

The Hawaiian Language: Background and Potential

A talk given by
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Language family: Austronesian Malayo-Polynesian (MP) Nuclear MP Central Eastern MP Eastern MP Oceanic Central-Eastern Oceanic Remote Oceanic Central Pacific East Fijian-Polynesian Polynesian Nuclear Polynesian Eastern Polynesian Central E. Polynesian Marquesic Hawaiian	Polynesian Languages:	
	<u>Eastern Polynesian Languages:</u> Hawaiian (Hawaiian Islands) Marquesan (Marquesas Islands) Pa'umotu (Tuāmotu Islands) Tahitian (Society Islands) Rapa Nui (Easter Island) Mangarevan (Mangareva) Rapa (Austral Islands) Rurutu (Austral Islands) Rarotongan Māori (Cook Islands) New Zealand Māori (New Zealand)	<u>Western Polynesian Languages:</u> Samoan (Sāmoa and American Sāmoa) Tongan (Tonga) Tuvaluan (Tūvalu) Tokelauan (Tokelau) Niuean (Niue)

The Polynesian languages are closely related to each other just as the Romance languages of Europe are related to each other (i.e. Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, French, etc.). The Polynesian languages can be divided between Eastern and Western in terms of language and culture. There is some mutual intelligibility between native speakers of Eastern Polynesian languages and so too between Western Polynesian speakers. There is less mutual intelligibility, however, between Eastern and Western Polynesian speakers.

Hawaiian was an unwritten language just like other Polynesian languages with perhaps the one exception being Rapa Nui. There are some claims of a written script among a privileged class of Hawaiians in pre-European contact times.

Capt. James Cook, an English explorer, arrived in the Hawaiian Islands in January of 1778. Population estimates for the Hawaiian Islands for that time period vary between about 400,000 to 1 million. All were monoglot Hawaiian speakers. Christian Protestant missionaries arrived in 1820 and established a Latin script for Hawaiian. Agreeing on a standard alphabet was a real challenge due to interchangeable consonants with the same phonetic meaning.

Example:

- Consonant sound /k/ is interchangeable with /t/ with same phonetic meaning.
- The consonant sound /l/ is interchangeable with /r/ with same phonetic meaning.
- The approximate v, which has three possible pronunciations: 1) a /w/ like in English, 2) a /v/ like in English, and 3) a bilabial fricative /β/.

The preference for one consonant pronunciation over another is largely based on local dialect throughout the Hawaiian Island chain. With missionaries in the 1820s being assigned to various locales throughout the Island chain, they began reducing the local language to writing with varying results. In order to print the Holy Bible in Hawaiian, missionaries felt a need to standardize the Hawaiian alphabet and so they met and dealt with the problem democratically and had a vote by the raising of hands to decide on a single alphabet to represent consonant sounds that had multiple pronunciations. The following represents the original potential alphabets submitted to the Mission Society in 1822:

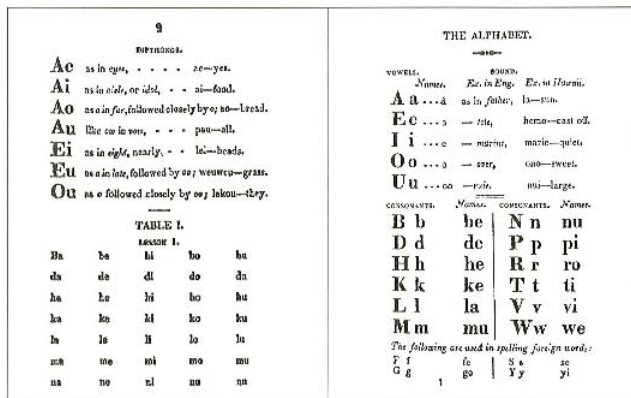


PLATE 7.1 A PAGE FROM THE HAWAIIAN SPELLING BOOK (*THE ALPHABET*), FIRST PUBLISHED BY THE MISSION PRESS, 1822.

