



We Call It “Our Language”: A Children’s Swahili Pidgin Transforms Social and Symbolic Order on a Remote Hillside in Up-Country Kenya

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This study describes a rare Swahili pidgin created by two five-year-old boys, one American and one African. The discussion examines the linguistic and social factors affecting the “origins, maintenance, change and loss” (Hymes 1971) of their language and the place it created for their friendship. This place, constructed by and through language, both held and projected their new identities, interrupting the harsh hegemony of colonial racism and inequality that surrounded them. [Swahili pidgin, communicative competence, child language identity and ideology, language origins and invention]

pidgins and creoles challenge our ability to deal with linguistic diversity, to discover its systematic basis from the standpoint of social life. I would predict that the future of sociolinguistics lies in a still more widely defined concern, namely, the explanation of the origin, maintenance, change and loss of a specific means of speech. The concern would be with the structure of variation, not for its own sake, but as part of human adaptation. It would be part of the general problem of the social sciences, the maintenance and transformation of social and symbolic order.

—Hymes, 1971, p. 5

Forty years ago Dell Hymes’s classic edited volume *Pidginization and Creolization of Languages* (1971) drew broad scholarly attention to the significant scientific contribution the study of pidgin and creole languages can make to linguistic and social theory and to a deeper understanding of central questions about the very nature of human language, social interaction, and meaning. He writes, “These languages demonstrate dramatically the interdependence of language and society. Their study opens up new possibilities for integration of linguistic and social research” (Hymes 1971:5). Hymes called for studies of specific cases of pidgins and creoles to generate a more comparative model of their formation across not only linguistic connections but also across common social factors. This essay responds to his call and recognizes his enduring contributions to the study of language in society in general, and the languages called pidgins and creoles in particular.

Although pidgin languages do not ordinarily serve as vehicles for personal friendships (Gumperz 1965), one such case is described in this essay. The discussion will focus on a Swahili pidgin language created more than three decades ago on an isolated hillside in up-country Kenya. For 15 months, the pidgin was exclusively used by two young five-year-old boys, my son Colin and his Samburu friend, Sadiki. This case is particularly striking because it is a rare and unique example of young children inventing a shared pidgin language, as compared to children learning an existing pidgin language from adults.¹

Also serendipitous was the fact that although unplanned, I was in a position to capture and document the children’s use of the pidgin from its early genesis through its ongoing use and expansion. This accidental study generated richly detailed empirical data documenting the children’s discursive processes in their cultural contexts.² This essay highlights some salient aspects of the “origins, maintenance, change and loss” (Hymes 1971:5) of Colin and Sadiki’s pidgin language. I will draw on examples from the larger corpus that illustrate the processes they employed to generate, shape, negotiate, and sustain member-

ship in their exclusive two-member discursive community. The creation of this original pidgin language marked the simultaneous creation of a new space in their existing multilingual, compartmentalized, and stratified speech community (e.g., for discussions and critiques of the concept of speech community see Blommaert 2007; Gumperz 1965; Hymes 1968, 1992; Mendoza-Denton 2011; Morgan 2009). Membership in the boys' new speech community in turn provided a place within which they could represent and actualize their shared identities, ideologies, and agency; a site for resistance and transformation. This representative place for their friendship allowed them to mediate and transcend the hegemonic linguistic and cultural borders that enveloped them. Enacted in a setting with historically distinct and oppressive colonizing histories, this case presents a provocative extreme along a continuum of possibilities in examining language choices and behaviors in social practice. The example also provides a lens for understanding how young members of language communities use and think about language; how they exercise language choice, change, and possibility.

Although scholars recognize the problems in defining even the most basic concepts of language (e.g., language vs. dialect), defining pidgin and creole languages can be all the more challenging (see, e.g., Holm 2000; Hymes 1971; Kouwenberg and Singler 2008; McWhorter 1998; Parkvall 2000; Romaine 1988; Smith 1973; Todd 1990). Parkvall and colleagues (n.d.) assert that there is no generally accepted definition of pidgin languages and offer instead common core properties. With these caveats expressed, I offer a brief description of pidgins and creoles at the outset of this discussion.

Most commonly a pidgin language is recognized as a reduced and simplified language that arises in extended contact situations where individuals have no common language and develop a means of restricted communication that will serve their limited needs. Extended contact might arise in circumstances of "discovery, exploration, trade, conquest, slavery, migration, colonialism, nationalism" (Hymes 1971:5) to name a few. No one's first language, pidgins are characterized by the discarding of many of the inessential features of standard (Todd 1990) or input languages (Parkvall 2000). Some of the features often absent in pidgins include articles, markers, inflection, and copula. The lexical stock is limited and usually reflects the restricted communicative needs of the speakers. The simplification process is similar to the linguistic accommodation that occurs in a number of other linguistic phenomena such as early childhood language (Bellugi and Brown 1971; Slobin 1985; Smith 1972), motherese (Newport et al. 1975), baby talk, lover talk, talk to foreigners and the deaf (Ferguson 1971; Goldin-Meadow 2002; Jakobson 1968), and second language acquisition (Schumann 1975). These situations often produce a linguistic shift to what has been called a "simple register" sharing many of the features described above for pidgins (Ferguson 1971).

Where pidgin functions to serve limited contact needs, creole serves as a primary language in a speech community. As the creolization process progresses, the original pidgin will undergo change in response to the growing needs of its speakers to communicate about a full range of human experience with a richer lexicon and more grammatical complexity (Labov 1971; Parkvall et al. n.d.; Sankoff and Laberge 1980; Stewart 2007). Hymes (1971) noted that it is the nature of a pidgin "to either develop into a fuller language or to disappear" (see Mufwene 2008 for a recent and controversial counter argument). David Smith observed "strikingly parallel processes" (1973:290) in a child's development of communicative competence, moving from a pidginized to a creolized speech. In the pidgin-creole continuum one would therefore find the constant interplay of the two processes of reduction and simplification as well as expansion and complication—or pidginization and creolization (Hymes 1971).

Hymes (1971) emphasized the significance of the processes of simplification and elaboration in these dynamic language phenomena. He notes the "awkward but accurate"

(Hymes 1971:7) title of his volume spoke to that focus. Instead of using the nouns, *pidgin* and *creole*, the volume title featured the words *pidginization* and *creolization*, focusing on the verblike aspects of such dynamic processes as language origins, development, maintenance, contact, hybridization, convergence, acculturation, and evolution. In a similar spirit and also emphasizing process, linguistic anthropologist David Smith chose to identify pidgin and creole languages as “acculturating languages” (1973:290) to escape these central problems of definition and variation and to capture the ever-changing nature of language in use, especially in the range of contact situations and multilingual hybrid speech communities where these “means of speech” most frequently arise.

Jourdan writes, “Just as cultures develop over time, so do the pidgin languages that become their linguistic medium. Languages cannot exist without the cultures that sustain them, and they cannot develop before the cultures that sustain them develop; the two go hand in hand, in a form of constant feedback, through which social groups become encultured and enlanguage” (2008:377). The discussion that follows will provide an ethnographic glimpse into Colin and Sadiki’s world—their story, their language, their creativity, and the many overlapping and complex layers of social meaning and linguistic ecologies they negotiated.

This story is also a very personal one, involving the study of my own child. Largely inspired by Dell Hymes, and under his tutelage (along with other noted linguists and anthropologists including David Smith, Bambi Schieffelin, William Labov, and Gillian Sankoff), I wrote several papers about Colin and Sadiki’s language in the late 1970s when we returned from Africa and I was a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania (e.g., Gilmore 1979a, 1979b, n.d.a). At that time, and with Hymes’s encouragement, I planned to continue my analysis and to later develop the individual papers into a manuscript that could tell their story more holistically.

