Hawaiian Language Translation Methodology

Hawaiian Language Nūpepa (newspapers) are a treasury of knowledge that document and provide insight to practices, traditions, and knowledge of old Hawai‘i. The ‘Ike Wai Project, whose mission is to ensure Hawai‘i’s future water security through research, education, and community engagement, look to our nūpepa as an integral component in our research—directing and educating both the community and the research team in our understanding of wai in both Kona, Hawai‘i and ‘Ewa, O‘ahu.

The first nūpepa published was on February 14, 1834 at the Lahainaluna printing press on Maui. For the next 114 years, over 100 different newspapers serving the nation of Hawai‘i were published. They varied in size, ranging from large pages with miniscule print to tabloid-sized publications. An estimated 100,000 newspaper pages have been collected and preserved thus far...if they were all typed out, the result would be over one million pages of text!

Nūpepa had a wide range of publishers, editors, and contributors, including politicians, religious figures, Hawaiian scholars like David Malo and John Papa ʻĪʻī, and community members. The literacy rate in the Hawaiian Islands at this time is debatable, but the general consensus is around 97 to 99 percent. Contributions were encouraged and newspapers became a repository for the sharing of Hawaiian knowledge, traditions that varied from island to island, and scholarly debate between academics. Content included old and new songs, genealogies, intergenerational stories, oli, customary traditions, foreign news, local news, and general day-to-day happenings.

Many nūpepa at the end of the year would bind the year’s publications into a single edition, many of which are preserved in large collections (e.g. Bishop Museum, Hawaiian Historical Society, Hamilton Library). However, some nūpepa contain an older form of Hawaiian that is not taught today, and a near majority of nūpepa do not use diacritical marks. This complicates the process of preserving, documenting, digitizing, translating, and publishing the wealth of knowledge in nūpepa.

The Institute of Hawaiian Language Research Team (IHLRT) spearheaded the translations, led by Puakea Nogelmeier, ‘Ano‘ilani Aga, and graduate students U‘ilani Au and Kilika Bennett. We sat down with ‘Ano‘i to understand and document the complexity behind translating nūpepa. She explained the ‘Ike Wai method of approaching nūpepa for information relevant to our research:
1. Start with “water” and “fresh water”
   a. Determine the many ways to say “water” and “fresh water” in Hawaiian
2. Create a list of possible search terms
3. Search Process-
   The search process utilizes two data sources: OHA’s Papakilo Database and nupepa.org, in conjunction with original documents. Papakilo Database is the largest digitized record of Hawaiian Language nūpepa, including content from Bishop Museum, Hawai’i State Archives, etc. Nupepa.org is another online newspaper site unaffiliated with Papakilo Database. Nupepa.org also contains a place name database.
4. Search Papakilo Database for search terms
   a. Each search term will generate a list of “hits”.
5. If Papakilo does not have content, search nupepa.org
6. If content does not exist on Papakilo or nupepa.org, search for the original copy from a collection.
7. Create a spreadsheet with hits from each search term
   a. If the list of hits are <1000, all of the hits are entered into a spreadsheet
   b. If the list of hits are 1000<, more parameters are entered to narrow the results
8. Filter hits into categories (e.g. articles, advertisements, pages)
9. Go through each article to ensure the content is relevant to our research
   a. For example: “punawai” (spring) may yield many hits. Filtering by place name “Kona” will help narrow content. However, content must be examined to ensure the Kona referenced in the nūpepa is the Kona of Hawai’i Island, not one of the many other places also named Kona throughout Hawai’i.

10. Transition from general search terms to place-based search terms
    a. Search terms for Kona were not yielding results because team members were from O’ahu and knew very little about Kona. Kona needed to be understood as a “wahi” (place) in order to obtain relevant information
11. Turn to physical maps for place-based search terms
    a. Ahupua’a (Hawaiian land use boundary/system) maps of Hawai’i Island contained many place names referenced in the nūpepa, but locations varied wildly between the ahupua’a maps and the nūpepa articles.
12. Obtain older maps with appropriate place names that match place names in nūpepa
13. Search Papakilo/nūpepa/collections with appropriate place names
14. Meet with researchers to determine what translations and/or study areas are most appropriate for their needs.
15. Translate pertinent articles and provide summaries and references.
    a. Once translated, articles would be reviewed word-for-word, line-by-line, with Puakea Nogelmeier and/or another researcher, to ensure content and context were accurate.
16. Maintain accurate citations; distribute for public use and record
a. Upon publishing, the IHLRT makes translations available to the public via online access. Articles translated for ‘Ike Wai are uploaded to the ‘Ike Wai Gateway, an online repository for data collection within the ‘Ike Wai project. Once integrated, translations are provided to our community members, stakeholders, and participants, as well as being made available online

‘Ike Wai employs a static translation method, which attempts to remain as true to the original text as possible (whereas dynamic translations are a type of paraphrasing). This is heavily reliant on content and context within the Hawaiian language, and does not lend itself to understandable direct English translations.

