

# Strategies for Identifying Sheng: What counts as Sheng?

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to look at different characteristics of Sheng that distinguishes it from other linguistics codes and specifically Standard Swahili. A loose application of the markedness theory will be used to show the elements that distinguishes Sheng from Standard Swahili. Sound segments, some prosodic features, morphological and lexical elements are examined and contrasted with those of their donor languages to identify the marked sounds that are regarded as markers of Sheng. These innovations are attributed to borrowing from various languages. The structural deviation and semantic shift of familiar words in Swahili and other languages is seen as another manifestation of markedness that qualifies those forms as Sheng. The paper concludes by calling for the expansion of the field of study of youth and urban languages to pay more attention to the linguistic areas that have not received adequate attention in order to provide a complete account of these languages.

**Keywords:** Sheng; Markedness; Compensatory lengthening; Semantic Shift

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## INTRODUCTION

It is unanimously agreed that Sheng is a mixed urban and youth code that originated from Nairobi but has now spread to various urban centers in Kenya. Mazrui (1995) and (Abdulaziz & Osinde, 1997) have claimed that its name is coined from Swahili English Slang, though Rudd's (2009) alternative suggestion is that the name is probably derived from syllabic transposition of syllables in the word 'English' to Lisheng followed by the deletion of

the syllable *li* to yield the name Sheng. Scholars attribute Sheng's origin to language mixing in social interactions between migrant workers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (see Ferrari, 2013, Rudd, 2009; Abdulaziz & Osinde, 1997; Spyropoulos, 1987). Sheng's appropriation by the youth as a badge of identity and the proliferation of enabling communication media has increased its reach to every corner of the country. Similar to slang and other youth and urban languages, Sheng's versatility is manifested in its ever-changing

nature, especially at the lexical level. The uninitiated see this instability as a shortcoming, but it is the code's greatest strength, for without such flexibility, it loses its value among its users. Nevertheless, we must bear in mind that Sheng's vitality and the challenge of understanding its highly productive and fast mutating vocabulary is a legitimate question. Moreover, understanding to what extent it can be considered as an autonomous system from its donor languages is also a worthy pursuit. This paper will attempt to look at how we can distinguish Sheng from Standard Swahili (henceforth SS) at various linguistic levels.

A loose application of the markedness theory will be used to show the elements that distinguish Sheng as a marked code that differs from Standard Swahili. The markedness theory is attributed to the Prague school especially Trubetzkoy's (1939) work in phonology translated as *Principles of Phonology* (1969) and also advanced by Jakobson (1942). The theory's four pillars are a) privative opposition, b) the frequency, c) neutralization and d) language change (Roussou, 2016; Hume, 2004; and Chomsky and Halle, 1968). Privative opposition refers to Trubetzkoy's claim that a sound is distinctive only when its properties are contrasted with properties of another sound. On frequency, the most frequent features in natural languages are regarded as unmarked while neutralization refers to the loss of contrast in similar phonetic environment (Hume 2006). Marked features undergo neutralization while unmarked segments retain their features. The fourth pillar, language change, implies that unmarked elements undergo change while the marked ones are resistant to change. Chomsky and Halle (1968), similar to Jakobson (1941) propose assigning

the [+] value for the marked and the [-] value for the unmarked features. The theory itself has had its critics most notably Gurevich (2001) and Hume (2005) who note its various shortcomings such as lack of predictability, circularity and failure to account for language specific patterns. Given this kind of criticism, one may wonder if using a different theoretical framework such as variationist sociolinguistics might provide a better approach to the current task. However, this paper is only interested in distinguishing Sheng from Standard Swahili rather than the analysis of variables in a Swahili speech community. In so doing we have capitalized on the notion of 'privative opposition' (Chomsky and Halle, 1968), where Sheng and Standard Swahili (SS henceforth) features at different linguistic levels are compared and contrasted.

