

HE ‘ŌLELO NA NĀ MĀKUAHINE ‘ELUA: (RE)CONCEPTUALIZING L2 HAWAIIAN SPEAKERHOOD THROUGH KANAKA MAOLI KINSHIP EPISTEMOLOGY

G. H. Kapeliela Gilbert

This article advocates for applying traditional Hawaiian kinship epistemology to the conceptualization of ‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i (Hawaiian language) acquisition as a process defined by pilina (relations, relationality). It presents a brief historical overview of Hawaiian acquisition over time, compares first-language (L1) and second-language (L2) speakers within the context of language shift, surveys past research on the sociolinguistic dynamics of Hawaiian language revitalization, and engages with metalinguistic discourses of L1s and L2s related to language ideology and speakerhood. The Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) kinship practice of hānai and genealogical principle of po‘olua are drawn upon to characterize intergenerational linguistic transmission of Hawaiian as a mo‘okū‘auhau ‘ōlelo (linguistic genealogy). This perspective counterbalances prevalent language ideologies of legitimacy and authenticity among new and prospective speakers, (re)conceptualizing L2 Hawaiian as an ‘ōlelo na nā mākuahine ‘elua—a language of two mothers—shaped by both traditional Hawaiian and contemporary L1s. In this view, L2 Hawaiian speakerhood reflects collective resilience within today’s postcolonial world.

This article finishes with a brief personal narrative by the author, an L2 Hawaiian speaker, where other L2s are encouraged to heed intra-community concerns related to language change and cultivate pilina with L1s in a spirit of unity as equal stakeholders in the revitalization of ‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i.

CORRESPONDENCE MAY BE SENT TO:

G. H. Kapeliela Gilbert

Email: ghgilbert@uchicago.edu

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HO'OLAUNA

More than six years ago, some two months after my high school graduation in that summertime limbo period before college, I stumbled on an episode of NPR's *Code Switch* about 'Ōlelo Hawai'i. In that episode, Larry Kimura and others told the story of how a group of passionate parents and educators fought not only to reinstate Hawaiian as an official language of Hawai'i, but to revive a language from near-death to thrive once again. In many ways, that podcast episode changed the course of my life: It was the first time I learned the words *language revitalization*.

A month later, I left home in Virginia for college. I did not yet realize that my New Hampshire campus would introduce me to other Kanaka Maoli peers for the first time after sixteen years of living in diaspora, nor could I have ever predicted that a Pūnana Leo and Kula Kaiapuni graduate, raised by second-language speaker parents to be the first native speaker in their family in generations, would be one of my classmates. That fall, I took my first linguistics class. I badgered my new friend incessantly about how to say this or that in Hawaiian. I used the class to explore how linguistics might help me make up for lost time as I stumbled through *Ka Lei Ha'aheo* and every Hawaiian textbook in the library, trying to retrace the innumerable steps between me and the kūpuna kuakahi in my mo'okū'auhau who last spoke 'Ōlelo Hawai'i.

I remember the night I read NeSmith's MA thesis, "Tūtū's Hawaiian." I left campus a few days later for winter break, determined to find ways to listen to the language—especially from native speakers—around the time that Kani'āina's archive of *Ka Leo Hawai'i* episodes went public and Maluhia States released the first episode of his *Ka Alala* podcast. I set a brutal goal for myself to spend at least an hour each day of that break reading, writing, listening, speaking, breathing 'ōlelo. Every day of December 2019, I ended up spending one to four hours learning, possessed by an unshakable dream of beating the odds and returning to campus able to converse with my friend. Four years later, I wrote my undergraduate thesis on the directionals—*aku*, *mai*, *iho*, and *a'e*—explaining how data from those kūpuna recorded by Clinton Kanahele not only prove there *are* contextual patterns to those words, but that Hawaiian grammar was not an impossible puzzle. Today, I am a linguistics PhD student still enamored of the beautiful ways that Hawaiian speakers past and present linguistically express their worlds. I have never stopped learning.

I am a second-language speaker, but one who, in diaspora, has had few chances to wala’au and even fewer conversation partners. Almost all my experience with Hawaiian has involved listening to the voices of kūpuna in collections like *Ka Leo Hawai’i*, transcribing their stories, songs, and histories in their myriad variations and styles. I’ve witnessed firsthand how, even in a recording, these native speakers are invaluable resources for teaching the hard stuff—intonation, humor, wordplay—that you can’t learn from a textbook. You must go to the source.

INTRODUCTION

I ulu nō ka lālā i ke kumu.
The branches grow because of the trunk.
 (Pukui, 1983, p. 137, #1261)

Like the branches of a tree, one’s knowledge of language—linguistic knowledge—proceeds from a *kumu* (source). One’s first language (L1) is inextricably linked to their very first *pilina* (relations): Children acquire their L1 from caretakers as their very first kumu. This process of L1 language acquisition is undertaken “during the first years of life,” and is a “fundamental human trait” (Sakai, 2005, p. 815). Any language acquired afterwards is learned as a second language (L2), shaped by different pilina in the linguistic environments that foster such acquisition, e.g., the relationship between student and teacher in a language class at school. How one speaks a language—whether as an L1 or L2—always reflects the pilina underpinning their language-learning experience. Linguistic knowledge is inherently relational.

This article examines the acquisition of ‘Ōlelo Hawai’i (lit. Hawaiian language), or ‘Ōlelo Makuahine (Hawaiian, lit. mother tongue), as a process shaped by pilina. Traditional conceptions of *mo’okū’auhau* (genealogy) as represented by Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) kinship epistemology are brought to bear in conceptualizing *speakerhood*, “the norms, requirements and the values that define who is considered to be a speaker” of a language (Márquez Reiter & Martín Rojo, 2019, p. 1). Speakerhood is argued to reflect pilina, and traditional conceptions about kinship are used to faithfully characterize a relationality inherent to language

acquisition. These understandings present an alternative means by which speakers can conceptualize 'Ōlelo Makuahine speakerhood. The variety (or varieties) of Hawaiian predominantly spoken by L2s can be understood to reflect a particular *mo'okū'auhau 'ōlelo* (linguistic genealogy)—a particular linguistic biography composed of pilina. That L2 speakers differ from L1s but resemble each other with respect to language production follows from their shared *mo'okū'auhau 'ōlelo*: L2s share linguistic kumu (e.g., English L1 caregivers in childhood, Hawaiian L2 teachers and peers) that contrast with those of L1s (e.g., Hawaiian L1 caregivers in childhood, Hawaiian L1 teachers and peers).

