

TFH: E10: Revitalization & Origins The Path of the Hawaiian Language (Dr. William Pila Wilson)

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SPEAKERS

Tony Vega, William "Pila" Wilson

Tony Vega 00:00

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Tony Vega 00:40

Transmissions from Hawaii.

Tony Vega 00:53

Producer Tony Vega here and welcome to Transmissions from Hawaii. Apologies for the delay. I am working on other episodes which should be coming out in the next few months, we've just been busy with other projects, particularly one Japanese language, one that I'm doing for the company here that I work at. But I do have something for you today. It's a little bit shorter than usual, but nevertheless, I do think it's quite interesting. So while I was doing research for another topic that I'm working on, I happen to come across an article that was about Polynesian migration to Hawaii and the origins of the Hawaiian language. Now, anything that has to do with language and linguistics is something that I really, really enjoy. In fact, I came to Hawaii to attend the Japanese language and linguistics master's program at the University of Hawaii at Mānoa. So, I think that tells you that I really do enjoy learning about language, not just the Japanese language, but also linguistics, in general, and languages in general, it's a fascinating topic for me. So this article really caught my attention and I thought I'd reach out to the

person behind the research that this article was about. His name is Dr. William Wilson, also known as Pila and he is a professor at the University of Hawaii Hilo.

William "Pila" Wilson 02:10

I'm a professor, a full professor, at the University of Hawaii at Hilo in the Hawaiian language college Ka Haka 'Ula O Ke'elikōlani. Our College was established by the state legislature to address the official status of the Hawaiian language in Hawaii. We provide teachers for the Hawaiian immersion schools, curriculum materials, we have a laboratory school, preschool through grade 12, total Hawaii medium school. We teach through the medium of Hawaiian and operate our college through Hawaiian at the university all the way to the PhD. So, that's basically my professional background right now. On a personal level, I'm married to a native Hawaiian woman, I'm not native Hawaiian myself. Her name is Kauanoe Kamana. She's also a professor at our college. She's the director of our laboratory school programs and is, as her main office at Nāwahīokalani'ōpu'u Laboratory School. Our two children were raised speaking only Hawaiian in the home and graduated from the laboratory school. So I'm deeply involved in the Hawaiian language revitalization efforts of the state of Hawaii.

Tony Vega 03:27

Hmm, yeah. I mean, yesterday, I was watching a presentation that you and your wife did in, I believe it was, Alaska. And it was like a hour and a half, something like that, presentation, very interesting on the whole immersion program and all that, that you just mentioned, that was really, really interesting stuff. So I was wondering, can you tell me a little bit about how you became interested in the Hawaiian language and decided to become so involved with it? Could you tell me a little bit about kind of the the origins of your story?

William "Pila" Wilson 04:02

Sure. I was born in Honolulu in 1950, a while back. My parents came to Hawaii during World War II from Kansas, because of the war, and then they settled here in Hawaii. I was born here. However, when I was 10, my father moved us to Europe to, he opened a business in, in Europe. And so I had kind of a shock of going someplace really different and also learning about languages. And when I was a child in Europe, they'd asked me where I was from and what language was spoken in Hawaii, and that's when I first kind of started thinking about learning the Hawaiian language. After Europe, we also moved to the Midwest where my parents are from, and I discovered languages there, I didn't know that my own grandmother was a speaker of German and I was.. We moved around a lot, I encountered Spanish, I also lived near American Indian areas in Oklahoma. And then, before I, my last year of high school, moved back to Hawaii, and I'd already started trying to teach myself Hawaiian, and I took it in high school. But I was going to be a biologist, and after I took Hawaiian and decided on University of Hawaii, and gradually moved into linguistics. My wife was also learning Hawaiian as a second language,

although her own parents and grandparents all spoke Hawaiian. And we, we kind of got married. And rather than doing what my father had suggested, be a biologist and work for the sugar plantations, which that was like a premier job, I went into linguistics. And when I got married, I worked for the State Archives as a Hawaiian translator, and was recruited by the University of Hawaii at Hilo to start a Hawaiian studies program in UH Hilo. And the idea was that the program would be taught through the medium of Hawaiian and that was based on my experience of living in Europe, where they actually use their languages as the language of education. So that's how we started our Hawaiian Studies program through Hawaiian and eventually grew into a college and all the Hawaii language schools and all. We went through a lot of things, we had to change a lot of laws and policies in the state, especially to get this thing going.

Tony Vega 06:42

Wow. Um, so what was it like trying to learn Hawaiian back then? Because I mean, because of you and many other people, you know, there's these immersion programs, there's so many more resources these days, of course, but back then, I imagine, it was much more difficult.

