

Sheng and Engsh: What they Are and What they Are Not

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Abstract

Kenya is a multilingual nation with over 40 ethnic languages, many foreign languages, and two codes whose classification is not yet clear. The two codes are called Sheng and Engsh and are respectively language varieties of the slum and affluent dwelling places in Kenyan urban centres – especially in Nairobi. The objective of the present paper is to locate the place of Sheng and Engsh on the Kenyan linguistic scene by finding out what Kenyans feel the two codes are as instruments of communication. Data for the paper was collected by use of questionnaire, interview schedules, participant observation and archival records. The theory used in this paper is Social Identity as developed by Tajfel (1970). The conclusion that the present paper gives is that Engsh is but a variety of Sheng and that Sheng can no longer be taken for granted on the Kenyan linguistic scene. The paper recommends Sheng's proper recognition and planning in Kenya.

Key words: Sheng, Engsh, Slang, Kiswahili, Kenyan linguistic scene.

1.1 Introduction

Young people in Kenya, and especially young people in Nairobi, talk to each other in Sheng or Engsh (Nzunga 2002, Mukhwana 1990,2008, 2010, 2014, Abdulaziz and Osinde 1997, Githinji 2014). Sheng is spoken by young people, some of them working, and of all social classes. There is in Nairobi another variety of expression similar to Sheng but spoken by the children of the Kenyan elite. This variety of expression is called Engsh.

Thus, the sociolinguistic situation in Kenya is such that Kenyans live in an atmosphere constant inter-linguistic contact. The linguistic convergence in Kenyan urban centers is such that it is difficult to find an urbanite that understands and speaks only one language (Nzunga 2002). This may be the reason why in reference to Sheng, Webb and Sure (2000:37) say Sheng is a mixed language in Kenyan urban centers with pidginized and creolized features and that has the social meaning of 'young', city-dwellers with no links with traditional African culture.

Sheng is in Kenya an urban centers' language that has its syntax resembling that of Kiswahili and its phonology is also very similar to that of Kiswahili (Mbaabu&Nzunga 2003). On the other hand the elements of Sheng's vocabulary come from virtually any of the languages (ethnic or foreign) spoken in Kenya although more words are borrowed from local languages than from foreign languages (Nzunga 2002). Speakers of Sheng are themselves speakers of several of the other languages used as mother tongues in Kenya. The syntax and the phonology of Engsh remain comparable to that of Sheng, the vocabulary is borrowed predominantly from English (Nzunga, *ibid*). Sheng and Engsh are like two sides of the same coin. Given their position as peer languages spoken by the youth in Kenya their study is worthwhile. This is because Sheng and Engsh can hardly be qualified as a temporary linguistic phenomenon in Kenya. They may affect the teaching and/or learning of Kiswahili and English by the Kenyan youth. It is on the basis of this important linguo-social phenomenon that this paper sets out to find out what Kenyans feel Sheng and Engsh are or are not.

1.2 Method and Procedure

The research on what Sheng and Engsh are on the Kenyan linguistic scene adopted a descriptive research method, using questionnaire to collect data. For the purposes of the investigations the city of Nairobi was chosen. The choice of Nairobi was informed by the fact that Sheng and Engsh are predominantly languages of Nairobi. Subjects for the research comprised of one hundred (100) respondents of whom seventy two were males and twenty eight were females, with about twenty five respondents drawn from each of the estates of Komarock, Kangemi, Buruburu and Kileleshwa. Respondents included professionals (doctors, lawyers, teachers, journalists and politicians), civil servants, and university lecturers and students. Variables for the study included ethnic group, occupation, and age, level of education and estate of residence. Tables 1 and 2 below show this:

Number	Male	%	Female	%
Under 20 Years	6	66.7	3	33.3
20-35 Years	30	65.2	16	34.8
36-50 Years	22	81.5	5	18.5
Over 50 Years	14	77.2	4	22.2
TOTAL	72		28	

Source: Research Data

Table 2: Occupation of Respondents

Occupation	Number of respondents
Lawyers	1
Teachers	12
Journalists	6
Politicians	2
Civil Servants	6
University lecturers	8
Students	48
Others	17
TOTAL	100 respondents

Source: Research Data

Tables 1 and 2 show the ethnic groups and occupations of respondents respectively. The tables have been referred to as the issue of what Sheng and Engsh are or are not is analyzed.