Linguistic and ideological differences between L1s and L2s continue to inspire much discussion within Hawaiian language circles. Academic work grapples with notions of language authenticity and standardization, especially as they relate to asymmetrical balances of power between different kinds of speakers. These discourses offer two questions that motivate this paper:

- (a) How can traditional Kanaka Maoli kinship epistemology inform how stakeholders in Hawaiian language revitalization engage language ideologies and discourses that abet further departure from traditional Hawaiian language norms and hinder increased language reclamation?
- (b) What kuleana do stakeholders in Hawaiian language revitalization have today, either as L1s, raised to speak Hawaiian from birth, or as L2s, in learning and reclaiming Hawaiian?

This paper argues that traditional conceptions of pilina about kinship and genealogy offer a framework for recognizing L2 Hawaiian as an *'ōlelo na nā mākuahine 'elua*—a language of two mothers—a fruit of struggle born from a new speaker's entire linguistic knowledge and shaped by all of the pilina embedded in their *mo'okū'auhau 'ōlelo*. The essay begins by exploring Hawaiian language transmission as a relational process defined by *mo'okū'auhau 'ōlelo* and contextualizes today's linguistic landscape within Hawaiian history. It then examines linguistic differences between L1s and L2s, linking them to distinct learning experiences. The third section centers L1 perspectives on speakerhood. The final section discusses how L2 speakers navigate language ideologies surrounding Hawaiian acquisition and how traditional kinship epistemological understandings can (re)conceptualize L2 speakerhood. A brief conclusion is given, written from the author's perspective.

HAWAIIAN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AS MO‘OKŪ‘AUHAU ‘ŌLELO

‘Ōlelo Makuahine is the ancestral language of Kānaka Maoli (Native Hawaiians) and the indigenous Polynesian language of Hawai‘i,¹ spoken across “Ko Hawaii Pae Aina” (the Hawaiian archipelago) (“Ka Paeaina,” 1897, 2). For most of Hawaiian history, proficiency in ‘Ōlelo Makuahine naturally accompanied being raised as a Hawaiian by Hawaiians. Kūpuna (elders) like Ralph Kaonohiokala Alapai “acquired [Hawaiian] from [their] own home[s], among [their] own people” (Landgraf, 1987, p. 12). It was the rule rather than the exception for Kānaka Maoli to acquire ‘Ōlelo Makuahine as a mother tongue from other Kānaka Maoli who spoke Hawaiian as their own mother tongue. This process of intergenerational language transmission involves the passing down of language from generation to generation, facilitating *language renewal*: A “language is given new life when children learn it from their parents and families” (Wong Fillmore, 2011, p. 1).

The English term *mother tongue* emphasizes this familial pattern of language acquisition. Within the Hawaiian lexicon, the term ‘*Ōlelo Makuahine*—though it translates word-for-word as English *mother tongue*—is typically used to refer to Hawaiian alone. The sense provided by English *mother tongue* as meaning one’s first or native language (i.e., L1) is encoded by another Hawaiian term, ‘*ōlelo kuakahi*, while one’s L2 is encoded by the term ‘*ōlelo kualua*. I use these terms after NeSmith (2019, p. 107), who follows the terms’ earlier use by Kanaka Maoli writer and L1 Simona Kaai in *Ka Hoku o ka Pakipika* (1861, 4).

The term ‘*ōlelo kuakahi* predates the now commonly used *mānaleo*, “originally invented by Larry Kimura and William H. Wilson in the late 1970s” to mean “native speaker, lit. inherited voice,” by more than a century (Pukui & Elbert, 1986, p. 236). No corresponding coined term for an L2 speaker currently exists. Elsewhere in the Hawaiian lexicon, the words *kuakahi* and *kualua* constitute kinship terms, as in *kupuna kuakahi* (great-grandparent) and *kupuna kualua* (great-great-grandparent). That *kuakahi* and *kualua* are found in both linguistic and kinship terms reflects the intertwined relationship between *pilina* and ‘*ōlelo* (language), revealing that Hawaiian’s native lexicon conceives of speakerhood like it does family. While ‘*ōlelo kuakahi* and ‘*ōlelo kualua* are not currently widely adopted terms in Hawaiian language scholarship to discuss L1s and L2s, they are selected here to not otherize either L1s or L2s from the position of one or the other. Instead, these labels embrace an Indigenous view of the process of language acquisition as a kind of *mo‘okū‘auhau*.

Mo'okū'auhau, translated simply as “genealogy,” involves the “tracing and narrating of lineages” (Chang, 2016, p. 138). It “connect[s] people to one another, to place, and to landscape” (Kauanui, 1999, p. 138). Historically, mo'okū'auhau determined social order: The ali'i (chiefs) as a hereditary nobility were defined by their traceable “history” and an “identity [determined] by relationships with the past” (Valeri, 1990, p. 165). Beyond family relations, mo'okū'auhau describes lineages like the “line of priestly succession” for kāhuna (priests, experts) and “expertise in a line of kumu hula” (Chang, 2016, p. 275). It is “foundational to Kanaka Maoli cosmology” (Chang, 2016, p. 275), “fundamental to Hawaiian epistemology and to our sense of knowing and being” (Wilson-Hokowhitu, 2019, p. 2), and is the “starting point of all things Hawaiian” (Kanahele, 2011, p. xiv).

Mo'okū'auhau presents a methodology uniquely calibrated for Hawai'i (Wilson-Hokowhitu, 2019). The kinship epistemological understandings that conceptualize mo'okū'auhau may be brought to bear in considering speakerhood and what it means to be a Hawaiian speaker today. Traditional genealogical practices like hānai (Hawaiian-style adoption) and po'olua (being a child of two fathers) are unfamiliar to a western mode of understanding, but, as will be discussed later, enable the imagination of speakerhood in a way that is compatible with 'ike ku'una (traditional knowledge). In retrospectively considering the history that underlies today's linguistic situation, this framework imagines 'Ōlelo Makuahine as reflective of pilina; it conceives of Hawaiian speakers as both bearers and custodians of mo'okū'auhau 'ōlelo unique to their individual families that together tell the collective story of Hawai'i.

