

CHAPTER 1

UWERYUMACHINI!: A LANGUAGE DISCOVERED

The limits of language are reached when language becomes unfamiliar, alien, altered. The limits mark a boundary between the known and the unknown, between the self and the other ... The confrontation with the unknown in language inevitably produces a reassessment of the known. Stories of the encounter with the other have written into them stories of the discovery, and rediscovery, of the self.

Martin Calder¹

“serendipity” ... the discovery, by chance or sagacity, of valid results which were not sought for ... the observation is anomalous, surprising, either because it seems inconsistent with prevailing theory or with other established facts. In either case, the seeming inconsistency provokes curiosity; it stimulates the investigator to “make sense of the datum,” to fit it into a broader framework of knowledge.

Robert Merton²

“Uweryumachini!!” Colin and Sadiki kicked up puffs of hot pale dust as they jumped up and down, excitedly yelling and pointing to a small airplane flying high above them in the clear blue Kenya sky. “Uweryumachini!” They gleefully giggled and shouted. With outstretched arms they reached up, jumping high, as if to touch the winged visitor. Then turning to each other, face to face, with their mouths and eyes wide open in exaggerated

expressions of surprise, they burst into wild laughter again. Huge smiles flashed across their faces as they loudly chanted over and over, “Uweryumachini!!” Eyes glistening with delight, they continued their ecstatic shouting and jumping with eager rhythmic repetition. It was as if the greatest discovery had just interrupted their daily morning soccer ball ritual. The unexpected airborne surprise buzzed its way across the vast sky that reflected itself perfectly in the flamingo-rimmed glassy blue soda lake below. It buzzed high over the endless savannah landscape marked by dramatic volcanic craters and the sharply carved lines of precipitous steep scarps and rocky cliffs that were so characteristic of this part of the Great Rift Valley. The massive sky and uninterrupted sweeping panoramic view surrounded the two little boys in all directions. “Uweryumachini!! Uweryumachini!!” Their voices rang out on the remote hillside wrapped in playful giggles as they shared their sheer, intense, and playful joy!

It was 1975. Colin’s father and I were both graduate students studying the communicative behaviors of a troop of 92 wild olive baboons (*Papio anubis*). Hugh Gilmore, my husband then, was a doctoral student in physical anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania, conducting his dissertation research on adult male face-to-face social interaction with a focus on their communicative vocalizations. I was completing research for my Master’s degree in education, focused on developmental psychology at Temple University, examining how juvenile baboons learned, interpreted, and displayed their place in, and knowledge of, the troop’s complex hierarchical ranking system.³ We were observing a free-ranging baboon troop that previous researchers had named the Pumphouse Gang, after the Tom Wolfe book.⁴ The aptly named baboon troop often “hung out” near a small pump house, a pumping station for the ranch’s water supply system that was at the bottom of a cliff in the center of their home range. The Pumphouse Gang was one of many troops that lived and foraged on Kekopey Ranch, a sprawling 48,000 acre cattle farm near the town of Gilgil, Kenya. Arthur and Tobina Cole, the ranch’s aristocratic British colonial second-generation Kenya land owners, had generously made an old uninhabited manager’s house available as a headquarters for the Gilgil Baboon Research Project.

For the five years before we arrived, the headquarters had been home to a string of primatologists, mostly students of the American physical anthropologist Sherwood Washburn, a pioneer in the field of primatology. The house was situated on an isolated hillside on a high bluff at the far south end of the huge ranch, eight miles from the Coles’ antique-filled historic farmhouse. The baboon headquarters was an airy six-room tin-roofed stone bungalow with the exterior painted a deep earth-colored red. The Red

2 Uweryumachini!

House (*Kiserigwa*), as it was often called, would be our family's new home for the next 15 months.

