Filling the Gap: The Place of Urban Vernaculars in Africa

*Ethno-linguistic interactions and cultural identity in African urban centers*

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African Urban Vernaculars

• Urbanization has led to the emergence of new language varieties throughout Africa spoken often only or primarily by the young who have been socialized in cities (Childs 1997: 342).

(1) Bemba in Zambia  
(2) **Camfranglais in Cameroon**  
(3) Indoubil in the Democratic Republic of Congo  
(4) Iscamtho in South Africa  
(5) Lingala in the Democratic Republic of Congo  
(6) Sango in Central African Republic  
(7) **Sheng in Kenya**
Mixed Languages

• **Grammar** and **Vocabulary** come in large chunks from source languages without significant changes.
• They arise in contact situations involving widespread bi- and multi-lingualism.
• They occur even though there is no need for a **medium of communication/ lingua franca**.
• One type of mixed language develops in **new ethnic groups**.
New Badge of Identity

- Intimate cultural and linguistic contact between ethnic groups
- A new ethnic group develops
  - the newly created mixed language is used as a symbol of its new ethnic identity
  - separates its speakers from the source groups.

(Thomason 2001)
Sheng in Kenya

- a population of over 35 million
- ~ 69 languages (Lewis 2009)
- "A shprakh iz a diyalekt mit an armey un a flot" (Max Weinreich 1945)
Three Major African Language Families

- one of very few African countries where three major language families intersect:
- Niger-Congo (65%)
- Nilo-Saharan (30%)
- Afro-Asiatic (3%)
- non-African (2%)

(Heine and Mohlig 1980)
The Linguistic Situation in Kenya

- **Local level**
  - Indigenous languages (Upcountry Swahili)
  - Swahili/English (urban areas)

- **Regional level**
  - Swahili; other languages of wider communication (e.g. Luo, Kikuyu, Kamba, Luyia ... English)

- **National level**
  - Swahili/English

- **International level**
  - English/Swahili
Official Language versus National Language

• English is the official language
  – Language of colonization
  – Language of world trade

• Swahili is the national language
  – Perceived to be politically neutral
  – Post-Independence symbol (less colonial)
Major Trade Routes of East Africa

Colonial Scramble for East Africa
Up-country Swahili

• Several non-standard varieties of Swahili developed in Kenya with trade in the 1800s (Vitale 1980; Berry 1971; Polomé 1967):
  – Kisetla (English settler)
  – Kihindi (Indian)
  – Kivita (military)
  – Kishamba (farmhand)
• Standard Swahili did not penetrate far into Kenya.
The official language of the Kenyan parliament was English from Independence in 1963 to the presidential decree in 1974.

An amendment in 1975 made parliamentary proceedings bilingual, permitting the use of either English or Swahili (Mbaabu 1996: 137).
English or Swahili: National Uncertainty

- Higher-level civil service positions required literacy in English and were occupied by educated Kikuyu speakers, giving them motive to promote English (Laitin & Eastman 1989:52).
- Swahili remained neither a testable nor a compulsory subject on the national examinations for primary and secondary schools until 1985.
A Postcolonial Generation

• In 1985, Swahili had finally reached some true status across the nation and began to be required for social advancement.

• The 22-year interim from 1963 to 1985 was also the genesis of Kenya’s first truly independent, postcolonial generation, and they had had little or no schooling in Standard Swahili.

• This educational lapse prevented the standardization of Swahili in Nairobi and in Kenya in general.

