Fluidity and Lexical Variation in Sheng: The Impact of In-Group/ Out-Group Mentality①

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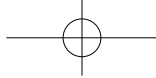Nicholus Makanji
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Abstract: Fluidity and lexical variation in the Sheng language have of late been a subject of discussion and a concern to many scholars. Sheng users seem to have numerous lexical items that are used to refer to the same thing, person, process or situation. Moreover, the words keep on changing in reference to the same item, person or situation. This paper investigates the reasons why words in the Sheng language change after a short time of usage. The paper seeks to explain the reasons behind the lexical variations and the fluidity. The data are collected from field interviews. The interviews are conducted through random sampling where different youths from different regions are interviewed and the lexicons used are recorded and noted. Besides, Sheng words that refer to specific items and situations under research in this paper are collected from existing publications on Sheng. The paper is guided by the Social Identity Theory (SIT) and employs it in analyzing reasons for the fluidity and lexical variations in Sheng, focusing specifically on the in-group and out-group mentality of users. The findings of this research

enable us to explain the main reason behind the lexical variation in Sheng by the use of the primary and secondary data that is obtained from the interviews and various academic literature. An understanding of the aspect of lexical variation will add to the knowledge that already exists about Sheng and help those who want to learn the language to be aware of the confusion that might arise during the learning process due to its fluidity. The findings show that there are indeed variations in preferred Sheng lexicons due to secrecy, privacy and the linkage of some of the words with insecurity and crime, etc.

Keywords: lexical; variation; in-group; out-group; Sheng

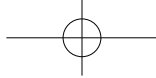## 盛语中的流变机制与词汇变体：群体内和群体外心理的影响

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摘　要： 近年来盛语的流变机制与词汇变体已成为学者广泛关注和讨论的话题。在盛语中，多个词语代指同一事物、人物、过程或情况的现象极为普遍，而这些代指同一事物、人物、情况的不同词语处在不断变化中。本文主要探讨盛语中的词汇为何在使用很短一段时间后就会发生变化，分析盛语词汇的变异性与流变性。本文的语料来源于随机抽样的访谈。访谈来自不同地区的盛语青年使用者，记录他们使用的词语。此外，具有特殊意义的词汇来源于现有盛语出版物。本文运用社会身份认同理论来分析盛语词汇变体和流变机制的原因，特别是使用者的群体内和群体外心理。通过剖析由访谈以及出版物中收集而来的资料，本研究将有助于揭示盛语词汇变体的原因，丰富关于盛语的现有研究，也可以帮助盛语学习者更好地理解其流变机制，从而减少学习过程中的困扰。本研究显示，由于保密、隐私以及不安全性、犯罪等原因，盛语的确存在词汇变体。

关键词： 词汇学；词汇变体；群体内；群体外；盛语

1　Introduction

Fluidity is the changeability or fluctuation of something. In this paper, fluidity is used to referto the state of being unsettled or unstable. Therefore, the fluidity of Sheng refers to the state of the language being unstable, unsettled and readily changing in a short time. The lexicon as it will be seen and discussed
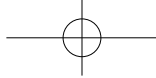
in this paper varies with time. The trend continues every day without a clearly documented reason for the variations. This paper will explain in detail the evident variations and explain the reasons for the variation exhibited in the usage of Sheng. To achieve this goal, the research will include some content from academic literature and primary data drawn from interviews. The data gathered will be used to show the fluidity in Sheng and the interviews and the data presented will assist the conclusions concerning the reasons for the evident fluidity.

Nairobi and other cities and big towns in Kenya have a complex multilingual and multicultural setting (Abdulaziz & Osinde, 1997). Due to this situation, mixed codes called Sheng and Engsh mostly used by the youth in Kenya have developed. The constitution of Kenya 2010 designates Kiswahili and English as the official languages with Kiswahili is the first official language as well as the only national language. This means that the two languages are used in official activities such as parliamentary debates, official government communication, and judicial proceedings. These two languages have been selected among over 40[①] distinct languages in Kenya. Moreover, for a long period of time the two languages have been taught as compulsory subjects in schools starting from primary to secondary schools，though English has been the main medium of instruction.

The two languages are not just dominant at the national level, but are also used for diplomatic, trade and most international communication. For instance, Kiswahili is used in diplomatic relations between Kenya and its neighbours such as Tanzania and Uganda. English as well is used, but more regularly in international relations between Kenya and its international partners in fields such as trade, peacekeeping, tourism and other international affairs. However,

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① According to Iribemwangi (2020), the languages spoken in Kenya range between 42 and 70 depending on the researcher and the mode of analysis. It is as a result of this scenario of a multiplicity of languages that Kenya has had to plan the languages and therefore assign various roles such as national, regional，or official to them.
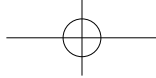
it has been noted by various scholars and researchers that English is used more prominently in official circles as compared to Kiswahili which is a contradiction to the written law. Kiswahili in this confusing situation is, therefore, left in the domains of political mobilization and social interaction where Kiswahili is mainly used in political meetings at the grassroots level.[①]

It is, however, noted that the first languages (L1s) used by Kenyans which are commonly referred to as mother tongues, are essential in social interaction between members of the same community, ethnic identity, cultural presentations and communal organization and meetings.