The researchers at the Gilgil Baboon Research Project shared the hillside with a half dozen African ranch workers and their families. The African workers' way of life stood in striking contrast to both the aristocratic entitled lifestyle of the British colonial land owners and to the privileged position of the Gilgil Baboon Project's researchers. The hillside African residents worked either for the ranch or for the project earning very meager wages. The Gilgil Baboon Project workers were better paid, earning increasing amounts over the years, from \$40 a month in the early years, up to \$100 in the later years. They lived with their families in two very small one-room stone dwellings just over the rise, about 50 yards away, on the other side of the hill. Sadiki was the son of a Samburu mother and Turkana father. Sadiki's parents were ranch workers for the Coles. Sadiki and his four sisters lived in one of the stone dwellings on the hillside with their parents, who herded cattle on foot and ran the pumps for the cattle's water supply, fed from a hot spring on the far north side of the ranch.

The cluster of African families on the hillside was multilingual, representing four to six tribal peoples. Each family spoke its own tribal language to each other. There was a broad range of diverse linguistic repertoires including Abaluhya, also known as Luhya, a Bantu language, and Luo, Maasai, Turkana, and Samburu (i.e., North Maa), all Nilotic languages with Luo being more distantly related to the others. There was occasional use of Kipsigis, Boran, and Somali depending on the presence of rotating ranch employees living on the hill. Our family spoke English as had all the previous researchers in the Red House. The language used to communicate across these highly marked and compartmentalized linguistic and cultural borders was a regional variety of Kiswahili, often called Up-Country Swahili, Kitchen Swahili, Kisetta, or Kisetla.⁵ The local variety of Swahili spoken in this region of the Kenya bush is not to be confused with Standard or East Coast Kiswahili.⁶ This Up-Country variety, a simplified or pidginized Swahili that Hancock has referred to as the "most aberrant variety"⁷ of Swahili, was a second language for African people living in Up-Country Kenya. It was also historically the language the colonial employers used to communicate with their African servants and workers.

The first day we arrived at the headquarters, all of the hillside residents were lined up in the small open courtyard standing in a row ready to formally greet the new *wazungu* (white) researchers. They had heard us approaching long before we turned our white Kombi Volkswagen bus on to the long dirt track that led up the hill to the Red House. Mike

and Cordelia Rose, colleagues who were studying colobus monkeys at nearby Lake Naivasha, had kindly hosted us in their small whitewashed mud and wattle thatched roof cottage the night before. The distinctive bel-lows, snorts, and grunts of nearby hippos and myriad other strange new animal sounds filled the cool night air as our little family tried to fall asleep anticipating the new life awaiting us, just miles away.

In the morning Mike and Cordelia led us, caravan style, to the head-quarters where they had often visited the previous baboon researchers. Our two vehicles stirred up long trailing veils of tawny dust clouds as we made our way across the parched and sun-baked savannah and up the hill, stop-ping to carefully open and close the cattle paddock gates before arriving at the headquarters. We all climbed out of the vehicles and began to exchange *jambo's* (hello's), smiles and introductions, each of us shaking hands as we walked down the warm and welcoming reception line.

Colin and Sadiki's eyes fixed on each other almost immediately. Sadiki stood out among his older and younger sisters. The boys were just about the same height and age. We would discover later that their birthdays were only one month apart. In the midst of the initial awkward formality and confusion around our introductions, everyone easily observed the instant magnetism between the two boys. Their new friendship took only a few days to emerge. From the fourth day after we arrived at the research station, Sadiki and Colin spent most of their days together, sunrise to sunset. They were to become inseparable friends, playing together almost daily for the next 15 months.

Initially the two children struggled to communicate in the local Up-Country Swahili, visibly using lots of gestures and charades during the first days and weeks. 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 match box cars Colin brought with him were favorite and frequent play props. Lying side by side on Colin's bed, looking at *Tintin* comic books, they softly pointed out pictures of *simba* (lion), *samaki* (fish), and the few Swahili words they seemed to know in common. It was heartwarming to observe them together. A little more than a month after our arrival, I wrote in my journal, "Sitting on the little wooden kitchen chairs in the cool courtyard shade, Sadiki patiently teaches Colin a melodious traditional Samburu song. Sadiki's rich peaceful voice sounds so wise and old for just a little boy as he softly chants the haunting Samburu melody; trance-like, tranquil, and knowing. Colin hums along catching a few syllables and soon his little voice is singing along and sounding surprisingly deep and wise and peaceful too." 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 match box cars in an imaginary African safari rally game, each playing “Action Man” or “Batman.”

