Student and Educator Perceptions of Prevalence of Use, Attitude and Views about *Sheng* Speakers

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Abstract

This study tested the difference and relationship between student and educator perceptions of prevalence of students' use, attitude, and views about *sheng* speakers in selected schools in Gucha District, Kenya. Two hundred and thirty nine (239) students and thirty three (33) educators participated. The test of differences revealed there was a significant difference in the educators' and teachers' perceptions on the prevalence of the use of *sheng,* Students' attitudes toward the use of *sheng,* positive views about *sheng* speakers, and negative views about *sheng* speakers. There was a significant relationship between the respondents' perceptions on the prevalence of the use of *sheng* and students' attitudes toward *sheng* and positive views about *sheng* speakers. Those who hold positive views use *sheng* or are in favor of its use while those who do not use it hold negative views on its use. Teachers should perfect the teaching of standard forms so that learners can identify boundaries between various forms of language use. *Sheng* can be a threat to purism of English and Kiswahili and measures should be taken to stem the negative ramifications it is likely to bring to the teaching and learning of standard Swahili.

Keywords: Sheng, Perceptions, Attitude, Views, Kiswahili, Gucha District

Introduction

Kiswahili is one of the fastest growing African languages. It can claim to be the East and Central African region's primary language of wider communication even in the face of a very rich and

varied multiplicity of languages and relentless rivalry from the two topmost, powerful European languages namely English and French (Chimerah, 1998).

Internationally, it is being taught as a foreign language in many universities like Yale, London and Korea. At the regional level, Kiswahili language has claimed an envious position in spearheading and propagating the spirit of Pan Africanism (Chimerah, 1998).As a Lingua Franca, the Kiswahili language is the seventh most widely spoken language in the globe (Mbaabu, 1985; Chimerah, 1998).Kiswahili is also evidently used for news broadcasting from major broadcasting stations:
According to the K.N.E.C. (1998),

"…..Kiswahili is used for news broadcasting from many stations around the globe, for example B.B.C (British Broadcasting Corporation), V.O.A (Voice of America) and Radio Deutch Well (Germany)"

Many scholars have made inroads into this linguistic code called *Sheng*. Mukhebi (1986) has said that *Sheng* is a cultural event which is associated with the thoughts and emotions of its speakers who found that they were incapable of expressing themselves in Standard English. It is a code that has borrowed mainly from Kiswahili and English__ S wahili+Eng-lish =**Sheng** (Chimerah, 1998). The speakers, therefore, saw the need of evolving their own code for communication. Moga and Fee (2000) went further and wrote a *sheng* dictionary that could assist speakers to improve on their vocabulary range in this language.

In his dissertation from the University of Pennsylvania, Samper (2002) has dealt with the role of *Sheng* in the construction of identity and youth culture in Nairobi. He has not looked at the negative effects of *Sheng* in the teaching and learning of Kiswahili in Kenya. While tracing the historical origins of *Sheng*, Mbaabu and Nzunga (2003) and Asiba,(1985) have said that the argot started in Kaloleni slums in the Eastlands of Nairobi in the 60s and 70s. Over time, this has spread further to as far as Tanzania (King'ei and Kobia, 2007). Ogechi, (2002) has done extensive research on the trilingual comparative aspects of English, Kiswahili, *Ekegusii* and *Sheng*. Further, he has looked at the lexicography of *Sheng*. The impact of the language in the teaching of Standard Kiswahili has not been his focus. Rinkanya (2005) has suggested that there is need to publish books in *Sheng*; this view has been vehemently opposed by King'ei and Kobia,(2007) who have actually recommended that there is need to contain the usage of *Sheng* and mitigate its negative effects on the national and official languages, which are the media of formal education and business. Momanyi (2002), in her paper to the journal of Pan African Studies, recommended specific researches to be done on the language situation in Kenya, especially as far as the spread of *Sheng* and its impact on education are concerned.

Sheng is a dynamic, protean combination of Swahili and English but also borrows from Kenyan ethnic languages like Kikuyu, Luo and Luhya, from the Indian Languages of Hindi and Gujarat, from foreign films, from the news and from the languages of Kenya's many tourists. Mbaabu (1996) suggests that one of the reasons *Sheng* has grown so fast is because there appears to be no systematic Kiswahili language policy. The speed at which the *Sheng* code is getting into the way of Kiswahili and English instruction is so alarming that the researchers believe that definite measures have to be taken to check this unprecedented growth to take care of the emergence of *Sheng* and help avert an otherwise very explosive language situation in the

future. This is the reason why this study, looked at the perceptions and attitudes of various people toward *Sheng*.