## **MARKED ARTICULATIONS: SHENG'S SOUND SEGMENTS**

Sheng's sounds that deviate from SS are influenced by residential areas which are influenced by the dominant speech community. Little work on Sheng's phonetic inventory has been done with the notable exceptions of Ferarri (2014) with her table of Sheng consonants and Bosire (2008) who has listed 39 sound segments, 34 consonantal and 5 vocalic. However, a closer examination shows that there are more vowels, which is hardly surprising considering that a language that borrows from other languages will display influences from those languages. Turning our attention to Sheng's phonetic inventory we begin with the vowels where it seems to have all the cardinal vowels as shown below.

(1)	i	[a]	ashoo	[afo:]	ten shillings
	ii	[ɛ]	msee	[mse:]	person
	iii	[i]	Isich	[i:sic]	Eastleigh
	iv	[ɔ]	Koch	[kɔc]	Korogocho
	v	[u]	mbanyu	[mba:ɲu]	house
	vi	[e]	keja	[keja]	house
	vii	[o]	ocha	[oca]	rural areas

Bosire (2008, p. 202) excludes [e] and [o], arguing that they are in free variation with [ɛ] and [ɔ] respectively. Indeed, the majority of Sheng speaker’s pronunciations show that [e] and [o] are not very common; however, there are some lexical variables and linguistic environment where you cannot replace [e] with [ɛ] or [ɔ] with [o] and vice versa. You cannot say [koc] in the place of [kɔc] or [keja] instead of [keja]. Bosire also includes the long vowel counterparts of vowels [a], [ɛ], [i], [ɔ] and [u]. Further evidence that Sheng has a distinctive sound system comes from its consonant inventory. Table (1) below is an initial attempt of the table of Sheng consonants.

From this table, we can see that most of the sounds in SS are also present in Sheng, though Sheng seem to have additional sound segments. This slightly differs from Githiora’s (2018) claim that all sound segments in Sheng are also found in SS. Githiora’s claim implies that Sheng does not innovate at the phonetic level, which would be strange for a code

that borrows heavily from languages other than SS. The voiceless interdental fricative [θ] is rarely used in Sheng, being mostly replaced by [ð] in almost all instances. In addition, the voiced velar fricative [ɣ] and its voiceless counterpart [x] are replaced by [g] and [k] respectfully (Ferrari, 2014). One notable different between the table suggested below and Ferarri’s (2014) table is that she does not include complex sounds such as prenasalized sounds as independent segments. This paper adopts Bosire (2008) position of treating prenasalized consonants as independent sound segments. Prenasalized consonants mp, nt, ŋk, ɲc ns and nz for instance are not attested in SS but when sequences mp, nt, ns and nz occur, the nasal is usually syllabic. Githiora (2018) has rightly observed that prenasalization is a conscious effort to distinguish Sheng from SS since it applies across the board in Sheng while in SS, it is constrained by voicing and manner of articulation. In SS for instance, prenasalization favors

**Table 1. Inventory of Sheng Consonants. Adapted from Bosire (2008)**

	labials	dentals	Labio dentals	alveolar	Post Alveolar	velar	glottal
plosives	p, <sup>m</sup> p, b, <sup>m</sup> b			t, <sup>n</sup> t, d, <sup>n</sup> d		k, <sup>ŋ</sup> k, g, <sup>ŋ</sup> g	
fricatives		ð	f	v	s, <sup>n</sup> s, z, <sup>n</sup> z	ʃ, <sup>ɲ</sup> ʃ	h
affricates					c, <sup>ɲ</sup> c, ʃ, <sup>ɲ</sup> ʃ		
nasals	m			n		ɲ	ŋ
liquids				l	r		
approximants	w					j	

voiced sounds and is attested more in stops compared to other sounds. In all, table (1) above is a suggested inventory which may overstate or understate Sheng consonants which can be resolved with acoustic analysis. However, even without acoustic analysis, it is noticeable that Sheng has more sound segments compared to SS. These extra sound segments are a further illustration of marked features that sets Sheng apart from SS.

## SHENG'S PHONOLOGICAL SYSTEM

It is a linguistic truism that while different languages may share similar or almost similar sound segments, each language has its unique way of arranging its sounds. Following Githiora's (2002, 2018) position of regarding Sheng as a Swahili urban vernacular, we shall compare its phonological system with that of SS to see if it exhibits an innovative system. We shall first look at stress placement in (2) below.

