

The Effects of 'Sheng' in the Teaching of Kiswahili in Kenyan Schools

by

Clara Momanyi, Ph.D.

clamona@yahoo.com

Kenyatta University, Nairobi, Kenya

Abstract

This paper discusses the effects of 'Sheng' in the education institutions of Kenya, and gives a general overview of its development at the expense of the official languages, that is, Kiswahili and English. While some people have advocated the growth of 'Sheng' as an indication of societal growth in Kenya, others, including scholars, researchers and educationists are on the opinion that the spread of this code impacts negatively on the learners in Kenyan schools and colleges. They base their arguments on the fact that other international languages did not achieve their sophistication through breaking their morpho-syntactic or grammatical rules at the pace in which 'Sheng' is infiltrating Kiswahili. Indeed, according to some, this code should be left to hip hop musicians, public transport touts, drug peddlers and school drop outs. The paper recommends specific researches to be done on the language situation in Kenya especially as far as the spread of 'Sheng' and its impacts on education are concerned.

Overview

The term Kiswahili here has been used to refer to the language which is widely spoken by the people of Eastern Africa and adjacent islands. Today, the language is spoken in many parts of the world including Africa and Arabia, and is taught in many institutions of learning in Europe, Japan, Korea, USA, England and Canada, among others. The term *Swahili* is used here to refer specifically to people who speak Kiswahili as their native language, who share a more or less common culture and who live along the eastern coast of Africa, including the islands of Comoro, Zanzibar, Pemba, Mombasa, Lamu and Pate. According to Chimerah (1995), the use of the term had a direct bearing on the advent and ultimate settlement of Arabs among the Bantu Swahili.

It is not the purpose of this paper to delve into the origin and development of Kiswahili, but suffice it to say that Kiswahili is typically a Bantu language (about 40% of its lexicon is Bantu) which borrowed and continue to borrow words and terminologies from other languages to enrich its lexicon.

Any developing speech community borrow from different communities that it interact with and it is specifically for this reason that some known international languages acquired their sophistication (Chimerah *ibid*). Indeed, English has expanded its lexicon largely through borrowing. Many English words are not native to the language but they originated from many languages, dead as well as living in the world. According to McCrum (1986), only 20% of the entire vocabulary of modern English is actually native English (i.e. German Anglo-Saxon). 80% of English vocabulary is borrowed from other languages, Kiswahili included. Kiswahili is not only the regional language of East Africa, but is fast becoming an international language. As Thomas and Katembo (2005) rightly states, ‘...the language dwarfs the linguistic fluency density and geographic span of any other indigenous African tongue...’ While Kiswahili is making these great strides, it is being faced with a variety of challenges in its place of origin due to the emergence of language varieties like ‘Sheng’.

Significance of Kiswahili in National Development

Kiswahili has admirable value within economic markets. Much trade in the East African region is conducted in Kiswahili. Small-scale enterprises often require lingua francas like Kiswahili to flourish (Webb 1998). Kiswahili is the social lingua franca of a large part of the Kenyan society at all socio-economic levels (Kimemia 2001:12). However, for a long time now in Kenya, language policy has come to mean nothing more than political pronouncements, government statements, and recommendations made by Educational Commissions which are rarely implemented. In 1969 for example, the then ruling party, KANU (Kenya National African Union), gave Kiswahili a formal recognition as the national language, therefore taking cognizance of its role in nation building. Yet it was not until 1971 when the language was officially declared the national language of Kenya.

The decision of Kenya to use Kiswahili as the national language immediately after independence came as a need to foster human development. This is because Kiswahili is the language of inter-ethnic communication in Kenya where it bridges the linguistic gap between communities. Kiswahili has the oldest uninterrupted history as an African written language compared to other African languages used in the country. Its written literary history is over a span of almost three centuries. It therefore has a significant role to play in higher education for purposes of equipping trainees and future professionals with communicative skills needed to foster national development.

