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## *Sheng: peer language, Swahili dialect or emerging Creole?*

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**ABSTRACT** *Quantitative data collected during a recent research trip have shed light on the social and linguistic factors that affect language choice and use in the complex multilingual setting of Nairobi City. The first section of this paper provides the sociolinguistic backdrop of Nairobi, addressing issues of language choice among the city residents, the general distribution of Kenyan national languages in areas of the city, and functional uses of those languages as well as Swahili and English. The main section of the paper however focuses on the widely used mixed code known as 'Sheng'. Used principally among the youth, it is based on Swahili grammar but uses resources from other Kenyan languages to create a dynamic, mixed code. Stratified data samples were collected during a period of four weeks in selected city locations covering the four compass directions. While the larger part of the survey consisted of quantitative information in the form of a written questionnaire, raw speech data collected during open-ended interviews are used to sketch a structural description of Sheng in areas of morpho-syntax and phonology. These are then contrasted to Kenyan Standard Swahili. Attitudes towards Sheng are also considered, and compared to Swahili, English and other languages spoken in the city. Present and future implications of the use and spread of Sheng in urban Kenya raise a few questions about the impact of Sheng in primary and secondary school, its implications for the growth of Standard Swahili, and (lack of) language policy in Kenya.*

### *1. Introduction*

Sheng is a mixed language that emerged from the complex multilingual situation of Nairobi City. It is mainly spoken by young people – preadolescents to young adults – and dominates the discourse of primary and secondary school children outside their formal classroom setting. (see Appendix Tables 1–3). Its syntax is basically Swahili, but through ingenious code-switching, it draws from the phonology, morphology and lexicon of Kenyan languages spoken in the city such as, but not restricted to, Luo, Gikūyū, Masai, Luhya, and coastal languages such as Giriama and Taita. English is also an important source of many loan words in Sheng. Abdulaziz and Osinde (1997) claim in part that Sheng emerged from a specific neighbourhood of Nairobi – Kaloleni – then spread to other parts of Eastlands, and the city. In Spyropoulos (1987) the focus is on the rise and use of Sheng among the street children of Nairobi. She adds, however, that it was probably the early immigrants in Nairobi after national independence in 1963, 'including migrant labourers, Kikuyu ex-Mau Mau and their relations, school drop-outs and suchlike' who coined a new code from linguistic resources available to them in the new

multilingual urban context. Its spread away from Eastlands to become a street language was through the informal sector, e.g. shoeshine boys, curio sellers, hawkers and parking boys.

The present article<sup>1</sup> is based on research that I conducted in August 2002 which shows that indeed, Sheng is strongly identified with the Eastlands section of Nairobi, and is regarded by most city residents as an 'estate' youth language. However, I will add a number of observations that do not contradict, but rather add to published discussion and analysis of Sheng today. First, our research revealed competing claims about Sheng's specific origins, and several variations of Sheng exist, making it harder to pinpoint the specific points of diffusion within the city's Eastlands. For example, respondents from Jericho considered their version of Sheng different and 'better' than that spoken in, say, neighbouring Bahati, or Kaloleni. Second, use of Sheng is no longer restricted to the Eastlands but is much more widespread in the city. Also in densely populated peripheral areas of the city such as Githurai in the north and Uthuru in the West, their version of Sheng is indeed different as it appears to be much more heavily influenced by the Gikuyu - language.

'Estate', or *mtaa* in Nairobi Swahili, carries a specific and narrower sense than the Standard Swahili meaning of 'suburb' or 'town quarter'.<sup>2</sup> In Sheng and Nairobi Swahili, *mtaa* refers to low income, city council housing estates concentrated in the Eastlands, a section of the city that emerged during the colonial period as a reserved area for African workers living in the city. Some also call it the 'ghetto' and there is a high consensus that this is where Sheng emerged and developed into a widely used mixed code. Eastlanders and members of the informal sector (e.g. street hawkers, street children and market sellers, etc.) remain the large critical mass of Sheng speakers. Beyond its core speakers, Sheng has moved away from its narrower base in Eastlands to permeate much of Nairobi social strata and its influence can be felt in other towns and rural areas of Kenya, especially among the youth. During this research, we found at least half of male university students interviewed reported using Sheng as their language of social interaction or when among peers. Also nearly a quarter of respondents aged 11–25 years reported using Sheng as their principal language of solidarity, i.e. outside classroom or workplace. A smaller but no less significant section of the adult population (13%) also reported using Sheng as such. Additionally, even those who claim not to speak Sheng as their primary language use it often in certain registers or social contexts. An increasing number of city residents are speaking Sheng in the marketplace, in the streets and even at home. The code has also found plenty of space in local television and radio and today it is identified with a numerically large and growing social class and an expanding age group. There is also reason to believe that some Nairobians – such as street 'children' who are now adults – speak Sheng as their primary or only language. A conclusive finding of this nature could have very important implications for Sheng's current and future status as a mixed code or a developing pidgin as we shall discuss further on in this paper.

## 2. *Nairobi: the context*

It is not possible to analyse Sheng without first understanding the socio-linguistic environment in which it is immersed. To understand the dynamics better, I shall first explore the state of multilingualism and language use in the city of Nairobi. This is one of the fastest growing cities in Africa, with a population of over 2.5 million, which is largely

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Theresa Ince of SOAS for her assistance with data input.

<sup>2</sup> TUKI 2001.

accounted for by rural–urban migration. The phenomenon has given rise to a complex, multi-ethnic population and very wide economic disparities. English is the language of prestige, and therefore of upward social mobility, and the medium for instruction in secondary and higher education. Swahili is also an official language and serves as the commonest language of inter-ethnic communication. At the same time use of ethnic languages is widely tolerated, and ethnic nationalism is strong.

According to this research (see Appendix Table 1), speakers of Gĩkũyũ comprise a majority of Nairobi city residents (43.3%), followed by Luo (15.2%), Kamba (13.3%) and Luhya (7.4%). Speakers of Swahili as a first language are only 7% of the total sampled. On the other hand, the great majority speak Swahili at home, twice the number of those whose household language is Gikuyu for example. In fact, when household bilingualism is factored out, more than 50% of sampled Nairobi residents report speaking Swahili mainly, when communicating with other family members; about a quarter of the total sampled live in bilingual households, and the average number of languages spoken by a Nairobi resident is three.

### *2.1 Research issues*

The situation of complex multilingualism such as prevails in the city of Nairobi provides a fascinating context for the study of many types of phenomena. Language choice by individuals in multilingual situations involves social and linguistic factors, such as setting, topic, interlocutors or identity. In addition to studying how these factors affect the dynamics of Sheng, I am also interested in addressing quantitative issues of language use in Nairobi, and the language data collected during August 2002 gives a very good indication of how to answer such questions as:

- what are the primary languages used by residents of Nairobi of diverse social groups?
- what are the functional roles of Swahili, Sheng and English in Nairobi?
- what is the general distribution of ethnic languages in the city and what accounts for those patterns?
- what are the attitudes towards each of these languages (including Sheng)?
- what role do age, gender and ethnicity play in language use/choice?

### *2.2 Research background*

I carried out fieldwork over a period of five weeks with the help of a team of ten assistants.<sup>3</sup> The work consisted of a quick socio-linguistic survey of the city to identify interview locations, participants and field assistants. This was followed by a formal selection of markers for systematic study from a variety of phonological, syntactic and lexical features. Following a brief training session on field methods and linguistic data collection, we collected stratified data samples from each of the following city locations and in four compass directions: East(lands): (Dandora, Buru Buru, Bahati, Pumwani); West (Uthiru, Westlands); South (Embakasi, Industrial Area, South 'C') and North (Parklands, Githurai). About 20% of the total number of 1300 respondents were solicited in two primary schools and one secondary school where ages ranged from 10–18 years.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The full time assistance of the following persons is gratefully acknowledged: Thomas Wamburu, Peter Kala, Virginia Wamburu, Emily Waweru, Njogu Kimani, Martin Wamunyu, Abigail Wamunyu. The research was aided by a grant from the British Academy (SG–34529).

<sup>4</sup> Many thanks to Mrs Phoebe Olelo, Headteacher, Ainsworth Primary School, Pumwani, for her permission, and Jane Wanjiru Mutonya, teacher, for her kind assistance (6 August 2002); to

The three schools are owned and managed by Nairobi City Council and are attended by children of low and medium income families, representing almost every Kenyan language or ethnic background. We sampled pre-adolescents and young adults (10–18 years), adult individuals and groups, careful speech in face-to-face interaction with adults and excited, spontaneous speech activity among the adolescents. We collected additional data at shopping centres and during door-to-door interviews in the neighbourhoods of Buru Buru, South ‘C’ and Adams Arcade. The larger part of the survey consisted of quantitative information collected in a written questionnaire but we also recorded speech samples of Sheng during open-ended interviews. These data are used here to sketch a structural description of Sheng by detecting the chief markers of Sheng which are then contrasted with standard Swahili. Beyond establishing Sheng’s structural properties (morphology, phonology, and lexical), a comparison of the similarities and differences between the two may also help to pinpoint the areas of reading, speaking or comprehension difficulties experienced by Sheng speakers in the classroom, as was reported severally by teachers.