(2)	i	rithe	[ríðe:]	risasi	[risási]	bullet
	ii	hao	[háo:]	nyumba	[nú <sup>m</sup> ba]	house
	iii	nai	[náí:]	Nairobi	[nájro'bi]	Nairobi
	iv	tenga	[té <sup>ŋ</sup> ga]	elfu	[é'lfu]	1000/
	v	tiabe	[tiábe]	chai	[cái]	tea

Although the data in (2) above show that Sheng adheres to some prosodic patterns of SS of placing stress in the penultimate syllable, those in (3) below show there is no strict adherence to the SS stress pattern. The first three words for instance, are derived from clipping, phonological manipulation and compensatory lengthening, but the last two words are coined and do not show phonological manipulations or compensatory lengthening. According to Bosire (2008), when borrowings from

donor languages are truncated, the final vowel is lengthened to preserve the morae for the truncated material. All the trisyllabic words in (3) below have become bisyllabic. The stress on the word 'Bahati' for instance in the penultimate syllable [ha] is SS, and is retained after truncation. The Kikuyu name 'Macharia', seem to take cue from SS pattern of assigning stress to the penultimate syllable as does other English borrowings like 'Bernard', 'government', 'Jericho', and 'Carnivore' in Bosire's (2008) data.

(3)		Sheng	SS/English	Gloss
	i	baháa	baháa	baháti
	ii	benáa	bérnærd	Bernard
	iii	macáa	macárja	government
	iv	gaváa	gáværmænt	elfu
	v	tiabe	tiábe	chai
	vi	jeríi	jérkou	Jerícho
	vii	kaníi	kárnævø	Carnivóre

(4)	i	odijo	[ɔdijɔ]	teacher	teacher (English)
	ii	odhedhe	[ɔðɛðɛ]	githeri	githeri (Kikuyu)
	iii	opara	[ɔpara]	bald head	kipara (Swahili)
	iv	odaro	[ɔdaro]	class	darasa (Swahili)
	v	oduko	[ɔduko]	shop	duka (Swahili)

The importance of these data is that you can use truncation of nouns from various languages as a strategy for recognizing Sheng nouns. It is safe to say that any truncated noun that displays compensatory lengthening is Sheng and not SS.

## THE WORD INITIAL AND WORD FINAL O

O-prefixation in Sheng has been attributed to Dholuo influence (Kießling and Mous, 2004; Githiora 2018). Unlike SS where nominal prefixes are morphological units, the same cannot be said of word initial O- in Sheng. The Sheng Dictionary at [www.sheng.co.ke](http://www.sheng.co.ke) lists 87 words that begin with prefix O-. Some of these words are shown in (4).

Not all cases of word initial o- are derived from the default assignment of dummy prefix o-. The word *O-Level* ‘oral sex’ has undergone a semantic shift from its former meaning of Ordinary Level — an exit exam at the end of secondary school in Kenya before the 8-4-4 system was introduced. Similarly, Okonkwo ‘big burly person; is taken from the protagonist in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. Besides, the fact that SS has many nouns beginning with o- such as

(5)	i	odhumo	Kisumu (Dholuo)	Kisumu
	ii	oruro	ndururu (Swahili)	five cents
	iii	oshago	gishagi (Kikuyu)	rural area
	iv	orezo	president (English)	President
	v	Okongo	makongeni (Swahili)	Makongeni

*ombe* ‘edge’ *ombwe* ‘vacuum’ *ofisi* ‘office’ among others means that word initial o- is not a feature peculiar to Sheng.

Another interesting observation is that Sheng also displays a preference for word final -o in truncated words (Kießling and Mous, 2004). Truncation, however, is not a prerequisite for the -o suffixation. In the first 3 words below for instance, the final vowel are replaced with -o while in the last two words, the final syllable is truncated before o- is added to the new final syllable. Consequently, the final vowel is lengthened and assigned stress.