The end result of that meeting was the standardized alphabet: A E I O U H K L M N P W. The glottal /ʔ/, a common feature in every Polynesian language except New Zealand Māori, was not taken into account at the time. Now it is represented with the single open quote mark (‘) and is phonetically meaningful and considered a consonant. Another feature of Polynesian language without exception is the long vowel, represented in

orthography as a macron over a vowel. The long vowel is also phonetically meaningful. What is interesting about the reducing of the Hawaiian language to writing is that it almost entirely eradicated dialectal variation among native Hawaiian speakers within a single generation in the early to mid 1800s as native speakers conformed their speech to the simplified alphabet devised by the Mission Society for the purpose of publishing the Bible in Hawaiian.

Schools were established in the Hawaiian Islands in 1824 on Maui Island and quickly spread throughout the islands. Children and adults alike quickly learned to read and write Hawaiian in the early 1800s and by the mid to late 1800s the Mission Society reported a literacy rate of more than 90% throughout the islands with up to 50 Hawaiian language newspapers in regular print.

Although the work of the Mission Society may initially seem altruistic, the semi annual reports of the Society reveal that the leadership expressed a desire for English to supplant the native language in time. The Society oversaw the schools on the islands until the late 1800s when the Hawaiian Kingdom government created the Department of Education which took over control of the schools. The intention to promote English language learning increased, however, with Protestant Christian indoctrination and the promulgation of pro- Euro-American sentiment and agendas in the islands via the Mission Society, foreigners, and indoctrinated natives. By the late 1800s, more government funding was going to schools which taught through the medium of English and less funding was given to Hawaiian medium schools.

In January of 1893, a small group of American-born businessmen living in Honolulu and ethnic white citizens of the Kingdom backed by armed US marines docked at Honolulu Harbor at the time revolted in a coup against the government of the Hawaiian Kingdom, a neutral state friendly to the US, and declared a Provisional Government. In 1898, The US government chose to annex the Hawaiian Islands by joint resolution (an act only having effect within the borders of the US, thus having no effect in the Hawaiian Kingdom) and in violation of multiple treaties between the two equally sovereign and friendly nations without any treaty of merger, effectively establishing a military occupation which continues to today. This remains an international dispute and is currently being addressed at the World Court at The Hague, Netherlands.

In 1896, the rebel government, which at that time called itself the Republic of Hawai'i, enacted into law, Act 57, which banned the Hawaiian language in public and private schools. Although schools teaching Chinese and Japanese continued to exist for the immigrant population in Hawai'i, similar initiatives to support the Hawaiian language were summarily quashed even through all but the last 25 years of the 1900s.

With the intense increase in pro-American sentiment and military development after 1898, native Hawaiian culture and language were turned into the pariah of the Hawaiian Islands. It was not until the mid to late 1970s that the tide began to change for native Hawaiians and their culture and language, but by then, the damage had been done. Since 1898, native Hawaiian parents began choosing to spare their children hardship in

the English only school system and in society by speaking only English to them and not Hawaiian. Eventually native Hawaiians became more and more English monoglots. By the 1970s very few native speakers of Hawaiian remained with the exception of the predominantly Hawaiian speaking Ni'ihau community located on the privately owned Ni'ihau Island and on the west side of Kaua'i Island.

The 1980s saw the development of the Hawaiian immersion schools and the beginning in the rise of the popularity of studying Hawaiian as a second language in community colleges and universities. That popularity skyrocketed in the 1990s until it plateaued at the opening of the new millennium. Today Hawaiian is the most popular second language course in most colleges and universities where it is offered and the number of high schools that offer the language has increased by perhaps 200% or more in the past 10 years (an estimated 3000+ Hawaiian language students in high schools and tertiary schools combined with approximately 130 teachers; Fall 2008 estimate).

With the increase in the number of second language speakers (L2s), we now see a much larger population of L2s in Hawai'i than native speakers. Native speakers now only amount to perhaps 500 or less and the L2s number perhaps 3000 or more who have varying levels of proficiency in the language with the majority probably exhibiting minimal or just above minimal proficiency (exactly what qualifies as an L2 speaker of Hawaiian is a matter of future research). Many Hawaiian linguistic imperfections are becoming fossilized or made permanent among L2s as they regularly interact with each other and not with native speakers. Native speakers are not the teachers of the language in schools; rather L2s are the teachers who are themselves products of the schools. Native speakers are largely physically separated from the L2 community since most of them are elderly individuals who are scattered throughout the islands or found among the Ni'ihau community (entire families of all ages) who live mostly on the west side of Kaua'i and on Ni'ihau. It is usually incredibly difficult to bring the native speaking community and the L2 speaking community together for the sake of transmitting the language of native speakers to L2 Hawaiian learners. There is, however, a large inventory of audio recordings of Hawaiian native speakers that often is used to help teach native speech.