### 3. *Languages of Kenya*

The official languages of Kenya are English and Swahili. English is the language of big business, higher education and government. Bills presented to the National Assembly, for example, are generally drafted in English so are parliamentary debates. More than 60 languages and dialects are spoken in Kenya. A few languages such as El Molo, are considered dead while Ogiek is currently an endangered language. Kenyan languages reflect a diversity of language families and sub-families. Three main linguistic groups are Bantu, Cushitic, and Nilotic. Bantu languages are assigned to the Niger–Congo family, Cushitic to the Afroasiatic, while Nilotic languages are part of the larger Nilo–Saharan family of languages (see Appendix Table 5). According to Heine and Möhlig (1980), approximately 65% of Kenyan people speak one Bantu language or another (e.g. Kuria, Swahili, Gĩkũyũ, etc.), 3% Cushitic (e.g. Borana, Somali) and 30% speak a Nilotic language (e.g. Masai, Luo or Nandi, etc.). Each of these groups can further be broken into a number of dialect clusters. In addition to being Kenya’s predominant language group, Bantu languages are spoken throughout central, southern, and parts of western Africa. Kenya’s Bantu speakers are commonly divided into three groups: western (Luhya, Kisii, and Kuria), central (Gĩkũyũ, Kamba, Meru, Embu, Tharaka, and Mbere), and coastal (Mijikenda languages, Taveta, Bajun, Pokomo, Taita, and Swahili). Kenyan immigrants some of whom have settled in the country for a few generations speak Indian languages such as Punjabi, Gujarati and Hindi. Most of these languages have made a contribution to Sheng’s lexical and phonological expansion, reflecting the unique linguistic pluralism of this urban code. Some loan words have entered Sheng directly from these languages in recent times, for example *buda* or *budaa*, the Sheng word for ‘father’ (also *mbuyu*) borrowed from Gujarati (and Hindi) *buda* (old man). However, other items such as *chokoraa* also from Hindi *chokkra* (little boy) probably entered Standard Swahili to mean ‘street child’ long before the emergence of Sheng.<sup>5</sup>

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Grace Waithaka, Headteacher, Bahati Primary School, and Mary Mathenge, teacher; and to Deputy Headteacher, Pumwani High School (7–8 August 2002).

<sup>5</sup> I have used Standard Swahili (SS) orthography in Sheng examples where *dh* represents IPA /ð/ and /ŋ/ is represented by *ng’*; *e* and *o* stand for low vowels /ɛ/ and /ɔ/, respectively. In Sheng but not SS, these tend to be long when in final position.

### *3.1 Swahili*

Swahili, the substrate language for Sheng, is a national and official language of Kenya, enshrined in the new 2002 draft constitution, as such. It is of the coastal Bantu sub-family along with others such as Giriama, Digo and Chonyi. Swahili developed to become the common coastal language as early as the thirteenth century and has been greatly influenced by Arabic, but it incorporates words also from Hindi, Persian, Portuguese and English. Its capacity to adapt to changing contexts has contributed to its unique position among languages of East and Central Africa. In Kenya today, Swahili is the universal lingua franca in small-scale trade and media. It is closely connected with urban life and with certain occupations. Swahili is in theory used as a medium of instruction in schools in urban areas, but in practice English is mainly used, according to teachers who responded to our survey. However, Swahili is taught as a subject at all levels of education in Kenya, producing many graduates each year from the three main national universities. Radio and television broadcasts may be heard in Swahili, English, and various Kenyan languages. In rural areas of Kenya, Swahili is usually encountered only in radio and television broadcasts, shops or businesses run by non-locals, or in Swahili newspapers and pamphlets. In rural schools, children are taught in their local language up to the age of 11, but are taught Swahili as well as English as a second, examinable language from age 12.

### *3.2 Variation in Swahili: the case of Sheng*

Every language has social and geographical dialects; therefore geography and social context shape dialects. Although some ways of speaking Swahili can be traced to mother tongue interference, geographical dialects also contribute to the variation in today's spoken Swahili. In broad terms, northern dialects of Swahili are such as Kipate, Kiamu, and Kibajuni, while the central group includes Kimvita, the Swahili dialect spoken on Mombasa Island. The principal dialect within the southern cluster is Kiungunja spoken in Zanzibar, which also includes Shirazi and Kivumba regional dialects. Kingwana is the Swahili dialect spoken in Congo. 'Standard Swahili' (SS), even in Kenya, is usually considered the dialect of Zanzibar.

The social dialects of Kenyan Swahili that appear in the literature on the subject (e.g. Scotton 1979) are 'Shamba Swahili' or 'Kisettla'. These two refer to the Swahili code that emerged in Kenya from the context of contact between the owners of the large European farms – most, but not all, English-speaking – and their workers who also were not native speakers of Swahili. Heine (1979) on the other hand talks of a 'Kenyan Pidgin Swahili' in referring to the reduced code that is used as vehicular Swahili for trade and interaction in the areas away from the coast.

Sheng comes to add to this repertoire of Swahili social variants. Like other mixed codes or peer languages, Sheng appears to be used by its speakers chiefly as a marker of identity and solidarity. There are not many other ways of explaining the fact that certain sectors of the society do not make use of the widely understood form of an existing common language, that is, (Standard) Swahili. Restricted codes are commonly identified with a closed in-group because its mastery confers prestige to the insider and, at the same time, disempowers outsiders. Such codes are known to have emerged from language contact situations similar to that of Nairobi. In fact most major urban centres of Africa are likely to have produced a mixed code identified with a certain sub-group of the larger society, such as Sheng. Town Bemba is one such example. It emerged from a multilingual context, code-mixes in ways Sheng does and is spoken between peers in the urban areas, copper belt and mining areas of Zambia (Spitulnik 1998). It is based on a

major existing language and is used as a lingua franca, and its chief characteristic is code mixing while retaining the structure of its substrate, Bemba. Another example may be Camfranglais, a mixed code spoken by Cameroonian youths and used 'to assert identity and maintain secrecy', as reported by Abdulaziz and Osinde (1997). It relies on heavy mixing of French, English and Cameroonian languages. Yet another example is Fanagalo, a mixed language that arose from the context of South African mines, industrial sites and farms where it was established as a lingua franca between speakers of various languages found in South Africa. Its syntax is based on Zulu, Xhosa and related languages with adaptations of modern terms from English, Dutch and Afrikaans. It evolved from contact between European settlers and African people especially in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa and later also in Zimbabwe, Mozambique and even Malawi (Cole 1964).

#### 4. *Pidgins and Creoles*

Pidgins and Creoles share the common feature of being reduced, mixed languages, i.e. they are syntactically and phonologically simplified. Reduction means that the language makes use of a smaller set of structural relations and items in the syntax, phonology and lexicon than some related variety of the same language. DeCamp (1971) defined a pidgin as a 'contact vernacular, normally not the native language of any of its speakers, characterized by a limited vocabulary, an elimination of many grammatical devices such as number, gender, and a drastic reduction of redundant features'. Hymes (1971) defined it as 'that complex sociolinguistic change comprising reduction in inner form; ... pidginization is usually associated with simplification in outer form.' Simplicity though, does not necessarily entail impoverishment of meaning or loss of means of expression. Pidgins have also been defined as mixed-languages which have the grammar of one language (*substratum*) and the lexicon of another (*superstratum*). Since code mixing appears to be the most salient feature of Sheng, it is no wonder that many of those interviewed during this research most often referred to it as a 'mixed language' or 'neither Swahili nor English'. But is it a pidgin?

##### 4.1 *Pidgins*

A pidgin such as Tok Pisin has regular means of generating meaning, such as verbal derivation and other complex processes (Romaine 1988). Pidgins favour analytic constructions over synthetic ones; they simplify the morphology of the language, in particular doing away with (complex) inflectional morphology e.g. *John's house* > *John haus*.