Comprehending the vitality of 'Ōlelo Makuahine demands a nuanced understanding of how mo'okū'auhau 'ōlelo have changed over time. Disruption to uninterrupted Hawaiian transmission followed Captain Cook's arrival in the islands in 1778–79 (Sahlins, 1989, p. 371). The subsequent “deadly sicknesses from foreigners, contagious illnesses...mosquitos, biting flies, and...bitter elements of [those] times” devastated the L1 population (Kamakau, 2022, p. 463). Between 1778 and 1830, the population fell from as high as 800,000 to about 130,000 (Stannard, 1989; Schmitt, 1968). The circumstances began to ripen for *language shift*, defined by Grenoble (2021) as “the replacement of one language by another in a community” (p. 9).

Hawaiian wasn't endangered as a sudden event, but as a process over time. In the early nineteenth century, the English-speaking missionaries “expended more of their energies on the chiefs” (Schütz, 2020, p. 188). As the ali'i learned to speak

English and to read and write in Hawaiian, English-medium educational institutions like the Royal School were founded “for children of the Hawaiian royal family” (Warner, 2001, p. 134). The foreigners quickly reaped the fruits of their labor. Warner explains: “At its inception, Hawaiian was the primary language of government,” but “by the 1870s, official government documents were written in English and translated into Hawaiian” (p. 134). These facts support Asensio’s (2010) assertion that the nineteenth-century Hawaiian Kingdom largely operated under a “covert policy of bilingualism,” evidenced by judicial appointments and language policies favoring English speakers (p. 15). But Hawaiian was still transmitted, entrenched in the education system. In 1848, “99% of 631 [government-funded public] schools” were “taught through the medium of Hawaiian” (Warner, 2001, p. 134). Hawaiian nationals of all ethnic backgrounds were Hawaiian speakers for most of the nineteenth century and overwhelmingly L1s. But this multilingualism—in the shadow of English’s mounting prestige as the language of empires—hung in a fragile balance to be shattered in 1893.

The 1893 coup and overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom targeted Hawaiian by attacking the education system. The provisional government passed Act 57, declaring: “The English language shall be the medium and basis of instruction in all public and private schools” (“Act 57,” 1896, p. 189). The United States Congress “passed a joint resolution purporting to annex the Hawaiian State” shortly afterwards in 1898 (Sai, 2004, p. 60). Widespread discrimination against Hawaiian speakers followed, with many kūpuna “physically punished or humiliated for speaking Hawaiian in school” (Warner, 2001, p. 136). These experiences are documented across the oral histories of numerous kūpuna (Ka Leo Hawai‘i, 1972–1988). They reveal that ‘Ōlelo Makuahine is a victim of *linguicide*, defined as “language killing” or “the forced loss of a language” (Zuckermann, 2020, 189).

By the 1950s, “language shift from Hawaiian to English was completed on all islands except Ni‘ihau” (Brenzinger & Heinrich, 2013, p. 302), whose residents maintain L1-to-L1 linguistic transmission to this day (Maka‘ai et al., 1998, p. 16; Elbert & Pukui, 1979, p. 23). For Hawaiian-speaking families on other islands, it became “the secret language spoken among the parents’ and grandparents’ generations,” not spoken to children for fear of inciting discrimination (NeSmith, 2002, p. 4). In just decades, Hawaiian was “replaced by [Hawaiian Creole English (HCE)] for practically all Hawai‘i-born children,” and “[b]y the end of the 1970s, most surviving Hawaiian speakers were over 70 years old” (Parker Jones, 2018, p. 103).

The mo'okū'auhau 'ōlelo of most historically Hawaiian-speaking families had drastically changed by the 1960s, and the dire linguistic situation was the immediate impetus for the Hawaiian revitalization movement. Scholars like Kinney (1956) called for more linguistic work “while the old speakers are still with us,” in the spirit of a race against time (p. 282). When Larry Kimura began the *Ka Leo Hawai'i* Hawaiian language radio show in 1972, he estimated about 2,000 elderly po'e 'ōlelo kuakahi living outside of Ni'ihau (Goo, 2019). In 1981, Benton “predicted that Hawaiian would be the first Polynesian language to be totally replaced by a European language” (Kamanā & Wilson, 2001, p. 148). A 2000 survey estimated no more than 200 “traditional native-speaking elders born before 1930” (p. 148). By 2019, such speakers numbered just “a couple of dozen[s]” (Goo, 2019).

To restore linguistic transmission, L2 language activists targeted the education system. They began to develop Hawaiian-medium and immersion education, beginning with the Pūnana Leo language nests (Kawai'ae'a et al., 2007, p. 227). The 'Aha Pūnana Leo (APL) was founded to oversee the Pūnana Leo and later the Kula Kaiapuni K-12 Hawaiian-medium education system “for the continuation of communities that greatly value a common identity stretching generations into the past and which is being prepared to stretch generations into the future” (Kamanā & Wilson, 2001, p. 147). Kamanā and Wilson explain: “The original concept of the Pūnana Leo language nest was to recreate an environment where Hawaiian language and culture were conveyed and developed” as “in the home in earlier generations” (p. 201). From inception, revitalization efforts sought to remedy the loss of linguistic pilina by creating contexts to cultivate new pilina between speakers and learners.

As many cherished L1s have now passed, the mo'okū'auhau 'ōlelo for most Hawaiian speakers today seldom features 'Ōlelo Makuahine as a mother tongue learned from L1 caregivers in childhood. L2s now constitute “[t]he vast majority of participants” in Hawaiian language revitalization, rarely growing up with or learning from L1s (Wong, 2011, p. 152). NeSmith's (2012) survey of Hawaiian teachers reveals “little contact with Hawaiian language and culture prior to their secondary and/or tertiary-level educational experiences,” identifying a “lack of ready access to native speakers” as “a major concern” among teachers (p. 123). Unlike L1 learning experiences from other L1s in formative years, L2s meet and learn from kumu only later in life: teachers in a Hawaiian language class; faculty in Hawaiian-medium education; instructors in the lo'i (kalo paddy) or on the wa'a (canoe); kumu hula (hula teacher) in their hālau (meeting house for hula instruction). Many of these kumu, particularly schoolteachers, are themselves L2s.

