

News

Data Inspires Increased Pride for Pidgin, the Language of Hawaii

By *Jennifer Sinco Kelleher*
Associated Press

MILILANI, Hawaii — When Hawaii comedian Andy Bumatai was searching for a new way to attract the attention of audiences on the Internet, his wife suggested he find inspiration in something from the old days: Pidgin, the language of his youth.

Her idea came after news reports on census data showed the number of speakers in the islands who said they spoke Pidgin, a mix of the languages spoken by Hawaiian, Filipino, Chinese, Puerto Rican and other workers who toiled in the state's sugar plantations.

Bumatai put up some

The news reports last fall helped spark a sense of pride among those who speak the language in their homes and among friends, and a discussion about its use and the stigma that limits its wider acceptance in the state.

There are other pidgins in other parts of the world, including in the Caribbean, Africa and Asia. Pidgin in Hawaii, or Hawaii Creole English, has long been considered a substandard form of English.

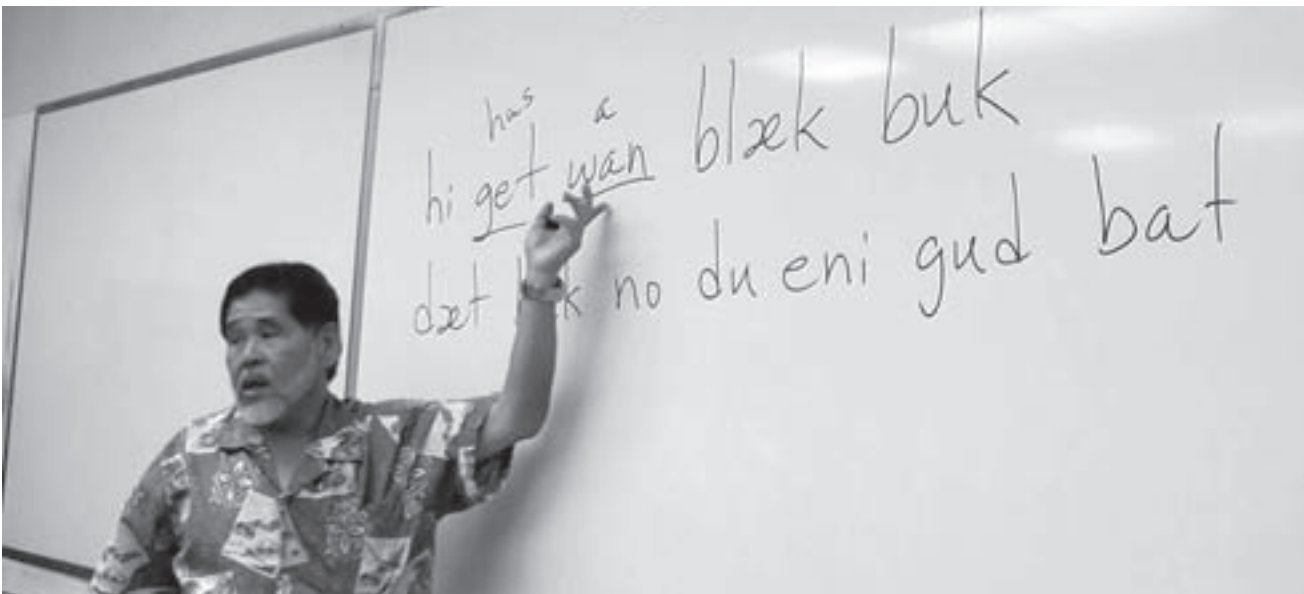
Some saw the census numbers as recognition for the language, though the U.S. Census isn't in the business of recognizing languages. Census officials have been counting Pidgin since 1990.

“I always thought that Pidgin was something of value. It made me feel grounded

videos online doing his routines in Pidgin, and one with English subtitles got 1.5 million views. He said his videos resonated with those who grew up in Hawaii and were homesick for the sounds of the language.

It is “more than a language. It's become a lexicon that congeals the people who are from Hawaii,” he said.

Christine Gambino, a survey statistician at the agency, said with more people knowing that it's acceptable to write down Pidgin on the federal questionnaires, future data will be more reflective of an accurate number of speakers. Many who speak Pidgin believe there are far more speakers than the 1,600 counted in the census surveys.



In this Feb. 5, 2016 photo, University of Hawaii at Manoa professor Kent Sakoda teaches a linguistics class on Pidgin in Honolulu. News reports on census data showing the number of Pidgin speakers in Hawaii have helped spark a sense of pride among those who speak the language in their homes.

While Pidgin may sound like mixed-up English because English words provide a large portion of Pidgin vocabulary, it has its own grammar and sound system, said Kent Sakoda, who teaches a course about Pidgin at the University of Hawaii.

Native Hawaiians, Chinese and Portuguese had the most influence on Pidgin structure because they were the earliest plantation laborers. Pidgin borrows phrases from various other languages. “The house is big” in Pidgin, for example, is “big, da house,” which borrows from Hawaiian sentence structure.

One of Cantonese's influences is evident in the Pidgin word “get,” which means both “has” and “have,” as well as both “there is” and “there are.” “Para,” for in Portuguese, influenced how Pidgin speakers use “for” in places where English uses “to.”

Pidgin has flourished as the voice of Hawaii long after the end of the plantation era.

“You're ranked as to how local you are with how much you understand and are able to speak,” Bumatai said.

TV station Hawaii News Now posted to Facebook a mock traffic report in Pidgin by reporter Lacy Deniz. Hawaii viewers were enthusiastic, while some outside the state thought it made her sound uneducated, she said.

In “Kapakahi Traffic,” Deniz refers to a stalled motorist as “uncle” and roadside assistance workers as “braddahs.” Her intonation is characteristically Pidgin, her grammar and vocabulary accurate: “We goin’

have choke students out on da roadway tryin’ fo get to school, makin’ their classes ... It's gonna be supa busy.”

“We knew that majority people here in Hawaii, it's something they connect to,” she said.

Colbert Matsumoto, chairman of Island Insurance, Hawaii's largest locally owned insurance company, said he doesn't always speak Pidgin in the “downtown circle” he operates in. Sometimes he lets himself fall into the ease of Pidgin.

“I always thought that Pidgin was something of value,” said Matsumoto, who grew up on Lanai, which can feel a world away from downtown Honolulu. “It made me feel grounded.”

Mike McCartney, chief of staff for Gov. David Ige, said he's proud of his ability to speak Pidgin.

“To me it's part of who we are as a people, place and culture,” said McCartney, whose father was an English teacher and would correct him when he spoke Pidgin. McCartney said now he can turn

Pidgin on and off fluidly, as many others do.

Former Hawaii Gov. Ben Cayetano worries about those who can't switch back and forth.

“Hawaii kids are at a distinct disadvantage if they can't speak standard English,” he said. “My first year in college on the mainland, I hardly said anything in class ... I was concerned about whether my English would be good enough.”

The stigma against speaking Pidgin is strong, despite moments of pride, said Lee Tonouchi, an author and activist who calls himself the “Da Pidgin Guerrilla.”

He makes it a point to only speak Pidgin.

To him, until the state university system starts offering degrees in Pidgin or if Pidgin joins Hawaiian and English as the state's official languages, the language will never gain any true respect.

“I tink still get stigma,” he said.

“For me, I tink da goal always goin’ be fo Pidgin to get institutionalized recognitions.”

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