



The Influence of Sheng' Phonology on The Learning of Kiswahili Grammar in Public Secondary Schools in Uasin Gishu County - Kenya

**Dorcas Mugun¹, John Simiyu¹, Rachel Koros¹*

¹School of Education, Department of curriculum and Instruction, P.O Box 1125-30100, University of Eldoret

***Corresponding Email:** mugund83@gmail.com

Abstract

Sheng' is a linguistic code that primarily utilizes Kiswahili structure and grammar, incorporating vocabulary from Kiswahili, English, and various Kenyan ethnic languages. This code is predominantly used in urban areas. This paper aims to investigate how Sheng' phonology affects the acquisition of Kiswahili grammar among students in public secondary schools in Uasin Gishu, Kenya. This study applied Howard Giles Communication Accommodation Theory. According to Giles, people adjust their vocal patterns, gestures and their speech in order to accommodate others during their interaction. The study employed mixed methods research and exploratory sequential research design. At the time of the study, there were 350 teachers Kiswahili and 18,661 Form Three learners. Using the Krejcie and Morgan sampling table, a sample of 55 teachers and 360 students were selected to participate in the research. Data was gathered through observation schedules, focus group discussion guides, and a writing task assigned to the students. Questionnaires and interview guides were used for teachers of Kiswahili. Qualitative data collected were analyzed thematically to produce insights that were visually summarized in graphics and discussed in narrative form. Quantitative data were examined using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The study found out that incorporating Sheng words did not provide any benefits for learning Kiswahili grammar. Additionally, Sheng phonology negatively affected the learning process, as students often wrote based on their spoken language patterns. The study advocates that school administrators enforce strict adherence to school-based language policies to manage the language environment effectively. Additionally, the Ministry of Education should promote drama, music, and debate competitions among schools to enhance language skills. The Department of Research Monitoring and Evaluation at the KICD should ensure that language use is clearly defined in the Kiswahili subject curriculum and consider recognizing Sheng' as a distinct language code within the country.

Keywords: Influence, Sheng, Phonology, learning, Kiswahili, grammar

INTRODUCTION

The term "Sheng" is a blend of Swahili and English, with the "h" added from the middle of "Swahili" to avoid the awkward sound of "Seng." It was first recorded in 1965. Sheng emerged in the early 1950s in Nairobi's Eastlands area, often described as a "slum," "ghetto," or "suburb." Today, Sheng is commonly spoken by matatu drivers and conductors and even school children. It is also prevalent in popular media. (Githui, 2021). Various factors such as language contact, limited knowledge of standard languages (Swahili and English), identity, obfuscation of meaning, and cognitive efficiency have been linked to its evolution and usage



(Angalia, 2017). As a language code, Sheng' can influence students' thinking and their expressions in both verbal and written communication. This study aimed at investigating the impact of Sheng' phonology on Kiswahili grammar and explore methods to reduce this impact on verbal and written expressions. The Kiswahili language's origins can be traced to the colonial era, with oral culture being deeply engraved in the majority of kunyas for an extended period (Kakai, 2022). The advent of foreign religions such as Christianity and Islam facilitated the introduction of written forms of communication. Consequently, Kiswahili emerged the first among other indigenous languages to be transcribed (Gitara, 2016). The Ominde Commission (1964) recommended that the widespread use of the Kiswahili language to serve as a means for national coordination and unification. It also significantly facilitated international communication in East Africa and beyond. The very importance of including Kiswahili in the curriculum was emphasized by all subsequent government commissions tasked with reviewing the educational system.

