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# Japanese Immigrant Workers and the Formation of Hawaiian Pidgin English

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## 1. Introduction

Historically, Hawaii has been one of the most popular tourist destinations for Japanese natives travelling abroad. While the overall number of overseas travelers from Japan has declined, the number of Japanese traveling to Hawaii has continued to increase; with approximately 1.5 million Japanese tourists visiting Hawaii in 2015 alone (Brasor and Tsubuku, 2016).

Some attribute this trend to the cultural similarities between Japan and Hawaii. For many Japanese citizens visiting Hawaii, numerous aspects of their native culture can be found permeated throughout Hawaiian culture (Wright, 2014). For example, the traditional Hawaiian food, Saimin, has elements of Japanese Ramen. Similarly, there is a popular salted plum snack in Hawaii akin to Umeboshi, a fermented plum that can be found virtually everywhere in Japan. These, among many other examples, were just some of cultural influences I was able to observe firsthand during my nine years in Hawaii. Of the many remnants of Japanese culture found influencing their Hawaiian counterparts, Japanese language has arguably had the greatest impact. Its influence on the development of Pidgin English and Creole is undeniable and is something linguists continue to examine today.

The mixture of Japanese and English being used in combination with one another was something I first became aware of while studying as an undergraduate student at the University of Hawaii, Monoa. One of the first things I noticed as a student was that the student population was comprised of a substantial number of Japanese and Japanese American students. While having conversations with peers throughout campus, there were numerous occasions in which I heard Japanese words that I had only heard being used once before. These words were very similar to words used by my grandparents, who were first generation Japanese Americans, otherwise known as Issei. As a native speaker of Japanese having grown up in Japan, what I found intriguing about these occurrences was that the Japanese utterances I heard were often times words that were more commonly used by older generations of Japanese speakers rather than the words more commonly used at the time. These experiences were what made me question not only how Japanese words were able to emerge in Hawaiian Pidgin English, but also to what extent has the Japanese language influenced Hawaiian Pidgin English of the past and today.

## **2. Difference Between Pidgin and Creole**

“Hawaiian Pidgin English”, often referred to as “Pidgin”, is the dominant language used by Native Hawaiians when interacting with one another. According to Sakoda and Siegel (2003), approximately 600,000 people speak Pidgin in the state of Hawaii. The common impression of Pidgin shared by native speakers of English is that Pidgin is essentially a simplified version of English, a “broken” version of English, or a dialect of English (Sakoda and Siegel, 2003; Sebba, 1997). However, studies by Sakoda and Siegel (2003) and Sakoda and Tamura (2008) argue that

although Pidgin borrowed a lot of vocabulary from American English, it still should be considered as a separate language.

In the field of Linguistics, pidgin languages refer to marginal languages for people who need a language to fulfill communication that has been restricted due to language barriers (Odlin, 1989; Todd, 1990). In other words, a pidgin language is any newly formed language for the purpose of communication between groups of people who do not share the same native language. In Hawaii, Pidgin first emerged from sugarcane plantations of the mid to late 1800s where it was widely used among plantation workers. During this period, much needed laborers were imported to Hawaii from numerous countries, such as China, Japan, and Portugal (Sakoda and Siegel, 2003). As a result, Pidgin was developed and served as an integral marginal language for workers to communicate with each other. As workers at these plantations in Hawaii started using Pidgin, they also began to combine new sound systems and structures into Pidgin using sources from their native languages. This process of language development resulted in the gradual modification and evolution of grammatical forms in Pidgin (Sakoda and Siegel, 2003).

As the population of Pidgin speakers increased, a new form of Pidgin language, “Hawaiian Creole English (HCE)”, also emerged in Hawaii (Sakoda and Siegel, 2003). With the use of Pidgin becoming more natural for immigrants to use as a means to communicate at work, the language quickly transitioned from a language limited to plantations to one that could also be heard in homes and schools throughout mixed urban areas (Todd, 1990). For example, parents started to use Pidgin on a regular basis at home which resulted in children acquiring Pidgin as their first language. This, and similar instances of Pidgin being used outside of

plantations, is why many see this transition as the foundation of HCE. What started as Pidgin now served as the cornerstone for this new variety of Pidgin, coined as HCE.

As the population of first-generation immigrants began to grow rapidly, so too did the growth of HCE. First-generation immigrant children were exposed to Pidgin from their parents at home and HCE from their peers at school. All of this, compounded with the English they were learning at school as well as the native languages of their parents, resulted in an evolved HCE, which took features from all of these sources. Despite this dramatic growth, however, it should be noted that many continue to recognize the integral role Pidgin had in the creation of HCE (Odlin, 1989). Having been deeply rooted in Pidgin, HCE is the language that is spoken by Hawaiian people today and is what they refer to when using the term Pidgin (Sakoda and Tamura, 2008).

