

Language Communication And Marketing: Contextualising the Rise of *Sheng*' Language in Advertising Platforms in Kenya

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Abstract

Commercial advertisers have turned to an extensive use of *Sheng*' to market their products. The entrepreneurial class in Kenya has now woken up to the economic advantages that *Sheng*' presents as the language of the youth. This paper first discusses the distribution and spread of *Sheng*' in Kenya, and secondly, it shows the need for use of *Sheng*' in marketing communication. The paper finally concludes by suggesting ways in which language spread can be a useful element to society and by showing how *Sheng*' can be incorporated in advertising without compromising the communication objectives and negatively impact on society.

1. Introduction

Iraki (2004) posits that *Sheng* is an idiom that fundamentally employs Swahili syntax and a lexicon drawn from African languages and English. He argues that *Sheng* also simplifies the Swahili noun system to exclude muddled-up categorization. It also modifies Swahili syntax to be in consonance with the majority of noun categorizations in African languages and English. For instance, animals and people are in the same noun class in Swahili which is rather counterintuitive in other Kenyan languages including English. *Sheng* rationalizes the anomaly by placing animals and people in the "thing" and "human" categories. *Sheng*' has been defined variously by different researchers. According to Mazrui (1995), it is a hybrid linguistic code that evolved in the city of Nairobi in the 1960s and 1970s. Githiora (2002), on the other hand, calls it a Kiswahili-based patois which has been influenced by many languages. Other researchers on *Sheng*' include Abdulaziz and Osinde (1997), Iraki, (2004), Ogechi (2005) and Momanyi (2009).

In the context of urbanization and the absence of a clear language policy, *Sheng* emerged as a convenient interface enabling young Kenyans from different ethnic identities to interact effectively and efficiently. Several authors have speculated on the origins and functions of *Sheng* (Abdulaziz et al, (1997), Ireeri-Mbaabu 1996, Githiora (2002) and Iraki (2004) but suffice it to say that the idiom has been a linguistic reality in Kenya for the last 50 years. What is common among the findings of all these researchers is that they all agree that *Sheng*' originated in residential areas in the Eastlands of Nairobi and that the present '*Sheng*' speakers are youth who can speak Kiswahili competently, but who choose to defy the norm by inventing their own code for purposes of group identity.

I would like to concur with most researchers in linguistics and communication that *Sheng*' is based primarily on the Kiswahili structure and grammar with lexicon drawn from Kiswahili, English and the various ethnic languages of Kenya that are mostly spoken in towns and other urban areas. Initially, this mixed code was unstable, random and fluid, but it gradually developed more systematic patterns of usage at the phonological, morphological and syntactic levels. *Sheng*' is indeed a hybrid of English, Kiswahili and many other major indigenous Kenyan languages such as; Gikuyu, Kikamba, Dholuo and the Luhyia dialects. *Sheng*' is thought to be a form of Kiswahili because its grammatical structure is majorly based on that of Kiswahili and other Bantu languages, and also because much of its vocabulary which, although incorporated from other languages, is adapted to Kiswahili both in sound and structure.

According to Abdulaziz and Osinde (1996:44); when *Sheng*' first evolved in the Eastlands region of Nairobi in the late 1960s and early 70s, it was a basic code used by the youth as an in-group marker, a solidarity building language and one used to shut the older folk out of the conversation of the youth. The genesis of *Sheng*', as Abdulaziz and Osinde (1996) observe, is argotic and its inventors were Kenyan urban youth living in multi-ethnic neighborhoods. This youth played truancy from school and experimented with smoking and drinking alcohol, and, living in small and crowded quarters, they lacked privacy from the adults as well as their younger siblings. They, therefore, needed a code that would shut out the unwanted members of their families and neighborhoods. *Sheng*' became that code, one that also helped them to express their identity as part of a larger youth group, the Eastlanders, and also one that marked them as holders of a sub-culture that separated speakers of different varieties of *Sheng*' on the basis of different estates of their residence within the Eastlands.

1.1 The Spread and Distribution of Sheng'

According to Githiora (2002) published research discussions today, show that *Sheng'* may have originated as different varieties in different residential estates in the Eastlands region of Nairobi. The variety spoken in Kaloleni Estate, for example, was different from that of Bahati Estate, which in turn, was different from the one spoken in Jericho Estate. However, each neighborhood feels that their variety is the authentic *Sheng'*.