But L2s are not a monolith. Those like Kimura who initiated revitalization efforts acquired Hawaiian when many more L1s were still living and cultivated pilina with L1 family members and mentors alongside classroom instruction. Some continued to acquire Hawaiian as adults even later from living L1 family members or peers, as NeSmith (2002) did from his grandmother. Individuals marrying into Ni‘ihau families, like Keoki Faria, learn to speak as they do as L2s (States, 2020). Though these L2s represent exceptional cases relative to the entire L2 population, they show that L2 experiences are a spectrum. Every single iteration of the L2 learning experience is uniquely shaped by the presence (or absence) of pilina.

Osorio (2021) explains that pilina “reflect our ‘āina and environment” and therefore “require great and constant care to maintain their good condition” (p. 6). Without conscious, intentional effort, the pilina between po‘e ‘ōlelo kuakahi and kualua cannot be formed. This lack of pilina between most po‘e ‘ōlelo kualua and po‘e ‘ōlelo kuakahi has defined what is considered typical L2 speech today. As K. L. Wong (1999) explains, “if learning to speak a second language is difficult enough [for an L2] in a community dominated by [L1s],” e.g., for the prospective L2 learning Spanish in Mexico City or Mandarin in Beijing, “that difficulty is greatly magnified in a community whose competent models”—e.g., L1s—“are rapidly disappearing” (p. 95). Without L1s, NeSmith (2019) argues, “[p]roficiency and cultural and communicative competence” represent “serious issues related to [L2 acquisition]” and that “it can be expected that L2s who have little to no ongoing contact with living Type-1s”—his term for po‘e ‘ōlelo kuakahi raised by other po‘e ‘ōlelo kuakahi with Hawaiian as an L1 passed down in an unbroken mo‘okū‘auhau ‘ōlelo of L1s—“demonstrate little of the linguistic characteristics of Type-1s” (p. 100). Without pilina with L1 kumu, the mo‘okū‘auhau ‘ōlelo of L2s is restricted, consequently preventing the acquisition of linguistic features associated with L1s. In turn, this prevention fuels the formation of ideologies and attitudes that feature in L2 reflections on speakerhood (Higgins, 2019).

Two observations emerge about the mo‘okū‘auhau ‘ōlelo for most L2s: (1) Hawaiian is neither passed down as a first language via pilina with L1 parents or caregivers in childhood nor cultivated by interactions with L1s; and (2) many L2s—including language educators—lack pilina with L1s and familiarity with L1 speech, primarily engaging with other L2s as teachers, students, and peers. These realities necessarily underlie linguistic differences between po‘e ‘ōlelo kuakahi and kualua today.

LINGUISTIC COMPARISONS OF PO'E 'ŌLELO KUAKAHI AND KUALUA

Observations specific to particular kinds of Hawaiian speakers include phonetic studies of Hawaiian pronunciation (Newbrand, 1951; NeSmith, 2002; Piccolo, 2005; Parker Jones, 2018; Kettig, 2021; Davidson & Parker Jones, 2023), observations about word choice and (dis)use of newly coined terms (NeSmith, 2002, 2012, 2019), issues of semantics and pragmatics (Warner, 1996; NeSmith, 2002; Wong, 2006, 2011; Gilbert, 2023, 2025), and differences in syntax, i.e., sentence structure (Warner, 1996; NeSmith, 2002, 2019; Wong 2006, 2011; Kneubuhl, 2014; Gilbert, 2025).

Piccolo (2005) compares the vowel systems of a Ni'ihau L1 and a university-educated L2 Hawaiian language teacher. She finds “vowel systems of two varieties of Hawaiian,” and that the L2’s vowel patterns comparatively show “transfer of English patterns” that are “due arguably to the influence of American English” as the L2’s native language (p. 22). Newbrand (1951) finds variation in how pre-revitalization L1s pronounce /w/: as both [w], e.g., English *wait*, and [v], e.g., English *van* (p. 8). But Parker Jones’s (2018) phonetic study of an L1 speaker raised by L2 speakers, part of the first generation of speakers raised in the revitalization era, produces only [v] (p. 105).

Studied lexical differences involve the use or disuse of revitalization-era terms, especially those coined by the Kōmike Hua'ōlelo (Lexicon Committee), the group that oversees and publishes the lexicon of new terms, *Māmaka Kaiao* (NeSmith, 2002, p. 47). While L1s demonstrate “[u]sage of traditional Hawaiian terms and expressions”—i.e., native vocabulary, non-neologisms—“for various concepts,” L2s show “[h]igh usage of recently invented terms...unknown to native speakers” (p. 25). NeSmith provides specific comparisons: for “sink,” L1s use *kāpu holoī* (*pā/lima*) while L2s use *kinika*; for weather, L2s use *anilā*, while L1s lack a single catch-all word and use various expressions (p. 25).

Studies of semantic and pragmatic differences between L1s and L2s are sparse. NeSmith (2002) briefly discusses the pragmatics of a situation where speakers are reacting to something “cute.” Where L1s might react to a puppy with, “*Auē nō ho'i ka u'i o kēia wahi 'īlio keiki!*” (What a cute little puppy!), L2s, he argues, have “invented the word *kiuke*, a supposed Hawaiianized form of the English ‘cute,’” and might utter it “with the high pitch and lengthened syllable as if said in English” in such a situation and “in every context” where the “English ‘cute’ is used” (p. 29).

K. L. Wong's (2006) dissertation on grammatical agents contends that "competent speakers of Hawaiian employ less direct ways of indicating agents than their English speaking counterparts," and that L2s, as L1s of other languages, must consciously try "to discover Hawaiian ways of pointing" and "to employ them in place of those established during acquisition" of their L1s (p. ix). In another paper, he compares expressions *ke ua nei* ([it] is raining) and *ke ua nei 'o ia* (it is raining); while the latter is "grammatically possible in Hawaiian," it "does not represent the normal way of expressing this idea" and an L2, "either guided or compelled by an English default system," might add *'o ia* 'he/she/it' to match the English phrase "it is raining" word for word (Wong, 2011, p. 157).

