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EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATION OF ‘SHENG’ IN THE LEARNING OF KISWAHILI AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOLS STUDENTS IN KENYA: A CASE STUDY OF KIRINYAGA COUNTY

Mune, C.W.

Department of Educational Foundations, P. O. Box 83844-00100, Kenyatta University, Kenya
 Tel.: +254720764200. Email: munecatherine@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

In the recent past Kiswahili has been hit by a wave of ‘Sheng’ speakers who are mostly adolescents and young adults. Use of Sheng has raised significant linguistic and pedagogical questions associated with the attainment of Kiswahili proficiency. 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 should be left to hip hop musicians, public transport touts, drug peddlers and school drop outs. In the education circles, the code is gangster slang, a secret code associated with social misfits, is fluid and not easy to understand. It interferes with standard Kiswahili and has negative effects on formal education. In Kenya, language policy has come to mean political pronouncements, government statements, and recommendations by Educational Commissions which are rarely implemented. The study was guided by Inter-language theory by Selinker. Study sample consisted of 9 schools, 368 form three students and 40 teachers. Sample populations were obtained through purposive and stratified sampling. Research showed that the code has interfered with formal language learning inside the classroom since students fail to mark the boundaries between ‘Sheng’ and standard Kiswahili and thus continue to show incompetence in writing and speaking. Also, it has interfered with the performance of students in national examinations especially in sentence constructions. Students regarded sheng as a tool to distinguish themselves from their parents whom they perceive as living in the past. Findings show that ‘Sheng’ has to do with lack of clarity in Kenya’s language policy. The paper recommends specific researches on the language situation in Kenya especially as far as the spread of ‘Sheng’ and its impacts on education are concerned.

Key words: *Adolescents, social misfits, Kiswahili proficiency, Formal education, Language policy*

INTRODUCTION

Background to the History of Kiswahili in Kenya

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). Kiswahili is typically a Bantu language (about 40% of

its lexicon is Bantu) which borrowed and continue to borrow words and terminologies from other languages to enrich its lexicon. As a Lingua Franca, the Kiswahili language is the seventh most widely spoken language in the globe (Mbaabu, 1985; Chimera, 1998). Kiswahili is also evidently used for news broadcasting from major broadcasting stations. However, while Kiswahili is making these great strides, it is being faced with a variety of challenges in its place of origin due to the emergence of language varieties like 'Sheng'. 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. He has not looked at the negative effects of *Sheng* in the teaching and learning of Kiswahili in Kenya.

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. 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.

The teaching and learning of Kiswahili has become extremely complex. Being the national language of the Republic of Kenya and from 2010 and one of the co-official languages with English, it became increasingly appropriate to find out educational implication of the use of sheng in the learning of Kiswahili in secondary schools in Kenya. for a long time now in Kenya, language policy has come to mean nothing more than political pronouncements, government statements, and recommendations made by Educational Commissions which are rarely implemented. The decision of Kenya to use Kiswahili as the national language immediately after independence came as a need to foster human development. This is because Kiswahili is the language of interethnic communication in Kenya where it bridges the linguistic gap between communities.

Any country that values the development of its people must incorporate them in all development processes. This can be realized through a language that they can comprehend and can competently use it to evaluate themselves and to implement development projects within their area. Kenyans are therefore lucky to have a language that is spoken and is understood by over 80% of the population. Kiswahili has been used by politicians to woo votes during political campaigns. Through Kiswahili literary genres especially lyrics, politicians gain popularity among the masses, hence improving their chances of winning in an election. Activities such as Civic Education, HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns, Human Rights advocacy and Constitutional Review process have become successful partly because the majority of Kenyans share a common language – Kiswahili. Professionals like engineers, agricultural extension officers, doctors and technicians use Kiswahili mostly to communicate to the public while discharging their duties. There is, therefore, an urgent need to equip these professionals with Kiswahili communication skills needed for them to competently discharge their duties.

