

In 1926-27, University of Oregon sociologist William C. Smith distributed a standardized questionnaire to various junior high and high schools throughout the Territory of Hawai'i. Among other things, the questionnaire asked students what languages they use in the home and how they value their native language. Teachers assigned the exercise as homework, and the resultant corpus contains about 1,550 life histories written by students born between 1902 and 1913. Linguistic and demographic evidence from other sources indicates that this was the most critical decade of language shift in Hawai'i, when Hawai'i Creole English began to nativize as a vernacular.

The corpus of life histories is significant because it includes detailed demographic data on the questionnaire's respondents. This permits the linguist to examine patterns of variation in the use of ancestral languages or English across generations, ethnic groups, gender, and other external variables. My paper will present data that reveals that the progression of language shift was highest among Hawaiian and Portuguese students, lowest among Japanese, with the Chinese somewhere in the middle. Generational data in the life histories will likewise show that Portuguese students had progressed the most in the direction of G3 (the third generation), Japanese students had progressed the least, with the Chinese again in the middle. These data have implications for substratal models of creole genesis, which would predict that Hawaiian, Cantonese, and Portuguese would have a greater effect on the language than the Japanese language. It has been claimed by Siegel (2000) and others that such is the case.

A multiplicity of factors is likely responsible for the slower process of language shift among Japanese children. Japanese immigration commenced later than did the other groups, the Japanese were more likely found in plantations where segregation supported ancestral language maintenance, the Japanese culturally preferred maintenance more than the Portuguese and other groups, and the continued importation of Japanese labor in contrast to the other groups ensured that the Japanese population would be dominated by immigrants.

The presentation will also include an examination of methodological problems involved in handling the WC Smith corpus. These include selection biases, the institutional context in which the study was pursued, and the literary form of the life histories themselves. The questionnaire also drew the ire of the local press at the time because of the invasive nature of some of its questions.