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IMPACT OF SHENG LANGUAGE IN KENYA

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Abstract

Purpose: the aim of the study is to evaluate the impact of sheng language in Kenya

Methodology: The study adopted a desktop literature review method (desk study). This involved an in-depth review of studies related to sheng language and its effect in Kenya. The research involved literature search and paper review of information on impact of sheng language with respect to the value of archival materials. Where appropriate, the review on how to rethink and reorganize what is being done to solve sheng language challenges in Kenya by policymakers was done.

Findings: Sheng is pervasive among Kenyan youths and they have adopted it as an identity marker. It is a variety that unifies them, creating in-group solidarity against outsiders. Sheng has now transcended socioeconomic class boundaries and is used by many youths irrespective of social class or gender. It is possible for a multilingual society to employ different languages in a diglossic manner and have all of them co-existing and enriching one another as they function in their different contexts. When this is put into practice, then the spread of Sheng' will no longer be perceived as a threat to the phenomenology of its' speakers because the users will be able to balance its use and to integrate its values with those they draw from other languages through language enriching process of multilingualism.

Unique contribution to theory, policy, and practice: 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. In today's world, knowledge societies are pluralistic and inclusive; Sheng' therefore should be allowed to add another 'feather' to the Kenyan pluralistic hat.

Key words: *sheng, multilingualism, community language*

INTRODUCTION

Sheng is an East African patois originating from English, Swahili and other African languages. The slang started way back in the 1950s at the Eastlands slums of Nairobi city. Although initially the language was coined from Swahili and English only, Nowadays it has embraced other African languages mostly from the bantu group. Currently sheng is the first language for most people born in urban centers across the whole of East Africa region. The language is spoken in the streets, some radio stations and even at school which raises the question, does it have any effect on the mainstream languages like English and Swahili (Kiama, 1990).

Sheng', an evolving Kenyan language has been blamed for a myriad of things by parents and teachers in the local communities. Among these are: Loss of paternity and patrimony, these being the identity and connection to any particular roots among the youth, especially the urbanite youth. This Kiswahili-based pidgin-like language is blamed for having negatively impacted its speakers' affinity to their past, the feeling of their continuity and their ethnic legacy as passed on from one generation to another (Samper, 2000). There is evidence too, that speakers of Sheng', especially those of the second generation, meaning those whose parents also speak it, have developed monostylism thus reducing the number of stylistic variants in their linguistic repertoire. Sheng' has also been blamed for its speaker's poor learning and mastery of other languages (Mbaabu, Ileri & Nzuga, 2003).

These researchers all agree 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 (Kiarie, 2004). Our observation agrees with these definitions and findings that Sheng' is indeed a hybrid of English, Kiswahili and many other major indigenous Kenyan languages such as; Gikuyu, Kikamba, Dholuo and the Luhya 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 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, is different from that of Bahati Estate, which in turn, is 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 Uthuru areas, and thrives in such slum areas as Mathare and Kibera.

Local television and radio stations have also given space to Sheng' where certain specific programmes use this code to broadcast some of their programmes alongside Kiswahili or English. 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 also recently turned to an extensive use of Sheng' to market their products (Abdulaziz & Osinde, 1997). 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.

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 (Mbaabu, Ileri & Nzuga, 2003). 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 in 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 (Samper, 2000). Our observation, however, reveals 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.

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 (Bosire, 2006). This fact of not learning and speaking the ethnic languages has created language shift in a generation (of children and their young parents), from ethnic languages to Sheng'.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language is useful as a tool for communication when it is widespread in usage and people, children included, will not bother to learn a language simply to be patriotic to their extended families. Rather, they would learn a language that is widespread in usage and whose image is attractive to them in a personalized way (Mazrui, 1995). This reluctance to learn or teach or even use mother tongue to the next generation encourages the learning and using of another language; one that is viewed as more socially prestigious, economically powerful or one that promises upward mobility and a better future.

Language shift, also known as language transfer, is a process whereby an individual or a speech community reduces the functions of their native language or even stops using it all together and replaces it with another language. This other language is usually the language of prestige and upward mobility in society or that of peer identity (Ogechi, 2005). These could well be languages of wider communication but could also be the languages of the neighbouring communities. The most severe form of language shift is known as assimilation. This happens when a community of speakers of one language becomes bilingual in another language and progressively stops using their own language in favour of that other language.

Today, however, native languages are shifting for the single reason that they are not passed on to the next generation by their speakers. No matter how large the adult-speaker population is, the fate of these languages is already sealed if they are not passed on to the next generation (Mbaabu, Ileri & Nzuga, 2003). The language is moribund as soon as the child and consequently the youth populations shift from it. Political and economic dominance by larger communities and western languages too, plays an enormous role in the process of language shift while peer acceptance seems to dominate the social scenario.

These languages of wider communication, be they Kiswahili for East Africa or English for the World can and do co-exist with local languages. However, more often than not, the languages of wider communication replace the local ones as older speakers die and younger ones adopt the more 'useful tongue'. In the case of Sheng', social pressure, the secrecy and the need to fit with the urbanite, seem to be the driving force for the shift (Bosire, 2006).