In this age of globalization, imported technology continues to bombard most of the African countries. Industrial production, which involves imported technologies, is tied to foreign languages. This means that the latter dominates industry and commerce. Yet at the grassroots level where the peasant farmer, the housewife, the kiosk operator, the street vendor or the Jua Kali artisan operates, this official foreign language is rarely used. Instead, the indigenous languages including Kiswahili are the media through which this technology is interpreted and applied. It is therefore imperative for our professionals to learn Kiswahili, to be able to impart the right knowledge and to communicate to the general public. Inconsistent Kiswahili language policies have continued to prevail in post-independent Kenya. These

inconsistencies have accentuated and contributed to negative attitudes towards teaching and learning of Kiswahili in educational institutions.

‘Sheng’ and its Implication on Education

The standard form in the use of Kiswahili is the way in which it is used in schools, administration, parliamentary systems and general communication. It also involves the way in which it is used to produce text books and other teaching materials in schools, and it is this standardized form that the student is expected to learn in order to communicate with the general public. Recently, Kiswahili has been hit by a wave of ‘Sheng’ speakers who are mostly pre-adolescents and young adults. The youths developed a secret code which they wanted to identify themselves with, and a variety of the subculture. ‘Sheng’ is based primarily on Kiswahili structure. It uses Kiswahili grammar with lexicon drawn from Kiswahili, English and the various ethnic languages mostly spoken in big towns.

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. The word ‘father’ started as ‘fadhee’, later it changed to ‘buda or budaa’ and now it is ‘mbuyu’. According to Githiora (2002), the word ‘buda’ has its origin in Gujarati and Hindi which means an old man. But in the new coinage ‘mbuyu’, there seems to be no explanation of its origin. The code dominates the discourse of primary and secondary school children outside their formal classrooms and is widely spoken also by street hawkers, street children, public service vehicle drivers and conductors and small scale business communities in market places. Originally a slang which was used by the youth of Nairobi, ‘Sheng’ now is used in the complex multilingual and multicultural setting of other major towns in Kenya apart from Nairobi.

‘Sheng’ is therefore a reflection of the linguistic complexities that exist in Nairobi and other major towns like Kisumu, Mombasa, Nakuru and Eldoret. In these big towns, Kiswahili, English and the mother tongues interact in a complex and unstable manner, giving rise to code switching, random language mixing and language shift (Abdul-Aziz and Osinde 1997). The youth come from diverse ethnic communities and devise this slang to enable them communicate among themselves in the subculture they have created. Local TV and Radio stations have also given space to ‘Sheng’ where specific programs use this code (Tahidi high, Inspekta Mwala, Machachari, Aunty Boss etc). These broadcasts have a lasting linguistic effect on school children and the youth since some of them tend to identify with certain characters in these programs through the use of this code. Most people in Kenya are on the opinion that this code interferes with standard Kiswahili and hence it has negative effects on formal education. In the education system, teachers have complained in various forums that the code interferes with formal language learning inside the classroom. This is because students fail to mark the boundaries between ‘Sheng’ and standard Kiswahili or even English.

It has also been observed by teachers that many students are more fluent with this restricted code than with the standard Kiswahili. However, Githiora (2002), think that the problems found in classrooms and blamed upon ‘Sheng’ in fact represent non-linguistic conflicts. These may be as a result of larger social processes which the teachers and students are part and parcel of, for example, poor education policy. Even high schools graduates have their communicative competence being very low. Hence, something goes wrong when these pupils go to high schools and this probably needs to be investigated. Even in universities where Kiswahili language and literature is offered, the students continue to show incompetence when it comes to writing and speaking Kiswahili. They are often not capable of switching from ‘Sheng’ to standard Kiswahili with ease, yet they comfortably switch from ‘Sheng’ to other languages like their mother tongues. It is true that to some extent, the code has interfered with the poor performance of students in national examinations. Some manifestations of this code can be seen in their class work especially in sentence constructions. Still, the social stigmatization associated with this code makes most people in Kenya feel uneasy about the code. It has more often than not been associated with touts, drug pushers, hip hop musicians and school drop outs. In the education circles, the code is gangster slang, a secret code associated with social misfits, is fluid and not easy to understand. 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. 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.