I was treasuring their budding friendship and so pleased to see Colin learning Swahili in such a playful loving way. He had not really been all that enthusiastic about the more formal vocabulary instruction I had been offering. In those early weeks I hadn’t yet realized that Sadiki’s first and primary language in the home was actually Samburu and that he was not a fluent Swahili speaker.

“Uweryumachini! Uweryumachini!” The two boys called out again and again as they continued jumping up and down, pointing to the sky and gleefully shouting at the small airplane flying high above them. Their giggles punctuated each utterance. Their voices carried over the swirl of late morning breezes and through the open window where I was working at my desk. I looked up to see them completely engaged in their exuberant play. I smiled, seeing them enjoying themselves so thoroughly, feeling so glad we had come to Kenya.

“Uweryumachini!” they shouted out again. I strained to listen to what they were saying, their high-pitched laughing voices somewhat muffled by the steady constant breeze so familiar on this high bluff above the basin of the Great Rift Valley. I was certain the local Swahili word for “airplane” was “ndege” but I couldn’t quite hear what the boys were calling out. Leafing through my Swahili dictionary, I could find nothing even close to what I thought I heard them shouting. I wasn’t sure how to spell or even parse it. Was it a single word? A phrase? I leaned across my desk and called to the boys to come closer to the open window. They approached and I asked them what they were saying. They mumbled something but I still couldn’t understand. I urged them to repeat themselves slowly so that I could hear them more clearly. They paused and looked at each other as if a great secret had just been revealed – and not quite sure if they had gotten themselves in trouble. They giggled again, then slowly and hesitantly, with furtive sideways glances at each other, 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, a language variety I was to later identify as a spontaneous Swahili pidgin, unintelligible to Swahili speakers.

A little more than two months after our family’s arrival to the hillside and within days of my own initial “discovery,” it seemed that everyone began to notice that the “Swahili” the boys spoke was “different.” While they appeared to speak to each other continuously and to understand each other with ease, no one else could understand them! The Coles and other English

visitors to the hillside, hearing the children play, would initially comment on being quite impressed with Colin's fluent Swahili. But after listening for a few more minutes, with a puzzled look, they would remark, "That's *not* Swahili, is it?"

Sadiki's family too had made the discovery. Sadiki's mother explained to us that because the boys loved each other so much, *Mungu* (God) had blessed them with their own special language. This sacred explanation immediately created an unusual close bond between our two families. Sadiki's older "brother" (actually his mother's young brother), David, who stayed with them on his school breaks, offered, "The language they speak is a very complicated one. Nobody understands it but the two of them." News traveled. Visiting relatives, other friends of Sadiki's family, and co-workers on the ranch would come over the rise to the Red House to see, and hear, the boys.

Sadiki's grandfather traveled several hundred miles to visit and to see the *rafiki mzuri* (good friends) that *Mungu* (God) had blessed with this special gift of a "very complicated" language. Our family was summoned to formally meet with him in a clearing on the side of the hill. Unlike most of the ranch workers, who dressed in western clothing, the *mzee* (elder) was dressed traditionally. Holding his long walking staff erect beside him, Sadiki's grandfather stood tall and regal, draped in a loose earth-colored blanket across one shoulder and adorned with traditional earplugs, colorful beaded arm bands, and bracelets. Slowly he began to speak. Both families stood in a circle around him, silent and attentive. Sadiki's father translated the lean old muscular elder's words from Turkana to Swahili. He spoke words that blessed the boys' special friendship and recognized the close brother-like bond they had made with each other. Then the *mzee* strode up very close to Colin and took his hand, turning his palm up. As a special blessing and an intimate gesture of lasting friendship, he spat twice onto the little open palm. I was both moved by the tribute he paid Colin and mortified, thinking that Colin's first reaction might be to yank his hand back and yell out "yuck." Not anticipating the ritual, I hadn't prepared Colin for it. But the serious ceremonial aura surrounding the event profoundly conveyed its message to all of us and Colin seemed, without any coaching, to sense the special honor being bestowed on him. The little five year old stood quiet, tall, and respectful with his arm outstretched and his small hand open, held firm and tender by Sadiki's grandfather. Sadiki looked on quietly, seriously, and proudly.

