

Draft paper

Language, Memory, Heritage and Youth: The Sheng idiom

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Abstract

The youth of Kenya – aged 30 years and below – constitute about 60% of the Kenyan population. At the same time, it is estimated that due to a paucity of opportunities in the rural areas, most of the young persons are migrating in huge numbers to the urban centers. In essence, this means that in a few decades, most of the youths will be urban dwellers. But what language will they be speaking?

Sheng has been the language of the urban youth, especially from the economically-challenged neighborhoods since the 1960s. However, today, it is spoken by all the socio-economic categories in Kenya. Despite the frequent mutations of the medium, relative stability and growth has been noted in the language. Further, the language has gained currency to include older generations, especially those who used it in the 1960s.

In matters of community memory and heritage, the language issue is critical since language is one of the most important conveyors and repositories of culture. Colonial history and pragmatism tend to favor the adoption of English as the first language of Kenya. Recently, the government proposed that Kiswahili – the putative national language-becomes an optional subject in Kenyan schools.

The popularity and ubiquity of *Sheng* among the youth makes it an ideal language through which we can begin to dialogue with them. As most of the youth tunes into Ghetto FM and sign up for the *Sheng* website, the language becomes not just a means of communication but also a powerful identity tool. The youth identify themselves as a distinct group from those other Kenyans who speak vernacular languages, Kiswahili or English.

This paper demonstrates how the Sheng language can be a powerful instrument in the encryption of the collective memory of Kenyans. We argue that keeping out Sheng might also mean shutting out most of the youths in the country.

Key words: *Sheng, Youth, memory, heritage, inclusion, democracy*

I. Language and Heritage: A general discussion

A prosaic definition of the term “heritage” states that heritage is “the history, traditions and qualities that a country or society has had for many years and that are considered an important part of its character.”¹ In this view of heritage it can be argued that language plays an important role in the generation and transmission of values cherished by society.

Kenya is incontestably a multi-racial and a multilingual society (Okoth-Okombo 2001). The linguistic heritage comprises a wide array of 40 plus African languages and English.² In addition, since the 1960s a novel idiom known as Sheng (Swahili **ENGLISH**), has become the stock-in-trade among the youth in urban centres, especially Nairobi, Nakuru, Kisumu and Mombasa. For close to 50 years, the sub-language has become the signature language for the youth denoting ideological affinity, social class, in-group identity³, coolness, generational rebellion, linguistic innovation, rejection of tribal identity, etc. Today, it is inconceivable for a young person living in the urban spheres of Kenya to be “normal” without speaking Sheng. A non-Sheng speaking youth would also be cut-off from any conversations taking place among his peers.

Interestingly, what was the language of the youth in the 1960s has remained a cherished legacy by the urbanites that are now in their late 50s.⁴ Further, in the context of mixed African marriages in towns, Sheng emerged as the natural choice for the future progeny since Swahili is considered a difficult language, even more difficult than English.⁵

In the context of urbanization and the absence of a clear language policy, Sheng emerged as a convenient interface enabling young Kenyans from different ethnic identities to interact effectively and efficiently. Several authors have speculated on the origins and functions of Sheng (Abdulaziz et al, (1997), Ireeri-Mbaabu 1996, Githiora (2002) and Iraki (2004) but suffice it to say that the idiom has been a linguistic reality in Kenya for the last 50 years. This makes a good case for scholars to consider enlisting Sheng among Kenya’s rich linguistic patrimony. But what exactly is Sheng?

II. Sheng: A brief description

Sheng is an idiom that fundamentally employs Swahili syntax and a lexicon drawn from African languages and English. However, Sheng also simplifies the Swahili noun system to exclude muddled-up categorization. It also modifies Swahili syntax to be in

¹ Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary.

² Nairobi has a growing number of French and German speakers.

³ Identity is a serious issue among the youth. In a recent survey, most of them prefer Shengified European names to African names. The main reasons include meanings associated with the names; ethnic identification/labeling

⁴ Most of the urban youths of the 1960s have kept pace with Sheng and use it regularly.

