

“Niaje? Uuh poa”: Structural Re-alignment and Convergence in Sheng

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1. Introduction

As a non-standard dialect, Sheng has continued to metamorphosize into a complex mixed language (Rudd, 2009) that is widely spoken by majority of the urban population in Kenya today. Over time, Sheng has seen its speaker-population expand from school-going teens to include entire city residents in Nairobi. Besides, its popularity on social media and local radio stations has activated its spread to other areas across the country. For a long time, Sheng was highly stigmatized from what was generally perceived as a ‘ghetto language’ whose speakers are poor and uneducated (Kaviti, 2015). However, in the more recent times, this perception seems to have changed as many view it as a prestigious code that plays the role of group identity, solidarity, and socializing.

Sheng structure is similar to that of Swahili and it is not a conventionally written language, however, it is very active in its spoken form. The lexicons in Sheng evolve rapidly over time and some of the vocabularies get replaced with newer lexicon. In the recent past, Sheng has continued to manifest constant innovation in its lexicon, phonology, morphology and structural patterning. This paper mainly focuses on structural re-alignment and morpho-syntactic patterning in Sheng that appear unique from Swahili, a language that has been considered to supply Sheng with a syntactic frame (Kange’the-Iraki, 2004).

Grammatical restructuring is a common phenomenon in a language contact situation, more so during language genesis (Lim & Ansado, 2016). Linguistic reanalysis is likely to occur in an environment that brings together speakers of different languages. Light Warlpiri, for example, displays a radical restructuring of source elements within the verbal

auxiliary system, where a formal modal distinction is made that is not found in the source languages (O'shannnessy, 2013). Languages in contact are bound to trigger grammaticalization. This is simply a process by which grammatical forms and constructions are transferred from one language to another as a result of being in contact or neighboring each other (Hein & Kuteva, 2005). The theory of grammaticalization has been proposed to explain why grammatical forms are structured the way they are. Dahl (2000) points out that grammaticalization processes tend to cluster not only genetically but also areally. The term areal grammaticalization (Kuteva, 2000) and gramaticalization area (Kuteva 1998) have been proposed to describe the effects of grammaticalization processes on the areal pattern of linguistic structures. East Africa is an area marked by massive contact between languages belonging to different genetic groups.

In the case of language contact, grammaticalization concerns itself with development of grammatical forms and constructions, which can be theoretically explained through the notion of parameters. Grammaticalization parameters such as extension, desemanticization, decategorization and erosion have all been proposed (Heine & Kuteva, 2005).

The extension parameter accounts for the emergence of innovative forms with the backing that their formation is due to extended constructions from one language context to the next. Decemantization applies when a given form loses its original meaning and the same form re-creates a different meaning far from the original. Decategorisation is similar to decemantization only that its meaning is re-classified. Erosion is simply loss of phonemic sound. This form has more to do with phonology. Such parameters can be used in reconstruction of new linguistic forms that carry new meanings.

2. Data

The data for the present study was outsourced from a common genre in Kenya known as *mchongoano*. Mchongoano is a performative discourse and speech genre of playful verbal insults exchanged with an opponent and directed to another opponent directly or to his/her family members. While it includes insults, these are not necessarily deliberate nor carry truth-value but are solely meant to entertain and cause humor for the audience. It can be likened to the African-American verbal art popularly known as 'playing the dozens', 'sounding', 'jonning', 'snapping' or 'capping' (Labov, 1972). The reason behind this choice of data is that *mchongoano* is a very rich genre in displaying new and innovative linguistic features in Sheng. This could be credited to the fact that, *mchongoano* is a genre used in very informal interactions where Sheng seem to thrive so well.