The ideal role of a language in any society is to be able to serve as many of its speakers as possible. Kiswahili can adequately perform this role because it is non-ethnic. This means that as per now, there is no particular community that can claim ownership of this language. Because of this neutrality, Kiswahili has enjoyed the support of the East African governments, Non-Governmental Organizations, and is spoken in many countries in the world. The East African region, for example, is part of the global village, which is currently undergoing fundamental transformations on the basis of intensive competition.

Indeed, regional groupings have reinforced themselves for purposes of strengthening their competitiveness in the global market. Kiswahili is the language of cross-border trade within the East African region, and plays a significant role in fostering socio-economic relationships within the region. It is the language of the East African Community (EAC) and has been proposed to be the language of the African Union (AU). This means that it has to be developed to meet the global challenges ahead.

Any country that values the development of its people must incorporate them in all development processes. This can be realized through a language that they can comprehend and can competently use it to evaluate themselves and to implement development projects within their area. Kenyans are therefore lucky to have a language that is spoken and is understood by over 80% of the population. Kiswahili has been used by politicians to woo votes during political campaigns. Through Kiswahili literary genres especially lyrics, politicians gain popularity among the masses, hence improving their chances of winning in an election. Activities such as Civic Education, HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns, Human Rights advocacy and Constitutional Review process have become successful partly because the majority of Kenyans share a common language – Kiswahili. Professionals like engineers, agricultural extension officers, doctors and technicians use Kiswahili mostly to communicate to the public while discharging their duties. There is, therefore, an urgent need to equip these professionals with Kiswahili communication skills needed for them to competently discharge their duties.

In this age of globalization, imported technology continues to bombard most of the African countries including Kenya. Industrial production, which involves imported technologies, is tied to foreign languages. This means that the latter dominates industry and commerce. Yet at the grassroots level where the peasant farmer, the housewife, the kiosk operator, the street vendor or the *Jua Kali* artisan operates, this official foreign language is rarely used. Instead, the indigenous languages including Kiswahili are the media through which this technology is interpreted and applied. It is therefore imperative for our professionals to learn Kiswahili, to be able to impart the right knowledge and to communicate to the general public.

Inconsistent Kiswahili language policies have continued to prevail in post-independent Kenya. These inconsistencies have accentuated and contributed to negative attitudes towards teaching and learning of Kiswahili in educational institutions. In the education sector, for example, the Ominde Commission of 1965 first advocated the use of Kiswahili as a compulsory subject in primary schools. Since this Report was compiled, subsequent reports have continued to recommend the teaching of Kiswahili for national integration. For example, following the Mackay Commission of 1984, Kiswahili became a compulsory and examinable subject in primary and secondary schools throughout the country. This culminated in the launching of the 8-4-4 system of education in 1985.

The move boosted the image of Kiswahili in the country since the government had realized the crucial role that Kiswahili plays in educational and socio-economic development of the country. Moreover, the Mackay Commission was reinforced by the Koech Commission of 1999, which proposed that Kiswahili should be one of the 5 compulsory subjects to be examined at the end of primary education. The language was also to be one of the 3 core subjects to be examined at the end of secondary education.

This move has had positive effects for Kiswahili in higher education because not only does Kenya have a Kiswahili National Association (CHAKITA-Kenya) but more Kiswahili departments have since been established in all public universities and their respective constituent colleges. Kiswahili is, however, not taught in some private universities and the government has not seen the need to make it mandatory for all universities to teach the language as a compulsory subject. It should also be understood that the bulk of professionals who graduate from these institutions serve the general public. They are employed in various sectors where, in most cases, they interact with the general public through using Kiswahili language. It is therefore imperative that they know the language well.