In Kenya, English was the sole compulsory and examinable subject for a long time and served as the primary medium of instruction across all subjects. This negatively impacted the attention given to Kiswahili by both teachers and learners. Consequently, The Gachathi Report (1976) recommended making Kiswahili compulsory at both primary and secondary educational levels. He suggested that while Kiswahili should be compulsory, it should not be an examinable subject at these levels (Kanana, 2024). Kiswahili, one of Kenya's national languages, taught as a compulsory subject in schools and plays a vital role in fostering national unity and cultural identity among Kenyans. However, the growing influence of Sheng on Kiswahili grammar instruction in public secondary schools raises concerns about its impact on students' language proficiency and comprehension of standard Kiswahili (Obata, 2022). Despite Kiswahili's significant societal role, performance in Kiswahili grammar had been notably poor, as highlighted by KNEC (2021). Research indicated that weaknesses in Kiswahili grammar and composition were key factors contributing to low performance in national examinations. Notably, Kiswahili was a core component of the subject cluster for all courses (Joint Admission Board, 2011). The study aimed to examine how language policy and career choices had led to increased attention on Kiswahili, similar to other examinable subjects. Success in national-level Kiswahili exams was largely dependent on proficiency in grammar. Therefore, the study focused on assessing the influence of Sheng on Kiswahili grammar learning in public secondary schools, where performance in this area had been inadequate. Uasin Gishu County was chosen for its cosmopolitan nature, which provided relevant insights into Sheng language code. Public schools were selected for sampling as they met the required criteria for the study.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized an exploratory sequential design, which begins with qualitative exploration to understand a topic and then uses these insights to develop quantitative instruments and phases of the research. This approach is particularly effective for areas or populations that are under-researched, as it allows for an initial deep dive into the topic before applying quantitative methods (Herye, 2021).

The study was executed in two distinct phases. In the qualitative phase, exploratory sequential design was employed to gather and analyze participants' views. This initial data was then used



to inform the development of the quantitative phase. The qualitative findings were instrumental in creating a tailored instrument for the subsequent quantitative study, identifying suitable tools for follow-up, and specifying key variables that needed further investigation (Obuya, 2020). In this study, a thorough sampling process was employed, utilizing a combination of techniques such as the Krejcie & Morgan sampling table, stratified random sampling, purposive sampling, and simple random sampling. Following the 30% sample size recommendation from Porth (2016), a total of 55 public secondary schools were selected. Specifically, the sample included seven girls' boarding schools out of 22, nine boys' boarding schools from 29, and 39 public day schools, amounting to 55 schools in total. Within each selected school, one teacher of Kiswahili was purposively chosen. For schools with multiple teachers of Kiswahili, simple random sampling determined which teacher would participate, resulting in a total of 55 teachers of Kiswahili. For the student sample, simple random sampling was used to select 45 Form Three students from each of the sampled schools, totaling 360 students. The overall sample consisted of 415 respondents: 360 students and 55 teachers. Form Three students were selected due to their sufficient exposure to Kiswahili topics, unlike Form One and Two students who had less experience. Form Four students were excluded from the study as they were focused on preparing for national examinations. Data collection included observation schedules, focus group discussion guides, and a writing task for students, while teachers were provided with questionnaires and interview guides. To ensure the accuracy and reliability of the data, the content validity of the instruments was assessed. This involved evaluating both face and content validity through piloting, with feedback incorporated into the final instruments. Additionally, the Test-Retest method was employed to validate the test, with two public secondary schools not included in the main study participating in this validation process.

Findings

Impact of Sheng' phonology in the Learning Kiswahili Grammar

Table 1.1 Impact of Sheng' phonology in the Learning of Kiswahili Grammar

Impact	Frequency	Percent
Very good	5	17.9
Good	6	21.4
Poor	17	60.7
Total	28	10

Source: Survey Data (2023)

The impact of Sheng' on language use was assessed through both spoken and written forms. Observations indicated that many students struggled with fluency in Kiswahili, frequently mixing it with other languages during communication. To gauge the influence of Sheng' on Kiswahili instruction, teachers were asked to evaluate how Sheng' affects the teaching of Kiswahili grammar.