### **3. The Development of Pidgin Hawaiian**

In 1835, the first sugarcane plantation was built and staffed by immigrant laborers who were brought in from a variety of countries. This marked the beginning of the plantation era. As the number of plantations increased, so too did the number of immigrants brought in to work on said plantations. According to Sakoda and Siegel (2003), from 1852 to 1876, approximately 2,000 Chinese laborers immigrated to Hawaii for the purpose of serving as plantation labor. Similarly, between the years 1877 and 1887, roughly 2,450 workers arrived from the Pacific Islands, with 10,000 Portuguese workers also arriving at the same time. It was not until 1884 that the first group of Japanese workers arrived in Hawaii. By the end of 1924, there were approximately 200,000 Japanese immigrants

working on sugarcane plantations throughout Hawaii.

At beginning of the plantation era, Pidgin English had not yet been developed, and as such, was not the first contact language that was spoken among workers at the plantations. In power at the time were Native Hawaiians, which meant immigrants in Hawaii were required to use the Hawaiian language. Chinese and Portuguese plantation workers, however, struggled to fully acquire the Hawaiian language, and as a result, plantation workers along with Native Hawaiians established a new language which they called “Pidgin Hawaiian”. This language, not to be confused with Pidgin English, was created in order to enable Native Hawaiians and immigrant populations to effectively communicate with one another. It is believed that Pidgin Hawaiian was the first pidgin language to be established in Hawaii, where it served as the most commonly used contact language by plantation workers throughout the 1970s (Sakoda and Siegel, 2003).

Having been the first ethnic groups to be brought over to work on sugarcane plantations in Hawaii, the Chinese and Portuguese played a major role in the development of Pidgin Hawaiian (Sakoda and Tamura, 2008). In addition, not only did Pidgin Hawaiian borrow linguistic features from Chinese and Portuguese, it also adopted a great amount of vocabulary from the Hawaiian language. In some instances, however, Hawaiian words did not always carry the same meaning when adopted by Pidgin Hawaiian (Sakoda and Siegel, 2003). For example, “pi mai,” which means “to climb in this direction” in the Hawaiian language, means “to come” in Pidgin Hawaiian. Likewise, “hapai,” which means “to carry” in the Hawaiian language, means “to bring” in Pidgin Hawaiian. “Makana,” a commonly used Pidgin Hawaiian word meaning “to give,” carries the

meaning “gift” in Hawaiian.

#### 4. The Development of Pidgin English

After the signing of the Reciprocity Treaty in 1875, there was a big shift from the use of Hawaiian to the use of English. As such, English became the dominant language used on the plantations. With this shift came the first instances of plantation workers mixing Pidgin Hawaiian and English. The following example illustrates the mixing of Pidgin Hawaiian and English:

*Oe no tumach holoholo, hausu stop, mama nana.*

*(Literal meaning: You no too-much travel-around, house stop, mother look.)*

*“Don’t go out so much. Stay home and take care of your mother.”*

(Bickerton and Wilson, 1987 as cited in Sakoda and Siegel, 2003)

In this example, the underlined words are borrowed from English, while the remaining words are borrowed from Pidgin Hawaiian. By the end of the nineteenth century, many workers at the plantations began to accept and adopt the mixing of languages (Sakoda and Siegel, 2003). This signified the first step towards the emergence of Pidgin English, otherwise known as Pidgin.

The establishment and eventual popularization of this new “mixed” language gave workers the opportunity to use Pidgin English outside of the plantations. Subsequently, those who were not working on plantations also began to have more exposure to this language. During this period in which Pidgin English was gaining traction outside of the plantations, one group of immigrants in particular, Nisei, was susceptible to the enhanced

exposure of Pidgin English. Nisei, a group of second-generation Japanese Americans, did not work on plantations, and as a result, only came across Pidgin English in schools and amongst their classmates (Sakoda and Siegel, 2003). Due to their parents being first-generation Japanese Americans, Nisei did not have adequate access to the Japanese language. With more access to Pidgin English than Japanese, it was natural for the Nisei to learn Pidgin English as their first language. According to Sakoda and Siegel (2003), between 1905 and 1920, other second-generation of ethnic groups like Nisei also acquired Pidgin English as their first language. Between 1920 and 1930, the majority of people in Hawaii spoke Pidgin English on a daily basis. This eventually leads to the emergence of and transition to HCE.

## **5. Pidgin English and Japanese Language**

The history of Pidgin Hawaiian and Pidgin English illustrates how modern-day Pidgin encapsulates complex linguistic forms that make it push it beyond being simply a dialect or “broken” English. Pidgin English should be considered a separate language that has developed as a result of a long history of adopting and adapting linguistic features and vocabulary from various languages throughout the world.