Today, *Sheng'* is no longer restricted to the Eastlands. It has grown in leaps and bounds, and has become the basic urban vernacular for the youth in Nairobi and generally in other parts of the country as well. It has spread to all the other urban centres and is also spoken in the rural areas too. However, *Sheng'* is more widespread in the city of Nairobi including its densely populated peripheries such as Githurai, Kangemi, Kawangware and Uthiru areas, and thrives in such slum areas as Mathare and Kibera. As a result of this growth, *Sheng'* has moved out of the narrow definition and usage where its domain was restricted within the members of the estate 'gangs', street boys and hawkers. Its influence is now felt across Kenya's social strata, influencing the way other languages are acquired, learnt and used, even within the educational system such as schools and colleges. *Sheng'* is also evidently used in Tanzania and Uganda, where the urban youth in the major cities show off their proficiency as a sign of international exposure (Momanyi 2009). Research has shown that university students in Kenya, for example, use *Sheng'* as their language of social interaction. Moreover, secondary and primary school students too, use *Sheng'* as their principle language outside of the classroom. Also, a growing adult population use *Sheng'* in certain social and business contexts such as the transport industry and traders in the formal and informal sector among others. It is also observed that an increasing number of Kenyan families are speaking *Sheng'* as the language of the home. It is worthy noting that the earliest speakers of *Sheng'*, the youth of the 1960s and 70s, are now men and women in their late-forties and early-fifties, some of these parents have completely shifted from speaking the languages of their ethnicity and now speak *Sheng'* as their primary language. The children of these people have therefore not been exposed to the ethnic languages and have not then acquired them as their primary languages; instead, they have acquired *Sheng'* which for this group is the language of the home. Later on they learn Kiswahili and English through exposure to the wider society and through the school system.

1.2 Sheng' in Advertising

As Iraki (2010:12) states: Socially, *Sheng's* image has improved tremendously to the extent of attracting membership from the elite classes. There are many up-market youths who are now using *Sheng'* as their preferred language of communication among themselves. In sum, an urban Kenyan can manipulate a rich patrimony of at least four languages: mother tongue, *Sheng'*, Kiswahili and English. He may in addition know other African languages (Kamba, Maasai, Giriama, etc.) and European languages (French, Spanish, German, etc.). Multilingualism is a reality in Kenya.

As a code, *Sheng'* has been found to be very popular in the local media especially in television and radio. Media presenters use *Sheng'* to identify with the large and growing *Sheng'*-speaking social class which cuts across language and social status. For example the Ghetto Radio Station whose language of broadcasting is exclusively *Sheng'*. Local television and radio stations have given space to *Sheng'* where certain specific programmes use this code to broadcast some of their programmes alongside Kiswahili or English. Examples of these include Kenya Broadcasting Corporation's (KBC) Vitimbi and Vioja Mahakamani as well as Citizen Television's Mashtaka, Tahidi High and Makutano among others. These broadcasts have a lasting linguistic effect on school children and the youth since some of these young people tend to identify with certain characters in these programmes through the use of this code.

Commercial advertisers have turned to an extensive use of *Sheng'* to market their products. The entrepreneurial class in Kenya has now woken up to the economic advantages that *Sheng'* presents as the language of the youth. With more than 60% of Kenyans being young persons, the advertising industry has turned to *Sheng'* to lure them. In particular, the two competing mobile telephone service providers, Safaricom and Airtel, have continually used '*Sheng'*' in their advertisements. For instance, Airtel uses *Bei poa* which means a fair price and *Kopa kredo* meaning borrow credit (airtime) while Safaricom employs *jisort na smartphone* to mean get yourself a smartphone and *Bamba 50*, meaning entertain yourself with 50 shillings! Campaigns against STIs and AIDs have fully adopted use of *sheng'*. Most common adverts are *weka condom mpangoni* meaning use a condom, *nimechill* meaning not indulging in irresponsible sexual behaviors, among others.