In the urban settings, in Kenya there exists a multicultural and multi-linguistic scenario. People from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds meet as many settle in cities and towns for varied reasons. For instance, there are construction sites where people from different speech communities work. In such instances, it is the only language, in this case Kiswahili or English, which is left as their unifying factor. With English not prevalent at the social interaction level, Kiswahili takes center stage in which few words in English and the different mother tongues escape into the conversations occasionally. This situation can be used as the basis over which the mixed codes are born. With code-switching dominating the interactions, there is random language mixing that leads to language shift or the birth of an interlanguage to take care of all the individual linguistic differences in the group. This can easily explain why we have mixed codes like Sheng and Engsh and why they are more popular in cities, towns and other urban areas as compared to the rural areas. This aspect of sheng having words from English, Kiswahili and other mother tongue languages in Kenya is well explained by Iribemwangi (2020).

Mazrui (1995) states that Sheng is a language formed by a majority of Kiswahili lexicon with few other words borrowed from different languages.
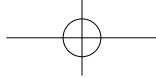
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① In an article written in *Taifa Leo* Newspaper (March 17, 2022), Iribemwangi notes that even in the political arena in Kenya, when it comes to official launch of manifestos and delivery of official speeches by politicians, the language of choice is English, not Kiswahili.

They explain that the Sheng language uses Kiswahili as its base. This view is also held by what is backed up by Iribemwangi (2020) who observes that Sheng, which developed in the less-affluent and slum areas of the East lands of Nairobi, is based primarily on Kiswahili structure with the lexicon drawn from Kiswahili, English, and various mother tongue languages. Initially, these mixed codes were unstable, random, and fluid, but they gradually developed some systematic patterns of usage at the phonological, morphological and syntactic levels. While discussing Sheng and Engsh, Abdulaziz & Osinde (1997) explain the difference between the two languages is that Engsh is a mixed code with more English words and less Kiswahili words while Sheng is a mixed code with more Kiswahili words than the English words. Further, while Sheng uses the structure of Kiswahili which is its base language, Engsh uses the structure of English. Most probably because of this reason, Sheng is more popular among the less affluent[①] areas of Nairobi as well as in slums such as Kibera, Mathare, Mukuru and Korogocho while Engsh is frequently used in the affluent areas such as Lavington, Karen and Muthaiga.

In the beginning, Sheng was developed as a secret code associated with youth group identity (Abdulaziz & Osinde, 1997). Gradually, Sheng became a language with more stabilized expressions of youth mixed culture and modes of speaking. According to Holington & Nassenstein (2015), the usage of Sheng by the Kenyan youth is regarded as their attempt to search for their own linguistic identity away from what is used as official and what the "old" people are using. They want to create their own linguistic realm where they can mark their linguistic territory and have their space in the linguistic landscape of the country. This paper investigates the sociolinguistic factors underlying the fluidity of these youth mixed languages. The paper attempts to explain the frequent vocabulary

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① It is important at this juncture to add that a new form of argot is, yet again, emerging from these same areas, specifically in the densely populated Dandora. The argot referred to as Shembeteng has the unmistakable feature of adding two syllables before the final one. Another main feature of the argot is the vowel harmony that is evident.
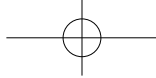
and semantic shifts as an aspect of Sheng occasioned by the need to create forms of speech that would serve certain functions among particular groups of speakers while blocking other groups from their communication. In an environment where bilingualism and multilingualism are evident, the development of mixed codes as a secret means of communication for peer identity is usually noticeable.

In this background, it can easily be argued that there is a triglossic use of these languages, especially in oral interaction. The youth seem to have a rich repertoire of speech forms, including one or more ethnic languages, Kiswahili, and English. Sheng is a code arising from the typical desire characteristic of youth for adventure and creativity. It is an attempt by the youth in a multilingual setting, to use the languages that they are familiar with to create their secret codes. In the first instance, these secret and peer codes take the form of slangs or backslags (Crystal, 1987). Such creations are temporary, and their distribution or spread is quite limited to a small number of speakers. This then explains why at first Sheng in Nairobi was different from that spoken in Mombasa, Kisumu, Kakamega and elsewhere. It's argued that even in the different areas of Nairobi, there are different varieties of Sheng in use. For instance, the Sheng used in the west of Nairobi varies from the one used in the east. This is attributed to the fact that the majority of the first language speakers in a specific area influence the words used as well as the vocabulary formation process (Mukhwana, 2015).

As mentioned, Sheng was initially unstable and fluid, thus allowing for a lot of innovations. However, the current trend is towards stability. The language is slowly developing a community of speakers for whom it is gradually becoming primary (Githiora, 2018). This argument can be supported by the coming in of marketing strategies (advertisement), radio stations and social media platforms that solely use Sheng, thus attempting to "standardize" the language and move it into a stage of stability.

The aim of this paper is not to look at Sheng as a means of communication, but as a code with fluidity occasioned by the need to maintain the in-group information to the in-group and completely lock out the out-group.
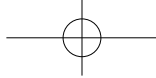
The formal mechanisms employed in the creation of Sheng are similar to those employed in pidgin formation. Sheng is therefore a mixed code resulting from English, Kiswahili and local languages in Kenya. The paper will be guided by the social identity theory of the in-group and the out-group.

2　Theoretical frameworks

As mentioned above, this paper will be guided by the social identity theory (SIT) in bringing out the reasons for lexical variations and fluidity in Sheng. This theory is deemed useful as it explains the behavior of a social group. It also gives the reasons for the behavior of individuals in a group that arises from a certain group mentality. Ultimately, SIT is one of the theories used in investigating a certain behavior among members of a specific group.