Scope of the Study

As Spyropoulos (1987) pointed out, the emergence of 'Sheng' may have to do with the lack of clarity in Kenya's language policy especially by providing speakers with a code that makes good use of all the major languages spoken in the country. To some extent this may be true because while Kenya boasts of having Kiswahili as its national and (now in the draft constitution) official language, there are no deliberate efforts to make this a reality through policy formulation. In fact, since 1930s, Kiswahili has undergone no rigorous standardization in the region to cater for the ever growing list of vocabulary and technical terms as a result of socio-economic and cultural developments. Due to its widespread use, 'Sheng' has been in the centre of discourse among scholars and researchers in Kenya. 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. It is also gaining prominence in music and popular youth culture where popular musicians often blend the various ethnic languages, Kiswahili and English words in their compositions.

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. The teaching and learning of Kiswahili has become extremely complex. Being the national language of the Republic of Kenya and from 2010 and one of the co-official languages with English, it became increasingly appropriate to find out educational implication of the use of sheng in the learning of Kiswahili in secondary schools in Kenya. for a long time now in Kenya, language policy has come to mean nothing more than political pronouncements, government statements, and recommendations made by Educational Commissions which are rarely implemented.

The decision of Kenya to use Kiswahili as the national language immediately after independence came as a need to foster human development. This is because Kiswahili is the language of interethnic communication in Kenya where it bridges the linguistic gap between communities. Kiswahili has the oldest uninterrupted history as an African written language compared to other African languages used in the country. Its written literary history is over a span of almost three centuries. It therefore has a significant role to play in education for purposes of equipping learners with communicative skills needed to foster national development.

The ideal role of a language in any society is to be able to serve as many of its speakers as possible. Kiswahili can adequately perform this role because it is non-ethnic .It also occupies an important place in the lives of Kenyans and therefore its sociological role and academic importance cannot be overlooked. An in-depth investigation of the influence of Sheng and related structure on the written work of secondary school learners has not been done so far. In particular, no effort has been made to establish the role of Sheng in hindering effective pedagogical process. This study has provided concrete information on learner behavior, an aspect of high utility to the teacher and educationists in general in the planning of pedagogical strategy.

This study is significant as it will provide information to understand difficulties experienced by learners whose linguistic environments are diverse. The findings of this study are expected to provide corrective feedback to language teaching practice. There is therefore need to find out educational implication of sheng in the learning of Kiswahili language in secondary school so that appropriate measures can be incorporated and avoid the use of corrupt language among secondary school learners in Kenya.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by Inter-language theory as proposed by Selinker (1972). The term inter-language was elaborated by Selinker (1972) as the separate linguistic system, which is hypothesized

from the observed output of learners' attempted production of the target language. According to Selinker (1975), the learners' language need not correspond with the target language since its evolution manifests characteristic differences. He observed that this learner language is a dynamic variable and is constantly changing. In this study, the use of Sheng related structures appears to be consistent with stipulations made by Corder P. and Selinker L. that focus on the active psycholinguistic processes of inter-language. Dulay et al (1972) elaborate these processes as the subconscious process, which learners use to organize the language input according to the rules in order to construct, understand and generate sentences. This is what Dulay et al (1972) summarizes as the creative construction hypothesis and it was relevant in guiding the investigation in this study. Kiswahili learners creatively construct meaningful Sheng related structures in which they communicate while generating new sentences. It was the objective of this study to identify the underlying morphological processes that underlie the production of Sheng-related morpho-syntactic structures. The Sheng related structures that learners generate are a product of the social environment and their creative potential as well as the nature of the linguistic input. According to this theory, the multilingual environment provides a rich source of linguistic input and the learners creatively organize this input to generate meaningful sentences according to their needs. In this respect, Krashen (1981) proposes what he terms as comprehensible input as an important aspect in the interaction process since it introduces communicative activities in the attainment of language proficiency.