The entire hillside community seemed to acknowledge the children's new language, seeing it as a special gift and a blessing from God; something sacred and a symbol of their new friendship. After just a few months

together on this remote hillside, in a complex multilingual contact zone at the borders and limits of language and culture, these two five-year-old friends, one African and one American, from vastly different and strikingly unequal worlds, had formed a special bond and generated a unique means of speech that they called “Our Language.”

Although I was deeply touched and moved by all of the loving attention to the children, the celebration of their friendship, and the affectionate embrace of my son, I was certain that this must all be a very big mistake. I knew this was impossible. I had been an elementary school teacher for six years. At that time I was a children’s fiction writer and curriculum developer for a national educational research laboratory. I was also a part-time graduate student studying language acquisition and developmental psychology. I knew the current language development literature and the literature was very clear – two five year olds simply could not create a new language! In fact, according to Piaget,⁸ egocentric five year olds could barely converse with each other. Piaget argued that they could not really modify or adjust their speech for interlocutors. He asserted that children of this age engaged in parallel monologues rather than genuine conversation. Although most parents could, based on their own direct observations, offer dozens of counterexamples demonstrating that young children are highly skilled and effective social communicators, Piagetian scholarly notions about children’s egocentric speech were professionally widely accepted and unquestioned in 1975. I had studied these prominent child language theories. I had even identified myself as a Piagetian, which I considered a noble alternative to being a Skinnerian in those days. I was a member of the Piaget Society. Piaget and his distinguished colleagues, Hermina Sinclair De-Zwart and Barbel Inhelder, had been regular consultants at Research for Better Schools, Inc. (RBS), the nationally funded educational research laboratory in Philadelphia where I had been working as a writer since Colin’s birth. I even kept a photograph of Piaget smoking his signature pipe and wearing his distinctive beret on my desk at RBS. How could these two five year olds possibly invent a shared language of their own? It simply wasn’t developmentally possible. Piaget said so.

At that time, 40 years ago, in 1975, child language studies were still relatively new and largely influenced by Chomskian goals and research methods such as interview and elicitation (e.g., “repeat after me” or “say this”). Naturalistic and ethnographic studies of everyday child language behavior were not yet widely accepted or even seen as significant.⁹ Cross-cultural knowledge about children’s language development was only beginning to be explored¹⁰ and little was known about children’s actual language behaviors in language contact situations. Linguistic anthropologist Bambi Schieffelin

was still in the field in Papua New Guinea conducting what was later to be published as her ground-breaking ethnographic study of Kaluli child language socialization.¹¹ Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky's¹² more social and interactional understanding of the development of child language and thought was not yet translated or widely read by western scholars. The pivotal studies on the sociocentric language abilities of very young children by Marilyn Shatz and Rochelle Gelman¹³ and Elinor Ochs Keenan,¹⁴ which directly contradicted Piaget's assertions about egocentric speech, had not yet been written.

Given that none of these studies yet existed, and relying on Piaget's theories, I was fairly convinced that children were incapable of such a sophisticated linguistic innovation. I searched for other explanations. Oh no. Maybe it was the little mock language game I made up with Colin that was the source of all this confusion. When we first arrived in Kenya, we had spent a few weeks in Nairobi taking care of myriad bureaucratic tasks and details, getting permits, buying a vehicle, purchasing supplies, and preparing to go to our new field site. In cosmopolitan multilingual Nairobi, though English and Swahili were prominently spoken, we were surrounded by people speaking dozens of other local indigenous and international languages. Colin seemed a bit overwhelmed and confused by the new languages being spoken all around us. He seemed anxious to play with the two young German children we saw in the dining room at breakfast every morning at the old Ainsworth Hotel where we were staying. But the obvious language barrier and Colin's shyness limited anything more than just looking on at their play from a distance, then imitating what they were doing on his own, alone. Feeling a bit concerned and protective, I came up with a playful language game for the two of us. I reassured him that we could be like the many others all around us speaking languages other than English – like the Gujarati family who owned the restaurant where we frequently ate, the Swahili-, Luo-, and Kikuyu-speaking Africans we met daily, and the many European tourists dressed in fashionable safari outfits chatting in cacophonous choruses of Italian, French, and German that we overheard on the patio of the New Stanley Hotel, a convenient spot where we'd meet after doing various errands and Colin would guzzle strawberries and ice cream.

