

The Sheng Identity, Cultural Background and Their Influence on Communication in Academic Endeavours: The Case of Machakos University College

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Abstract: *Young people in Kenya want to be identified with Sheng and some, in addition, want to be identified with their cultures. Sheng is a slang language originating in Nairobi, Kenya, spoken by the youth all over the country. It is a mixture of several languages, mainly English, Kiswahili and Kenyan languages. It is coined in the eastern part of the city. Youths from other parts of the country also come up with their own vocabulary which may be at variance with this Sheng. At Machakos University College there are various types of Sheng used which become a hindrance in the communication process between the students themselves and in academic discourse.*

Cultural background, which is manifested in incorrect pronunciations, coupled with dissimilar interpretations of the varieties of sheng also affects communication in academic discourse.

The objectives of this study are designed to answer the question of whether the use of Sheng and the cultural background of the students have an impact on communication between the lecturer and the students and among students themselves.

Purposive sampling will be used to get the respondents. Qualitative methods will be used to analyze the data.

The findings of the study will be used to come up with a way of mitigating so as to improve communication in academic discourse.

In conclusion, this study purposes to establish the fact that it's not just Sheng but the various types of Sheng used and that each individual wants to identify with their type, so these types can affect communication in academic discourse. The potential impact of conducting this research is to improve communication in academic discourse.

1. INTRODUCTION

Communication is the process of sharing information/ideas among two or more people through a certain sign, symbol or behavior. The communication process involves a message moving from the creation stage to the feedback stage; thus, the receiver knows what the sender wants him to know effectively. (Ronald B et al, 2013).

Sheng is a Swahili-based slang, perhaps a mixed language or creole, originating among the urban underclass of Nairobi, Kenya, and influenced by many of the languages spoken there. It is primarily a language of urban youths that has spread across social classes. The word Sheng is actually derived from the two national languages: Swahili and English, the specific letters were merged to form the famous 'SHENG' name (Abdul-Aziz, 1997). The language resembles a pidgin, or even a Creole (Githiora 2002). Montgomery

(2008) discusses the emergence of Creole in a way that can be compared to Sheng in Kenya. After moving from Pidgin English, the Creole language became an affirmation of special relations of solidarity between the members and provided a way of excluding outsiders. Those who were verbally adept with the Creole formed the nucleus, while those who were less adept were left on the periphery. Creole was used to appropriately register social, ethnic and linguistic differences from the surrounding contemporary British speech community. In a similar way, Sheng began as a way in which Kenyans from various backgrounds could express themselves in the 1950s since the colonial master was unwilling to teach them English. Later, it became a code language for the youth to talk about things they did not want the older people to understand (Bosire, 2008).

Sheng is a contact phenomenon that arose in a 'mixed' environment with diverse cultures and languages in Nairobi. It emerged from the native quarters where Kenyans from diverse origins were lumped together by the colonial government in the eastern part of Nairobi. The colonial government did not want them to learn the language of power- English and this created a need for a lingua franca (Hassan, 2005, Bosire, 2008).

The syntax of Sheng is mainly Swahili but it is sustained by the lexicon and phonology and morphology from other Kenyan languages, mainly, Kikuyu, Dholuo, Maasai, Luhya and coastal languages and English (Bosire, 2008, Echessa, 1990, Mazrui, 1995, Osinde & Abdulaziz , 1997, Githiomi, 2002).

The loanwords then undergo shengnization once they leave the source language and acquire a new meaning (Bosire, 2008, Ogechi, 2005). They then spread to other urban and the rural areas.

The role of language in the various spheres of society needs no underscoring. In Kenya, the role of particular languages at school and their treatment in education policy is about English and Kiswahili. However, outside the formal class setting, Sheng determines the discourse of primary and secondary school children (Githinji, 2006). Sheng is appealing for the simple reason that the speakers are not constrained to using a particular language idiom or lexicon (Ferrari, 2003). This therefore means that a speaker of Sheng can always tap into all available lexicons and be able to express themselves. This is the situation that is carried to academic discourse.