But in 1988 my son, Colin Gilmore, at the age of 18, was killed by a drunk driver. For many years after Colin’s death, I did not touch or talk about these data.

Sadiki is now in his forties with children of his own. He remembers his friendship with Colin more than he remembers the details of their language. I am now the lone keeper of their language. The boys’ special friendship left a significant gift—a rare language legacy that contributes to our understanding of the agentive power of young children to transform the social and symbolic order around them through their everyday creative language practices. I feel a special responsibility to revisit these data and share the boys’ unusual story. I share their story in honor and celebration of Colin’s memory and of the unique bond of language and love these two young boys shared for a brief period of their lives more than three decades ago (e.g., Gilmore 1983, 2008, 2009, 2011, n.d.b).

Colin and Sadiki’s Story

Stories of pidgin genesis are invariably stories of people . . . whose life circumstances have set the stage, created the need, and made it possible for a new pidgin to appear. But they are also the stories of cultural contacts . . . and therefore of cultural change, both radical and gradual, total and partial. And obviously, they are also stories of the power relations that are at the core of the social worlds that have fostered most of the pidgin and creole languages we know.

—Jourdan, 2008, p. 360

“Uweryumachini!” Colin and Sadiki kicked up puffs of hot dust as they jumped up and down in the bright sunlight, pointing to a small airplane flying high above them in the clear blue Kenya sky. “Uweryumachini!” they continued as they laughed and pointed above them.

It was 1975. I was a graduate student studying a troop of 92 feral baboons on a sprawling 48,000-acre cattle ranch in the Great Rift Valley. The aristocratic English owners

of the ranch had made an old manager's house on a remote hillside available to the Gilgil Baboon Research Project, our new home. The project researchers shared the hillside with a half dozen African workers and their families. Our African neighbors worked for very meager wages either for the research project or for the ranch (\$20–\$40 a month depending on their position). The workers lived just over the rise about 50 yards away, on the other side of the hill, in two simple dirt floor stone dwellings. Sadiki was the son of Samburu ranch workers. Sadiki and his five sisters lived on the hillside with their parents who herded cattle on foot and ran the pumps for the cattle's water supply.

Each family on this multilingual hillside spoke its own tribal language to each other—Luo, Abaluhyah, Turkana, or Samburu (i.e., North Maa). The language used to communicate across linguistic and cultural borders was a regional variety of Kiswahili, often called Up-Country Swahili (see, e.g., Le Breton 1968; Vitale 1980). This variety, a highly pidginized Swahili that Hancock refers to as the "most aberrant variety" (1971:519) of Swahili, was a second language for most African people living in Up-Country Kenya.³

From the fourth day after we arrived at the research station, Sadiki and Colin spent all their days together, sunrise to sunset. Initially the two children struggled to communicate in Swahili, using lots of gestures and charades. A soccer ball, a wheel rim and a stick, an old rope swing hanging from the lone tree in the courtyard, and the collection of Matchbox cars Colin brought with him were favorite and frequent play props. Lying side by side looking at *Tin Tin* comic books, they softly pointed out "simba" (lion), "samaki" (fish), and the few Swahili words they seemed to know in common. Sitting in the shade, Sadiki patiently taught Colin melodious traditional Samburu songs. Within just a few months they seemed to be in effortless and continual conversation as they pretended to hunt herds of Thomson gazelles in the tall grasses or raced Matchbox cars in an imaginary African Safari Rally game, each playing "Action Man" or "Batman."

"Uweryumachini!" the two boys continued jumping, pointing to the sky, and gleefully shouting at the plane again and again. Their giggles punctuated each utterance. Their voices carried over the swirl of the warm morning breezes through the open window where I was working at my desk. I looked up at them, smiled to see them enjoying themselves so thoroughly, and then strained to listen more carefully to what they were saying. I was certain the local Swahili word for "airplane" was "ndege" but I couldn't understand what the boys were calling out. Leafing through my Swahili dictionary, I could find nothing even close to what I heard them shouting. I called to the boys to come closer to the window and asked them what they were saying. I urged them to repeat themselves slowly so that I could hear more clearly what they were actually yelling. They paused, looked at each other as if a secret had been revealed, giggled, and then slowly pronounced something that sounded to me like "who-are-you-machini"! They uttered the phrase as a single word with a Swahili "accent." I would eventually discover that their "word" for airplane was part of a continuously expanding vocabulary and grammar that made their speech unintelligible to Swahili speakers.

A little more than two months after our arrival and within days and weeks of my initial "discovery" it seemed that everyone began to notice that the "Swahili" the boys spoke was "different." Although they appeared to speak to and understand each other with ease, no one else could understand them! Visitors, hearing the children play, would initially comment on being impressed with Colin's Swahili only to remark a few minutes later, "That's not Swahili, is it?" Sadiki's older brother, home on his school break, offered, "The language they speak is a very complicated one. Nobody understands it but the two of them." Sadiki's parents declared that because the boys loved each other so much, "Mungu" (God) had blessed them with this special language. Sadiki's grandfather traveled several hundred miles from the Samburu Reserve to see the "rafiki mzuri" (good friends) that "Mungu" had blessed. In a formal greeting with both families present,

Sadiki's father translating Samburu (Maa) to Swahili, the elder grandfather strode up to Colin, took his hand and spit twice in his palm, an intimate Samburu gesture of lasting friendship, and a special blessing. All of the hillside residents seemed to see the boys' language as a special gift. After just a few months together the children had generated a unique means of speech, what I was to identify as a spontaneous Swahili pidgin, that these two five-year-old friends, one African and one American, from vastly different worlds, called "Our Language."

As time passed, Sadiki became quite competent in English eventually attending and excelling in an English preschool I took them both to during the last four months of our stay. At the school it was expected that everyone speak English. Colin developed increasing competence in Swahili and spoke to neighbors easily. The children were able to demonstrate appropriate bi- and trilingual code-switching abilities in each of their multiple overlapping linguistic communities. Both children spoke to all Africans in Swahili. However, all interactions with one another were in their private language. They regularly demonstrated alternations and cooccurrences in their language use. Words quite familiar to them both in Swahili (e.g., *pesi pesi* [fast], *namna hi* [like this], *viatu* [shoe], *teari* [ready]) were used when speaking to Africans. When speaking to each other in their private language these lexical items were expressed in their own lexicon (e.g., *tena* [fast], *la thas* [like this], *boot* [shoe], *redi* [ready]). In addition to lexical code switching they also shifted their language syntactically. In Swahili, for example, the children would say *mpira yango* (my ball [ball of mine]) and in their language they would say *mimi mpira* (me ball).

The two continually played mostly in isolation. Occasionally they played with Sadiki's sisters, or other children who came to visit but for the most part they spent most of their daylight hours playing with each other exclusively. One might speculate about whether their private language might have arisen if Colin had siblings or if Sadiki had brothers. Such factors might have dramatically altered the language equation.

Initially they shared only minimum competence in Swahili. As a result and out of necessity, they generated spontaneously a pidgin that would serve their immediate communicative needs. As time passed, however, when other linguistic options were available to each of them, namely English and Swahili, they continued to use and continually expand their private language.

An Accidental Study: A Language Discovered

Their unique situation was strikingly reminiscent of Herodotus and the infamous "forbidden experiment" that sought to answer philosophical questions about the origins of language—What would happen if two young children who shared no language were isolated and deprived of language? Would they invent a language? What would that language be? (See, e.g., Rymer 1994; Shattuck 1980.) The boys' experience was certainly a happier version of the experiment, but nonetheless shared many of the extreme social and linguistic conditions that gave rise to it. I began to record the boys' language and to document the range of their language use and social interactions across contexts.