There exists a healthy body of literature about Pearl Harbor, including a series translated by Puku’i about ‘Ewa. The ‘Ewa district was renowned for its fresh water, both above and below ground, and the place names containing “wai” accurately reflect that (Waipahu, Waikele, Waimalu, Kahuawai, etc). The following is an example from the Pearl Harbor study site translated by Kaimana Chock, a staff member student in the Institute of Hawaiian Language Research and Translation using the methods described above.

Moʻolelo of Laukaʻieie
The Waʻahila rain beautifies Hālawa,
Remaining atop ‘Aiea,
Fierce heat rolls across the plains of Kalauao. [Makanikeoe] arrived to Kalauao and saw the waters of Kahuawai. He searched for the source of this water that was flowing up from the ground, which he found high above in the uplands of Waimalu. The water could not be seen flowing above ground, but our explorer knew it to be flowing beneath the earth. Many hidden grottos are situated on the sides of the Waimalu cliffs, and within some of these grottos lie some of the ancient aliʻi. There too was placed the body of David Malo[1], who died at Kalauao, and who was one of the people educated in English. He was a person whose name became famous, and he was well known by many people.

[1] This is perhaps not David Malo, the historian who continues to be well-known today; his grave is located on Maui at Lahainaluna. This is another man, perhaps named after said David Malo. Manu, Moses. “He Moolelo Kaao no Laukaieie.” 1895, Apr. 22 Ka Leo o ka Lahui, Vol. II, Num. 1091, Page 1, Column 1-2. Retrieved from Papakilo
For Kona, two series continued to resurface during nūpepa research: Na Hoonanea Ka Manawa and Ka Moolelo o Hawaii (John Papa ʻĪʻī's Fragments of Hawaiian History). Highlighting place names and moʻolelo of Kona, the translation team agreed a translation of both series would be an appropriate way to thank the communities of Kona for their time, ʻike, and aloha. The following is an example from the Pearl Harbor study site translated by U’ilani Au, a graduate student with the Institute of Hawaiian Language Research and Translation using the methods described above.

**Na Hunahuna No Ka Moolelo Hawaii**

The aforementioned point inland of the sand of Kaiakekua was pa ka la o Umi.[2] Inland of that place were the sands of Niumalu.[3] stretching until the place where Huiheʻeʻe[4] stands. Just outside of its enclosure is a small spring at the shoreline, Kiʻope[5] is the name. This was a spring that rose from the smooth lava and mixed with the seawater. This bend was the King’s first house and his royal home was called Pāpā.[6] This was a place enjoyed by all to bathe and was used as a surf landing during rough seas. It was also a deep enough place to safely land skiffs during high tide, and when it was low tide the skiffs would adhere to the pāhoehoe side. From there on was a reef flat up until the spring of Honuaʻula.[7] A house structure paved with stones was there and that was where the young king resided, and below it was a small patch of sand for canoes to land. The entry on the north side was always open, and this was a face of the temple, Keikipuʻipuʻi.[8] Turning to look upland, there was a Haleolono,[9] and on the north side of that structure was pāhoehoe lava that joined directly with sea water. This was a surfing spot for the children and there on the south side was a surf break. At the back of this temple was a surfing place known as Huihā.[10] And north of Kapohonāʻū.[11]
there was also a temple, although it did not exist at this time, the King erected it later on.

[3] Niumalu, Lanihau, Kona, Hawai‘i. Beach between Pāo‘umi and Kalāke‘e. Shelters were built out of coconut leaves here for shade, giving this place its name.
[7] ‘Īʻī mentions “ka punawai o Honuaula,” the spring of Honua‘ula, which is near Liholiho’s residence and Keikipu‘ipu‘i heiau.
[9] House where prayers and religious services were offered to the god, Lono.


Approximately 80 articles were translated in the process of studying Pu‘uloa and Kona. Na Hoonanea Ka Manawa contains around 32 articles, Kamiki nine, Ka Leo Hawai‘i six, Na Hunahuna No Ka Moolelo o Hawaii five, and about 20 related articles from other publications.

The nūpepa translations have proven invaluable to the ‘Ike Wai project. Nūpepa have enriched our understanding of wai by revealing attributes, characteristics, and management practices that are unknown to modern research practices and findings. Nūpepa have both reinforced research findings and/or informed us of different approaches to take. Most important, the knowledge uncovered in the nūpepa has been critical to our successes with the community. A number of community members have expressed that without the outreach efforts of the IHLRT, they would
not have participated with the ‘Ike Wai program. Furthermore, translation compilations by the IHLRT have been ‘Ike Wai’s most impactful gift to the community for their participation.