

Maintenance and Shift of Japanese Language : A case study of second generation of Japanese Americans at the Hawai'i Japanese Center

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With changes of season and weather comes growth and death, blossoming and weakening. Minority language communities are similarly in a constant state of change. Such language shift may be fast or slow, upwards or downwards, but never absent. (Baker, 2001)

Introduction

Although language is an important tool for both individuals and their social group, it is easily shifted, lost or even dead.ⁱ Baker (2001) described as this phenomenon “scenario for immigrants” and “three generation shift”, most migrant languages have not been able to survive for more than three generations.ⁱⁱ Similar to many other cases of language loss among immigrants, the third generation of Japanese Americans is not successful in maintaining the Japanese language in Hawai'i.

At the beginning of my research, my interests were focused on the lives of Japanese immigrants in Japanese communities in Hilo on the Island of Hawai'i. I conducted research on this through an oral history approach. Fortunately, I received considerable support from the Hawai'i Japanese Center in Hilo and I met some *Nisei*, the second generation of Japanese Americans who possessed a lot of knowledge about these communities. These ten *Nisei* are the core subjects of my study. These results were compiled for my master's thesis. Through field research, I came to be interested in the maintenance and shift of “their” Japanese language.ⁱⁱⁱ

They speak Japanese fluently in spite of the limited use of Japanese in their daily lives. Furthermore, these *Nisei* had experienced many difficult circumstances, such as World War II and the Tsunami attacks. It is not exceptional case that the second generation of immigrants was able to retain their first language or mother tongue; however, it is exceptional considering that during the war of Japanese had been banned for about five years.

Thus, this study aims to investigate how *Nisei*'s linguistic skills have been maintained and shifted. I examine this by looking closely at individual oral histories.^{iv} I will describe my research findings, then I will offer an analysis and explanation using the “reward system” theory proposed by Joshua A. Fishman.

The Communities of Japanese Immigrants in Hilo

By the beginning twentieth century, Japanese communities of *Yashicjimachou* and *Shinmachi* took shape from Japanese people who traveled to the Island of Hawai‘i to find work.^v

World War II was a particularly difficult experience for Japanese immigrants in Hilo. Fortunately, the majority of them were able to stay in their own homes and many of them continued their businesses under the martial law that was declared at the outbreak of the war. Thus, compared to many Japanese immigrants on the mainland who were almost all sent to concentration camps, the Japanese immigrants in Hilo lived under better circumstances. However, the Japanese in Hilo were prohibited to speak Japanese in public, and Japanese schools were shut down. They did, however, speak Japanese at home. Since *Issei*, the first generation of Japanese Americans did not speak English well.

After the war, when people who were finally getting lives back together, a major tsunami hit Hawai‘i in 1946 and then again in 1960. Japanese communities were the hardest hit by the giant waves, since these communities were along the coastal area. After the first tsunami, people were able to rebuild their communities, but not after the second.

Findings and analysis

The findings of this study fall into four major categories: (1) the age of subjects and acquisition of the Japanese language, (2) the parents’ role in promoting Japanese, (3) the position of Japanese language in society, and (4) personal contacts with Japanese language and the culture.

①*The age of subjects Acquiring Japanese.* It is important to point out that my subjects finished their Japanese language education, before the war and even before the tsunamis destroyed their communities. Children form their language abilities at a very young age and because these *Nisei* speak English much better than Japanese, they consider English as their first language. However, Nakajima(2000) defines “mother tongue” as “the first language they met”—so in one sense their mother tongue was Japanese.^{vi} Inevitably, English would become the dominant language later in their lives, but during their childhood, Japanese was the first language, the “mother tongue” of these *Nisei*.

②*The Role of Parents.* *Nisei* were strongly encouraged to learn Japanese language and culture by their parents. Many studies on Japanese immigrants have pointed out that the creation of Japanese language schools was due to the eagerness of *Issei* to maintain their Japanese heritage.^{vii} One of my subjects remembered that his mother encouraged him to take every opportunity to learn and use Japanese. He mentioned that though he himself was interested in learning Japanese, his mother’s expectation was quite a strong motivation as well.

