

# Hawai'i Local English<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper describes Hawai'i Local English, a variety of English that is neither Hawai'i Creole English (aka Pidgin) nor standard North American English. Although it is very much like North American English, it shares many characteristics with Hawai'i Creole English. These characteristics include palatalization of /t/ and /d/ before /r/, full vowels in unstressed syllables, absence of off-glides, lack of syllabic nasals, deletion of postvocalic /r/, primary stress pattern shifts, primary and secondary stress in compounds, intonation in yes/no questions, lack of lengthening of last stressed syllable, the diphthong /aw/, insertion of a glottal stop in Japanese names, verb agreement, singular *much* with plural nouns, past perfect for past tense, *yeah* as a tag, *you folks* as a pronoun, kinship terms, and names in their full form.

## Introduction

In recent years, attention has been focused on the creole spoken in Hawai'i known to residents as "Pidgin" but called "Hawai'i Creole English" (HCE) by linguists. The view taken by many—both linguists and residents—is that in Hawai'i, residents speak either Pidgin or (North American) English, or both, but little attention has been paid to the fact that the variety of English spoken on a regular basis by the majority of people raised in Hawai'i, i.e. what I will call "Hawai'i Local English" (HLE), differs from the English spoken on the North American continent. This paper describes this variety and contrasts it with an idealized North American English (NAE). It concludes with a discussion of how HLE relates to HCE. Let us first look at the indicators that set HLE apart from NAE, but as we do, let us keep in mind that these indicators form a cluster of features. I am not suggesting that all speakers of HLE exhibit all of these characteristics, but they do often exhibit the majority of them. There is also regional and social variation within HLE; hence, for example, a speaker from Makawao, Maui will speak differently from one from downtown Honolulu. HLE, like any form of human language, is not monolithic.

## Phonology

### *Palatalization Of /t/ And /d/ Before /r/*

Examples of this palatalization are *truck* and *dream*, pronounced [tʃrʌk] and [dʒrɪm]. This palatalization also spreads leftward to an /s/ that precedes a sequence of /tr/, when a syllable starts with /s/, as in [ʃtʃrɪt] *street* and [kənʃtʃrʌkʃən] *construction*. I suspect that this palatalization was introduced by Portuguese immigrants who came to Hawai'i in large numbers in the late 1800's and early 1900's. In Portuguese, /s/ is palatalized when it occurs in syllable-initial position after /e/ and before a voiceless stop, e.g. in *e[ʃ]timar*, 'estimate' *E[ʃ]panha*, 'Spain' and *e[ʃ]critor* 'writer'.

### *Full Vowels in Unstressed Syllables*

My name, Kenneth, which on the mainland is pronounced [kɛnəθ] or [kɛnɪθ], with a reduced vowel in the second syllable, is pronounced [kɛnɛθ] in HLE, with a full vowel in the second syllable. One thing that contributes to this pronunciation is the tendency to give almost secondary stress to the second syllable of a two-syllable word that on the mainland would have a primary-unstressed pattern; hence my name is pronounced more like Kénnèth than Kénneth. Another example of this phenomenon is the word *semester*. In NAE, this word is pronounced [sɪmɛstər] or



[səmɛstər] with a reduced vowel (either /ɪ/ or /ə/) in the first syllable and primary stress on the second syllable. In HLE, there is weak secondary stress on the first syllable as well as primary on the second, and the vowel in the first syllable is the full vowel [i]. Thus the word is pronounced [simɛstər]. Another example of this phenomenon is a clear [o] pronunciation of the first vowel in *o'clock*. This type of clear pronunciation of vowels could be the result of being taught in school to pronounce clearly or the effect of contact with languages (e.g. Japanese and Filipino languages) that have clear vowels.

