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# MAMBO!

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## The Evolution of Sheng during the last decade

Aurélia Ferrari

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*Sheng, popularly defined as an acronym for “Swahili-English slang”, emerged in the 1960s in the multicultural environment of Nairobi. It is an urban language which combines mainly Kiswahili and English but also other Kenyan languages such as Kikuyu, Luyha, Dholuo and Kikamba. Sheng is characterized by an important linguistic flexibility. It does not have any official status even if it is widely spoken, especially by the youth. Originally used as a vehicular language between people from different regions, it is becoming a vernacular language, some people born in the 1980s or later having Sheng as their first language.*

### Introduction

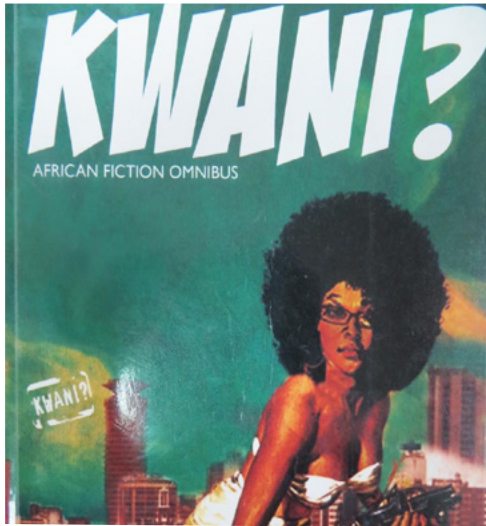
Sheng is not a unique linguistic phenomenon in Africa. In the last fifty years, urbanization and globalization have prompted the emergence of new urban linguistic codes. Such codes are based on multilingual speech and characterized by unstable vocabulary. Many derived from a criminal slang to a youth code. Despite constant devaluation by educationalists, traditionalists, language planners and the elites, those youth languages have expanded and transformed into urban varieties that feature highly in popular culture and the media.

Sheng has attracted increasing attention internationally within academia. Before the last decade, research focused on lexical characteristics and categorization of Sheng, but new approaches appeared recently. They consist of sophisticated linguistic descriptions of Sheng, and reconsideration of its categorization and impact on urban society. Sheng indeed used to be blamed to spoil “pure” languages such as English, Swahili and other Kenyan languages and to have negative impacts on Swahili learning in schools. Nowadays, however, Sheng is considered to be part of linguistic national

identity and to neutralize ethnicity<sup>1</sup>. It is categorized as a Swahili dialect or youth language. While former research works paid attention to extreme registers of Sheng, the category of Sheng now encompasses all the mixed codes spoken in Nairobi based on Swahili structure and characterized by common features. New questions also emerged with regard to education, as the possibility to include Sheng in the educational system is under consideration<sup>2</sup>. Research is also conducted on specific themes such as the use of Sheng and code switching in advertisements. However, the myth of pure language is still pervasive among scholars and therefore Sheng continues to be seen as a “dangerous or impure” language in certain research works.

Here I use the word Sheng to designate a continuum of different mixed language codes spoken in Nairobi and based on Swahili grammatical structure. However, some people still use the word Sheng to identify Nairobi’s slang only, and associate the mixed code commonly

- 1 Githiora, Chege, 2013, “The rise and rise of Sheng: Language and identity in modern Kenya”, paper presented at the conference “Sheng language in Kenya: structure, uses and pedagogy”, IFRA, Nairobi, 16th July 2013
- 2 Githinji, Peter, 2013, “Sheng and language pedagogy”, paper presented at the conference “Sheng language...”, IFRA, Nairobi, 16th July 2013.



*Kwani? the book of the Nairobi youth*

spoken in Nairobi today to Swahili, also referred to as “Swahili of Nairobi”. From a linguistic point of view, however, those different codes – whether slang or Swahili of Nairobi – have common features and a same linguistic structure which is based on Swahili structure but which is also different from the other existing varieties of Swahili. Therefore, according to this definition, Sheng has different levels of usages: formal, informal, popular and argotic. The formal level of Sheng is recent and still fragile.