Warner's (1996) dissertation examines how L2 children in Hawaiian-immersion education acquire different grammatical patterns. He finds that children learning Hawaiian "are able to use the language (i.e., comprehend and speak it, read and write) after only one or two years" in the program, and that their language use "in many aspects...resembles that of native speakers" except for "systematic errors related, perhaps, to influence from the children's L1," i.e., English or HCE (p. 267). In his MA thesis, NeSmith (2002) observes some morphosyntactic differences between L1s and L2s, noting that while L1s have "[e]ight ways to express past-tense and/or aspect," L2s demonstrate "[c]onsistent use of *ua* (*verb*)...in expressing English past-tense" (p. 23). Gilbert (2025) develops this further in a recent study, finding that for pre-revitalization L1s, the tense-aspect marker *ua* resembles the English present perfect, but for revitalization era L2s, *ua* forms the simple past tense.

Authors linguistically comparing L1s and L2s consistently characterize L2 tendencies that diverge from L1 Hawaiian due to the L2, usually English or HCE. Different labels have been proposed as labels for each group's variety. *Hawaiian* as an umbrella term enjoys general use as a catch-all for all varieties, particularly in work from fields outside of linguistics, but studies distinguishing between varieties characterize them based on their speakers' acquisition pattern, i.e., as L1s in childhood or L2s at school. The Hawaiian spoken by po'e 'ōlelo kuakahi—L1 Hawaiian speech in *Ka Leo Hawai'i* recordings, the language as spoken by L1s of all ages from the Ni'ihau community and the few remaining L1s of other islands, has been called "Traditional Hawaiian" (NeSmith, 2002, p. 21; Gilbert, 2025, p. 1), "real" Hawaiian" (Wong, 1999, p. 100), and "olelo Kanaka" (UH News, 2019). The variety spoken by po'e 'ōlelo kuakahi of the Ni'ihau community has been variously referred to as the "Ni'ihau dialect" (Hawkins, 1979, p. 1; Parker Jones, 2018,

p. 103; Elbert & Pukui, 1979, p. 23), “Ni‘ihau Hawaiian” (Kamanā & Wilson, 2001, p. 148; Kettig, 2025, p. 1), and “Ka Olelo Kanaka o Niihau [*Hawaiian of Niihau*]” (Wong, 2019, p. 71). The labels used to describe the Hawaiian portrayed in the relatively recently published reference works used in revitalization-era classroom contexts has been named “Neo-Hawaiian” (NeSmith, 2002, p. 20), “University Hawaiian” (Wong, 1999, p. 100), “UH dialect” or “UH Hawaiian” (where UH stands for University of Hawai‘i) (Piccolo, 2005, p. 1), and “Standard Hawaiian” (Parker Jones, 2018, p. 103). Parker Jones’ (2018) “Standard Hawaiian” includes L1 and L2 speakers of other Hawaiian varieties, but he juxtaposes the label with speakers of “the Ni‘ihau dialect” on Ni‘ihau and parts of Kaua‘i, using the term “Heritage Speakers” to distinguish the elderly L1s who acquired Hawaiian before revitalization (p. 103–104).

Words like “dialect” and modifiers like “real” and “standard” allude to a metalinguistic discourse inspired by the present linguistic situation. This discourse, rooted in the sociolinguistic dimension, grapples with questions of social meaning intimately related to language use, language ideologies, and speakerhood. K. L. Wong asks a question in 1999 that only seems more relevant today: “Who is to say what is and is not authentic Hawaiian?” (p. 96). Linguistic facts in tow, let us turn to the perspectives of po‘e ‘ōlelo kuakahi and, afterwards, of po‘e ‘ōlelo kualua.

PERSPECTIVES OF PO‘E ‘ŌLELO KUAKAHI

The linguistic differences between po‘e ‘ōlelo kuakahi and kualua were noted early on in Hawaiian language revitalization. In a 1999 article titled “Authenticity and the Revitalization of Hawaiian,” K. L. Wong writes that “it has become apparent that new speakers of Hawaiian exhibit a marked divergence from those speakers who acquired Hawaiian as a first language” (p. 94). NeSmith’s 2002 thesis found that while “[t]he number of students enrolled in Hawaiian at secondary and tertiary-level schools throughout Hawai‘i...increased greatly since the 1980s,” the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa (UH Mānoa) lacked L1 Hawaiian teachers at the beginning of the 1990–1991 academic year (p. 18). This changed later when Ni‘ihau community faculty members were hired (UH News, 2019), but still shows the

relative absence of L1 linguistic kumu (e.g., as teachers, conversation partners, mentors, etc.) as more and more L2s began learning Hawaiian. This situation explains how L1 and L2 speakers came to associate one's Hawaiian language acquisition to broader understandings of speakerhood.

Kupuna L1s on L2 'Ōlelo Hawai'i in the Revitalization Era

Oral interviews reveal how L1s perceived differences between the Hawaiian they grew up with and the Hawaiian they began to hear amid revitalization efforts. Helen Lady Kamanā, an L1 from Kohala, Hawai'i, born in 1908 who learned Hawaiian from her L1 family, compares the Hawaiian of her youth with that spoken by Hawaiian language students:

...kā lākou 'ano wala'au, 'oko'a nō 'o kēia manawa. 'Ano 'oko'a. Hawai'i pono'ī. Ka kani o ka leo, he 'oko'a. Eī, ka nono'o paha.

...their way of speaking, it was different from now. Rather different. Their own kind of Hawaiian. The intonation of the voice, it was different. Also perhaps, their way of thinking. (Lucero, 2008)

Similarly, Malu'ihī Lee (2010), an L1 from Kona, Hawai'i, born in 1929, indicates a barrier between herself and the L2 students learning Hawaiian at the university:

...nā haumāna o ka iunewerki...lohe lākou akā 'a'ale ho'opili mai i ku'u mana'o... 'a'ole au e ho'āhewa iā lākou, no ka mea, ua ma'a lākou i ka kama'ilio 'ana i ka 'ano o ka kula.