Pidgin languages tend to have a reduced lexical inventory compared to their lexifying or superordinate language. Samarin (1971) went as far as to claim that the number of basic morphemes in Sango was 700-1000. However, pidgin lexicon tends to cover a wider semantic domain, thus compensating for the reduction in lexical inventory. The small lexical inventory is reflective of the context dependence nature of Pidgin languages, which therefore make much use of paraphrase, circumlocution and borrowing. Pidgins also develop morphosyntactic markers from the lexicon through grammaticalization, and the lexicon is multifunctional, i.e. words can function as nouns, verbs (intransitive or transitive). The following two verbs, 'sik' and *hepi* function as nouns and adjectives in Tok Pisin and Sheng, respectively:

e.g. Tok Pisin:       mi sik 'I am sick'  
                          sik malaria 'malaria'

Sheng:                   twende hepi 'let's go (and) have fun'  
                               niko hepi sana 'I am very happy'

Vehicular and inland Swahili ('pidgin Swahili') as we have seen, are forms of non-coastal Swahili used in most parts of Kenya. These describe a code that is less drastically reduced than a true pidgin grammar in part because they share greater mutual intelligibility with the superordinate language (SS). Although lacking most features of a stable pidgin, those versions of Swahili reveal a high level of reduction, such as replacing affixes with full pronominal forms.

e.g. SS:               sikumwona jana  
 Non-SS: mimi hapana ona yeye jana  
               'I did not see him/her yesterday'

In the above example, the SOV (SUBJECT–OBJECT–VERB) word order common in most Bantu languages is changed to become SVO, and tense marking is made redundant. Givón (1979) has argued that SVO order is the most common in pidgins because it is easiest to process by increasing the distance between a subject and an object, thus avoiding confusion between the two. The invariable nature of pidgin word order leads to a greater isomorphism between form and meaning. The structure of words in pidgins is quite similar to that found in analytical languages. They tend to be morphologically simple, whereas in synthetic languages it is very complex. English for example, uses possessive constructions such as *Juma's house*, where the inflectional /'s/ morpheme indicates possession, but Tok Pisin, an English based Creole language of Papua Guinea, opts for a morphologically simpler construction, using the prepositional phrase headed by *bilong* (< English *belong*), e.g. *haus bilong John* 'John's house' (Romaine 1988: 28).

In Standard Swahili the idea of location is expressed by an affix to the noun. For example, 'in the house' or 'at home' is expressed by the suffix *-ni* added to the noun *nyumba* 'house', whereas a reduced form of Kenyan vehicular Swahili uses the 'preposition' *kwa* 'in/at':

SS:               iko nyumbni  
 Non-SS: iko kwa nyumba  
               '(it) is at home'

#### 4.2 Phonological features of pidgins

Phonological inventories of pidgins are small in size compared to their lexifiers or substratum languages. For example, a number of marked sounds of the lexifier tend to be represented by a single phoneme in pidgin. In English based pidgins (e.g. Jamaican), interdental fricatives tend to be replaced by the corresponding stops /t/ and /d/. Heine (1979) noted that some Fanagalo speakers substitute the clicks of Khoisan origin with a simple velar stop /k/, and that compared to Fanagalo, words tend to be disyllabic whereas in Zulu they tend to be trisyllabic. In Sheng, the syllable structure of many words tends to be reduced, with heavy final syllables occurring very frequently in final position such as *tichee* for *ticha* 'teacher', *odiroo* from Standard Swahili *dirisha* 'window' or *gavaa* from English 'government' and *madhee* from *madha* 'mother', etc. Creoles tend not to have initial or final consonant clusters, and have a simple syllabic structure of CVCV. The results of these two constraints on word structure is the insertion of epenthetic vowels or deletion of such consonant clusters, e.g. Jamaican *fas* for 'fast' or *mas* for 'mast'. Consonant cluster deletion is unlikely in Swahili because such segments in final position are rare. However, Sheng frequently epenthesisizes in order to maintain a CV syllable structure, for example *ku-dishi* 'to eat' (< 'dish') or *ku-kreki* 'go mad' (<crack up).



### 4.3 *Creoles*

The term Creole is derived from Portuguese *crioulo*. It passed into English and French to refer to a white person of European descent born and raised in a (New World) colony. Later the meaning expanded to include an elite society within the colony. The term then began to be applied to certain languages spoken around the Caribbean and in West Africa, then to those other Creole languages of similar type. The development of a pidgin into a Creole entails an expansion of expressive forces in response to communicative needs, that is, the ‘process of creolization involves an expansion of inner form and complexification of outer form’ (Valdman 1977: 158). A Creole can also be defined as ‘the native language of most of its speakers, therefore its vocabulary and syntactic devices are like those of the native language, large enough to meet all the communicative needs of its speakers’ (DeCamp 1971). In view of these structural features and parameters, Creoles therefore represent an ‘advanced’ stage of pidginization whereby the non-native speakers have become native, and the code is now undergoing a process of expansion rather than reduction of inner form.

### 4.4 *Sheng: is it a pidgin then?*

The surface features of some Sheng items we have seen so far seem to reveal pidgin-like characteristics. The most compelling ones are lexical and phonological. The most common Sheng sounds, particularly at word final position are /sh/, /ny/, /e/, /i/ and /o/. Although they are all found in SS’s inventory of sounds, they occur with much greater frequency in Sheng. As indicated in footnote 4, the vowel quality is also different from SS; Sheng’s /i/ and /o/ are lower than their canonical counterparts. Also syllable structure of the sentence’s initial word (e.g. *sasa* ‘now’) is often simplified resulting in one ‘heavy’ syllable *saa*, instead of the two found in Standard Swahili. Some greetings and spatial expressions also seem to provide some evidence of reduction of forms derived from Standard Swahili and influenced by English equivalents in a perfect recipe of Sheng:

Walapa! (casual greeting < ‘what’s up!’ <?)  
 Niwatize? (‘what’s going on?’ < *ni what is it?*)  
 Asapaa! (‘right here’ < *hapa hapa!*)

Lexical borrowing is perhaps the most salient feature of Sheng. A major source of borrowing is English, but many Kenyan languages contribute loan words. These are readily inserted into the morphology generally without affecting the template of Standard Swahili, as examples, (1) - (3) show:

- (1) Sheng: ebu lola huyu mresh! (< *Giriama lola*)  
 SS: *hebu angalia huyu msichana*  
 look at this girl
- (2) Sheng: alikam (< English *come*)  
 SS: *alikuja*  
 s/he came
- (3) Sheng: *twende hom, maze*  
 SS: *twende nyumbani, bwana*  
 let’s go home, man.

In (1) and (2) borrowed verbs are inserted in the morphology, without altering the template or order of morphemes of SS. A Mijikenda verb -*lola* is used in place of Standard Swahili -*angalia*, and in (2) *kam* from English *come* is used in place of SS

kuja. Nouns may also be borrowed and inserted into SS morphology as in example (3). Adverbs are also involved in code mixing, and coined Sheng verbs such as -vuruta (SS kunywa) are quite common:

- (4) Sheng: sina eni lakini nataka kuvuruta  
 SS: *sina kitu (pesa) lakini nataka kunywa pombe*  
 I haven't anything (money) but I want to drink

Imperatives follow regular rules of SS where the pronominal object of the command takes the subject position, and the final vowel is duly inflected (a>e):

- (5) Sheng: nibring'ie  
 SS: *niletee*  
 bring (it) to me

Possible evidence of reduction is seen with plural ending -ni for imperatives (2nd pers. pl.) which is normally left out in Sheng:

- (6) Sheng: twende hepi  
 SS: *twende (ni) tukajiburudishe*  
 let's go and have a good time
- (7) Sheng: ebu lola huyu mresh!  
 SS: *hebu angalia (-eni) huyu msichana*  
 ('you' pl.) look at this girl
- (8) Sheng: tuishie  
 SS: *twende (ni)*  
 let's (all) go!

#### 4.4.1 Pig Latin

Pig Latin is a term that is used to describe word games or secret coded means which use a set of regular rules, usually that of syllable transposition. Pig Latin-type phonologically manipulated secret language features in many youth languages. Words are distorted rather than the phonological forms, e.g. nouns, verbs and adjectives are replaced by their semantic opposites – man for woman, up for down, etc. In some varieties of the language game, the tones remain as in the original with just the segments of syllables moved, and in another the tones move with the syllable. Sheng makes much use of pig Latin in forming sentences or coining words, lending further weight to the claim that it is a peer or secret language. The chief communicative goal of the speakers is to obscure meanings and intentions from non-members. Examples:

- (9) Sheng: analaku  
 SS: *anakula*  
 s/he is eating
- (10) Sheng A: kiche leyu mude  
 Sheng B: cheki yule dem  
 SS: *angalia yule msichana*  
 look at that girl
- (11) (a) ndifu < fundi 'handyman'  
 (b) ngife < fegi 'cigarette'  
 (c) mjamo < mmoja 'one (person)'

There are other instances of phonological reduction in Sheng. Quite often syllable reduction occurs in the data samples, where for example, disyllabic stems are reduced to

monosyllabic ones. Final syllables are also likely to be deleted or replaced with long-V (heavy) single syllables. For example:

- (12) (a) *sasa* > *saa* ‘now’  
 (b) *mimi* > *mi* or *mii* ‘I’  
 (c) *maḁa* > *madhee* ‘mother’

Shift of meaning is prevalent in Sheng whereby referential meanings are reassigned. This is a characteristic of codes in which rapid lexical innovations are constantly taking place. For example,

- (13) Sheng: *saa ni idhaa ya ketesh*  
 SS: *sasa ni wakati wa (kula) miraa*  
 now it's time for (chewing) *miraa*

In standard Swahili, *idhaa* means ‘radio/television broadcast period/service’, e.g. *idhaa ya Kiswahili ya BBC* (‘BBC Swahili Service’). The meaning shift in this case retains some of the general semantic notion of ‘period of’ which is now used in place of SS *wakati wa*. In the same example there is a radical meaning shift of the word *ketesh*, which in this example refers to *miraa*. Its origin is in the name of a tea brand (Ketepa or Kenya Tea Packers).

