HAWAIIAN LANGUAGE & GLOSSARY

Hawaii has two official state languages: English and Hawaiian. Actually, make that three. There’s also an unofficial vernacular, pidgin, which has a laid-back, lilting accent and colorful vocabulary that might baffle unfamiliar ears. While English is definitely the dominant language, it’s hard read a local newspaper or carry on a conversation without basic familiarity of the other two. Many are daunted by the Hawaiian language’s multisyllabic words and double vowels (humuhumunukunukuapua’a is the iconic example), but you’ll soon learn that Hawaiian pronunciation is very straightforward.

The Hawaiians had no written language prior to the arrival of Christian missionaries in 1820. Instead they relied on the oral tradition to perpetuate their genealogies, stories, chants, songs and place names. The missionaries rendered the spoken language into the Roman alphabet and established the first presses in the Islands, which were used to print the Bible and other religious instructional materials in Hawaiian.

Throughout the 19th century, as more and more foreigners (particularly the Americans and the British) settled in the Islands, the everyday use of Hawaiian declined. In the 1890s, English was made the official language of government and education.

The push for statehood, from 1900 to 1959, added to the decline of the Hawaiian language. Speaking Hawaiian was seen as a deterrent to American assimilation, thus adult native speakers were strongly discouraged from teaching their children Hawaiian as the primary language in the home.

This attitude remained until the early 1970s, when the Hawaiian community began to experience a cultural renaissance. A handful of young Hawaiians lobbied to establish Hawaiian language classes at the University of Hawai‘i, and Hawaiian language immersion preschools followed in the 1980s. These preschools are modeled after Maori kohanga reo (language nests), where the primary method of language perpetuation is through speaking and hearing the language on a daily basis. In Hawaii’s ‘Aha Punana Leo preschools, all learning and communication takes place in the mother tongue – ka ‘olelo makuahine.

Hawaiian has now been revived from the point of extinction and is growing throughout the community. Record numbers of students enroll in Hawaiian language classes in high schools and colleges, and immersion school graduates are raising a new generation of native speakers.

If you’d like to discover more about the Hawaiian language, get a copy of Lonely Planet’s South Pacific Phrasebook.

PRONUNCIATION

Written Hawaiian has just thirteen letters: five vowels (a, e, i, o, u) and seven consonants (h, k, l, m, n, p, w). The letters h, l, m and n are pronounced much the same as in English. Usually every letter in Hawaiian words is pronounced. Each vowel has a different pronunciation depending on whether it is stressed or unstressed.

Consonants

- \( p / k \) similar to English, but with less aspiration; \( k \) may be replaced with \( t \)
- \( w \) after i and e, usually a soft English ‘v;’ thus the town of Hale‘iwa is pronounced ‘Haleiva.’ After u or o it’s often like English ‘w,’ thus Olowalu is pronounced as ‘written.’ After a or at the beginning of a word it can be as English ‘w’ or ‘v,’ thus you’ll hear both ‘Hawai‘i’ and ‘Havai‘i’ (The Big Island).

Unstressed Vowels (Without Macron)

- a as in ‘ago’
- e as in ‘bet’
- i as the ‘y’ in ‘city’
- o as in ‘sole’
- u as in ‘rude’
Glottal Stops & Macrons
Written Hawaiian uses both glottal stops (‘), called ‘okina, and macrons (a straight bar above a vowel, eg ā), called kahako. In modern print both the glottal stop and the macron are often omitted. In our guidebooks, most macrons have been omitted, but glottal stops have been included, as they can be helpful in striving to pronounce common place names and words correctly.

The glottal stop indicates a break between two vowels, producing an effect similar to saying ‘oh-oh’ in English. For example, ‘a’a, a type of lava, is pronounced ‘ah-ah,’ and Ho’okena, a place name, is pronounced ‘Ho-oh-kena.’ A macron indicates that the vowel is stressed and has a long pronunciation.

Glottal stops and macrons not only affect pronunciation, but can give a word a completely different meaning. For example, ai (with no glottal) means ‘sexual intercourse,’ but ‘ai (with the glottal) means ‘food.’ Similarly, the word ka’a (with no macron over the second a) means ‘to roll, turn or twist,’ but ka‘ā (with a macron over the second a) is a thread or line, used in fishing.

Compound Words
In the written form, many Hawaiian words are compound words made up of several different words. For example, the word humuhumunukunukuapua’a can be broken down as follows: humu-humunukunuku-a-pua’ā (literally, trigger fish snout of pig), meaning ‘the fish with a snout like a pig.’ The place name Waikiki is also a compound word: wai-kiki (literally, freshwater sprouting), referring to the freshwater swamps once found in the area. Some words are doubled to emphasize their meaning, much like in English. For example, wiki means ‘quick,’ while wikiwiki means ‘very quick.’

PIDGIN
Hawaii pidgin is a distinct language, spoken by over 500,000 people. It developed on sugar plantations where the luna (foreman) had to communicate with field laborers from many foreign countries. Early plantation pidgin used a very minimal and condensed form of English as the root language, to which elements from Cantonese, Japanese, Hawaiian and Portuguese were added. It became the second language of first-generation immigrants and many Hawaiians.