...the students of the university...they hear (me) but they do not grasp my meaning...I do not blame them because they are familiar with the university's way of speaking.

M. Lee (2010) indicates a perceived distance between the Hawaiian speakers she grew up with as an L1 and, in her own words, those L2s who speak "ka 'ano o ka kula [*the way of the university*]."² Even as an L1, she defers to the university as the linguistic authority for a particular variety of Hawaiian transmitted to its students.

This stance is not specific to her. During the first decades of revitalization, many L1s “could be described as semispeakers...more comfortable in English than in Hawaiian” (Kamanā & Wilson, 2001, p. 149). Violet Leimamo Wahihākō Lee (1986), an L1 from Ke‘anae, Maui, recalls how many L1s had anxieties about speaking Hawaiian to prospective L2s in public contexts like at school. During her guest appearance on *Ka Leo Hawai‘i* in 1986, she relates:

Ka hapa nui o mākou, hiki ke lohe i ka leo, a, ‘Ōlelo Makuahine. Akā na‘e, ma ka wala‘au ‘ana, ‘a‘ole i mākaukau loa...‘Ano maka‘u lākou e komo mai, no ka mea, no‘ono‘o lākou ua hemahema lākou.

*The majority of us are able to listen to the language, uh, to Hawaiian. But when speaking, (some) are not very skilled... They are rather scared to participate, because they think they’ve become incompetent.*³

Notice the recurring theme of anxiety experienced by these speakers as closely linked to perceived differences between speakers. What fuels such distinctions? One particularly salient root emerges in the education system itself.

How Education Distances L1s from L2s

Fishman (2006) characterizes education as “a very useful and highly irreversible language-shift mechanism” (p. 320). Education contexts invest teachers with the power to dictate what is correct or incorrect language. This power dynamic was used against ‘Ōlelo Makuahine after the overthrow, and the latent power the education system retained was later reclaimed by revitalization leaders. Hawaiian language activists targeted the education system to re-initiate Hawaiian transmission: Today, “the very same schools that led to the decline of Hawaiian are involved in its revitalization” (Snyder-Frey, 2013, p. 236), securing “impressive gains and numbers of children and adults learning Hawaiian” (Warner, 2001, p. 141). But the power of the education system to affect language change elucidates how it became so instrumental in determining the way Hawaiian is usually spoken by L2s today.

The classroom's impact on language learning cannot be understated. Consider the textbook as a construct. "[A]lmost all" respondents questioned by NeSmith (2012) in a survey of Hawaiian language educators reported using textbooks in their classrooms, even though half "expressed reservations about textbooks designed for [teaching Hawaiian as an additional language]" (p. 124).

Why do L2s feel hesitant about printed materials? Textbooks are published in a static form. They are internally consistent representations of one form of language, frozen in time. The language they describe—no matter how thoroughly—inevitably contrasts with the spoken, colloquial language as used by living po'e 'ōlelo kuakahi. Living languages are always changing. In the face of discrepancies between L1 speech and "Book Language," po'e 'ōlelo kuakahi are judged as having "many 'incorrect' forms" when they speak (Wong, 1999, p. 99). L1 language becomes criticized for perceived divergence from standardized materials, while textbooks are increasingly treated as kumu unto themselves. These materials and the language they purport to represent—an idealized, static, standardized form of Hawaiian—is further empowered, entrenched, and legitimized with each successive generation of learners who uses them. Their status as linguistic authorities implicitly comes to present a challenge to other linguistic kumu, including living L1s today.

Ni'ihau L1 Experiences

The experiences of the Ni'ihau community illustrate the tension between spoken language and the perceived standard language propagated in education contexts. A. K. Wong (2019), a Ni'ihau L1, writes: "O Niihau wale no ka mokuaina a puni ka honua nei i kupaa ma ka olelo Kanaka wale no" [*Ni'ihau is the only island in the whole world where only Hawaiian is spoken*] (p. 67).⁴ The Ni'ihau community was instrumental in early revitalization efforts. Kimura and Counciller (2009) relate how, as the Lexicon Committee began coining new words, "all of the *kūpuna* members, except for the representative from the Ni'ihau-Kaua'i community, were not then current active users" of Hawaiian (p. 122). Elama Kanahele, "represent[ing] the Hawaiian that already existed in the viable Ni'ihau Hawaiian speaking community," eagerly offered terms in active use by Ni'ihau L1s (Kimura & Counciller, 2009, p. 124). Since then, however, Ni'ihau community members have become much less involved in coining new words, and today the committee is staffed primarily by L2s.

The relationship between Ni‘ihau speakers and L2s has been significantly affected by the language ideologies that exist today. NeSmith (2019) details some of the history of this relationship, relating a passionate episode during a gathering of the Ni‘ihau community on Kaua‘i that illustrates this tension clearly:

...one father, Malaki Kanahele Jr., stood before the expectant crowd, grabbed a copy of the Pukui-Elbert Dictionary and in an impassioned speech charged with emotion, held the book high above his head and said, “In my family, we never needed this book. My grandfather was the dictionary. My father was the dictionary. And now I am the dictionary.” (p. 93)

Similar sentiments have been expressed by other members of the Ni‘ihau community in platforms outside of academic work in recent years, e.g., on YouTube (Ka Alala, 2021), TikTok, and other digital media platforms (Porzucki, 2016). An L1 born on Ni‘ihau attests to the discrimination and shame he experienced on Kaua‘i in an October 2023 TikTok:

...people of Ni‘ihau being denigrated is so true...that is something I had witnessed my whole life. I was nine years old when I went to Kekaha Elementary School. From then on...I would hear people tell me, ‘Oh, the way you guys talk is sloppy. You guys talk too fast. You guys don’t pronounce all the words’...When I was in high school, the teacher told me, ‘You no belong here. You belong in special ed.’ (Kanahele, 2023)

These excerpts reveal how the Ni‘ihau community, in just the past few decades, has suffered from the same kinds of linguistic discrimination that kūpuna suffered during the twentieth century. Given Hawaiian cultural practices espousing the ‘ōlelo no‘eau (proverb, lit. wise saying) “nānā i ke kumu” [*look to the source*] (Pukui et al., 1972, p. vii),⁵ such treatment of L1s damages the cultivation of pilina centering ‘Ōlelo Makuahine. For individuals to denigrate the speech of L1s—because of

perceived disparities with written standards—violates a core cultural protocol and otherizes precious kumu of linguistic and cultural knowledge. These words of kūpuna and Ni‘ihau L1s remind that revitalization—as a collective endeavor undertaken on behalf of all stakeholders in ‘Ōlelo Makuahine—must endeavor to always consider po‘e ‘ōlelo kuakahi, too.