Although we have claimed that the o-prefixing and suffixing is influenced by Dholuo, we note that it does not spare words borrowed from Dholuo either. Kisumu for instance is a Dholuo word, but it has also undergone o-prefixing and suffixing. This calls for caution when using o- prefixing as a criterion for identifying Sheng. Still, it is important to note that from available Sheng dictionaries such as Mbaabu and Nzunga (2003), and the Go Sheng online dictionary [www.sheng.co.ke](http://www.sheng.co.ke), Sheng has more nouns that begin with o-. At the same time, SS dictionaries like TUKI (2014) Swahili English dictionary show that SS has more verbs beginning with o-.

## WORD INITIAL AND WORD MEDIAL [H] DELETION

Standard Swahili words with *h* syllable onsets, whether word initial or word medial are potential targets of deletion though it does not happen in all cases. Most of the time, there is no deletion at all, but when it occurs, it is a good indicator of Sheng and sometimes Mother Tongue influence. Ferrari (2014) gives some examples of [h] deletion in verbal negation contrasted with SS with an English gloss.

Ferri observes that Sheng has evolved two ways of negating Swahili verbs. In (6), [h] in SS undergoes deletion and then vowel [a] is added to serve negation purpose. In (7), besides the

deletion of [h], stress is added in the first syllable to distinguish the affirmative and negated verbs. Additionally, there is a tendency to drop [h] in habitual tense among Sheng speakers. Verb conjugated for habitual tense like *husema*, ‘says’ *hukaa*, ‘stays/lives’ *huenda* ‘goes’ for instance, become *usema*, *ukaa* and *uenda* respectively. This deletion of [h] in Sheng is a feature that has become so pervasive that it is becoming more common among some speakers of Standard Swahili in Kenya.

### Glide deletion

Githiora (2018) has mentioned about glide deletion of some SS words that are borrowed into Sheng. In the case of [w], it appears with the auxiliary verb *weza* ‘to be able’ with its various conjugations.

- |     |   |                   |                                     |
|-----|---|-------------------|-------------------------------------|
| (6) |   | Affirmative       | Negation                            |
|     | Standard Swahili  | <i>una</i>        | <i>huna</i>                         |
|     | Sheng   | <i>uko na/una</i> | <i>auko na/auna</i>                 |
|     | English   | you have          | you don’t have                      |
| (7) |   | Affirmative       | Negation                            |
|     | Standard Swahili  | <i>atakwenda</i>  | <i>hatakwenda</i>                   |
|     | Sheng   | <i>ata’enda</i>   | <i>*ata’enda</i>                    |
|     | English   | s/he will go      | s/he will not go                    |
| (8) | anaeza  | anaweza           | progressive                         |
|     | siezi   | siwezi            | progressive/habitual<br>negation    |
|     | aeze  | aweze             | ‘3rd person singular<br>subjunctive |
| (9) | Sheng: Lugha ya Kiswahili na Kiingereza tu <b>ndio</b> inatumika ndio<ndiyo<ni hiyo<br>Target: Lugha ya Kiswahili na Kiingereza to <b>ndiyo</b> inatumika<br>Gloss: Swahili language and English are the only languages used. |                   |                                     |
|     | Sheng: kwa sababu yeye <b>sio</b> wa kabila fulani  |                   | sio<siye<si yeye                    |
|     | Target: kwa sababu yeye <b>siye</b> wa kabila fulani  |                   |                                     |
|     | Gloss: because s/he is not from the a certain ethnic group  |                   |                                     |

There is need for caution here because [w] deletion seems to be restricted to the verb 'weza'. In addition, [w] does not delete in plural nominal prefixes in *warosho* 'girls' *wathii* 'passengers' and *watoi* 'children' or in constructions where it serves grammatical functions in SS. It should also be noted that Sheng has words where [w] appear word medial as in *mawaba* 'water', *mahewa* 'music', *mawanda* 'marijuana' among others. The deletion of [y] is more noticeable in referential demonstratives and emphatics that end with -o as in the two examples as shown in (9);

Like [w] above, [y] deletion is also very restricted. In the first example, the glide in "lugha **ya** Kiswahili" does not undergo deletion while in the second, the two [y] in the "**yeye**" are not affected. In these two cases, the [y] that is deleted is the one that appear before -o in referential demonstratives and truncated emphatics.