1.3 Justification for Use of Sheng' In Advertising

Speakers of *Sheng'* are proud to speak it and some non-speakers too approve of it as suitable for the youth and the youth at heart. Many assert that it is good for street smartness. *Sheng'* is more accepted because it embraces and incorporates elements from different languages; representing many Kenyan linguistic groups and this makes it devoid of ethnicity. Therefore, its speakers view it as an inclusive and accommodative language which does not discriminate among its users, and which cuts through the national social strata, age and gender.

The underworld media, including the alternative press enjoy writing news and information in *Sheng'* and have a very big readership among the youth and other *Sheng'* speakers. Book writers who write in *Sheng'*, for the example, Kwani? Publishers, as cited earlier, say that *Sheng'* is a beautiful language that gives its speakers a medium of communication that they can relate to and which is originally truly Kenyan.

From all these, I would say that *Sheng'* has produced and nurtured a mass culture among its speakers. According to Fishman (1966:408), mass culture induces antagonistic attitudes and behaviors towards particularism and traditionalism, by standardizing products and homogenizing tastes. In a society where mass culture is rampant through the ethnic vehicle, a shift in ethnic allegiance thrives. Further, Fishman reinstates that "the adolescent period appears to be the juncture at which the impact of mass culture on ethnicity-based language maintenance is best felt" Fishman (1966:409). He describes a situation where non-institutional transition takes place, replacing values, patterns, behaviour and skills; especially those of the middle class society. This happens because the culprits seek identification and acceptance outside of the family and the status they belong to.

It has been observed that, many urban youth who are *Sheng'* speakers do not know or at best are not fluent in the languages of their ethnicity (Momanyi 2009), the languages in which their family values, behaviour patterns, skills and the whole cultural output is coached. People who get caught up in mass culture operate in subtraction and exclusion rather than addition of their cultural orientation. They tend to use mixed or hybrid languages and these serve as in-group markers. Examples of such languages abound in the world: *Nouchi* of Abidjan is a local dialect of French, *Indoubil*, a variety of Lingala in Kinshasa, *Darija* of Morocco, a mixture of Arabic, French and Spanish, *Tsotsitall* and *Iscamtho* of Johannesburg, mixture of Afrikaans and Zulu, are examples of this. For Kenya, *Sheng'*, a product of widespread multilingualism and multi-cultural output through decades of peoples' contact is a clear example of mass culture language.

Sheng' speakers, especially the urbanites below 35 years of age, and whose parents speak *Sheng'* too, have abandoned the languages of their ethnicity. For some, it is due to a situation where they did not acquire the ethnic language in childhood, since they did not get exposure to it for the simple reason that their parents spoke *Sheng'* and other languages at home. There are also other speakers who acquired *Sheng'* by picking it up alongside other languages. This fact of not learning and speaking the ethnic languages has created language shift in a generation from ethnic languages to *Sheng'*. Advertisers and marketers therefore are left with no choice but to use *sheng'* in reaching their potential clients.

2. Conclusion

Sheng' is an evolving language with a grammatical structure that keeps growing and changing. Due to the allure of making its speakers fit and get acceptance in urban social circles, it has acquired a very large population of speakers and has rapidly spread throughout Kenya and in the East African region. Many of its speakers use it as their primary language and have shifted either from using Kiswahili or the language of their ethnicity. Because of this shift it has delineated its speakers from their cultural orientations and value systems.

This paper suggests that, *Sheng'* be nurtured in the same manner other Kenyan languages are nurtured. After all, it has one of the largest and growing speech communities in the country. One of the most effective means of nurturing it is by using it and sharing in it; 'language like love is the only other thing that grows as it is shared'. Writing and publishing in the language would also nurture it to grow, because this would open it up for wider communication and international accessibility. Media houses would attract the growing speech community if there is literature in *Sheng'* in the print and electronic media. If this were the case, *Sheng'* would then be viewed as a resource and not a problem. Kenya is multilingual and multilingualism is not a problem, it is a resource since there are many benefits to being multilingual with cultural diversity and flexibility being one of them. In today's world, knowledge societies are pluralistic and inclusive; *Sheng'* therefore should be allowed to add another 'feather' to the Kenyan *pluralistic hat*. Advertisers should embrace the use *sheng'* in order to nurture it.

3. References

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