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Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

Heartfelt Research

Review by Eric Baptiste

Kisisi (Our Language): The Story of Colin and Sadiki

by Perry Gilmore

Wiley-Blackwell, 2015

Perry Gilmore's, *Kisisi (Our Language): The Story of Colin and Sadiki*, is a detailed investigation of the experience of two boys who, while playing in post-colonial Kenya, made their own language. It is also so much more. The book stands in contrast to many of the prevailing theories at the time about the formation of new languages. Throughout the book, the author looks critically at linguistic theories of language formation that were prevalent at the time and contrasts them the development of a language between her son Colin and his Kenyan friend, Sadiki. This comparison is used to show how the field of linguistics developed to the point where language creation among children, with no outside help from adults, would be seen as possible. Thus, her research adds to the scholarship on language development in children, a research area that is lacking in linguistics literature. Although *Kisisi (Our Language): The Story of Colin and Sadiki* does little to push the field of linguistics further, it does provide a good example of child language creation, which could make the book attractive to introductory students of linguistics. It is unique in its consideration of anthropological concepts such as colonialism, which may make the book interesting to students of anthropology.

Perry Gilmore was a master's student in education at the time of her research. Her research focused on language acquisition and developmental psychology at the time that she recorded the interaction between Colin and Sadiki. Since earning her PhD, she has written extensively on language and literature acquisition. Gilmore's extensive background in linguistics, education and anthropology are quite evident in the book as she refers to numerous well-known names in those fields such as Chomski, Vygotsky, Piaget and others. The comparison of the research to theories at the time lends some

academic rigor to a book that takes on a highly narrative form at times.

The early sections of the book take the form of recollections which are full of vivid descriptions of the setting and context of post-colonial Kenya. The author continues to use a chronological narrative form to describe the Kenyan countryside and the people who resided there. She gradually intersperses the story with linguistic analyses of the pidgin which developed between Colin and Sadiki. By the second chapter, the book takes on the form of a literature review, which compares and contrasts similar examples of spontaneous pidgin language creation among children to the example in the book. The example from the book is presented as an opportunity to pursue research which past scholars wanted to study through forbidden, language deprivation experiments.

The third chapter contains most of the linguistic analysis of the language interactions between Colin and Sadiki and reads more like a paper on linguistics with written examples of spoken interactions between Sadiki and Colin where they speak their unique pidgin. What is distinctive about this chapter is the context in which the linguistic analysis takes place. The author presents examples of linguistic development through and during play, which speaks to the importance of play as a vehicle for creating language. The fourth chapter is best described as an anthropological and sociolinguistic examination of the context of the creation of the pidgin and how the boys overcame the legacy of a colonial past through the creation of their language. In this chapter, the boys' confrontation with this legacy is described in detail. The unique bond between the boys is demonstrated through their willingness to remain together, even when the world around them would prefer that they remain apart. Anecdotes from Colin and Sadiki's school life are especially illustrative of the bond between the boys and their struggle against the influence of the colonial past. The fifth chapter presents a more detailed description of the language with lists of words and examples of their usage. In this section, the author does not try to define what constitutes a language versus a creole, but rather, provides ample empirical evidence of spontaneous pidgin formation by children.

As a story of life in the post-colonial Kenyan countryside, *Kisisi (Our Language)* is a poignant tale of loss, but also a celebration of a special life. When the writer lets the reader know that Colin, the writer's son, is dead at the beginning of the book it is a sorrowful revelation. As the book continues and you see the painstaking details that the writer has kept for all this time, the grief of the situation really comes through. The attention to detail kept throughout the book exemplifies the writer's devotion to her son

and the interesting gift that he shared with not only his friend Sadiki, but also all the people who got to interact with them. Even though there are more recorded examples of language development and pidgin development by children, the way the book is written makes it very moving.

Kisisi (Our Language) stands as a good example of spontaneous pidgin formation by children and the author contrasts the work of Jean Piaget with her observations of Colin and Sadiki, suggesting that Piaget was not correct in this instance and a new theory has to be considered. Although the author doesn't really offer a hypothesis for more contemporary beliefs about childhood language development, the spontaneous pidgin formation of Colin and Sadiki is described in detail. The other reason why *Kisisi (Our Language)* is a good example of spontaneous pidgin formation by children lies in the comparison of Kisisi to other examples of spontaneous pidgin formation. The book does well to compare the events described in the book to other examples of spontaneous pidgin formation by children such as an event where deaf children in Nicaragua, who were not receiving mainstream education for deaf children, developed their own pidgin version of Nicaraguan sign language. The interactions are also reminiscent of other studies in Hawaii where pidgin is sometimes used to resist the influence of an assimilating culture. The author is able to show how the examples are similar while also providing the opportunity for scholars to further explore language development.

Kisisi (Our Language): The Story of Colin and Sadiki is not just a story of two boys in the post-colonial Kenyan countryside. It is a story that includes language development, socio-linguistic interaction, and anthropological study. The book fits in many genres, which might make it difficult to read at times if the reader is expecting something which is not multi-disciplinary. The book's descriptive style helps convey its vivid and emotional story – which is clearly meaningful to the writer. *Kisisi (Our Language)* may not be as groundbreaking for linguists because of the many other examples of childhood language development and pidgin development available to current scholars, but it could be useful to current socio-linguistic scholars and anthropologists who are looking for data on post-colonial language development and the effects of colonialism on language. Novice students of linguistics as well as anthropologists will certainly enjoy the mixed narrative style of *Kisisi (Our Language): The Story of Colin and Sadiki*.

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