

# What Makes a Sheng Word Unique? Lexical Manipulation in Mixed Languages

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## 1. Background

Swahili and English are the two co-official languages in Kenya with regard to functional load (Skandera, 2000) and both are widely spoken all over the country. Alongside these two are a contentious number of other 40-plus living languages all actively spoken by ethnic communities in the country. In urban settings, people are largely multilingual in Swahili and English and some other Kenyan language. As a result, there is an abundance of code switching (CS). CS is such a linguistic staple in Kenya's urban settings that researchers have concluded that it is the *unmarked* code in many conversations in Kenya (Myers-Scotton, 1993; Ogechi, 2004; Bosire, 2006b). But in this multiplicity of language choices is **Sheng** which has become the basic urban vernacular for the youth in Kenyan urban centers today<sup>1</sup>. How did Sheng come about and how is it different from the established linguistic choices available? While many are agreed that Sheng is a contact outcome, there is little consensus about structure, typology, function, etc. Some attribute Sheng's origin to the practice of CS (Mufwene, 2003). Others like Mazrui (1995) go a step further to equate Sheng with Swahili-English CS. We argue here that Sheng utilizes lexical manipulation strategies that go beyond classic CS and those strategies form part of the uniqueness and appeal that Sheng has over other codes in the speakers' repertoire.

## 2. Sheng and code switching

The most categorical statement about the structural typology of Sheng is Mazrui's that Sheng is a 'slang based on Swahili-English code switching' (1995:171). Looking at the typical Sheng sentence below, it is easy to see why:

- (1) ma- pinchi wa- ta- m- sany- a vi- zii<sup>2</sup> (Sheng)  
cl.10- pinch cl.2-TAM-obj-frisk-FV adv-bad<sup>3</sup>  
'the thieves will have a field day with him/her'

The construction above is morpho-syntactically similar to the Swahili construction in (2) below, differing only in the bolded and underlined lexical elements:

- (2) w- **ezi** wa- ta- mw-ib- i- a vi- **baya**' (cf. Swahili)  
cl.2-thief cl.2-TAM-obj-steal-appl- Fv adv-bad  
'the thieves will have a field day with him/her'

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<sup>1</sup> Adults recognize this and use Sheng to reach the youth. In 2002 presidential election, the most popular slogan was the Sheng word *un-bwog-able* 'unshakeable' (Hillewaert, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all of the material for this paper has been taken from a field study undertaken by the writer in Nairobi, Kenya in the summer of 2005.

<sup>3</sup> All abbreviations are explained in the appendix

But, closer scrutiny of the ‘foreign’ i.e. non-Swahili bolded elements in (1) however shows that not all of them are from English. The items *sanya* and *zii* are not of English origin. If the statement in (1) were to be a case of Swahili-English CS, it would perhaps be similar to the following:

- (3) ma- **pickpockets** wa- ta- m-**pick** vi- baya  
 cl.10-pickpockets cl.2-TAM-obj-pick cl.8-bad  
 ‘the thieves will have a field day with him/her’

Interestingly, note that (3) above which is an acceptable Swahili-English CS utterance is not considered a Sheng bona fide construction by Sheng speakers. If (1) is the typical Sheng construction, an alternative hypothesis would be that a Sheng utterance has to have elements from other languages in addition to English. However, not all foreign elements make a sentence Sheng: the sentence below which utilizes some Ekegusii (E.10) lexical items in place of the English elements in the construction (3) above is not considered Sheng either:

- (4) a- **ba- ib- i** wa- ta- m- **pick** vi- baya  
 foc-cl.2-thief-NS cl.2-TAM-obj- steal- cl.8-bad  
 ‘the thieves will have a field day with him/her’

We note further that CS is not even a necessary condition for a Sheng construction. The idiomatic expression below using all-Swahili words has a potent meaning in Sheng but is semantically odd and unattested in Swahili:

- (5) a- me- pig- w- a pasi <cf. Swahili: lit. ‘s/he has been ironed/hit by iron’>  
 s/he-TAM-hit- pass-FV iron  
 ‘s/he has been picked’

Significantly, Sheng appears to be different from classic CS since it consistently violates CS structural constraints, notably those defined by Myers-Scotton’s Matrix Language Frame (MLF) and the 4-Morpheme (4-M) models (1993, 2000, 2006). A necessary constraint in classic CS is that in a CS clause, outsider late system morphemes must be supplied by the matrix language, the language that is supplying the morpho-syntactic frame in the CS clause. Sheng constructions allow the presence of the habitual marker /-**ang**/, an outsider late system morpheme from outside Swahili - the matrix language as seen in the construction below:

- (6) ha- ko ka- manoo ka- na- katisi-**ang**- a<sup>4</sup>  
 cl.12-that cl.12-man cl.12-TAM- cut- TAM-FV  
 ‘that little man is (always) so annoying’

<cf. **Swahili**: hi-cho ki- ji- tu hu- sumbu-a >

Now consider the sentence below where only the use of one non-Swahili word tags the utterance as Sheng although the whole construction is essentially Swahili in structure:

- (7) wa- ta- ni- **noki** (cf. Swahili: wa-ta-ni-**penda**)  
 cl.2-TAM-obj- love  
 ‘they will love me’

In (7), clearly it is the word **noki** that seems to play a unique identifying role in signifying that the construction is in the realm of Sheng. *What is in a word that completely overrides/constrains other words in the discourse?* The word *noki* comes from English ‘knock’ as in ‘engine-knock’ i.e. when a

<sup>4</sup> Note here more morphological distortion with the introduction of diminutive classes 12/13.

car misfires. In Sheng, the head is considered the engine of the body and when it misfires, the mind/brain has been affected. Consequently, ‘knock’ usually means ‘go mad’ or ‘become crazy’ with the extended meaning that if you ‘knock’ over something, you are ‘crazy’ about it i.e., ‘in love’ with it. Because of the manipulation (‘distortion’) of meaning in this lexeme, its use becomes different from the source word and its new meaning helps to index the language domain as Sheng and not Swahili-English CS.

### 3. Lexical manipulation

Looking at (7) above, it is apparent that lexical manipulation is a tool that extends, ‘distorts’ and re-engineers the structure and meaning of words in a way that uniquely identifies them as Sheng. Distortion may be structural or semantic.

#### 3.1. Semantic Manipulations

These are processes employed to extend, invert or radically change the meaning of lexemes appropriated from Swahili, English or any of the source languages that Sheng takes vocabulary from. This vocabulary building process also incorporates the creation of novel forms or coins.

##### 3.1.1. Coins

We consider as coinage those words of unknown etymology (per consultants) and those which, as far as we can determine, do not seem to derive from any language in the contact situation (English, Swahili, other Kenyan languages). Examples are given below:

(8) Coined words:

a)	kemfa/korona/luch/hagi/pokoyoyo/mbokyo/poko/	‘whore/prostitute’
b)	hamo/sanya/dipa/gondii/dingoo	‘steal’
c)	senye/noi/bwenye/bwei/nginyo/noko/soipo	‘female genitalia’
d)	/tunii/haga/manyake/rasa	‘ass/butt’
e)	likwanga/olubdaz	‘penis’
f)	ngori	‘Sheng the language’
g)	sense/shada/arizaa/boza/doba/mbom/ngwai/sasi	‘marijuana’
h)	manzi/mwasi/ngede/pido/mtasis/burungo/ chutii/kapienga	‘girl/woman’
i)	karau/pai/sansee/	‘police’
j)	chapaa/niadu/much/mkwanja/winch/jongolo	‘money’

Other forms of coining involve idiomatic expressions (where the source of individual words is not crucial since the meaning is exclusively Sheng):