Social identity theory was proposed in social psychology by Tajfel and his colleagues (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social identity explains that people's self-concepts are based on a certain social group membership. Examples of these social groups include sports teams, religions, nationalities, occupations, sexual orientations, ethnic groups and gender. Social identity theory is used to explain how social identities affect people's attitudes and behaviors regarding their in-group and out-group. The social identities become even more influential when certain individuals consider membership in a particular group to be central and vital to their self-concept. Such individuals feel strong emotional ties to a particular social group. Their association with a certain specific social group accords their self-esteem, which helps to sustain their social identity.

One of the key processes associated with important social identities includes in-group pressures to conform to the in-group's norms and forms of intergroup bias, positively evaluating one's in-group as compared to out-group and in a negative sense evaluating the out-group. SIT has been used in developmental psychology to explain conformity and socialization in peer groups (Archer, 1992; Harris, 1995; Leaper, 2000) and group-based prejudice
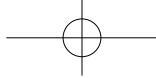
(Bigler & Liben, 2007; Nesdale, 2004).

SIT is a theory concerned with people's self-categorizations concerning their social group memberships (Erikson, 1968). For example, social identity becomes significant when peers are interacting on the playing ground. Research indicates that group stereotyping and prejudice are more likely when social identities are salient. In this regard, individual differences, stereotypes, and prejudices can be effectively managed by social group identity (Bigler & Liben, 2006; Turner, 1985; Turner et al., 1987; Hewstone et al., 2002).

Social identity theory offers an explanation for in-group bias and a reason for out-group exclusion. Judgments about one's self as a group member are held to be associated with the outcome of social comparisons between the in-group and the relevant out-groups. It is assumed that each individual in the social group longs for a satisfactory self-image and positive self-esteem. Positive self-evaluation as a certain social group member is of vital importance. This is attained by ensuring that the in-group is positively distinct from the out-group. This explains the reason why at some point, the in-group will engage in social competition with out-groups to try to make the in-group positively identified.

SIT has been used to demonstrate in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination. This is the concept that is employed by this research. To show the reason why there is fluidity in Sheng, the SIT is used to explain how Sheng users group themselves into an in-group and those who are perceived as not supposed to use Sheng are perceived as out-groups. This theory therefore explains why words have to continuously change as this helps in maintaining an in-group identity and keeping the out-group discriminated against.

3 Methodology

Githinji (2006a, 2006b) has discussed extensively the issue of variations in Sheng. What is lacking is a full focus on the reasons that cause the variations. In his research, Githinji discusses the origin of Sheng in reference to what is told
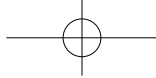
by other researchers. This paper's focus is mainly on the reasons for the lexical variation. What is unique to this paper is the idea that the paper explains how in-group and out-group mentality of the Sheng users can be a major contributing factor towards their frequent change of the lexicons used in communication.

To satisfy this approach, the research focuses on the youth in various parts of Nairobi the capital city of Kenya, where the previous researchers including earlier ones like Abdulaziz & Osinde (1997) attribute the origin of Sheng. The youths are interviewed by random sampling and the words used to refer to the specific items in question noted. The data obtained from these interviews is what is then used to come up with the distinct reason for the lexical variations witnessed in the Sheng language.

Youths from various parts of Nairobi including Kangemi, Mathare, Kibra, Kayole, and Kawangware give their views on why they would prefer to use Sheng *vis-à-vis* other languages such as Kiswahili and English. They also discuss their own reasons why they have to keep shifting to new words, at times in less than a week after formation. This is a short time for a lexicon to be completely replaced, but it happens.

Some older generations have also been interviewed to get their views on Sheng as a language and the reason why they think lexicon varies that fast. The middle-aged generation also provides the words they used to refer to some items in question to compare the words used now with the words that were used then. This helps to detect the extent of variations and fluidity.

Moreover, this research not only focuses on interviews, but also uses the available knowledge on Sheng lexicons to find out other terms that might have been used at some point and are now extinct due to the fluidity in the language. Books and journal papers on Sheng have been used to come up with a corpus of words that were used in discussion in various papers as part of the lexicon that must have existed at some point. This is in a bid to detect the fluidity and variation.

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4 Sheng's diachronic compositions

Sheng consists of words borrowed from Kiswahili, English and many other indigenous languages. Such languages include Kikuyu, Dholuo, Luhya and Kamba (Githiora, 2002; Ogechi, 2005; Githinji, 2006a; Githinji, 2008). On top of these four, other indigenous languages include Kalenjin, Kisii, Meru, Mijikenda, Masai (Iribemwangi, 2020). The vocabularies of these different languages are mixed by the Sheng speakers to come up with their own Sheng specific words. Initially, Sheng's vocabulary was composed of real words from a myriad of languages. For instance, one was said to speak Sheng when using words from different languages in the same sentence. For example,
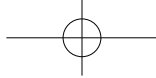
(1) *Ninaenda* school

In example (1) above, the first word is a Kiswahili word (*Ninaenda*) meaning *I am going*. School is an English word to indicate the place where the speaker is going. In such a case, the language used here was said to be Sheng.