When first analyzing the boys' language, I was both led and limited by prominent theories of the day. Consider that 35 years ago, child-language studies were still relatively new and largely influenced by Chomskian goals and research methods (i.e., interview and elicitation). At that time naturalistic and ethnographic studies of child language behavior were not yet widely accepted or seen as significant (see Gilmore 1983). Cross-cultural knowledge about children's language development was only beginning to be explored and little was known about children's language behaviors in contact situations. Bambi Schieffelin was in the field conducting what was to be her groundbreaking study of Kaluli-language socialization in Papua New Guinea (Schieffelin 1990). Piagetian notions of

children's egocentric speech were still dominant, asserting that five-year-olds could not modify their speech for an interlocutor and that they engaged in parallel monologues, rather than in genuine conversation (Piaget 1926). Vygotsky's more social and interactional understanding of the development of child language and thought was not yet widely read by Western scholars. Pivotal studies on the sociocentric language abilities of very young children had either not yet been written or were only newly being circulated (e.g., Gelman and Shatz 1977; Ochs 1977). Pidgin-creole scholars debated then (and still do) about the actual role of children in the creolization of pidgin languages.⁴

Revisiting these data more than three decades later, there is a much richer repertoire of theoretical lenses and discourses through which to explore and express central aspects of their language. Colin and Sadiki's pidgin language represents a compelling intersection of more recently developed multilayered dynamic theoretical influences including studies of identity and ideology (González 2001; Schieffelin et al. 1999), language socialization (Ochs and Schieffelin 1986), and the more recently emerging field of the ethnography of language policy (Hornberger and Johnson 2007; Johnson 2009; McCarty 2011), to name a few. These concepts were present in nascent form in my original papers but they were not yet a part of the articulated theoretical and descriptive discourse available to me when I was writing in the late 1970s. These theoretical concepts are pertinent now as I reexamine the boys' language practices as well as the social and symbolic order they negotiated, resisted, and transformed. Ochs summarizes the dramatic shift in the current anthropological view of children's language socialization that better captures a discussion of Colin and Sadiki's language creation. She writes, "children engage in multiple social worlds, become aware of social difference, and eventually are drawn into struggles for power. At the same time, they are influenced by ways of thinking, being, and (inter)acting that shift across contexts and transcend local boundaries, as traditional expectations dialogue with the effects of migration, hybridization, and globalization" (Ochs 2009:545).

Many of today's scholars have reached back to and reexamined Hymes's writing for insights into language in society and for their renewed insertion into a more current anthropology (see, e.g., Blommaert 2009; Gilmore 2011; Hornberger 2003, 2009; McCarty 2011; Rampton 2007). Hymes's understandings of ever-negotiated language and culture change, choice, and diversity have been found to be a good fit with the anthropology of today. This view of anthropology recognizes that "culture is not an immutable entity that would remain impervious to contact with others and unaffected by it. Nor is it immune to the actions of its members. Culture is never pristine. It is always changing" (Jourdan 2008:361-362). What Jourdan calls "the cultural in pidgin genesis" (2008) highlights these dynamic characteristics and in many ways echoes Hymes's insistence that the social be at the core of pidgin-creole studies and that the processes of change be a central focus.

McCarty (2011) draws heavily on Hymes's work in the newly developing field of the ethnography of language policy (see, e.g., Hornberger and Johnson 2007; Johnson 2009). McCarty describes this approach as "processual, dynamic, and in motion" and investigates policy as "a practice of power that operates at multiple, intersecting levels" from individual face-to-face interactions, to communities of practice, to larger global forces (2011:2-3). Language policies and practices both reflect and produce the discursive ideological positions and the social and material conditions that surround and are embedded in them (Pennycook 1998). Norma González, recognizing children's ideologies, notes "children's fluid use of distinct language domains illustrates the dynamism of children's own language ideologies" (2001:xxii).

In the case of Colin and Sadiki's language, inequities of power, race, and class are contested, resisted, and reshaped through shifting language ideologies, changing discursive practices, and sociocultural transformations that interrupt existing language hierarchies. As Makihara and Schieffelin note, "By closely examining both the contexts of

language and ideologies that give them meaning we can see how particular social and cultural formations and linguistic forms arise, continue to be effective, or come to be associated in new ways . . . as a consequence of contact" (2007:16). These current anthropological views enrich the close reexamination of the boys' pidgin language, their creative processes of invention, and their de facto language policies within their cultural and ideological contexts.

Colin and Sadiki's Language: Origins, Maintenance, Change, and Loss

The children's pidgin shared characteristics of pidgin or contact languages all over the world. Like other pidgins, it is an admixture of both source languages (English and Swahili) and yet distinct from both. It reflects the simplification of forms typical of pidgins all over the world (e.g., unmarking, absence of copula, articles, and inflection). The lexicon is limited as is the function of the language. In Colin's words, "Well, you can't say everything in our language."

With the expansion of the function of the language to express more fully all of the communicative needs two close friends have beyond limited play contact, the data indicate there is expansion of the language form as well. A continually building lexicon and the reappearance of articles as well as tense and aspect markers in their language indicate these nascent forms of creolization. The following sections present select lexical and syntactic examples from my data.

Lexical Creativity

Colin and Sadiki's language had five lexical classes. There were loan words from Swahili and from English, modified words from Swahili and from English, and many newly invented words or neologisms drawing on sound play, onomatopoeia, and reduplication.

Many words were taken directly from Swahili, the dominant superstrate language in the pidgin. As in most pidgins many of the things indigenous to the environment (wildlife, local foods, etc.) were frequently named in Swahili. For example, all of the species of wildlife in the area were the first Swahili words that Colin learned and their English equivalents were the first to be forgotten. For example, a few months after we arrived, Colin asked "How do you say *duma* (cheetah) in English?" Samarin (1971) notes that this type of memory loss and obsolescence is common to pidgin situations.

There were many modified Swahili words. Systematic, predictable, and consistent phonological changes were made. For example, velar stops shifted from voiceless to voiced (*Africa* > *Afriga*). Phonemes were added to words (*na enda* [to go] > *na wenda*). Quite common and often inconsistently used were a variety of morphophonemic reductions—*safari* (trip) becomes *fari*, *wewe* (you) becomes *we*, and *mimi* (I) becomes *mi*. Another type of modification of Swahili loan words was calquing or compounding. For example the word for *sun* in Swahili is *jua*. Compounding two Swahili words, the boys instead called the "sun" *kubwa moto* or *big fire* displaying their rich metaphoric inventiveness. The word *choo* in Swahili has multiple meanings—it can refer to feces, urine, or the lavatory itself. The boys elaborated and expanded their "toilet" lexicon by compounding the Swahili word for *water* (*maji*) with *choo* to distinguish urinating, *maji choo*, from defecating, *choo*.

Similarly, English words were borrowed directly with no modifications (e.g., *stop*, *run*, *jump*). Many English loan words were "comic book" words like *pow* and *bang*. I also considered words like *huh* (what) and *uhuh* (no) as English loan words. As with the Swahili loan words, there were morphophonemic reductions, for example, *pretend* is reduced to *tend*. This is a common feature in child-language development and Colin often used *tend*

when speaking English as well. As in the Swahili examples above, there were consistent phonological modifications across the English lexical items. Velar (k > g) and alveolar (t > d) stops shifted from voiceless to voiced (take it > tegid; jacket > jegid). The phonological system displayed morphophonemic additions as well as reductions. For example, the English word *cowboy* became *calaboy*.

