

## **Pidgin Voices**

### **Introduction**

*Hanh thi Nguyen*

Pidgin or Hawaii Creole English (HCE, sometimes referred to as Hawaii Creole) is a crucial part of society in Hawaii. Existing on a continuum (Bickerton, 1973), Pidgin can be almost inaccessible to English speakers in its “pure” form or it can be so close to standard English that it may be considered a local dialect of English (see Cook, 2011 on Local English in Hawaii). Further, a speaker may shift between different varieties of Pidgin depending on the topic, setting, and interlocutors involved. Pidgin is said to be a marker of local identity and pride by some, and looked down upon by some others (Booth & Young, 2009).

In Spring 2012, graduate students in the TESOL program explored the stories of Pidgin speakers and probed their views on Pidgin’s status. They interviewed local Pidgin

speakers that they encountered outside of class. In this collection are excerpts from four interviews followed by the interviewers’ discussion and comments on what it means to be a Pidgin speaker to some locals in contemporary Honolulu, Hawaii.

Explorations of language varieties and people’s attitudes about them are important for language teachers. Language is not just sounds, words, and grammatical rules; it also lives in the hearts and minds of those who speak it as well as those who deny or refuse to speak it. A second language learner needs to know both the substance of language, i.e., language forms and rules, and the culture and society in which the language is used. The interview excerpts below demonstrate the significance of the social aspects of language.

#### References

- Bickerton, D. (1973). The nature of a creole continuum. *Language*, 49(3), 640–669.
- Booth, M., & Young, K. (2009). *Pidgin: The voice of Hawaii*. Documentary, New Day Films.

- Cook, K. (2011). Hawaii local English. Hawaii Pacific University TESOL Working Paper Series, 9, 32–36.

## Prapa Da Pidgin

*Christopher Erickson*

This transcript is the result of an interview with three college students in a brief, informal discussion. The interview questions focused on who they were and what they thought about Pidgin. The transcript has been edited for coherence.

The informants are former students of mine. They are all females in their early twenties who grew up on the west side of O'ahu in Wai'anae. This area has a notable Hawaiian, immigrant, and impoverished demographic. Other than their geographic and linguistic similarities, the speakers had

significant differences. Pidgin Speaker 1 (PS1) is Hawaiian and received foster care. As a ward of the state and a Hawaiian she was eligible for several scholarships and grants. She lived in Waikiki while attending university. Pidgin Speaker 2 (PS2) is a first generation immigrant from the Philippines. She and her family came to Hawai'i when she was 8 years old. Pidgin Speaker 3 (PS3) was born in Hawai'i to Laotian immigrants. PS2 and PS3 commute from Wai'anae to Honolulu while attending university. In the excerpts below, T stands for the interviewer.

### Interview Excerpt

T        What do you think about Pidgin?

PS2      I tink Pidgin is great! I speak it heavy too, laik - sometimes its hard fo - its so natural its laik second nature speaking it. Sometimes I don't even catch on that dat I'm taking Pidgin to people sometimes. So laik dehr not even from hea and I would be talking Pidgin to dem.

T        What are some happy memories you have?

PS2      Wen I waz little. haed laik smaw bawbeicu. I remember sitting on laik box stools eating oysters wit family. Dae toiz wuz different. Wen haed laik no aek brekauts and no boy trouble.

PS1      I would say laik now. Laik fo me, right now I'm living pretty good. Laik I'm goin to skoo, I'm making money ya know. And laik wen I was small - even in high skoo I didn't have money, cuz I was in fosta cea. It was always hard. I went from having nothing to having something, know whad I mean? I have everything I need now. I like to be independent and now I can be.

PS3      I grew up in Maili and I started riding bikes. Das da kine stuff we do ova dea. Ride bikes, ride mopeds. Go to each other's houses. I had laik hula doll. I laik have wen I was young - my grandma gave me.