### The evolution of Sheng structure

**Phonological characteristics of Sheng:** The Sheng phonological system differs slightly from Standard Swahili. The sounds of Arabic origin [ʁ] (written “gh” in Swahili) and [χ] (written “kh” in Swahili) are replaced by [g] and [k]. The sound [h] tends to disappear. But as this sound has a distinctive function in Standard Swahili conjugated verbs – it marks verbal negation –, Sheng has developed two phonological ways of negating a verbal form, by either adding the prefix [a] to the affirmative subject prefix in the 2nd person singular, or adding a stress to the affirmative subject prefix (replacing the h).

English: you have you don't have

Swahili: *una huna*

Sheng: *uko na/una; auko na/auna*

English: s/he will go; s/he will not go

Swahili: *atakwenda hatakwenda*

Sheng: *ata'enda 'ata'enda*

### Morpho-syntactical characteristics of Sheng:

Sheng has transformed the 18 noun class system that characterizes Standard Swahili (M/WA(1/2), M/MI(3/4), JI/MA(5/6), KI/VI(7/8), N(9/10), U(11/14), KU(15), and PA/KU/MU(16/17/18). It only divides between human beings, non-human beings, and places. It also extensively uses diminutive noun classes (KA/TU, 12/13) which do not exist in Swahili. On the one hand, therefore, a kind of simplification occurred given that the 18 noun classes used in Swahili are not used in Sheng, but on the other hand, there are classes in Sheng that are not used in Standard Swahili. This means that speaking of “simplification” is surely not right to define Sheng: the simplification of certain linguistic aspects always goes along with the creation of other complex structures. Names of animals are classified with non-human beings (N, 9/10) instead of human beings (M/WA, 1/2), for instance in the case of “this dog is sleeping”:

Sheng: **Hii** dogi in adoro (demonstrative class 9; a verbal prefix of class 9)  
Swahili: **Huyu** mbwa a melala (demonstrative class 1; a verbal prefix of class 1)

Another specificity worth mentioning is that the prefix *ki-* is used as an augmentative whereas in Swahili it is used as a diminutive:

Cheki hiki **kindai** (Look at this big car)

Other observations can be done

concerning morpho-syntactical differences, such as:

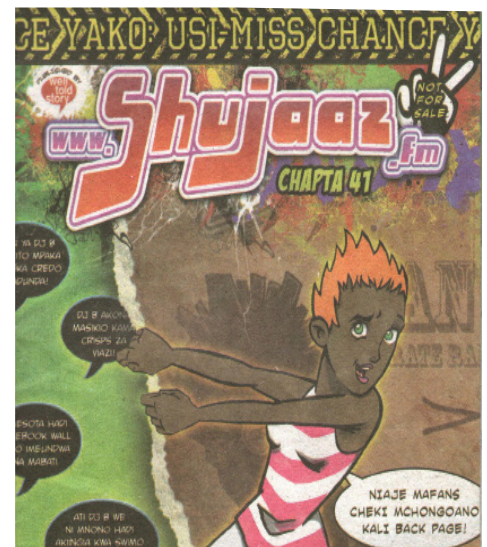
- A verbal extension called “intensive”, which is not used in Standard Swahili, is used in Sheng by adding the suffix *-a(n)g* as the habitual form: for example in “He often goes”: *anaenda/huenda* in Swahili but *anaenda(n)ga* in Sheng

- Little use of object infixes and locative suffix *ni-*, for example in “I’m at home”: *nipo nyumbani* in Swahili but *niko hom* or *niko kwa keja* in Sheng

- The generalization of “a” as the subject prefix of the 3rd person singular, for example in “he is” (locative): *yuko* in Swahili but *ako* in Sheng.