When speakers lose their language they lose their symbol of identity and this impacts negatively on their social-psychological well-being because language is not only an instrument of communication; it is the carrier of cultural norms and values of a people. The transmission of a language from one generation to another ensures the transmission of their culture and value systems to the next generation. In the event where this fails to happen, these norms and values are lost with the dying of the last generation that carried them. In the case of Kenya, it is evident that Sheng' is fast spreading and in certain domains and areas replacing the native languages of its speakers, especially those of the second generation whose parents spoke it at home as the primary language of the home. These speakers have therefore shifted from their native language and have broken away from the feelings of loyalty and solidarity with the native languages of their parents.

The Kenyan language policy for education stipulates that in the first three years of schooling, pupils be taught in the language of the catchment area of the school (Mbaabu 1996). This essentially translates into using the languages of the ethnic communities in the linguistically homogenous rural areas. Kiswahili is used in regions of linguistic heterogeneity, such as urban centres and ethnically mixed settlement areas. The education policy states that, from Standard Four, school instruction be conducted in English as the medium of instruction. Also, both English and Kiswahili are compulsory and examinable subjects at primary and secondary school level. So, there is a big premium placed on English and Kiswahili because, Kiswahili which was previously Kenya's national language is now both the national and one of the official languages. As a national language, Kiswahili is the carrier of the people's national heritage and identity. Both English and Kiswahili are now the official languages to be used for carrying out national official business and for international communication. A good mastery of these two languages ensures a good grade at national examinations and a placement in a good school or college. According to the Universities' Joint Admission Board, a candidate must have a strong grade in either English or Kiswahili for them to get an admission to a public university (Mbaabu, Ileri & Nzuga, 2003).

The stakes in these languages are thus very high and because of this, Sheng' has then been blamed for undermining the learning and mastery of the two school languages; English and Kiswahili as observed in school meetings and other educational forums (Mazrui, 1995). Primary and Secondary School teachers responsible for language instruction claim that the acquisition of Sheng' by the youth, especially the school-going youth, has impacted negatively on the learning and good usage of standard Kiswahili and English. The very nature of Sheng' as a hybrid language, creating its

vocabulary by mixing English, Kiswahili and many other languages is the basis for this reasoning and effort to make it the culprit here (Ogechi, 2005).

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a desktop literature review method (desk study). This involved an in-depth review of studies related to sheng language and its effect in Kenya. The research involved literature search and paper review of information on impact of sheng language with respect to the value of archival materials (Creswell, 2014). This article reviewed recorded sources to present the current state of sheng language in Kenya. In line with Creswell's assertion that observations are important for obtaining first-hand knowledge that enriches analysis results, under different themes, the study revealed observations were made from the recorded sources. Where appropriate, the review on how to rethink and reorganize what is being done to solve sheng language challenges in Kenya by policymakers was done.

FINDINGS

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. Sheng' has therefore been blamed for raising a Kenyan generation devoid of culture and cultural values. It has also been blamed by school teachers and parents for interfering with the learning and mastery of both English and Kiswahili; the official languages of education in Kenya. However, Sheng' as a mass language, cannot be wished away. Its influence is felt throughout the country and Kenyans must live with it as it is one of the indigenous languages of the country. It must be accommodated.

Sheng has now transcended socioeconomic class boundaries and is used by many youths irrespective of social class or gender. It is now gradually spreading to some rural areas by way of radio and young people who travel between urban and rural areas. This variety has also attracted the attention of business people and politicians who use it to promote their products and policies to young people. The spread and appreciation of Sheng has also been made possible due to avenues that are usually appealing to the youths and the public in general. For example, young people especially in Kenya and to some extent in Tanzania and Uganda, have adopted hip hop music that is usually sung in Sheng or Swahinglish as this hybrid form is referred to in Tanzania (Higgins, 2007). During recent national elections in Kenya, politicians have been capitalizing on hip hop music to show that they are trendy and that they identify with the youths. Such instances usually affect people's attitudes towards Sheng even though it is not a legitimate code in formal institutions.

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.⁸ 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'⁹ 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.

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.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In summary, Sheng is pervasive among Kenyan youths and they have adopted it as an identity marker. It is a variety that unifies them, creating in-group solidarity against outsiders. Rural youths also attempt to align with their urban counterparts because they view their way of speaking to be trendy. Although these rural youths can hardly speak like their urban counterparts due to their lack of knowledge of English and exposure to a variety of mass media, their temporal identification with them is something that most rural youths would like to project in non-threatening situations. The code has also caught the attention of the print and electronic media especially in advertisements, official health warnings on HIV/AIDS, and other commercials.

While some people have advocated the growth of ‘Sheng’ as an indication of societal growth in Kenya, others, including scholars, researchers and educationists are on the opinion that the spread of this code impacts negatively on the learners in Kenyan schools and colleges. They base their arguments on the fact that other international languages did not achieve their sophistication through breaking their morpho-syntactic or grammatical rules at the pace in which ‘Sheng’ is infiltrating Kiswahili.

It is possible for a multilingual society to employ different languages in a diglossic manner and have all of them co-existing and enriching one another as they function in their different contexts. When this is put into practice, then the spread of Sheng’ will no longer be perceived as a threat to the phenomenology of its’ speakers because the users will be able to balance its use and to integrate its values with those they draw from other languages through language enriching process of multilingualism. This would help them avoid operating in subtraction and exclusion but rather, in addition of their cultural orientation and linguistic repertoire.

It is our suggestion 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.

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