Onditi (2012) argues that vast numbers of Kenyans have been excluded from "decision-making and community participation" in various areas of society, ranging from political, health, and other socioeconomic issues, "because the languages they understand are not the ones used in the affairs of their counties". This exclusion results in economic stratification that breeds conflict, he argues. Accent and dialect act as indicators of not only one's relationship to a locality but also one's social class position. This is because features of pronunciation and sentence structure assume obvious social significance (Montgomery, 2008). The youth in Kenya want to be identified with Sheng which they feel they are part of its creation. This is the situation in institutions of higher learning in Kenya and at MUC in particular. In Nairobi, the Eastlanders use Sheng while those in the western side of Nairobi use English. The rest of the youthful population from the rest of the country find themselves using either and indeed a variety of Sheng vocabulary, some which are coined on the spur of the moment, depending on the town. Our conclusion on the issue of Sheng and identity in MUC concurs with Romaine (2000) that a speech community is not necessarily co-existence with a language community. People do not have to share the same language to form a speech community but share a set of norms and rules for a language it is this 'dialectal' scenario of sheng that is common at MUC and the concern of this study.

Language carries the identities of the speech communities and, English and Kiswahili do not define who we are but Sheng defines 'who we are' (Mugubi, 2006). This is because Sheng is a deliberate attempt to reflect

the way people actually speak and it transcends ethnic fences and therefore forges unity among speakers. Onditi (2012) concludes that may be Sheng could be part of this linguistic revolution may be not. Many rural youth want to know the latest urban words (Mugubi, 2006). This shows that they want to identify themselves with Sheng.

2. JUSTIFICATION

According to Lagat (2010) the huge dynamism of Sheng causes a challenge to the language as a tool for communication and gives an example of “Niaje” (How are you?) whose use evolved to “Aje jo” then “Niwuodhes” in a span of six weeks. Iraki (2010) sees this dynamism as a normal trait of language, but agrees that change that is too rapid can be limiting. The dynamism of sheng is high both in the rural and urban set ups which is the same at various institutions including MUC.

Sheng may be a model for translanguaging in classroom discussion (Kerfoot, 2013), a scenario that should be studied with regard to particular institutions. Of concern to the current study is that the vocabulary of Sheng varies significantly across Kenya’s subdivisions and regions.(Jowal,2015). These linguistic variations of Sheng are to be found in universities in Kenya and as such MUC. This study sought to find out if the varieties of sheng cause lack of intelligibility in academic discourse and in communication between students and university staff.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research was carried in January 2016 at Machakos University College which is in Machakos town.

The study used questionnaires and interviews as data collection instruments from students and members of staff at MUC. The research population consisted of 100 students and 50 members of staff. Purposive sampling was used to pick the respondents. Ten students, who did not form part of the sample of 100, were interviewed to corroborate the information in the questionnaires. The ages of the students ranged from 20-25 years and they were from different parts and towns of Kenya while the workers in the sample ranged between the ages of 25 to 35.

In terms of theory, the study was informed by the Wilbur Schramm (1954) theory of communication according to which the message is actually of no use unless and until the second party is able to understand or decode the information the sender wants to communicate. Schramm believed that an individual’s knowledge, experience and cultural background also play an important role in communication. Individuals from diverse cultures, religion or background tend to interpret the message in different ways.

In this study, the responses from the respondents were, grouped according to the objectives of the study, analyzed and interpreted.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Types of Sheng

The objective was to find out if there are varieties in the sheng that is used by students and youthful staff at MUC. Some Sheng vocabulary varies according to region and in MUC, therefore, students use different words to mean the same thing or interpret the same sheng word differently.

From the study, there are varieties of Sheng due to different vocabularies used. 60 % of the sample said that there are three types of Sheng, 10% said that there are at least five while 30% said there are two types. These

varieties depend on whether one comes from the rural areas or town and in the case of Nairobi which side. The Sheng also varies across towns and even universities. Those from the rural areas end up coming up with new sheng vocabulary and this is one of the things that contribute to 'varieties' of Sheng. This is because they use what is familiar to them to decode the new information hence come up with new vocabulary.

Therefore, the type of Sheng that each individual youth speaks will depend on where those s/he interacts with come from- city or part of the city, town, region or university. All these types are found in MUC and the results of the study show that they sometimes cause breakdown in communication among the students themselves. A student who fails to understand an unfamiliar word will try to 'discover' how the user coins words and is able to understand him after a while.