1.3 What Kenyans Feel Sheng and Engsh Are or Are Not

Sheng and Engsh are 'popular' languages in Kenyan schools and colleges because it is said by elderly respondents that most students can express themselves fluently neither in Kiswahili nor in English. Unlike the two languages, Sheng and Engsh have no strict grammatical rules. There is no incorrect usage of a word as long as one person understands what the other is saying. 'What matters in Sheng and Engsh usage is "easy communication"'. This is, according to respondents aged 50 years and above, the reason why Sheng and Engsh are purely contextual languages to that extent that when you remove a context of usage, the interpretation will be varied. Sheng and Engsh, therefore to the above respondents, become poor instruments of communication for they cannot effectively communicate ideas outside the context of usage.

To elderly respondents, aged 50 years and above, Sheng and Engsh are regarded as languages for some 'spoilt youths' in the streets of Kenyan towns — especially Nairobi. Sheng and Engsh are thus regarded by the elderly respondents as street languages. Sheng and Engsh are resented by these respondents because the languages are highly colloquial. For that reason Sheng and Engsh are supposed to be considered as below the level of standard Kiswahili and English respectively, and consisting either of new words or of current words employed in some special sense. In this sense, Sheng and Engsh are to the respondents "childish languages". This is because Sheng and Engsh are to the diction that results from the favorite game among the young and lively of playing with words and renaming things and actions; they result in some inventing new words, mutilate or misapply the old words for the pleasure of novelty, and others take up surprise words for the pleasure of being in the fashion.

Youthful respondents aged 35 years and below argue that as Sheng is used by every one in the Kenyan society, the stigma once attached to the language has long since been removed. To the respondents, what is called Engsh is a social dialect of Sheng used by the children of the educated elite. Sheng is used in Kenya's rap music such that whoever is uninitiated into speaking Sheng will be at a loss to understand present-day Kenyan popular music.

Another observation about Sheng and Engsh by the elderly respondents stems from the fact that the two codes are not used as means of self-expression; they connote personality. The use of these languages comes from the wish of the individuals to distinguish themselves by oddity or unusual humor. In other words, what Sheng and Engsh consist of does not depend upon intrinsic qualities, but upon the surrounding circumstances. It is the users that determine the matter, and partly the users' habitual way of thinking. According to respondents, the use of poll-parroted terms in Sheng and Engsh and lack of sense of their shades and limitation of meaning makes the languages poor instruments of communication.

Sheng and Engsh are used for ease of communication; they are used by people who would like to be secretive such that they cannot be easily understood by the 'outsiders' around them. Respondents observe that the youth, the 'evergreen' youth and students use Sheng and Engsh for social interaction but without wanting to be understood by those persons who do not belong to their group.

Looking at the above use of Sheng and Engsh as reported by respondents, respondents aged 35 years and below are generally positive towards these codes, but respondents aged 50 years and above are scornful. These elderly respondents believe that 'Sheng and Engsh are codes of fools'. To respondents who hold this view towards Sheng and Engsh, people of discretion will not pervert Kiswahili and English to the unprofitable purposes of conversational mimicry. The reason for this observation is because Sheng and Engsh are opposed to standard languages.

Sheng and Engsh have also been condemned by respondents mostly aged 50 years and above on the ground that being evanescent, vague to those who use standard Swahili and English respectively, and ill-defined they have a deleterious effect to those who use them often. Due to this, Sheng and Engsh are seen by some of the respondents as 'lazy men's speech'. This is because the above respondents observe that to the users of Sheng and Engsh, when a word becomes definite in meaning it ceases to be a Sheng or Engsh word for another word is found and used in its place.

