Language and Cultural Maintenance of Hawai‘i-born Nisei

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to consider how *Nisei*, the second generation of Japanese immigrants, in Hilo on the island of Hawai‘i have maintained their Japanese cultural and linguistic skills. *Issei* refers to the first-generation Japanese Americans and *Nisei* to the second-generation. *Nikkei* refers generally to people of Japanese ancestry. A sub-group called *Kibei Nisei* includes people who were born on the US mainland or in Hawai‘i and then went to Japan in their formative years. As a result, this latter group became more fluent in Japanese than in English, and they tend to speak Japanese better than other *Nisei.* This paper deals only with *Nisei* and not the *Kibei Nisei*.

At the beginning of my research, my interests were focused on the lives of Japanese immigrants in Japanese communities in Hilo. Although a large numbers of studies have been conducted on Japanese immigrants in Hawai‘i, most of them focus on the island of Oahu. Surprisingly, few studies have so far been conducted with the Japanese immigrants on the island of Hawai‘i. In addition, research studies have tended to focus on the *Nisei* soldiers during World War II or the lives of Japanese immigrants in plantation villages, and they have ignored the experience of Japanese immigrants' who lived in the towns. Needless to say, these significant issues are not only important academically but are of value in presenting a more complete picture of the Japanese-American experience in Hawai‘i. I believe strongly that it is important to give a clear idea of the lives of Japanese immigrants in towns as well as their experiences during the war and in plantation villages.

Methodology and fieldwork

Between 2003 and 2005, I was able to visit Hilo five times to investigate the Japanese communities of *Shinmachi* and *Yashijimachou*.[1] Usually, I stayed there for two or three weeks at a time, except for the first visit when I stayed for only one week. Of course, these communities do not exist any more because of tsunamis in 1946 and in 1960. However, I was able to meet numerous *Nikkei* who are still living in Hilo. I was also able to join various parties and events and this allowed me to meet as many *Nikkei* as necessary for my study. Surprisingly, the younger generations, such as third and fourth generations of *Nikkei* have very little knowledge about these older communities of *Shinmachi* and *Yashijimachou.*

Fortunately, I was able to receive considerable support from Professor Honda of the University of Hawai‘i. Professor Honda is president of the Hawai‘i Japanese Center in Hilo and through his kind help, I was able to participate in some of the activities of the Center. Finally, I met some *Nisei* who had lived in *Shinmachi* and *Yashijimachou*. I also had several opportunities to gather information by interviewing some *Nikkei* who possessed a lot of knowledge about these communities. These ten *Nisei* who were kind enough to share their life histories with me are the core informants of my research study. The results of this research were compiled for my master's thesis and include maps that represented what these Japanese communities looked like, and how Japanese immigrants lived there.

While conducting research, I kept wondering why these *Nisei* could still speak Japanese so fluently in spite of the limited use of Japanese that they seemed to make in their daily lives. These *Nikkei* had experienced many difficult circumstances, especially during the war period, when the use of Japanese had been banned. How had they retained their Japanese language abilities?

I hypothesized that there were some circumstances that allowed them to use their Japanese. However, I could not, at first, find any evidence that would explain how they had been able to keep their language and cultural knowledge alive. I needed, therefore, to look closely at individual life histories to find the reasons.

In this paper, I will first provide a history of these Japanese immigrant communities in Hilo. Next, I will describe my research findings. I will then offer an analysis and explanation using the "reward system" theory proposed by Joshua A. Fishman.[2] I will conclude with some comments on the *Nisei* use of Japanese and the special Japanese culture they uphold.

My research is based on interviews with *Nisei* whom I have met. I recognize 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. Thus, I do not intend to generalize my findings to all *Nisei* in Hilo.