On the other hand, literature transmits language, history, traditions and customs of a people. For example, it is through written or oral literature that the heroes and heroines of the nation are idolized (Were and Amutabi 2000:35). It is through orature that the country's great leaders are known and their deeds pass on from generation to generation. Kiswahili being the common medium of expression in Kenya can best serve these roles, hence the need to develop and teach it in the school curricular. Various literary scholars have underscored the importance of teaching and appreciating African literatures. For example, P' Bitek (1973) realized this need by advocating the teaching of African literature to children and the youth as a means of achieving educational goals and not just for the sake of passing examinations. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, a renowned literary scholar from Kenya, has even gone further to advocate the teaching of African literatures by using African languages. This, however, may not happen if we do not have a standardized way of speaking which cuts across all social strata.

Nature of 'Sheng' and its Effects on Education

Kiswahili language was standardized in the third decade of the 20th century (1930) so as to have a common way of expression in all the East African countries for purposes of cultural, educational and socio-political developments. The standard form is the one that is used in schools, administration, parliamentary systems and general communication. It is therefore the one that is used to produce text books and other teaching materials in schools, and it is this standardized form that the student is expected to learn in order to communicate with the general public.

However, in the recent past Kiswahili, including English, have been hit by a wave of ‘Sheng’ speakers who are mostly pre-adolescents and young adults. The youths developed a secret code which they wanted to identify themselves with, and a variety of the subculture. So the term ‘Sheng’ was originally coined as a result of an emerging mixture of Swahili and English words. But as time went by, the code no longer was situated in these two languages. It is now a blend of these languages and other ethnic Kenyan languages.

Different theories have been advanced by researchers as to the exact origin of the code (Ogechi 2005; Githiora 2002; Abdulaziz and Osinde 1997; Spyropoulos 1987). However, they all agree at one point that the code started in the less affluent and slum areas of eastlands of Nairobi. Spyropoulos, for example, indicates that the code must have been invented soon after national independence in 1963 but I cannot agree with this argument because of the nature and character of the code. This is because it cannot be equated with the 1960s inhabitants of Nairobi who were speaking broken Kiswahili for purposes of communicating. The present ‘Sheng’ speakers are youths who can speak Kiswahili competently but who choose to defy the norm and inventing their own code for group identity. Let us not forget that the 8-4-4 system of education I mentioned earlier made Kiswahili a mandatory subject to be taught in schools. The school graduates of this system are the ones who are engrossed in ‘Sheng’ so much so that it is part of their life. It should also be realized that restricted codes like ‘Sheng’ are commonly identified with a closed in-group. This is because once one is able to speak it fluently; one achieves prestige among members of one’s group. This also disempowers the outsider and makes the group assert their identity.

‘Sheng’ is based primarily on Kiswahili structure. It uses Kiswahili grammar with lexicon drawn from Kiswahili, English and the various ethnic languages mostly spoken in big towns. Initially, this mixed code was unstable, random and fluid, but it gradually developed more systematic patterns of usage at the phonological, morphological and syntactic levels. For example, the word ‘father’ started as ‘fadhee’, later it changed to ‘buda or budaa’ and now it is ‘mbuyu’. According to Githiora (2002), the word ‘buda’ has its origin in Gujarati and Hindi which means an old man. But in the new coinage ‘mbuyu’ there seems to be no explanation as to its origin. The code dominates the discourse of primary and secondary school children outside their formal classroom setting, and is widely spoken also by street hawkers, street children, public service vehicle drivers and conductors and small scale business communities in market places.

Originally a slang which was used by the youth of Nairobi, ‘Sheng’ now is used in the complex multilingual and multicultural setting of other major towns in Kenya apart from Nairobi. ‘Sheng’ is therefore a reflection of the linguistic complexities that exist in Nairobi and other major towns like Kisumu, Mombasa, Nakuru and Eldoret. In these big towns, Kiswahili, English and the mother tongues interact in a complex and unstable manner, giving rise to code switching, random language mixing and language shift. (Abdulaziz & Osinde 1997). The youth come from diverse ethnic communities and devise this slang to enable them communicate among themselves in the subculture they have created.

Hence the slang reflects the norms and values among the urban youth of Kenya. The particular 'Sheng' they adopt will also depend on the geographic location and social background. For example, if in one estate the dominant ethnic community is Kikuyu or Luo, the kind of 'Sheng' will have a higher percentage of Kikuyu or Luo words. A high lexicon, however, is from Kiswahili language.