About word-formation in Sheng and Engsh, youthful respondents aged 35 years and below claim that Sheng (and Engsh) provides substitutes for the old words. Sheng becomes the source from which the decaying Swahili words are constantly refreshed. One respondent said, "Many of these Sheng words and phrases are but serving their apprenticeship after which they will enter main-stream Swahili". This

observation by the youthful respondent to Sheng and Engsh stems from the fact that idiomatic expressions in languages come from peer languages like these two (refer to standard Kiswahili words like kitututu, kingunge and kipanya).

As a support to Sheng and Engsh respondents who are aged below 36 years claims that Sheng and Engsh as languages have their domain of usage. Therefore, except in formal and dignified writing and in professional speaking, a vivid and extensive usage of these codes is likely to be preferable to conventional languages like standard Kiswahili and English. On the other hand, elderly respondents who oppose the use of Sheng and Engsh in Kenya are guided by the language loyalty attitude towards Kiswahili. To them Kiswahili as a language has to be preserved by encouraging its proper study and teach it in its standard form to the younger generation. This is one reason why the respondents try to protect Kiswahili from changes caused by Sheng and Engsh and which to them are perceived as adulteration of the purity of Kiswahili.

In referring to the origin of Sheng words respondents aged 50 years and above constantly commented; ‘That is a Luo or Kikuyu or Luhya word’. In this case, respondents deplored the use of ‘unnecessary’ loan words in Sheng.

Asked what they thought about the future of Sheng and Engsh elderly respondents, from the study sample, admitted that they are languages that are doomed to extinction. The reason given by respondents is that Sheng as a language does not have original native speakers who can claim it as theirs. One respondent said, “We started it in the late 1970s. We have now abandoned it. When we die, the language will be no more because it will lack original speakers. As for Engsh, it has already been assimilated by Sheng for it is a social dialect of Sheng”. The youthful respondents, however, disagreed with this thinking. They see a bright future for Sheng where the publication of Sheng dictionaries by scholars like Ireri Mbaabu and Nzunga (2003) and Moga and Danfee (2004) and the use of Sheng in the media - especially in music by musicians like Nonini and Prczzo is a pointer to the language’s future being bright. A typically ambivalent attitude to the future of Sheng by youthful informants goes thus:-

Sheng is the most enduring medium of expression which the people of Kenya have because it contains nearly all the elements of other languages used in Kenya.

This support of Sheng by youthful respondents, is in direct contradiction to the earlier one that claims Sheng is doomed to perish with the present generation of speakers. Most elderly respondents with the negative attitude towards Sheng and Engsh hold that although some booklets are written in Sheng, the booklets “are minutely studied”.

From the data, it is indicative that the users of Sheng and Engsh do not regard them much as languages. Asked how many Kenyan languages they knew, none of the respondents ever mentioned Sheng or even Engsh. It was only when I remarked about Sheng that the respondents came up to say they spoke it as a peer language. Therefore, on the Kenyan linguistic scene, Sheng and Engsh as languages are spoken by people who will refrain from saying they speak them. Respondents note that this is because of the hostility felt toward the social and historical connotations of Sheng and Engsh. Thus, the extent to which Sheng and Engsh are remembered and spoken in Kenya seems to depend on individual circumstances and preferences. It is even surprising that some respondent users of Engsh words like *kamuu* for come, *mtell* for tell him/her and *Jamuu* for Jamhuri High School; think they are using Sheng words. Thus, to supporters or even opposers of Sheng and Engsh the two codes are one and the same.

To respondents who also are speakers Sheng and Engsh, Kiswahili and English respondent speakers are against the two languages because they feel threatened. These respondents observe that there is tension on the part of speakers of Kiswahili because its linguistic features are threatened by those of Sheng and Engsh. This is manifested in the refusal by some Kiswahili speakers to use Sheng and Engsh as an effort to keep Kiswahili 'pure' and free from the taint of Sheng and Engsh elements. 'This is further manifested in the insistence on recognition of standard Kiswahili, and the derogatory terms of reference respondents, who support Kiswahili use for Sheng and Engsh. For instance, to the elderly respondents, Sheng is no language at all and if at all it is, then it is a bastard language. In all these instances, youthful respondents observe, it is the Kiswahili-speaking community or group who experience feelings of threat.