## SHENG'S SYLLABIC FEATURES

In Swahili, all borrowed words are adjusted in order to conform to SS syllable structure of CVCV. SS also allows the C syllables in syllabic nasals and V syllables in words with VV sequences involving vowels of different quality. Nevertheless, borrowing has led to the presence of words that have not fully assimilated into the SS syllable structure. The first syllable of the word 'askofu' [as.kɔ.fu] is a good example of VC structure while the first syllable in 'hospitali' [hɔs.pi.ta.li] shows the CVC structure. The CCV syllable sequence in the borrowed word 'blauzi' [bla.u.zi] in (10) below is another example of a borrowing that has not undergone complete syllabification.

- (10) blouse [blauzi] [bla.u.zi]  
office [ɔfisi] [ɔ.fi.si]  
captain [kaptɛni] [kap.tɛ.ni]

In Sheng, the words 'office', 'blouse' and 'captain' are sometimes adopted without any phonetic or prosodic alteration. Hence blouse is adopted as monosyllabic [blaws], with a CCVCC structure, while bisyllabic office and captain yield [p.fis] CV\$CVC, and [kap.tɛn] CVC\$CVC. Words do not necessarily have to undergo modification in order to be regarded as Sheng as long as they are codeswitched with Swahili. Since Sheng borrows from many languages, it means that the syllable structures of those languages are also likely to occur in Sheng (Bosire 2008). This is why complex onsets and codas are allowed in Sheng

## METATHESIS: TRANSPOSITION OF SYLLABLES

Metathesis is a phonological process that involves transposing sounds in words such that a sequence of a,b,c becomes a,c,b. (Hume, 2004). In Sheng, syllables rather than sounds are transposed (see Githinji, 2006). Mazrui (1995) calls it backslang while Githiora (2002, 2018) additionally calls this phenomenon 'Pig Latin'. The term syllabic transposition (Rudd, 2009) is preferred to circumvent terminological confusion. This sentence taken from Githiora (2018) shows that a whole sentence can be composed of words with syllabic transposition;

- (11) Sheng A: kiche leyu mude  
Sheng B: cheki yule dem  
SS: angalia yule msichana  
Gloss: look at that girl

The terms Sheng A and Sheng B are used here to refer to two Sheng versions. The standard Swahili sentence '*Angalia*

*yule msichana* ‘look at that girl’ is first reinterpreted to ‘check that dame’ which is now transformed into Sheng by adding [i] to ‘check’ with a translated Swahili demonstrative yielding *cheki yule demu* which is labeled as Sheng B. However, Sheng is highly versatile and some speakers create a new version from an earlier Sheng version where all the three words in Sheng B undergo syllabic transposition without altering the word order. This is what is labeled here as Sheng A. Syllabic transposition is very productive in Sheng’s renewal as the following vocabulary from Githinji (2006) show.

(12)	<i>new word</i>	<i>old word</i>	<i>gloss</i>
	mdiki	mkidi	‘kid’
	enda	ndae	‘car’
	dingo	gondi	‘thief’

Syllabic transposition occur rarely in SS. Some of the few examples are usually unintentional errors such as saying *laasiri* instead of *alasiri* ‘early afternoon’ and *hairisha* instead of *ahirisha* ‘postpone’. In Sheng however, this is a deliberate strategy that distinguishes it from SS.

## SHENG’S MORPHOSYNTAX

At the morphological level, the manipulation of nominal classes alludes to the presence of two parallel operations. Most of the kinship terms, animal names and most English borrowings in SS are in the 9/10 nominal classes that does not have markers for singular and plurals.

- (13) U-tafiti w-a akina Chami i-na- on-yesh-a....  
 11-research 11-of 9-sing-the likes of Chami 9-sing-PROG-show-CAUS-FV  
 People like Chami’s research shows...

Wa-tu na vi-tu z-ao  
 2-person and 8-thing 10-POSS  
 People and their things

*Mdiki* ‘child’, *mithama* ‘mother’, *mtichee* ‘teacher’, *mdabu* ‘father’, *mindito,* ‘girl’ *mjunia/mniaju* ‘child’ are all Sheng words classified in Noun class 1 and assigned the nominal prefix M. Normal adoption in SS would have yielded *kidi, thama, tichee, dabu, ndito,* and *junia/niaju* ,would have would all be 9 nouns in SS. At the syntactic level, there is a pervasive use of class 9/10 verbal agreement markers for nouns that belong to other noun classes as illustrated in (13) below.