Iraki (2004) has said that sheng is becoming the mother tongue of most city dwellers: can it then be systematized so that it is developed with a stable grammar rather than the current position in which it is using the Kiswahili grammar and haphazardly at that? Rono (2001) has claimed that it is not in order for a language to be the premise on which another one dies. Why should the use of English and Kiswahili die to improve the use of *Sheng*?

 Performance of Standard Kiswahili in national examinations has been dropping from year to year. The teaching and learning of Kiswahili has become extremely complex. Being the national language of the Republic of Kenya and from 2010 (after the promulgation of the New Constitution) and one of the co-official languages with English, it became increasingly appropriate to make comparisons to find out whether there are any relationships between students and educators on attitudes and perceptions towards *Sheng* with regard to the teaching and learning of Standard Swahili.

Prevalence of the use of Sheng
According to Mukhebi (1986), *Sheng* is a social event that is associated with the philosophy and feelings of the people who use it. He asserts that the original users of this code found out that from their poor background, in the eastern parts of Nairobi, they were unable to acquire education. They therefore saw the need to evolve their own code of communication. In addition, these users found it difficult to learn the basic western type of curriculum that was being brought to them in English.

Sheng appears to be more of a peer language, among the youth, an idiom that defines the identity of a youth that wants to share its secrets and exclude the adult world (Spyropoulous, 1987; Mbaabu, 1996; Samper, 2002 and Ogechi, 2002) . In fact Ogechi (2005) has said that University Students use the lexicon and expressions that tend to *Sheng* in most of their interactions. Specifically, Ogechi has unraveled that the University Students find it easier to express HIV/AIDS related information by using *Sheng*. Samper (2002) has observed that unlike English and Kiswahili, *Sheng* is a language that the Kenyan youth call their "own". Not only does *Sheng* belong to them but they, in a sense belong to *Sheng*. The *manambas (*young men who operate the public transportation vans called *'matatus') and* the Kenya rappers are the master innovators of *Sheng.* These are the people who give western commodities a local sign-value. They serve as mediators between the rural and the urban, between the local and the global. They take on the responsibility of interpreting Western culture into the Nairobi context (Fink, 2005).

The gangsters, especially in Nairobi, found this argot quite handy. Kobia (2006) argues that the people needed to carry out their clandestine activities without other people knowing what they were doing. Studies trace the origins and rationale for the use of this code from the time the Kenyans acquired their independence in 1963 (Osinde, 1986 & Shitemi, 2001). During this time, there was an influx of people to Nairobi from the rural areas in search of employment. Most industries were based in the eastern parts of Nairobi. These people were forced to use Kiswahili but because this language was disregarded by the colonial

administration as a language of the servants and house boys, with time, the children of these immigrants switched on to this code to create a class of their own.

According to Journo (2009) and Momanyi (2009), *Sheng* is the vehicle of literary production. *Sheng* seems to constitute a space where the complexity and the fluidity of contemporary urban experiences can be reflected. This fluidity, seen in *Sheng's* versatile incorporation of new words and coinages, reflects the way in which modernity (whether drawn from Western, or other, more local, influences) is appropriated, modified and blended with revised pre-existing values (Journo, 2009 & Momanyi, 2009),

It will, therefore, be in order to give this code a special attention as it has its place in the linguistic lay-out of Kenya (Iraki, 2002). Not only is the *Sheng* code spoken by the youth but also by hip hop musicians, public transport touts (*manambas*), drug peddlers, school dropouts, small scale business community in market places (Momanyi,2009).These people form the linguistic environment within which the youth, who form most of the respondents in this study, appear to reside.

Abdulaziz and Osinde (1982; 1997) have claimed in part that this code emerged from a specific neighborhood of Nairobi, Kaloleni then spread to other parts of the Eastlands and the city. It can be convincingly said that it was first noted in the 1960s in Nairobi especially among the black neighborhoods. It emerged due to a lack of a language policy in Kenya. It does not exist in the same extent and fluidity in Tanzania as it does in Kenya because Tanzania is unified by the fact that Kiswahili is both an official and national language. If we compare the *lugha ya Mitaani*(lyM) in Tanzania with neighboring *Sheng* in Kenya, we find some similarities: they share the same function as an urban youth style of speaking, they share the same morphosyntactic frame, i.e Swahili and the wider linguistic ecology with Swahili and English as major contact languages is similar. But apart from this, LyM and *Sheng*, differ in two important respects: in the strategies employed for local manipulation and in the public awareness of the phenomenon both at national and international level. With respect to the national perception of the phenomena as well as to the perception of the scientific public, *Sheng* seems to attract more attention so far than LyM.*Sheng* has also instigated an intense debate among Kenyans-teachers, pupils, politicians and everybody concerned with the educational sector- mostly in the paradigm of the falling standards, corruption of language and declining linguistic abilities of students. And it seems to be more perceived as a threat to linguistic norms than LyM (Swahili Forum, 13, 2006).Though Githiora (2002) has indicated that this happens outside the classroom setting, it can now be asserted that this argot has invaded our classrooms.