The Communities of Japanese immigrants in Hilo:

Yashijimachou and Shinmachi

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Japanese people started to travel across the Pacific Ocean as immigrants. They set off for many destinations in North and South America. Many traveled to Hawai‘i to find work in the plantations. The majority of these people were from the Hiroshima, Yamaguchi, and Okinawa prefectures.[3] They left Japan to look for better lives—many of them hoping to save money by working hard. After arriving in Hawai‘i, most of these immigrants started to work at the big sugar plantations. The contract period for the plantation was

normally three years. After their contract had expired, a few of these immigrants went back to Japan, but others remained at the plantation villages, while others chose to move to the mainland of the United States. Some were able to find work outside of the plantations in such towns as Hilo.[4]

Early immigrant groups in Hilo lived in the downtown area, where a number of other ethnic groups—Caucasian American, Chinese, and Portuguese were already established. By the beginning of twentieth century, the Japanese were the majority ethnic group in the coastal areas.[5] Many of them lived inside or near downtown. As more and more Japanese kept moving into these areas, Japanese communities gradually took shape close to the downtown area. Japanese immigrants soon started their own businesses. There were grocery stores, tofu shops, barbershops, restaurants, hotels, and theaters. Others worked as fishermen, carpenters, and stevedores. Two major Japanese areas developed. The first was formed in the area of Waiākea, located in the southern part of Hilo. Although its official name was Waiākea Town, Japanese people called it Y*ashijimachou*, which means "the coconuts-island town" in Japanese.[6] The second area was formed between the downtown and the *Yashijimachou* area. This area was called *Shinmachi*, meaning "a new town." The name of *Shinmachi* was the official name. However, during World War II, these Japanese names, as well as many names for streets and parks, were required to be changed. But in spite of these official demands, *Shinmachi* somehow survived in use.

World War II and Japanese Immigrants

The war 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. Of course, many of the stories I heard told of tragic situations. In one case, one of my informants served as a member of the 100th Battalion and went to fight in Europe. In another case, the father of my informant was sent to a concentration camp on the US mainland. One informant lost her husband during the war. Unfortunately, she could not prepare a proper funeral as there were no monks in Hilo, and it was strictly banned for more than ten Japanese to gather together in one place.

The Japanese in Hilo were also prohibited to speak Japanese in public, and Japanese schools were shut down. My informants remember how quiet it was inside the buses back then, as many Japanese immigrants were not able to speak English. They did, however, speak Japanese at home.

The Tsunamis of 1946 and 1960

On the first of April, 1946, April Fools Day, a major tsunami hit Hawai'i. It devastated the coastal area of Hilo. It swept buildings, roads, and people away. Almost all of my informants suffered personally from this disaster.[7] Some of them lost family members. In Hilo alone, ninety-six people were killed.[8] It was an unexpected and cruel occurrence for people who were finally getting their lives back together after the war. It was a hard struggle, but people found the strength to carry on and rebuild their old communities.

In 1960, as people were beginning to put the nightmare of 1946 behind them, another tsunami struck Hilo with a similar deadly force.[9] It was because of this second strike against Hilo that legislation was enacted to create a green zone as a barrier against future tsunamis. The people who had lived there were required to relocate. *Yashijimachou* and *Shinmachi* were two of the areas hardest hit by the giant waves, and these devastated communities along the coast have vanished, replaced by a golf course and a parking area.

Introducing Two Nisei [10]

I would like to introduce two of the *Nisei* who were the subjects of my study. One grew up in *Shinmachi* and the other grew up in *Yashijimachou*. Both of them speak fluent Japanese.

My first informant was Mr. Yoshirou Inoue. He was born in 1918 and grew up in *Shinmachi.* Like many other Japanese immigrants to Hawai'i, his father came to the islands first, and then his mother came as a picture bride. Both of them were from Fukuoka prefecture. For this generation, finding a partner with the same religion was important. They first lived in a plantation village, but the family moved to *Shinmachi* later. Mr. Inoue began his education in Japanese language at an early age. After entering Waiākea Elementary School, he started to study Japanese at a Buddhist church.