Although Japanese immigrants were the largest groups of immigrants during the plantation era, the Japanese language did not appear to have as significant an influence on linguistic forms in Pidgin English as Chinese, Portuguese, or Hawaiian. This may be attributed to Chinese, Portuguese, and Hawaiian populations having already established the fundamental structure of Pidgin before the first group of Japanese immigrants arrived in Hawaii (Renecke, 1969 as cited in Sakoda and Siegel, 2003). While there

appear to be very few, if any, Japanese influences on the linguistic structures of Pidgin English, there are a great number of words and expressions borrowed from Japanese. A notable example of this would be the word, “goosebumps” (Sakoda and Siegel, 2003). In Pidgin English, the state of having goosebumps would be referred to as “Chicken skin”. The phrase “Chicken skin” originates from a direct translation of the Japanese word, “Tori-hada,” which is the Japanese phrase for goosebumps.

In addition to using direct translations of Japanese words, Pidgin English also at times directly borrows words from Japanese (Simonson, Sasaki, and Sakata, 2005). This is illustrated in the following examples:

Example 1:

A: Atsui yeah? (Isn't hot?)

B: Fo' Real! (Yeah, it is hot.)

Example 2:

When you do something nasty, you will get Bachi. (When you do something nasty, it will come back to you.)

Example 3:

A: No go outside when dark, bumbye da Obake going get you! (You can't go outside when it's dark. If you do, a ghost will come and get you.)

In Example 1, the speaker A used the Japanese word, “Atsui” to express that he felt hot. The speaker in Example 2 produced the word, “Bachi” to convey retribution for a wrongdoing. In the Example 3, the speaker used the word, “Obake” as a substitute for ghost. In examples 1-3, Japanese words appeared in each sentence without any alteration to the

pronunciation or meaning of the words in their original Japanese form. In the following examples, Japanese words are again borrowed; however, they are combined with English words (Simonson, Sasaki, and Sakata, 2005).

Example 4:

Chawan cut

Example 5:

Daikon legs

The word, “Chawan cut” in example 4, is used to describe a haircut. More specifically, it refers to a haircut style that looks an inverted rice bowl. In this example, both Japanese and English words are combined to create a word that differs in meaning from the Japanese meaning of “rice bowl.” In example 5, the word, “Daikon legs” is used to describe a person’s legs being “white, short, and fat.” The original, “daikon” is a borrowed Japanese word for what is referred to in English as the daikon radish. However, when combined with the English word “legs”, it carries a new meaning.

As Sakoda and Siegel (2003) mention, there is strong evidence to show that Chinese and Portuguese languages have heavy influences on Pidgin English; however, that is not to say that there are no influences from the Japanese language. These aforementioned examples indicate that a lot of vocabulary in Pidgin English has close ties to Japanese words.

The following excerpt was taken from an interview I had conducted with a Japanese American born in Hawaii in order to analyze the differences in accent patterns between Hawaiian Pidgin English and American English. In this excerpt, he is talking about having a barbeque

at a beach and uses the word, “Hibachi” to describe a portable stove.

Excerpt 1:

Interviewee: So yeah Waikiki sometimes maybe once a month me and my friend. When we go Waikiki, we have a barbeque like a barbeque and party and everyone brings on BYOB everyone brings own beer and foods. It's like a potluck. So my friend usually bring like the meat from Costco and I bring the meat I bring the poke. So, I go to Chinatown and buy the Poke in the morning and then go to Barbeque and my other friend bring the meat and my other friends brings the Hibachi. Hibachi is the place you cook the meat. In Hawaii, we say Hibachi. That's old right? That old way in Japanese the smoking to make the Ika I think, so we say Hibachi.

During the interview, the interviewee uses the word, “Hibachi” to refer to a barbeque grill. According to a glossary of Hawaiian Japanese by Inoue (1991), the word, “Hibachi” comes from dialectal Japanese meaning shichirin or portable stove.

Later in the interview, I asked the interviewee if he knew any other Japanese words. He then proceeded to list the following Japanese words: Bakatare (You are stupid.), abunai (dangerous), yakamashii (be quiet), shishi (a pee), benjo (a restroom), bocha (take a bath), and sukebe (a pervert). He also mentioned the name of several Japanese foods and condiments such as, tsukemono (pickles), kamaboko (fish cake), shoyu (soy sauce), and musubi (rice ball).

From interviews such as these along with numerous other firsthand

experiences, I have been able to observe the natural use of Japanese words that are typically more commonly used among older generations. I remembered my grandfather, who was a Japanese American veteran who had served during WWII, had always used these words but I couldn't recall ever hearing them used in high frequency by others. This interview is evidence that although Japanese was not as structurally impactful as other languages, the Japanese language certainly played a large role in the development of modern-day Pidgin English.