#### *Absence of Off-glides*

The stressed vowels /iy, ey, uw, ow/ in mainland English have the off-glides /y/ and /w/ associated with them. These offglides are often missing in HLE. In particular, the off-glide [w] is missing from [uw] and [ow] so that *do* and *go* are pronounced [du] and [go] rather than [duw] and [gow]. The /y/ of /ey/ is noticeably missing in syllables that end in [l]; so *detail* is pronounced [ditɛl] rather than [diytɛyl]. The distinction between *sell* and *sale* is lost; hence an item is *for* [sɛl] rather than *for* [sey]. This neutralization parallels the lack of distinction between *Mary* [meyri] and *merry* [mɛri], which is widespread on the mainland. This neutralization that occurs only before /r/ on the mainland is generalized to “before liquids,” i.e. before /r/ and /l/ in HLE.

Possibly related to this is the fact that in HLE, the word *variable* only has three syllables, while in NAE it has four. In NAE it is pronounced [vəriəbəl] or [vəriəbəl], while in HLE it is pronounced [vɛriəbəl]. In all cases, there is primary stress on the first syllable. A parallel word, *valuable* is pronounced with either three or four syllables in NAE, i.e. either as [vælyuəbəl] or [vælyuəbəl]. Again, what has happened in a word with one liquid (/l/ in the case of *valuable*) in NAE has been extended to a similar word that contains the other liquid (*variable*) in HLE.

#### *Lack of Syllabic Nasals*

In NAE, an alveolar nasal serves as a syllabic in an unstressed syllable following an alveolar stop. In turn, the alveolar stop before a syllabic nasal is either glottalized or replaced by a glottal stop. Two example words are *mountain* [mawʔn], and *kitten* [kɪʔn]. These phenomena do not occur in HLE. These two words, for example, are pronounced with a clear [t] followed by a full vowel: [mawtɛn], and [kɪtɛn]. Again, there is near-secondary stress on the second syllable. Other examples include *important* and *wouldn't*.

#### *Deletion of Postvocalic /r/*

Postvocalic /r/ is often deleted in HLE but not in standard NAE. Thus *department* is pronounced [depa:tment]. The word *source* (as pronounced by Honolulu City Prosecutor Keith Kaneshiro on TV) sounds more like *sauce*. This seems to be more common among older speakers of HLE, such as Daniel Inouye, who represents Hawai'i in the US Senate.

#### *Primary Stress Pattern Shifts*

Latinate verbs like *estimate* that end in *-ate* have primary stress on the first syllable and secondary on the last in NAE, but they have primary on the final syllable and secondary on the first in HLE. Hence this example verb is *éstimate* in NAE but *èstimate* in HLE. The difference in stress patterns is more noticeable in the related *-ator* noun forms. Compare NAE *éstimator* with HLE *èstimator*. Other examples are *alternate*, *duplicate*, *graduate*, and *moderate*.

In general, there is a tendency for primary stress to move rightward in HLE. Hence some place names like *Hong Kong* and *The Philippines* have primary stress on the first and secondary on the last syllable in NAE but primary on the last syllable and secondary on the first in HLE. Thus *Hóng Kòng* is pronounced *Hòng Kóng* in HLE, and *The Philip-pines* is pronounced *The Philìppines*.

### *Primary and Secondary Stress in Compound Nouns and Phrases*

Two-syllable compound nouns in NAE have a 1-2 stress pattern, while in HLE they have a 2-1 pattern. Compare NAE *súrfbòard* with HLE *súrfbòard* (Robert Boom, personal communication). A fruit commonly associated with Hawai'i is the pineapple, which is pronounced *píneápple* in NAE but *píneápple* in HLE. Similarly, NAE compound phrases have a 1-2 pattern while HLE have a 2-1 pattern. Compare NAE Éwa bòund with HLE Èwa bóund (as pronounced by Jason Yosuda, traffic reporter for KHON-TV in Honolulu). *Diámmond Héad* is heard as *Diámmond Héad* in the Kapi'olani Community College announcement on Channel 355.<sup>2</sup>

### *3-1 Intonation in Yes/No Questions*

This intonation pattern could be considered one of the most noticeable characteristics of HLE. On the mainland, *yes/no* questions start off with a mid level pitch (2), then the pitch rises to (3) on the last stressed syllable and continues to rise at the end of the question. In contrast, in HLE, a *yes/no* question starts off at level 3, and then drops to level 1 on the last major stress. Compare:

- (1) NAE: (2) Are you (3) ready?  
HLE: (3) Are you (1) ready?

