

THE CAMOUFLAGING OF SHENG' LANGUAGE IN KENYA SINCE ITS EMERGENCE

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Abstract

This paper reviews the growth and development of Sheng as a 'lingua franca' in the regions in Kenya since its emergence. Languages do grow and develop as time passes by and this is evident by the way today's language is somewhat different from yesterday's language. On the other hand, other new 'languages' spring up from the main languages to cater for different linguistic needs, for their speakers, at a given period of time as it is in the case of Sheng in Kenya. To meet technological advancement and the ever fast development in the world, these languages, including Sheng, have come up with new terminologies and or vocabulary so as to continue being relevant. This has seen a rise in the 'new languages' springing up from the main ones – and being very popular amongst the youth. Before these codes developed as a language used by youth to hide their communication among the old, but currently, these codes have even developed to an extent of being recognized as 'lingua franca' in the regions where they are spoken. Meaning it is no longer a youth language but a code that is used by a larger population in regardless of their age and location. This paper affirms that with the passage of time; new ideas, structures, terminologies and or vocabulary have been and continue being coined in these languages.

Keywords: Sheng, language, growth, development, lingua franca

Introduction

In this study, we have done an overview on the emergence and the development of Sheng. Sheng developed as a code but it has now reached the status of a language. This code is changing everyday thus becoming so slippery for it to remain the same hence it is very hard for it to be standardized.

Origin and Meaning of Sheng

Sheng began as a slang code largely used by gangs in the poorest corners of Nairobi. More so, used by the youths to hide their secrets from their parents in shanties (Kandagor, 2002). There is no clear evidence concerning the origin of Sheng though most scholars believe that it might have started due to massive migration to the city due to search of employment. This resulted to large numbers of young people living in close quarters with their families in low-income neighborhoods in Nairobi to invent a secretive language (Githiora, 2002; Ogechi, 2002; Mutonya, cited in Blum, 2015). These people came from varied ethnic groups speaking different vernacular languages, mainly Kikuyu, Luo and Kamba, along with Kiswahili and English. Jowal (2015) says:

Nobody can accurately put a finger on when

the language came to be, but an undeniable fact is that Sheng is on its course to overtaking all languages in Kenya as the most used language of communication... Although it borrows vocabulary widely, its grammar and syntax remains predominantly Swahili. (par. 2)

Bosire (2006) says that children of the different ethnic groups are of two worlds and they want a way to express this duality, this new 'ethnicity'. Sheng is a way to break away and give them a global urban ethnicity; the urbanite: sophisticated, street-smart, new generation, tough. Sheng is not becoming just a language but a sophisticated one and with a face of unifying people from different ethnic groups.

According to Mutonya (cited in Blum, 2015), when these people lived together in these very crowded areas of Nairobi, they needed a language of secrecy where they could be able to communicate without getting the information out to their parents. This language came to be known as Sheng, a combination of Kiswahili, English and other native languages. The word Sheng is a short form of Swahili and English (Mazrui, 1995).

The Fast-changing Sheng

Since its emergence, Sheng has kept changing over time. Though there are 42 languages spoken in



Kenya (Dean, 2013), Sheng is overtaking them all as the language of the big city youth. Remarkably, Sheng is catching on across all parts of society. Today it is not uncommon to see Sheng pop up almost anywhere – on political campaigns, on bill boards, on the radio, in songs (secular and religious) and even public service announcements among other arenas. It has become a ‘lingua franca’ of the Kenyan youth who make around 53.7% of the Kenyan population as of 2009 (National Council for Population and Development). According to Harriet (2009) the concept of language change is a phenomenon by which permanent alterations are made in the features and the use of a language over time. All natural languages change, and language change affects all areas of language use. She continues to say that there are different types of language change including sound changes, lexical changes, semantic changes, and syntactic changes.

There are three main aspects of language change over time (Atchison, 2001): vocabulary, sentence structure and pronunciation. Vocabulary can change fast as new words are borrowed from other languages, or coined altogether, or words get combined or shortened. Some words are even created accidentally (by mistake). Before a language can change, its speakers must adopt new words, sentence structures and sounds, spread them through the community and transmit them to the next generation. Sheng changes are majorly on the lexicon, which might either affect or not affect the root, thus bringing a new inflectional phenomenon, e.g *nifla* for *fulani*, *gambo* for **mboga**, *jaku* for *kuja* e.t.c. The main root of the word cannot be easily identified as well as its position in the word.

One important thing to note about Sheng is how each neighborhood speaks its own variety, while the language itself is changing almost every week. Its dynamism is the language’s unique feature; it is so fast than even the technological change itself. The main reasons for the change are to meet immediate communication needs and to identify oneself within a group. Mutonya (cited in Blum, 2015) says words that describe illegal substances or law enforcement change most rapidly. Mahoney (2014) gives the reasons as to why languages keep changing by saying:

In some ways, it is surprising that languages change. After all, they are passed down through generations reliably enough for parents and children to communicate with each other. Linguists find that all languages change over time – albeit at different rates.