3. Sheng language

Sheng is a product of language contact between English, Swahili and other ethnic dialects spoken within Nairobi and its environs. The urban slums of Nairobi consist of a multimodal speech community with speakers from different ethnic background who co-exist together. With Swahili being one of the official languages in Kenya as well as a lingua franca, its continued use has seen great modification that is coupled with condensed code switching and mixing between English, Swahili and other ethnic dialects. The emergence and rise of Sheng is partly attributed to cognitive process in which young minds exposed to several languages are likely to weave a compromised new language from the linguistic input available to them (Kange'the Iraki, 2004)

- b. *Wa-toto wa-na-kula ugali*
 CL1.PL-Child 3PL.CL2-TAM-eat food.
 “Children are eating food”

- (3) a. **M-toto li-na-kula ugali*
 b. **Wa-toto ya-na-kula ugali*

In (2a), the first noun *mtoto* ‘child’ is in CLASS 1 and agrees with the verbal prefix *a-* in the following verb. Any effort to change the prefix as in (3a) renders the construction ungrammatical. On the other hand, the first noun *watoto* ‘children’ in (2b) is in CLASS 2 co-indexed with *wa-*prefix in the following verb morphology. Again, any effort to alter the prefix as seen in (3b) renders the construction ungrammatical. The two prefixes (A and WA) are therefore used to identify the two classes, which happen to be separated by singular-plural criteria. Elsewhere, the two noun classes converge into one noun class known as A-WA (Kihore, Massamba & Msanjila, 2003). However, for the sake of current study, we will assume these two to be in separate noun classes, that is, CLASS1 and 2. To affirm these, let’s consider another concordial agreement in CLASS 3 and 4. Consider example (4) and (5) below;

- (4) a. *Mji u-ko mbali*
 Town.SG LOC.CL3-BE far
 b. *Miji i-ko mbali.*
 Town.PL LOC.CL4-BE far
 (5) a. **Mji a- ko mbali*
 b. **Miji wa-ko mbali*
 “The town(s) is far”

The singular noun *mji* ‘town/city’ in (4a) belongs to noun CLASS 3 and agrees with the preverbal prefix *u-*. Its plural counterpart in (5b) *miji* ‘towns/cities’ is in noun CLASS 4 and agrees with preverbal prefix *i-*. These grammatical agreements are crucial in identifying a noun class and how it co-indexes with other grammatical elements within a sentence.

Table (1) shows Swahili noun class classification and their agreement markers on subjects, objects, possessives, adjectives as well as demonstratives. On the other hand, Table (2) shows similar classification in Sheng. However, sheng appears to have an extra noun class KA-TU in its configuration.

Notable differences are salient in both Table (1) and (2). In noun CLASS 1, Sheng appears to have variant of subject prefixes in comparison to standard Swahili. One notable difference is the prefix marker *i-*, which is grammatical in Sheng but ungrammatical in standard Swahili. Consider the Sheng example in (6).

- (6) *Paka_i y-enyu i_i-me-ona mamovie_j*
 Cat CL1SG. POSS CL1 SUBJ-TAM-see CL10PL.SUBJ-movie

mpaka i_i-ki-anza ku-fuata panya i_i-na-lia tereng! tereng!
 until CL1SUBJ-TAM-start to-follow rats CL1SUBJ-TAM-cry IDIOPHONE
 “Your cat has is addicted to movies until when it runs after mice it sounds tereng!Tereng!”

Table1: Noun class concordial agreement in Swahili

Class No.	Noun prefix	Subject prefix	Object prefix	Possessive prefix	Adjectival prefix	Dem. suffix
1	M-	a-;yu-	m-	w-	m-	-yo
2	WA-	wa	wa	w-	wa	-o
3	M-	u	-o-	w-	wa-	u
4	MI-	i-	i-	y-	mi	-yo
5	ø/JI	li-	li-	l-	ø/ji	lo
6	MA-	ya-	ya-	y-	ma	-yo
7	KI-	ki-	ki-	ch-	ch-	-cho
8	VI-	vi-	vi-	vy-	vy-	-vyo
9	N-	i-	i-	y-	n-	-yo
10	N-	Zi-	zi	z-	n-	-zo
11	U-	u-	u-	w-	m-	-o
14	U-	u-	u-	w-	m-	-o
15	KU-	ku	ku	kw	ku	-ko
16	PA-	pa-	pa-	p-	pa-	-po
17	KU-	ku-	ku-	kw-	ku-	-ko
18	MU-	mu	mu-	mw-	m-	-mo