There is also another variety called 'Engsh' which according to Abdulaziz and Osinde (1997) developed in the richer suburbs of westlands of Nairobi. It is based on English structure and vocabulary but with words from Kiswahili and other local languages. An example of this kind of slang is:

'You'll go to majoints first before you pitia mahom?'
'He gave me chums and I pitia shaggs'.

According to Githiora (2002), Nairobi has a population of over 2.5 million people and is one of the fastest growing cities in Africa. Over 50% of Nairobi residents speak Kiswahili mainly when communicating with their fellow residents from other ethnic communities or even with other family members. Infact, most urban families are bilingual where Kiswahili is one of the languages spoken. 'Sheng' has moved far beyond the urban centres and is spoken by youths in the rural areas of Kenya. In Nairobi alone, increasing number of city residents are speaking 'Sheng' and this includes some parents in the home environment, even politicians when addressing people in public gatherings.

Local TV and Radio stations have also given space to 'Sheng' where specific programmes use this code (Vioja Mahakamani, Vitimbi etc). These broadcasts have a lasting linguistic effect on school children and the youth since some of them tend to identify with certain characters in these programmes through the use of this code.

Let us now observe a few linguistic features about 'Sheng'.

Many words seem to have common sounds in word final position. The most common sounds are /sh/, /e/, /i/, and /o/. For example, some Kiswahili words are shortened (truncated) to end with some of these sounds as is seen in the following words:

Gikomba (place name) – Gikosh

Mtumba (conventionally used as second hand cloth) – Mtush

Mtoto (child) – Mtoi

Ogechi (2005) explains that truncation also happens in 'Sheng' where a word is borrowed from one of the languages of the speech-community spoken, for example, English. The word undergoes a process before it is used in 'Sheng'. First the word is Bantuized to enter into the Kiswahili structure which is predominantly Bantu.

Secondly, the Bantuized form is truncated. Here it is mostly the final syllables that are truncated although sometimes the initial ones also undergo this process. Finally, the truncated form may be suffixed where either a coined syllable or sound is used to complete its marking for ‘Sheng’. A few examples below can help to elucidate this process:

| <u>Eng</u> | <u>Kisw</u> | <u>Truncated sound</u> | <u>‘Sheng</u> |
|------------|-------------|------------------------|---------------|
| Fifty | fifti | -fti | finje: |
| President | Prezidenti | -denti | Prezzo: |
| Timothy | Timothi | -thi | Timo: |
| Vincent | Vincenti | -centi | Vini: |

Sometimes the initial syllable is also truncated as is seen below:

| | | | |
|----------|----------|-------|------|
| Practice | Practizi | -Prac | tizi |
|----------|----------|-------|------|

The prefix ma- is used in many Bantu languages to indicate plurality. This prefix is also used by ‘Sheng’ speakers with some English words as plural marker:

Youths – Ma-youth
 Lecturers – Ma-lecturer
 Politicians – Ma-politicians
 Fathers – Ma-fadhee (sometimes Ma-mbuyu)

Code mixing is a common feature in ‘Sheng’ where Kiswahili, English and sometimes even other local African languages’ morphemes are used to form words and sentences. Examples are given here below:

He has come – Ame-come
 Let us go and eat – Twende tuka-dish
 To die – Ku-dead

The word ‘dead’ is also used by ‘Sheng’ speakers to mean ‘pleasant’ ‘beautiful’ or ‘sexy’ e.g. Yule manzi ana-dedisha – That girl is too sexy.

Note also that the word ‘manzi’ is a ‘Sheng’ word for ‘girl’.

Bring the book to me – Nibring’ie kitabu.

The travelers have gone home – Wathii (Gikuyu word for ‘travellers’) wameenda ma-hom.

