SLANG AND CODE-SWITCHING: THE CASE OF SHENG IN KENYA

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Introduction

Social identity between interlocutors is an indispensable factor in the formation of a community (i.e., a social unit whose members are held together by an international network and who share certain interests, beliefs, views and attitudes). In this regard, language is known to be an influential symbol of identity, an important clue to social group membership. As Einer Haugen states, language is at once "a social institution, like the laws, the religion, or the economy of a community, and a social instrument which accompanies and makes possible all other institutions. As an institution it may become a symbol of the community." (1956:87).

People who are in the process of establishing independent community links and bonds have a tendency to "give" this a distinct linguistic expression which may not only serve as a symbol of solidarity and positive social divergence from other groups, but also as a functional code for expressing valued feelings, attitudes and loyalties. This linguistic expression of a sociopsychological phenomenon not seldom gives rise to a distinct language variety whose differentiation from the "norm" may assume one among many sociolinguistic forms depending on the sociolinguistic configuration of the wider community. What has come to be popularly known as "Sheng" in Kenya today, then, is probably one such variety whose origin(s) in society can, by and large, be attributed to factors that are essentially extra-linguistic in nature.

In its dual community role as an instrument and as a symbol, language is normally accompanied by attitudes (held by members of ingroups and outgroups) which could sometimes lead to passionate conflicts between its seeming protagonists and antagonists. The history of the world is literally "littered" with linguistic conflicts of this nature. While it is yet too early to assess Sheng's potential for generating a substantial linguistic conflict of any sort, its seeming consolidation among the (especially lower class) urban youth may already have given rise to divergent and conflicting attitudes in Kenya. On the one extreme we have the somewhat demeaning attitude that regards Sheng (or "Mtaa", as it is sometimes known in Nairobi slums) as a subversive factor in Kenya's language education efforts. This, for example, seems to be the stated opinion of Professor Peter Gacii, once the Vice-Chancellor of Kenyatta University (King'oi, 1987:22). And more recently, in a letter to the Sunday Nation of March 6, 1994, Kaberia Kajuki commented, "I was on an academic visit to Nairobi recently when I spotted Sheng dictionaries along the streets selling for as little as sh20 per copy. Despite their intention, I assume, of helping rural folk with the urban slang, these dictionaries are a great harm and a set-back to the development of a standard language. Society stands to gain nothing linguistically from such publications. Censorship by the relevant authorities is a possible remedy." Kajuki was here referring to the Sheng Dictionary by Jacko Moga and Dan Fee (1993).
What is Sheng?

Virtually all the articles on Sheng that have appeared in the local newspapers so far have attempted to grapple with the question of the sociolinguistic nature of Sheng. As would be expected of any media survey of a social issue the views have been quite varied. Some of the contributors to this newspaper "debate" on the sociolinguistic identity of Sheng have in fact been professional linguists lecturing in the relevant departments of the national universities in Kenya; and even among these professionals the divergence of opinion has been quite immense. It is necessary that we begin this section, therefore, with a brief review of some of those ideas on the nature and origin of Sheng.

Some of the earliest views expressed in the local media appeared in the monthly magazine Men Only towards the end of 1984. In his editorial Brian Tetley suggests that Sheng is Kenya's Newspeak, a discrete language in its own right that emerged out of an amalgamation of various Kenyan languages. "Its genesis" writes Brian Tetley "was the wealth of languages spoken in Kenya" catalyzed into formation by the need of the ethnically heterogeneous urban youth, "who spoke neither English nor Swahili, to communicate effectively with each other" (Men Only 1/3, October 1984). Tetley's views were reaffirmed by Charles Otieno in his column "Perspective." In his personal reminiscence as a child growing up in Nairobi's multi-ethnic eastlands Otieno writes, "In our parents' houses, we would converse in vernacular but in the streets we had to find a way to easy communication since we were yet to go to school and we knew neither English nor Kiswahili" (Men Only 1/4, November 1984).