Like all natural languages, there is polysemy in Sheng, e.g.:

- (14) *mbao* ‘20 shillings’ or a ‘slap’  
*guoko* a ‘fight’ or ‘five shillings’

and synonymy, e.g.:

- (15) ‘*marijuana*’: *boza*, *fuaka*, *shada*, *gode*, *dara*, *gushumpeng*’, etc.

### 5. *Sheng verbs*

In a vocabulary of 534 items gleaned from our data, 74 or 13.8% of the total were verbs while the greater majority 346 (64.8%) were nouns. Sheng seems to borrow verbs from any of the languages in contact (see Appendix Table 6), eagerly adding to its verbal repertoire through various strategies. Loans from Kenyan national languages are e.g. *-nyita* (<*Gikūyū* *-nyita* ‘grasp, understand’) whose base meaning and idiomatic uses in Sheng remain parallel to those of the lexifying language, e.g. *Sheng umenyita rada?* ‘do you get the idea?’ (SS: *umelewa?*). Sheng also tends to use less frequent synonyms of standard Swahili, e.g. *-bamba* for the more commonly used *-shika* ‘hold’, ‘arrest’. It also sources from non-standard English e.g. *ku-chill* (<‘chill out’), or colloquial expressions, e.g. *ku-kreki* (‘crack up, go mad’) and *ku-shoot* (‘take off, go; shoot’). English nouns are converted into verbs, e.g. *ku-dishi* (‘to eat’, from ‘dish’), *ku-heng* (‘hang out’) and *ku-bugi* (<‘boogie’). Sheng uses a non-SS verb *ku-bonga* more frequently than their SS equivalents such as *ku-ongea* or *ku-sema* or even *ku-zungungumza* ‘talk, chat’. To ‘have a chat with friends’ is *ku-piga stori* also *ku-piga risto*, coined from the verb *ku-piga* ‘hit’, which has more than thirty different idiomatic uses in SS (e.g. *piga simu* ‘to telephone’; *piga chafa* ‘sneeze’, etc.). In this innovative case the verbalizing noun is a loan from English (‘story’). The second version of this Sheng expression uses a pig Latin form of *stori*.

From other unverified sources come words such as *ku-chai* ‘steal’, *ku-dema* ‘eat’, *ku-dhanya* ‘beat, hit’, *ku-manga* ‘eat’ and *ku-ng’am* ‘see’. Finally, as seen from a few examples already, pig Latin or transposition of syllables (e.g. *stori* > *risto*) is yet another source of coinage, e.g. *ku-laku* (<back-formed SS *ku-la* ‘eat’). In all cases, once coined, Sheng verbs follow the rules of SS in any further derivations. For example,

-kidiwa, a passive verb form derived from ku-kidi, is ultimately a loan from (American) English, 'to kid' (joke).

### 6. Attitudes towards Sheng

I will now turn attention away from structural features of Sheng to look at the social aspects of this code, and what speakers reveal about their material culture and society in which they live.

Opinions about Sheng are reflective of the two main issues surrounding its existence, i.e. its identification with a popular youth culture, and its status as a language of an underclass, a 'sub-culture' (Spyropoulos 1987), or inner city 'estates'. In broad terms, comments about Sheng that we obtained from respondents can be grouped in two categories of 'good' and 'bad'. On the one hand are those that refer to its interference with 'proper' Swahili and consequently its negative effect on formal education (e.g. 'it spoils Kiswahili', 'it has spoiled students' language.') These commentaries suggest that there are elements of social stigmatization, in addition to problems of communication associated with Sheng (e.g. 'it's a gangster language', 'it's a dirty language', 'it's a secret language', 'not easy to understand', etc.). I shall now examine them systematically in the following section.

#### 6.1 Positive: *Sheng ni poa sana 'Sheng is very cool'*

A majority of preadolescents and young adults who were interviewed approved of Sheng as a suitable means of communication for the youth (*Sheng inafaa na mayuth*). A significant number also advocated for it because 'it is good for keeping secrets' while others believed that Sheng makes people 'smarter', an assertion that could have been made with reference to street smartness, i.e. Sheng is a useful mechanism for adaptation in the urban environment, particularly in the estates. Sheng is perceived by the positive minded respondents as an inclusive language because it has incorporated and embraced words or phrases from many languages representing as many diverse groups of Kenyans living together in the city. Sheng is good because it is a mixed, inclusive code that accommodates many national languages without discrimination.

#### 6.2 Negative: *Sheng ni lugha chafu 'Sheng is a dirty language'*

Negative attitudes towards Sheng appear to be linked to age, class and to some extent gender. Many of the negative remarks about Sheng referred to its unintelligibility for the mature adults who have little contact or no regular experience with registers in which Sheng is spoken, and therefore do not speak or understand Sheng at all. Some 40–60 year olds<sup>6</sup> interviewed actually claimed no knowledge or awareness of Sheng as a 'language' that is widely spoken in the city. In our survey (see Appendix Table 3.2), 42.4% of those mature adults aged 25 years and over listed Swahili as their principal language of solidarity and only 12.4% cited Sheng as serving this purpose. Furthermore, over 20% used one of Kenya's other ethnic languages as their main language of solidarity, whereby 'solidarity' is defined as a scale of perceived like-mindedness or similarity of behavioural disposition between a speaker and addressee deriving from their similar backgrounds, acquaintance, or personal characteristics (Brown and Gilman 1960). Of the preadolescent group aged 11–15, 24% cited Sheng and only 8% used one of the 'other' languages between friends outside school or work. These figures are clearly indicative of the centrality of age in determining language habits of Nairobi residents because of a clear

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<sup>6</sup> These tended to be recent elderly immigrants into the city from rural Kenya.

correspondence between age and social status, and the attitudes toward a code they do (not) identify with.

A significant number of comments by adults over 25 years old were along the lines that Sheng has ‘spoilt Swahili’ and that it ‘should be banned’. Use of Sheng seems to cause conflict between youths and parents or adults and also brings confusion into the family and classroom. There were particular concerns, including from those teachers interviewed, that Sheng interferes with the formal learning inside the classroom because students fail to mark the boundaries between Sheng and Standard Swahili. Ultimately, many youngsters are more fluent with the restricted code than with classroom (Standard) Swahili. Many adults also described Sheng as ‘secretive’ and therefore ‘bad’ for social relations whereas youths agreed about its secretive nature, but believed that Sheng was ‘good’ for them, for the same reasons. Finally, those who reported speaking English as their household and solidarity language generally disapproved of Sheng, usually on the basis that ‘dodgy fellows speak it’ Sheng inaongewa na wakorawakora.

### 6.3 *Social context of Sheng narratives*

During this study we collected a few narratives told in Sheng from school children aged 11–17 years. In trying to elicit strong emotions, we hoped to overcome the ‘observer’s paradox’ by obtaining samples of the code that most approximated natural speech. To achieve this, the investigator must minimize the degree of self-consciousness or inhibitions of the respondent on matters of language. The ‘danger of death’ approach (Labov 1972) was used, for reasons I have already discussed. Indeed, the method yielded animated, hence more natural speech samples. It also gave us interesting insights into the day to day experiences of those young residents of Nairobi. In the following two sample narratives, I have underlined Sheng words in the text and *italicized* structures of Standard Swahili that are found within the same narrative. Upper case (CAPITALS) represent animated, breathy and loud voice.

#### Sheng Narrative A:

Siku moja nilikuwa... nilikuwa huko ochaa tukiona masangu pamoja na mbuyu wangu. Sasa tulipowasili pale Machakos na ... na... kuchukua buu... tu... tu... tulianza safari yetu fiti na nili... nilicheki mbele ya safari nikaona, nikaona tu ni poa ... lakini tulipofika na huko ... karibu tufike ochaa tulikutana na mangosa wengine waliposimamisha buu na kuanza kuhanda watu ... wakaambia watu warushe walipo... walichokuwa nacho ... asanteni ... walinyang’anya kila mtu kile alichokuwa nacho ..kama ni thauu, mbau ... halafu tukawachwa hivo.