③*Japanese Language in the community.* Japanese language did not have a low social status in Hilo. An important reason for the survival of a language is that it possesses a certain amount

of political, economic, and culture power in the society.^{viii} The Japanese accounted for approximately fifty percent of the population of Hilo, so Japanese language enjoyed substantial support in the area. Thus for *Nisei* who grew up in Japanese communities, Japanese was the dominant language. It should be noted in addition that Japanese immigrants' experiences in Hilo during the war were less harsh than those in other areas. Discrimination and prejudice were much less intense than in the mainland US. Some of my subjects described the atmosphere of ethnic toleration in their stories, thus, this amicable circumstance undoubtedly affected in positive ways, their attitude towards the Japanese language.

④ *Personal contacts.* Some of my subjects who especially speak fluently in Japanese, managed to stay in touch with Japanese language and culture. After the war, there was a decrease in the stream of people, products, and information from Japan to Hilo. However, some of these *Nisei* were able to visit Japan and invite their relatives or friends to visit Hawai'i. Moreover, these *Nisei* had a key person(s) who led *Nisei* to use Japanese in daily lives. Some had opportunities to become friends with Japanese women who moved into Hilo as a "war brides", while others hosted guests from Japan at their jobs. Furthermore, there have been enjoyable activities, such as singing Japanese songs at Karaoke, watching TV dramas from Japan, listening to Japanese radio programs and several activities arranged by the Hawai'i Japanese Center. Although their literacy abilities, such as reading and writing in Japanese have gradually declined, my subjects mentioned that these activities provide them opportunities to keep their speaking and listening skills alive.

The above stories suggest interesting patterns of linguistic survival along the lines posited by Joshua Fishman who identifies four rewards that contribute to language maintenance. There are social rewards, fiscal rewards, political rewards and religious rewards. When the *Nisei* were younger, a variety of these rewards contributed to them leaning Japanese. However, this did not explain why some *Nisei*, many who are now in their 80s and 90s, are still able to speak Japanese fluently. I suspect that one main reason they have maintained their Japanese is not due simply to the continuing influence of these rewards. It is more a result of personal interests and commitments kept alive by the survival of community values. It is an affirmation of personal value, sense of community, and commitment.

Conclusion

The *Nisei* of Hilo have experienced some difficulties in maintaining their proficiency in Japanese language. Moreover, the language shift and loss is the rule rather than the exception in Hawai'i. Nevertheless, four factors have contributed to linguistic maintenance for these *Nisei*. These internal and external influences have impacted the continuity of Japanese language among the *Nisei* in Hilo. Furthermore, there is a personal dimension to their attachment to the Japanese language and culture—one that contributes importantly to the survival of Japanese language in Hawai'i.

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ⁱ There are various arguments from different academic fields why language is important. I emphasize on the relationship between the language as a maker of identity.(Crystal 2000 — Baker, 2001 p.51)

ⁱⁱ Moreover, “this survival was typically accompanied by a shrinkage in the domains and functions in which these languages are used.” (Words and Worlds)

ⁱⁱⁱ Their Japanese language is different from standard Japanese spoken in contemporary Japanese society. It is based on Japanese influenced by Hiroshima and Yamaguchi dialects and mixed with vocabulary that derives from other languages such as English and Hawaiian. Their language often betrays older patterns of Japanese speech.

^{iv} My research is based on interviews with Nisei whom I have met. I recognized that there are Nisei who do not want to speak Japanese nor participate in Japanese events and who are less familiar with their Japanese roots. Therefore, I do not intend to generalize my findings to all Nisei in Hilo.

^v Towards the end of nineteen century, Japanese people started to travel to Hawaii to find work in plantations. After the contact period expired, some of them moved into the downtown area where a number of other ethnic groups already established.

^{vi} Nakajima, *Bairingararu Kyouiku No Houhou*,18-26

^{vii} Tanimura, *Hawaii Nihonjin Imin-shi*,14

^{viii} Nakajima,12