With support teaching reference to table 1.1 the results show that majority (60.7%) said that Sheng' does not support the teaching of Kiswahili grammar. This is because Sheng' words are borrowed from two languages of which one could be from mother tongue. The Sheng' words have no connection with either the languages the words were borrowed, for example



wooza meaning *hujambo* or how are you. *Cheza chini* to mean take it easy, *tenje*, to mean a phone, *mboch*, a domestic worker, *mode*, for a teacher, *mokoro* for mother, *mboka* for work and *mambo kwa ground ni different* meaning the how a situation appears is different from reality. These are some of the Sheng' words commonly used in everyday conversation, leading to significant interference with standard Kiswahili grammar. When comparing Kiswahili spoken in Kenya to that in Tanzania, there is a notable disparity in quality. This observation aligns with Kakai (2022), who reports that Sheng' morpho-syntactic structures can significantly impact students' proficiency in Kiswahili. Additionally, Githiora (2018) findings concurred with this view, clearly noting that many Kenyans believe Sheng' disrupts standard Kiswahili, thereby negatively affecting formal education.

Nevertheless, 39.3% of respondents believed that Sheng' could enhance the learning of Kiswahili grammar. This perspective was likely held by those teachers who supported the dire use of Sheng', viewing it as one of prestigious and appealing form of communication. They argued that Sheng' could reinforce discourse in both traditional and virtual contexts, helping students better understand technical facets of the subject and expand their worldview. These findings aligned with Hussain (2023), who suggested that code-switching, including the use of Sheng', could support and deepen student engagement with the material. According to Hussain, code-switching aided in grasping complex concepts and encouraged more profound expression of ideas. However, this view was challenged by Erastus (2023), who contended that the dynamic nature of Sheng' posed difficulties for using Kiswahili effectively as a medium of instruction in schools.

Sheng' Phonology on the Learning Kiswahili Grammar

The study aimed to assess respondents' reactions to Sheng' phonology by presenting them with a series of statements. Each statement offered five response options: Strongly Agree (S.A), Agree (A), Undecided (U), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (S.D). Respondents were instructed to select the option that best reflected their opinion on the impact of Sheng' phonology on the instruction of Kiswahili grammar, marking their choice with a tick (✓) in the spaces provided in Table 4.6.

Table 2.1: Sheng' Phonology and the learning Kiswahili grammar

STATEMENT	SA	A	U	D	SD
1 I am familiar with Sheng' phonology	22(40%)	15(27%)	0	11(20%)	7(13%)
2 I have encountered challenges in pronouncing or understanding Sheng' words	29(53%)	15(27%)	0	7(12%)	4(7%)
3 I think Sheng' phonology affects the teaching and learning of Kiswahili grammar	26(47%)	26(47%)	0	4(7%)	4(7%)
4 There are benefits of incorporating Sheng'	4(7%)	7(13%)	4(7%)	15(27%)	26(47%)



phonology in teaching
Kiswahili grammar

5	There are drawbacks of incorporating Sheng' phonology in teaching Kiswahili grammar	33(60%)	15(27%)	0	4(7%)	4(7%)
6	I think Sheng' phonology should be included in the Kiswahili curriculum	26(47%)	22(40%)	7(13%)	4(7%)	0

Source: Survey Data (2023)

Table 2.1 presents the responses regarding Sheng' phonology's influence on learning Kiswahili grammar. A significant portion of respondents, 40%, strongly agreed that they were familiar with Sheng', while 27% agreed, and 13% strongly disagreed. Regarding challenges with Sheng' words, 53% strongly agreed that they encountered difficulties in pronunciation or understanding, and 27% agreed. In terms of Sheng' phonology's impact on Kiswahili grammar learning, 47% strongly had agreed that it affects the learning process, with 40% agreeing, while only 7% disagreed. On the benefits of incorporating Sheng' phonology, 47% strongly disagreed, and 27% disagreed, indicating a lack of perceived benefits. Conversely, 60% strongly had agreed that there are drawbacks to integrating Sheng' phonology into teaching Kiswahili grammar, with 27% agreeing. When it comes to including Sheng' phonology in the Kiswahili curriculum, 47% strongly agreed and 40% agreed, though 13% were undecided and 7% disagreed.