- T Can you talk about when and why you might choose to switch between standard English and Pidgin?
- PS2 I tink it determines - the environment and who you're talking to, yeah.
- PS1 Yeah, I tink it all depends on where you stay and who your talking to laik. If I was going in fo laik a job interview or speaking to laik - idunno - a college professor maybe. Some are laik pretty prapa. So you goddah laik ok - be proper. But if it was somebody laid back and somebody you feel comfortable with then it kinda jus comes out. Because you jus feel laik, 'OK. He's not gonna judge'. And you can jus kinda be regula.
- PS3 Sometimes you jus kinda know cus - me, ya know, I didn't notice until laik came to HPU becasue da diversity.
- PS1 Yeah
- PS3 Being in Wai'anae everybody talks Pidgin. And den coming hea so its laik people dey speak proper - deas people from British - all dis, laik all kine places. So I have to laik switch. Laik talk prapa. But dea is some laik - I would laik determine it by how dey talk to me too. Cuz some are local n stuff so dey talk to me Pidgin. I talk to dem Pidgin back
- PS1 Yeah. You'll catch it. Laik if you hea dem talk Pidgin it's laik, "OK, can talk". Dey'll know whad I'm saying.
- PS3 Yah - talk.
- T I noticed that you referred to standard English as "proper"? Do you think Pidgin is improper?
- PS2 Yeah, I guess well because the stereotype 'proper' is 'not broken English'. And Pidgin is broken English and it doesn't sound laik very educated. I guess? And den das why people wouldn't consider it proper. Because, I guess, if you was to go on an interview or whatever and you speak Pidgin it doesn't sound very...
- PS1 Attractive
- PS2 It doesn't sound right. It doesn't fit. It's laik more laik an informal thing. Pidgin I guess.
- PS3 Yah, but den again why should we be scared of speaking Pidgin to people who don't, you know, actually get it? But den again the don't understand it.
- PS2 Yah they don't understand it. That's the reason we all need to switch. If people understand Pidgin I be taking Pidgin to dem. But dey don't understand it.

#### Interviewer's Comments

Pidgin in Hawai'i is an essential ethnic marker with duplicitous implications. On the positive side, it connects individuals reared on the Islands of Hawai'i. It quickly marks inclusion into a regional and cultural group. It carries diverse historical and ideological content and facilitates comfort, informality, deference, and

inclusivity. More recently, HCE competence augments efforts within political, cultural, social and revitalization movements addressing Hawaiian issues. On the other hand, Pidgin's non-affiliation with institutional modalities of power such as economic resources, educational standards, even

religious practice forces assimilation to SAE (Standard American English) by most, if not all, of its users.

When asked about code switching between HCE and SAE, all three informants described using “proper” English (SAE). One speaker defined Pidgin as “broken English.” Using HCE signaled roles, contexts, even geography for the speakers. For them it represented a casual, informal style in contrast to the professional, formal speech of SAE. Another speaker claimed that going to a job interview or talking with a professor in Pidgin “Doesn't sound right - it's like an informal thing.” A public/private binary fits with this characterization. While all three speakers enjoyed speaking in HCE they have indeed incorporated the message of assimilation, namely ‘HCE is improper (English) that signals uneducated and lower status.’

Da Pidgin Coup's position paper about acknowledging rather than denigrating the

#### Reference

Da Pidgin Coup (1999). *Pidgin in education*. Honolulu, HI: Sato Center

home language (1999, p. 11) is pertinent. A student is empowered when they are affirmed for language competence (i.e. bilingual). Whether Pidgin is or is not recognized as a legitimate language in Hawai'i there is no question that it is a vibrant and deeply cultural discursive expression. As a learner of a language, knowing its creoles (or varieties) *is* important. In Hawai'i, competence in HCE for a student learning English should not be the aim, but awareness of this variety (or creole) of English spoken ought to be covered. To learn any language is to learn its culture. To omit this cultural context omits vital regional, economic, and ethnic knowledge.

One indisputable joy is watching the face of a Pidgin speaker brighten when they are introduced to the idea that some linguists believe Pidgin (HCE) is *not* broken English, but a perfect, usable, legitimate and effective language.

## “Dat’s Pidgin Kinda Talk, Yeah?”

*Monica Smith*

Two local Pidgin speakers, a repairman and a mother, were interviewed. Excerpt 1 is from the interview with the repairman and Excerpts 2-5 are from the interview with the mother.

### Interview Excerpt 1

The interviewee, K, is a 53-year-old local man who does repair work as employment. He was in my apartment repairing a hole in the roof in the shower. He graciously granted me an

interview while he worked. In this and the other excerpts, M stands for the interviewer.

K’s attitude toward Pidgin seemed to be very positive. He was not shy in claiming that he speaks Pidgin and seemed to take pride in giving me examples of Pidgin (Excerpt 1). He additionally stated that his family and friends frequently had gatherings where they exclusively spoke in Pidgin. It gave them a sense of pride and camaraderie in their community.

M: Can you tell me in Pidgin how you do you feel about Pidgin? How do you feel about the language?