As this English-based pidgin evolved, it took on its own grammatical structure and syntax. Many words were pronounced differently and combined in ways not found in English. Rather than a careless or broken form of English, it evolved into a separate language, called Hawaiian Creole by linguists.

Today, there is ongoing controversy about the validity of pidgin, with opponents saying that it erodes standard English and becomes a barrier to social and educational advancement. Proponents argue that pidgin is a rich and vibrant language that should not be looked down upon or banned from schools, and that pidgin speakers are often unjustly seen as less intelligent.

In recent years many award-winning plays, novels and poetry have been written in pidgin by local authors who are passionate in their determination to keep pidgin alive in the community. There are a number of good websites where you can learn more about pidgin, such as www.eyeofhawaii.com/Pidgin/pidgin.htm.

Common Pidgin Words & Phrases
brah – shortened form of braddah (brother); also used as ‘hey you’
broke da mout – delicious, as in ‘My auntie make broke da mout kine fish!’
buggahs – guys, as in ‘Da buggahs went without me!’
bumbye – later on, as in ‘We go movies bumbye den (then).’
bummahs – bummer; an expression of disappointment or regret
chicken skin – goose bumps
cockaroach – to steal, as in ‘Who went cockaroach my slippahs?’
da kine – whatchamacallit; used whenever you can’t think of the word you want
Fo’ real? – Really? Are you kidding me?
funny kine – strange or different, as in ‘He stay acking (acting) all funny kine.’
geev ‘um – Go for it! Give it all you got!
grind – to eat; as in ‘What you like grind, brah?’
hapai – pregnant
Howzit? – Hi, how’s it going? As in ‘Eh, howzit brah?’
How you stay? – How are you doing these days?
kay den – ‘OK then,’ as in ‘Kay den, we go beach.’
laydahs – Later on. I’ll see you later, as in, ‘Kay den, laydahs.

no ack – (Literally, ‘no act.’) Stop showing off, cool it.

no can – unable to

no moa – out of, no more

rubbah slippahs – rubber slippers (lit); flip-flops

talk story – any kind of casual conversation

to da max – a suffix that adds emphasis to something, as in ‘Da waves was big to da max!’

try – please; as in ‘Try hurry, eh?’

goza – rolled-up straw mats used at the beach

Glossary

ʻaʻa – type of lava that is rough and jagged

ʻahi – yellowfin tuna

ʻahina – silversword plant with pointed silver leaves

ʻahu – stone cairns used to mark a trail; an altar or shrine

ahuʻa – traditional land division, usually in a wedge shape that extends from the mountains to the sea

ʻai – friend

ʻa‘ina – land

ʻakala – Hawaiian raspberry; also called a thimbleberry

akamai – clever

ʻakepa – endangered crested honeycreeper

aku – bonito (skipjack tuna)

akua – god, spirit, idol

ʻalaʻe ke ʻokeʻo – endangered Hawaiian coot

ʻalala – Hawaiian crow

alii – chief, royalty

aloha – the traditional greeting meaning love, welcome, good-bye

aloha ʻaina – love of the land

ʻamaʻama – mullet

ʻamakihi – small, yellow-green bird; one of the more common native birds

anchialine pool – contains a mixture of seawater and freshwater

ʻaʻo – Newell’s shearwater (a seabird)

ʻapapane – bright red native Hawaiian honeycreeper

ʻaumakua – protective deity, deified ancestor or trustworthy person

awa – milkfish

ʻawa – see kava

ʻawapuhi – wild ginger

azuki bean – prepared as a sweetened paste; added to shave ice or Japanese desserts

bentō – Japanese-style box lunch

broke da mout – delicious; literally, ‘broke the mouth’

crack seed – Chinese preserved fruit; a salty, sweet and/or sour snack

ʻelepaio – a brownish native bird with a white rump, common to Oʻahu forests

fuku-bonsai – Hawaiian-style potted dwarf trees

haha – pandanus tree; the leaves are used in weaving mats and baskets

hale – house

hana – work; a bay, when used as a compound in place names

haole – Caucasian; literally, ‘without breath’

hapa – portion or fragment; person of mixed blood

hau – indigenous lowland hibiscus tree whose wood is often used for making canoe outriggers (stabilizing arms that jut out from the hull)

Hawaiʻi nei – all the Hawaiian Islands taken as a group

heihau – ancient stone temple; a place of worship in Hawaii

hele on – to get moving

Hina – Polynesian goddess (wife of Ku, one of the four main gods)

holoholo – to walk, drive or ramble around for pleasure

holua – sled or sled course

honu – turtle

hoʻoalaʻa – celebration, party

hoʻonanea – to pass the time in ease, peace and pleasure

huhu – angry

hui – group, organization

hukilau – fishing with a seine (a large net), involving a group of people who pull in the net

hula – Hawaiian dance form, either traditional or modern

hula ‘auana – modern hula, developed after the introduction of Western music

hula halau – hula school or troupe

hula kahiko – traditional hula

hula oheho – a hula dance style in which some of the dancer’s motions imitate sexual intercourse

humuhumunukunukuapuaʻa – rectangular trigger-fish; Hawaii’s unofficial state fish