He joined the National Guards and then served in World War II as a member of the 100th Battalion. He returned to Hilo after the war, and before the 1946 tsunami that devastated *Shinmachi*. He survived, but other family members were not so fortunate. He lost his parents, one of his nephews, and a niece. Nowadays he participates in the activities of Hawai'i Japanese Center, and because of his fluency in Japanese and his very friendly, outgoing character, he contributes positively to the visitor experience and to the welcome that people from Japan enjoy when they visit the center.

The other subject of my study is Ms. Kimiyo Higashi. She was born in 1923 in *Yashijimachou*. Although her parents came to Hilo separately, they were both from Yamaguchi prefecture. Her father was a carpenter. Her mother had run a tofu shop first, then a general store in *Yashijimachou*. She attended a Japanese language school in *Yashijimachou*, called *Yahijima Nippongo Gakkou*. She recalled many stories of *Yashijimachou* and was willing to share them with me.

At present, she works as a volunteer for the Hawai'i Japanese Center answering telephone calls and helping visitors. Because of her fluency in Japanese and vivid memories of early life in Hilo, she has been able to contribute a lot to the center and to its visitors.

Findings and analysis

The findings of this study fall into four major categories: (1)

the age of subjects and the 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.

Acquiring Japanese. It is important to point out that my informants finished their Japanese language education when they were in their teens. That was before the war, and 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 that English is their first language. However, Nakajima (2000) defines "mother tongue" as "the first language they met"—so in one sense their mother tongue was Japanese.[11] 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.* In the case of Ms. Higashi, who was born in 1923 in *Yashijimachou,* she had already mastered the foundations of Japanese language before the war started. The acquisition of Japanese language and culture inside these Japanese communities was completed before the people were banned from using Japanese during the war. This helps explain why these *Nisei* maintained their Japanese language and cultural skills.

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.[12] It is said that *Nisei* used a varied mixture of English, Hawaiian, and Japanese with local dialects. For instance, "Papa, Hana hana. House, Oran" means "My father is at work, absent from home." "Papa" and "house" are English words. "Hana hana" means job in Hawaiian. "Oran" means absent in Japanese.[13] *Issei* aspired to provide proper Japanese language and cultural education so that their children would grow up as competent Japanese speakers fully aware of their cultural heritage. Moreover, many of the Japanese immigrants were thinking of returning to Japan someday after they have saved enough money. Many *Nisei* complied with their parents' expectations.

Mr. Inoue, who was born in 1918 in *Shinmachi,* 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. In addition, when he was only five years old, his mother arranged private lessons in reading and writing Japanese. In Japan, children do not usually begin learning to read and write until they are six years old. Mr. Inoue's mother also found a part time job for her son so that he could use Japanese when he was a high school student. He had to keep a book in Japanese and communicate with customers in Japanese.

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 cultural power in the society.[14] The Japanese accounted for sixty percent of the population of Hilo, so Japanese language and culture enjoyed substantial support in the area. Thus for *Nisei* who grew up in *Yashijimachou* and *Shinmachi*, 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 and Japanese language and culture did not need to be disclaimed by the *Nisei.* For example, Mr. Inoue mentions that he was surprised to witness how African-Americans were segregated in public places when he was training on the mainland. He repeatedly told me that he was shocked to see it, as he had never experienced such discrimination in Hilo. He recalled that he used to have lunch together with his co-worker from Portugal. This atmosphere of ethnic toleration undoubtedly affected, in positive ways, Mr. Inoue's attitude towards the Japanese language and the culture.

Personal Contacts. Several of the people I spoke with, who 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. These events inspired the *Nisei* to use Japanese whenever the occasion permitted. For example, my informants were keen to speak with me in Japanese.

