

UC SANTA BARBARA

THE **Current**

December 9, 1999

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STANDARD AMERICAN ENGLISH, PIDGIN EACH HAVE PLACE IN LIVES OF HAWAIIAN YOUTH, SAYS UCSB LINGUIST

Hawaiian educators troubled by low student scores on English proficiency tests should not rush into programs that try to dissuade youngsters from speaking their native pidgin English.

So says University of California, Santa Barbara professor Martha Swearingen Davis, a linguist and member of the Department of Black Studies.

"An essential point is to realize that pidgin is not slang," Davis said. "This is a very old system that has been around for some time, perhaps originating as far back as the early part of the 19th century.

It should be treated with respect."

Nonetheless, many Hawaiian students need to become proficient in Standard American English, Davis said, if they hope to reach their educational goals.

Results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress tests given in September showed island eighth-graders to be substantially behind the rest of the nation in English.

And some concerned educators and politicians have placed blame for the scores on the use of pidgin by substantial numbers of Hawaiian families.

But if Hawaiian students are to improve their English skills, they need to do so in an atmosphere that does not denigrate their native speech, while stressing the use of standard English in academic and other formal situations, Davis said.

"There are those who say the answer is simple: just force them to speak Standard American English," Davis said. "It's not that easy or even appropriate."

Davis finds nothing wrong with using each in its appropriate setting.

"This doesn't have to be an either/or situation," Davis said. "Pidgin is perfectly all right, depending on the social situation."

Hawaiian concerns about pidgin are reminiscent of the controversy over Ebonics -- African-American English -- a few years ago in the African-American community in Oakland, Calif.

"This situation is very close to one found in black America," Davis said. "And there also are striking parallels with what is happening throughout the rest of the world.

"A great irony is that while much of the rest of the world regards this as an interesting feature of our culture, within the United States, you still find controversy and disparagement of minority forms by speakers of standardized ones," she said.

The challenge for educators is to support students in their use of pidgin while convincing them of the value of also speaking Standard American English.

At stake are issues of self-esteem in addition to education.

"This is not just about research," Davis said.

"It also concerns people's lives."

In the final analysis, all languages are valid and worthy of respect, Davis said.

They provide an important window into the traditions and values of a community.

And the difference between standard English language and its pidgin dialect can be summed up in an oft-cited definition Davis said is well known to sociolinguists:

Language is but a dialect with an army and a navy.

About UC Santa Barbara

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