Long Dismissed, Hawaii Pidgin Finds A Place in Classroom
Unofficial Language of Locals Is Featured in Literature;
'Bradajo,' or Brother Joe

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HONOLULU -- Lee Tonouchi looked like any other teacher getting ready for class here at Hawaii Pacific University as he scribbled on a whiteboard in his taupe aloha shirt. Then he spoke. "Dees ees Ingleesh Tree-Eight-Oh-Seex-Ay," he announced in a nasal tenor. "Whooz name I nevah call?"

That is, English 3806A, Pidgin Literature -- what many believe to be the first college-level class fully devoted to fiction and poetry using the local Hawaii patois. Born in the sugar and pineapple plantations of a century ago, Hawaii's pidgin is the unofficial language of local residents, usually sounding to English-speaking Westerners like an odd, sometimes unintelligible dialect spoken in rapid staccato.

Hawaii's pidgin was dismissed for decades as a low-class form of poorly spoken English, its public displays mostly confined to the jokes of comedians here. Pidgin was particularly scorned in academia, with teachers sometimes refusing to let kids go to the bathroom until they could make the request in standard English.

But over the past 10 years, Hawaii pidgin has undergone a major transformation and is now being hailed in many highbrow circles as a critical component of Hawaii's culture. There's a thriving pidgin literary scene. And filmmakers are making more movies featuring pidgin dialogue.

Some academics at Hawaiian universities, once home to pidgin's staunchest critics, are embracing the language as never before. Hawaii Pacific is holding its inaugural pidgin literature and beginning pidgin language courses this summer. HPU's much bigger rival, the University of Hawaii at Manoa, is close to approving an undergraduate certificate in pidgin and Creole studies beginning in the fall.

"There's a renaissance rich in pidgin," says Jozuf Hadley, a Honolulu poet who writes what he calls "haiku pidgin" under the name "Bradajo," by which he means Brother Joe. "There's a resurgence, with the appearance of pidgin as an art form in literature." Mr. Hadley says he now knows of half a dozen other pidgin poets and regularly gets invitations to read his work.

Although the real thing can be unintelligible to the novice listener, Hawaii pidgin is even making its way to Hollywood. Pidgin abounds on A&E Network's current reality hit "Dog the Bounty
Hunter," which focuses on a bounty hunter who runs "Da Kine Bail Bonds." ("Da Kine," a common pidgin phrase, has no English equivalent, although, in some usages, "whatchamacallit" is close.) When the pidgin gets too thick, the show provides subtitles. "I think it definitely enhances the show's unique flavor," says its executive producer, Robert Sharenow.

Hawaii-pidgin advocates aren't always thrilled with the way pidgin is used, most notably in last year's romantic comedy "50 First Dates" starring Adam Sandler. Some say Mr. Sandler's sidekick, supposedly a pidgin-speaking Oahu resident named Ula, sounded more as if he were from Mexico than from the islands. "If they attitude make fun of language 'cause foreign, that's when get problems," grumbles Mr. Tonouchi, who writes and speaks in pidgin only. Happy Madison Productions, Mr. Sandler's production company, didn't return calls seeking comment.

College courses and Hollywood movies are a long way from pidgin's humble origins. Around 1900, after large numbers of indigenous Hawaiians were felled by foreign diseases, plantations imported thousands of immigrants from different countries and put them to work in often difficult conditions.

What resulted, as it turned out, was a language that borrows heavily from English but mixes languages like Japanese, Chinese, Hawaiian and Portuguese. It is one of the 200 or so pidgin and Creole languages now spoken around the world, according to Michael Forman, a linguistics professor at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. While it is universally referred to in Hawaii as "pidgin," the term technically applies to something people learn as a second language. Linguists say that what Hawaiians actually speak is a Creole, a form of language that develops when speakers of mutually unintelligible languages remain in persistent and long-lasting contact with one another. One of the contributing languages is usually dominant.

What started as a necessity soon became the unofficial language for local Hawaiians, but pidgin has long been looked down on because of its plantation-worker roots. From the 1920s to the 1950s, Hawaii established English Standard Schools for non-pidgin speakers, frequently barring the descendants of plantation workers from attending. "A lot of people identify lower classes with pidgin," says Eric Chock, co-founder of Honolulu's Bamboo Ridge Press, a publisher that's widely considered a pioneer of the pidgin movement.

When a college professor ordered her to write in pidgin because it was "her voice," Lois-Ann Yamanaka says she resisted at first, convinced that, if she complied, her classmates would think she was stupid. She eventually gave in, and her first book, published by Bamboo Ridge in 1993,
swiftly got her a book deal from Farrar, Straus & Giroux, national attention and awards. Ms. Yamanaka has been an inspiration for a number of other pidgin writers.

Mr. Tonouchi, whose nickname is "Da Pidgin Guerrilla," remembers his aunt telling him he couldn't buy a copy of "Pidgin To Da Max," one of the language's most popular pidgin dictionaries. But as a student at the University of Hawaii in the early 1990s, Mr. Tonouchi stumbled across a pidgin poem and was, he says, "blown away." He boldly elected to write all his papers in pidgin.

After graduation, Mr. Tonouchi founded a magazine for local writers called Hybolics, a word defined by Pidgin To Da Max as "to talk like one intellectual-kine" Caucasian. What "we trying fo' do is reclaim da word and make da statement dat you can use pidgin jus as well fo' express da kine intellectual ideas," Mr. Tonouchi wrote in one issue.

Generally, there isn't a lot of money to be made in the Hawaii-pidgin movement. Mr. Tonouchi, who is 32 years old, still lives at home with his dad. But he says he has spoken to more than 100 schools and community organizations for his cause. He's on the verge of releasing his third book, dubbed "Da Kine Dictionary," and recruited his comrade, University of Hawaii lecturer and pidgin expert Kent Sakoda, to help teach the groundbreaking classes at Hawaii Pacific. Kent "wen grumble little bit, cuz das mo' work for him," Mr. Tonouchi explains in an email. "But I toll 'em brah, we doing it for da pidgin revolution."

While resistance to pidgin has faded in some quarters, it isn't gone altogether. Hawaii Pacific's faculty was happy to sign off on the idea of pidgin classes, but English program chairwoman Catherine Sustana says outside reaction to the idea was mixed. "A lot of people were really confused why we were offering that," she says.

In another generation, there may not be as much to fight over. While pidgin is thriving in certain Oahu neighborhoods and the outer islands, many note that fewer kids appear to be speaking pidgin, particularly here, the state's largest city. Sandi Takayama, author of a local children's book that replaces the gingerbread man of the classic tale with a pidgin-speaking rice snack, says she has noticed that some local kids sometimes have trouble understanding her at readings. "I feel a little sad," says Ms. Takayama, who admits her own kids can struggle with pidgin themselves. "But I can understand -- for children to be able to succeed in the larger world, they have to speak standard English."

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