(9) Idiomatic expressions:

a)	shika rada	‘realize/know’ (lit. ‘track the radar’ = Swahili + English)
b)	lenga/lenga pam	‘refuse’ (‘targeted look’ = Swahili + pam - unknown meaning )
c)	tupa mbao	‘drop the ball/loser/ washed up’ (lit. ‘drop the timber’ = Swahili)
d)	ingiza njeve	‘be scared’ (lit. ‘take in cold’ = Swahili + coin)
e)	thika nare	‘get angry’ (lit. ‘catch fire’)
f)	toka kijiko	‘dash off’ (lit. ‘get out like a spoon’ = Swahili)

##### 3.1.2. Ideophones

Some of the coins in Sheng are clearly words that utilize sound symbolism to vividly express an idea, or imagery and are usually onomatopoeic. While forms formed in this fashion do occur in other languages, they are sparsely distributed in languages but appear to be common in Sheng:

(10) Examples of ideophone:

- a) twatwa/thwawo ‘gun/pistol’ (from the sound of gunfire)
- b) duf ‘swim/bathe’ (from the sound of diving into pool)
- c) jongolo ‘money’ (from the jingling of coins)
- d) pum-pum ‘big/fat’ (from the bursting of balloon)

### 3.1.3. Calques

Calques are loan translations – lexical items borrowed from other languages and then translated into Sheng. The famous one is **cool** (originally) ‘not hot/chill/calm’ - but now most popularly means ‘nice/trendy/preferred/good’. In Sheng, ‘cool’ is appropriately translated as *poa* ‘chill’ while still retaining the adjectival meaning ‘trendy/good’. Also used is ‘**date**’ which is translated into *tarehe* ‘time period’ but keeps the more modern meaning of ‘romantic engagement’.

### 3.1.4. Semantic extension

Ordinary words or those that hitherto had one meaning (either acquired through borrowing or otherwise) may take on a new meaning in Sheng, usually with the old meaning still intact.

(11) Extension of meaning:

	ordinary word	new meaning	ordinary/old meaning
a)	ma-hewa	‘music’	‘air’
b)	manga	‘make love’	‘eat’
c)	shamba	‘crotch’	‘garden’
d)	tembe	‘drugs’	‘tablet/pill’
e)	moto	‘nice/hot’	‘fire’
f)	waka	‘be drunk’	‘light up/glow’
g)	maziwa lala	‘lazy/weak’	‘yoghurt/cultured milk’
h)	miti	‘thousands/ penises’	‘trees’
i)	tema	‘break up affair’	‘spit’
j)	chora	‘employ’	‘draw/trace’
k)	bonga	‘fart’	‘speak/tell a story’

Some words derive from topical or current items in the news where an incident or name associated with a particular news story or some global current event becomes associated or equated with a local event or issue:

(12) Other coins:

- a) kosovo ‘dangerous place’ (from the war in Bosnia/Serbia)
- b) unbwogable ‘infallible’ (blend: from Dholuo *bwogo* ‘fall’)
- c) mungiki ‘gang member’ (from a local gang of the same name)
- d) juurasik ‘whore’ (from the movie ‘Jurassic park’ link unknown)
- e) mteja ‘missing’ (from Swahili voicemail prompt ‘customer unavailable’)
- f) rwanda ‘beat up/kill’ (from Rwandese genocide)
- g) obama ‘popular beer brand’ (from rising fame of Barack Obama)

Meanings can also be inverted and a word given quite the opposite meaning from the original/usual reference as we will see in the following section.

### 3.1.5. Antonymy/Inversion of meaning

(13) Inverted meanings:

	<b>ordinary word</b>	<b>ordinary meaning</b>	<b>new meaning</b>
a)	m-chafu	'dirty/unkept'	'very good at'
b)	kapieng'a /m-toto	'kid/child'	'girlfriend/woman'
c)	m-see	'old man'	'youth'
d)	m-baya/vi-baya sana	'bad/very badly'	'very well'
e)	noki	'go mad'	'love deeply'

### 3.2. Structural manipulations

There are two main structural 'distortions': syllable metathesis and truncation. Metathesis interposes syllables in the stem and truncations involve the deletion of syllables or even whole chunks of syllables word-finally (and also word-initially in some cases), disguising the word and giving it a new morpho-phonological shape.