The English phrase *like this* was phonologically modified and lexicalized as *lathas*. Over the course of the year it was often shortened to *las*. This is very similar to reports in children's use of Tok Pisin by Sankoff and Laberge (1980); where adults will say "Mi go long haus," a child will often say "Mi go laus" for "I am going home."

There were numerous newly invented words, or neologisms. Much of this lexical inventiveness seems to have grown out of sound play, particularly car sounds they made while the children played with Matchbox cars. *Tena*, *diding*, and *gningininge* all meant "to go fast" and all sounded similar to the play noises they made when they raced their cars. It is particularly of interest that in spite of the fact that the boys both knew and used the Swahili word for *fast*, *pesi pesi*, they developed new and numerous lexical items and synonyms for this word in their own language—all clearly drawing on sound play. While I was transcribing one of their recordings, Colin commented that I wasn't spelling it right because, "Our language has sounds that aren't in the alphabet."

In one case Colin was able to not only provide me with the translation but also an etymology for their word *diding*. He recounted that one day, soon after we had arrived, they were outside kicking a soccer ball back and forth when Colin saw the baboon troop coming up over the cliff and toward them. The rule was that when the baboons (who took down prey larger than the children) came near the headquarters, the boys had to be inside with all of the windows and doors locked. Sadiki could not see the baboons behind him and Colin could not remember the Swahili word for *fast*. He shouted out the play noise they made for speeding cars. "Diding!" Sadiki immediately understood. They ran fast and safely entered the headquarters. *Diding* was officially added to their lexical repertoire.

Like many of their neologisms *diding* originated in sound play and onomatopoeia. As some of the examples below will illustrate verbal play and repetition were crucial discourse devices for their language invention. Their metalinguistic competencies were reflected in ability to actually talk about their language and in this case even provide an etymological history for a single lexical item.

The recordings and transcribed data capture many discursive interactions in which the boys demonstrate not only their metalinguistic awareness and but also their metapragmatic competence. For example, they often refined, defined, negotiated, and discussed new lexical items or negotiated meaning in syntactic miscommunications. Their lexical stock was continually growing until the time we left Kenya and the two children were separated. Our leaving actually marked the end and loss of their special private language. Once we returned to the United States, the boys' friendship continued primarily through letters written in English. The pidgin, which had been performed exclusively orally and in face-to-face interactions and was never written, ended its use the day we left the hillside speech situation.

There is some indication that more English words were being added as time went by and Sadiki's English became more competent, especially after they started going to school. But new word invention in their pidgin continued until the end. After 15 months and just four days before we left Kenya, one neologism's genesis, embedded in discursive processes, was captured in a recording while the boys were having tea (*chai*) and eating freshly baked breads that they had helped me prepare. The invented word was *pupu* and not too surprisingly, it meant *fart*. The slightly pejorative meaning and onomatopoeic aspects no doubt made this word particularly appealing to and representative of the children and their play with scatological words and topics. For example *dudu* is the Swahili word for a

large insect. One of the visitors who came to the headquarters was an entomologist and enlisted the children to help him collect insect samples. They delighted in calling him *Bwana Dudu*, which made them laugh each time they said his name. Certainly Colin knew the English scatological meaning of the word and I assume he shared the double entendre with Sadiki.

There may be a possibility that the word *pu* or something similar was known to Colin in English. I do not recall his ever using it and at this time he had been in Africa for more than a year. I believe it was a new word and not an English loan word, although the influence of similar words in English (e.g., *poop*, *poos*) was no doubt operating. William Samarin (personal communication, November 2, 1981) offered a different explanation for the meaning and origin of *pupu*, tracing the word to Sango origins where *pupu* means *wind* and suggesting that Colin may have heard the word and “stored the phonological shape and some of its semantics” and later extended its meaning. Although I didn’t agree with Samarin, I found the possible alternative lexical histories fascinating.

The transcript below presents the discourse surrounding the creation of *pupu*. The lexical innovation process flows through and is embedded in the rhythmic context of their ongoing playful interactions. These data provide a closely detailed look at their generative, meaning making, and metalinguistic discursive processes.

Excerpt Number One

The children are eating breads that we had baked in the shape of tires, tractors, and balls. Colin’s father (F) sits with them at the table.

[x = inaudible syllable]

1. Colin: xx na kula. Silly. Silly I. Silly hello. Sema Sadiki “hello” las ingine.
(xx eat. Silly. Silly I. Silly hello. Sadiki say more like this “hello”)
2. Sadiki: Silly bottom. (laughs) **Pzzzt.**
[Sadiki makes a “farting” sound]
3. Colin: Bottom fanya nini?
(Bottom makes what?)
4. Sadiki: Bottom na fanya **pzzzt.**
(Bottom makes pzzzt.)
5. Colin: Na fanya **paauu.**
(It makes paauu.)
6. Sadiki: Ach! Mimi na taka thas mingi. Wewe na taka? Uh-huh?
(Ach! Me want this many. You want? Yes?)
(Ach! I want lots of these. Do you want [some]? Yes?)
7. Colin: Mimi ndiyo.
(Me yes.)
(Yes I do.)
8. Sadiki: Uh?
9. Colin: Mimi kubwa tire.
[loud comic voice and holding up a big bread]
(Me big tire.)
(My big tire.)
10. Sadiki: (laughs)
11. Colin: Mimi hacuna taka kula mimi tire.
(Me no want eat me tire.)
(I don’t want to eat my tire.)
12. Sadiki: Huh? (laughing)
13. Colin: Mimi hacuna taka kula moja kubwa tire. [loud comic voice]
(Me no want eat one big tire.)
(I don’t want to eat the big tire.)

14. Sadiki: xxx?
[F takes some of the bread.]
15. Colin: (to F) That's Sadiki's . . . bread. That bread.
16. (to Sadiki) Tegid wewe mkati.
(Take you bread.)
(He took your bread.)
17. F: Hi mkati yango. [teasingly in Swahili to both children]
(This is my bread.)
18. Colin: (to F) Umum. Mkati kwa mimi.
(No. Bread for me.)
(No. The bread is for me.)
19. Sadiki: (to F) Kula thas mimi mkati kwa Colin, yeh?
(Eat this me bread for Colin, yeh?)
(Eat my bread instead of Colin's, yes?)
- [F puts the bread back and the boys return to talking to each other.]
20. Colin: Kula thas mingi.
(Eat this many.)
(Eat lots of these.)
21. Sadiki: Kula moja tire. Mingi kubwa. Kula moja tire.
(Eat one tire. Many big. Eat one tire.)
(Eat a tire. Many are big. Eat a tire.)
22. Colin: Thas kwa **pupu** na moja kula moja tire. xx mimi tire?
(This for "fart" one eat one tire . . . xx me tire?)
(It makes you fart if you eat the tire . . . xx my tire?)
23. Sadiki: Thas kwa **pupu** na moja kula moja tire. xx mimi tire?
[Repeats Colin's utterance exactly with precise intonation.]
(It makes you fart if you eat the tirexxx my tire?)
24. Colin: Huh?
25. Sadiki: (laughs)
26. Colin: Nini we lathas? Na fanya nini?
[looking at one of Sadiki's breads]
(What you like this? Make what?)
(What did you make like this? What did you make?)
27. Sadiki: xxx na kula mimi mkati?
[Talks with mouth full]
(xxx eat my bread?)
28. Colin: Kwa kucheza wewe nini?
(For play you what?)
(Who will you be for play/pretend?)
29. Sadiki: Oge? xx bandit
(Okay? xx bandit)
30. Colin: Kwa kucheza mi xx bandit.
(For play I'll be a bandit.)
31. Sadiki: xxx
32. Colin: Wewe jua nini **pupu**?
(You know what pupu?)
(Do you know what pupu is?)
33. Sadiki: **Pupu?** [laughing] xx **pupu?** [laughing]
34. Colin: Uh uh, **pupu** . . . **pupu** moja thas, wewe na sidown kwa choo,
moja **pupu's** cumin.
(No, pupu . . . pupu one this, you sit down for bowel movement
one pupu is coming.)
(No, pupu . . . pupu is this, when you sit down for a bowel
movement a pupu comes.)
35. Sadiki: Oh. [laughs]

