

This article was first published in the July 2020 issue of the Sylvia Woods Harp Center e-Newsletter. It is part of Sylvia's ongoing series about living on Kauai, Hawaii.

## Hawaiian Pidgin

I was recently driving behind a Kauai Police Department cruiser and noticed a bumper sticker on the back saying, "**no miss da census.**" I've also seen signs throughout the island with this phrase, reminding us to complete our census forms. (The photo here is the banner in front of the Lihue courthouse.) I realized that "no miss da census" makes perfect sense here in Hawaii, but people elsewhere might be confused, or annoyed by the "bad grammar." But this is not bad grammar: it is pidgin.



In 2015, the U.S. Census Bureau released the data from a five-year American Community Survey, which tracked the languages spoken in the U.S. between 2009 and 2013. In Hawaii, over 1,600 residents reported that they speak pidgin at home. For the first time, the Census Bureau recognized Hawaiian Pidgin English as an official language, with its own vocabulary, grammar, inflection, and syntax.

Hawaiian Pidgin originated in the sugarcane plantations during the 1850s as a way for the Chinese, Japanese, and Portuguese workers to communicate with each other and their English-speaking supervisors and Hawaiian-speaking locals. Around 1900, waves of Okinawans, Puerto Ricans, Koreans, and Filipinos arrived. Their languages were added into the mix of what we now call Hawaiian Pidgin.

Many locals speak pidgin on a daily basis. For example, there is a group of about ten local *kapuna* (senior citizens) who occupy four tables at Burger King for several hours every morning. I enjoy eavesdropping on their conversations since much of it is in pidgin.

In the [April 2018 issue](#) of this newsletter, I listed some Hawaiian words visitors should know: keiki, mahalo, 'ohana, 'ono, pau, etc. Some of these words are pidgin.

We often hear pidgin on Hawaiian radio and TV commercials. You can watch an example of a [COVID-19 public service announcement](#) featuring local comedian Frank De Lima. (A "*tutu*" is a grandparent.)

Here are a few examples of pidgin words and phrases that are in common usage in Hawaii.

**Brah** (short for brother or braddah): a casual way guys refer to each other

**Broke da mouth** or **broke da mout**: delicious

**Chicken skin**: goosebumps

**Da**: the

**Da kine**: a handy phrase that refers to anything you can't remember the name of

**Grinds** or **Grindz**: food, or a meal

**Hele on**: let's go or get moving

**Howzit** (a combination of "how," "is" and "it"): how are you?

**If can can. If no can, no can**: If I can get to it, I will. If not, I can't. (Often shortened to *if can can.*)

**Okole**: buttocks, rear end

**Shishi**: to pee or urinate

**Slippahs**: slippers, sandals, or flip-flops

**Stink eye**: a very dirty look

**Tanks**: thanks.

**Talk story**: to tell stories, gossip, and converse with friends

**Talk stink**: badmouth someone



*Mahalo  
for removing  
your slippahs.*

*But no take mo' bettah ones  
when you leave!*

P.S. It is customary to remove your shoes when entering a home in Hawaii. Here's an example of a fun front door sign.