#### 3.2.1. Syllable metathesis/Verlan

The table below shows how Sheng metathesizes / inverts syllables in words that have been borrowed from other languages or those that had been coined/ introduced into the language before. By manipulating the syllable sequence in an existing/common word, a common word is disguised as new and different:

(14) Syllable metathesis:

	<b>Sheng</b>	<b>gloss</b>	<b>source-word</b>	<b>source</b>
a)	o.mba	'timber /erect'	mba.o	<b>Swahili</b>
b)	le.mbe	'authorities/court'	mbe.le	""
c)	m-.no.ko	'hand'	m-.ko.no	""
d)	m-.ngo.so	'white person'	m-.zu.ngu	""
e)	u-.li.kwe	'truth'	u-.kwe.li	""
f)	ki-.ri.bi.ti	'lighter'	ki.bi.ri.ti	""
<b>g)</b>	gi.do	'dog'	dog	<b>English</b>
h)	ga.shu	'sugar'	su.gar	""
i)	nje.fi	'fifty'	fif.ty	""
j)	no.po	'porn'	porno(graphy)	""
k)	ti.no	'note' (paper money)	note	""
<b>l)</b>	nje.te	'radio'	te.nje	<b>coined/unknown</b>

Note that the metathesis/ inversion targets the first two syllables of the root/stem and excludes prefixes unless the stem is monosyllabic (see Mous, 2003). Evidence that the prefixes are excluded is exemplified in the negative form:

(15) ha.ku.na → ha.na.ku 'there isn't' (from: ha (neg) + kuna 'there is')

It might be that noun class prefixes are not factored into metathesis so as to preserve noun class marking. In verbal derivations the process is blocked probably because the resultant form will be unrecognizable from the original. Thus, whereas the word for 'read' is *som-a*, which is rendered *ma.so* after metathesis, the applicative form is not (as expected):

(16) /ma.so+i+*FV*/ → \*maso<sub>a</sub> or \*mase<sub>a</sub> (after a vowel cluster simplification rule),

but the un-metathesized form:

(17) /som-i-a/ → somea ‘read for’<sup>5</sup>

### 3.2.2. Truncation

In Sheng, truncation targets only nouns and appears to subsume three distinct processes: clipping of words from both edges with a circumfix added (/o-, -o/); clipping of words from the right edge with a subsequent dummy suffix added (/o/-sh/) and clipping of a word from the right edge without any suffixation but with compensatory lengthening. We examine each in turn.

#### 3.2.2.1. Truncation at both ends of a word with dummy circumfix (*loucherbem*)

The algorithm in this process clips the first syllable if the target word contains more than two syllables and clips all other syllables after the coda of the second syllable:

(18) Loucherbem:

	<b>Sheng</b>	<b>source (word)</b>	<b>gloss</b>
a)	[ololóo]	kaloleni	‘Kaloleni’
b)	[okongóo]	makongeni	‘Makongeni’
c)	[orakóo]	practice	‘practice/exercise’
d)	[okuyóo]	kikuyu	‘Kikuyu’
e)	[oñatoo]	kenyatta	‘Kenyatta’
f)	[oðumóo]	kisumu	‘Kisumu’
g)	[oranjóo]	karanja	‘Karanja’
h)	[otichóo] / [tichée]	teacher	‘teacher’
i)	[odukoo]	duka	‘corner store’

This process seems to make words bi-syllabic and if a word is larger than bi-syllabic, the first syllable and other syllables after the second are truncated:

(19) CV<sub>1</sub>CV<sub>2</sub>CV<sub>3</sub>... → CV<sub>2</sub>C

But if bi-syllabic, then only the final vowel will be deleted as in (i-j) above:

(20) CV<sub>1</sub>CV<sub>2</sub> → CV<sub>1</sub>C

The resultant monosyllabic form which is invariably CVC (with the coda being the onset of the following truncated syllable) is then circumfixed with the dummy affix /o-, -o/. This dummy circumfix lengthens at the right edge to reflect the deletion of mora word-finally:

(21) kaloleni → lol      → ololo      → ololoo  
 (original) → (truncation) → (dummy affix) → (compensatory lengthening)

Note here that the dummy circumfix /-o/ does not add any new meaning other than alter the phonological shape of the words involved and is therefore only a tool fashioned by Sheng speakers to manipulate the shape of lexical items, give them a foreign-sounding, Sheng character.

#### 3.2.2.2. Truncation word-finally with a final dummy suffix

In this second type of truncation, the number of syllables does not matter and all forms are targeted: the algorithm deletes all elements after the first root syllable. Note that as stated above, the

<sup>5</sup> The applicative marker /-i-/ lowers to [e] after mid vowels in the root due to height harmony

prefixed elements are not factored into the rule – see (22c). There are two types of dummy suffixes that can be used here: /-o/ and /-sh/. In (22) below, we see the use of the suffix /-o/ and (23) exemplifies the use of /-sh/:

(22) Truncation with dummy suffix /-o/:

	<b>Sheng</b>	<b>source word</b>	<b>gloss</b>	<b>cf. Swahili</b>
a)	daróo	‘darasa’	‘classroom’	darasa
b)	kaóo	‘Kamba’	‘Kamba’	kámba
c)	m-kañóo	‘m-kate’	‘bread’	mkátε
d)	safoo	‘safari’	‘Safari Rally’	Safari
e)	vajoo	‘virgin’	‘virgin’	bikira
f)	makoo	‘market’	‘market’	soko
g)	presoo/prezoo	‘president’	president	rais

Word-final truncation sometimes uses a consonantal dummy affix, /-sh/. This algorithm only targets the very last syllable for clipping:

(23) truncation with dummy suffix /-sh/:

	<b>Sheng</b>	<b>source word</b>	<b>gloss</b>
a)	[maish]	maina	‘Maina’ (proper name)
b)	[saitosh]	saitoti	‘Saitoti’ (name)
c)	[uhush]	uhuru	‘Uhuru’ (name)
d)	[mresh]	mrembo	‘beautiful person’
e)	[mongesh]	mungiki	‘gang’
f)	[nosh]	nopo (metathesis - ‘porno’)	‘porn’
g)	[chokosh]	chokora	‘street children/urchins’
h)	[gikosh]	gikomba	‘Gikomba’ (place name)

There is no clear pattern showing when the vowel dummy affix /-o/ is used versus the consonantal /-sh/ and the alternation must be considered stylistic or dialectal for now.

### 3.2.2.3. Truncation word-finally (without adding a dummy suffix)

A third type of truncation is where the last syllable is deleted but instead of adding a dummy affix, the vowel of the resulting final syllable is lengthened to compensate for the loss of segments word-finally:

(24) Truncation without dummy suffix:

	<b>truncation</b>	<b>source word</b>	<b>gloss</b>
a)	baháa	‘bahati’	‘Bahati’ (suburb)
b)	macháa	‘macharia’	‘Macharia’ ( name)
c)	gaváa	‘government’	‘government’
d)	kanjóo	‘council’	‘City council guards’
e)	naíí / [cf.orobíí]	‘nairobi’	‘Nairobi city’
f)	mii	‘mimi’	‘me’
g)	wεε	‘wewe’	‘you’
h)	sii	‘sisi’	‘we/us’