In both these articles Men Only took a strong pro-Sheng stand, virtually campaigning for its recognition as a bona fide Kenyan language, a product of the nation's creative genius, and castigating those language teachers of Swahili and English who condemned its evolution and development. Men Only went even further by establishing a Sheng glossary column, which welcomed readers' contribution, and which, it was hoped, would eventually lead to the compilation of a Sheng dictionary.

Tetley's and Otieno's suggestion, however, that Sheng developed out of some linguistic fusion of a multitude of Kenya's many languages to meet the needs of children who knew neither English nor Swahili does not seem to be supported by the linguistic evidence from Sheng. On the contrary, Sheng's linguistic corpus is predominantly Swahili and English with a host of innovations and only "sprinklings" from other Kenyan languages. In fact, apart from a few lexical items taken from Luo, Kikuyu and a couple other Kenyan languages, linguistic items from Kenya's ethnic-based languages are among the least common features of Sheng. In other words, the etno-linguistic effect on Sheng has been one of linguistic differentiation rather than uniformation. So while Swahili and English, complimented by continuous linguistic innovations, form the primary linguistic base of Sheng, there are local variations of the language which betray the presence of ethnically predominant groups in the respective localities. The Sheng of the predominantly Kikuyu Bahati, therefore, would be expected to have a higher proportion of Kikuyu linguistic items than say the Sheng spoken in Majengo, even though both are situated in Nairobi eastlands. The same would apply to the Sheng of the predominantly Luo location of Kaloleni and Makadara, and so forth.
The question of the proportion of linguistic items in Sheng, however, is by no means limited to Kenya’s ethnic-based languages. It may well apply to the more trans-ethnic Swahili and English languages. Impressionistically speaking it would appear that the Sheng heard in the more affluent sections of Nairobi has a higher proportion of items from the English language than the Sheng spoken in the slum areas. Complemented by the ethno-linguistic factor discussed above, therefore, the variation of Sheng as a sociolinguistic phenomenon would be expected to manifest the rather typical superimposition of the ethnic factor on the (socio-economic) class factor.

The picture that we have drawn so far on the broad linguistic composition of Sheng, then, seems to militate against the views expressed in Men Only on the linguistic genesis of the language as a mere linguistic amalgam of some over forty Kenyan languages.

The kind of positive understanding characteristic of the quoted articles in Men Only would have been expected to feature with even greater scientific reasoning in the views of professional linguists. But on the contrary, there is a section of Kenyan linguists who, seemingly informed by a rather narrow and puritanical brand of nationalism, have assumed an overly anti-Sheng position. One such linguist who is quoted in a feature article entitled “Can Sheng stand the test of time?”, which appeared in the Sunday Nation of August 23, 1987, asserts that Sheng is merely a linguistic “contortion” of a sort which should be discouraged in favor of (the standardized variety of) the national language, Swahili.

While the pro-Swahili bias of the linguist is quite understandable (in view of the status of the language in East Africa), his views on Sheng are rather odd as pronouncements of a linguist because the notion of “linguistic contortion” is not known to have any scientific (linguistic) validity. And some of the linguistic fallacies discussed by Labov, Cohen, Robins and Lewis (1968) with regard to the deficit hypothesis in their demonstration of the logic of non-standard English of minority groups in the USA, apply equally well to the “contortion hypothesis” with regard to Sheng in Kenya.

Sheng has also been regarded as a pidgin at least in form if not in its genesis (Osinde 1986:7). A pidgin is an emergent, functionally specialized, linguistic variety which exhibits extensive (though rule-governed) simplifications in its grammar. Its development is usually attributed to communicational needs of people of divergent tongues who come together for specific purposes like trade or under the conditions of slavery. In its linguistic composition a pidgin is a gradient mixture of elements of two or more languages forming a system that is substantially different from its antecedent parents systems.

How well, then, does Sheng fit this description of pidgin? While there is no doubt that Sheng does manifest features of pidginization, the extent to which it can actually be considered a pidgin is less certain. For example, does the linguistic mixture in Sheng constitute a unique system of grammar or merely a juxtaposition of two grammatical systems? By and large, the latter appears to be the case. So far Sheng’s structural uniqueness seems to exist only in the form of sporadic linguistic elements which cannot be claimed to constitute a separate language system.