There are also new derived meanings from original Kiswahili meanings which are widely used in this code. For example, the word ‘mbao’ means pieces of wood in Kiswahili. In ‘Sheng’ the word can either mean a twenty shillings coin or it can also mean to throw away one’s luck, or just to spoil things for oneself.

Look at these sentences:

He has thrown his luck away – Ametupa mbao (which in ordinary Kiswahili this could mean he has thrown away pieces of wood)

The word ‘kumanga’ or ‘kumangamanga’ in Kiswahili means to roam around helplessly or to move around a place with no clear intentions. The word now has derived meaning in ‘Sheng’ which means ‘to eat’ (kumanga).

Also the word ‘hewa’ in Kiswahili means ‘air’. In ‘Sheng’, the word carries a prefix ma- to form ‘mahewa’ which means ‘music’.

‘Sheng’ words from other borrowed Kenyan languages are as follows:

‘Nyita’ (Gikuyu) which means ‘to understand’ has found its way into ‘Sheng’ as this sentence shows-

Ume-nyita? – Have you understood?

‘Gichagi’ (Gikuyu) which means ‘rural home’ or just ‘home’. The word has undergone a metamorphosis such that it became ‘Ushago’ then ‘Shaggs’ and finally ‘Ocha’. Other ‘Sheng’ words that have undergone transformation through time include the following:

The word ‘mother’ became ‘madhee’ and now it is used as ‘masa’

The word ‘money’ became ‘chums’ and now it is ‘doo’.

What are the educational and social implications of ‘Sheng’? Most people in Kenya are on the opinion that this code interferes with standard Kiswahili and hence it has negative effects on formal education. Recently the Standard newspaper (a local daily newspaper in Kenya) took issue with the Kenya Publishers Association where in one of its Book exhibition it declared that it will in future publish books in ‘Sheng’ (Standard newspaper, 29/9/2006). This led to a wide national outcry because of the effects that this move will have in the education system. While the same Association cautions the youth that this code should only be used in informal set-ups and standard Kiswahili to be used in formal situations, it does not realize the lasting effects this code will have in their lives through publishing. Perhaps the question which one can ask is; which particular slang will they adopt to publish since ‘Sheng’ is spoken in different varieties depending on the locality? Secondly, the social stigmatization associated with this code makes most people in Kenya feel uneasy about the code. It has more often than not been associated with touts, drug pushers, hip hop musicians and school drop outs. In the education circles, the code is gangster slang, a secret code associated with social misfits, is fluid and not easy to understand.

Besides, 'Sheng' is unintelligible for the most mature adults who have little contact or regular experience with registers in which 'Sheng' is spoken. Some parents of school going children feel that this mixed code should be banned altogether because it is causing conflict between the youth and parents or adults, and is also creating confusion in the family and classroom. Yet one thing is certain; no one can stop the spread of 'Sheng' because like any form of communication, it has its speakers who give it life and sustainability.

In the education system, teachers have complained in various fora that the code interferes with formal language learning inside the classroom. This is because students fail to mark the boundaries between 'Sheng' and standard Kiswahili or even English. It has also been observed by teachers that many students are more fluent with this restricted code than with the standard Kiswahili. However, Githiora (2002), think that the problems found in classrooms and blamed upon 'Sheng' may infact represent non-linguistic conflicts. These may be as a result of larger social processes which the teachers and students are part and parcel of, for example, poor education policy. He thinks that many teachers are overworked as a result of under-staffing and also zero teacher recruitment by the government. Besides, he thinks that the introduction of free primary school education (this was introduced in 2003) has led to over enrolment of pupils leading to watering down of teacher instruction.