One day I was ... I was over there in village, admiring the countryside with my father. Now when we arrived there at Machakos [bus terminal] and ... and to take the bus ... we ... we started our trip okay and I loo-... I looked ahead of the trip and saw ... I saw it would be all fine ... but when we got there ... before we got to the village we met some other gangsters then they stopped the bus and started robbing people ... they told people to throw down all they had ... thank you ... they robbed everybody of what they had ... if it’s a thousand [shillings], twenty ... then we were left like that.

#### Sheng narrative B:

Siku moja nilikuwa naendaga na hapo hivo Dandoo, tukakutana na mangosa wengine hapo- EH! hao mangosa walikuwa na ma-guns zingine hapo hivo KAALII! ehh! wakaanza kushoot watu ...walikuwa wamepelekeshwa watu ndwathe!! HE! HEE! HE! wacha nikuAMBIE MIMI SIKUONEKANA KWA HIYO NJIA TENA!! Nilikuwa nimeKATA he! ata kama ungeniona! ungesema hata huyo si mtu, haki! ...asanteni

One day I was going about there in Dandoo [Dandora estate] we met some other gangsters there -EH! those gansters had some other TOUGH guns eh! they started to shoot people ... they were really making people run! HE! HEE! HE! let me TELL YOU ME I WAS NOT TO BE SEEN ON THAT ROAD AGAIN! I had taken to my heels! he! if you had seen me! you'd have said that really is not a human being, I swear! ...thank you.

### 6.3.1 Narrative structure

Labov described narrative as 'one method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events that actually happened' (1972: 375). In his study of African American narratives in New York City 'ghettos' among speakers of what he referred to then as 'Black English Vernacular (BEV)',<sup>7</sup> Labov attempted to correlate language features such as syntactic forms (e.g. comparatives and intensifiers) and age with particular components of the narrative. Signaling devices include syntactic features such as tense or aspect and discourse markers such as hedges, overlaps and repetitions. All these gain significance in the deconstruction and interpretation of narrative. Labov identified six parts in the overall structure of the narrative, and each part is characterized by distinctive grammatical, prosodic or other patterns. I will summarize them very briefly and then show where and how they fit in with the sample narratives of Sheng.

The *abstract* is normally a clause that summarizes for the listener what the narrative will be about. Both narrators in A and B started out with such a clause, recurring to a formulaic narrative device: 'one day ...'. The abstract is usually followed by an *orientation*, which provides background information about the narrative (time, place, etc.). Again, in both cases, the orienting clause was followed by an identification of the location in which the narrative took place (A: ochaa 'countryside, village') and in B: 'around about Dandora [estate]'):

A: siku moja nilikuwa...nilikuwa huko ochaa

B: siku moja nilikuwa naendaga na hapo hivo Dandoo

The *complicating action* follows to give detailed description of the actual sequence of events which occurred in the narrative; a reversal in the order of the narrative clauses, for example, would change the entire meaning of the narrative. Since narratives rely heavily on sequenced description, a minimum number of complicating action clauses is required in order to identify a narrative as such. Narrative A provides ample support for this analysis, constituting at least six, well sequenced complicating actions; any change in that order would obviously damage the narrative's coherence or effectiveness:

A:

- (1) sasa tulipowasili pale Machakos  
now when we arrived at Machakos [bus station]
- (2) na...na...kuchukua buu...  
and took the bus
- (3) lakini tulipofika na huko...karibu tufike ochaa  
but when we arrived there near the village
- (4) tulikutana na mangosa wengine  
we met other gangsters
- (5) waliposimamisha buu  
when [then?] they stopped the bus
- (6) na kuanza kuhanda watu...  
and started robbing people...

<sup>7</sup> 'African American variety of English' (AAVE) or 'Black English'.

Comments about the universe of the story from the outside are referred to as *evaluation*. For example, embedded within the first complicating actions above, we find a remark such as:

tu..tu..tulianza safari yetu fiti na nili- nilicheki mbele ya safari nikaona, nikaona tu ni poa.. 'we..we..we started our journey and I looked ahead and saw it would be just fine'

According to Labov, such evaluating remarks occur in the narrative to tell or remind the listener of the significance of the story such as, 'I thought the trip would be alright but little did I know that danger was forthcoming'. Evaluations may therefore be intertwined in the story at different sections. The *resolution* marks the end of the complicating action, and may be the prelude to a *coda* or that section of the narrative that brings the author and listener back to the present world.

Resolution:

walinyang'anya kila mtu kile alichokuwa nacho.kama ni thauu, mbau...  
they robbed everyone of all they had, if it was a thousand [shillings], twenty...

Coda:

halafu tukawachwa hivo.  
and then we were left like that [robbed].

It needs to be mentioned that indeed oral narratives are best appreciated within their cultural context of performance. The context gives the audience a picture of the implications of the narrative itself, and in the performance paralinguistic features such as movement, facial expression and so on, enhance the messages contained in the language used. As such, transcriptions of narratives such as the ones above present only part of the performance; significant aspects of rhythm, prosody, or interaction with the audience, are not easily represented and may also be lost.

It is interesting to note that while Narrative B told by a teenage girl (15 years) contains all the components described above, its complicating action section comprises of only three, rapidly sequenced clauses. The emotion by the narrator is much more evident in the raised, animated voice, her use of metaphor (MIMI SIKUONEKANA KWA HIYO NJIA TENA! 'I WAS NOT TO BE SEEN ON THAT ROAD AGAIN!') and Sheng idioms (*walikuwa wamepelekesha watu ndwathel* 'they [robbers] were making people run [flee]'). The narrative ends with another vivid metaphor (*ata ungeniona! ungesema mimi si mtu, haki!* 'if you had seen me you'd have said I am not human, honest!'). Notably, she does not resort to any evaluating comments such as seen in boy A's narrative, indicating a more straightforward, highly animated story that effectively makes full use of her Sheng verbal skills and idiom.

In sum, these two samples of Sheng oral narratives do certainly fit in the Labovian structure of narrative obtained in a geographically distant location, but sharing certain socio-linguistic characteristics as described in the first section of this paper. It will be useful to examine further if the Sheng narratives encode information regarding social context in which narrators are involved, thus providing us with additional source of socio-cultural data for understanding Sheng. But before that I shall turn briefly to looking at structural aspects of the Sheng narratives and how these relate to the attempt to understand the nature of Sheng as a social dialect of Swahili.

### 6.3.2 *Grammar in Sheng narratives*

The most interesting aspect of these narratives is that, other than the use of Sheng words highlighted by underlining in the story, all of the grammatical structures used to narrate are well formed Standard Swahili sentences *italicized* in the text. Many of them

actually are complex structures involving a combination of tenses, relativization and contractions, as the following example clearly shows:

Sheng: wenye hawakuwa wamedema, wakadema  
 SS: (wale) ambao hawakuwa wamekula, wakala  
 those who had not eaten, (then) ate

Correlations – or lack of them – between grammatical elements and parts of the narrative are found in many languages. For example many Bantu languages such as Swahili and Gĩkũyũ employ a special tense known as the consecutive tense (C-tense) which is used only in sequenced narrative clauses. The tense does not occur in English where its closest equivalent would be ‘...and then...’. In Swahili it is achieved through use of an infix -ka- (-kĩ- in Gĩkũyũ) as underlined in the example above, and in those that follow below. The C-tense naturally dominates in narratives for obvious reasons, and because it is also used for pace and dramatic effect. In all Sheng narratives and other data samples, we find that Sheng speakers correctly applied the C-tense in their discourse. Furthermore, the context of their use in narratives corresponds, as expected, with the complicating action where most sequencing takes place, naturally:

A:

watu..wakaambia watu warushe ...  
and then they told people to throw down ...  
 halafu tukawachwa hivo ...  
and then we were left like that ...

B:

tukakutana na mangosa wengine  
and then we met some gangsters  
 wakaanza ku-shut  
and then they started to shoot

One may expect a reduced, pidginized variety to adhere less to canonical forms of its substrate but Sheng samples do not reveal any such reduction of grammatical form. In fact, many of them are as complex and used in the same ways as in Standard Swahili. Such structures include the use of infixes in relativized clauses, such as when A says, ... kile alichokuwa nacho ... (‘that which s/he had’). In another instance, the narrator self corrects, and uses the correct relative marker -cho- which agrees with kitu (‘thing’) the default object in relative sentences in SS ... walipo- walichokuwa nacho ... This is clearly an indication of a conscious awareness and knowledge of standard Swahili grammar when juxtaposed to that of Sheng. Despite Narrator B’s use of non-standard expressions or loan words, she similarly demonstrates a clear ability to use correctly those complex forms of SS, such as compound tenses in walikuwa wamepelekesha watu ndwathe! (‘they had been making people flee’) and nilikuwa nimeKATA, he! (‘I had taken off running!’), the conditional past tense, ata kama ungeniona! ungesema (‘had you seen me you would have said...’), and so on.