The full cycle of invention depicted in the above protocol includes several distinct characteristic elements that are possibly typical of the etymologies of many neologisms in the pidgin (e.g., *kiki*, *tena*, *diding*, *gninginge*). These elements include: (1) onomatopoeia and sound play (line 2: *pzzzt*), (2) designation of a semantic value to the sound play vocalization (line 4: *Bottom na fanya pzzzt.*), and (3) adaptation of the play sound to the phonological

system with eventual reduplication (lines 2, 4: *pzzzt* > line 5: *paauu* > line 22, 23, 32–35: *pupu*). Others (e.g., Garvey 1977; Jakobson 1971; Jespersen 1921) have noted similar speculations about individual children creating lexical items in these ways, the way a child might come to call a truck a *vroom*.

The three characteristics mentioned above function quite independently of any joint discourse effort or conversation. But as the text above illustrates this particular progression from playful sound to lexical item occurs gradually and is woven through and integrated into the flow of their discursive interactions. When a shared and symmetrical language is developed (as opposed to an individual child's lexical innovation) an additional set of interactive elements must be operating as well. The text illustrates several such discourse devices used for mutually understanding these linguistic inventions. This cooperative process includes (1) repetition (lines 23, 33), (2) definition (line 34), and (3) agreement (lines 5, 35). These characteristics provide the communicative resources for developing the shared competence in their emerging language.

Consider further analysis of the discursive processual interaction. In line 1, Colin appears to be inviting Sadiki to join him in his verbal play with *silly*. Sadiki responds to the game saying "silly bottom" (line 2), a frequent Britishism used teasingly by and with their schoolmates. Sadiki then adds the farting sound. Instead of continuing the play with *silly*, Colin (probably amused by Sadiki's little joke) responds to Sadiki and asks the question in line 14 "Bottom fanya ninyi?" The conversation then briefly focuses on the designation of shared meaning for the sound *pzzzt*. It is possible at this point that Colin may have wanted to stay with this topic and initiate the lexical agreement he seems to be moving toward. But Sadiki changes the topic and they both move on. When the lexical item *pupu* first appears in line 22, it suggests that Colin has not dropped his original interest and has in fact been modifying the phonological shape of the original sound. Sadiki's immediate and exact imitation and repetition (line 23) in response to Colin's utterance is the only such response in this protocol. Sadiki repeats the utterance with the exact intonation and prosody. His precise repetition of the utterance appears to be a spontaneous reaction to the fact that he did not understand what Colin said, possibly because of the inclusion of the lexical item *pupu*. At this point in the interaction there is no reason to guess that Sadiki recognized *pupu* as a word. The repetition performed the function of at least briefly keeping the conversation going (see Ochs 1977) and allowing Sadiki the chance to play with and duplicate the unknown sound and utterance. In developing a shared language repetitions of new vocalizations are probably essential to produce equally competent speakers.

In line 32 when Colin directly asks Sadiki if he knows what *pupu* means, the conversation moves to a metalinguistic level. Sadiki laughs and says "Oh" indicating he understands, accepts, and is amused. The process of defining and agreeing is not unconsciously evolving through sound play and repetitions but is in this particular instance an articulated negotiation, acknowledging the arbitrary nature of language. This ability to agree on and discuss their language in this way is another device for assuring the shared competence and symmetrical performance of their pidgin.

Grammatical Creativity

The next examples explore the boys' play with change in several syntactic elaborations. For example, while the bare pidgin the boys generated initially was characterized by a lack of articles and markers, it appears that they considerably extended the functions, uses, and meanings of one Swahili word, using it frequently and in a variety of ways. The word was *moja*, the Swahili word for *one* (see fuller discussion of *moja* in Gilmore 1979a). In everyday uses of Swahili it would be heard only rarely, either in counting, *moja* (one), *mbili* (two),

tatu (three); or in answering a question such as, "How many? *Moja* (one)." When listening to the children speaking their language, however, the increasing frequency of the use of *moja* was striking and noticeable. Both children used it repeatedly and in a variety of sentential environments. The repetitious rhythm punctuated every utterance with multiple tokens of its use. A detailed analysis of the uses of *moja* indicated that it was gaining determiner status, representing an article, for example, *moja nyimbani* (a house), and also having pronoun status, for example, "Ah hacuna moja" [Ah that's not one]. This seems strikingly similar to the expanded use in Tok Pisin of the word *wanpela* (one fellow) that has similar determiner functions. The data also indicate that *moja* appeared to be expanding its functions to serve as an auxiliary with certain verbs. It is clear that *moja* had considerably elaborated its meaning and its syntactic function far beyond its original meaning and use in Swahili.

The final examples of grammatical change and elaboration focus on tense and aspect. These examples illustrate some of the devices, semantic and grammatical, that the children used to communicate temporal and aspectual relationships in their speech. Pidgins are usually described as lacking markers of tense and aspect whereas creole languages not only possess but also share many characteristic ways of treating these temporal relations (see Bickerton 1975). An important consideration to keep in mind is that the boys' language was created based on their competencies as young children and not adults. However, it is beyond the scope of this essay to explore these developmental distinctions in any depth. To more closely examine the range of possible ways in which the children expressed tense and aspect, frequently occurring verb strings (e.g., *will have gone*) were analyzed for possible auxiliaries and original tense markers. The following examples describe some of the innovative devices Colin and Sadiki used for expressing temporal relations.

Although the local variety of Swahili did not mark future or past tense or grammaticalize aspectual distinctions, the boys generated original tense and aspect markers. For example, nonpunctuality or durativity refers to a situation lasting for a period of time, while a punctual action takes place momentarily (Comrie 1976). The children created numerous forms for this type of aspectual distinction. Consider one example, the Swahili verb *ende* (to go). In their pidgin Colin and Sadiki expanded the functions of this verb in various ways. They used the word as an auxiliary with states such as *na enda dead* (go dead, dying) indicating that the dying took some duration of time, that it did not happen punctually but dramatically and slowly. The verb *ende* also over time began to frequently appear in a preverbal position and the verb that followed was always unmarked (i.e., the Swahili present tense marker *na* was absent). The function of *ende* seems to be that of an aspectual auxiliary and possibly even a marker of durativity. Much of their pretend play around which these discursive exchanges took place was being described as it was enacted. As the utterances were spoken the boys were pushing Matchbox cars, rocks, and small action figures across the floor, playing out cooperative vignettes. It was important to know what each player was doing so that the next actions would fit the scene. Their play dialogue in these interactions was mapped on to the actions. In many of these instances the actions are ongoing and continuous. One can see why it would be useful in such contexts to distinguish between punctual and nonpunctual actions.

Irrealis or unreal time includes future, conditional, subjunctive, and so forth. Not surprisingly the boys also drew on their linguistic resources to express irrealis in a variety of ways. Statements that began with the word *tend* (pretend) clearly signal unreal time. The uses of *tend* sometimes indicated the statement was descriptive of actions that would be performed following the utterance, and other times setting the stage for other scenarios, thus providing the necessary background information required to make sense out of the activities being played out, usually in a play voice register within the planned play scene.