Furthermore, it is not clear in what sense Sheng can be considered a simplified code along the lines of a pidgin language. Acknowledgely, there are some obvious areas which could be
said to have undergone some simplification: for example, the reduction of the noun class and concordial system of the Swahili component of Sheng. But this kind and degree of simplification cannot be claimed to be much different from that found in the non-standard Swahili varieties of upcountry Kenya. Some of the more pidgin-specific types of linguistic simplification, e.g., the relative absence of embedding, do not appear to be significant features of Sheng. The claim, therefore, that Sheng is a pidgin seems to have little support from Sheng's own linguistic evidence.

A linguist who ambitiously sets out to "put the Sheng ghost to rest" is King'ei (1987) in the short article that appeared in the second issues of *Kenyatta University Newsletter*. King'ei begins by pointing out that the linguistic nature and status of Sheng is not clear "A close analysis of Sheng", says King'ei "shows that it does not wholly fall into any of the language varieties, jargon, slang, code, creole and pidgin. It incorporates qualities of each of these varieties or social styles of language" (King'ei 1987:22). Then King'ei proceeds to define each of these language varieties without coming to any definitive conclusion as to the real status of Sheng.

In summary, then, the journalistic and scholarly attempts to situate Sheng within sociolinguistic typology have so far succeeded only in raising more questions without answering any, and unconsciously perhaps, have tended to reaffirm the supposedly enigmatic character of this emergent speech form. As both Osinde (1968) and King'ei (1987) intimate in their works there is need for extensive study of sociolinguistic characteristics of Sheng before we can begin to unfold this seeming linguistics mystery.

The Men Only articles referred to above claim that the term "Sheng" is in fact an acronym for Swahili-English Slang. The articles do not say how and when this term came into existence, but they are quite unequivocal as to its meaning. And later writers and commentators on this speech variety have generally tended to accept this hypothesis. By all indication, this is a reasonable proposition and I have no reason to dispute it at this stage.

What I would like to highlight here is that if this proposition is correct, then there is probably no better definition of the variety than the one contained in its own name. The sociolinguistic evidence from Kibera (and seemingly from other areas of Nairobi) gives a strong impression that Sheng is a slang based primarily on Swahili-English code switching which serves as a para-code of mainly lower class urban youth. Essentially Swahili and English structures and lexical items are variably interspersed with, mainly lexical, innovations which seem to manifest slang attributes in their sociolinguistic function. The central sociolinguistic concepts in this definition of Sheng, then, are *slang* and *code-switching*. And it is to a discussion of these two central features of Sheng that we should now turn.

**Sheng as Slang**

Shorn of its class bias the term slang has much in common with the more dignified jargon. Both slang and jargon are basically para-codes of professional groups: slang in its various forms is, in essence, a professional jargon of the underworld while jargon is usually reserved for the more "acceptable" professional groups. And in both cases, these para-codes have the
socio-psychological function of differentiating one group from another, the prostitute from the street hustler, the chemist from the biologist, in short "us" from "them"

Equally important is slang's socio-psychological function of promoting a sense of group solidarity. Social psychological factors help to explain why individual speakers use speech strategies they do in terms other than just social norms and rules. These factors may consist of speaker's modes, motives, feelings, beliefs and loyalties as well as their perception of the inter-group relation situation and their awareness of existing socio-linguistic norms.

This dual function of slang, part social and part psychological, as a para-code of the "underclass" probably partly explains the seeming ephemeral nature of slang. This proposition is partly based on the 'interpersonal accommodation theory' propounded by Tajfel (1974). Tajfel suggests that when members of different groups are in contact, they tend to compare themselves on dimensions which are important to them such as personal attributes, abilities, material possessions and the like. These intergroup social comparisons, he contends, will lead individuals to search for, and even create, dimensions on which they can make themselves distinct from the outgroup. One such dimension is speech divergence. Since speech style is known to be an important clue to social group membership, speech divergence may be an important dimension for creating ingroup distinctiveness. And where, as is common with slang, members of the outgroup take up slang expressions (for one reason or another), thereby qualifying for admission into the ingroup—provided other criteria like ethnicity, religion etc. are also met—the ingroup is automatically put in a threat of losing its distinctive identity. There is thus constant pressure on the members of the ingroup to continually create new slang expressions in an attempt to maintain their ingroup distinctiveness.