ʻiwi – a bright red Hawaiian honeycreeper with a curved, salmon-colored beak

ʻiliʻi – Hawaiian sandalwood

ʻiiʻi – small stones

ʻilima – native plant, a ground cover with delicate yellow-orange flowers

ʻio – Hawaiian hawk

issei – first-generation Japanese immigrants
lei — garland, usually of flowers, but also of leaves or shells
limu — seaweed
lio — horse
loko i’a — fishpond
lolo — stupid, feeble-minded, crazy
lomi — to rub or soften
lomilomi — traditional Hawaiian massage
Lono — Polynesian god of harvest, agriculture, fertility and peace
luau — traditional Hawaiian feast
mahalo — thank you
mahele — to divide; usually refers to the missionary-initiated land divisions of 1848
mahimahi — dolphin fish or dorado, popular in restaurants; not related to the mammal dolphin
mai ho’oka’awale — leprosy; literally, ‘the separating sickness’
mai’a — banana
maile — native plant with twining habit and fragrant leaves; often used for lei
maka’aina — commoners; literally, ‘people who tend the land’
mahalo — thank you
maka’a’s — newcomers
malo — loincloth
mamane — a native tree with bright yellow flowers; used to make lei
mana — spiritual power
manini — convict tang (a reef fish); also used to refer to something small or insignificant
mokihana — an endemic tree or shrub, with scented green berries; used to make lei
mo’o — water spirit, water lizard or dragon
moa pahe’e — a game, similar to ‘ulu maika, using wooden darts and spears
mokihana — an endemic tree or shrub, with scented green berries; used to make lei
mokihana — an endemic tree or shrub, with scented green berries; used to make lei
mu — a ‘body catcher’ who secured sacrificial victims for the heiau altar
mu’umuu — a long, loose-fitting dress introduced by the missionaries
naupaka — a native shrub with delicate white flowers
Neighbor Islands — the term used to refer to the main Hawaiian Islands outside of Oʻahu
nene — a native goose; Hawaii’s state bird
nisei — second-generation Japanese immigrants
niu — coconut palm
noni — Indian mulberry; a small tree with yellow, smelly fruit that is used medicinally
nuku puʻu — a native honeycreeper with a yellow-green underbelly
ogo — seaweed
ʻohana — family, extended family
ʻohiʻa lehua — native Hawaiian tree with tufted, feathery, pom-pom–like flowers
ʻokole — buttocks
olo — traditional long, wooden surfboard
one hanau — birthplace, homeland
ʻono — delicious
ʻoʻo ihe — spear-throwing
pahoehoe — type of lava that is quick and smooth-flowing
pakalolo — marijuana; literally, ‘crazy smoke’
palaka — plantation-era plaid fabric (usually navy-white or red-white) made from sturdy cotton
pali — cliff
palila — endemic honeycreeper
paniolo — cowboy
pau — finished, completed, no more
Pele — goddess of fire and volcanoes; her home is in Kilauea Caldera
pigdin — distinct Hawaiian language or dialect (see p578)
piko — navel, umbilical cord
pili — a bunchgrass, commonly used for thatching houses
pilo — native shrub of the coffee family
pohaku — rock
pohuehue — morning glory
poi — staple Hawaiian starch made of steamed, mashed taro
Poliahu — goddess of snow
poʻouli — endangered endemic creeper
pua aloalo — a hibiscus flower
pueo — Hawaiian owl
puhi — eel
puʻili — bamboo sticks used in hula performances
puka — any kind of hole or opening; small shells that are made into necklaces
pukiawe — native plant with red and white berries and evergreen leaves
pulu — the silken clusters encasing the stems of hapuʻu ferns
pupu — snack or appetizer; also a type of cowry shell
puʻu — hill, cinder cone
puʻuhonua — place of refuge
raku — a style of Japanese pottery characterized by a rough, handmade appearance
ryōkan — traditional Japanese inn
sansei — third-generation Japanese immigrants
shaka — hand gesture used in Hawaii as a greeting or sign of local pride
stink-eye — dirty look
tabi — Japanese reef-walking shoes
talk story — to strike up a conversation, make small talk
tapa — cloth made by pounding the bark of paper mulberry, used for early Hawaiian clothing (kapa in Hawaiian)
ti — common native plant; its long shiny leaves are used for wrapping food and making hula skirts (ki in Hawaiian)
tiki — see kiʻi
tutu — grandmother or grandfather; also term of respect for any member of that generation
ʻuaʻu — dark-rumped petrel
ʻukulele — four-stringed musical instrument used in modern Hawaiian music (literally, ‘leaping flea,’ because of the action of the fingers when playing), derived from the braguinha, which was introduced to Hawaii in the 1800s by Portuguese immigrants
ʻuliʻuli — gourd rattle containing seeds and decorated with feathers
ʻulu maika — ancient Hawaiian bowling game
unagi — eel
wahine — woman
wikiwiki — hurry, quick
williwilli — the lightest of the native woods
zazen — Zen meditation
Zendo — communal Zen meditation hall