Although what Mahoney (2014) is giving as the reason why languages change over time is true, it is a bit different when it comes to Sheng. The other reasons why Sheng is fast changing is due to the linguistic need of its speakers; to keep secrets from the ‘outsiders’ (Githiora, 2002; Kandagor, 2002; Ogechi, 2002), to identify oneself to a group (Abdulaziz & Osinde, 1997), to avoid language hegemony, among other reasons (Mutonya, 2008). The secrets however differ from one geographical area to another, one level of education to another, one social status to another, etc. And this is the one reason why Sheng has different varieties spoken in different places in Kenya.

The secrets, as well, change from time to time and that is why the language keeps camouflaging itself from one time to another, one place to another and one era to another. The Sheng that was spoken in the 80’s is very different from that of the 90’s, and that of 90’s is different from the one being spoken now (even so, some words have been maintained). These changes often occur in response to social, economic, security and even political pressures. Even without these reasons, Sheng can dramatically change if enough of its speakers alter the way they speak it.

The following extract is an example of Sheng spoken by University students (Githinji, 2008):

Nahusko Dubz kuna campo nifla inajulikana kama American University of Dubai. Hiyo chuo majority ya mastude wako miaka ka 24/25, lakini jo! Uki yebi parking lot unaweza chizi. Zile mandae ziko parking uta get ndae kama Rolls-Royce, Ferrari, Aston Martin na akina Bentley. Hizi ni zile ndae una expect kuzi yebi kwa ma filo zile noma noma. Ndae kama Range Rover ni gari iko chini tu sana, inaseme kana ni gari ya pesa kidogo. Nashindwa ukiwa na ndae kama hiyo una du nini chuo.

This translates as:

I hear that there is a campus in Dubai called American University of Dubai. Majority of students there are aged 24/25, but alas! If you go to their parking lot you will be shocked. You will find vehicles like Rolls-Royce, Ferrari, Aston Martin and Bentley. These are vehicles that you expect to find in big companies. Vehicles like Range Rover are said to be very cheap. I wonder what one does in college if he has that type of a vehicle.

Frequently the needs of the speakers of a language drive its change. New technologies, industries,

products and experiences simply require new words. By using new and emerging terms and or vocabulary, we all drive change. But the unique way that individuals speak also causes language to change. Teens and young adults for example, often use different words and phrases from their parents. Some of them spread through the population and can either change the language slowly or fast. Several linguists have opined that Sheng could be the most dynamic language in the world. This has made it extremely hard to standardize, as its vocabulary keeps changing at a speedy rate and with an intention to be secretive. The Sheng that was spoken five years ago is not exactly the same as the Sheng that is spoken today. Words like:

Sheng	English
ashara	ten shillings
jongo	a shilling
moti	car
wagido	a dog

These were favorites in the past but are now faded and forgotten (Jowal, 2015). Sheng is said to have spread to all segments of society though of course its origin can be traced to Nairobi's slums in Kenya.

The following is a list of some of the Sheng words which have kept changing over time:

Original Sheng	English	Synonyms/new words
Ushagoo	village	shags, ocha, moshatha, mashi nani
Moti	car	ndinga, moti, murenga
Demu	girl	msupa, mresh, shore, manzi, vipepe
Gova	police officer	karao, sanse
Hao	house	keja, mbanyu, base, digs
Veve	khat	jamba, ketepa, gomba, conton
Madhee	mother	madha, mnyaka, moda, masa
Chapaa	money	dau, doh, mkwanja, ganji, cheddar

These examples show that the words changes very fast so that we can have several synonyms for a word and these synonyms do not come from one language but several.

Other Sheng words:

Sheng	English
Mburungo	luggage
Sonko	rich man
Pack	to reside
Mangware	very early in the morning
Mapero	parents

Sota	not to have money
Chizi	mad person
Msee	guy
Mseiya	old man
Arosto	any of the hard drugs (commonly used in the Kenyan Coast).

There are traces of Sheng in schools, institutions of higher learning etc and each has its unique word or words to name or identify something e.g: **Sheng word common only in UEAB (University of Eastern Africa, Baraton):** *Mgallo* – secret for galivanting etc.

Sheng words common only in secondary schools: *Earth wire* – neck tie, *mbwenya* – blazer/light coat etc. This, specific word used in a specific group for a particular communication need, is a specific feature to the group and can be identified with the same.

According to Jowal (2015), the rise, development and present status of Sheng is a reflection of a larger social process and social relations, such as class divisions, age and gender within a highly multilingual context. Sheng's most important function is to empower a certain group of speakers by providing a 'closed' in-group means of communication. It also acts as a means of establishing group identity, expressing solidarity and creating prestige among 'insiders'. He continues to say that out of its dynamism, it has permeated all levels of society and gained much media and scholarly attention.

In recent years however, Sheng has been popularized and further developed by music, both secular and religious, for example, Kelele Takatifu, Size 8, Mercy Masika, Juacali and Jaquar among others, and public transport workers especially the touts and conductors. It has also been adopted by radio stations such as the Nairobi – based Ghetto Radio which broadcasts in Sheng (Gheto Radio 89.5 FM), and the official Sheng station (Voice of the Youth.)