In the first sentence, *utafiti* ‘research’, a class 11 noun should determine verbal agreement but we have class 9 agreement instead. In the second sentence, *zao* ‘their’ is an adjectival possessive which should agree with the *vitu* ‘things’, a class 8 noun that precedes it. Vy- should have been attached to ‘-ao’ to conform with SS adjective agreement. Bosire (2008) observed a similar trend in the sentences *umeona vitabu zangu?* ‘have you seen my books?’ and *mainzi zimejaa huku* ‘there are so many flies here’. Ferrari’s (2014) example *Hii dogii inadoro* instead of the Standard Swahili’s “Huyu mbwa amelala” should be viewed similarly.

The class 9/10 verbal agreement seems to run in the opposite direction when it involves prefixation of **ma** to nouns from different nominal classes. Although **ma** prefixation may seem random, Bosire (2008) has isolated class 14 nouns which comprise of abstract nouns that only appear in singular but pluralize by attaching *ma*-prefix as illustrated below;

The data in 14 shows that rather than



simply copying SS's grammatical template, Sheng has its own system. Double morphology normally happens when lexical items have two morphemes from different languages to accomplish the same grammatical function. All the examples given in example (14) from

SS come to Sheng with their nominal markers and are assigned other nominal markers consistent with Sheng's structure. Other already pluralized nouns that are affixed with the **ma-** plural prefix are shown in (15)

(14)	SS (sg)	SS (pl)	Sheng (sg)	Sheng (pl)	Gloss
	u-kame	u-kame	ukame	ma-ukame	famine/dearth
	u-chawi	u-chawi	uchawi	ma-uchawi	witchcraft
	u-fuska	u-fuska	unyadi	ma-unyadi	promiscuity
	u-haba	u-haba	ubao	ma-ubao	hunger

(15)	Ma-vi-janaa	class 6-class 8-youth
	Ma-vi-ti	class 6-class 8-chair
	Ma-ø-dem	class 6-class 10-girl
	Ma-mi-ti	class 6-class 4-tree

Diminutives in many Bantu languages are classified in class 12 and 13 for singulars and plurals and are prefixed with KA and TU respectively (Ogechi, 2005). In SS, classes 12 and 13 do not exist since diminutives take class 7/8 prefix KI and VI (Mbaabu, 1978; 1992; Bosire, 2008 Ferarri, 2014). In Sheng, however, KA and TU are normally added to other nouns that have already taken the prefixes of their respective noun classes. SS word *mtu* 'person' will thus become *kamtu*, however, its plural counterpart will not be *tu-watu* but *tu-mtu*. In other nouns, pluralized nouns are also prefixed with the TU plural prefix. More examples are provided below

In (16), the Sheng words that take KA/TU prefixes belong to various noun classes in SS. It is unpredictable if TU will attach to singular or plural nouns, even with words that belong to the same noun class in SS. *Mlango* and *mchoro* belong to M/MI, but while TU attaches to the already pluralized *milango* to give *tumilango*, it attaches to singular *mchoro* to yield *tumchoro*. This process is a productive operation and is an indicator that Sheng has its own complex morphosyntactic frame and does not just map into the SS morphosyntax.

(16)	<i>singular</i>	<i>plural</i>	<i>singular</i>	<i>plural</i>
	mdudu	kamdudu	wadudu	tumdudu
	mlango	kamlango	milango	tumilango
	mchoro	kamchoro	michoro	tumchoro
	jina	kajina	majina	tujina/tumajina
	kijiti	kakijiti	vijiti	tuvijiti
	nyumba	kanyumba	nyumba	tunyumba
	ukuta	kaukuta	kuta	tuukuta

In codeswitching, English nouns that precede SS adjectives should be regarded as Sheng because they reflect the structure of Swahili NPs rather than that of English. In addition, codeswitching itself is markedness which is our criterion for distinguishing Sheng from SS. Moreover, since possessives

and demonstratives in English precede nouns, the phrases in (17) cannot be English APs.