The data in (24) above is clear evidence that the final vowel elongates after the deletion of segments at the right edge. It is instructive that in English as in Sheng, truncation/clipping is fundamentally only targeting nouns. The difference is that in Sheng this process is rampant and is applied to all sorts of nouns and in different ways including the use of dummy affixes on both edges of the word whereas in English, there are no dummy affixes on the left edge and the limited types introduced as suffixes do actually add new meaning to the word, however slight:

(25) English shortened/clipped forms:

	<b>regular word (noun)</b>	<b>clipped/short form</b>
a)	Patricia	Pat/ Patty/Trish
b)	Philadelphia	Philly
c)	Amanda	Mandy
d)	perpetrator	perp
e)	Christina	Tina/Christie
f)	Discotheque	Disco
g)	Aaron	Ron/Ronnie
h)	Massachusetts	Mass

As seen in this data from English, truncation may happen from both edges and sometimes after truncation, an affix (suffix) may be added (a-c,e,g). In this case that affix adds some nuance and therefore has a specific shade of meaning (endearment or smallness). In Sheng, the affixes are all dummies and carry no semantic meaning except perhaps to signal that the word is Sheng.

#### 3.2.2.4. *Extension of morphology*

This refers to the phenomenon of using morphological processes from one language on items appropriated from another language i.e. when a form from one language is subjected to the morphology of another:

(26) dead- ish- a  
 dead- causative-FV  
 ‘finish’

Here the English adjective ‘dead’ is turned into a verb and suffixed with the Sheng causative morpheme /-ish-/ and final vowel /-a/. As usual with Sheng, borrowings are not used ‘as is’ but undergo phonological and morphological manipulations. Here, the adjective ‘dead’ is here used as the transitive verb ‘kill’. Many items expropriated by Sheng thus undergo more processes than is observed in mere borrowing or classic CS particularly because Sheng appropriates even the so-called ‘system morphemes’ – grammatical elements from other languages not normally seen in cases of CS:

(27) si- shtuk- **ang-** i < cf. **Swahili:** (hu-w-a) si-shtuk-i>  
 neg- startle-TAM- NS  
 ‘I never get ruffled’

As seen in (6), the TAM /-**ang**/ is a foreign grammatical element used to mark aspect in a Sheng – contrary to classic cases of code switching since in this construction Swahili supplies the morpho-syntactic frame and is therefore a matrix language that should solely supply the kind of system morpheme that /-**ang**/ is.

## 4. Conclusion

Clearly lexical manipulation is one crucial way in which Sheng distinguishes itself from the languages in the speakers’ repertoire especially from CS that is an inevitable outcome of sustained language contact and multilingualism. The flexibility involved in this manipulation is perhaps contrasted with grammatical rigidity and correctness associated with the ‘established’ languages in the repertoire and may be what attracts its speakers i.e. its ‘open-source’ freeware factor (Ferrari, 2004). Mous (2003) claims that most mixed languages do show this particular facet of lexical re-engineering.

Sheng’s structural and semantic malleability allows speakers to be creators. The reason why Sheng sounds slangy is partly due to its ever-growing vocabulary, which as we have seen may be

drawn from common sources but transformed in novel ways. (Truncation and dummy affixation create rhyming forms that reminds one of *Cockney* English). Lexical manipulation allows speakers not only to be creative, but to enjoy Sheng as a verbal art that they now lovingly call *ki-noki*– meaning the language of the rebels or transgressors (Mutonye, 2006). Socially, Sheng thus continues to grow because for many of the dispossessed youth of the urban wilderness, Sheng is something they can own, shape and be proud of (see Childs 1997). As Samper (2000) has remarked, Sheng also gives the youth a unique ‘hybrid’ identity – the transcending of the ethnic and official languages ‘status quo’ into a fused, *Sheng sub-culture*, constructed at their own terms.

## Appendix

adv	Adverbial affixes	cl.	Noun class
CS	code switching	Foc	Focus marker/pre-prefix
FV	Final vowel	NS	Nominalizing suffix
Obj	Direct object	Swa.	Swahili
TAM	Tense/Aspect/Mood marker		

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