### Lexical characteristic of Sheng

Most researches concerning Sheng focused on lexical creativity. Some new words are created by adding a suffix “o” used with English words, such as: *jako*/jacket, *filo*/film, *steto*/state. Some add a suffix and prefix “o” to a Swahili word, like: *obaro*/barabara (road), *oembo*/embe (mango), *oduko*/duka (shop), *orezo*/rais (president). Inversion of syllables is also a common practice, like: *kuachu*/chukua (take), *manyu*/nyuma (behind), *mbanyu*/nyuma (house). Other lexical manipulations are used such as idiophones



Cover of the magazine Shujaaz.FM

(*pumpum* for “big, fat”, *twatwa* for “gun”), extension of meaning (*tembe* means in Swahili “pills” and in Sheng “drugs”), antonym (*mzee* means in Swahili “old man” but its variant in Sheng, *msee*, means “young man”; *vibaya* means in Swahili “very bad” but “very well” in Sheng), or truncation (*skiza*, from the Swahili word *sikiliza*, “listen”). New words recently appeared such as: *memba* for “friend”, *mbegu* for “bullet”, *chafi* for “to hide”, or *gathemba* for “father”.

### Linguistic practices and attitudes in Nairobi

There are diverse opinions toward Sheng code. The Sheng enthusiasts argue that it is important for youth communication because it breaks down ethnic barriers. Sheng opponents bemoan the loss of pure languages, complain about Sheng unintelligibility by the non-initiated and harshly criticize its negative impacts with school learning. The contrast between real-life linguistic practices and discourses is, however, very significant. On the one hand, some people devalue this code in their epilinguistic discourses, but on the other hand, they show that they value it through their practice of Sheng in daily life situations, and some even transmit Sheng to their children as a first language, especially in slum areas but not only.

Kenyan radio stations and TV channels have given more space to Sheng during the last decade. Specific programs use it in TV series like *Machachari* (Citizen TV), *Vioja mahakamani* (Citizen TV), or *Inspekta Mwala* (Citizen TV); in comic shows like *Churchill show* (NTV), *Hapa kule news* (KTN); and in music or dance programs such as *Sakata* (Citizen TV), or *Orange beat ya street* (NTV). Many of these

programs switch between English, Sheng, and Swahili. Ghetto Radio (89.5FM or [www.ghettoradio.co.ke](http://www.ghettoradio.co.ke)) advertises itself as the official Sheng station and broadcasts programs in Sheng only. Nevertheless, even if Sheng is widely used in Kenyan media, it is still restricted to specific programs. For instance, Sheng is not used in official news either on TV radios or on newspapers whereas some urban languages in other African countries are used for this purpose.

### Sheng in urban art

**Sheng in literature:** The written use of Sheng in literature is still a minor phenomenon. Even the well-known *Kwani?* book published by Kwani Trust, advertised as the book of the Nairobi youth, gives little space to Sheng. For instance in *Kwani?2* (2004), there are around 15 pages on Dandora life in Sheng (“Maisha kule D: in the words, lyrics, poems” by Mashifta, Don Rawzi, and Mc Kah”) among 334 pages in English. In *Kwani?3* (2005), only a short poem (“*Zana za vita nashika*”) by Kama from Kalamashaka rap band and other poems by authors Mc Kah (“*Ukombozi wa ki akili*”), Kitu Sewer and G. Wiji. In *Kwani?4* (2007), less than five short poems of mainly Kenyan rap group Ukoo Flani Mau Mau are in Sheng, equivalent to only 4 pages in a book of more than 400 pages. In the last *Kwani?7* (2012) about the Kenyan diaspora, again, only short poems, messages and transcriptions of emails on visa issues are available in Sheng.

However, some poems written published in Sheng show that this code is also used and developed by the Kenyan diaspora, as the following poem, entitled “*Ideas za Hollywood/ Hollywood ideas*” by Lenjo Maza, illustrates: *Nikiwa primo, Father Richard na silver*

*screens* (When I was in primary school, Father Richard and silver screens) / [...] *Tukaamini majuu a bed of roses, tunapaint wishes* (Then we believed that Occident was a bed of roses, we painted/had wishes) / *Kwa ma-aapplications za visa* (for visa application) / *Believing tutarudi loaded kistyle ya P. Diddy* (Believing that we will be back loaded as P. Diddy) / *Rumors best paying jobs kazi za mocha* (Rumors best paying jobs, (in fact) mortuary job).