Table 2:Noun class concordial agreement in Sheng

Class No.	Noun prefix	Subject prefix	Object prefix	Possessive prefix	Adjectival prefix	Dem. suffix
1	M-	a-;yu-	m-	y;w-	m-	-yo
2	WA-	wa	wa	w-	wa	-o
3	M-	u	-o-	w-	wa-	u
4	MI-/MA	i-/zi	i-/ ø	y-	mi	-zo
7	KI-	ki-	ki-	ch-	ch-	-cho
8	VI-	zi-	zi-	z-	ny-	-zo
9	Ø-	i-	i-/ ø	y-	ø	-yo
10	MA-	Zi-	zi	z-	ma-	-zo
11	ø/u-	u-	u-/ ø	w-	m-	-o
12	KA-	ka-	ka-	k-	ka-	-ko
13	TU	tu	tu	tw	tu	-to
15	KU-	ku-	ku-/ ø	kw-	ku-	-ko
16	PA-	pa-/ku-	Ø	p-/kw-	pa-/ku-	-po
17	KU-	Ku-	ø	kw-	ku-	-ko

We observe that *paka* ‘cat’, which belongs to CLASS 1 in standard Swahili, is co-indexed with prefix/marker *i-* for subject in Sheng. This prefix is inherent with noun class 3/4 in standard Swahili. On the other hand, the noun *paka* is coindexed with *a-* prefix in standard Swahili as observed in (7).

- (7) *Paka w-enyu a-me-nona senema mpaka -*
 Cat CL1.POSS. PL CL1-3SG.SUBJ see movies until
a-kianza kufuata panya a-na-lia tereng! tereng!
 CL1.3SG.SUBJ-start follow mice CL1.3SG.SUBJ-TAM-cry IDIOPHONIC
 “Your cat has is addicted to movies until when it runs after mice it sounds tereng!
 Tereng!”

It appears that Sheng re-classifies Swahili nouns to different groups based on what I will term as nominal morphology. Nouns that do not conjugate their morphology in singular and plural tend to be moved to CLASS 9/10. A notable characteristic with CLASS 9 is that all of its nouns have Ø nominal prefix so that nouns that appear with Ø prefix in CLASS 1 are likely to be moved to CLASS 9/10 in Sheng. Sheng seems not to reclassify nouns that conjugate its morphology from singular to plural. Consider example 10 below;

- (8) *Mtoi* *wake* *a-me-m-show-*
 CL1 SG-Child CL1.POSS CL1SUBJ-TAM-OBJ-tell
a-kam-ie *i-le* *burungu yake.*
 3SG-collect-for CL9.SG that stuff 3SG. POSS.
 “His child told him to come for his stuff”

The noun in (7) *cat* and one in (8) *child* both belong to CLASS 1 in Standard Swahili, however Sheng co-indexes them differently resulting to *mtoi* ‘child’ staying in CLASS 1 and *paka* ‘cat’ moving to CLASS 9/10 in Sheng.

3.3 Noun CLASS 8 vs Noun CLASS 10

There seems to be a structural convergence between concordial prefix of noun CLASS 8 which is the plural counterpart of nouns in CLASS 7. Nouns in CLASS 8 get co-indexed with prefixes in noun CLASS 10. Consider the following examples for both standard Swahili and Sheng.

- (9) Standard Swahili
 a. *Vitabu, vy-angu* *vi-me-potea*
 Book.PL CL8-POSS CL8.PL.SUBJ-TAM-lose
- Sheng
 b. *Vitabu, za-ngu* *zi-me-potea*
 Book.PL CL10-POSS CL10.PL.SUBJ-TAM-lose
 “The books have disappeared”

In Standard Swahili, the co-indexation seen in (9b) would be considered ungrammatical but in Sheng it turns out to be a well-formed structure.

When a bilingual individual uses two languages equitably, there is a tendency for the two languages to share structural properties (Mysken, 2001 & Sebba, 2009). Literature has shown that motivation of convergence can be alluded to the ‘Abstract Level Model (ABL)’ (Myers-Scotton 2002:18). Based on this model, Myer-Scotton argues that convergence is both a process and an outcome. As an outcome, it is a linguistic configuration with all surface morphemes from one language and part of its abstract lexical structure from another language. On the other, convergence is a process in the sense that it is a mechanism in the progressive outcome of attrition, language shift, and language death and or creole formation. It appears that such structural re-alignment in Sheng is supported by the ABL model.