Tajfel's accommodation theory appears to explain not only the seeming transient tendency of slang expressions, but also why members of the outgroup, of the mainstream culture, keep appropriating many of these expressions. Burling (1973:87-88) presents a good discussion of this phenomenon with regard to what he calls Black street slang. He shows how, especially young, middle class white Americans have had an insatiable appetite for Black slang expressions (which, once picked up, are usually quickly replaced by other expressions among the Blacks themselves.) And if Black slang is a symbol of rebellion of lower class Blacks against white middle class values, it is quite understandable, according to Burling, why white youth who desire to be identified with that rebellion, would eagerly appropriate the same linguistic symbol (1973:107).

What has been said so far about slang, in general, and Black slang in the United States, in particular, can easily be extended to Sheng in Kenya. Just as Black slang can be considered a para-code of predominantly lower class youth in the United States, Sheng can be associated with the lower class urban youth of Nairobi (and increasingly of other urban areas of Kenya). For this group, Sheng serves the dual function of creating social distance with the outgroup, with the "mainstream urban culture," while strengthening bonds of solidarity for the ingroup. The only qualification one would like to make here is that unlike the situation in the United States, class formation in Kenya is relatively a fluid phenomenon whose social solidification is yet to be fully realized. As a result the social boundaries of the wider Sheng ingroup are still "soft" and highly accommodative of outgoing members. This relatively greater
accommodativeness of the Sheng group at this particular historical juncture would also explain why the Kenyan middle class youth tend to acquire a relatively greater proportion of Sheng forms than their (white) counterparts in the United States manage to acquire Black slang expressions.

In the definition of Sheng presented above, it is implied that at one point it was a kind of an argot, a professional jargon of the underworld which, over time, has ceased to be so. What evidence is there to support this claim? In a number of informal interviews with the elderly squatters of Kibera the interviewees suggested that something akin to Sheng was used in their younger days in seemingly underworld circumstances. Some of these old interviewees even gave lexical examples of the Sheng used in their time as young people (like *nongwe, mnogo, budaa, saiti, pai* and *deka*).

But probably the most explicit suggestion of a Sheng-like code that was in existence as far back as the early 1930s, is to be found in *Miaka 50 Katika Jela* (Fifty Years in Jail) by Michael Ngugi Karanja. Karanja, now over 70 years of age, gives examples of a code used by the professional category of *mapanja/mapancha* (pickpocket) of which he was one, around 1933/34 when he had just been exposed to the Nairobi underworld. At that time Karanja was just 15 years old and his associates were more or less about that age. And the examples he gives (like *Namdekea pai anakam sazti hii, ebu tupangue ot Nongwe anakam saiti hii na ana mnogo fogo*) (1993:72) strongly suggests that "Sheng" emerged as an underworld professional code way back in the colonial period.

This was a time when the eastlands area of Nairobi --Pangani in the case of Karanja-- was reserved for "natives" (Africans) some of whom came as temporary migrant workers, and some as desperate seekers of livelihood, all being the direct victims of the mass appropriation of agricultural land by British settlers. Many of these urban migrants had already been exposed to some English when they were resident laborers or squatters in British appropriated farms or in other circumstances; and Swahili was already well spread in the urban areas of Kenya. The ethno-linguistically heterogenous population of African juveniles who were hit by harsh conditions of unemployment, therefore, found the "trans-ethnic" Swahili and English languages to be a readily available linguistic combination upon which could be developed a slang to cater for the multi-ethnic underworld into which they had been forced. The appearance of the (police) *spy* who would order them to "*come (here)!"* for example, could now be signaled in Sheng as *Pai anakam* as a warning to members of the professional underworld.