Attitudes and perceptions of students and teachers toward *Sheng*

The perceptual process allows us to experience the normal world around us. Perception is our sensory experience of the world around us and involves both the recognition of environmental stimuli and actions in response to these stimuli. Through the perceptual process, we gain information about properties and elements of the environment that are crucial to our survival. Language is one of those basic activities that we get involved in and our responses to it; how we rate certain aspects of any language variety that we use or that is used by other people defines us in one way or another.

The *Sheng* code in the linguistic layout of Kenya from the early 60's has been the target of stigma by various groups of people. Those who use it rate it positively while those who do not use it, view it negatively(Muaka,2011). Tajfel (1982), a social psychologist who specialized in inter-group relations, and Hournsey and Hogg (2000) pointed out that people engage in social comparisons to cultivate a positive self esteem and preserve their distinctiveness. Finally this becomes the basis for positive self evaluation and biased or negative evaluation for other people.

Language attitudes are invoked every time interlocutors encounter a variety of speech they have heard before (Cargile and Bradac 2001). Advancing a similar argument, Preston (2002) notes that attitudes towards languages and their varieties seem to be tied to attitudes towards groups of people. It has also been shown in the work of Milroy and Mclanaghan (1977) and Hournsey & Hogg (2000) that linguistic meaning may be constructed from the characteristics that have been transferred from stereotypes of their speakers. This is further underscored by Dittmar and Schlobinski (1988) who have asserted that attitudes towards the language determine the way it is evaluated in the speech community and also dictates the status it enjoys and the kind of people likely to use it.

Since languages function as forms of symbolic wealth spent during social negotiations in the linguistic marketplace (Bourdieu, 1991), they leave different values assigned by their respective speech communities. In turn, speakers are evaluated according to the language(s) they speak. Typically, speakers of standard languages are evaluated positively along status enhancing attributes such as *educated, rich, friendly, kind and benevolent* (Krauss and Chiu, 1998).

The association of standard languages with power, status and upward mobility enhances their favorable rating in both the mainstream and the alternative linguistic markets. Speakers of standard language thus negotiate their status by advocating the retention of the status quo. On the other hand, speakers of non-standard varieties who harbor ambitions of upward mobility and status also perpetuate the status quo by aspiring for both the material and symbolic rewards afforded by standard languages (Githinji, 2008).It is important to make a concrete observation about the country's linguistic diversity at this stage before this case on perceptions and attitudes toward *Sheng* gains momentum. The reason for this is so that we ground our premise on the language situation from where to expound reality. Kenya is pervasively multilingual both at the societal and individual levels and an average person is able to speak at least three languages. This is partly due to the prevalence of the ethno linguistic groups in the country and their desire to interact with different people in different contexts (Muaka, 2011).Secondly, there is this street urban slang variety called *Sheng* with a grammar that is very close to Kiswahili. This linguistic variety is not standard and, therefore, it will cause confusion in the efforts of educationists to craft a language policy.

Outside the mainstream linguistic market, however, non-standard languages retain their vitality through their use in interpersonal negotiations. These non-standard languages, though stigmatized, in the mainstream, find favorable evaluations, especially amongst the marginalized groups due to their perception as indices of local identity as well as resources for negotiating local solidarity. When the use of a non standard variety extends beyond the

stereotypical groups normally associated with it, attitudes towards such a variety are bound to be inconsistent as a result of different symbolisms associated with it by different categories of speakers. The extension of a language's domain does not eliminate the boundaries that define existing social stratification. Instead it symbolizes a convergence point for members of different communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) in the exploitation of a linguistic resource for different ends. Since these ends do not normally converge, the language is bound to elicit different perceptions with respect to how raters   perceive themselves within the overlapping communities of practice. Such fluidity creates ambivalence in people's attitudes that defy broad stereotypical generalizations as raters' attentions shift from personal, others, and idealized others' characterization of speakers of such a code. This is actually what happens in *Sheng*