LITERATURE REVIEW

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. This is evidence of language shift in Kenya.

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. 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 and Momanyi, 2009).

It will, therefore, be in order to give this code a special attention as it has its place in the linguistic layout 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. 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 *lughya 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 morph syntactic 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 hence the need for this study. The 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, this necessitates the need for this study 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 Kirinyaga County.

METHODOLOGY

A descriptive survey research design was adopted. Descriptive survey design is a scientific method which involves observing and describing the behavior of subjects without influencing them in any way. This design helps provide answers to the questions of who, what, when, where, and how associated with a particular research problem. Descriptive survey explains the state of affairs as it exists. Descriptive studies are not only restricted to fact findings, but may often result in the formulation of important principles of knowledge and solution to significant problems. Simple random sampling was used to obtain secondary schools. Purposive sampling was used to select teachers and heads of institutions who participated in the study. Data collection instruments were observation schedule and questionnaires administered to teachers and learners. Content validity of the instrument was determined by discussing the items in the instrument with the supervisors. Data analysis was done basing on descriptive statistical techniques such as; frequencies, and percentages.

Target Population, Sampling and Sample Size

A purposeful sampling method was used to get a population of 368 learners from nine schools. This provided a population whose linguistic background is heterogeneous. The sample population was form three students from nine secondary schools. Opinion about *Sheng* usage was sought from Kiswahili language teachers from the respective schools. Form three students were the most appropriate since they had only a couple of months before they could enter the terminal class where they were expected to show the level of proficiency attained in Standard Kiswahili after four years of learning it in high school.

FINDINGS

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 *sheng* 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. 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 suppressors of the use of this idiom.

Results also showed that only slightly more than half of teachers use Kiswahili only in the process of teaching while the rest mix the language while teaching. The learner is likely to be affected by this for they are going to imitate the language of the teacher and will end up not being fluent. Additionally the writing of Kiswahili will be affected; the learner may end up using other languages like „sheng“ together with Kiswahili in the process of writing. When teachers use Kiswahili language during the lesson and when addressing the learners during assembly, it creates motivation in the learning process. Additionally, they act as a role model for learners who would want to speak good Kiswahili. More so, it has been established by research that learners are motivated by their teachers to speak Kiswahili. Motivation is a very important factor as far as performance is concerned. One of its functions is to energize the behavior of the organisms and arouse it for action. The energy is supplied in proportion to the amount of energy output for a task; motives help to sustain interests and behavior (Ingule et al., 1996).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There is 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. Kang'ethe, Iraki (2004) stated 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.

Kiswahili Learning needs frequent use of the language, the more involvement in learning activities such as presentation of topics in public, asking and answering questions, the more the learner learns (Vygotsky, 1987). When the learner participates in the debate he gets time to practice different vocabularies, different sentence structures since as he expresses himself he chooses the appropriate words. Additionally it is during such activities that peer mediation takes place. The learners are able to learn from each other and correct one another.

The study further established that majority of the learners did not participate in Kiswahili interschool competitions. Inter school competition involves learners from different schools who gather together for the purpose of learning. This implies that most schools do not participate in the inter-school quiz. This affected the learning of Kiswahili since he learners do not exercise what they have been taught. Vygotsky (1987) states that, mediation is done by the teachers and learners themselves through dialogue and correcting learners in sentence construction, reading and writing. Minimal use of Kiswahili in communication at school affected the learning of Kiswahili. If the learner practices by speaking the language in debate or inter-school competition, he or she will learn the language and vice versa. Schools should come up with clear and working language policies in order to promote the use of Kiswahili language. For example, all the teachers, workers and pupils should use Kiswahili when addressing each other particularly in School.

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