K: Let’s see. Well, um. Speak in Pidgin as I’m explaining, but uh. Well what had uh happen is trough generation afta generation, dere were many different uh cultures dat we all had to mesh togeda and develop one language. A lot of it was all different nationalities from da Phillipines and Japan and Korea and from Portugal, so dere was a mix.

(Interruption)

K: Well, so when we all get togeda we always we speak one language which is Pidgin. And um it’s a broken English. So dere is a lot of short cuts. Like “da kine” and “us guys” and um a “where we goin” “ova dere” “come hea” or “all pau” means all finished. And um it’s basically a blend of all different kinds of nationalities and language. And a so a...

M: Just talk Pidgin. So what are you doing today? What are you doing this morning?

K: Well, today I’m gonna go fix da roof ova hea and put anoda coat of mud on da ceiling so we can patch da puka.

In Excerpts 2-5, the interviewee, L, is a thirty-one-year-old mother of two who was very open and happy to talk to me about Pidgin. She seemed to be very eager to grant me an interview for this project, which I took as a

sign that she has some pride in her competence and identity as a Pidgin speaker. For example, L vividly remembers speaking to her grandmother in pidgin when she was a little girl (Excerpt 2).



Smith, M. (2012). “Dat’s Pidgin kinda talk, yeah?” *Hawaii Pacific University TESOL Working Paper Series 10*, 97-99. Website: <http://www.hpu.edu>

Interview Excerpt 2

M: What would you talk to your grandmother about?

L: What we used to talk about? Oh, like. Things like. You know coz' like in da olden days, Hawaiian days, all da girls do everything. I don't know if you know about dat but, mens just lay back and not do anything. So, yeah. Always talk about how my brother used to not do everyting. I used to get pissed off. I used to get mad. (laughs) I used to get real mad and I used to tell her, 'How come?' You know? Why I gotta do everyting? What about him? You know. Dat's how we used to talk to each odda ladat.

Below is L's response when asked about her feelings concerning Pidgin.

Interview Excerpt 3

L: Um, it's ok but sometime you gotta, you know, I need talk to people in Pidgin they can not undastand, yeah.

L: I guess it's like you know in our nature. You know. Wheneva da words come out, just gon come out. You know like da word...you know like some people say certain words and you like, "What are dey talking about?" you know. Like da word you know "ladat". I don know if you know what is dat "ladat". "Ladat" means like that. And den like "Whea you goin?" You know stuff like dat. You know like "Whea you goin?" Dats Pidgin kinda talk, yeah?

M: Yeah.

L: You know like, "Who's dat?" "Who dat". You know like dat kind stuff, yeah. Like dose words. Like little kinds of words.

L had strong feelings about her children speaking Pidgin, as expressed in the next two excerpts.

Interview Excerpt 4

M: Do you want your kids to speak pidgin?

L: No.

M: Why not?

L: (laughs) Dat way dey...Cause I don't like dem learning, you know dose kinda (unintelligible) (...)

M: When you were younger, did you speak pidgin in school?

L: Yeah. I did.

M: Did your teachers get mad?

L: Kinda

M: Why?

L: Because dey would say, 'Oh', you know, 'Why you talking like dat?' People can not undastand what you are saying. Had a lot of people can not understand what I was saying.

Interview Excerpt 5

M: Are you proud to speak pidgin?

L: No (laughs) Um, yeah. Some what. (laughs)

M: Tell me why?

L: Um, I don't know. I don't know how to (laughs) explain.

(Talks to child) But when she...you talk... you speak sometimes, yeah.

C: What?

L: Pidgin language. You know what is Pidgin language? You know, you know when...you know like what I was telling her? You know da word "ladat"? What does "ladat" mean?

C: Like this?

L: Yeah. Dat's what it means. She knows.

#### Interviewer's Comments

L's feelings in regards to Pidgin seemed to be conflicted or ambivalent at best. Although she said speaking Pidgin was in her nature (Excerpt 3), she seems uncertain about being proud to speak Pidgin (Excerpt 5). It was also interesting that initially she had strong feelings against her daughters speaking Pidgin (Excerpt 4), however, she seemed pleased that her daughter has competence in speaking Pidgin (Excerpt 5). It seems that while a

person may find Pidgin an integral part of her life and identity and may encourage that identity in their children, they are aware that Pidgin is not accepted in formal education and may hinder their upward mobility as well as the upward mobility of their children (Excerpt 4). This negative attitude may come from the negative experience they had when they were in school (Excerpt 4, see also Erickson (2012, this volume).

