

Toward a dialectology of ‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i: Recognizing linguistic variation and change while supporting intergenerational continuity

Methods in Dialectology & Language Diversity

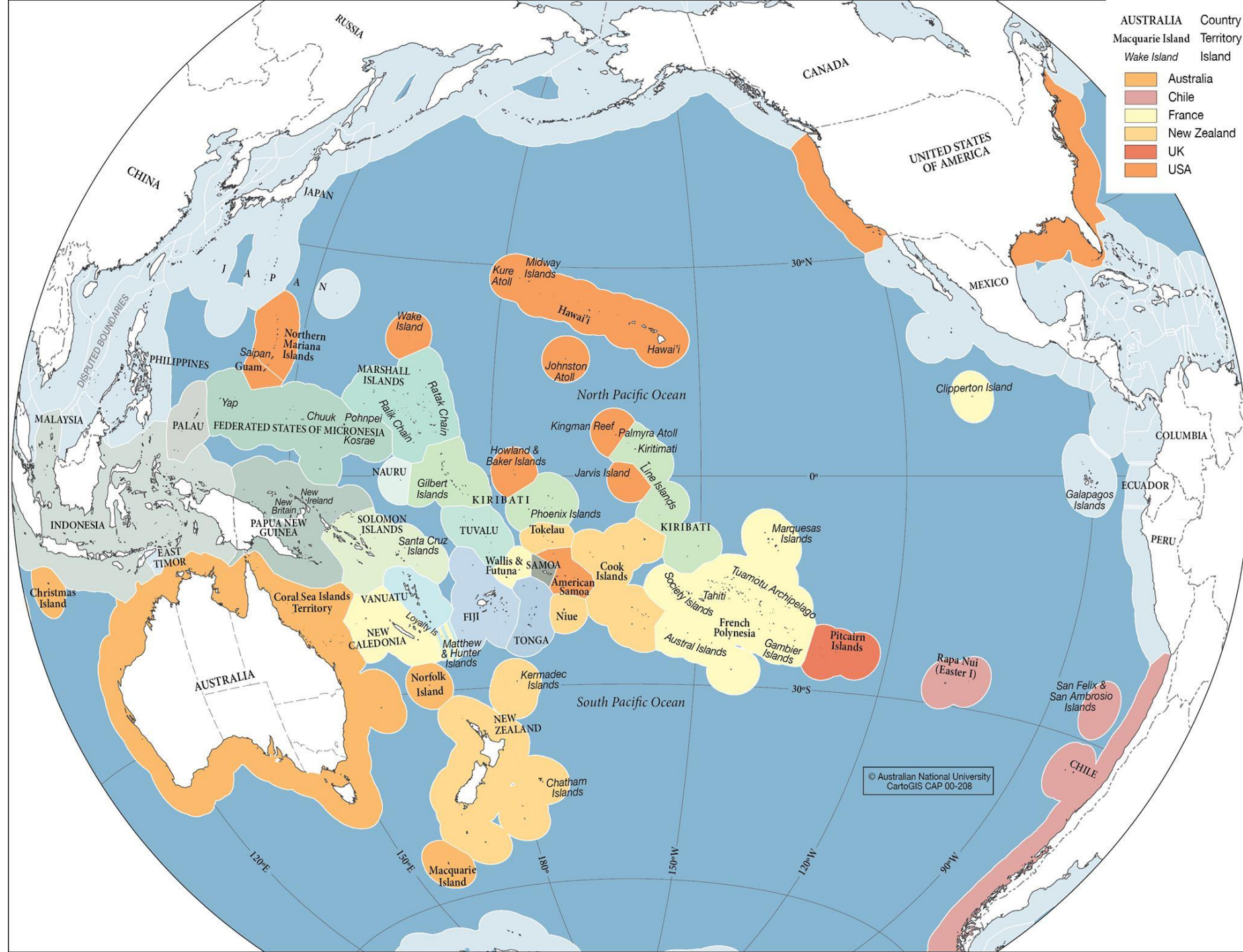
University of British Columbia

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Varieties of Hawaiian: Context and considerations

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TAUA'I
▲ *Wai'ale'ale*
NI'HAU