• During this time, a new identity emerged: the urban sophisticate.
Linguistic Paradox

• National language was a hindrance to both the educated and the uneducated.
• By 1970, English was being used in most primary and secondary schools.
• Neither the *nouveau riche* nor the *wananchi* “citizens” spoke standard Swahili.
The Genesis of Sheng I

- Kenyans of various ethnic backgrounds and vernaculars migrated to and came together in Nairobi.
- These immigrants continued to speak their first languages and also brought Up-Country Swahili with them or acquired it informally once they had settled in the city.
- A language with a Swahili base developed which eased inter-ethnic communication (African-African, European-Asian).
- This language was no longer just that of the original ethnic languages.
The Genesis of Sheng II

- Children are born into a linguistic situation in which their native language has a Swahili lexical base.
- Education leads to some children metropolitanizing their variety toward what has become a standardized Swahili.
- Education and media lead exposure to English.
- The various African vernaculars are spoken in fewer and fewer domains.
- A new variety increasingly heavy with English borrowings comes to be the native language of many children, even those without access to formal education in Nairobi.
What remains the same

• From pre-Independence through post-Independence, most Nairobi residents live in slum settlements.

• In Nairobi approximately 60% of the population lives in slums (United Nations Settlement Programme 2003).

• Uncontrolled urban settlements are conducive to social and linguistic interaction.
  – People of differing ethnic and language backgrounds exist shoulder to shoulder.
  – Children are denied access to education in the standard languages (Githinji 2006: 27).

• Sheng is perhaps the slum-dweller’s best option.
Sheng

- The language of an emergent speech community.
- A new code that derives its value from neither its origin in colonial administration nor its mother-tongue status of a specific ethnic group.
Sheng’s Vocabulary

• Basic Vocabulary (core words)
  – 52% Swahili
  – 32% English
  – 16% Innovation

• Nonbasic Vocabulary (Dictionary counts)
  – Non-Swahili 80%
  – Swahili 20%

☐The vocabulary of Sheng is from multiple sources, reflecting a new society.
Filling the Void

• The phenomenon of a highly mixed code reflecting the multilingual and multicultural reality of young urban Africans is not specific to Kenya.
• Similar developments can be described for other African countries.
Traverse the Continent

[Map of Africa]

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Camfranglais in Cameroon

- two official languages, French and English,
- approximately 280 indigenous languages spoken at the local level,
- about eight languages, including Cameroon Pidgin English (CamP), have attained the status of regional lingua francas,
- but none has been accorded the status of a national language.
The Linguistic Situation in Cameroon

• **Local level (280)**
  - Indigenous languages
  - Cameroon Pidgin English (CamP) (urban areas)

• **Regional level (8)**
  - CamP other languages of wider communication (e.g. Fulfulde, Duala, ... French)

• **National level (3)**
  - French/English/CamP

• **International level (2)**
  - English/French

(Schröder 2003a: 121)
(modified from Bamgbose 1991)
Camfranglais

• In Cameroon, Camfranglais’s primary function is **identification** with the peer-group and not communication with other, non-group members.

• However, as the group of urban adolescents in Cameroon typically comprises people from different ethnic backgrounds, it is a means of **inter-ethnic and intra-group communication** at the same time.
Camfranglais

• For these young people the official languages leave a void as they are inadequate means of communication at the local level and in informal settings.
• This void, however, cannot be filled by indigenous languages either, because of the heterogeneous linguistic background of the group members on the one hand and the lack of proficiency of the young people in these languages on the other.
The Wherefores

- Why are speakers in African urban centers choosing to create new languages?
Language Ecology

- Like biological systems, languages exist in their own ecosystems of interacting parts.
- **Poor language policy** and **inadequate urban planning** create **disturbances** in the ecolinguistic systems of urban residents and their offspring.
- Emergent groups form in which an **unmarked language gap** separates the community.
Even some of the more affluent residents acknowledge Sheng as a good inter-ethnic form of communication.

Respondents noted that Sheng is:
(a) ‘cool’; has style;
(b) communicativeness;
(c) flexible;
(d) dynamic.

Language mixing avoids favoring or disfavoring the language of a particular ethnic group.
African Urban Ecologies

• In Cameroon’s urban centers, Camfranglais hybridizes aspects of the indigenous languages, the languages of wider communication, and the two official languages.

• In Nairobi, speaking homeland languages is tribal; Up-Country Swahili, provincial; and English, colonial/elitist; consequently, Sheng empowers speakers to avoid all three pitfalls.

• In African urban environments, the mixed language fills the ecolinguistic gap.

• Thank you.