## “The Culture Is Changing”

*Emily Moore*

The interviewee, G, works as an education assistant at a local elementary school. He was born and raised on Oahu. He primarily grew up in Kaimuki, attended Kaimuki High School and later moved to Kaneohe once he

was married. He has three children who are in their mid to early thirties. He grew up speaking Pidgin at home and also used it at school.

Interview Excerpt:

E: Do you think Pidgin is dying out today?

G: Yes.

E: And how do you feel about that?

G: It shouldn't be.

E: Yea.. and.. Can you tell me.. or, how did you grow up or where did you grew up in Hawaii?

G: Kaimuki.

E: Kaimuiki?

G: Yup.

E: And was there a lot of-

G: Definately a lot of Pidgin goin on all ova. All though high school and afta high school too, but you no hear it as much anymore and it's sad. The culture is changin, it isn't like how it was when I was a child or teenager growing up.

(...)

E: And what about your children? Do you speak Pidgin to them at home too?

G: To some extent, yea. You know like... my kids are all big now and dey teaching der own kids stuff on der own and I don't think dey use Pidgin like I wen did with them at home.

E: So how do you feel about um... children speaking Pidgin in the classroom? I personally don't mind, but I know that some of the teachers here get upset when it happens? What do you think about this?

G: I tink it's a normal way of speaking in Hawaii. And, yea, da kids need to be able to speak good English, but at da same time dey got to communicate with each other and what eva it takes to communicate is what dey need, or should do. You know, everybody needs to be able to say what dey need, or want to say.

E: True.

E: So what do you think about the kids here at [this elementary school]? Do you think that they speak Pidgin, or not really anymore?

G: A few... A few of um. Depending on wea dey wen grow up, I tink. It also depends geographically and economically at times. Um..

E: Where are these kids mostly from. Up here, in the affluent neighborhoods or down where the public housing is?



Moore, E. (2012). “The culture is changing” *Hawaii Pacific University TESOL Working Paper Series 10*, 100-101. Website: <http://www.hpu.edu>



G: Yea... yea.. some of da kids are from pretty nice neighborhoods and some are from more of da country, country life kien of ting.

E: So do you think the kid that live in the country tend to use it more?

G: Yea definitely. Definitely. Look a J, in da fourth grade.

E: haha.

G: When he was, when he was in M's class all he wen talk about is pigs in Pidgin and he is one of da few kids who still speaks Pidgin on a daily basis.

E: He talks about chickens a lot too.

G: yea, but befo all he would talk about is pigs.

E: What was school like for you as a kid?

G: My teachas were strict. They had one big stick. If you ac up they wen give you one big crack.

G: Wen I was in da forth grade.. it was like.. wow. about the first week of school I just wen shut my mout. You know what.. I look back on it now.. and...

#### Interviewer's Comments

G believes the language he grew up with should be preserved; however, because it is not socially accepted anymore at school or in the workplace, it is slowly diminishing and he feels discontent about this cultural change. Pidgin was the main variety of language he used when he was growing up. However, once his children moved away from home and had their own families, he believes his children didn't speak much Pidgin anymore. I am not sure why this happened, but I am assuming Pidgin was slowly lost in his family because the children either married spouses from other places in the United States, or they attended colleges where Pidgin was not used.

When I asked G what he thought about children speaking Pidgin today in school, he stated that it is a normal way of communicating and it should be used if needed. He agrees that children should learn Standard English, but at the same time if they are having trouble getting their point across, or need something and can't express it in Standard English, they should have every right to use Pidgin to convey their meaning or ideas. This view, coming from a teacher, shows that Pidgin may be given a place in education and may be tolerated more in some schools these

days, an improvement from the past (cf. The Pidgin Coup, 1999).

Currently, G observed that some kids at his school still speak Pidgin, but not everyone does, as this also depends on what geographical location you are from. For example, if you grow up in an affluent neighborhood, most likely Pidgin will not be spoken. If you come from a home in a more rural setting then Pidgin will definitely be used more. He shared a story about one child in the fourth grade who lives in the county and speaks Pidgin everyday as his first language. He described that this specific child speaks Pidgin on a daily basis. Pidgin then seems to be a social marker of one's (or one's parents') economical status and residential location on the island.

Overall, G is disappointed to see the language he grew up with becoming less commonly used in his family. This language was apart of his history, his up bringing, and the way he expressed himself growing up. In addition, his children do not use it that much anymore, and his grandchildren do not use it at all. This is the reason why G, as well as many other locals, feels that parts of the culture in Hawaii are quickly disappearing.

#### Reference

Da Pidgin Coup (1999). *Pidgin in education*. Honolulu, HI: Sato Center