I suggested that we could speak "our own" special language too. I would utter a string of nonsense syllables with exaggerated intonation and dramatic prosody. Then Colin would do the same to answer me. We both had lots of fun with our highly animated nonsensical mock language game. Now I was horrified. I thought Colin must have been using the mock language when he played with Sadiki. Sadiki was probably deferring to and simply

imitating him. Maybe they were both speaking a kind of playful gibberish in Piagetian parallel monologues?

Skeptical and not convinced that the children were really communicating, I decided to conduct a small experiment. I asked Sadiki to wait outside in the courtyard and instructed Colin that when Sadiki returned, Colin should give him specific verbal directions. I asked him to tell Sadiki to do things like “Turn around three times and sit in the blue chair.” “Eat one cookie from the plate on the table.” When Sadiki came back into the house, Colin repeated the directions. To my surprise, Sadiki followed each of the directions exactly! I did the same with Sadiki who also was able to have Colin follow his directions. They both did this all in a Swahili-sounding language that I could not understand. I was shocked but persuaded. I was finally convinced of what my neighbors already were certain of. The boys had actually created, and were speaking, a unique variety of speech that no one else could understand but the two of them. Piaget was wrong. I was captivated.

The word “serendipity” was coined by Horace Walpole, upon discovering a Persian fairy tale about three princes of “Serendip.” In a letter to Horace Mann on January 28, 1754, Walpole described the princes as “always making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things which they were not in quest of.”¹⁵ Many years later, drawing on this neologism, Robert K. Merton developed the notion of a “serendipity pattern” in social science research, referring to the common experience of having an unanticipated and anomalous observation that is both surprising and inconsistent with existing conceptions, ideas, facts, and theories. These unsought for discoveries provoke curiosity and subsequently further scientific inquiry. Merton also draws on Charles Sanders Peirce’s related ideas about the strategic role of the “surprise fact” in his conception of “abduction” (as differentiated from induction and deduction), which leads to the logic of formulating newly invented explanatory hypotheses and new knowledge.¹⁶

At the time I witnessed Colin and Sadiki’s language invention, I had not read Walpole, Merton, or Peirce, but I can vividly recall my complete shock and surprise at these events and my intense curiosity sparked by observing this unexplained linguistic marvel. The discovery of their surprising and unique language behaviors caused me to question all that I knew about child language. It provoked me to systematically pay even closer attention to what was happening in order to seek some orderly way to explain this startling, if not to my knowledge, impossible, phenomenon. Thus began my own serendipitous, unplanned and accidental study, prompting close and detailed observations of the children’s daily interactions and ranging multilingual discursive practices in their numerous linguistic and cultural contexts.

I turned the tape recorder on and began to document and record the children. I recorded their interactions in a range of daily activities including dialogues at mealtime, indoor and outdoor play times, chatting in the back seat on car rides, and the like. I also had them record themselves when they were alone, hoping to compare their public and private interactions. In addition to my cassette recorder, Colin's father had brought some sensitive high-quality recording equipment for taping baboon vocalizations. Hugh helped me record the children's verbal interactions using his more sensitive sound equipment. Strongly influenced by Dell Hymes'¹⁷ ethnography of communication approach, in addition to the recordings I kept detailed written records of my daily observations of their range of public and private, in and out group, and formal and informal social interactions with each other and with the variety of others they encountered on the hillside, at the local market, in shops in town, and later at their little preschool. I also documented our family's daily life experiences and routines in personal journals and letters. These written texts contained the ethnographic details of our everyday lives and the context and setting for the boys' unusual language practices. I was able to document the uses of their idiosyncratic private language over time from its early genesis through its ongoing use and expansion until the day we left to return to the United States, when their ephemeral pidgin ceased to be spoken.