Another case for structural convergence in Sheng language involves CLASS 5/6 and 9/10. As it can be observed from table (2) above, Sheng lacks classification for CLASS 5/6. This class merges with CLASS 9/10 and co-indexation for its nouns takes the form of

those in CLASS 9/10. In Sheng, CLASS 5/6 nouns in Swahili take the concordial markers for CLASS 9/10 as illustrated in the following *mchongoano* example;

- (10) a. *ati frijesa y-enu i-me-chapa ...* (Sheng)
EXCL CL9 refrigerator CL9.POSS 3PL CL9SUBJ-TAM-old
b. *Eti friji l-enu limezeeka* (Std. Swahili)
EXCL refrigerator CL5 POSS CL5.SUBJ-TAM-old

From (10a) above, the noun *frijesa* ‘refrigerator’ is co-indexed by possessive affix *y-* and subject prefix *i-*, which happens to be the affixes for CLASS 10. In Swahili, the noun *friji* ‘refrigerator’ is coindexed by possessive prefix *l-* and subject prefix *li-* which align with CLASS 5 as seen from table (1) above. If sentence (12a) were to be used in Standard Swahili it would automatically be filtered out as ungrammatical.

3.4 Diminutives

Diminutives in Swahili and Sheng are marked differently (Bosire, 2008). In Swahili diminutives are formed by prefixing augmentives with prefix *ki-*. Consider the following example;

- (11) Noun Augmentive Diminutive
Mtu (person) *jitu* *kijitu*

All nouns in diminutive forms take on CLASS 7/8. So the word *kijitu*, diminutive for *mtu* ‘person’, in CLASS 7 becomes *vijitu* (plural diminutive for *mtu*) in class 8. Sheng on the other hand forms its own class for diminutives both in singular and plural. Noun class 12/13 also known as KA-TU is reserved for diminutives in Sheng. Example (12) was outsourced from *Facebook*.

- (12) *Tu-rembo twa siku hizi tu-na-ringa sana*
CL13.PL-lady of nowadays DEM.PL CL13PL.SUBJ-TAM-proud very.
“The modern socialites are very proud”

The singular equivalent for (12) would be;

- (13) *Ka-rembo ka siku hizi ka-naringa sana*
CL12.SG-lady of day this. PL CL12SUBJ-TAM-pride very
“The modern socialite is very proud”

3.5 Habitual Prefix –nga

Swahili and Sheng are typically agglutinative languages and their verbal morphology plays an integral part in binding relationship. The subject, object, tense, aspect and mood markers/prefixes all appear before the verb stem in Swahili and for a large part in Sheng. Consider the following example.

- (14) Swahili
a. *A-ta- ni-ona*
CL1.3SG.SUBJ-TAM-CL1.1SG.OBJ-see
“H/she will see me”

- Sheng
b. *A-ta-ni- cheki*

CL1.3SG.SUBJ-TAM-CL1.1SG.OBJ-see
 “H/she will see me”

In (14), we note that all the prefixes are preverbal in both languages. However, there is a glaring morphological distinction when it comes to placement of habitual aspect in Sheng. As it can be seen in (15), Sheng prefers a post verbal conjugation of habitual prefix *-nga*.

(15) Swahili

a. *Yeye huniona*
 He/she HAB-CL1.1SG.OBJ

Sheng

b. *Yee_i a_i-na-ni_j-ona-nga*
 He/she CL1.3SG.SUBJ-PRES-CL1.2SG.OBJ-see-HAB
 “S/he sees me”

Apparently, Sheng construction consists of present tense prefix *-ni-* in the preverbal position and the habitual aspect marker *-nga* in post verbal position. It appears that Sheng assigns tense and habitual aspect to two different morphemes i.e. *-na-* and *-nga* respectively. On the other hand, Swahili has the present simple tense as well as habitual aspect marker mapped onto one morpheme *hu-*, at least for this type of construction. In a different construction like the one in (16) Swahili introduces temporal adverbials to mark habitual aspect. It should be noted that Sheng only modifies the tense aspect when compared to example (15) above.

(16) Swahili

a. *Musa a-li-kuwa a-ki-ni-tembelea kila siku.*
 Musa CL1.3SG.SUBJ-PST-used to CL1.3SG.SUBJ-HAB-CL1.1SG.OBJ-visit
 every day.
 “Moses used to visit me every day.”

Sheng

b. *Mose a-li-ni-tembelea-nga.*
 Mose CL1.3SG.SUBJ-PST-visit-HAB
 “Moses used to visit.”