As a result of the scant number of native speakers who mostly live on Kaua'i and inaccessible Ni'ihau, L2 Hawaiian learners are separated from native role models and end up inventing terminologies and repeating incorrect syntax and phonology. My Masters thesis in 2002 dealt with the phenomenon of a burgeoning L2 population and dwindling native speaking population and the implications of this on the Hawaiian language itself. One conclusion I arrive at in my paper is that the present situation perhaps more closely resembles the Hebrew language situation than any other endangered language situation such as the Māori situation in New Zealand, which is so often talked about as resembling the Hawaiian situation. The reason is that the Māori Language Commission in New Zealand reports that there are perhaps 10s of thousands of native speakers of Māori in that country and therefore there are many native Māori role models to help pass on that language relatively intact.

Hebrew technically is a language which was abandoned more than 1700 years ago and the language spoken in Israel today is called Hebrew but is a recreation or a reinvented language as Hebrew scholar, Zuckerman, calls it (see www.zuckermann.org/research.html). This seems to be the phase that the Hawaiian language is going through at the moment.

Hawaiian Syntax:

Hawaiian language in its most basic form is a VSO language (Verb, Subject, Object) just like all of the Eastern Polynesian languages. This perhaps presents opportunities for the development of translation software relatively easily compared to other languages. In fact, if it is possible to create translation software for Hawaiian, I imagine that the potential for creating translation software for other Eastern Polynesian languages would be relatively easy since a high percentage of grammatical and syntactical elements of these languages are the same or similar.

Another advantage to Eastern Polynesian languages like Hawaiian in terms of potential software development is the almost complete absence of true tense which requires modification or conjugation of verbs: For example, the English verb 'go' must be modified to a completely new word 'went' to express completed action. In Hawaiian the word 'hele' (go) is always 'hele' no matter when that action is accomplished, whether completed, in the process or to be completed. It is the particles that surround the verb that indicate the aspect whether already done, being done or to be done, etc. This is not unlike the English modals 'will' or 'going to' as to express future aspect.

Challenges which will arise in the development of translation software may be typical of other languages such as the potential for interpretation of text, lexicon appropriateness, idioms and intended meaning. I imagine that a huge amount of human hours and beta testing will be necessary and it is difficult for me to imagine a truly intuitive and precise product, but perhaps this conference is a right step in the process.

Endeavors in Hawaiian language technology development at present are geared mostly toward Hawaiian language maintenance and creating databases and clearinghouses for Hawaiian language resources, such as www.ulukau.org, but some businesses are daring to provide actual business services and products to the Hawaiian speaking public. Some examples are Go Airlines, an interisland carrier which has a website for booking reservations in Hawaiian (www.lelegowau.com). The School of Hawaiian Studies at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo created an email service in Hawaiian where all fields are in Hawaiian (www.olelo.hawaii.edu). There are also sites that provide literature in Hawaiian (www2.hawaii.edu/~kroddy/moolelo/Hiiakaikapoliopole_poepoe/mokuna2.htm).

Please check out my website: www.traditionalhawaiian.com for more information about my research on Hawaiian language maintenance and shift. Included in my site are two audio clips of a native speaker of Hawaiian (my grandmother, Annie Kealoha Kauhane) speaking the language and many images. You may contact me via my website should you have any inquiries.

On behalf of Kawaihuelani — Center for Hawaiian Language at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, I congratulate AMTA on this conference and for seeking to learn about the native language of the Hawaiian Islands. It is of great importance to those of us in the field of Hawaiian language instruction to continually seek out innovative ways to maintain, promote and teach the Hawaiian language and perhaps AMTA will play a role in that.

Mahalo nui loa! (Thank you very much!)

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