The children's different language proficiencies and practices were dynamic and continuously changing over the course of the time we were there. I kept records of the range and frequency of uses of the different languages in their overlapping, collective, and steadily growing multilingual repertoires – English, Samburu, Up-Country Swahili as well as their own private language.

When we first arrived at Kekopey, Colin spoke English and had learned a few Swahili words. Joab, the project's long-time Abaluhya house servant and cook, who had run the Red House and graciously cared for the needs of its transient residents since the project began, took on the role of our family's *mwalimu* (teacher). With his gentle, kind, and patient encouragement, Colin was acquiring more and more Swahili. Colin developed increasing competence in Swahili and soon seemed able to speak with our African neighbors easily. Late one day at the end of our second month in the Red House, Joab, with an approving nod and smile, commented that Colin knew "*Swahili mingi*" (much Swahili). When I was observing the baboons nearby, Colin would sometimes stay alone with Joab, with whom he communicated only in Swahili. That is not to say that Colin's Swahili was fluent at that point. Though he could communicate his needs and generally feel confident about expressing himself, Colin's competence in Swahili was limited. He never

needed a degree of proficiency beyond a certain level because, as is traditionally appropriate, his conversation with adults was limited, and because we were so isolated he did not often or regularly play with predominantly Swahili-speaking children. However, Colin's Swahili was good enough that when our car broke down on one of our first shopping trips to the nearby town of Nakuru, and we had to hitchhike home with our groceries, Colin assumed the role of translator and interpreter for me. The driver of the lorry (i.e., truck) who kindly picked us up understood Colin's Swahili much better than he did mine. Later Colin, trying to console me, said, "You know the words, Mom, but you don't have the voice for it." My voice did have a nasal resonance when speaking Swahili or, for that matter, English. Colin instead, when speaking Swahili, had picked up Sadiki's rich deep-toned chest resonance with utterances often delivered in command-like syllable stressed staccato tones. This stylistic "deep voice" made them both sound so confident and strong to me, especially for such young children.

Colin certainly didn't seem shy in this new environment. The African neighbors on the hill were very loving and would gently joke and tease with him in Swahili. He managed to respond and hold his own in these stylized humorous interactions. If they drank the milk of the *ngombe* (cow), what did he drink? Colin, even as a very young child, had a great sense of humor and a fast wit and could easily join the fun insisting that he drank the milk of the *nyani* (baboons). He not only demonstrated his competence in his limited but growing Swahili fluency but also in his appropriate performance as a participant in the gentle new teasing routine, a genre he was eagerly and confidently being socialized into.

Sadiki began the year fluent in Samburu, his home language and the language he spoke with his parents and siblings. He had some competence in Swahili but it was difficult to assess accurately his exact level of fluency. I suspected it was significantly more than he demonstrated. In keeping with cultural practice, Sadiki would not freely initiate talk or engage in lengthy conversations with adults. That would have been seen as disrespectful. (Occasionally his eyes would widen with surprise when Colin interacted with us by resisting or negotiating a request to clean his room, finish a meal, or get ready for bedtime; demanding our attention; asking for some indulgence, and the like. It was clear that from Sadiki's experience these were not only unfamiliar but inappropriate, almost outrageous, behaviors for children to engage in with adults.) Since there were rarely other Swahili-speaking children visiting the hillside, there were few opportunities to see him demonstrate his Swahili competence.

Sadiki was of course more proficient in Swahili than Colin. For example, in the early days of their friendship, in response to something Sadiki

might say in Swahili, Colin would respond by repeating the phrase, “*Wewe sema nini?*” (What did you say?). Sadiki would often manage to find the words, gestures or actions that eventually would help Colin understand. But sometimes the frustration got to Colin and he would simply end the play session with an abrupt “*Kwa heri*” (Goodbye). I would witness these events with sympathy for Colin’s frustration but concerned that he had a dismissive ring to his farewell and was not being considerate enough of Sadiki’s feelings, and I would tell him so. Sadiki showed no outward signs of hurt or rejection if he felt them, but I thought he must have. He would simply repeat “*Kwa heri*” as he headed home. I’m sure they were both at times exasperated by their initial limited communicative proficiencies though I never saw Sadiki end a play session out of communicative frustration. But the frequency of these initial and obvious communication failures and frustrations seemed to dramatically decline by the end of the first few weeks.