However, this situation has gradually changed. There came another phase of different word formation in Sheng including sentence constructions where words from one language (LA) were mixed with words from the second language (LB) to form words, phrases or even sentences. Different from what was witnessed in example (1), the words were truncated and their sections were picked to join other sections of the second language involved in the word formation. For example,

(2) *Ninacome*, *atabring*, *tutafix*

In example (2), the Sheng words are composed of two parts. The first part of the word is Kiswahili, i.e. *nina* (I am), *ata* (he/she will), *tuta* (we will). The second part is composed of English words, i.e. come, bring, fix. Through this type of word formation Sheng accrued its vocabulary defining another step into its "independence".

Gradually, Sheng continued to gain a unique word formation style. Eventually, Sheng used words from other languages but first passed them through a stage we may refer to as *Shengification*. The words would be adapted so as to gain Sheng pronunciation. The same words from a combination of words would be written in another form. For example,

(3) *Ninacome* would be *ninakam*

In example (3), the word *ninakam* lacks the English section since the section has been made easy by the Sheng users. This example implies that Sheng is not just a spoken language but also a written language.
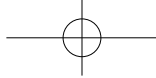
Moreover, complex forms have continued to emerge giving Sheng an identity of its own with aspects of borrowing from languages such as English, Kiswahili and other diverse indigenous languages of Kenya while maintaining a distinct vocabulary that is Sheng-specific. Up to this point, the vocabulary formed in Sheng cannot be understood by both Kiswahili and English and even a vernacular speaker in Kenya unless he or she is a member of the Sheng-speaking community. For example,

(4) *mbogi*/*rende*[①] (English – group, Kiswahili – *kundi*)

　　Mbwegxe (English – two, Kiswahili – *mbili*)

From example (4), it's evident that the words are not in any way related to the Kiswahili or English vocabulary. This is what has given Sheng a distinct pathway as a language of its own with its own words and sentence construction rules that give the language a peculiar characteristic. The Sheng language has all along been gaining its uniqueness proving to be able to stand on its own. However, the Sheng vocabulary has kept on changing even when the words formed are unique to Sheng. This is the aspect investigated by this paper, to find out the reasons behind the numerous and frequent reshuffles in word semantics which making the language notoriously fluid.

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① It appears to us that the word rende /rɛndɛ/ is a borrowing from the Kikuyu word kirindi /kɛrɛndɛ/ which basically means a group of people.
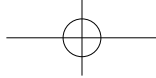
5　The origin of the Sheng language

5.1　Sheng and prison

Mazrui (1995) attempts to explain the emergence and development of Sheng. Mazrui states that Sheng may have emerged as early as the 1930s. Mazrui relies on an autobiographical prose work written by Karanja (1993) about his life in prison in which Karanja comments that in the early 1930s when he was a petty thief, they often used a hybrid code to communicate in the underworld. The code had many Kiswahili and English words, though the matrix language was Kiswahili. It is through such theories that this paper attempts to explain the reasons behind the fluidity since in the prison set-up, the concerned parties wanted to hide information and confine it to their in-group while locking it from the out-group since their actions and intentions were deemed illegal.

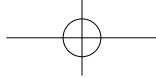## 5.2　Sheng with the low-income neighbourhoods

The most popular view is that Sheng emerged in the late 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. What Mazrui (1995) and other linguists like Osinde (1986), Abdulaziz & Osinde (1997), Githiora (2002), Githinji (2008) seem to agree on is that Sheng emerged from the Eastlands of Nairobi. Mazrui states that Karanja lived in the Pangani area and that is where they used the hybrid code. Githiora (2002) mentions areas such as Jericho, Bahati and Kaloleni, are all in the Eastlands. The prevailing view is that Sheng originated from the low-income neighbourhoods of Eastlands among youths who wanted to use codes to conceal their communication from adults. A further view as seen in Mazrui (1995) is that the language was mainly used by offenders in order to conceal their deeds, strategies and plans. Even the concept of originating from low-income neighbourhoods is itself a veiling of the idea that the language was used to conceal evil deeds, strategies and plans. This explains the concept behind this paper and shows how and why Sheng users find it uncomfortable to use one word over and over again for a longer period of time.

6   Current state of Sheng

Sheng is no longer a language of the youth only (Wanjala, 2019). It's used by many people in Kenya to the extent that it cannot be confined to the youth and evil gangs who want to conceal their plans and strategies. This can be explained by the fact that currently some people use Sheng as their vernacular (Githiora, 2018). The youth of the 1980s are now adults. It would be unrealistic to opine that they no longer remember or use Sheng (Iribemwangi, 2020). Githinji (2003) states that there are a number of people who use Sheng unconsciously while denying its knowledge or use. These, the 1980s youth, have (knowingly or unknowingly) been using Sheng to their offsprings and in some cases their grandchildren. Regular visits to rural areas have led to the spread of Sheng to the rest of the country (Iribemwangi, 2020). This has given the rural youth a feeling of having the same identity as the urban youth (Kaviti, 2016).

Even some of the politicians are using Sheng as a means of communication and a way to identify themselves with the political crowds which are majorly composed of the youths who are perceived to be Sheng users. Sheng is also used consciously or unconsciously by employers to their employees. Moreover, Sheng is currently used in radio and television stations especially in commercial advertisements and infomercials. The mention of all these domains is not a counterproductive affair to this paper, but a way to show that despite the motive of its formation being negative as discussed by the scholars mentioned earlier, Sheng has continued to shape its path and define its role as a means of communication. Besides, Sheng is no longer just a mere way of concealing information but a distinct way of communication and a language now used to pass important information such as in political rallies and in the media. This argument should not in any way derail the argument in this paper for it being a means to conceal information. This continues to happen all the time as words are formed and used publicly. This assertion will be discussed in detail and evidence given a little later.

