

Sheng: Rise of a Kenyan Swahili Vernacular

Chege Githiora

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Sheng is a variety of Swahili strongly admixed with English, both standard and non-standard, and elements from Kenya's other indigenous languages. It emerged in the wake of decolonization, spreading from Nairobi, the nation's capital and urban metropolis. Its speaker base has increased rapidly, unlike its reputation among the more conservative members of the country's political and educational establishment, who tend to see it as a corruption of Standard Swahili and an impediment to the teaching of both correct Swahili and English. The author of the present study, currently a Professor of Linguistics, African Languages and Literatures at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London, can look back on two decades of experience doing research on Sheng, and he writes from the advantageous position of a semi-insider. As a professional linguist, he is up-to-date with the international state of the art in the field, and as a Kenyan he remains a participant observer of the Sheng scene, fluent in all the relevant languages and equipped with an insider's knowledge of the cultural background.

The book consists of a brief introduction, eight chapters, and substantial appendices. While brief (10 pages), the introduction deftly establishes the framework of the study. Sheng is described as a language, as befits a linguistic study. But Sheng is also studied as a set of modern Kenyan cultural practices, which adds an equally important ethnographic dimension to the linguistic one. Also, the author makes clear that although his specific study example is local and Kenyan, the scope is much wider, pan-African and even global. Sheng is presented as one of many examples of a type of modern African multilingualism that has variously been described as hybrid urban vernacular (because speakers typically come from deprived neighborhoods in the continent's sprawling cities) or as modern African youth language (because young speakers are the drivers of innovation in the language and its spread in the wider community). Whether 'youth language' or 'urban vernacular' is the more appropriate category may be immaterial in the end, as the young are the numerically dominant population in the continent's rapidly growing demographics.

Additionally, urbanization, coupled with the emergence of large blighted communities that are nevertheless the basis of a vibrant

informal economy for survival, is a major feature of ongoing social transformation. Some of these new varieties are pidgins and creoles, such as Naija/Nigerian Pidgin in Nigeria or Kamtok in Cameroon. Others, such as urban Wolof in Senegal or the tsotsitaals of South Africa, are—like Sheng—mixed languages.

Chapter 1, “Sheng as Kenyan Swahili,” introduces the reader to the author’s extensive fieldwork, presents some of the data, and advances his conception of Sheng. Beginning with folk theories of Sheng, he discusses a number of possible categorizations, rejecting one (Sheng as a pidgin/creole) and criticizing a number of others as incomplete. With good reasons, he ultimately settles for a model in which Swahili figures as a transnational macro-language of East Africa, of which Sheng is regarded as one specifically Kenyan manifestation. What I find particularly interesting are the final remarks on “‘Kenyanese’: a continuum of speech codes” (p. 33-37). This neologism makes clear that boundaries between languages may be more fluid in modern African settings than elsewhere, and that therefore any attempt to draw fixed boundaries between Sheng, the two institutionalized prestige languages: that is, Swahili and English, and Kenya’s other indigenous languages is bound to distort the complex multilingual ecologies of contemporary African cities (which are rather different, of course, from the traditional multilingual ecologies of the rural areas). Yet another domain of language use beyond the urban and the rural is the internet. Studying social-media communication in diasporic web-forums operated from Nigeria and Cameroon, I have suggested the labels ‘Cyber-Nigerian’ and ‘Cyber-Cameroonian’ for the complex mixtures of English, Pidgin, French, Camfranglais and West African indigenous languages encountered in the data (Mair 2013: 266, 271; Mair 2014: 71) and am happy to see the term ‘Kenyanese’ used here in the description of an offline equivalent to these online repertoires.

Chapter 2 discusses the colonial and postcolonial history of Swahili in Kenya and Tanzania and the two countries’ different policies regarding the role of Standard Swahili in education. Standard Swahili continues to serve its traditional function as a national language for Kenyans, but where modern urban life with its openness to outside influences is concerned, Sheng may have become a language that even more Kenyans can rally around as a national symbol, also because Sheng more strongly connotes ‘not-Tanzanian’ than Standard Swahili.

Chapter 3 returns to the author’s fieldwork in Nairobi, which includes participant observation, sociolinguistic interviews, and experiments to elicit language attitudes. Here the most striking findings are that in Nairobi indigenous languages other than Swahili tend to have low prestige, giving way to various vernacularized

varieties of Swahili affected by contact with indigenous languages. English and Standard Swahili retain their traditional prestige, with Sheng building up increasingly open prestige as a symbol of a modern African urban identity.