Many studies that have been conducted mention the negative attitudes and stereotypes associated with it. In Githiora (2002) for example, attitudes towards *Sheng* oscillated between the positive and the negative extremes. On the one hand, the *Sheng* enthusiasts argued that it was an important code for youth communication because it breaks down ethnic barriers. *Sheng* opponents, on the other hand disliked its unintelligibility by adults and its negative interference with school learning. These two extremes are further explored in Fink (2005) whose work is a global survey of language attitudes, covering the perceptual processes between Swahili, English, *Sheng* and mother tongues. She examines the variables such as age; gender and socio economic background and concludes that young people preferred English to mother tongues while the reverse was the case for adults. She takes this as evidence of language shift in Kenya. Her study also reveals that although females and high class people exhibited preference for English, males from lower socio economic background in poor residential areas of the East lands demonstrated higher preference for *Sheng.*

Githinji (2008) has looked at people's beliefs about *sheng's* structure, its usefulness, functions and the speakers' proficiency across age and socio economic status categories. Besides, he has looked ambivalent attitudes that people have towards language categories and people who speak them. He found out that when respondents were presented with both positive and negative statements on *sheng,* negative statements received higher scores than the positive ones. Surprisingly, the young people who speak *Sheng* displayed the most negative attitudes towards it.

In spite of these functions its negative effect on school performance in English and Kiswahili, the standard languages in both primary and secondary school levels has been a thorn in the flesh for the parents and language pedagogists (Samper, 2002; Fink, 2003). Driven by the need to prevent corruption of languages and the endeavor to teach 'proper' languages that enhance the learner's career opportunities such stakeholders are usually harsh in their evaluation of *sheng*.

This study builds on what Githinji did and widens the variables under investigation with specific emphasis on what students, teachers and other educators think and perceive about *Sheng* as regards the teaching and learning of Standard Swahili in selected schools in Gucha District.

METHODS

This study was conducted through the descriptive co-relational and descriptive comparative designs. Descriptive co-relational design resides in the estimation of relationships between variables. Questionnaires were used to solicit for information from two hundred and thirty nine (239) students, thirty three (33) educators, who composed of (13) head teachers, Nineteen (19) teachers and one District Quality Assurance and Standards Officer (DQASO). After obtaining research permit from the National Council for Science and Technology, Ministry of Education and an authorization from the District Commissioner, Gucha District and District Education Officer from the same District, permission was then sought from the principals of sampled schools to allow for research to take place in their schools. The Principals were requested to offer any assistance needed for the exercise.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study tested if there was significant difference between the students' self-rating and educators' perceptions on a) prevalence of students' use of *sheng*, b) students' attitude toward the use of *sheng*, c) positive views about *sheng* speakers, and d) negative views about *sheng* speakers. We also tested the relationship between prevalence of students' use of *sheng* and a) attitude toward the use of s*heng,* b) positive views about *sheng* speakers, and c) negative views about s*heng* speakers.

Table 1 shows analysis of ANOVA on the use and attitudes of *sheng* as expressed by the respondents.

Table 1: Analysis of ANOVA on the use of *sheng* and attitudes towards it

Descriptive Statistics

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
PREVALENCE OF THE USE OF SHENG	STUDENTS	239	2.4787	.77833	.05035
	EDUCATORS	33	3.4167	.74861	.13032
	Total	272	2.5925	.83208	.05045
ATTITUDE TOWARD THE USE OF SHENG	STUDENTS	239	3.0448	.51590	.03337
	EDUCATORS	33	3.2332	.39837	.06935
	Total	272	3.0676	.50625	.03070
POSITIVE VIEWS ABOUT SHENG SPEAKERS	STUDENTS	239	2.6772	.60034	.03883
	EDUCATORS	33	3.0331	.96376	.16777
	Total	272	2.7204	.66314	.04021
NEGATIVE VIEW ABOUT SHENG SPEAKERS	STUDENTS	239	2.9524	.73101	.04728
	EDUCATORS	33	3.5455	.67179	.11694
	Total	272	3.0244	.74848	.04538

		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
PREVALENCE OF THE USE OF SHENG	Between Groups	25.513	1	25.513	42.491	.000
	Within Groups	162.115	270	.600		
	Total	187.627	271			
ATTITUDE TOWARD THE USE OF SHENG	Between Groups	1.030	1	1.030	4.064	.045
	Within Groups	68.424	270	.253		
	Total	69.454	271			
POSITIVE VIEWS ABOUT SHENG SPEAKERS	Between Groups	3.673	1	3.673	8.587	.004
	Within Groups	115.501	270	.428		
	Total	119.174	271			
NEGATIVE VIEW ABOUT SHENG SPEAKERS	Between Groups	10.197	1	10.197	19.440	.000
	Within Groups	141.622	270	.525		
	Total	151.819	271			

The test of differences revealed there was a significant difference in the educators' and teachers' perceptions on the prevalence of the use of *Sheng, Students' attitudes toward the use of Sheng, positive views about Sheng speakers, and negative views about Sheng speakers* since all p-values associated with the F-values are less than 0.05.