Reading and writing in Japanese was not so much a part of the daily lives of these *Nisei*, and so their literacy abilities have gradually declined. However, they are still able to enjoy watching TV dramas from Japan, listening to Japanese radio programs, and singing Japanese songs at Karaoke[15]. They consider these to be enjoyable activities that provide them with opportunities to keep their speaking and listening skills alive.

My informants often participate in activities arranged by the Hawai'i Japanese Center. Its theme is "preserving the past to build the future." The center has two main objectives: to gather and preserve historical materials for anyone who wants to know the history of Japanese immigrants and to organize events and activities for the *Nikkei* community. My informants report that they enjoy participating in singing Karaoke, dancing at festivals, welcoming guests from Japan, and explaining local history to them in Japanese. Thus the center performs an important role in the community in promoting Japanese culture and language.

On March 3, the Girl's Day Festival was celebrated at the campus of the University of Hawai'i. [16] This event brought together not only *Nikkei* but other university students. They were able to enjoy participating in Japanese martial arts such as *Aikido* and traditions like *Sadou* (the tea ceremony), and *Shuuji* (penmanship). On April 19, there was a showing of the movie *Aizen Katsura* (The Tree of Love). It is quite an old film, made in 1938, and based on a novel with the same title by Kawaguchi Matsuda. It is a love story involving a doctor from a rich family and a single mother. They struggle to overcome many difficulties to be together. I had never heard of it, but it is a great favorite of the *Nisei*. On Mother's day, the eleventh of May, they showed *Samurai Musashi*, a film

based on the life of the famed swordsman. On June 15, they had a Japanese buffet luncheon party. In July, they had a show with Japanese singers and dancers. And in August, they had a guest from Okinawa who demonstrated Okinawan dance and music and explained the history of these arts.

Later in the fall, the Center held a *Kamon* (family crest) workshop. Many *Nisei* have obtained their family crests from Japan. The *Kamon* show *Nikkei* their roots, if they have been maintained properly. I participated in this workshop with several *Nisei* and saw how excited they were to trace their roots. In October the Center held one its main events, a musical festival called Musical Nostalgia. Both professional and semi-professional singers and dancers entertained the audience of more than three hundred people. The variety and excellence of these events attracts a wide participation, including *Nisei* and non-Japanese people who live in Hilo.

The above stories suggest interesting patterns of linguistic and cultural survival along the lines posited by Joshua Fishman who identifies four rewards that contribute to language maintenance. There are social rewards such as enforcing and recognizing membership in the family, in the community, in society, and generally among people; fiscal rewards such as jobs, promotions, raises, and bonuses; political rewards such as elections, appointments, and public, acclaim; and, finally, religious rewards.[17]

When the *Nisei* were younger, a variety of social and fiscal rewards contributed to them learning Japanese. These results were clear from the individual life histories that my research disclosed. However, this did not explain why some *Nisei*, many who are now in their 80s, 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 earlier social and fiscal rewards. It is more a result of personal interests and commitments kept alive by the survival of community values. The *Nisei* continue to enjoy old Japanese songs and films that enable them to stay in touch with Japanese language and culture. This personal factor would not have been as strong in their earlier years. But in surviving the difficult periods of the war and the tsunamis that devastated their communities, they have maintained and deepened their desire to keep their language and culture alive. It is an affirmation of personal value, sense of community, and commitment.

Thoughts on Japanese Language and the Culture of the Nisei

I have referred to *Nisei*'s fluency in speaking Japanese. This requires some further explanations. Their Japanese language is different from standard Japanese spoken in contemporary Japanese society. *Nisei* Japanese 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.

For instance, Mr. Inoue related a story to me from his childhood—a story about catching some small fish. His mother disliked cooking such small fish. So, he brought them to his friends' house.

> Mr. Inoue: Washiga, yoo, Sakana demo chiisaino toru, yeah? Uchino house motteittara, mendokusai tte okorukara, ano house ittene. Ano obasanga, ryourishite, soide, tofuuya dakara, aburaga aru, yeah? Asukode, soijake, washi, natsuyasumi no tokide, uchinoieni ite tabetakoto nai.