Later the social solidarity that developed within Nairobi's African communities as a result of their besiegement by the colonial government (especially during and immediately after the Emergency), and the population flux that became a feature of these communities due to the temporariness of African migrant labor, had a catalytic effect on the spread of Sheng speech beyond the frontiers of the professional underworld. The convertees to Sheng's slang culture were the young men of Nairobi's eastlands (even though young women in the slum areas are increasingly becoming regular users of Sheng). Slum conditions that were set in motion during the colonial period thus helped Sheng develop into a post-professional slang of the lower class urban youth. And it is this social section of the urban population that can be said to constitute
the ingroup of Sheng culture. But for reasons already explained, Sheng also eventually came to accommodate youth from the outgroup, from the more privileged African urban classes.

The continuous absorption of new members into the Sheng culture has naturally contributed to the para-code's dynamic form, to its changing expressions that promote linguistic divergence at one level (the ethnic level) and convergence at another level (the group level). Furthermore, this accommodation phenomenon also gives Sheng expressions their relative ephemeral character. According to the accommodation theory of Tajfel, ingroup and outgroup attitudes and behaviors are determined by a continuing process of self-definition depending on the individual's relationship with others in the complex network of groups within the wider community. Some Sheng terms serving the wider Sheng community, therefore, may persist over several generations while those that form part of the professional jargon of sub-communities of the underworld, (like the mapanja (pickpockets), manamba (touts), drug peddlers, and illegal brewers of local beer) can be transient. This is probably why terms like 'liquor,' 'marijuana,' 'steal,' 'policeman,' 'run away' and others have so many Sheng equivalents. This relative transience of some Sheng expressions, in other words, is a linguistic tussle of a sort aimed at maintaining some distinctiveness between the ingroup and the outgroup, and between various shades of the ingroup and the accommodated outgroup.

This ephemeral nature of some Sheng expressions naturally presupposes a high degree of innovativeness, which, in fact, is a feature of any slang community. But what are some of the sources of the linguistic innovations in Sheng? One of the most productive sources of these innovations is, in fact, Sheng's own base languages, Swahili and English, even though the Luo and Kikuyu languages have also been significant contributors in this regard. These innovations may be merely a result of phonetic manipulations of Swahili, English, Kikuyu, Luo or other lexical items without any semantic shift (e.g. odukoo - shop, from the Swahili duka; Ken-came, from the English 'came'; oshagoo - house, from the Kikuyu gecagi). Sometimes, in addition to phonetic adaptation, the terms may also acquire a semantically extended or figurative sense (e.g. dedi - finish, from the English 'dead'; shtua - inform, from the Swahili shtua; muhilton - a tall person, from the image of the tall Hilton Hotel in Nairobi). Alternatively, the innovations may be completely new creations without known, pre-existing linguistic sources (e.g. stra-words; kiwii - buttocks).

What I have attempted to do thus far is demonstrate the sense in which Sheng can be considered a slang, and briefly highlight some of the possible social origins of its formation, and its socio-psychological functions. I have also tried to suggest some of the possible linguistic sources that Sheng may have fed on for its creation. Having looked at the slang component of Sheng, then, let us now turn to its code-switching aspect.

**Sheng as Code-Switching**

In any bilingual or multilingual community whose members are, equally or variably proficient in more than one language, speakers may often alternate between two or more languages in the same utterance or conversation. This phenomenon is usually called code-switching in sociolinguistic scholarship. Code-switching may involve a word or phrase in a single sentence -
What, then, can we say about code-switching in Sheng? Is it like the "average" code-switching phenomenon found anywhere in the world or is it a unique kind of code-switching? By and large, Sheng seems to have many of the usual features of code-switching, but it also manifests several other features which can be considered peculiar to it. Let us now proceed to briefly look at the characteristics of code-switching in Sheng, beginning with the issue of base language.

Is it possible to determine the base in Sheng? The answer to this, at least insofar as the lower-class variety of Sheng is concerned, is pretty much in the affirmative. As indicated earlier the two main alternating languages in Sheng are Swahili and English, and if there is a monolingual base then it is likely to come from one of these languages; secondary lexical contributors to Sheng like Luo and Kikuyu can be ruled out as potential monolingual base languages in this regard. If there are sufficient grounds for positing a monolingual base in Sheng, therefore, the choice would have to lie between Swahili and English.