All said and discussed, Sheng continues to offer the youth a unique identity—an identity that they would like to have and keep to themselves without sharing with other groups not in their "bracket".
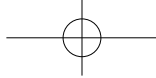
7 Sheng as a language and an in-group

According to Osinde (1986), Sheng first developed in the eastern parts of Nairobi. This area, usually referred to as Eastlands, comprises approximately 25 distinct estates. Eastlands falls into two residential areas distinguished by social class differences. One area consists of Jericho[①], Dandora and Majengo which are regarded as slum areas, and the second consists of Buruburu, Kimathi, and Donholm, whose dwellers belong more or less to the middle class. The major factor in this categorization or placement is purely a socioeconomic one. Those in slum areas often exist below the poverty line.

All the ethnic groups in Kenya have some representation in Eastlands. The common languages used in these areas for day-to-day interaction are Kiswahili and English, though Kiswahili has a larger number of proficient speakers and is more widely used as a language of socialization and commercial interaction. It should be noted that there is a high incidence of ethnic language use in Eastlands. However, the use of Kiswahili and English as *lingua francas* facilitates interethnic communication. There are also cases of interethnic language use in Eastlands. According to Osinde (1986), Sheng is said to have originated in Kaloleni estate in the Eastlands of Nairobi and then to have spread out to other areas of Eastlands and finally to other parts of the city. Currently, different varieties of Sheng are spoken not only in other parts of the city of Nairobi but also in other urban centers in Kenya.

It is not clear yet when Sheng first came into being. However, it is believed that it might have started around the early 1970s (Abdulaziz & Osinde, 1997). The original speakers of Sheng reportedly belonged to groups of teenagers that
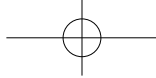
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① Jericho is not mentioned in Osinde (1986)

were rather wayward, whose behavior was not socially approved of by the wider community. The group created a language that could only be understood by its members, which then served as a group identity marker with the prime function of shutting out non-members from their conversations. At present, school-going youth from Eastlands are competent and active speakers of the language.

Sheng has developed and is used in small-group interaction as a group identity marker and to some extent a social class or peer marker. It is used by a special group within the community, namely the youth who regard themselves as distinct, with their own unique modes of interaction and socialization. The major factor in the formation of Sheng is the usual yearning for belonging to a group with which one identifies, a group that in most cases excludes some other groups. The language serves as an identity marker of a certain group of the youth. The youth of a community in most cases see themselves as belonging to a social group distinct and exclusive from that of the adults. In order to maintain membership in the peer group, the youth have invented distinctive group ways of talking as an indicator of group identity and solidarity. With the creation or availability of such a language, the group members are assured that the secrets of their group will remain within their circles. In this sense, then, the language was developed as a secret code that non-members would not understand. This desire to belong to a special group, distinct from other groups, forms the psychosocial basis for Sheng.

Sheng is a slang language that borrows its words/lexical items from English and Kiswahili. Its main usage is solely to enhance hidden communication in a group of targeted people mostly young in age. The language is widely used in Kenya especially in urban setups. Though most people regard it as unofficial way of communication, the language is gradually taking over and its usage slowly being accepted not only by the young generation but also by the old generation. For instance, a good grasp of Sheng language can land you a lucrative job like a radio presenter or even as an interpreter. Codes are characterized by in-group/out-group mentality. Deviation is a feature of the

codes used in communication. For this reason, this paper investigates how these aspects inform fluidity in Sheng.

8   Examples of lexical variations in Sheng over time

father: *kize,*   *fadhee,*   *zeiksman,*   *modhee,*   *fusebox,*
        Budeng',   *mzae,*   *mdabu,*   *mdagala,*   *fathy,*
        buda,   *mbuyu*   *fadhela,*   *budasco,*   *mzimbiting*
mother: *muthes,*   *mathe,*   *munthre,*   *therma,*   *mnyaka,*
        myasa,   *mathor,*   *matha,*   *muthama,*   *moda,*
        monsai,   *masa,*   *mukoro*
rest: *pozi,*   *tulia,*   *tuliza,*   *relax,*   *poa,*
        bangaiza,   *rest,*   *chill,*   *dozi,*   *tuna*
police: *vedi,*   *goshogi,*   *banga,*   *sinya,*   *pai,*
        sanse,   *mabeast,*   *ponyi,*   *gava,*   *karao*
girl: *Manzi,*   *Mamu,*   *mshe,*   *denge,*   *dem,*
        mandu,   *chile Atoti,* *quella,*   *chik,*   *mbus,*
        mkoba,   *mshi,*   *fame mroro,*   *mroroo,*   *shore*
        Ma-red Rose, *keki,*   *totois empress,* *leleis,*
        nguna,   *ngoko,*   *ngeus,*
        ndoko,   *gushodo*
boy: *hommie,*   *beshte,*   *mthi,*   *bro,*   *licha,*
        msee,   *kijana,*   *boi,*   *bwoy,*   *jamaa,*
        chali,   *Mzengazwang*
bhang: *Ndom,*   *ngwai,*   *Vela,*   *ganja,*   *Laz'e,*
        Webeg shashola,   *shadda,*   *tire,*   *kishash,*
        kindukulu
miraa: *KDF,*   *jaba,*   *mogoka,*   *mairongi,*   *alele*
friend: *Arif,*   *fafiri,*   *morio,*   *Omre*
prostitute: *malaya, poko,*   *kuro*
story: *stori,*   *riba,*   *rojo*