William "Pila" Wilson 06:58

Right. In our time, the Hawaiian language wasn't really used. In the Hawaiian language class, you learned to say certain things, but the teacher spoke in English. And it was a lot of reading and writing and it had not developed very much because people weren't very knowledgeable of how Hawaii worked and was put together. However, at the very end of my time taking Hawaii at the university, at Mānoa, our teacher, Larry Kimora, started a Hawaiian language radio program with elders Kupuna, and I was the driver, helped him pick up the Kupuna to be on the program. And that's when we really started using Hawaiian, when we interacted with those community people.

Tony Vega 07:48

Oh, wow. Huh. And then, when was it that you started working on the immersion program? How was that?

William "Pila" Wilson 07:59

Well, as I said, when we started our program at UH Hilo, we did this radical thing of teaching our coin studies courses through Hawaiian, and our Hawaiian language courses to Hawaiian. And so that was kind of the beginning of it. But then, my wife and I decided we would speak only Hawaiian to our children, we had children, and we, and our teacher, Larry Kimora, and some other teachers started the Aha Pūnana Leo nonprofit to start employing immersion in preschools for Hawaiian speaking children and others who wanted to learn it. That was 1983 that we did.

Tony Vega 08:40

Gotcha. Okay. So what about your your research in linguistics, because like, when I was reading about, you know, the recent journal article, you know, I saw that originally, like this, or, you were doing research into the origins of the Hawaiian language back in the 80s, I think, like in 1985, or something like that, you, you had proposed this idea, but was that something you were like, the history, or the, the origins of the language? Is that, was that kind of your, your area of research or what were you looking into that back then?

William "Pila" Wilson 09:16

Oh okay, so again, my real interest is in the Hawaiian language, learning it for myself, and then discovering that it was endangered, and, and all of that. But nobody knew much about it, so I thought maybe linguistics would help. And then when I got into linguistics, most of it was very theoretical and non applied. So that's the best area to go into was Historical Linguistics when you really learned all the different structures of individual languages. So I went into Historical Linguistics and so that's where I got my PhD, in Historical Linguistics at the University of Hawaii at Mānoa. And my PhD was on possessives, or like my/your/his/hers. And they're very complicated in Hawaiian and also in other Polynesian languages, so my focus was on the history of the development of these possessors. And in doing so, I discovered that there's these tiny little atolls of the Solomon Islands called the northern outliers that had very similar possessives and pronoun systems to Hawaiian, and other eastern Polynesian languages, as they're called. And that's when I first got the idea that maybe the standard idea that East Polynesia, including Hawaii, came directly from Samoa. And that's what research is talking about.

Tony Vega 10:53

Okay, so you propose this back then, and then,.. so the common understanding was that, I guess, people migrated from Samoa and, of course, brought the language along with them to Hawaii, is that correct?!

William "Pila" Wilson 11:12

A little bit more complicated. They came from Samoa and went into what is called Eastern Polynesia, which is like, Tahiti maybe, people might have heard of the Cook Islands, or Marquesas Islands, and then came to Hawaii. However, all of the Eastern Polynesian languages are very closely related and so, the basic idea of moving from Samoa into eastern Polynesia. And my, my theory that has a lot of support now is that instead of coming directly from Samoa, they went to these outlier Islands to the west, and they came up along these little atolls, and then came into eastern Polynesia through these, now uninhabited, islands called Phoenix and Line Islands, which are directly south of Hawaii.

Tony Vega 12:10

Oh okay. But at the time, people were not very receptive to this idea. And by "the time", I mean, like, when, I guess 1985, is that correct?

William "Pila" Wilson 12:22

Yeah, I finished my PhD in 1982. And then it was published. And then people didn't pay much attention to it, it was just kind of like a footnote, and I spent all my time working on Hawaiian language revitalization. And then towards the end of the, or the beginning of the next century, I started to go back, because we finally had our high school graduation, we got a PhD going, and so then I decided to start publishing in linguistics again and I started collecting data in support of this proposal. And, to my surprise, nobody really paid much attention, so then I did another article, another article and another, and built up a volume of over 200 what they're called, "innovations," that show the practice of this theory. And I've been invited to be the keynote presenter for the Oceanic Linguistics conference in Tahiti in this coming fall to explain this theory in more detail to those who are not directly involved in, just Polynesian but in the languages of the Pacific Ocean, in general.

Tony Vega 13:43

Hmm, that's really interesting. So it's, basically I mean, I guess possessives is one aspect of this, but basically, you're looking at kind of these little features in the language, and then kind of trying to build a timeline through that, is that kind of the general idea?