Sadiki spent many long hours with our family. Although Colin’s father and I spoke to Sadiki in Swahili, we spoke English to one another and to Colin. As the months passed Sadiki became quite competent in English though he rarely spoke it. Eventually his English seemed good enough that, with the enthusiastic approval of his parents, we arranged for him to attend a private English preschool with Colin. At the preschool it was expected that everyone speak English, and the British expatriate teacher was strict about the policy. The children both spoke and did their lessons in English at the school. Sadiki was able to navigate those English language spaces and tasks easily. He excelled there, demonstrating his competency not only with the English language but also with the range of appropriate interactional behaviors and classroom routines of this British school environment that was so new to and different for him.

Both children were eventually able to demonstrate appropriate bi- and trilingual code-switching abilities in each of their multiple overlapping linguistic communities. Many years later, this type of situation systematically occurring in Europe has been described under the rubric of superdiversity.¹⁸ Both children spoke to Africans in Swahili. However, all interactions with one another were in their private language. They regularly demonstrated alternations and co-occurrences in their language use. For example, words quite familiar to them both in Swahili were regularly used when speaking to Africans. When speaking to each other in their private language, these same lexical items were replaced with their own newly invented words. In some cases, they actually invented numerous novel words for a single word they already knew and used regularly in Swahili. For example, while they knew, understood, and used the Swahili word *pesi pesi* (fast), they did not

use it in their own language but actually created three new words that all meant *fast* – *diding*, *tena*, and *gningininga*. Not surprisingly, all of these newly invented words, or neologisms, sounded like the speeding car noises they made when they played together. They used these multiple sounds, which they had reshaped into onomatopoeia words, often and with visible playful pleasure. In addition to lexical code switching, they also shifted their language syntactically. In Up-Country Swahili, for example, the children would say *mpira yangu* (ball of mine – my ball) and in their language they would say *mimi mpira* (me ball – my ball).

The two continually played together mostly in isolation. Occasionally they played with Sadiki's sisters or other children who came to visit, but in general 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 would likely have dramatically altered the language equation.

Initially they shared only minimum competence in Swahili, the language they were expected to use when speaking across the language borders of the numerous compartmentalized self-contained speech communities on the hillside. As a result of not sharing a common language and out of necessity, Sadiki and Colin spontaneously generated a simplified means of speech that would serve their immediate communicative needs – what I identified as a Swahili pidgin, and they called “Our Language.” Their private language sounded Swahili. Swahili was the dominant language and the language from which many of the loan words and most of the pronunciation patterns came. Aside from a few shared words, Samburu remained almost exclusively in Sadiki's repertoire and did not appear to be significantly represented lexically or syntactically in their language. Colin and Sadiki's language shared all of the basic linguistic features and 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, including preverbal negation (e.g., *no run*), the absence of copula (i.e., the verb *to be*), articles (e.g., *the*, *a*) and inflection (e.g., grammatical word endings such as *-ed*, *-ing*). The lexicon is limited as is the function of the language. In Colin's words, “Well, you can't say *everything* in our language.”

Though John Gumperz¹⁹ had claimed that pidgin languages do not ordinarily serve as vehicles for personal friendships, it was clear that this was precisely what the two boys' pidgin was doing. Based on what little I knew and had read about contact languages, I assumed that their language was some variety of a simplified pidgin language. But no literature I knew of at that time suggested that it was possible that two children, without adult

input, could create a pidgin by themselves. The literature generally claimed that children learned pidgins from adults.

As time passed, however, when other linguistic options were clearly available to each of them, namely English and Swahili, they maintained, continued to use, and continually expanded their private pidgin language with lexical expansion and sophisticated syntactic elaboration that was in fact more complex in some grammatical features than the local Up-Country Swahili. These complex linguistic innovations were suggestive of a nascent creolization or elaboration process that they accomplished in an extremely compressed time period. The process of creolization is characterized by an expansion of the pidgin, (re)introducing lexical and grammatical complexities that were reduced, simplified, and missing in the original pidgin, including a growing vocabulary, articles, markers, inflection, and copula, etc. Generally, the creolization process, the elaboration and complication of linguistic features, takes several generations and large populations to accomplish.