### *Lack Of Lengthening Of Last Stressed Syllable*

In NAE, the last stressed syllable of a sentence is lengthened. This lengthening is lacking in HLE. Thus the expression *as well*, if pronounced in sentence final position, will have a lengthened /ɛ:/ in NAE, but not in HLE.

- (2) NAE: I like this one as /wɛ:l/.  
HLE: *I like this one as /wɛl/.*

(as pronounced by KHON-TV anchor Kathy Muneno)

### *The Diphthong /aw/*

The diphthong /aw/ as in /dawn/ *down*, is pronounced in a particular way in HLE that I find hard to describe. Perhaps the off-glide is

given more time, making it more like the full vowel /u/. In other words, /dawn/ is pronounced [daun]. This could be historically related to the fact that in Hawaiian, vowels are clearer—even in diphthongs.

### *Insertion of a Glottal Stop in Japanese Names with Geminate Vowels*

Examples of this phenomenon are [nɪʔiʔi] for *Nishii* [fudʒiʔi] for *Fujii*. This, no doubt, derives from the fact that usually in Hawaiian, what would otherwise be geminate vowels are separated by a glottal stop, e.g. *ali'i* 'chief', and *Kaho'olawe*, the name of one of the Hawaiian Islands.

## **Syntax**

### *Singular Verb with Plural Subject*

Plural verb forms are used with plural subjects in NAE; in HLE, a singular verb is often used with a plural subject:

- (3) NAE: Heavy showers are predicted for the Big Island.  
HLE: Heavy showers is predicted for the Big Island.

### *Singular Much With Plural Nouns*

*Many* is used with plural nouns in NAE; *much* serves the same function in HLE:

- (4) NAE: How many toppings do you want?  
HLE: "How much toppings do you want?" (From a Pizza Hut phone operator on O'ahu.)

### *Past Perfect Used for Simple Past*

In NAE, the past perfect tense is used as a secondary tense, i.e. it is used in combination with other tenses, usually the plain past, in order to refer to a point of time farther back in the past than that referred to by the past tense. The following sentence illustrates this usage:

- (5) NAE: I tried to open the door, but my son had locked it from the other side.

In contrast, the past perfect is used in HLE as a primary tense that simply indicates that something happened in the past. Gary Kanada (personal communication) reported that in the variety of HCE spoken on the island of Kaua'i, *had* is used as a past tense marker. This feature seems to be shared by this variety of HCE and HLE. This use of the past perfect is illustrated in the following quotation from an email written by a speaker of HLE. A speaker of NAE would have used either the simple past *purchased* or the present perfect *have purchased* in this passage.

- (6) HLE “On another note, I’ve been thinking of you a lot lately. *I had purchased* a two-bedroom unit at Yacht Club Terrace, on Kaneohe Bay Drive. I’d like to rent out one of the rooms because I want to pay my mortgage off in 10 years.”

#### Yeah *As A Tag*

One of the easy-to-spot indicators of HLE is the use of *yeah* [jæ] as a tag. Compare the following:

- (7) NAE: It’s humid today, isn’t it?  
HLE: It’s humid today, yeah?

#### You Folks *as a Pronoun*

*You guys*, which has become common on the mainland as a second person plural pronoun, is heard regularly in Hawai’i. But competing with *you guys* is, what I would consider an older form—at least in Hawai’i—*you folks*. This form is often heard in settings in which the speaker (of HLE) shows deference for his addressees, as, for example in a department store setting in which the speaker is a clerk attempting to sell a domestic appliance to a married couple. In sum, I would say that for speakers who have both forms, *you guys* is informal and *you folks* is formal.

#### The Use of Kinship Terms

Kinship terms (Aunty, Uncle, Brother, Sister, Cousin) are frequently used in HLE to refer to or address people—both known and unknown. Recently, when I was driving

aggressively near Ala Moana Shopping Center in Honolulu, the driver in another car, who appeared to be a speaker of HLE, shouted out at me, “Brother, slow down!” In HCE, “brother” as a vocative term is reduced to [brə].