Generally, all respondents hold the view that Sheng is a mixed code with lexical items from English, Kiswahili, and other Kenya languages (mainly Dholuo and Kikuyu) superimposed onto the Kiswahili way of building sentences. From what respondents say the researcher can remark that Sheng users superimpose English, Kiswahili and other Kenyan languages because they want to be said to be like the original speakers of these Kenyan languages. At the same time, respondents note that they may be out to be accepted by other speakers of Kenyan Languages. In this case therefore, Sheng speakers are guided by instrumental as well as integrative motivation. All respondents note that speakers of Sheng and Engsh stick to their native languages in order to ensure cohesion and emotional security from members of their respective ethnic group.

Elderly respondents oppose the use of Sheng and Engsh in Kenya and say they are adulterous to Kiswahili. Thus, elderly respondents act as guardians to Kiswahili's linguistic properties; they argue that standard Kiswahili should be the norm for use in public domains and not Sheng or Engsh., Thus, Sheng and Engsh usage is a deviation from standard Kiswahili.

As already mentioned, the acceptance of Sheng and Engsh by youthful respondents on the other hand implies an obligation to popularize them through the mass media, the publishing houses, and in government administration. This is the position now because, as respondents observe, the popular rap music on Kenyan televisions and the radios is in Sheng and Engsh. The famous novelist by the name David Mailu has one of the longest novels ever written by a Kenyan but in Sheng. Besides printing books like Mailu's **The Broken Drum**, respondents aged 35 years and below note that there is also the production of dictionaries like Ileri Mbaabu's (2003) and Moga et-al's (2004) that propagate Sheng. These processes in the development of these languages are important because they determine the positive attitudes of Kenyans to Sheng and Engsh. Renown scholars like Ileri Mbaabu and David Mailu help in nurturing a positive attitude towards Sheng and Engsh by giving them recognition and popularizing their use. Therefore, from respondents, this paper can argue that Sheng and Engsh languages have been institutionalized in Kenya.

In a general sense, what Sheng and Engsh are or are not can be divided into three categories: negative, neutral, and positive. These categories can be arrived at by an analysis of what the respondents think Sheng and Engsh are or are not, what they can do and what they cannot do as languages and as instruments of communication.

Elderly respondents note Sheng and Engsh originate and flourish best in colloquial speech. Elderly respondents observe that among the impulses which led to the invention of Sheng and Engsh, the two most important are the desire to secure increased vivacity and the desire to secure increased sense of

intimacy in the use of the two languages. Respondents quoted above note that the most favourable conditions for Sheng and Engsh are those of 'excitement' and 'artificial' life. Thus, to elderly respondents, any sudden excitement or peculiar circumstance is quite sufficient to originate and set going a score of Sheng and Engsh words. Thus, Sheng and Engsh are a product of an exuberance of mental activity, and the natural delight of language making. This point has been cited by elderly respondents as one of the reasons why in Sheng, as in English, one speaks according to how one feels. So, to the elderly respondents, the purpose of Sheng and Engsh is not communication parse. No wonder, there are respondents across the divide who view the two codes as not being languages. "If they are languages at all, then they are each a mixture of languages", remarked one respondent (# 2). "Of what use are mixtures of languages when we have proper languages like our mother tongues, Kiswahili and English in Kenya?" he adds.

By asking the question above, the respondent quoted above shares the view that Sheng and Engsh are unconventional languages. This is because Sheng and Engsh are commonly made by the use of metaphors, obscure analogies, meaningless words, and expressions derived from the less unknown and less esteemed vocations or customs. Thus, to elderly respondents, Sheng and Engsh are languages composed of colloquialisms that are current but not refined enough to be admitted into standard speech. Examples of such Sheng/Engsh colloquialisms are as follows:

- (a) Kukamata, Kusosi, Kumanga - to eat
- (b) Kuishia, ku/cache, kuamburuka - to go
- (c) Kobole, ngovo, punch - five

The above examples, and that are from the elderly respondents, show that Sheng and Engsh are aspects of language in which linguistic processes can be observed in unrestricted activity.