The students regarded *sheng* as a tool for defining their generation. Its versatility, as Fink (2005) has observed, results in the view that there are distinctions between generations of *Sheng* speakers. Samper (2002) tends to agree that because of the character of its changing trend, the students see it as a tool for young people to distinguish themselves from their parents whom they perceive as living in the past as they live in the present.

Students, teachers and head teachers who use *sheng* view themselves positively while those students and teachers who do not use or condone the use of s*heng* either keep quiet about it or appear to be lukewarm in the presence of those who use it. From the attitudes and perceptions of the *sheng* code, there are some differences between the indexing of *sheng* for men and for women. It has been observed that men tend to be heavier sheng users than women.

Samper (2002) has argued that since *Sheng* is a source of interpersonal power for men, women's comparative avoidance of it indicates their lack of power in the Kenyan society. As they have viewed it, women testify to the liberating quality of *sheng-* for a woman, knowing too much of *Sheng* may mark her as sexually permissive, while not knowing it will mark her as rural and backward. In terms of age and gender, it was observed that *sheng* use varies in place and situation. This shows that the idiom has become a force to reckon with. As Iraki (2011) has commented, certain stereotypic projections are bound to come across the suppressors of the use of this idiom.

To test the relationship between prevalence of students' use of *Sheng* and a) attitude toward the use of *Sheng,* b) positive views about *Sheng* speakers, and c) negative views about *Sheng* speakers, Person product moment correlation coefficient was used as shown in table 2.

Table 2: Correlations of various speakers and educators on Sheng.

		PREVALENCE OF THE USE SHENG	THE ATTITUDE OF TOWARD USE OF SHENG	POSITIVE VIEWS ABOUT SHENG SPEAKERS	NEGATIVE VIEWS ABOUT SHENG SPEAKERS
PREVALENCE OF THE USE OF SHENG	Pearson Correlation	1	214**	213**	.034
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001	.001	.605
	N	239	239	239	239
ATTITUDE TOWARD THE USE OF SHENG	Pearson Correlation	214**	1	.208**	.047
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001		.001	..473
	N	239	239	239	239
POSITIVE VIEWS ABOUT SHENG SPEAKERS	Pearson Correlation	213**	.208**	1	.074
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.001		.257
	N	239	239	239	239
NEGATIVE VIEW ABOUT SHENG SPEAKERS	Pearson Correlation	.034	.047	.074	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.605	.473	.257	
	N	239	239	239	239

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Given that correlation is significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed), a sig of 0.001 that is less than 0.01 shows that there is a significant relationship between the respondents' perceptions on the prevalence of the use of *Sheng* and students' attitudes toward *Sheng* and positive views about *Sheng* speakers. Those who hold positive views use *Sheng* or are in favor of its use while those who do not use it hold negative views on its use.

Abdulaziz and Osinde (1997) have studied a shift in language attitudes and perceptions in Nairobi. Woods (1995) quoted in Fink (2005) has done extensive studies on language attitudes in which behavioral choices, evaluations and beliefs were basic in getting language attitudes. This study suggests that the appropriateness of a common language will sort out the problem of language for communication. This dilemma in language teaching calls for the formulation of a clear language policy to forestall the performance in languages that are

taught in secondary schools with specific interest in Kiswahili which is the interest of this study.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Before *Sheng* is qualified as a Creole, there is every need to find out the extent at which the code is used; verify its grammar and lay rules of formation of words; otherwise the impact on standard Swahili is far reaching and dangerous. In the journal 'Pragmatics' Kang'ethe Iraki (2004) has said that *Sheng* vocabulary cannot be wished away; it needs to be properly studied and documented as it continues to expand and spread its wings. The truth alongside this assertion is that the *Sheng* vocabulary is not systematized - word formation and coinage continues to get into it in several ways. There are suggestions that the code should be banned from use. But the solution does not reside in banning *Sheng.* Instead the solution is to be located in rigorous language teaching strategies. A mode of speaking cannot be fought and banned; rather we should perfect the teaching of standard forms so that pupils can identify boundaries between various forms of language use. Alongside the previous statement, Iraki (2004) has said that educationalists view *Sheng* as a threat to purism of English and Kiswahili and measures should be taken to stem the negative ramifications it is likely to bring to the teaching and learning of standard Swahili.

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