It's interesting to reflect on the rich linguistic variety of this passage: *Yoo* is a local dialect word of western Japan that means "often". *Yeah* is the same as in English conversation. *House* is English. *Soide* means "and then" in Japanese. This is a local dialect word of western and southern Japan. *Sorede* is standard Japanese. *Asukode* means "there" in Japanese. This word is used mainly in western and southern Japan. *Asokode* is standard Japanese. *Soijake* means "because of that" in Hiroshima dialect, while *Soudakara* is used in standard Japanese. Similarly, *Jakee* or *Jakara* are employed quite often among *Nisei*, and are still in use in the dialect of Hiroshima and its surrounding areas.

With regard to Japanese culture and entertainment, the *Nisei* clearly favor pre-war times. They may enjoy TV programs and songs that are currently popular in Japan. However, these people have a special attachment to the past. Even though the *Nisei* have kept in touch with Japanese people and Japanese culture, the language and culture of the *Nisei* are quite distinctive. They have changed it to fit to the local life of Hilo, and it is this personal dimension that has become internalized, preserving a continuous tradition of language and practice.

Conclusion

The *Nisei* of Hilo have experienced some difficulties in maintaining their proficiency in Japanese language and culture. Nevertheless, four factors have contributed to linguistic and cultural maintenance. First, the *Nisei* acquired their language and the culture early and were able to develop it through various educational means—the school, the home, and the community. Secondly, *Issei* played a significant role in motivating *Nisei* to learn the Japanese language and culture. The high expectations that they had for their children and the strong support that they gave them were important factors. Thirdly, the prestige of Japanese language in the wider community was critical to keeping the tradition alive. And finally, even though their exposure to Japanese was and is limited, the Hawai'i Japanese Center has provided and continues to provide many opportunities to promote Japanese language so that people are able to remain acquainted with Japanese culture. *Nisei* do enjoy entertainments that allow them to use their Japanese. They like singing Karaoke in Japanese, watching Japanese films, and talking with guests from Japan. All of these activities allow the *Nisei* to keep in touch routinely with Japanese language and the culture. These internal and external influences have impacted the continuity of Japanese language and culture among the *Nisei* in Hilo. Furthermore, as the life histories of the *Nisei* make clear, there is a personal dimension to their attachment to the Japanese language and culture—one that contributes importantly to the survival of Japanese language and culture in Hawai'i.

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Endnotes

1 *Shinmachi* means “new town” and *Yashijimachou* means “coconut-island town” in Japanese.

2 Fishman, *The Rise and Fall of the Ethnic Revival: Perspectives on Language and Ethnicity,* 369

3 Kyokai. *Hawaii Nihonjin Imin-shi,* 312–314

4 Ibid., 317

5 Glen Wright, *Hilo from the Beginning : A History of Hawai’i Islands,* 33.

6 Nakamura & Kobayashi, *The History of The Waiakea Pirates Athletic Club and The Yashijima Story*, 19.

7 Editorial, Hilo Tribune-Herald, April 3, 1946; Editorial, Hawaii Tribune-Herald, April 1, 1979

8 Dudley & Stone, *The Tsunami of 1946 and the Devastation of Hilo Town*, 16.

9 Dudley & Lee, *TSUNAMI!* 130–176.

10 These are not the real names of the two subjects.

11 Nakajima, *Bairingaru Kyouiku No Houhou*, 18–26.

12 Tanimura, *Hawai‘i Nihonjin Imin-shi*, 14.

13 Ibid., 15.

14 Nakajima, 12.

15 A Japanese radio program from the Hawaii Japanese Center on KHBC (AM1060) called *Kangaesaserareta Mondai*.

16 “Keep in Touch”(January, 1, 2004) is a news later which is published by the Hawaii Japanese Center.

17 Fishman, 369.