiian language, considered the indigenous language of the Hawaiian Islands, was thought to be near extinction in the 1970s after Hawaiian-speaking parents were compelled by changing power hierarchies in the islands to choose English over Hawaiian as the language to pass down to their children. However, a strong revitalization movement helped establish Hawaiian as an official language of the state (together with English) in 1978 and also led to the creation of a series of schools now taught through the medium of Hawaiian (Wilson & Kamanā, 2001, 2006). These developments are indicative of a shift in language ideologies in Hawai‘i that now sees Hawaiian admired as the “jewel of our culture” (Kawai‘ae‘a, Housman, & Alencastre, 2007:186) and also recognizes the Hawaiian revitalization movement as “among the best known in the world” (Grenoble & Whaley, 2006:94).

Less clear, however, is the effect of this shift in language ideologies on the situation of Hawai‘i Creole (HC), another language that developed in Hawai‘i. Born out of the need of the sugar plantation-worker immigrants who arrived from various countries in the mid-to-late 1800s and early 1900s to communicate with one another, HC emerged from a mix of languages that includes English, Hawaiian, Cantonese, Portuguese, and Japanese. In contrast to Hawaiian, HC’s place in Hawaiian society is far from official and continues to be a source of controversy. Even though it is spoken as a first language by nearly half of the state’s population (Romaine, 1999),³ it is frequently condemned as a broken form of English that needs to be eliminated from educational environments because of the perception that it prevents students in Hawai‘i from succeeding in school and achieving affluence. As former governor Ben Cayetano stated, “for the kids who have a difficult time articulating proper English, it’s a tremendous handicap. . . It didn’t make any sense to me when I heard that in some public schools teachers were using Pidgin to teach some classes” (Wong, 2013). Similarly, a local businessman was quoted in the newspaper in 1995 as saying, “Growing up in an environment where pidgin is a daily routine is like being sentenced to a life of poverty. They are doomed to struggle” (Kleinjans, 1995; also quoted in Hargrove & Sakoda, 1999).

Research on language attitudes among people residing in Hawai‘i is demonstrating a growing tolerance regarding the usage of HC, although there is still a significant amount of ambivalence. As part of a course entitled “Pidgins and Creole Languages” at the University of Hawai‘i at Hilo, Romaine (1999) asked her students to conduct interviews with people in the community and found that slightly more than half of the respondents (53%) supported the usage of spoken HC in school contexts. Many of the interviewees noted that HC would allow teachers to better connect with their students and encourage participation in class. At the same time, though, there were a number of negative responses that adopted the hard-line view “speaking pidgin in the classroom should never be allowed because this is an English-based world where success is measured by knowledge of it” (1999:291). This was also a common sentiment found in survey research by Marlow and Giles (2008, 2010) who found strong beliefs that English remain the language in educational as well as in business settings. They did note, though, that some of the same people with negative views of HC also admitted that they sometimes employed HC in official settings.

As this survey research suggests, it is often the users of HC themselves who demonstrate the most ambivalence. They can react very negatively to HC, especially as it is used in public settings, even while they are employing the language and even passing it on to future generations. Most researchers attribute this occurrence to the ideologies about language that are promoted in school. As Wong (1999:220) explains, “some of the worst critics of Pidgin are Pidgin speakers themselves. This is a culmination of years of socialization and indoctrination through which the importance of SE was promoted at the expense of Pidgin.” This thus helps explain why a former governor such as Cayetano, who admits to using HC himself, might retain the belief that it is necessary to keep HC out of schools. It also explains why, in another set of interviews with people born and raised in Hawai‘i, Yokota found frequent criticisms of HC speakers as “acting stupid” and “retarded sounding” (2008:28). These very strong statements about HC and also about underlying ideologies seem to suggest that the positive beliefs about the Hawaiian language that began developing forty or fifty years ago have not had a similar effect on attitudes toward HC.

This study builds on previous research on language ideologies in Hawai‘i concerning HC by reporting on a set of interviews conducted in the summer and fall of 2014 with current faculty at the University of Hawai‘i at Hilo (henceforth, UHH). In doing so, we follow Jourdan and Angeli (2014) in making a distinction between language ideologies and perceptions about languages. As Jourdan and Angeli explain, “perceptions are the most visible layer, expressed directly in social discourses,

³ Sakoda and Siegel (2003) estimate that there are approximately 600,000 speakers of HC in Hawai‘i.

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