⁵ Informal interviews conducted among the youth in Kibera slums in April 2010 indicated that the respondents preferred using either Sheng or English since Swahili was considered more complex and therefore more demanding.

consonance with the majority of noun categorizations in African languages and English. For instance, animals and people are in the same noun class in Swahili which is rather counterintuitive in other Kenyan languages including English. Sheng rationalizes the anomaly by placing animals and people in the “thing” and “human” categories.

But Sheng goes beyond simple borrowing of terms. It has its own words that cannot be traced etymologically to any African or European language: *manzi* (girl), *sosi* (food), *chapaa* (money), *dinga* (car), *fala* (idiot), and *kudinya* (make love to), *kutuna* (to sleep) just to mention a few. Of particular interest are words relating to food, sex, money, states of mind, music. Sheng also truncates the borrowed words or reverses some à la *pig latin*. For instance, *Basketball* becomes *Bakay*; *mother* becomes *masa* then *sama*.⁶

The prosody of Sheng is also different from Swahili. Like Swahili, Sheng is very vocalic with a preference for open syllables⁷. With the influence of Dholuo, a Kenyan Nilotic language, a number of words change at the beginning and at the end: *Kenyatta/Onyato*, *Kibaki/Obako*, *Kadenge⁸/Odengo*, *Class/Olaso*, *Dirisha⁹/Odiro*, *darasa¹⁰/Odaro*.

III. Sheng: an interlanguage, pidgin or Creole?

There is no denying that Sheng portrays a number of features associated with interlanguage¹¹ but the fact that its speakers are the youth does not favor the interlanguage hypothesis. But Sheng shares most of the features of a pidgin (contact language): syntactical simplification, lexical borrowings, morphological modifications, etc (Githiora 2002). The only problem with the pidgin hypothesis is that most Sheng speakers also speak vernacular, English and Kiswahili. Sheng is not the only language spoken by the youth. However, there are strong indications that in the case of mixed African urban marriages, a new crop of Sheng mother-tongue speakers is quickly emerging¹². This generation might employ Sheng as a Creole.

Some varieties of Sheng are jargons more than anything else. For instance, the matatu subsector has a jargon that is influenced more by the Gikuyu language. In view of the importance of this industry in Kenya, the language of the touts has been a key player in the country-wide spread of the Sheng language. Further, since the touts are viewed as “cool” by the youth, their linguistic influence has been considerable. Words borrowed from this group include domains such as sex, money, cars, cops and women. Examples include:

⁶ See Iraki, F. (2004) for a detailed description of Sheng.

⁷ Most Swahili words of Bantu origin end with *a*. Sheng changes some of the endings of names to *o* e.g. *Kibaki* becomes *obako*.

⁸ Name of a person.

⁹ Swahili word for *window*.

¹⁰ Classroom, class.

¹¹ Intermediary language used by a child before mastering a mother tongue.

¹² Some children born in the 1990s have Sheng as their first language. Contrary to some arguments, children from the impoverished urban neighborhoods do speak Sheng but their mother tongue is another African language.

Sheng	Meaning	Possible origin
Muti, tenga	1000 bob	(muti) Gikuyu; tenga origin unknown
Ashu	10 bob	Arabic?
Chwani, chwee, fiu	50 cents	unknown
Muringa, dinga	Car	Gikuyu; dinga unknown.
Mbao	20 bob	English “pound”
Manzi	Young girl	unknown
Karao, midanze, sonyi	police	unknown
Msee, chali	Guy	Swahili word <i>mzee</i> old man; English word <i>Charlie</i> ?
Kusosiana, kudinyana	Have sex	unknown
Noi	Vagina	Swahili word “kino”
Deeki, tarimbo, paip	Penis	(Deeki) Penis; <i>tarimbo</i> from Swahili <i>mtaimbo</i> meaning iron crow bar; <i>paip</i> from English (pipe).

The discussion above serves to demonstrate that Sheng does more than just borrow from known languages; it innovates ushering in new coinages that underscore the creative genius of the Kenyan youth. But Sheng has had more than its fair share of attention in the national psyche of Kenyans. It has many admirers but also very many detractors.