#### Lexicon

Certain words and expressions are indicators of HLE: *package* for NAE (shopping) *bag*, *wagon* for (shopping) *cart*, *talk story* for *carry on an informal conversation*, *chicken skin* for *goose bumps*, *shave ice* for Japanese *kakigori*, i.e. ice like that in a North American snow cone but of a finer grain, more like Italian *granita*. Certain Hawaiian words: *pau* for *finished*, *puka* for *hole*, *lanai* for *balcony*, *mauka* for *inland*, *makai* for *seaward*, *'okole* for *buttocks*, *akamai* for *smart*, *hapai* for *pregnant*, *'ohana* for *family*, *keiki* for *child(ren)*, *hanai* for *adopted*, *haole* for *white person*, *tutu* for *granny*, *pupu* for *appetizer*, *'ono* for *delicious*, *kuleana* for *responsibility*, etc.<sup>3</sup> *Again* is often used as a sentence-initial filler (like *well* or *actually*) in explanations even when nothing is being repeated. For example, someone is talking about the stock market and says, “Again, this will depend on how the European market does” without having previously said, “This will depend on how the European market does.” Landmarks (e.g. Diamond Head and Ewa) are favored over the cardinal directions (east, west, etc.) when giving directions. The word *town* by itself refers specifically to Honolulu. It can also be combined with town names as in *Kailua town*. The full form *cannot* (rather than the contraction *can't*) is used more frequently in spoken HLE than it is in spoken NAE. The adjective *Hawaiian* is used in HLE for people of Hawaiian ancestry and for things that are related to the native Hawaiian culture. Speakers of NAE are likely to use *Hawaiian* to describe people and objects from Hawai’i, as they would use Californian to describe people and items from California. In HLE, people from Hawai’i are *local* rather than *Hawaiian*. Of particular interest is the word *rubbish*, which is used for *garbage/trash*. *Rubbish* is used in the UK and in some parts of New England, which maintained longer and stronger contact

with England, compared to the rest of the Atlantic coast. Sailors on whaling ships that sailed from New England ports (in particular New Bedford, Massachusetts) and called at Lahaina and other parts of Hawai'i most likely brought with them not only their garbage/trash but also their word *rubbish* for it.<sup>4</sup>

## Names

While male names are commonly shortened on the mainland, speakers of HLE favor full first names: *Kenneth* rather than *Ken*, *Ronald* rather than *Ron*, *Rodney* rather than *Rod*, *Gilbert* rather than *Gil*, *Stanley* rather than *Stan*, *Jeffrey* rather than *Jeff*, *Russel* rather than *Russ*.

## HLE and HCE

Something should be said about how HLE relates to HCE. When I first started this project of describing HLE, I believed that I would find some elements of HLE that are not present in HCE (as described by Sakoda and Siegel (2003) and by numerous authors mentioned in the reference section of their book). The only indicator of HLE that is not in HCE that I can think of is the contrast involving [brə] and “brother” as a vocative

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at the VII International Conference on Easter Island and the Pacific: Migration, Identity and Cultural Heritage at Gotland University, 20-25 August 2007. I thank Hanh thi Nguyen and Brian Rugen for their comments and suggested examples. All errors and shortcomings in this paper are my own.

<sup>2</sup> This stress shift occurs regardless of the stress pattern of the surrounding words, thus it is not a shift of prominent stress to maintain the rhythm of the metric grid. On a second note, some speakers of HLE, when asked about this phenomenon, recognize it, but say that it is Pidgin. It is certainly a characteristic of Pidgin (HCE), but I

think it is also a characteristic of HLE. Otherwise, why would it occur in, for example, a planned recorded TV announcement that is supposedly in English?

<sup>3</sup> Several of these Hawaiian words have one or more long vowels, but since vowel length is not phonemic in English, long vowels are not indicated here. However, initial glottal stops are indicated since initial vowels in English are preceded by a non-phonemic glottal stop.

<sup>4</sup> I thank James Considine, who is originally from New Bedford, for this explanation for the use of *rubbish* in Hawai'i.

## Reference

Sakoda, K. and Siegel J. (2003). *Pidgin Grammar: An Introduction to the Creole Language of Hawai'i*. Honolulu, HI: Bess Press.