KINSHIP EPISTEMOLOGY AS LINGUISTIC EPISTEMOLOGY

L2s today perceive a kuleana (responsibility) to learn Hawaiian. This kuleana is frequently identified in the context of mo‘okū‘auhau, and the “link between mo‘okū‘auhau and kuleana is not new” (ho‘omanawanui, 2019, p. 50). To L2s, this link is believed to span past, present, and future, connecting L2s not only with Hawaiian-speaking ancestors, but also with their descendants as future Hawaiian speakers. Snyder-Frey (2013) records that at UH Mānoa, “Hawaiian-language learners...overwhelmingly linked their efforts to *kuleana*: their responsibility to their *kūpuna*, *‘ohana* and people, to understand and use their *‘ōlelo ‘ōiwi* (native, indigenous language)” (p. 240).⁶ Hawaiian language students at UH Mānoa interviewed by Adams (2018) indicated “their own grandparents and other elders” as motivations, some identifying “their kuleana to learn Hawaiian for the next generation,” their future children (p. 65). Participants in Solomon’s (2024) dissertation corroborate, identifying “the complicated nature of one’s kuleana to ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i and the knowledge surrounding it” (p. 109).

Participants interviewed by Higgins (2019) reveal some of the tensions Hawaiian L2s experience today. One interviewee describes the Hawaiian heard on television as “very clear,” with a “correct” and “exact” pronunciation, but that “it’s sometimes criticized as University Hawaiian” and “doesn’t sound like the kind of Hawaiian I want to speak” (p. 66). Another interviewee explicitly identifies “language standardization” as something she “struggled through...all throughout college” where she was “forced to [speak] College Hawaiian” in a way that “didn’t necessarily jibe with the way [she] heard [her] grandmother” speak as an L1 from Moloka‘i (p. 66). Another interviewee, an immersion student, was “encouraged to speak Hawaiian in the home” but “hesitated...out of fear of making mistakes” (p. 67).

Higgins (2019) finds that L2s are “compelled to choose one way to speak, or to adapt their Hawaiian to the norms of the community they were in” (p. 67). This pressure to meet various competing standards while only being instructed in one particular variety at school can exacerbate relationships between L1s and L2s. One informant in Adams’s (2018) study explains his apprehension about visiting L1s on Kaua’i when invited to visit and stay with a Ni’ihau family, relating how many of his friends “gave many excuses” because “no one...[felt] comfortable enough to go,” and how after finally relenting and visiting, he was “intimidated” when experiencing Ni’ihau speakers for the first time (p. 51). But ultimately the informant claims “it was probably...the best experience ever,” sharing how he “experience[d] Hawaiian like not *pili* [‘close’] to school at all” (p. 51). Surmounting his initial anxieties, the participant gains new pilina with L1 role models and consequently a powerful motivation for further language experiences.

How Hānai and Po’olua Can (Re)conceptualize Mo’okū’auhau ‘Ōlelo

To examine intergenerational language transmission in the Hawaiian context without framing L2 experiences as informed by mo’okū’auhau neglects the complex pilina networks underpinning language acquisition at every stage. Two characteristics of Kanaka Maoli kinship epistemology offer powerful insights into how mo’okū’auhau ‘ōlelo might be (re)conceptualized: the practice of hānai and the principle of po’olua.

As a kinship practice, hānai involves “a child...taken permanently to be reared, educated and loved by someone other than natural parents” (Pukui et al., 1972, p. 43). This guardian “was traditionally a grandparent or other relative,” and could be called a “*makua hānai*” (hānai parent, foster parent) or “*kahu hānai*” (master or teacher of the *hānai*)” (p. 43).⁷ Pukui contends that hānai was a binding agreement without any sense of involving the surrender of one’s child to a stranger.

The tendency for children to be raised by individuals other than their parents, like their grandparents, is how many kupuna L1s maintained knowledge of Hawaiian despite language shift. During the mid-to-late twentieth century, kūpuna ‘ōlelo kuakahi including Mary Kawena Pukui (Pukui et al., 1972), Iokepa Maka’ai (Maka’ai et al., 1998), and others recorded in *Ka Leo Hawai’i* were hānai children raised as L1s by L1s. The practice of hānai sustained ‘Ōlelo Makuahine, protecting the language for future generations amid rampant disruption to transmission for most families following the overthrow. Later, these hānai children, as kūpuna,

would join the Ni‘ihau community as teacher-mentors for those first L2s at the vanguard of Hawaiian revitalization. Hānai was critical in safeguarding Hawaiian for today’s new speakers, empowering those first revitalization-era L2s to create pilina with L1s and learn from them directly.

The prevalence of hānai in traditional Hawaiian society recasts being raised and educated by someone other than a natural parent as a well-established norm. Though hānai is often associated with blood relations, for po‘e ‘ōlelo kualua to acquire Hawaiian from kumu outside of their mo‘okū‘auhau is not inherently peculiar. For families to seek Hawaiian-medium education for their children today—to facilitate the transmission of linguistic knowledge and reclaim Hawaiian as their family language—reminds of the legacy of hānai and parallels traditional conceptions of mo‘okū‘auhau as lines of succession beyond family ties (kāhuna, hula) that connect successive generations of teachers and students.

While hānai informs how L2s might reconsider insecurities immediately related to Hawaiian as a learned language, it neither precludes nor directly addresses the anxieties inspired by L2 Hawaiian’s linguistic qualities. The language evidenced by po‘e ‘ōlelo kualua inevitably reflects their L1s and the language of their kumu, who, as L2s, may also transmit their own L2 tendencies as part of the Hawaiian they seek to teach. This is an authentic part of the mo‘okū‘auhau ‘ōlelo that defines new Hawaiian speakers of the revitalization era.