There is a church in Nairobi which conducts its services in Sheng, and this attracts quite a number of Nairobi youths. Politicians in Kenya identify with the youth by using Sheng words such as: *mahustler* (DP), *wasee mpo* (Obama when he addressed youth at Kasarani, 2015). Advertisements, as well, use Sheng to reach out to the youth for example '*Ni poa ku-chill*' – its safe to abstain and '*na kufeel*' – I care for you in condom adverts. Successful business campaigns have also used Sheng as a strategy to reach their clientel, for example, '*sakanya chapaa*' QFM radio, '*Ponyoka na pick-up*' Safaricom, '*Bankika na KCB*' KCB, '*Mkopo*



wa salo 'Barclays Bank.

The fast development and changes in Sheng is not a unique phenomenon because languages similar to Sheng's urban slang are popping up in other parts of the country as well as in other countries in Africa. In Kenyan situation we can place these codes rising as Sheng dialects. The following are some codes that are contributing to the advancement and fast changes of Sheng:

Sheng and Pig Latin

Sheng has begun to have its own different varieties as is claimed by Githiora (2002), there's Pig Latin, a word used to describe the concept of word games or secret codes that follow syllable transposition. Pig Latin is a secret language mainly used by the youth whereby they play with the phonology of words in which case the words change but its phonology remain the same. These changes can take place in nouns, verbs, adjectives etc. This mainly happens because the youth want to hide something from 'the rest'.

Examples:

Pig-Latin	Kiswahili
Analaku	anakula
Kiche leyu mude	cheki yule mtu
Ndifu	fundi

Engsh

Engsh is another concept that is frequently related to Sheng. Engsh is a language similar to Sheng but its structure is that of English, unlike the structure of Sheng which is that of Kiswahili. It is spoken by children and youth from elite/rich families in Kenya (Abdulaziz & Osinde, 1997). Researchers claim that Engsh borrow a lot of its vocabulary from English and this is the main reason why its structure is that of English. They identify this language with the youth from Western parts of Nairobi who are relatively affluent. The following are examples of Engsh words according to Mbaabu (2003):

Engsh	English
Homie	– my friend
Jeezing	– strolling
Shizzing	– looking
Pano	– punishment
Matho	– mathematics
Devo	– devil
Mathee	– mother

Moros	–	tomorrow
Blue	–	twenty shillings
Kuro	–	prostitute.

Originally these words were borrowed from English but they have been deliberately shortened to hide something.

Kinoki

Kinoki is a type of language that is used by street children and those children from poor backgrounds, Mutonya (2007). Duszak (2002) says that people come up with their code according to their social status as well as their cultural differences such as tribe, nationality, gender, age, and life styles. In this case, Kinoki is associated with youths who go through similar experiences as well as having similar attitudes. Mutonya (2007) posits that the feelings that one should belong to a certain group, forces the same person to stay away from the rest, hence resulting in the springing up of such Sheng's variety as Kinoki. Kinoki is basically used by such people as mechanics, metal workers in jua kali, and hawkers while going around with their daily businesses especially in Nairobi. These groups of people face economic difficulties apart from being harassed from time to time by city askaris (Kilbride, Njeru, & Suda, 2000). According to Mutonya (2007) street families use certain terms to refer to themselves e.g. Munoki (tough one), kauzi, mtegaji, NARK etc. in this manner they keep away from negative terms that other people call them such as chokoraa, mgodi, kuro wakora etc.

The following words are commonly used by 'Wanoki' according to Mutonya:

Kinoki	English
Kabier	– small beer
Camero	– Toyota model
Mbota	– bottle cap
Base	– military base (home)

Words that are commonly used to escape from authorities:

Kasheshe	–	spy
Mororaji	–	spy
Mafedi	–	federal agents
Kanjo	–	city council
Gava	–	government
Kuonwa kando	–	to be attacked by a group of people
Kushikwashikwa	–	to be attacked
Guchunia	–	to steal or rob

Kuzikata – to run away

Words that are different between Sheng and kinoki:

NARK – wakora (thugs/thieves)
 Munoki – chokoraa (street children)
 Mtagaji – kuro (prostitute)
 Mchapalegi – houka (hawkers)

Conclusion and Recommendation

Although Sheng is changing over time, has cut across all segments of society, and is a ‘lingua franca’ for the youth in Kenya, there are still negative perceptions about it. Many of the older generation despise the language. Educators accuse Sheng for having corrupted Standard English and Kiswahili and they see it as a hindrance to mastery of the two official languages. However, the way in which Sheng is being used in different avenues in Kenya, show how the language has embraced innovation especially in the changes it has since undergone. Sheng is here to stay; it can no longer be fought with much success.

It is therefore imperative for linguists, educationists and any other person to start learning the language if they are interested in reaching out to and even understanding the youth. By so doing these people shall easily understand the problems the youths are going through, know their interests in life, their fears, hopes and expectations and even their feeling about certain issues in society. More research should be done so as to see the possibility of standardizing the language for the benefit of the society.

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