

Features of Hawaiian Spelling & Pronunciation: **‘Okina and Kahakō**

‘Okina

It’s important to understand that the ‘okina is not just a punctuation mark but an actual letter, considered a consonant, in Hawaiian. This is clarified by the pī‘āpā song, memorized by all Pūnana Leo preschool students, which ends with “...a me ka ‘okina” demonstrating that the ‘okina is the last letter in the Hawaiian alphabet. The ‘okina is pronounced as a glottal stop which is the sound, or rather lack of sound, between the two vowels of “uh-oh”. A glottal stop is a tightening of the glottis in the throat to cut off sound for a moment. It’s also found in the British English Cockney way of saying “butter” as “bu‘er”. And it’s the stop between the two “i”s at the end of the Hawai‘i. This idea is emphasized by the nerdy but educational bumper sticker you may have seen:

“I brake for ‘okina.”

More and more people are understanding the importance of the ‘okina in Hawaiian words. For instance if you look at the County of Hawai‘i website, you will find that the ‘okina is included in the spelling of Hawai‘i. This is also true of system-wide UH websites and letterhead. And if you look at the new highway sign on Kamehameha Avenue near the turn-off to Bayfront Highway, you will see that the correct spelling of Honoka‘a and Hāmākua are included. Hāmākua includes two kahakō, a language feature which we will discuss in the next part of this lesson.

Let’s take a moment to think about the word Honoka‘a.

- With the ‘okina, it is pronounced correctly: Honoka‘a, which means a bay (hono) of rolling (ka‘a) stones.
- Without the ‘okina, we get the common mispronunciation: Honokā, which sounds more like a word ending in an “a” with a kahakō or extended vowel sound. This results in the meaning “Bay of Smiting.”
- I attended Honoka‘a Intermediate in 7th grade, and I was as guilty as mostly everyone at that time, of saying Honokā rather than Honoka‘a. This points out a big

pitfall of mispronunciation – the wrong sound will become normalized if enough people use it.

Another example of the importance of the ‘okina can be seen in the following possessive pronouns where the ‘okina makes a complete difference in meaning:

- kou (your)
- ko‘u (my)

And then there’s the name of the Hawaiian language center where I and my colleagues work, the Hale Kuamo‘o. Without the ‘okina, you get the mispronunciation Hale Kuamō, or as one literacy project team member who is new to Hawai‘i says, the Hale Kuamoo (Kuamū), which seems to have something to do with cows. Kuamo‘o means “backbone” but also refers to customs, traditions, and those aspects of language and culture that we strive to perpetuate. Kuamō could actually mean “severed backbone”, the exact opposite of the desired meaning, which is a continuity and revitalization of knowledge from the past. So you can begin to see how important the ‘okina is in terms of meaning-making in the Hawaiian language.

Another common mistake for English speakers is to insert an ‘okina where there is none, especially in Hawaiian words with multiple vowels in a row, like heiau (a temple), which some people incorrectly think is pronounced he‘iau or he‘iao.

Just so you know what an ‘okina is supposed to look like, it is often likened to a small “6” with the loop filled in. It is also the same as a single open quote so long as that single quote includes the solid dot at the bottom to form the shape of a tiny number six.

Now we will practice pronouncing the ‘okina with the kōkua of a partner. “Ma ka hana ka ‘ike.” This well-known traditional proverb, or ‘ōlelo no‘eau, means, “Doing leads to knowing.” The best way to master the ‘okina is to practice using it. See the ‘okina practice sheet.

Kahakō

Now let's turn our attention to the kahakō or macron. The kahakō is not a letter, but a diacritical mark, a line over a vowel which tells the reader to pronounce that letter with a longer vowel sound. The word "kahakō" is sometimes shortened and referred to as a **kō**, especially while spelling out loud. Both the long and the short forms of the word include a kahakō in their spelling.

Notice the difference of meaning for the three words below, based on the location of the kahakō stressed vowels [practice determining where the kahakō is for each word]:

pūpū – shell

pupū – to stall or move slowly

pupu – a small, humble shelter

Another example is found in the difference between the "e" in the greeting "Aloha e Kaulana" (used in proper Hawaiian when addressing someone, including in emails), and the word 'ē, which means "strange" as in "'ano 'ē" (kind of odd).

So, like the 'okina, the kahakō is essential in determining the meaning of some words as spelled in the written word, and as spoken in oral language. It does so by modifying the length of sound of a vowel.

Some words use a kahakō to show the plural form:

kanaka (a person) kānaka (people)

makua (a parent) mākua (parents)

kupuna (an elder) kūpuna (elders)

Another point that came up among our team as we were preparing for this lesson, is the tendency to overemphasize the kahakō. I have to admit, that I am still guilty of this from time to time. So if I do so while we practice, I am sure that one of my coworkers will step in and provide the correction.

You already practiced the kahakō a bit with Māhealani and the hakalama practice chart, but let's take a few minutes for more practice pronouncing the kahakō with a partner.

Remember: Ma ka hana ka 'ike (Doing leads to knowing). See the kahakō practice sheet.