Kuja is the Swahili verb *to come*. In Colin and Sadiki's pidgin *kuja* appears to function in much the same way that *go* does in Anglo-Creoles (Bickerton 1975), that is, it appears to expand its original function and serve as an irrealis marker, in a preverbal position, to denote future tense. As in the case of expressing duration of activity, it was important in the boys' discursive play routines to express future temporal distinctions. Planning play and enacting it requires linguistic mechanisms for expressing such things as duration, irrealis, and future time. There were numerous innovations created to meet such pragmatic needs.

The Florentine philosopher, Gelli, posited that, "All languages are fit to express the concepts of those who use them; and if they should chance not to be, they make them so." Clearly Colin and Sadiki made their language so. The creative grammatical features in their language are linguistically sophisticated and more common to creolized pidgin languages that have been used by large populations over generations. Surprisingly the boys created these innovations within a few months and at an age when the literature identifies them as developing language learners, rather than virtuoso language inventors.

Miscommunication, Maintenance, and Repair

In the previous examples the children display the symmetrical nature of their competence in the language and their shared lexical and grammatical understandings. This was not always the case. There were also times when they miscommunicated. The following example will analyze an interaction where the children were unsuccessful in communicating about the temporal aspects of their interaction. A closer examination of how they struggle discursively to negotiate and renegotiate meaning will be informative.

The interaction takes place outside the house near a tree with a rope swing. The children are alone and, at my request, the tape recorder is on. Sadiki is trying to ask Colin if he would like to listen to what they have said on the tape recorder so far. Colin does not understand Sadiki's request and misinterprets what he is saying. Sadiki's use of *li*, the Swahili past tense marker, in line 8 of the transcript below, is a rare occurrence in the data. Sadiki's reliance on his own more advanced competence in Swahili (i.e., using *li* to denote past) appears useless with Colin who apparently still does not understand that Sadiki is not referring to what Colin has just said (simple past) but to what they had been saying for the last 15 minutes on the tape.

Excerpt Number Two

1. Sadiki: Wewe na taka sema sasa / si jua . . . oh . . . eh..thas
(You want say now / I don't know . . . oh..eh..this)
(You want to know what we said now / we don't know..oh..eh ..this)
 2. Colin: Kwa kucheza / ogay so mimi na taka enda na swing ogay / sha sha.
(For play / okay so I want to go and swing okay / sha sha)
 3. Kuja mi na kucheza the swing Sadiki / Sha sha.
(Come I play the swing Sadiki / sha sha)
(I will play on the swing Sadiki / sha sha)
 4. Sasa mimi na sema kabisa.
(Now I say enough)
(Now I said enough.)
- [They take turns on the swing and talk briefly.]
5. Colin: Mimi na jua moja run moja tree na swing, wewe na jua.
(I know I run to the tree and swing, you know)
(I know how to run to the tree and swing, do you know?)
 6. Sadiki: Na run na moja tree kwa uko swing—wewe na taka jua na sema?
(Run the tree swing there / you want to know what we say?)

- ([I know] you run to the tree and swing there / [now] do you want to know what we said?)
7. Colin: Nini?
(What?)
8. Sadiki: Wewe na taka jua si li sema/ is wap . . . sema si jui?
(You want know not LI say/ is where . . . say not know)
(Do you want to know what we said before..we don't know what we said?)
9. Colin: Uh uh mimi na taka jua swing hacuna ingine?
(No me want know swing nothing again?)
(Do I need to explain to you about the swing again?)
10. Gay sasa ona/swing sema moja las/so na taka tegid ona las . . .
running kwisha.
(Okay now look/ swing say one like this. so want take look like this
. . . running finish)
(Okay now look/ I'll explain how you swing like this/so you need to
take it like this, look, and finish running)
11. swing mrefu . . . jua sasa? Uhuh like Afrigan swing
(swing farknow now? yes like African swing)
(swing far . . . do you know now? It's like an African swing)
12. uko Afriga nawenda na jua las kwa uko.
(there Africa go know like this for there)
(you know you go like this over there in Africa)
13. Sadiki: Mimi na jua latha swing. Wewe na ona! [annoyed tone]
(I know like that swing, you look!)
(I know how to swing like that. You watch me!)
- [Sadiki swings]
14. Colin: Um hum.
15. Sadiki: (inaudible) xxx
16. Colin: Uh uh..riding mi horse kwa Pembrook . . . sha
(No..I ride my horse at Pembrook . . . sha)
- [TAPE OFF] [TAPE ON]
17. Colin: Ogay. Sasa mimi hacuna jua nini mi sema so bas
(Okay. now me not know what me say so enough)
(Okay. Now I don't know what I said so we'll stop)
18. Know what I said? I said I want to stop a bit
19. because we want to listen to what we hear. So just stop a bit ogay.
Be back soon.

In line 1, Sadiki asks Colin if he wants to know what they said now (on the tape recorder). However Colin understands it to be a request for him to say something now. In lines 3 and 4 Colin says that now he has talked enough for the tape recorder and he and Sadiki are about to play on the swing. In line 6, Sadiki again tries to ask Colin if he is curious about what they have said on the tape, "Wewe no taka jua na sema?" [You no want know say?/Do you want to know what we said?] But again there is nothing in the utterance or in the immediate context to let Colin understand that the statement refers to something that occurred in the past. Colin confirms this with his question in line 7, "Nini?" [What?]. At this point Sadiki attempts to clarify the confusion about time by using the Swahili marker *li* to establish past tense. Colin still does not understand and thinks that Sadiki is saying that he doesn't know what Colin has said about how to swing (line 5). Colin therefore goes into a lengthy demonstration of how to swing, slowly describing his actions as he performs and then twice (lines 11–12) asking Sadiki if he now understands. Sadiki's frustration with Colin's didactic behavior in addition to his lack of understanding can be heard in Sadiki's annoyed tone when he delivers line 13, declaring that he quite well knows how to swing that way. Sadiki then tells Colin to watch him as he further proves his own swinging competence. Colin acknowledges this as he looks on at Sadiki's swinging demonstration saying, "Um hum." Line 15 is a statement by Sadiki that is inaudible—possibly he is suggesting at this time that they turn

off the tape recorder, so as not to further document their linguistic failures. But Colin, who still does not understand, begins telling Sadiki about the time he saw this type of swing at Pembroke School when he was horseback riding. In the middle of his utterance the tape recorder is shut off—probably by Sadiki. It will never be known just how the children repaired their communication, but it is clear that in some way, while the recorder was off, Sadiki communicated with complete accuracy to Colin. When the tape is once again on, Colin finally demonstrates that he knows what Sadiki wanted to do and now shares the same goal. He too now wants to listen to what they have been saying on the tape. When Colin tells the tape recorder in pidgin what he is going to do, he uses no past markers. Even when he explains to the tape recorder in English he does not say that they want to listen to what they *said* but to “What we hear.” This suggests his own developmental limitations for expressing past before past. Yet they have managed to understand each other and now share the same meaning for these words. The process with which they managed this will remain a mystery but the ultimate success of their communication is documented and will remain an inspiring testimony about the human ability to communicate in spite of apparent linguistic limitations and obstacles.

This example demonstrated that the children did not have elaborated linguistic devices for placing events in past time. The facility with which the children express themselves about present and future stands in striking contrast to the hard work that went into communicating about the past. We can assume that they did not frequently use their language to discuss temporal complexities of past experience but instead their language functioned mainly to facilitate contextual activity and future planning. The example above provides evidence that in spite of the limited linguistic resources they had, they were still able to get the past temporal message through.