phone: *fon,   tenje,   mofa,   dura,   took,*
ng'ombe (smart phone),   Tulutulu (mulika mwizi phone)

fool: *zuzu,   ng'ethia,   mwere*

sex: *manga,   pigwa,   maji,   pigwa miti,*
pigwa kuni,   lamba lolo pekejeng,   kae

nairobi: *Nai,   Nairoberi,   Kanairo*

rich person: *Bombee,   mzito,   sonko,*
big man,   bazenga,   bazuu,
"kuwa mfuko",   "kuwa Liquid",   sponyo,
mwenyekiti,   mkuu,   kiongos

money: *dooh,   odo,   dau,   chapaa,   cheddar,*
maziwa,   kakitu,   mkwanja,   ganji,   baroda,
maweng

ten: *ten,   kakumi,   kinde,   ashu*

fifty: *hamsa,   Njui,   chuani,   finje*

rural home: *ocha, ushago,   shagz,   moshatta,   banka,   dous*

vehicle: *ndai,   gendi,   Dinga,   pira,   nganya,*
murenga

die: *dedi,   nyuria,   Baki*

police: *fisi,   karao,   njege,   manugu,   Masonyi,*
mbang'a,   beast,   sanse

teacher: *Ticha,   Mode,   Odijo*

ignore/avoid: *kanyagia,   iza,   cheza chini*

watchman: *wochi, soja,   sogi*

job: *works,   janta,   wera*

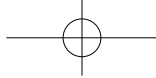**form**: *fom,   fuom,   rieng'*

school: *chuo,   Mesty,   system*

pregnant: *kula beans,   boll,   gondo*

upset: *kujam,   kujaa gas,   kubonda*

alcohol: *makali,   mnyweso,   mnyonyi,   Gede,   maji,   tei*

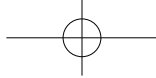| **plan**: *mpango,*	*rieng,*	*mutaratara,*	*rada*	
talk: *bonga,*	*link,*	*chapiana,*		
house robbery:	*koto,*	*jems (key),*	*Puff (break)*	
house: *hao,*	*mbanyu,*	*mtiecha*		
come: *kam,*	*tokea,*	*mochoka,*	*muok*	
traitor: *mtiaji,*	*mbleina,*	*mrazi*		
fear: *ingiza,*	*njeve,*	*teveva,*	*buya*	
fine: *fiti,*	*rieng,*	*genje*		
eat: *dishi,*	*dimbua,*	*dimbuka*		
party:	*bash,*	*kuwakunywa,*	*kuwamocho*	
counterfeit:	*feki,*	*imbo,*	*mboy,*	*mchingu*

9   Reasons for fluidity and lexical variations in Sheng

Throughout the interviews with different respondents, why Sheng is their preferred mode of communication was asked. A follow-up question on why the lexicon is fluid and in constant variation was also posed to have a first-hand view of this phenomenon. Some of the clear-cut answers were that fluidity and variation are significant for privacy, secrecy and for gang or squad communications and coding. These reasons are discussed below.

9.1   Privacy

The youth look for a way to have private communication with their peers without interference from the aged people including their parents.

About 71% of Sheng users who were interviewed noted that they use Sheng to privatize their conversations among themselves and not to let those who are not concerned listen to their communications or just discussions. For instance, one will note that the names used to refer to a "girl" or "lady" change very fast. This can be attributed to the stories that the youth have while in their social groups discussing ladies or girls without letting them know of their conversation or

without the people around them understanding their conversation.

About 63% of the youth, including school-going adolescents, explained that they use Sheng to hide their conversations from their parents. The numerous words used to refer to parents and their variations inform about the idea of the youth trying to find a way to hide their conversations from their parents. They would like to discuss their parents even in their presence but ensure that they do not understand. This then leads to lexical variations immediately when the youth notice that their parents know the meaning of the current terminologies.
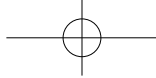
(5)

father: *kize,*	*fadhee,*	*zeiksman,*	*modhee,*	*fusebox,*
Budeng',	*mzae,*	*mdabu,*	*mdagala,*	*fatha,*
buda,	*mbuyu,*	*fadhela,*	*mzimbiting*	
mother: *muthes,*	*mathe,*	*munthre,*	*therma,*	*mnyaka,*
myasa,	*mathor,*	*matha,*	*muthama,*	*moda,*
monsai,	*masa,*	*mukoro*		

In example (5) above, words used to refer to mother and father are more than 10. This situation points to the overwhelming urge by the youth to have a lexicon that their parents won't be able to notice that they are talking about them. The same case is evident to the names used to refer to a girl or a boy, in case of gossiping about the girl or referring to one's boyfriend or girlfriend but in a way to hide it from other people present at the scene of the conversation.