From the mostly elderly respondents, it was stated that speakers of Sheng and Engsh have that instinctive desire to speak bad Kiswahili and bad English respectively. Elderly respondents further state that there is also the synonymous desire to speak Sheng and Engsh of any kind, at any price. Thus, to the respondents aged 50 years and above, Sheng and Engsh do not easily obey propriety for they break the canons of good Kiswahili and good English. Therefore Sheng and Engsh are seen as a linguistic law unto themselves. Thus, Sheng and Engsh are not wholly accepted by all respondents as mediums of communication because they have a taint impropriety about them which makes them offensive. More so, the elderly respondents note that the very currency of Sheng and Engsh depends on the languages' allusions to things that are not supposed to be universally familiar or generally respectable. According to elderly respondents, Sheng and Engsh are thus vulgar, since they bring in associations with what is for the moment regarded as unknown or of bad repute. Because of this, Sheng and Engsh are therefore regarded as languages that attempt to express themselves illimitably.

From the study sample, it emerges that the use of Sheng and Engsh proves a certain freedom in speech. According to over 80% of respondents, Sheng and Engsh are much more spoken than written languages. Thus, Sheng and Engsh originated in Kenya in discontent with the words and phrases in far too general use in Kiswahili and English. This argument for Sheng and Engsh by respondents in essence supports the use of these codes. However, according to mostly elderly respondents, the fact that Sheng and Engsh are basically spoken languages reduces their social status - thus making them appear second-rate languages. As one respondent (No. 48) had to argue, "In the present day world where everyone is going computer, how can a language afford to remain oral?"

Respondents with some knowledge of linguistics observe that the use and prevalence of Sheng and Engsh is not based on the influence of culture or of lack of culture at home, efficiency or nonefficiency in the use of Kiswahili and English, but rather upon the individuality of the persons who uses the two languages. Although respondent #13 (Mr. O) does not differentiate between Sheng and Engsh, he confesses that he uses Sheng although he is equally good in Kiswahili and English. What this respondent above likes most about using Sheng is the language's humor. "An element of humor is almost always present in Sheng. This humor usually appears in Sheng as humorous exaggeration". This labeling here implies that Sheng sets things in their proper places with a sense of smile. When young men are called *Tinis* and young women *Manzi*, this is obviously a language of a world that takes its passions lightly.

Youthful respondents observe that because these codes occasionally use catch — words or phrases in a special sense of which only the users of those languages are aware these languages' use becomes a kind of short-hand which enables them to express and to realize their experiences without elaborate analysis. Therefore, looked at from the stylistic point of view, Sheng and Engsh can be analyzed depending on the various trades and professions. Hence, every group of association that uses Sheng or Engsh feels, at some time or another, the need to defend it against outsiders. It is due to this stylistic device that a restricted kind of Sheng or Engsh is created with an aim to conceal its thoughts. This stylistic element is what leads to Sheng and Engsh being languages that are noted for their artistic possibilities and for the abundance of synonyms. Examples of Sheng and Engsh words with their synonyms are as follows:-

Illicit brew (Changaa) — Wege gin, BF (Blue flame), Mudi, (from mood), Machozi ya Simba, Cham and Cham-to-to (due to drops).

Girl - Kidoshoo, Demu, Chile, Chiki, Sheri, Manzi and Supuu.

Motor car-Moti, Murenga, Ndai and Buu.

Because Sheng and Engsh are languages that are rich in synonyms, "the element of boredom when using them in speech does not arise". On the other hand, elderly respondents argue that partly because so much of the vocabulary of these languages is short-lived, the languages are unsuitable as means of general inter-communications. This is because many of the languages' elements are obsolescent and also because of too much freedom of interpretability attached to so many of their recent accessions.

It was noted from the respondents that the value of many of the creations in Sheng and Engsh is often destroyed, frequently lessened by the obvious intent to surprise, to astonish, or even to shock. The perversions of form and ludicrous twisting of meaning are the result of that intent, and they form a considerable proportion of Sheng and Engsh words. It is only in the limbo of Sheng and Engsh that word intervention finds unhampered liberty. This is unlike the case is in Kiswahili and English where words, phrases and syntax are judged, not because of their vitality or their expressiveness, but by their conformity to standard'.