While these may sound very convincing, it should also be noted that 'Sheng' started way back before FPE was introduced. Hence there is need to carry out an investigation of school instruction and teacher evaluations in order to establish whether the students are disadvantaged in the classroom because they are linguistically deficient, which I highly doubt. I also doubt that over enrolment of pupils or even teachers being overworked has led to this phenomenon. The introduction of the 8-4-4 system of education in Kenya in 1985 gave Kiswahili language a boost because it was to be taught and examined in all primary and secondary schools as a compulsory subject. It is also observed that in primary schools, the pupils are able to speak and write very good Kiswahili. But when they finally graduate in high schools, their communicative competence is very low. Hence, something goes wrong when these pupils go to high schools and this probably needs to be investigated. Even in universities where Kiswahili language and literature is offered, the students continue to show incompetence when it comes to writing and speaking Kiswahili. They are often not capable of switching from 'Sheng' to standard Kiswahili with ease, yet they comfortably switch from 'Sheng' to other languages like their mother tongues.

It is true that to some extent, the code has interfered with the poor performance of students in national examinations. Some manifestations of this code can be seen in their class work especially in sentence constructions. Here are a few examples of ungrammatical sentence constructions to elucidate this fact:

1. 'Sheng' – Wenye hawakuwa wamemanga, wakamanga
Kiswahili – Wale ambao hawakuwa wamekula, wakala
English – Those who had not eaten, then ate
2. 'Sheng' – Nilichukua mavitu zangu nikaura
Kiswahili – Nilichukua vitu vyangu nikaenda
English – I took my things and left

Conclusion

What is the future of 'Sheng'?

As Spyropoulos (1987) pointed out, the emergence of 'Sheng' may have to do with the lack of clarity in Kenya's language policy especially by providing speakers with a code that makes good use of all the major languages spoken in the country. To some extent this may be true because while Kenya boasts of having Kiswahili as its national and (now in the draft constitution) official language, there are no deliberate efforts to make this a reality through policy formulation. Infact, since 1930s, Kiswahili has undergone no rigorous standardization in the region to cater for the ever growing list of vocabulary and technical terms as a result of socio-economic and cultural developments. Due to its widespread use, 'Sheng' has been in the centre of discourse among scholars and researchers in Kenya. The code has also caught the attention of the print and electronic media especially in advertisements, official health warnings on HIV/AIDS, and other commercials. It is also gaining prominence in music and popular youth culture where popular musicians like Gidi Gidi Maji Maji and those who specialize in hip hop music like Kalamashaka, Nameless, Mr. Nice and Darling P. often blend the various ethnic languages, Kiswahili and English words in their compositions.

The coinage of certain words in society has helped to enrich this code. For example, the coinage of words to reflect certain events of national importance like the death of a prominent Kenyan lawyer, S.M Otieno where the word 'Nyalgunga' became a household word to mean one's rural home. This is because there was a court battle concerning where he was to be buried. His wife wanted him buried in his marital home on the outskirts of Nairobi while his clansmen wanted him buried in his ancestral home in a place called Nyalgunga. The court favoured the clansmen and the lawyer was buried in his ancestral home. Kenyans picked this up and referred one's home as 'Nyalgunga'. Nowadays this word is not commonly used especially by the youth. The death also led the youth to perpetuate a song called 'Tero buru' which is culturally a Luo song sang when a leader dies. Tero buru is now a common song among the youth.

Another observation that is worth noting is that the majority of the youth who use ‘Sheng’ are males. Females become a little bit reserved and I tend to believe that they are aware of the negative social implications of using it. This conservative linguistic behaviour of women has been documented in early works of researchers such as Labov (1972), Milroy (1980) and Coates (1986).

One emerging feature about this code which is also worth noting here is that in Nairobi the street children who are now adults speak ‘Sheng’ as their primary or only language. Could this then be the creolization of ‘Sheng’? De Camp (1971) defines Creole as the native language of most of its speakers. Its vocabulary and syntactic devices are like those of a native language, large enough to meet all the communicative needs of its speakers. Hence Creole is an advanced stage of pidginization whereby the non native speakers have become native. In the streets of Nairobi and in other urban centres are to be found street families who use ‘Sheng’ as their means of communication. They do not have another language of expression because some were born and brought up in the streets. Research is therefore required to establish the extent at which the code is used in order for it to be qualified as a creole.

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