In the phenomenon called linguistic borrowing the "base" is usually determined by looking at which language has integrated the items of the other language(s) into its grammatical system. For instance, for a long time Swahili was regarded as a "bastard" language due to its heavy lexical "mixture" of Arabic and the so-called Bantu languages. But linguists were able to establish that Swahili is basically a Bantu language partly because the Arabic contribution was rendered subject to the Bantu phonological, morphological and syntactic mode. The direction of grammatical integration, therefore, has been one of the main criteria used to determine the base/recipient language in linguistic borrowing.

Probably to a much lesser extent a similar criterion can be used in determining the base language in code-switching. If the items of language A, for example, demonstrate some degree of capitulation to the grammatical system of language B, but not the reverse, then it may be safe to conclude that language B is the base. This "linguistic capitulation" to one or the other system may, of course, be quite a variable phenomenon in code-switching, but as long as it is relatively uni-directional the problem of identifying the language base should not be insurmountable.

In the type of Swahili-English code-mixing prevalent in Sheng, however, the direction of "linguistic capitulation" is not always so clear. No linguistic integration, of course, takes place at the phonological level of code-switching. So apart from those Swahili and English items which have been subject to Sheng's slang influence, other Swahili and English items largely retain their original phonological character.

At the syntactic level, however, the situation is slightly more fluid, even though the Swahili word order is still more prevalent except in switches involving phrases. And in cases where an English word order takes precedence, as in baridi dollar (literally 'cold dollar,' but meaning 'night job') one could probably say that the slang factor in Sheng operates not only at the lexical level, but also at the syntactic level. That is probably why the phrases, with internal Swahili-English code-switching, that violate the Swahili word order constitute a relatively fixed, and numerically small set.

- this is sometimes called code-mixing -- or it could be an alternation between one or several sentences of the two or more languages.
It is at the level of morphology, however, that Swahili’s grammatical primacy is expressed in quite an unambiguous manner. There are numerous instances of English items (verbs, nouns, adjectives, etc.) taking Swahili affixes, but not a single example of the reverse tendency, of a Swahili lexical item being subjected to the rules of English morphology. So, the English verbs ‘relax’, ‘come’, ‘elapse’, and many others, can all take the Swahili subject, tense, aspect (and even object) markers to form words like alirelax, anacome, ime-elapse; but no Swahili verb can take the English tense-aspect markers. For example: *pumzika-ed, *kuja-ing and *pita-ed are all ill formed switches. There are cases where English items will maintain their English morphological structure; there are also cases in which English and Swahili affixes may “compete” for the same English item (as in mabits and mapos, with both the Swahili /ma-/ and the English /-s/ serving as markers of plurality). But Swahili items invariably remain within the Swahili morphological sphere of influence. From the totality of the existing evidence, therefore, there is little doubt that Swahili is the linguistic base of the Kibera, and most likely of other slum, varieties of Sheng. This would also explain why, for example, most of the anti-Sheng critics whose views have appeared in the local media have tended to regard Sheng as a “contortion” of Swahili rather than of English.

It is important to note, however, that Sheng’s Swahili has started developing its own peculiarities. Apart from the predominantly up-country Swahili features which seem to pay no regard to nominal class concord, for example, or which would not abide by the linguistic context of use of certain items (e.g. je in ni aje (how) instead of ni vipi? or kuja in kujeni (come!) instead of njooni), Sheng’s Swahili is acquiring its own distinctive features. At the discourse level, for example, there seems to be a systematic use of juu to signal a shift to a new conversational topic or (h)usikii as a marker of “suddenness.” Intensity of an action can be signaled by a repetition of the main verb in its infinitive form: The infinitive forms kutuna and kusoma in the example Ametuna kutuna (He has slept to sleep/sleeping) and Nilisoma kusoma (I have read to read/reading) are essentially intensifiers of the actions, meaning ‘He is in very deep sleep’ and ‘I read a lot’ respectively. In the nominal category, kaa -onde/-ote (lit. like all) is a regular marker of ‘plentiness’ as in Anaread minoveli yonthe (He reads plenty of novels). In short there are quite a good many examples of grammatical constructions in the Swahili of Sheng that gives it a somewhat unique character.