IV. Sheng: the raging debate

Over the years, Sheng has been in the centre-stage of language controversy¹³. For some scholars Sheng is nothing but a hodge-podge of words used by lazy youth to hide their evil intentions from the adults. Here are some of the arguments about sheng:

a. Criticisms

- i. Sheng is not a language
- ii. Sheng has no community of speakers
- iii. Sheng has no grammar
- iv. Sheng changes every day!
- v. Sheng is different from one group to the other
- vi. Sheng is the option of linguistic misfits!
- vii. Sheng is a slang of Swahili.
- viii. Sheng is killing good vernacular, Swahili and good English!
- ix. Sheng is for confused people!
- x. Sheng is used by lowly people.

b. Support

¹³ Scholars are divided on the nature, importance and relevance of Sheng in Kenya. Live debates are not uncommon to argue over the matter.

- i. Sheng is the future language of Kenya
- ii. Sheng is the new neutral language amidst tribal languages in Kenya.
- iii. Sheng integrates the major Kenyan languages in an innovative and practical fashion
- iv. Sheng is the rescuer of Swahili!
- v. Sheng is the language of the youth in towns, no matter what the old guys say!
- vi. Sheng varies from one group to another but NOT to the extent of jeopardizing intelligibility. Dialects are allowed.
- vii. Sheng reflects the creative spirit of the Kenyan youth
- viii. Sheng does not suffer the negative images of Vernacular, English and Swahili.
- ix. Sheng makes you feel that you belong to a progressive and unique group
- x. Sheng makes sense!

The arguments above if anything point to the importance of the Sheng phenomenon.

VI. Sheng, memory and heritage

The idiom has been acclaimed in the political domain (with slogans *Unbwogable* (fearless), expressions *muji-enjoy*¹⁴(have fun).

In the economic arena, a good number of commercials targeting the youth in Kenya are now in Sheng. For example Safaricom, Zain, Equity Bank, Barclays Bank just to name a few have been advertising both in the print and electronic media using Sheng.

Socially, the Sheng idiom has been accepted as the form of communication that best encapsulates the mood of the times. The youth regard it as indispensable in their daily lives. It is the best medium for socializing, relaxing, playing and bonding. It does not have the strictures of Swahili or the snobbishness of English. The Sheng websites have been very active recently in their bid to share new words across the world.

If we argue that the future of the nation is in the hands of the youth then it makes sense for us to make room for Sheng which is the youth's main tool for interaction with their peers. This means that the values and symbols of our country will be encoded, relayed and preserved (at least orally) via the Sheng language. This is not to mean that Sheng is the only language at play in Kenya. On the contrary, the other languages, including English, French, Spanish, etc have a very important role to play in the prosperity of Kenya (Iraki 2005).

In sum, to discuss the heritage of Kenya without considering the linguistic diversity of Kenya in its entirety and complexity is to bypass a critical change factor in Kenya. Further, in the projected scenario where most of the people of the world will be town-

¹⁴ Both expressions have been employed by Mwai Kibaki, Kenya's third president, in his presidential address to the nation.

dwellers in the next century, the town people will be communicating in a medium they find easy and friendly. In the case of Kenya, the rapid urbanization can only mean that most of the future urbanites in Kenya will be using Sheng in their daily interactions.

VII. Conclusions

The criticisms leveled against Sheng are many and probably they can be justified. Modern European languages, especially French and English, were equally if not more vilified than Sheng up to the Nineteenth century. But these languages survived the onslaught from Latin (the pure language) to become the great languages of today. French arose from simplified (not to say bastardized) Latin. By turning a blind eye to Sheng might we be turning our backs to one of the greatest innovations of our society that will one day become a powerful language? 50 years of Sheng and the language is still growing strong might be a strong indicator that the idiom is probably one of Kenya's indisputable gemstones. It would be a shame not to consider Sheng a great Kenyan linguistic innovation and therefore a good candidate for a heritage slot.

As Kenya grapples with the thorny issue of fostering nationhood, could Sheng be the idiom of unifying the youth and the country at large in the future? With rapid urbanization in the next 50 years will Sheng be the language of the country? Since Sheng does not fall within the ethnic languages of Kenya, could it be the language to unite all language groups of Kenya? These questions probably make a case for the documentation¹⁵ and recognition of Sheng as forming an integral part of the linguistic landscape of Kenya. This is a critical heritage issue.

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¹⁵ The author is compiling a 50-year history of Sheng words in a book form.