To understand this fact beyond evaluative ideologies of standardization or authenticity, we may draw on the principle of po‘olua. Andrews (1865) defines *po‘olua* as “he keiki na na makuakane elua” [*a child who has two fathers*] (p. 60).⁸ This is possible in the Hawaiian view because, as Kame‘eleihiwa (2001) writes, “marriage did not exist” in pre-contact Hawai‘i, and Kānaka Maoli “did not ‘own’ one another because they were lovers” (p. 74). Instead, those born from mothers via *punalua*, the enjoying of simultaneous “[m]ultiple sexual relationships,” were called *po‘olua*, understood to have “two or more fathers” and able to claim “higher rank” (p. 74). This higher rank was obtained from being able to claim the genealogies of multiple fathers at once, as was the case for Princess Ruth Ke‘elikōlani and her two fathers, Kahalai‘a and Mataio Kekūanaō‘a (Silva, 2019, p. 334). It was not something as shameful as infidelity or bastardization is in western or Christian conceptions. For many ali‘i, status as po‘olua could command greater social rank and increased prestige.

A traditional understanding of kinship includes po'olua in the construct of mo'okū'auhau. We can apply this concept to Hawaiian acquisition as a mo'okū'auhau 'ōlelo. A Hawaiian L2 today might learn to speak English at home from their English-speaking parents, but can learn to understand, speak, and embody Hawaiian at any education level, from pre-school to graduate school. While they may not learn Hawaiian directly from L1 parents or grandparents as an L1, the infrastructure of the Hawaiian revitalization movement has created the possibility for both Hawaiian and English to jointly inform one's everyday life. Accordingly, po'e 'ōlelo kualua raised as English L1s who grow up to become Hawaiian L2s—especially if enrolled in Hawaiian-medium education for many years—can be said to resemble linguistic po'olua. The Hawaiian they speak—linguistic disparities with their kūpuna or L1 Hawaiian aside—may be conceptualized as an 'ōlelo na nā mākuahine 'elua: a language of two mothers.

Language Transfer and Mo'okū'auhau 'Ōlelo

What Odlin (2022) terms “negative transfer” involves “errors in either comprehension or production,” where a speaker reproduces a novel pattern acquired with their native language in a target language, i.e., their L2 (p. 2). Successive L2-to-L2 transmission increasingly introduces new patterns transferred from other languages likely to be reproduced, which explains some of the L2 speech qualities identified previously. There simultaneously exists, however, “positive transfer, i.e. a convergence” between what Hawaiian L1s do and what Hawaiian L2s do in their own native language (p. 3). While there is even less work on positive transfer for Hawaiian than exists for negative transfer, probabilistically it must be present among the thousands of Hawaiian L2s today. Elbert and Pukui (1979) explain that some verbs, e.g., *maopopo* (understand), usually require a particular pronoun form, e.g., *ia'u* (to me), but that in the 1970s, some L1s would say *maopopo au*, using *au* (I) instead of *ia'u* (p. 50). For the English verb *understand*, only *I understand* is possible—the alternative, *understood (to) me*, requires additional context. For an English L1 learning Hawaiian as an L2, to produce *maopopo au*—even if literally translating (i.e., calquing) from English—would more closely match modern L1s than textbooks, almost as if they'd learned directly from L1s.

Hawaiian L2s may engage in *translanguaging*, or “the use of all of one’s linguistic and semiotic resources” (Higgins, 2019, p. 51). García and Li Wei (2015) explain: “Translanguaging not only promotes a deeper understanding of content, but also develops the weaker language in relationship with the one that is more dominant” (p. 225). In other words, translanguaging is a linguistic practice unique to L2s that, in the Hawaiian context, is calibrated for ongoing linguistic situations where English remains dominant. The linguistic characteristics of po’e ‘ōlelo kualua, in all shapes and forms, represent a victory never intended for Hawaiian by its opponents. L2 Hawaiian’s very existence bears witness to a collective resilience of Hawaiian speakers—and of ‘Ōlelo Makuahine—in the face of linguicide.

‘O KA ‘ŌLELO HAWAI‘I, HE ‘ŌLELO OLA MAU NŌ

Since I’ve started learning ‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i, I’ve continuously grappled with a hard truth: We cannot choose the pilina that facilitated acquisition of our L1s. But I have taken solace in the conclusion that we can, however, choose the pilina that will constitute our mo’okū‘auhau ‘ōlelo as L2s. In the age of social media, members of the Ni‘ihau community have never been more accessible; they have already taught me more in Instagram stories, DMs, and TikToks than I could have ever dreamed as a linguist staring at textbooks, poking at the language from the outside. For UH Mānoa students, “Mānaleo Mondays” with Dr. Ipo Wong and other Ni‘ihau L1s offer ways to acquire conversation partners, powerfully augmenting class time with colloquial language exposure and helping participants learn to speak Hawaiian from those who’ve lived and breathed it for their entire lives. And for those like me who aren’t able, whether on another island or situated far away from Hawai‘i nei, thanks to wonderful folks like ‘Anakala Larry Kimura and Bruce Torres Fischer who manage repositories like *Kani‘āina* at UH Hilo, we have the special twenty-first century privilege of *thousands* of hours of recordings where the voices of countless kūpuna wait for us to listen to them. Pilina with these kānaka *matters*, and cultivating those relations is a part of our kuleana, too. Aloha nō.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

G. H. Kapeliela Gilbert is a writer and linguistics PhD student at the University of Chicago where he studies ‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i of the past and the present. A diasporic Kanaka, his mo‘okū‘auhau hails from the islands of Samar and Maui. His work attempts to discern and describe linguistic variation across Hawaiian speakers; presently, his research focuses on the Hawaiian traditionally spoken by kūpuna on the island of Maui.



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NOTES

- 1 I spell *indigenous* with lowercase /i/ to relate how the language is no different from the plants, creatures, and ecosystems that constitute the 'āina, in contrast to spelling *Indigenous* with a capitalized /I/, which references a political identity diametrically opposed to settler colonial power.
- 2 Translation by author.
- 3 Translation by author.
- 4 Translation by author.
- 5 Translation by original authors.
- 6 Italics from original.
- 7 Italics from original.
- 8 Translation by original author.