The persistence and elaboration of Sadiki and Colin's private language were particularly striking. Even though as time went by they were both demonstrating proficiency in and use of both English and Swahili, they did not stop using their language and instead were continually creating new lexical items and modifying their own novel syntactic constructions. I have recordings of the children inventing new lexical items four days before we left. It became clear that their language came to serve more than its initial pragmatic basic communicative function. Through their private language, they had constructed a separate speech community and a separate identity and they were determined to maintain both. None of the other language choices they had (i.e., English or Swahili) could accomplish those social functions.

As our arrival and the children's hillside encounter had marked the genesis of the boys' language, our leaving marked the end of their special private pidgin language. Once we returned to the United States, the boys' friendship continued primarily through letters written in English. Their spontaneous ephemeral language, which they had performed exclusively orally and in face-to-face interactions and was never written, ended its use the day we left the hillside speech situation.

I was able to take the data back with me to the States where I began to study with scholars in the field to discover what the children's language behavior was, what it meant and how they could have accomplished such complex language innovations. I realized later that I had only heard the children name their language in English. This was usually in response to

my asking Colin something like “what are you speaking?” or “what was that?” I primarily directed my questions to Colin in the early days when I had just become aware of the existence of their language. The answer, “Our Language,” was directed to me and therefore was always in English. In all the data I have collected, I have never found their own word for their language in their own language. Possibly they had one but I never heard it, didn’t think to question them about it then, and today Sadiki doesn’t remember anything other than the English, “Our Language.” In earlier papers and publications, I referred to their language as “A Children’s Pidgin (CP)” or “Colin and Sadiki’s Pidgin.” However, for the purpose of telling their full story in this book, Mikael Parkvall, a Swedish linguist and pidgin creole scholar with whom I had been corresponding, suggested to me, and I agreed, that the language should have its own name, in their own language. I set about constructing a translation of “Our Language” using the children’s own lexical and grammatical rules.

In Kiswahili, the prefix *ki-* refers to the language itself. For example, the Swahili people speak Kiswahili, the Swahili language. (This is similar to the way *-ish* identifies the English, Danish, and Turkish languages.) The *ki-* prefix has also been used repeatedly to identify the many other language variations of Kiswahili, including Kisetla or Kisetta, the variety of language used by Africans and Europeans also known as Up-Country Swahili (also sometimes spelled KiSettla or KiSetta); Kivita, the war language which arose during World War II with the presence of Italian, French, and English troops in East Africa; Kishamba or plantation language; Kihindi, the Swahili variation used between Asians and Africans; and Kikar, the Swahili pidgin used as a lingua franca which served as a military jargon for the troops in the King’s African Rifles (KAR) of British Colonial East Africa.²⁰ I chose the prefix *ki-* to name Colin and Sadiki’s language. This was consistent with the practice of identifying and naming the wide range of other Swahili language varieties. The boys themselves often used this prefix, saying “Kisamburu” when referring to Sadiki’s language.

But what morpheme, or meaningful unit of language, could follow *ki-* that might suggest “our” language? Colin and Sadiki’s language didn’t use the possessive “our.” Further, they didn’t distinguish between subject (e.g., I, we) and object (e.g., me, us) in their language. Their language used the objective case (e.g., me, us) to identify both the subject and object of the verb. “Our language” might therefore be translated as the “language (of) us.” *Sisi* is the Swahili word for *we* or *us*, and also a word the children knew and sometimes used. *Sisi* also uses a repetitive reduplicated form that was a common feature in many of the children’s newly invented words.

With Sadiki's amusement and approval in skype conversations, and following all of the linguistic rules of the boys' language, I named their language *Kisisi*. Though they didn't create the name, or ever actually utter the word, it sounds like something they might have said, and follows their own rule-governed language practices. I think Colin would have liked it too.