(17)	<b>Sheng</b>	<b>English</b>
	boy wangu	my boy
	bike yangu	my bike
	game hii	this game

Similarly, English adjectives that appear after nouns whether the noun is in English or Swahili will be classified as Sheng because in English APs, adjectives precede nouns while the reverse is the case in Swahili as the data in (18) illustrate.

(19)	KS:	...Kenye nataka ni dō zangu	
	SS:	... <u>ninachotaka</u> ni pesa zangu	(Chenye nataka)
		...what I want is my money	
	KS:	Kenye tulikuwa tunangojea ni majibu	
	SS:	Kitu ambacho tulikuwa tunangojea ni majibu	
		What we were waiting for were answers.	

*kwenye glasi* ‘pour water into the glass’). Although these uses are also possible in Sheng, the use of *-enye* before conjugated verb makes it a relative pronoun in Sheng as in Githiora’s (2018) (KS) which is regarded as Sheng and shown here as examples in (19).

Similar to *-enye*, the use of *juu* in Sheng is another innovation. In SS *juu* means ‘up’, and when followed by prepositional ‘ya’, it gives the prepositional reading of ‘over’ or ‘above’, but in (20) below, *juu* is used as a conjunction. Just like in *-enye*, constructions similar to (20) above are absent in SS.

Normally, innovation of functional categories is not common in any language, new and emerging urban languages included. Innovating a marked grammatical structure rather than use the already available word not only points to its innovativeness, but it is also a way of making it distinct from

(18)	<b>Sheng</b>	<b>English</b>
	wall ya blue	blue wall
	macho ya red	red eyes
	pesa fake	fake money
	waist slim	slim waist

The final variables to be considered as features of Sheng’s structure involve the use of adjectival *enye* and prepositional *juu*. In SS, *-enye* is a possessive adjective, (e.g., *matunda yenye utamu* ‘fruits with sweetness), a pronoun (e.g., *mwenye shibe hamjui mwenye njaa* ‘a sated person does not understand a hungry person), and also as a preposition (e.g., *mimina maji*

Standard Swahili.

Before winding up this section on Sheng’s structure, let us briefly comment on its word order. Although the SS word order is dominant in Sheng, some constructions display some flexibility. Githiora’s example mentioned in (11) is repeated in (20) for ease of reference

(20)	Sheng A:	kiche leyu mude
	Sheng B:	cheki yule dem
	SS:	angalia yule msichana
		look at that girl

Since demonstratives in SS are regarded as an adjectival category, they should appear after the nouns they modify. This should have yielded *cheki dem yule*, and *kiche mude leyu* in both Sheng A and Sheng B. Instead, in *cheki yule dem*, the modifier *yule* preceded the noun *dem*. Indeed, the word order here would mirror that of English rather than Swahili

which is hardly surprising. A speaker who makes such a statement would only have mapped Swahili or Sheng words into an English template. This flexibility in word order, albeit minimal, is an illustration of the influence of the two key donor languages. The English word order is marked which would qualify such constructions as Sheng. To wind up this paper, our attention shifts to one of the most recognizable features of Sheng — its vocabulary as marked from Standard Swahili vocabulary.

### SHENG VOCABULARY: SEMANTIC SHIFTS

The lexicon remains the most prominent and hence most researchable area in Sheng. It is easy to compare words in SS or English with their counterparts in Sheng in both form and meaning. Markedness that highlight if a word is Sheng or not can be viewed from three perspectives; a) the semantics it has been assigned by Sheng speakers that differs from its original meaning, b) its collocations, especially if it is a commonly used word and c) chunks of code-switched material where the word in question occurs. Data in (21) below illustrate semantic shift.

(21)	<i>Sheng</i>	<i>English</i>
	area	hood
	barley	alcohol
	browse	to have sex with
	dashboard	breasts

Pronunciation of these words does not change at all, but their meanings do. ‘Area’ and ‘barley’ are cases of semantic broadening and narrowing respectively. The meanings of the other two derive from metaphorical mapping where the connection between a woman’s bosoms and dashboard, or browsing and having

sex is only relational where meaning is constructed through association with something that invokes a similar imagery.