This provide an evidence in which Sheng is constantly restructuring itself and becoming less similar to a language that was previously argued to be a variant of Swahili. The introduction of a new noun class that is not in Standard Swahili is quite interesting.

4. Discussion

Generally, we observe that Sheng is a product of language contact diffusion. Such diffusion may involve contact induced gain, or loss of form or pattern in either of the languages in contact (Aikhevald, 2006). Contact-induced changes may involve significant restructuring of a grammatical system. The Sheng binding relationship shows a structural re-alignment that tends to shift away from that of standard Swahili, a language that Sheng is structurally associated with. As observed in example (6) and (7), Sheng re-innovates the grammatical binding relationship between nouns and its conjugation based on noun classes. *Paka* ‘cat’ which is a CLASS 1 noun in Swahili agrees with conjugation marker(s) *i-* for CLASS 9 in Sheng. Based on verbal-morphology noun classification, Sheng

automatically re-classify the noun *paka* into CLASS 9 in order to agree grammatically. It appears that this is not a random movement and reclassification of nouns. There seems to be an underlying constraint that restricts such re-alignment. Nouns that bear Ø morph for plurality in CLASS 1 and 2 of Swahili, such as *paka*, *mbwa*, *kunguni* among others, only can agree with CLASS 9 and 10 Sheng's pre-verbal prefix *i-*. On the other hand, grammatical relation between nouns that bear CLASS morpheme, as observed in example (8), stay within CLASS 1 and are not subjected to grammatical re-alignment. This is illustrated below:

Table 3: Reclassification of nouns in Sheng

Swahili CL 1&2		Sheng CL 9&10		Sheng CL1&2		Gloss
Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural	
Ø Paka	Ø Paka	Ø Paka	Ø Paka			Cat
Økunguni	Økunguni	Økunguni	Økunguni			bedbug
M-toto	Wa-toto			M-toi	Wa-toi	child
M-zungu	Wa-zungu			M-lami	Wa-lami	caucasian

The nouns *mtoto* 'child' and *mzungu* 'Caucasian man/woman' do not re-classify to class 9/10 in Sheng due to the presence of nominal prefix markers, that is, *m-/ wa-*. Such nouns, though they re-analyze their lexical morphology, they do maintain the nominal morphology *m-/wa-* in Sheng.

The formation of KA-TU noun class in Sheng can be alluded to areally-induced grammaticalization (Aikhenvald, 2006; Heine & Kuteva 2005). According to Aikhenvald (2006) grammaticalization is the process by which lexical item is grammaticalized to express a category or a meaning in the target language that has a similar grammaticalization path in the influencing language. Swahili classifies its nouns into classes by singular/plural distinctions. For instance, CLASS 1 consists of nouns in singular and CLASS 2 the same nouns as in one but in plural. This path seems to be one adopted by Sheng classification of all singular and plural diminutives into CLASS 13 and 14 respectively. The diminutives in Sheng have undergone some form of re-analysis in the sense that they do not necessary refer to 'smallness' rather aesthetic value that is attached to the diminutive marker. For instance, *karemba* (cf example 12 & 13) may not necessarily mean 'a diminutive form of the noun girl' but rather 'a precious beautiful girl'. The plural form of *karemba* is *turemba*. This creates a new class KA-TU that is apparently absent from languages Sheng borrows from.

5. Conclusion

The focus of this paper was to understand how Sheng radically restructures its morphosyntactic patterning to give rise to newly-formed structures that are unique and absent from the languages it heavily borrows from. I have argued that Sheng is a product of structural diffusion between Swahili and other indigenous dialects it borrows from. The case of binding relationship between CLASS 1 and 2 in Swahili and CLASS 9 and 10 in Sheng provide a fair example to argue out that there exists structural re-alignment in Sheng. The absence of CLASS 5 and 6 in Sheng as observed in the study indicates that Sheng exhibits a structural convergence. While this study has used *mchongoano* and *Facebook* posts to demonstrate how structural realignment takes shape in Sheng, there is still need to replicate it with expanded data in different regions where Sheng is spoken in

order to strengthen arguments made in the present study. Further research on how grammaticalization promotes structural realignment should be given closer attention in future studies.

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