O'AHU

MOANA PĀKĪPIKA

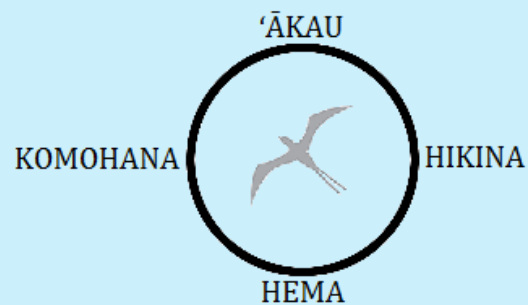
MOLOKA'I

LĀNA'I

MAUI

▲ *Haleakalā*

KAHO'OLawe



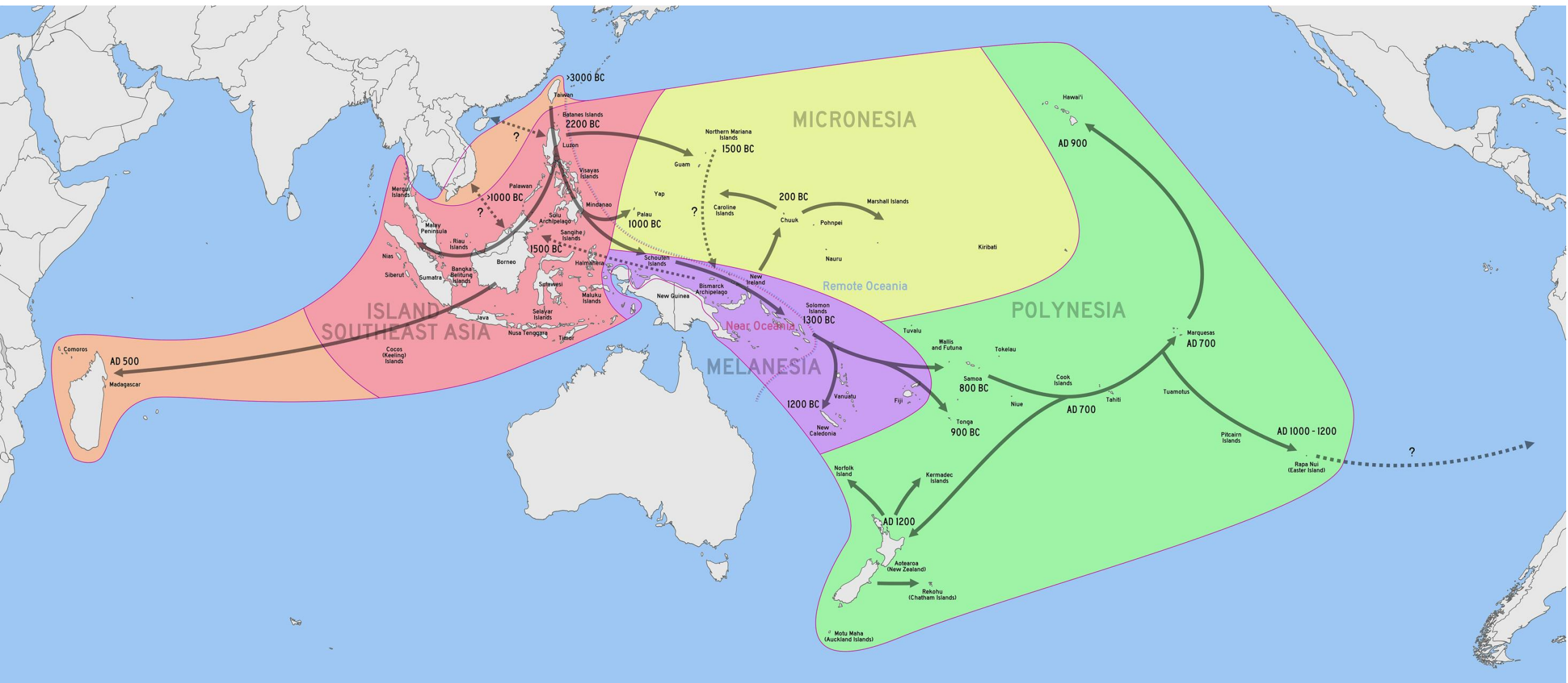
HAWAI'I

Mauna a Wākea ▲

▲ *Mauna Loa*

MOKUPUNI O HAWAI'I

www.decolonialatlas.wordpress.com



Background

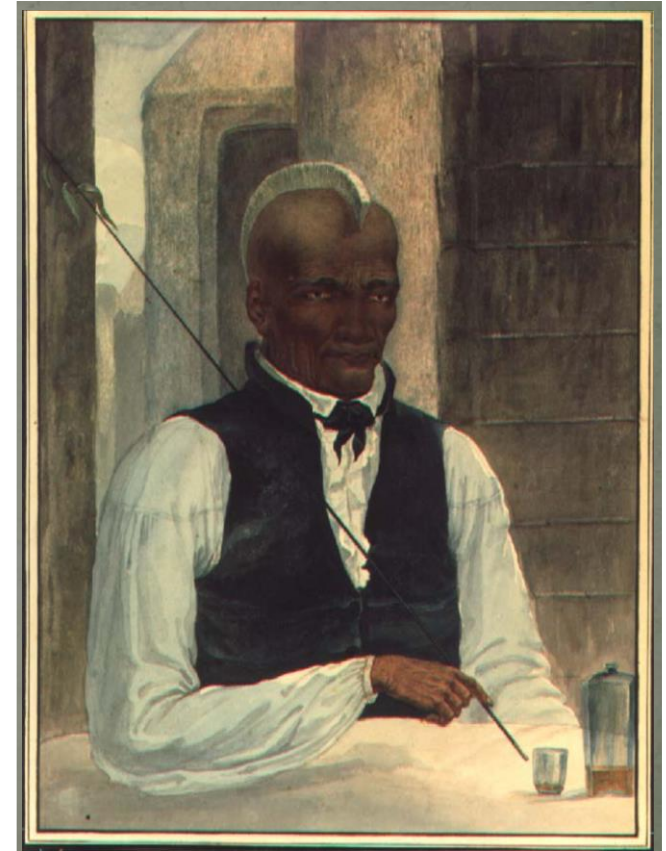
- Austronesian > Malayo-Polynesian > Oceanic > Polynesian
- Settlement around 1200 AD (Weisler et al 2024)
- European contact beginning 1778
- Unification under Kamehameha I by 1810

*to me I beg you will send by the earliest Opportunity
my best respects to you & your Queen & all your Family
wishing you Health Happiness & a long prosperous
Reign*

*And am Sir
Your Majestys
most devoted Friend & Servant*

TA MAAHMAAH

King of the Sandwich Islands



Background

- 1820: Missionaries arrive from New England, develop alphabet
- 1824: Hawaiian translation of the Bible begins
- 1825: Kamehameha III, “He aupuni palapala ko‘u”
[*Mine will be a nation of literacy*]
- 1834: First newspaper publication
 - Nearly universal literacy within decades
 - Preservation of oral histories and mythologies
 - Legal debate, community notifications, translations of classic international literature, local and international news, scientific information
 - 1 million+ pages of text 1834–1948

THE ALPHABET.			
VOWELS.		SOUND.	
Names.	Ex. in Eng.	Ex. in Hawaii.	
A a --- â	as in father,	la—sun.	
E e --- æ	— tele,	hemo—cast off.	
I i --- e	— marine,	marie—quiet.	
O o --- o	— oper,	one—sweet.	
U u --- oo	— rule,	rui—large.	
CONSONANTS.	Names.	CONSONANTS.	Names.
B b	be	N n	nu
D d	de	P p	pi
H h	he	R r	ro
K k	ke	T t	ti
L l	la	V v	vi
M m	mu	W w	we
The following are used in spelling foreign words:			
F f	fe	S s	se
G g	ge	Y y	yi

Shift in the nineteenth century

- Early 1800s: Massive population devastation due to foreign-introduced disease (Kamakau 2022 [1867])
- 1850s: Increasing English influence at government domains
 - "covert policy of bilingualism" (Asensio 2010)
- 1893: Overthrow of Hawaiian Kingdom
- 1898: Unilateral annexation without treaty by United States amid Spanish-American war