Table 1: varieties of Sheng

word	sheng	sheng	sheng	sheng	sheng	sheng
mother	madha	masa	manyaka	moda	mathe	mthama
money	chapaa	daw	doh	mkwanja	ganji	chaddarfather
father	fathe	buda	msee	mzae	mbuyu	mdabuz

4.2. Sheng in Academic Discourse

Sheng is no longer only found in ghettos and among the Nairobi youth. Indeed some media houses now use it in both print medium and broadcasting. Some radio stations like ghetto radio broadcast their programmes exclusively in Sheng (Jowal, 2015). Even politicians who are intent on winning the youthful vote use it. Advertisements are also using sheng to capture the market- mkopo wa salo.

Sheng is now finding its way in academic discourse. It is in the answers that students write in examinations, in group discussions and tutorials. Most students find it hard to express themselves in Standard English or Kiswahili. They even understand most concepts better when they rephrase them into sheng or get their equivalents in sheng.

4.3. Communication between lecturers and students

One of the objectives of this study was to find out if the English students use in academic discourse has some Sheng and if this inhibits communication in the lecture hall. 90% of the students in the sample said that whenever they use sheng words the lecturers don't understand so they strive to use English.

4.4. Communication between students

All the students sampled know that group discussion is an official academic endeavour which should be done in English. However, there are times when they find themselves using Sheng, especially when one cannot find the right word or expression in English. When this happens, some students fail to understand some Sheng vocabulary and yet they are shy to ask. During group discussions students from the urban areas say that those from the rural areas are more lost when words that they do not understand are used. They are, however, shy to ask for the meanings of such words and they end up not contributing in group discussions. They do not want to be called 'berbies' and would rather pretend that they too, know and understand Sheng- they want to identify with it. Those students from the rural also use Sheng vocabulary that the urban students cannot understand.

As a result, whenever students are left on their own to form groups, they end up grouping themselves according to region of origin, town or city.

50% the students in the sample think that sheng interferes with, not just standard English but also Kiswahili. In spite of this they say that they use sheng because it is easier to understand and that they express themselves better using it.

5. COMMUNICATION BETWEEN WORKERS AND STUDENTS

As indicated in the introduction, Sheng is quite dynamic and this means that the workers, mostly the youthful ones, are not at par with students who are quite vibrant when it comes to keeping abreast with new sheng vocabulary or coining new words. The results from the survey show that there is sometimes breakdown of communication during service delivery. However, unlike students, workers always ask students what words that they do not understand mean. The breakdown of communication sometimes causes frustration among workers when a student fails to express himself appropriately or keeps using sheng vocabulary that they do not understand.

Table 2 below is a summary of the response from the sample population on the use of sheng.

Table 2: Summary of the findings

Response	%
Poor grammar	80%
Corrupts English & Kiswahili	73.3%
Interferes with understanding of English	50%
The lecturer may not understand the Sheng vocabulary	93.3%
Failure to interpret information adequately during study group discussions and tutorials.	86.6%
.The workers may fail to understand the Sheng vocabulary used by students	90%
Creates social groupings among students and workers	90%
Affects fluency in both English and Kiswahili	60%
Cultural/regional background creates another variety of Sheng	50%
Creates inferiority in the rural based students	70%
Inadequate English vocabulary due to too much dependence on Sheng	80%

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

At MUC students tend to group with those who speak the same variety of sheng, particularly during the first year in college.

Although it degrades what teachers teach about proper grammar and interferes with communication in academic discourse, it is difficult to completely rule out a word or two of Sheng because students think it is easy to express them using Sheng. Also, to give Sheng some recognition as one of the official languages as some scholars argue will not be so easy because it is quite dynamic and therefore, not easy to standardize. However the respondents in this study think that with the advent of social media, Sheng is not as dynamic as

it was before the cell phone. New words spread quite fast nowadays and they don't change as much. 40% of the study sample is of the view that Sheng may not grow much because the youth no longer find pride in it as it was in the yester years. Intact the varieties of Sheng are due to the social classes. Those from other areas do not want to be associated with the eastlands variety. We recommend a study to find out the effect of social media on Sheng.

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