(6)

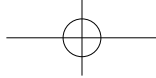|				
girl: *manzi,*	*mamu,*	*mshe,*	*denge,*	*dem,*
mandu,	*chile Atoti,*	*quella,*	*chik,*	*mbus,*
mkoba,	*mshi,*	*fame mroro,*	*mroroo,*	*shore,*
Ma-red Rose,	*keki,*	*totois empress,*	*leleis, nguna,*	
ngoko,	*ngeus,*	*ndoko,*	*gushodo*	
boy: *hommie,*	*beshte,*	*mthi,*	*bro,*	*licha,*
msee,	*kijana,*	*oi,*	*bwoy,*	*jamaa,*
chali,	*mzengazwang*			

9.2　Secrecy

　　People who have secrets to keep use Sheng to help them communicate among themselves and lock out those who should never get hold of the messages being passed. For instance, children would like to communicate among themselves and hoping their communication not to be followed by their parents. For this reason, most parents do not use Sheng language as the language of preference in communication, but the children would prefer to use it for their own benefit to hide the information being passed. The same case is evident when the learners are at school. The learners are taught standard Kiswahili and English as compulsory subjects and languages for use in communication at school. Nonetheless, this is not always the case when the learners are communicating among themselves. They use Kiswahili and English to communicate with their parents and teachers while at school but use Sheng while passing information among themselves. This is brought about by the appeal to hide some communication from those deemed non-concerned parties such as their teachers. The use of Sheng helps them to even deny any information that leaks by stating that the words used did not mean what has been interpreted. Since it's clear that Sheng has outright fluidity, making a judgment on which is the correct meaning of the Sheng lexicon becomes a nightmare. The same concept is identified among the employed youth who attribute their preference to the use of Sheng at the workplace to attempt to hide the discussion from their bosses. Most explaine that, they are comfortable in using Sheng as compared to Kiswahili and English as the use of Sheng gives them a sense of security even if the boss is to eavesdrop or appear abruptly in the midst of their conversation. In this case, the employees regard themselves as the in-group while their bosses are the out-group. This concept explains why the youth would vary the terms used to refer to being rich and money so as to keep their deal hidden.

　　(7)

　　rich person: *bombee,　　mzito,　　sonko,　　big man, bazenga,　　bazuu,*
　　　　　　　　"kuwa mfuko",　　　"kuwa liquid"
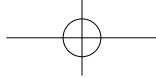
money: *dooh,   odo,   dau,   chapaa,   cheddar,   maziwa,
kakitu,   mkwanja,   ganji,   baroda,   maweng*

About 53% of Sheng users interviewed explained that to come up with a worthy deal, secrets must be kept—a job that is done perfectly by the Sheng language. This is necessary because Sheng is not understood by many in society; it thus can easily keep secrets. Moreover, the shift from usage of one word to another makes it difficult for even those who understood some of the words to follow the conversation even one week later. The ability of Sheng to keep secrets is mainly pegged on the language's fluidity and variation of its lexicon. When words keep changing, the changeability hampers reliability. Responsibility for statements let out by an individual is also lost. This is because, it's almost impossible to insist on a single direction of meaning of the words used by the Sheng user since an argument of the words changing meaning can be floated or losing its original meaning or even being completely replaced by other words. This situation which can be viewed as confusion is brought about by fluidity and variation which then gives room for the passage of hidden codes in the name of secrets meant to be understood by certain social group considered as an in-group while locking out any other audience considered as the out-group.

9.3   Variations linkage to insecurity

From the interviews conducted, 51% of interviewees felt that gangs use Sheng codes to communicate among themselves to commit a crime without their plot being easily unmasked. Most of the youth who have at some point confirmed that they could hear a conversation between some of the robbers but could not understand. The conversations are most probably in Sheng. From the explanations of the interviewees, gangs find it easy to communicate in Sheng since it's a language whose vocabulary has no monitoring and therefore can be easily manipulated to form new lexicons that have the intended meanings. For this matter the gangs use Sheng words, if they are not common, and formulate
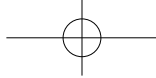
new lexicons where they feel the words used are too familiar to many. This enables smooth communications between the gangs while ensuring no leakage of information to those not intended. This concept can be used to explain why we have a huge variation and fluidity in the terms used to refer to bhang or marijuana and alcohol.

(8)

bhang: *Ndom,   ngwai,   vela,   ganja,   laz'e,*
              webeg shashola,   shadda,   tire,   kishash,   kindukulu
alcohol: *makali,   mnyweso,   mnyonyi,   gede,   maji,   tei*

From our discussions, the language has been linked to communication in the prison where the inmates wanted to communicate without being heard or their message understood by the prison warders. As discussed in this paper about the origin of Sheng, it was noted that Sheng was used by those in prison to pass messages and secrets to the prisoners about a certain issue. By use of Sheng they were comfortably secure from any bad blood between them and the prison warders. They would use Sheng to warn of impending officers to save others from being caught in an illegal act. The linkage of Sheng to a prison domain, indicates how Sheng has been able to pass information in what is mentally perceived to an in-group versus out-group mentality. Sheng has therefore been used as a lee way towards confining messages to an in-group and hiding the message from the out-group. In the same vein, in the struggle to make sure that their information remains confidential away from the prison warders and any other administrators, the lexicons have to be fluid and in constant variation to completely lock the conversation to the in-group who are the prisoners only.

According to the respondents, Sheng codes can easily be manipulated to pass a hidden message. For this reason, it is the preferred language of choice by gangs as they are able to plan and execute their shoddy and underhand deals without getting noticed from their conversation. As the language has to pass these hidden but essential messages of the group, the words used keep on changing to keep the in-group secrets tight and continuously completely locking out

anyone considered an outsider in the conversation.