Having established that Swahili in any of its many varieties, is the probable monolingual base, let us now take a closer look at its other code-switching characteristics. One of the most interesting aspects of code-switching in Sheng is that it is a two level operation. There are in Sheng what we may call normative code-switching and contextual code-switching. In normative code-switching, which is the more integral aspect of Sheng, it is only a more or less fixed set of one or two-word English items that appear almost constantly in Sheng speech in place of their Swahili, Kikuyu or Luo equivalents. This set would include nouns like ‘something’, ‘story’, ‘idea’, ‘neighbor’, ‘home’, ‘game’, ‘deal’, ‘job’, ‘night’, ‘time’; verbs like “blow”, ‘say’, ‘get’, ‘come’, ‘play’, ”dead”, ”check”, ”connect”, ‘roll’; adjectives like ”best”, ”fit”, ”mob” etc. (The Sheng items in double quotes have different meanings from their original English counterparts). These and other examples form part of what may be seen as almost a permanent set of switches in Sheng.
This seeming permanence, however, does not preclude a certain degree of variability in the use of certain items. In rare cases this variation may involve Swahili equivalents. However, there is a more curious variation involving phonologically integrated variants of the original English items. Hence dedi, cheki, gerul, kambu, fiti, for instance, have emerged as phonologically integrated variants of the English 'dead', 'check', 'game', 'come', and 'fit', respectively. It is possible, then, that what I have called normative code-switching is simply a stage in complete linguistic integration of the switched English items into Sheng's basically Swahili grammatical mould. The unintegrated variants may ultimately be superseded by the integrated ones.

With regard to contextual code-switching, on the other hand, -- the term context here is used to include discourse, stylistic and social context -- its features are essentially those of the more usual type of code-switching discussed above. Sheng's speech exhibits numerous examples of one-word, two-words, phrasal, clause and sentence switches triggered by a variety of contextual factors, such as topical shift (e.g., the increasing use of English when the topic centers around the rehearsal of an English play), entrance or exit of one of the interlocutors (e.g., the shift from a predominantly Swahili discourse to one in Sheng upon the exit of a female interlocutor), filling a linguistic need for a set of phrases or other items or, when quoting someone. Who is talking to whom/where/when/why, then, in addition to the factor of fulfilling felt linguistic needs of some sort, can explain most of the switches occurring in Sheng's contextual code-switching.

Moving now to other linguistic features of Sheng's code-switching, frequency counts reveal that some speakers use more one-word switches than they do phrases/clauses/sentence switches, while others have the opposite pattern with phrase/clause/sentence switches being more preponderant. But between phrase, clause and sentence switches, phrases tend to be proportionally more numerous than clauses, while clauses outnumber sentence switches. In one-word switches, on the other hand, out of a corpus of 670 items, 44 percent were nouns, 35 percent verbs, 16 percent adjectives while the remaining 5 percent can be classified as 'others'. This is taking all the switches at the normative as well the contextual level. If we restrict ourselves to normative code-switching, however, the verb category seems to be just as productive as the noun category, with a very thin verb: noun ratio margin that may well tilt one way or the other depending perhaps on the individual speaker and discourse context. The findings of Pfaff (1979) with regard to preferred grammatical categories in code-switching, therefore, do not seem to be vindicated by Sheng's normative code-switching.

A consideration of the supposedly universal grammatical constraints on code-switching reveals even more interesting linguistic peculiarities of Sheng. The free morpheme constraint, for example, seems to be manifestly violated by the following recorded examples: 'nimefinigjwa' (I am drugged), 'utaconnectiwa' (you will be contacted), 'alislapiwa' (he/she was slapped). Hence the English passive affix '-ed' in the above examples has been switched to the Swahili passive marker '-iwa/ despite the fact that the verb stems 'drug', 'connect', and 'slap' are not phonologically integrated into the Swahili system.