### 6.3.3 Content of narratives

The content of these narratives reflects very well the social context in which the young Sheng speakers live. Nairobi, in particular the Eastlands area, has high crime levels. Although one could argue that most crime in the estates is poverty related, gangsterism, drug trafficking and violent robbery have become extremely common in the city during



the past decade. So has police violence against the poor and the young. It is therefore not surprising that the vocabulary of violence is prevalent in Sheng. Nearly all the narratives we collected were about bad experiences involving the narrator and criminals or police, youthful escapades e.g. to illegal parties, hiding from parents or conducting secret messages. Some of the stories also involved jokes and bantering. Many words have been coined in recent times to describe various types of 'new' methods of criminality such as *kuhanda* 'hold up' applied to an encounter either with police or robbers, e.g. *jana tulipoachana maze nilihandwa na makarao!* 'last night after we parted, man, I was held up (robbed) by the police!' or *ngeta*, now a common tactic used in alleys of Nairobi involving the sudden use of a vicious arm hold around the victim's neck, using a wooden stick or iron bar held along the inner forearm and concealed from view under the robber's jacket or coat sleeve. Words for 'criminal' abound, such as *mangosa*, *wagondii*, *mnoma* and so on. Also many of the stories describe activities that are prohibited among the youth, or socially stigmatized (e.g. chewing *miraa*, going to all-night discos, etc.) and are therefore to be kept away from parents. Sheng becomes very useful in exchanging such private, in-group information, and adds to one's repertoire of street survival skills. Such covert uses of Sheng add more weight to its uses as a secret peer language.

#### 6.4 *The future of Sheng*

The rise, development and present status of Sheng is a reflection of a larger social process and internal social relations, such as class division, age and gender within a highly multilingual context. It was pointed out by Spyropoulos (1987) that 'the emergence of Sheng may also have to do with the lack of clarity in Kenya's language policy' by providing speakers with a code that makes good use of all the major languages spoken in the city.

I think that Sheng's most important function is to empower a certain group of speakers by providing a 'closed' in-group means of communication. In this way it also acts as a means of establishing group identity, expressing solidarity and creating prestige among insiders. Sheng's widespread use and its acceptance among Nairobians are on the rise first and simply because of the great numbers of its speakers – the young and underprivileged residents of Nairobi. Out of its own dynamism, it has permeated all levels of society and gained much media and scholarly attention such as letters to editors, newspaper columns, advertisements, official health warnings on AIDS, and so on.

Sheng is moving out of the estates because of a growing perception of 'coolness' especially among young males, i.e. a covert prestige that is associated with toughness, masculinity and local solidarity. This is taking place in part because of Sheng's increasing use in mainstream media, but more significantly because of music and popular youth culture. 'Rapping' and singing in Sheng is currently enjoying great success among the youth across all socio-economic classes of Nairobi.<sup>8</sup> For example, some upper class adolescents we interviewed claimed to speak the code without actually being able to do so. In fact, an analysis of my interviews with them revealed that they speak 'slang',<sup>9</sup> the version of Nairobi English spoken by the upper classes, not Sheng as we have described it. Such attitudes are produced by the effect of those qualities of covert prestige and 'street smartness' embodied by Sheng and transmitted through popular music.

<sup>8</sup> One such group is Ogopa DJ's whose 'rap' music productions were enjoying tremendous popularity at the time of this research. Equally popular rappers in Sheng are the groups Gidi Gidi and Maji Maji.

<sup>9</sup> This has been referred to as 'Engsh' by Abdulaziz and Osinde (1997).

Sheng's prestige remains covert because it is the non-standard language of an otherwise unprestigious section of society. This would explain the gender differences noted among respondents. Amongst young adults, women, especially female university students, reported less use of Sheng than their male counterparts. Most of them claimed to be speakers of 'slang' rather than 'Sheng', despite, for example, their family residence and background being in predominantly Sheng-speaking areas of the city. Similar conservative linguistic behaviour of women is documented (e.g. Labov 1972; Milroy 1980) in urban communities of the USA and the UK respectively. The linguistic conservatism is often manifested by females' lesser use of local, non-prestigious forms, reflecting their status consciousness. Young adult females in Nairobi are therefore more aware of the (negative) social significance of using Sheng.

In the future, Sheng is likely to increase in use and in the number of speakers, as more young Nairobians identify with its dynamic and innovative culture. The conditions for its existence are likely to continue to prevail, such as the socio-linguistic distance between classes and generations. Sheng will probably continue to be the favoured code of the urban masses that do not fit in to the world of Standard Swahili – being ethnically non-coastals, and having low levels of formal education. Sheng could eventually establish itself firmly as an urban dialect of Swahili with certain implications for language in Kenya: to what extent for example, would it influence Standard (Kenyan) Swahili in future? Or will Sheng crystallize as an age-graded phenomenon?

### *6.5 Sheng and education*

About 24% of our respondents aged 11–25 reported Sheng as their street as well as household language. However, the language of instruction in all secondary schools is English, and Swahili is taught as a subject examinable at KCPE (Certificate of Primary Education), O and A levels. In our research, a number of teachers blamed Sheng for the poor performance or failure of their students in Swahili or other exams. How is Sheng an impediment to learning in the classroom? How does multilingualism and the existence of a peer language affect the student's competence in Standard Swahili and English? An investigation of school work and teacher evaluations is necessary in order to establish whether Sheng speakers who are students in the primary and secondary levels, are disadvantaged in the classroom because they are linguistically deficient. Despite its highly fluid nature, particularly in the lexicon, and the existence of 'dialects' within itself, it is unlikely that Sheng lacks the logical means for analysis, discussion and creativity. The results of this study have shown that the grammatical structure of Sheng is really that of mainstream Swahili and that only a handful of Nairobians are monolingual. Why then is it a problem for young individuals to switch from Sheng to classroom Swahili, just as they are capable of switching between other languages, according to the relevant speech register? The problems found in the classroom and blamed upon Sheng may actually represent non-linguistic conflicts reflective of larger social processes which the teachers and students are part and parcel of, such as poor education policy.<sup>10</sup>

### *7. Conclusions*

Code-switching is widespread in Nairobi but it is not restricted to Sheng speakers. The principal languages used by Nairobi City residents of diverse socio-economic groups are

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<sup>10</sup> For example, we learned during this research that many teachers in Kenya today are overworked 'jacks of all trades' as a result of under staffing, zero teacher recruitment or staff development affecting all public schools of Kenya.

Gĩkũyũ, Luo, Luhya, Kamba, and Swahili, but many other Kenyan languages are also represented. Each language plays a distinct functional role, constrained by domain or register. Clearly Swahili is the principal means of inter-ethnic communication across generations while English remains the language of prestige; it is the language of higher education, parliament, laws, good jobs, and is spoken by the upper socio-economic classes of Nairobi. In terms of social prestige, an asymmetric relationship exists between Sheng and 'slang' on the one hand, and Swahili and English on the other. Although it is not yet possible to specify the exact distribution of ethnic languages in the city and what accounts for those patterns, this investigation shows that certain language speakers are concentrated in specific neighbourhoods of the city following patterns that were established in colonial times. This division however, is not clear cut today because there is considerable mixing of people even within these locations. Sheng is definitely marked by age since the vast majority of its users are children, adolescents and young adults. Although its use correlates with age, we have not been able to draw conclusions at this point about whether it is age-grading which makes Sheng function as a peer language. Sheng demonstrates a few characteristics of a pidgin such as widespread lexical borrowing and phonological reduction. However, its grammar is, by and large, that of Standard Swahili. Grammaticalization, borrowing and semantic games aimed at excluding 'outsiders' and so on, make it appear very different from Standard Swahili on the surface, but Sheng is clearly a version of Swahili. It is too early to talk of a proper pidgin, much less an evolving Creole. In sum, Sheng is an age-marked, urban dialect of Kenyan Swahili whose outer form is pidgin-like.