Sheng and Engsh are held in high esteem in Kenya due to the characteristic of word formation form in the two languages. Both Sheng and Engsh delight to curtail (clip, abbreviate, and shorten) words as in BF for blue flame, *Moti* for motorcar, and *mathe* for mother. This characteristic is not unique to Sheng and Engsh, and neither is it new to languages the world-over. All languages go in for what is commonly known as 'economy of language usage'. For instance, English has many such words that started as slang but have now passed into Standard English. Examples include flu for influenza and bus for omnibus. This kind of argument carries the view that words of this nature in Sheng and Engsh will eventually attain the dignity of Standard Kiswahili and Standard Kenyan English respectively.

Another point to note from Sheng and Engsh by youthful respondents is that many Sheng and Engsh vocabulary consist of old words changed in form or, far more often, old words with new meanings or new shades of meaning. Nevertheless, these changes of sense-which sometimes lead to a change in the basic meaning of a word - belong to the dynamics of semantic study; and is not unique to Sheng and Engsh. According to youthful respondents and those with some training in linguistics, reference can be made to Kiswahili words like Kupe, Husudu and Tarakanya.

According to respondents with some knowledge in linguistics, any language falls into the dichotomy of good and bad; so are Sheng and Engsh. Good Sheng and Engsh say clearly or concisely or forcibly what 'standard' Kiswahili or English can say obscurely or diffusely or feebly. To these respondents, the distinctive test of good Sheng or good Engsh is that they have a real meaning. Bad Sheng or Engsh have no meaning; they are simply a succession of sounds which impose upon the ignorant imagination of the reader or listener. On the other hand, respondents observe that good Sheng or Engsh is idiomatically expressive. Thus, such respondents think that it is wrong to condemn these two codes wholesale as being bad instruments of communication. Respondents with some background in linguistics argue that good Sheng or Engsh is that which gives new life to old or abstract ideas; bad Sheng or Engsh lacks the precision of statement of good Sheng or good Engsh. In short, expressing oneself in Sheng or Engsh which tells us something is better than the immaculate sentence in Kiswahili or English that is empty of everything but the consciousness of its own propriety.

According to this paper's sample, the use of Sheng and Engsh conveys the suggestion that the speaker and the listener enjoy a special 'fraternity', and thus, integrative motivation in its use. This is slightly different from the informality and familiarity of a general social situation. Respondents note that Sheng and Engsh words and expressions are peculiar to the users of these languages. Sheng and Engsh have conversational familiar idiom that is used and generally understood by speakers of these codes. According to youthful respondents aged 35 years and below, the users of Sheng and Engsh enjoy a special linguistic fraternity because they have secret vocabulary that is unique to the two languages. T

1 4 Conclusion

Language attitudes towards Sheng and its subsituary Engsh in urban Kenya -especially in Nairobi -bring it out as a language that has great emotional appeal to its advocates. Sheng is said to be beyond tribal or regional affiliations because its structure is a linguistic blend of all languages used in Kenya. The study can argue that Sheng/Engsh equate with lack of tribalism and with national cohesion in the Kenyan context. Therefore, according to this paper's sample, Sheng/ Engsh as a language has considerable national coverage of users.

Besides, the result of this paper on what Sheng and Engsh are or are not in Kenya shows that the languages are under great criticism especially from the elderly respondents and teachers who see it as irrelevant of Kenyans. This criticism means that there are some respondents whose attitudes towards Sheng can be said to be negative. In view of the fact that many youthful respondents favor Sheng, ways must be sought to accommodate this language in Kenya's language planning process. Some assets of Sheng, especially in context of the integrating function of language, are as follows:

- (a) Sheng is ethnically neutral
- (b) Sheng has an unplanned national spread, and
- (c) Sheng has a utility as the bridge language in the teaching of Kiswahili.

In conclusion, the present paper realizes the importance of Sheng and Engsh to language policy and language planning processes in Kenya – hence the essence of saying exactly what the two codes are and what they are not. Ways and means should be sought to incorporate Sheng in Kenya's language plan.

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