Although their pidgin was largely symmetrical, it was constantly developing and changing, causing continuous need for discursive work involving interactional repetition, repair, negotiation, adaptation, innovation, and creative meaning making. Almost all of this maintenance work was embedded in play and play-related activities. Much the way Jourdan (2008) identifies the culture of work, in slave-generated plantation pidgins, as the locus for the exploration of meaning and as the social context for extended and sustained contact, *play* served as the interactional center and cultural context for Colin and Sadiki. As Sadiki’s mother told me, “Play is the work of children.”

Colin began the year with competence in English and gradually built a degree of competence in Swahili over the course of the period. Although he could communicate his needs and generally feel confident communicatively, Colin’s competence in Swahili was limited. He never needed a degree of proficiency beyond a certain level because his conversation with adults was limited (as the tradition goes) and he did not often or regularly play with predominantly Swahili-speaking children.

Sadiki began the year with competence in Samburu and limited competence in Swahili. It is difficult to assess accurately just exactly what Swahili competence Sadiki had. I suspect it was significantly more than he demonstrated with us. What is clear is that Sadiki was fluent in Samburu, that he had more proficiency in Swahili than Colin did, and that he could code switch easily from English to Swahili and Samburu as well as to the boys’ pidgin. The following example traverses these overlapping language domains and illustrates Sadiki’s multilingual proficiency and communicative competence.

This interaction was recorded ten months after we arrived on a voice letter that Colin was sending to his grandmother. Colin asks Sadiki to say some things in Samburu for his grandmother. As Sadiki does so, Colin attempts to negotiate the translations and mediate the discourse. However Sadiki’s multilingual abilities make this a challenging task for Colin.

Excerpt Number Three

1. Colin: Sadiki ni nini ngombe kwa Kisamburu? [in Pidgin]
(Sadiki what is cow in Samburu?)
2. Sadiki: Ngishu [in Samburu]
(cow)
3. Colin: He just told you cow in Samburu [English to grandmother]
[I make some other suggestions about what he might say and then Colin turns the tape recorder off and privately speaks to Sadiki in their pidgin; he then turns the tape recorder back on and they continue.]
4. Colin: (inaudible) xxx sema kwa Kisamburu
(say for Samburu/talk in Samburu)
5. Sadiki: Sema ninyi?
(Say what?)
6. Colin: Mingi
(Lots)
7. Sadiki: Oge. (Samburu utterance—XXXXXXXXXX).
8. Colin: Nini wewe na sema?
(What did you say?)
9. Sadiki: Uh, (pause) mm, mm.
10. Colin: Nini wewe na sema, Sadiki?
(What did you say, Sadiki?)
11. Sadiki: xxx piga mpira kila siku na Colin [in Swahili]
(xxx kick the ball every day with Colin)
12. Colin: Nini wewe na sema, Sadiki?
(What did you say, Sadiki?)
13. Sadiki: (laughs)
14. Colin: Nini wewe na sema, Sadiki?
(What did you say, Sadiki?)
15. Sadiki: Mi nawenda kwa mingi na leo piga mpira kwa mingi [in Pidgin]
(I go for many today kick ball for many)
16. Colin: He said that every time we kick
17. Colin/Sadiki: the ball [both boys simultaneously in English]
18. Colin: every d—d um day! [silly playful voice]

In this brief interaction Sadiki demonstrates his competence in the range of language varieties available to him. He also displays his abilities to participate with appropriate language choices in a single speech event to multiple overlapping audiences for a variety of purposes. For example in line 11 Sadiki uses the phrase *kila siku*, Swahili for *every day*. I suggest he chose to respond in Swahili to be formal and polite in this public performance for an elder, Colin's grandmother. Colin clearly did not understand the Swahili expression *kila siku* and asks Sadiki what he said (lines 12 and 14). Sadiki, recognizing Colin does not understand him, code switches to their pidgin in line 15. Colin's immediate comprehension of his response is clear as he begins to translate the utterance into English for his grandmother (lines 16–18). Sadiki also demonstrates his comprehension of all of the shifting language terrain chiming in with Colin in English (the ball) in line 17. He is clearly following, even anticipating, all of Colin's English translations.

Conclusion: Transcending Linguistic Hegemony

The oppressive English colonial history and overwhelming African poverty were potent aspects of daily life, often making Colin and Sadiki's friendship painfully controversial. We lived a life style that dramatically contrasted with our neighbors. We had cars, a full pantry, a kerosene refrigerator, access to medicine, education, and social networks completely unavailable to them. Initially the African project assistants were disturbed that Sadiki and his sisters were coming into our headquarters and would send them home. It

took some time and tears to get all of that settled. Both children eventually were able to move with apparent ease between the two worlds in ways their parents could not. They would play at each other's houses, eat each other's food, and frequently interact with both families. School was the site of additional exclusiveness. I had to implore the teacher who ran the little preschool the children attended, to admit Sadiki as a student there. The other dozen or so students came from more elite homes—children of English lords and ladies, ranch owners and managers, an African military general, a United Nations agricultural consultant from Indonesia, and the like. It was almost a local scandal when Sadiki was admitted. (The teacher was eventually wonderfully supportive and Sadiki continued his education at the school after we left. The same teacher also helped for years to supervise his continued schooling.)

The range of linguistic repertoires on our hillside included four to sometimes six local languages depending on the presence of additional transient employees who lived temporarily on the hill. All interactions across tribal groups and with the researchers and ranch owners was in the local variety of Up-Country Swahili. English was the language of the colonizers; Swahili, the more formal language of government, employers, and strangers. On the hillside each family had its own private language of intimacy in which they communicated with each other and expressed their closeness. The mere use of different languages conveyed power relationships, intimacy, and distance.

There were strong vestiges of colonialism in conveying roles and statuses when using each of these different languages. Consider the following excerpts from translation exercises taken from F. H. Le Breton's 1968 publication, *Up-Country Swahili: Swahili Simplified*, the Swahili book kept at the headquarters. Le Breton writes that this is a book "on the sort of Swahili that all normal Europeans and Africans talk" (1968:1). The text also painfully depicts the uneven colonial power arrangements and social order Le Breton assumes were "normal." Consider these translation exercises:

Translate: Look here cook, since I ate that bread you made I have been very ill, because you cook extremely badly, also you are always late, if you do it again I shall sack you altogether. [p. 39]

Translate: If a woman brings a tin with much unripe coffee I shall refuse her reward. Now you, old man, your pay is ten shillings, but you have already borrowed three, there remain seven shillings. Tell the man to give out *posho*, women of three tins get a whole measure, and those of only one tin do not get any. [p. 44]

Translate: Boy, my razor is spoilt, it will not cut even a little, I know you have used it to shave your head, and my scissors likewise, they are still dirty with your black hairs. [p. 51]

The hierarchical social stratification is made highly visible in these translation examples. Sadly it was an accurate representation of the social order on the hillside and in the broader society in the mid-1970s. The unequal power arrangements expressed in every language choice was ever present. Use of the different languages conveyed different relationships and historical messages (Bakhtin 1975). For example, when the English ranch owner came to deliver "rations" (milk and *posho*/maize-flour) to the workers on Fridays, he would address the two children by saying "Jambo Sadiki" and "Hello Colin" using English to address Colin and Swahili to address Sadiki. The discursive distinction, although considered polite, marked powerful race and class messages (Foucault 1972).