Chapters 4 to 6 form the linguistic core of the study, laying out a wide range of complex and fascinating facts about Sheng and analyzing them with knowledge and care. Chapter 4 focuses on current developments in Kenyan Swahili, including contact with Dholuo and Gĩkũyũ (as is manifested by the incorporation of elements of both into Sheng). Chapter 5 presents salient phonetic, grammatical and lexical features of Sheng, adding a discourse analytical component by analyzing how the individual features are used in connected speech in longer passages of the informants' narratives.

Chapter 6 offers a fascinating look at the global circulation of vernacular linguistic resources which often spread in connection with globally successful musical styles (e.g. *reggae*, *hip hop*) and politico-religious subcultural movements (e.g. *Rastafarianism*). Here Sheng is an importer, but increasingly also an exporter. Outside of Kenya, its mobility is due to migration and the establishment of diasporic communities, and additionally boosted by the recent advances in media and communications technology. Within Kenya, Sheng has expanded its base from Nairobi and spread into other towns and cities, and even into rural areas. The geographical spread has been paralleled by some upward social mobility, with Sheng spreading from the informal economy (*jua kali*, Swahili for 'hot sun', i.e. outdoors, without premises) to the corporate sector (the indoors economy). Fine examples of some *jua kali* exchange of linguistic and cultural resources in the global linguistic marketplace are provided in two nicely balanced sections on "Sheng in reggae" (149) and "Jamaicanisms in Sheng" (150-151). Githiora draws our attention to a fascinating informal network in which Kenyan anticolonial militants inspired Rastafarians in 1950s Kingston. A reggae superstar named himself after Jomo Kenyatta (Burning Spear), and 'dreads'—locally referred to as *Mrasta* or *Mnati*—have become a common sight on the Nairobi Sheng scene. Chapter 7 follows this up with close analyses of further examples of Sheng in media use (local radio, comics, popular music).

Chapter 8 provides a provisional conclusion to the story of the rise of Sheng—from small beginnings in the mid-20th century to the authentic 'we-code' of the "Sheng generation," the Kenyan millennials who have come of age in the 21st century. They form a vast speaker base for whom Sheng has become an essential component of their multilingual repertoires, and a genuine expression not only of their Kenyan, but of a wider and more open modern African urban identity. As the author argues in the final sentences:

[...] a common 'language' such as Swahili can foster wider solidarity and nationalism among Kenyans, but alone it cannot resolve the challenges of national integration and cohesion. Sheng can make a contribution in this direction because it is an important facet of Kenya's national identity at home and abroad. (184)

In this spirit, the concluding chapter articulates a strong plea for a more enlightened attitude toward Sheng in the educational and cultural sectors, arguing that it should not be seen as an impediment to the acquisition of Swahili and English, but rather as a link connecting the many languages of the country to the official languages, and the two official languages with each other. Reading Githiora, who takes pains to always relate Sheng, the language, to the social, economic and cultural contexts of its use, one is tempted to conclude that Sheng is the equivalent of *jua kali* in the linguistic marketplace. Both thrive on the robust and resilient creativity of millions of ordinary Kenyans and help them cope in a rapidly modernizing urban African environment—an environment in which too many people are still failed by the political institutions and the formal economy and, by implication, Standard English and Standard Swahili, the two languages of prestige associated with them.

There is little to criticize in this well-written and well-produced book. The routine reviewer's cross-check of the book's list of references against the MLA bibliography confirms that all major strands of relevant research have been covered adequately. Personally, I would have liked to read a little more about Sheng on the internet and on social media; the relevant section (132-134) is rather brief. In his phonetic transcriptions, the author does not use the International Phonetic Association (IPA) alphabet, but his own, partly idiosyncratic transcription system. This makes his arguments more complex than necessary for linguist readers to follow, but may have advantages for lay readers (an audience which the study explicitly addresses, too). As for the few errors, some of them even give the appearance of sophisticated translanguaging, such as the "throw out the baby with the birth water" (p. 182), reminding the reader of the homophony of *birth* and *bath* in a Kenyan English pronunciation.

In sum, Githiora's book is a substantial study of Sheng, both as a linguistic and as a cultural code. It is essential reading for anyone interested in the role of language(s) in contemporary Kenyan culture and society. A wider readership will find it interesting for its demonstration of how, in a globalizing Africa, language boundaries enforced by colonialism are becoming fluid. There is increasing permeability and overlap between the Anglophone, Francophone and Lusophone (post)colonial language domains. Within these zones, the social divide—English, French, Portuguese for the elites, indigenous

languages for the masses—is being challenged more and more, very often by new grassroots vernaculars such as Sheng and their functional equivalents in other countries. In the form of Sheng, Swahili has escaped the control of the colonial and postcolonial language planners in Kenya. In this process it has not only incorporated and adapted large numbers of words from Standard English, the language of the colonizer, but also from several nonstandard sources—such as Jamaican Creole, a transplanted colonial legacy from West Africa.

Works Cited

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