This concept of Sheng and gangs explains why we have many words used to refer to Bhang or marijuana and words used to refer to the police. Bhang is majorly used by the gangs while the police are their major fears. These gangs have to therefore devise words and frequently change them to suit the purpose of communicating to their gang members and informing them of the police's whereabouts without anyone following the communication. They have to sell and buy marijuana which is against the law of the country and use it without anyone considered to be in the out-group following the conversation.
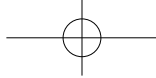
(9)

police: *vedi,   goshogi,   banga,   sinya,   pai,*

sanse,   mabeast,   ponyi,   gava,   karao

10 Conclusion

Lexical variations and fluidity are not in any way new concepts. In fact, many languages, with the advent of inventions and technological advancements, undergo new word formations as interactions with diverse technologies, inventions, languages, and culture continue. Besides, it's human nature to feel boredom necessitated by repetitive use of the same thing. The same to language and its lexicons, language users find it boring to use the same words over time. This makes them opt to invent some more or different words that can be used to refer to the same thing or situation which they already had a word for. When such occasions present themselves, new words are formed causing a lexical shift from one word to the other. The desire to be unique in the individual idiosyncrasies is a factor that also leads to formation of words that can be preferred against the initial terms.

However, this is not the case with the Sheng language as witnessed throughout the discussions in this paper. Sheng as a language and its users have demonstrated a special attachment to the lexical variations. The fluidity witnessed in the Sheng language is clearly envisaged in certain secret intentions
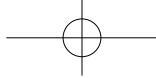
of those who initiate a lexical shift. These frequent shifts make the Sheng language to be crowded with lexical variations. Examples that illustrate this concept have been well explained in this paper showing how Sheng started as a simple result of code mixing but grew to become independently a language with its own unique lexicons. Unlikely, even with the unique lexicons, the terms and words have continuously evolved into some other words or completely replaced.

The concept of in-group and out-group mentality is enshrined in the Sheng language starting from its conceptualization to what it is today. Starting from its usage among prisoners, gangs, young children who want to hide some information from their parents and other elders, to even different groups of youths who do not want to leak their information to other groups. This explanation is cemented by Mukhwana (2015) who argues that, even among the youths, Sheng lexicons differ depending on their place of residence. For instance, Sheng lexicon used in the city of Nairobi is different from the one used in the rural areas and other towns in Kenya. Even Sheng used in Nairobi County differs depending on the regions. For example, Sheng used in Mathare differs lexically from that used in Kangemi or Kibra. The two major reasons for this are attributed from the dominant ethnic groups residing in those areas and the need to have an identity. The in-group and out-group mentality leads to formations of unique lexicons to be used and to identify the specific area as an in-group and those from other areas locked out as out-groups.

From the examples given in this paper which are direct recordings of words over a period of time that has been in usage, it's evidently clear that lexical variations are very high in Sheng. The language is fluid to an extend that one needs to stay closely to the in-group so as to keep abreast with the semantic shifts and lexical changes among Sheng users.

All the reasons given for the variations of the word use and lexical semantics variation in Sheng, are mainly attributed to secrets kept to a group and locked out from another group. This demonstrates that the in-group and out-group
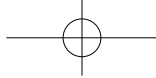
mentality, is the main and major cause of the lexical variation witnessed in Sheng as a language of communication not only just among the youth in Kenya but also among other people including those above the age of the youth but who have something to hide from another group.
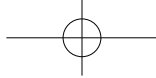
Sheng as a language has had its growth to the extent of becoming a language of its own with its linguistic features unique to itself. Sheng has found its way into the day-to-day communication domain and even advertisements. This expounds how stable the language has evolved to rise to the level of being used in media stations such as radio and TV stations with social media without an exception. All these facts should never be confused with the hidden intentions discussed in this paper. In fact, it is the usage of this Sheng vocabulary in such situations and domains that even lead to fluidity and variations of the highest order as many get to understand the meaning of the new words faster as spread by the various types of media including social media. The usage of the Sheng language might be informed by the reason for the usage of all other languages, but the intentions of the fluidity and variations experienced in the lexicons are not the same as that of the other languages. That is to say, the Sheng language in its usage is not different from other languages in Kenya such as English and Kiswahili. However, its fluidity level is uniquely different from the other languages for the reason well explained in this paper. The language is experiencing linguistic usage expansion, but this increased usage doesn't take away the intentions of the users in certain domains of ensuring their communications remain reachable to the relevant concerned parties and unreachable to those who are irrelevant or should not be privy to the communication therein.
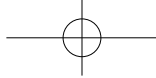
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• 27 •

Appendix

More Sheng words from the research:

an elderly lady	shosh	mukuru
chapati	chapo	pocha
cigarete	ngala	ngem
die	dedi	nyuria
fail	dunda	gwara
five	kobole	ngovo
group/gang	rende	mbogi
gun	chuma	oboho
thug	gondi	msanii
impressive	wezaa	fika bei
items/cargo	bidhaa	mburungo
work	janta	mboka
jail	ndondo	thiinie
mathematics	mao	madhafu
meat	nyake	nyagu
mia mbili	tusoo	rwabe
mia tano	sotano	panch
music	ngoma	masound
ng'ara	dunga	kladi
problem	ngori	noma
rural home	oshago	ocha
shoe	njumundula	
two	mbwegze	mbekse
driver	dere	kigonyi
to sleep	tokomona	doz
ugly	kuchapa	chura
woman	madhe	auntie

（编辑：马秀杰）