Sheng’s lexical innovation manifests in the way new words are quickly introduced as old ones are discarded. Lexicalization in Sheng has been discussed adequately in Ogechi (2005), Githinji (2006), Bosire (2008) and Muriira (2016), among others. Of interest here is the semantic expansion where a lexeme already in existence in donor languages is assigned new meanings without affecting its pronunciation (as illustrated in (22)).

The word *chrome* has been used in the matatu industry to mean overloading of passengers, some of whom have to hold onto the ‘shiny metal’ on the roof for support. Go Sheng’s dictionary defines it as ‘shiny car rims’. The same name means ‘gun’ in Kayole, a neighborhood associated with gun-related violent crimes. Equally interesting is the word ‘Oboho’ which is defined as a bad boy from the Eastlands in Go Sheng’s dictionary but stands for ‘gun’ in Kayole. To a large extent, lexical differences are mostly attributed to innovation and semantic shift of words already in existence. This semantic shift of familiar words whether from English, Swahili, other languages or earlier versions of Sheng should be viewed as deviation from the norm which is yet another manifestation of markedness.

### CONCLUSIONS

This paper has dealt with different strategies for identifying Sheng. The markedness theory was used to identify linguistic elements that distinguish Sheng from Standard Swahili. Previous literature has focused on the vocabulary as the most robust linguistic area where deviation of Sheng from Standard

(22)	<i>sheng</i>	<i>Origin</i>	<i>gloss</i>	<i>original meaning</i>
	earthwire	English	'necktie'	protective covering
	mshikaji	Swahili	'boy/girlfriend'	one who sticks on
	ubao	Swahili	'hunger'	rib
	pasuka	Swahili	'laugh'	rip
	kutia ndani	Swahili	'eat'	put inside
	kupewa	Swahili	'get drunk'	to be given
	kuchill	English	'abstinence'	to relax
	ngono	Swahili	'cart'	sex
	chrome	English	'gun'	chromium

Swahili is normally conceptualized; however, this paper laid more emphasis on its phonetic, phonological and morphosyntactic features based on the previous work, especially Bosire (2008) Ferarri (2014) and Githiora (2018). This is because structure is the least studied area in urban and youth languages. Rudd (2009) and Ogechi (2002) are notable works that look at Sheng's structure, but it is an area that has not received adequate attention. Moreover, its semantics and pragmatic elements have been mentioned by almost every scholar who has written on Sheng. Nevertheless, little work has been done on its phonetic, phonological or morphological features. Indeed, majority of the scholarly work on urban languages has tended to focus more on their emergence, lexical and grammatical features, perceptions and social functions. The sound system of these languages is murky because of their transient nature. While this is a legitimate concern, linguists should take this as a challenge rather than averting the topic altogether. Indeed the transience of these languages may provide us with a window in which to witness sound change in progress. Just like the study of vocabulary provides us with a glimpse of the social realities that drive such innovations, the study of Sheng's sound system will complement the work done in other linguistics areas

to provide a rich account of these urban languages. In any case, a description of Sheng or any linguistic system is incomplete if it does not provide an account of all its linguistic levels.

In conclusion, Githiora's (2002) position of viewing Sheng within the dialect matrix is very helpful when juxtaposing Sheng and SS. Dialects are recognized linguistic systems that do not have to be subjected to scrutiny about how much they retain fidelity to related linguistic systems. Not only are differences between dialects viewed as legitimate innovations, but dialects themselves are regarded as unique communicative codes that are celebrated and studied to illuminate human experience. Sheng as a social dialect of Swahili has proven to be effective in challenging Kenya's linguistic power structure and empowering the youth and other marginalized groups by crafting alternative platforms of social discourse and modes of expression that are not dictated by the mainstream. In addition, it has become an effective medium of popular culture and a badge for youth identity. The preoccupation with how Sheng differs from Swahili should never be about passing judgment on its authenticity but rather, it should be designed to give a descriptive account that enrich the field of linguistics in general .

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