William "Pila" Wilson 14:02

Exactly. So languages are always changing. And so when you have a change in language, it's called an innovation, it's something new, and that innovation will be carried down to the next generation, next generation until there's a new innovation so you can tell what people, who are, who's related to who, by these innovations. For instance, in human beings, that's very similar to biology. So in biology, if, you know, like, let's use dogs rather than people, so if dogs have suddenly have curly hair, one born with curly hair, then it's children or it's puppies will have curly hair, and you'll be able to tell they're the same breed of dogs based on their curly hair. That's an innovation where before they had straight hair. So languages do the same thing, so we have new words and.. Similar to English, English. originally came from an ancient Germanic language, and we have lots of words in English that are related to German like hand and in German we say hand, we say 5, they say fünf with an F. Originally that F was a P. So like, I can't think of the law to put No, let but anyway, so I could do it with examples from Hawaiian, but I wasn't really prepared to go into the super details of this where something that people would know. But I'll give an example of - some people in Hawaii may know this thing called ha'uke'uke, it's these purple sea urchins that are on the rocks. So the H, there was originally a P and a V, in of actually a V in Samoan, and they still have a V. But in the Outlier languages, it changed to an F, and then F changed to an H. And so we know that the progression from F to H that Hawaii had to go through an F, and other

languages like patient have an F. So we know that Hawaiian is connected to Tahitian and outlier languages rather than Samoan because of that change to F and H. That's a little complicated, I think, for a lot of people, but that's basically it you're change- chasing these changes, and you can chase changes to biology, and you can chase, trace changes to language.

Tony Vega 16:44

Yeah, it's these.. one, one aspect of this, for my understanding at least is that, there's a, there's a, you see this across many languages, certain sounds in the mouth just tend to transition into other sounds in the mouth, just based on where exactly it's being pronounced and things like that, right.

William "Pila" Wilson 17:06

Exactly.

Tony Vega 17:07

Okay, like if like you were saying, like Ps and Bs, and kind of the way you say it is kind of similar, so there's this kind of natural tendency for it to transition into something else.

William "Pila" Wilson 17:17

Exactly. And so.. But there's also things where people will change an entire word, where they formerly had used one word, and then they use a new word for something. So then you can see that new word is shared among people. So one of the words that I've traced is the word for brother and sister in law, and it's completely changed in East Polynesian, so you can see that these are related languages. So the whole idea of change is also a way to trace your genealogy.

Tony Vega 18:00

Hmm. Interesting. So, okay, so you, you, you, you do this research in the 80s and nobody really pays attention, and then now you come back to it, and you, you publish multiple papers, and finally people are starting to go like, "hey, there's something here!" How do you feel like, what did you think? Did you, did you get it, was there a certain moment where you go like, "Oh, wow, like people are actually paying attention this time". Was, can you tell me anything about like this, revisiting this and how it's been going?

William "Pila" Wilson 18:34

Well, it's, you know, it's anybody who's doing something like a puzzle, because history, history is a puzzle, so you feel good about discovering the puzzle on your own and then when other people verify that you're, you've solved the puzzle, it is gratifying. But for me, it's kind of like a hobby. The most important thing for me is the revitalization of the Hawaiian language. And looking at these other

languages, I also learned about things that are happening now with the Hawaiian language, how, you know, it's going through this new process of life and so it's changing somewhat, which is a natural process, and also how, how it's spreading again, it's all related to history. So I feel like that my study of Historical Linguistics was useful in the overall goal for our college, and I would say the State of Hawaii to see the Hawaiian language come back again. So history is important, you learn from history, but you also have to think about, think forward, and what can we do to move things forward, and that's my really big focus. So I'm, I'm happy to see people recognizing that my little hobby has, has some value, that looking at,.. language is really important in determining the projection of peoples and where they're going and who are their relatives. I think what happened before, part of the reason that people didn't see this before, was that they tend to just look "Oh, it's easy to sail from here to here, so people must have come from there." People don't always take the easy path, they may take different paths to where they're going. And that's good, too! We, we all take different paths, and we can, we can move forward by going through different, different paths.

Tony Vega 20:42

To learn more about Dr. Wilson's research and his work with the Hawaiian language, you can find some links in the show notes. Transmissions from Hawaii is a production of Wasabi magazine. It's produced in the beautiful city of Honolulu by me, Tony Vega. If you enjoy the show, then please let us know you can leave us a review on Apple podcast or on your podcast platform of choice - that is an immense help. And don't forget to subscribe so that you don't miss future episodes. We'll be back soon. Mahalo for listening and see you next time on Transmissions from Hawaii.