Endangerment in the twentieth century

- 1896–1986: Hawaiian outlawed as medium of education in public schools (Warner 2001; Kamanā & Wilson 2001)
- Widespread linguistic discrimination against Hawaiian speakers attested across oral histories (Maka'ai et al. 1998; *Ka Leo Hawai'i*)
- Language shift from Hawaiian to Hawai'i Creole English (Pidgin) effectively complete on all islands except Ni'ihau by 1970s (Bickerton & Wilson 1987; Parker Jones 2018)
- No community of Hawaiian-speaking children outside of Ni'ihau in 1982 (Wilson & Kamanā 2019)



Early language documentation

- Efforts in early-mid 1900s to preserve a record of the language
 - Dictionaries: Parker 1922, Judd, Pukui and Stokes 1943, **Pukui and Elbert 1957**
 - Documentation (lexical documentation, interviews, recordings) by Mary Kawena Pukui under the Bishop Museum (informed authoritative dictionary and grammar to follow)
- "The function of Hawaiian as a basic social factor is being displaced by English so that today's scholarship necessitates a closer, perceptive study of the Hawaiian language **while the old speakers are still with us**" (Kinney 1956: 282)

The revitalization era

- Cultural renaissance starting in 1970s (music, hula, navigation)
- Language revitalization spearheaded by language activists and parents (Kawai'ae'a et al. 2007)
 - *Ka Leo Hawai'i* Hawaiian-language radio show (1972–1988)
 - 'Aha Pūnana Leo formally established in 1982 (preschool language nests)
 - Standing law against Hawaiian medium education in public schools repealed in 1986
 - K-12 Hawaiian immersion/medium schools in 1992
 - Year of Hawaiian language in 1996



The language community today

- In 1980, census data showed 9,060 reported Hawaiian use at home; in 2023, this number measured at 27,000 (200% increase)
- Today, the Hawaiian language community consists of speakers of various backgrounds and linguistic biographies, including:
 - Students who learned Hawaiian as early as preschool; in high school; at college; or much later in life
 - Speakers who grew up speaking Hawaiian with their parents/grandparents in their home community — and those who learned from them as adults
 - New native speakers raised by parents who learned Hawaiian at school and committed to raising their children with Hawaiian as their home language

Describing variation in ‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i

Hawaiian's **revitalizing language ecology** presents novel challenges to language documentation, description, and analysis.

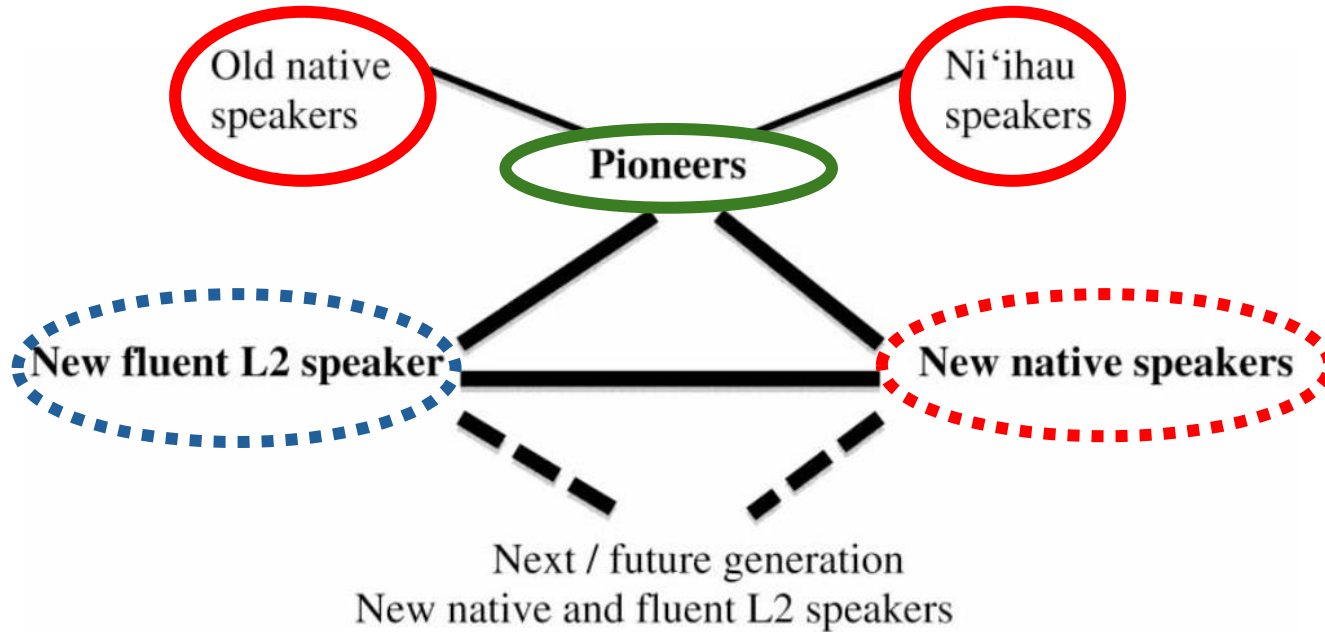
In describing Hawaiian, it is important to identify:

- **whose** Hawaiian is being described
- **why** that choice is made to describe those speakers
- **how** different groups of speakers are positioned in the community
- **what** words we use to designate them and their language

Speakers vs. varieties

- Distinguishing varieties vs. speakers as a recurring tension in existing literature
- Labels are helpful for linguists, but how helpful are they for speakers themselves?
 - Well, this is a linguistics conference... so maybe we can set this aside and just try to figure out what descriptors we as linguists should be using
- But there *is* a lot of metalinguistic commentary, and what we do goes back into the community
 - Increasing diversity across L2 Hawaiian as these discourses circulate and speakers respond to our work

Types of speakers



Types of Hawaiian speakers (Brenzinger & Heinrich 2013: 309)

‘ōlelo kuakahi 'primary/native language' **‘ōlelo kualua** 'second language'

- Earliest recorded use in Kaai (1861); *kualua* refers to L2s acquiring language during the time of L1s
- Brought to modern attention in NeSmith (2019) as possible alternatives to *mānaleo*

NeSmith (2019)

Type-1

(Type-1.5)

Type-2

(Type-2.5)

mānaleo

'native speaker'

- *māna* 'trait acquired from caretakers' + *leo* 'voice'
- Coined in 1970s, printed in later versions of Pukui & Elbert (1986)
- Used primarily for elderly native speakers in archival collections, Ni'ihau speakers
- Not exactly = to L1!

Terms for varieties

- **Traditional Hawaiian** (NeSmith 2002; Kettig 2021; Wilson & Kamanā 2024; Gilbert 2025)
- **Pre-Revitalization Hawaiian** (Kettig forthcoming)
- **Ni'ihau Hawaiian**
 - Olelo Niihau, Olelo Kanaka Niihau (Wong 2019, Wong et al. 2025)
- Other regional varieties
 - 'Ōlelo Maui/Moloka'i/Lāna'i/Kaua'i

- **Book/University/College/UH Hawaiian** (Wong 1999; Piccolo 2005; Higgins 2019)
- **Neo-Hawaiian** (NeSmith 2005)
- **New Hawaiian** (Gilbert 2025)
- **Revitalized Hawaiian** (Wilson & Kamanā 2006; Kettig forthcoming)
- **Standard Hawaiian** (Hawkins 1979; Kimura 1983; Parker Jones 2018)
- **Modern Hawaiian** (Davidson & Parker Jones 2023)

Question for panelists

When linguists are writing descriptively (in English) about ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i, what terms should we use or avoid in describing dialects?

e.g. Is **Revitalized Hawaiian** sufficiently descriptive of the break in transmission, + carrying less judgements about authenticity and L1/L2 status than *Neo Hawaiian, Type-2 Hawaiian, New Hawaiian, Modern Hawaiian, University/College/UH Hawaiian*? Is this *Standard Hawaiian*?

e.g. Is **Pre-Revitalization Hawaiian** a good alternative to *Traditional Hawaiian, Old Native Speakers, mānaleo*?

Where does **Ni‘ihau Hawaiian** fit in? Is it *Pre-Revitalization* because of its uninterrupted transmission, or does it have separate status?

Where do **diaspora learners** outside the revitalization communities fit in?

What about L2s who consciously model their language on Pre-Revitalization norms as markers of authenticity?

Mahalo!