The other universal linguistic constraint, the equivalence constraints, is again not without exceptions in Sheng. Examples like demu wa mine (my girlfriend), and maskam ya his (his
place) are constructions that do not abide by the requirements of the equivalence constraints in that in the Swahili constructions *demu wangu* (my girl friend) and *maskani yake* (his place), the permissible switch points are immediately before the possessives *wangu* (my) and *yake* (his). Switching here is not allowed to split the bound morphemes wa- and -angu or ya- and -ake and substitute one with a free morpheme. Yet this is exactly what has happened in the above examples from Sheng. (Notice that switching is also not permissible immediately after nouns *demu* and *maskani* in the above examples because *wangu* (wa-angu) and *yake* (ya-ake) are not structurally "equivalent" to the English 'my' and 'his', respectively.)

In general, then, at least normative code-switching in Sheng does show some evidence of violating both the free morpheme and equivalence constraints, even though in limited contexts. For example, the passive verbal construction seems to be the only instance of violation of the free morpheme constraint, while the equivalence constraint fails to apply only in the case of what we may call "possessive phrases." But the persistence of the violations of the constraints on code-switching do demonstrate Sheng’s potential to develop into a truly independent linguistic system beyond the mere juxtaposition of Swahili, English, Kikuyu, Luo, linguistic forms interspersed with lexical innovations.

In a more detailed and systematic study of speech data these linguistic features of Sheng’s code-switching may very well have some correlation with the process of community formation. It may be possible, for example, that the speech of those who consider themselves transitory members of the Kibera slum on the one hand, and that of its seemingly more "permanent" residents, would reveal significantly different ratios in the use of the different grammatical categories. Likewise, the frequency and type of structures that violate the free morpheme and equivalence constraints may also vary between the two groups.

There are some discourse features of Sheng, however, which quite obviously seem to perform a solidarity function that could enhance community relations. These features include, for example,

1. Addresses of comradeship like *joo*, *ojandee*, and *mazee*. So even essentially confrontational discourse may be successfully tempered with these terms. *Usinkasirishe!* (Don’t make me angry), for example, is a much less comradely encounter than say, *Usinkasirishe joo*!

2. Supportive strategies in which one interlocutor repeats or rephrases a section of another interlocutor’s words, as in the following example:

   A: Days zinaelapse (Days pass quickly)
   B: Zinaelapse (They pass quickly)
   C: Enyewe siku hizi days zinapass mazee. (Truly, days really pass nowadays mazee)

   Or as in this example:

   A: unajua kudrive hiyo nding ni taabu. (You know, driving that car is difficult)
   B: Nio noma. (It is difficult)
   C: Imekuwa ni headache. (It’s a real headache)

While this kind of supportive strategy is not restricted to Sheng discourses, it appears to be particularly productive in this para-code.
3. Participatory strategies in which a speaker would allow listeners to contribute a couple of syllabic cues that enable them to guess the word(s) intended by the speaker. Here are some examples:

A: dola haijulikani ni baridi ama ni mo ...? (You can’t tell whether a "dollar" is cold or is mo--)
B: Ni hot (is hot)
A: ... halafu nito ... (Then nito-)
B: halafu utoke (Then you go out)

In some cases the original speaker may repeat his listener’s right guess, again for supportive purposes. Again this strategy is not exclusively a Sheng feature, but it does tend to be particularly pronounced among Sheng speakers. And these speakers are likely to be those who have the most felt need for social solidarity under the precarious slum conditions.

There are most likely, a number of other discourse features in Sheng which fulfill social solidarity and group identity functions. These are undoubtedly important functions in the promotion of a sense of community. And as social networks under the prevailing slum conditions get denser, there is a possibility that these kinds of features in Sheng will increase in number and in their contexts of use. This may in turn serve as an impetus to further consolidation of community bonds. In other words, the two processes, the development of Sheng and community formation, can essentially be expected to feed on each other.

References


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