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## APPENDIX

TABLE 1: First language of respondents

Language	Speakers	% of total
Gikūyū	204	43.3%
Swahili	33	7.0%
Luhya	35	7.4%
Luo	72	15.2%
Kamba	63	13.3%
English	3	0.6%
Others	61	12.9%
<i>Total:</i>	471	

TABLE 2: National language preference

Language	Speakers	% of total
Swahili	304	58.2%
English	160	30.7%
Sheng	43	8.2%
Others	15	2.9%
<i>Total:</i>	522	

TABLES 3.1 &amp; 3.2: Solidarity Language (between friends, outside school or work)

## 3.1: Age group: 11-25 years

Language	Speakers	% of total
Swahili	121	40%
Sheng	72	24%
English	77	25%
Others	24	8%
<i>Total:</i>	294	

## 3.2: Age group: 25+ years

Language	Speakers	% of total
Swahili	82	42.4%
English	49	25.3%
Sheng	24	12.4%
Others	38	19.7%
<i>Total:</i>	193	

TABLE 4: Household language(s)

Language	Speakers
Swahili	24
Gikūyū	127
English	106
Luhya	10
Luo	37
Kamba	48
Sheng	40
Others	41

*Note:* 179 respondents speak 2 or more languages in the home.

TABLE 5: Kenyan language families

Group	% of population
BANTU (e.g. Swahili, Gikūyū, Kamba, etc)	65%
NILOTIC (e.g. Luo, Masai, Nandi, etc)	30%
CUSHITIC (e.g. Somali, Borana, etc)	3%
OTHERS (e.g. English, Hindi, Gujarati, etc)	2%

*Source:* Heine & Möhlig (1980)

TABLE 6: Sheng verbs obtained from collected data (August 2002)

- (*Std. Swahili in italics*), *exp*: expression
- bamba *vb shika* catch
  - bonga *vb ongea* talk
  - bugi *vb cheza dansi* dance (<*boogie*>)
  - chai *vb iba* steal
  - chil *vb pumzika* relax (<*chill out*>)
  - chop *vb soma sana* swot/cram
  - dema *vb la* eat (used esp. by girls)
  - dhanya *vb piga/chapa* hit; beat
  - dish *vb la* eat
  - doro *vb lala* sleep
  - dunga tent *exp wa na nyege* have an erection
  - gway *vb ogopa* fear
  - hanyahanya *vb tafutatafuta* busily search
  - heng *vb ? hang out* (<English>)
  - jaz *vb pendeza* entertain, e.g. amenijazz
  - jazika *vb furahi* to be happy
  - jazika *vb furuhia* enjoy
  - jikata *vb kimbia* escape; run away
  - jikata *vb ondoka* leave, e.g. *acha nijikate*
  - kreki *vb enda wazimu* go mad
  - laku *vb -la* eat
  - mada *vb maliza* finish of (e.g. food) (<English *murder*>)
  - manga *vb la* eat (<Mijikenda>)
  - manya *vb jua* know; understand (<Mijikenda>)
  - mbuthu *vb ? drill* a hole
  - ng'am *vb ona* see
  - nyita *vb elewa* to understand (<Gĩkũyũ>)
  - sabisia *vb fanya mapenzi* make love
  - shaba *vb ? make* love
  - shoot *vb enda* to go
  - show *vb onyesha* to show
  - sorora *vb jasusi* spy around
  - tuna *vb lala* sleep
  - tupa mbao *exp enda wazimu* go mad
  - ukata *vb fa* to die
  - wa ? ? ?
  - wa masaa *vb wa macho* be alert ('all eyes')
  - yebi *vb furahi* be happy

TABLE 7: A short glossary of Sheng August 2002

*Note*: dh represents IPA sound /ð/ and /ŋ/ is represented by ng'; e and o stand for low vowels /ɛ/ and ɔ, respectively. In Sheng these tend to be long when in final position. Known source of words is indicated (Eng for English; Gky for Gĩkũyũ), with examples from natural data where available. Parts of speech etc. are abbreviated *n*: noun, *vb*: verb, *adj*: adjective, *adv*: adverb, *excl*: exclamation, *imp*: imperative verb-form; *infl*: inflected verb-form, *exp*: expression, *phr*: phrase. Std. Swahili is shown in *italics*.

- ach *n Msomali* *Somalian*
- aire! *excl ? 'Iree!'*
- alam *n tatizo* trouble (<Eng. *alarm*>)
- alele *n kibeti* wallet
- alele *n kibeti* miraa
- antono *n wariahe* *Somalian*
- asapaa *exp hapa hapa* right here
- ashara *n shilingi kumi* ten shillings
- ashuu *n shilingi kumi* ten shillings
- ateno *n mwithiopia* *Ethiopian*
- avunjaa *n ? military* boots
- babi *n ? elite*, Western oriented (< Eng. *Babylon*>)
- bachu *n miraa* miraa
- bamba *vb shika* hold; sieze; catch
- bandi *n mwizi* thief (<Eng. *bandit*>)
- banjika *vb cheza* dance
- binja *vb fanya mapenzi* have sex
- bisnaa *n biashara* business
- bluu *n shilingi ishirini* twenty shillings
- bogolo *n msichana* girl
- boli *n mpira* ball
- bongo *n pesa* money (Mbotela)
- buda *n baba* father (< Hindi *buda*>)
- burugno ? ? ?
- burungo *n ? stolen* property
- bwenya *n koti* coat
- chali *n kijana* guy (< Eng. *charlie?*>)
- chapaa *n pesa* money
- chapoo *n chapati* chapati
- chizi *n wazimu* mad (person)
- chizi *n ujuaaji* know all
- chora noma *vb leta shida* cause trouble
- chuna ngoma *vb cheza ngoma* play music
- daso *n soda* soda (Pig Latin)
- dastee *n ? duster*
- demo *n chakula* food (cf. kudema)

- deree *n* dereva driver  
dinga *n* motokaa car  
doba *n* ? reggae  
doo *n* pesa money (<Eng. *dough*)  
doro *vb* lala sleep  
duba *n* matako buttocks  
faka ? ? ?  
fegi *n* sigara cigarette (<Eng. *fat*)  
filanga *vb* jisikia be vain  
finji *n* shilingi hamsini fifty shillings  
fisi *n* polisi police  
fiyuu *n* thumni fifty cent coin (<Eng. *fifty*)  
gange *n* kazi job  
ganji *n* pesa money  
ganzi *n* pesa money  
gastus ? ? ?  
gavaa *n* polisi/serikali police, government in general  
gesi *adj* filisika broke, e.g. wee mgesi or uko waya  
ghetto *n* mtaa council estate  
gode *n* bangi marijuana  
gofa *n* salamu greetings  
gomba *n* miraa miraa  
gota *n* ? greetings using knuckles of a clenched fist  
gotha *vb* danganya cheat, trick (<Gky. gũtha)  
guoko *n* shilingi tano five shillings  
guoko *n* vita fight  
gwany ?  
gwara *vb* anguka/kutofaulu fail, e.g. a test  
gwenje *n* pesa money  
hamsa *n* hamsini fifty  
handa *vb* sumbua harass, e.g. niliandwa na makaro jana!  
hepi *n* furaha good time  
hewa *n* mziki music  
inashanura watu *phr* inerevusha (Sheng) makes people smart  
isivii *phr* ni hivi 'it's like this'  
jacko *n* ? jacket (<Eng. *jacket*)  
joo! *excl* ah! aah! (or surprise)  
junguu *n* mzungu European (Slang)  
kago *n* mziigo stolen property (<Eng. *cargo*)  
kajande *n* mahari dowry  
kao *n* Mkamba Kamba person  
karao ? polisi police(man)  
kasheshe *vb* kelele noise; too much talk  
katia *vb* ? seduce a girl  
kavu *n* shilingi elfu moja 1000 shillings  
kawaroshu *n* chochoro alley  
keja *n* nyumba house  
kibeste *adv* kirafiki friendly  
kidi *n* mtoto kid  
kidiwa *vb* taniwa pull one's leg  
kijaka *adv* kijaluo Luo language  
kijanta *n* kazini place of work  
kinde *n* shilingi kumi ten shillings  
kingoso *n* kizungu English language  
kionjee *n* kioski kiosk  
kiruru *n* pombe traditional alcoholic beverage (<Gky. kirũrũ)  
kisapere *adv* Kikuyu Gĩkũyũ language  
kitowe! *excl* ondoka! 'get lost!'  
kobole *n* shilingi tano five shillings  
konkodi *n* makanga matatu tout  
korona *n* malaya prostitute  
kubamba *vb* shika hold, arrest  
kubonga *vb* kuongea talk, chat  
kuchi *n* bangi marijuana  
ku-chill *vb* pumzika relax (<Eng. *chill out*)  
kudema *vb* kula eat (used esp. by girls)  
kudhanya *vb* kupiga/chapa hit, beat, e.g. nitakudhanya!  
kudish *vb* kula eat  
kuhanyahanya *vb* tafutatafuta busily search  
kujaz *vb* pendeza entertain, e.g. amenijazz  
kujikata *vb* kimbia escape; run away  
kujikata *vb* kwondoka leave, e.g. acha nijikate  
kumanga *vb* kula eat  
kumanya *vb* kujua know; understand  
kunyii *n* matako buttocks  
kunyita *vb* kushika/elewa to understand (<Gky. nyita)  
kuro *n* malaya prostitute  
ku-shut *vb* piga risasi shoot (<Eng. *shoot*)  
kusorora *vb* jasusi spy around  
kutuna *vb* kulala sleep  
kuukata *vb* kufa to die  
kuwa masaa *vb* kuwa macho be alert ('all eyes')  
kuzoo *n* binamu cousin  
lanyee *n* malaya prostitute  
lebo *n* ? smart dress  
loba *vb* kosa kuelewa not understand, e.g. umeloba hayo maneno