**Sheng in Mchongoano:** *Mchongoano* designates a ritualized genre of verbal duel<sup>3</sup> somehow comparable to African American ritual insults but less virulent and belonging to a more derisory and comic framework. It can be informal, formal, face-to-face, addressed to no one (internet) or used in the media transfer. The linguistic processes used are wordplay/pun and exaggeration. Some *mchongoano* can be seen as real insults and mockery because it can target a person’s particular physical or mental characteristics, while others are denunciation of social inequalities or society problem. See: *Wewe ni mugly hata hauned mask kuact movie ya horror* (You are so ugly; you do not even need a mask to act in a horror movie) of *We ni fala hadi ulidial \*144# kucheck balance kwa ATM* (You are so foolish that you dial \*144# to check your balance in a ATM machine). *Mchongoano* can be linked with hip-hop culture which is rising in Nairobi since 1980 as dual spirit of competition, and the idea of transforming negative thought into form of art such examples as hip hop dances or rap battles.

3 Githinji, Peter, 2007, “Mchongoano, Verbal duels: risky discourse and sociocultural commentary.” In Njogu K & Oluoch-Olunya *Cultural Production and Social Change in Kenya: Building Bridges*, Art culture and society, vol. 1, Nairobi, Twaweza communications.

**Sheng in hip-hop music:** Artistic uses of Sheng, like in hip-hop, constitute a spreading dynamic of this code. The young Africans in urban areas are caught between the Western way of life led in the big towns and values considered more African. Sheng is a way to combine them. In the song *Angalia saa* by Mau Mau, the topic of the song is the Kikuyu struggle for independence and the valorization of Kikuyu heroes, but the language used is Sheng and not Kikuyu. This proves the importance of Sheng even among the conservative youth often associated to the Mungiki political radical movement. As an excerpt says: *Damu, jasho, machozi* (Blood, sweat and tears) / *Mau Mau wakashinda war mashabiki wakaenda na trophy* (It is Mau Mau who won the war, the spectators went with the trophy) / *Matigari hana ata ka-ploti* (The Mau Mau survivor doesn't even have a piece of land) / *Serikali inataka imfukuze Nairobi* (The government wants to evict him from Nairobi) / *Magava wanataka wamangishe jirongi* (The government wants to shoot him).

**Sheng in cinema:** "Nairobi Half Life" is a Kenyan drama film of 2012 mostly in Sheng directed by David Tosh. It is the first movie that fully resorts to this code. The story is about a young aspiring actor named Mwas who moves from his home village to Nairobi to try to make money and realize his dreams in life. As a Kikuyu speaker, he needs to learn Sheng quickly in order to live in Nairobi. But as he tries to adapt to his new life and looks for auditions in a theater, he finds himself integrated into a street gang of young thugs. The story starts in Kikuyu in his native village then switch to Sheng in Nairobi streets, like in the following example: Mwas: *Ah Oti Gota jo mtu wangu* (Ah Oti give me five, my man!) / Oti: *We ni job gani unadu?* (Which kind of job are you doing?) / *Ushabonga na Dingo* (Did you talk to Dingo?) / Mwas: *Hee na akanirusha hii waks* (Yes and he got me this job).

### Conclusion

It is undeniable that Sheng is spreading, and such a spread cannot be stopped. Sheng has become so common in Nairobi everyday communication that a Sheng language manual on CDs called Ultimate Sheng<sup>4</sup> is now sold in supermarkets. This manual targets foreign residents "to make them aware of what is going on around them" as well as parents "to enable them to bond with their children", corporate marketers "to target the youth better", and politicians "to connect with the youth". Sheng is also spreading outside Kenya through an increasing number of Sheng websites and the significant Kenyan diaspora. Therefore, if Sheng has not really changed during the last decade, its expansion throughout Kenyan society is a central aspect of its development, notably showing that it has not been affected by existing negative attitudes toward this language code.



Sheng used in advertising

<sup>4</sup> Banential media(2013).

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