The children's language created no asymmetrical status messages the way Swahili and English did. The boys were able to resist being socialized into existing language ideologies and instead, they created new ones. What they called "Our Language" created a free space for their friendship and a site for their discursive resistance. The children boldly demonstrated their ability to reshape language policies and social practices through their everyday speech. Their de facto language policies were unplanned, spontaneous, unexplicit, informal, unofficial, private, bottom up, enacted through everyday oral verbal practices.

The boys' private language bonded them as much as it reflected their bonds, changing the linguistic landscape and transforming the social and symbolic order all around them. Each boy's language proficiency varied across the 15 months in the languages most readily available to them, Swahili and English. But both children demonstrated equal proficiency in one language, the pidgin they created together. Maintaining their symmetrical competence required daily negotiation, continually mediating any real and potential asymmetries in their everyday discursive practices.

The overt colonial racism and "arrogant behavior of the early British colonists" (Conniff 2007:40) that dominated Kenyan society and the hillside community was palpable. It penetrated every interaction. The racial tensions and dramatic economic and political inequality are well known and well documented in popular books and films like *Out of Africa* and *White Mischief*, which identified The Great Rift Valley as the infamous "Happy Valley," where white aristocratic settlers indulged in a luxurious lifestyle surrounded by African peoples in their employ who lived in desperate poverty. This racism manifested itself not only in language but also in all aspects of life in the Great Rift Valley where these tensions continue to this day (see, e.g., Conniff 2007; MacIntosh 2009, 2010).

The boys' special language crossed and transcended these marked social and linguistic borders. They were bold in their discursive performances and thrived on the positive support everyone on the hillside offered. The boys' resistance to the prevailing language ideologies that established inequality among speakers (Hymes 1973; Philips 2007) was multilayered and paradoxical. Although the larger colonial social order prevailed, the smaller hillside community had early on made it clear that the boys' special language was a "blessing" and a "gift from God (Mungu)." My own research interest in and regular tape recordings of it also added to its elevated status and legitimacy. The language came to function as symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1977) for the children, reinforcing the recognition, acceptance, prestige, and status of their friendship. Their resistance therefore might be considered a sanctioned resistance, one in which their bold discursive parrhesia (Foucault 2001; Gilmore 2008) and newly aligned identity was not thwarted in its immediate social context. The situation may have unfolded very differently if, for example, I had forbidden them to use the language because I feared it might interfere with their language development, or if Sadiki's family felt it violated their own cultural norms.

Instead their language functioned as a stance-saturated linguistic form used to challenge "social, political and moral hierarchies" (Jaffe 2009:3). When called on to translate for each other in public, for example, the two would stand up very close, faces almost touching, and whisper in their pidgin language. These ritualized translations took place for example when English or Swahili speaking children came to visit. These speech events usually involved directions for soccer games, races, and the like. Whether in all cases they needed one another to translate is unclear, especially as they each acquired more language competencies in English (for Sadiki) and Swahili (for Colin). Nonetheless, the ritual of translation (both a public and private performance at once) persisted to the end. The performances of these identity rituals were a way for them to "give off" (Blommaert 2007:203) information about who they were and to establish boundary markers to the others present.

Their pidgin language not only facilitated their communication but also made a social semiotic statement about the existence of, and the values and beliefs in, their own speech community. Their own language ideology was a metapragmatic (Silverstein 1993) pronouncement. It was a public declaration of the symmetry of their relationship and the possibility that the existing rigid and oppressive biases of the everyday language policies and culture practices surrounding them could be challenged and transformed by two children.

Identities may be chosen or imposed by language use—used to distance and differentiate or for creating shared identities. Bucholtz describes identity reconstruction through language use as “emerg[ing] over time through discursive and other social practices” (1999:12). She suggests that identity is produced in social interaction and through a process of contestation and collaboration. Colin and Sadiki created new identities and new local language policies enacted through their own discursive practices. Their policies transfixed and transformed those around them who were touched by their bold love story. Through daily language creation they both generated and were affected by these unfolding new language ideologies. The language created a place for their friendship, a place “invested with meaning” that shaped social life and served as a “critical force . . . both locational and conceptual, physical and psychological” (Schieffelin 2002:156). This place, constructed through and by language, both held and projected their language identities and ideologies.

Although ideology is often identified as explicitly discursive, it can also be seen, as in the case of Colin and Sadiki, as behavioral, structural, inexplicit, prereflective, and unconscious signifying language practices to be observed in lived experience. Although their language ideologies were not often explicitly discursive they were regularly, powerfully, and symbolically enacted. Their language, unintelligible to everyone else, markedly changed the linguistic ecology of their tiny hillside community and affected the language ideologies, practices, and policies of every other child and adult living and visiting there.

In writing this essay, I have only begun to retell Colin and Sadiki’s story and the case of their pidgin language. The data are rich and the examples expansive. Much remains to be told. These limited glimpses of their language experiences illustrate the boys’ remarkable linguistic resourcefulness and their powerful social agency. But while this story celebrates the language and lives of my son Colin and his friend Sadiki, it also celebrates the language capacities of all children and their potential for communicative brilliance. To some degree there are hints of these discursive behaviors and transformative processes in every child’s daily social interactions and play. The unusual extreme social and environmental circumstances that Colin and Sadiki experienced created the need for their extreme and extended discursive creativity. We need to consider what contexts, in and out of school, would best nurture and develop the rich and too often untapped language and communicative capacities of all children (see, e.g., Gilmore and Glatthorn 1982; Gilmore 1983, 1985; Hymes 1972; Smith 1983). Colin and Sadiki’s fluid movement within and across sharply contested linguistic and cultural borders should remind us that the unmet challenges in developing successful programs for bilingual education, English language learners, and minority language speakers are not about the children and their lacking abilities, but about our own language ideologies and the deep underlying doubt in children’s language competencies that are instantiated in the foundations of our educational institutions and policies.

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Notes

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1. William Samarin, a noted pidgin–creole scholar, reported that his three-year-old daughter “developed, in interacting with her older African playmate, a pidgin based on Sango, English, French, and Gbeya” (personal communication, William Samarin, November 2, 1981). However, Samarin did not document or record their pidgin. Although this case resembles some instances of twin idioglosses, one major distinguishing difference is that, unlike most of the reported idioglosses, Colin and Sadiki were competent in a first language before generating the pidgin and afterward were able to continually and appropriately code-switch bi- and trilingually (e.g., for further examples of idioglosses and twin language see Bakker 1987; Hale 1886; Horowitz 1978; Jespersen 1921; Luria and Yudovitch 1956). Further, while Colin and Sadiki’s language may be reminiscent of the secret play languages that children often develop using rules of simple substitution and rearrangement of their shared lexicon (e.g., Pig Latin), this pidgin language invention is a completely different speech phenomenon, involving extensive lexical, semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic language innovation and creativity by speakers of two different languages.

2. My late husband, David Smith, originally introduced me to the study of pidgin and creole languages. Largely because I had read and been inspired by David’s compelling articles comparing child language development and the pidginization process before I went to Africa, I realized the need to document the boys’ unique language situation as it arose and developed.

3. See Vitale (1980) for a fuller description of other Swahili based pidgins such as KiVita (war language) which arose during World War II with the presence of English, French and Italian troops in East Africa; KiShamba, or plantation language; KiHindi, the Swahili used between Asians and Africans; and KiSetla, the variety of Swahili used by Africans and Europeans, to name a few.

4. Although no studies of children creating an original pidgin were documented in the literature, Bickerton’s highly controversial proposal for initiating a controlled experiment to induce the genesis of pidgin language by placing six linguistically different families on an isolated island was in the process of being developed in the late 1970s (Berreby 1992, Bickerton 2008). The project was considered unethical (“forbidden”) and never funded.

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