luch *n malaya* prostitute  
 wa-/mwagush *n mshamba* country person  
 wa-/mjaka *n m/wajaluo* Luo people  
 wa-/mlami *n mzungu* white person  
 wa-/mangoso *n mzungu* European person  
 wa-msapere *n m/wakikuyu* Gikūyū people  
 wa-/mtaliban *n m/wajaluo* Luo  
     person(s)  
 mabeste *n marafiki* friend (< *best friend*)  
 madamosi *n msichana* girl  
 madiaba *n matako* buttocks  
 madigida *n matako* buttocks  
 madondo *n ?* bean stew  
 mahewa *n mziki* music (also hewa)  
 majani *n pesa* money  
 mandao *n mandazi* mandazi (pastry)  
 mang'wenyes *n pesa* money (Mbotela)  
 mantik ?  
 manyu *adv nyuma* behind (Pig Latin)  
 manyuitee *n chai* tea (used esp. in  
     Mbotela Estate)  
 manzi *n msichana* girl  
 masa *n mama* mother  
 mat *n matatu* matatu  
 matape *n matajiri* rich people (note  
     prefix as in SS instead of m-/wa-)  
 mathree *n matatu* matatu  
 matupaz ?  
 mauduu *n filisika* 'brokenness', e.g.  
     nimeuduu!  
 mawowow *n ?* (hip hop) youth (<'Yo!')  
 mbanyu *n nyumba* house  
 mboch *n ?* housemaid  
 mbosho *n mfuko* pocket  
 mbota *n saa* watch  
 mbuja *n ?* military boots  
 mbuku *n shida* problem  
 mbuku *n kitabu* books  
 mbuyu *n baba* father  
 mbwenya *n koti* coat; jacket  
 mchuda *n uume* penis  
 mchuma *n bunduki* gun  
 mdhama *n mama* mother  
 mdosi *n mkubwa* big (rich) man; boss  
 mgondi *n mkora* gangster  
 mjamo *n mmoja* one (Pig Latin)  
 mkambodia *n mkamba* Kamba person  
 mkinyoo *n ?* con; side cash; windfall  
 mlosho *n msichana* girl  
 mnoma *n ?* bad guy  
 mobinjo *n simu ya?* mobile phone  
 morenga *n motokaa/gari* car  
 mozo *n sigara* cigarette

mpongo *n makanga* matatu tout  
 mradi *n mpango* plan  
 mroro *n mwanamke* woman/girl  
 msee *n mwanamme* man  
 mshii *n msichana* girl  
 msororaji *n mjasusi* spy  
 msupuu *n mrembo* beautiful woman  
 mthama *n mama* mother  
 mtiaji *n msaliti* traitor  
 mtoo *n bunduki* gun  
 muimbaka *n Mkamba* Kamba person  
 mung'aring'ari *n ?* boys' play wheel  
 mzaee *n mzee* old man  
 mzeles *n jamaa* 'dude', 'mate'  
 Naii *n Nairobi* Nairobi  
 nari *n tairi/gurdumu* car tyre  
 ndae *n gari* car (< *Hyundai*), new word  
 ndai *n gari* car  
 ndai *n motokaa/gari* car  
 ndechu *n dhahabu* gold, e.g. amevaa  
     mandechu  
 ndesho *n mavi* shit (< *shonde*)  
 ndeve *n dereva* driver  
 ndom *n bangi* marijuana  
 ndovu *n shilingi 1000* 1000 shillings  
 ndula *n kiatu/viatu* shoe(s)  
 nduu *n pesa* money  
 ng'ethia *n zubaa* stare; be idle  
 ngale *n sigara* cigarette  
 ngamwe *n fala* simpleton; country  
     bumpkin  
 ngepa *n kofia* hat  
 ngeta *n kukabwa koo na ma-thug*  
     mugging  
 nginyoo *n matako* buttocks  
 ngosho *n shilingi tano* five shillings  
 niaje *excl niaje* how is it?  
 nigei *imper nipe* give me  
 ninanoki *exp ninaenda wazimu* I am  
     going crazy  
 nitamuja *infl nitakuja* I'll come  
 njeve *n baridi* cold  
 njiva *n chipsi* chips  
 njumu *n ki/viatu* shoe(s)  
 noii *n matako* buttocks  
 noma ? *tatizo* problems  
 nyakee *n nyama* meat  
 nyamchom *n nyamachoma* roast meat  
 nyang'andee *n ?*  
 nyof *n penseli* pencil  
 nyonda *vb kunya* to defecate (e.g. paka  
     hii inanyonda hapa!)  
 ocha *n gicagi* upcountry

ochaa <i>n</i> ushagoo upcountry	tenje <i>n</i> ? music system
odee <i>n</i> maji water	tenje <i>n</i> nyumba house
odich <i>n</i> mwalimu teacher	thomed <i>n</i> msomi learned
odijoo <i>n</i> mwalimu teacher	tibe/tiabe <i>n</i> chai tea (<Eng.)
olodoo <i>n</i> ploti house plot	tisa <i>n</i> mugging (arm hold by the neck)
orifoo <i>n</i> kiranja prefect	todhi <i>n</i> tosti toast/slice of bread
orush <i>n</i> ndururu five cent coin	(<Gky.)
otheroo <i>n</i> githeri githeri (Gky.)	toka tara <i>vb</i> kukimbia run, e.g.
pasteo <i>n</i> kasisi church pastor	tulitoka tara
peleka honda <i>vb</i> kuhara diarrhoea	tomisha <i>vb</i> ? be stingy
piga faka <i>phr</i> ? ?	tuishie <i>imper</i> twende let's go
pimbi <i>n</i> fala simpleton	tuliza <i>vb</i> poa relax
piwa <i>adv</i> wapi where	tuna <i>vb</i> lala sleep
poa <i>adj</i> sawa OK; fine; good	tunajilive <i>infl</i> tunaenda 'we are
poko <i>n</i> malaya prostitute	leaving'
primoo <i>n</i> msingi primary school	tunakwendako <i>infl</i> ? used by Luyhas
punju <i>n</i> mwizi thief	ubao <i>n</i> njaa hunger
rasa <i>n</i> matako buttocks	uduu <i>adv</i> hakuna there's none
risto <i>n</i> hadithi chat, e.g. piga risto	ugangaa <i>n</i> ugali ugali
rithee <i>n</i> risasi bullet	ura! <i>excl</i> potea!nenda! get lost! (<Gky.
rora <i>vb</i> angalia look (?<Gky. rora)	ūra)
rwabe <i>n</i> mia mbili two hundred shillings	ushagoo <i>n</i> mashambani upcountry (< Gky.
salo <i>n</i> mshahara salary (<Eng.)	gicagi)
sanya <i>vb</i> iba steal	usukoo <i>exp</i> pale over there
sasa? <i>exc</i> habari gani? are you alright?	utadu <i>infl</i> utafanya you will do
shada <i>n</i> bangi marijuana	vako <i>n</i> subira wait ,i.e. kula vako
shakee <i>n</i> shamba shamba	veka <i>vb/imp</i> njoo/kuja come
shamba <i>n</i> miraa miraa	veve <i>n</i> miraa miraa
shore <i>n</i> msichana woman	vingipi? <i>excl</i> vipi? how are you?
shuu <i>n</i> viatu shoes (<Eng.)	walaluu <i>n</i> wariahe Somali (<wariahe!)
skwenjeng' ? ? ?	warosho <i>n</i> chochoro alley
soo <i>n</i> mia hundred	wasapii <i>phr</i> ni wapi? where is it?
sota <i>vb</i> filisika be broke	(<whassup?)
sugee <i>n</i> sukari sugar	watee <i>n</i> maji water (<Eng. water)
supuu <i>n</i> msichana pretty girl	wathii <i>n</i> wasafiri travellers (<Gky.
taoo <i>n</i> mji town (<Eng.)	athii)
tegea <i>vb</i> ngojea wait for	zii <i>adv</i> hakuna there's none
teii <i>n</i> bia/pombe beer	