## **6. Conclusion**

Although the population of Hawaii is composed of a variety of ethnic backgrounds, each ethnic community is still able to thrive whilst simultaneously respecting the values of neighboring ethnic groups. This phenomenon is what many refer to as Aloha Spirit. Todd (1990) believed that in the past, native speakers of English inhabiting Hawaii often had negative perspectives regarding the Pidgin and Creole speaking population. He mentioned that in many years, people have thought pidgins and creoles as "inferior, haphazard, and broken version of older languages." However, the development of language in Hawaii has shown that pidgins and creoles cannot be simply generalized as broken languages. In fact, HCE contains various cultural and historical aspects which make it an accurate representation of Hawaii. For example, Issei, the first-generation of Japanese Americans, had perpetuated Japanese culture and its values to HCE. Furthermore, the Pidgin English most commonly used in Hawaii today illustrates how aspects of Japanese culture have permeated and continue to be preserved in Hawaii. There are many Japanese words that Japanese Americans still use in Hawaii today in order to identify with the

local Japanese American culture. The word “Banzai”, for example, is one of many famous words used by Japanese Americans. According to Inoue (1991), the word, “Banzai” is borrowed from old fashioned Japanese and carries a similar meaning to “cheers!” in English. The word “Banzai” continues to be widely used by Japanese Americans in Hawaii when celebrating special occasions. This word is not only used for celebrations, but it also indicates the level of appreciation and respect towards their ancestors. Observing the presence of Japanese language in HCE, as illustrated in instances like these, demonstrates the depth in which Japan’s culture has impacted the development of HCE.

Despite the presence of Japanese language in HCE, a significant issue has emerged in that many of the younger generations of Japanese Americans are gradually using Japanese words less and less. As newer generations were born in Hawaii such as Yonsei, the fourth generation of the Japanese Americans, or Shin-nissei, the new second generation of the Japanese Americans, the use of Japanese words began to dwindle. One of the reasons for this decline could be that there are not many individuals from older generations, such as Issei, left to tell the history of Japanese Americans. Another possible reason could be the movement towards the use of standard American English rather than Hawaiian Pidgin English in schools. These observations not only give merit to conducting further research exploring Japanese influence on Pidgin but also highlight the importance of preserving Japanese values that the Issei wanted to preserve for future generations.

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## 日系移民と接触言語の発展

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アメリカのハワイ州には、1868年の契約労働移民以来、今も数多くの日系アメリカ人が在住している。彼らは一世から語り継がれた日本人としての精神文化を受け継ぎ、それは何代もの世代を超えて現在に至るまで様々な形で日系社会に継承されている。

日本語を母語とする日系移民たちは、プランテーションの労働力として雇用され、そこで最初にぶつかった壁が言語であった。彼らにはゆっくりと新しい言語だけを習得していく状況や環境はなかった。言語をできるだけ早く、しかも最小限の努力で習得する必要があった。そのためには簡略化された文法、少ない語彙数の言語が求められた。これによって、仕事上あるいは生活上、最低必要なコミュニケーションがとれた。こうして日系移民たちは「接触言語」であるハワイアン・ピジン語 (Hawaiian Pidgin English、その略称 HPE)、さらにハワイアン・クリオール語 (Hawaiian Creole English、その略称 HCE) を習得していくこととなった。

日系移民たちが雇用されたのは、主に砂糖プランテーションであった。ここには日本以外の様々な国からも沢山の労働者がハワイに移住してきた。お互いが同じ言語を話さないため、砂糖プランテーション内では接触言語が自然と形成されていった。その形成過程には日本語からの影響も指摘されている。

この接触言語は、移民たち同士のコミュニケーションの一つの手段として形成されていくことになった。これがハワイアン・ピジン語 (HPE) の発生のルーツだと考えられている。

HPE は様々な発展を遂げ、現在では「ハワイアン・クレオール英語 (HCE)」と位置づけ、ハワイの公用語として存在している。HCE は過去にはブローケン英語として見なされてきたが、現在では、言語学的にも一つの言語としてみなされている。

ハワイに存在する接触言語は、その形成過程において移民たちの母国の文化の影響を明らかに受けている。ハワイの言語の形成過程を通じて、ハワイの歴史を紐解くとき、日本の文化もどの様にしてハワイの文化に移入し、あるいは同化されていったのかを考察することは意義深いことだろう。

ハワイは一般に多民族社会のアラベスク模様、すなわち多文化社会だと言われている。

本稿では、ハワイアン・ピジン語 (HPE) とハワイアン・クレオール語 (HCE) の成り立ちに注目し、日本文化および言語がどの様にハワイの接触言語に影響を与えたのかについて考察する。