The study found that a majority (67%) of respondents were familiar with Sheng' phonology, whereas 33% were not. It also uncovered that 80% had faced challenges in pronouncing or understanding Sheng' words, with only 20% reporting no difficulties. Consequently, the study concluded that Sheng' pronunciation issues were likely to impact Kiswahili grammar learning negatively. Furthermore, 87% of respondents indicated that Sheng' phonology adversely affected Kiswahili learning, while 13% disagreed. Regarding the ultimate benefits of incorporating Sheng' phonology into Kiswahili grammar instruction, the study found no perceived advantages, with 74% of respondents disagreeing and only 20% agreeing that Sheng' phonology would be beneficial.

The study found that 87% of respondents believed incorporating Sheng' phonology into Kiswahili grammar instruction had significant drawbacks, while 13% disagreed. Despite this, 87% of participants felt Sheng' phonology should be included in the Kiswahili curriculum, with 13% undecided. These results align with Ochieng (2021), who argues that Sheng' is not a major factor in poor English performance and questions the idea that proficiency in one language hinders another. Ochieng believes that learning a bit of multiple languages can enhance overall language skills. Conversely, Githinji (2021) supports the study's findings, attributing poor language performance to the ultimate influence of Sheng' and mother tongue, especially when used in both educational settings and casual communication. Githinji argues that such language interference negatively impacts language proficiency.

The study revealed that 87% of respondents supported the inclusion of Sheng' phonology in the Kiswahili curriculum. Sheng' is widely used by various age groups and ethnicities in Kenya, serving as a common language code outside formal education settings (Barasa, 2021).



It is a prevalent mode of social interaction among university, secondary, and primary school students, and is not owned by any specific community, making it a potentially valuable element of the education system alongside other indigenous languages.

Despite 67% of respondents being familiar with Sheng' phonology, 74% of teachers felt there were no benefits to incorporating it into Kiswahili grammar instruction. They argued that Sheng', not being an official language for any ethnic group, might only introduce confusion and alter word structures. Sheng' often involves altering or swapping syllables, which can significantly change the appearance and meaning of words. These findings align with Kakai (2022), who notes that borrowed words in Sheng' are modified to appear distinct from their original forms, leading to potential confusion.

The findings show that teachers generally agreed on several aspects of Sheng' usage. They strongly concurred that Sheng' words impede understanding of Kiswahili and that Sheng' should not be used in written Kiswahili. This highlights the impact Sheng' has on learning Kiswahili, as some teachers who speak Sheng' may use the code to explain concepts or construct sentences. This finding supports Githinji's (2022) assertion that Sheng' is widely used within educational settings such as schools and colleges. Sheng' is prevalent across all demographics, irrespective of status, age, or gender.

Sheng' Phonology on Focus Group Discussion

The study aimed to investigate Sheng phonology through focus group discussions and recorded observations. The findings are detailed in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Sheng' Phonology

Sheng'	Standard Swahili	Direct translation	Standard English
Teo	Mtihani	Mtihani	Exam
Makombotoro	Mama	Wamama	Mother
Nakulombotovu	Nakupenda	Nakupenda	I love you
Kizumbutungu	Kizungu	Mangereza	English
Nakulambatata	Nakuchukia	Ninakuchukia	I hate you
Mushombtosh	Nyanya	Mnyanaya	Grand mother
Mkosembete	Mkamba	Genegashi	A Kamba
Wambatangu	Wangu	Mawangu	Mine
Gembeteshi	Genge	Magenge	Gang
Mazimbiting	Wasichana	Mawasichana	Girls
Mazembete	Baba	Mababa	Father
Mafambatans	Mashabiki	Wamashabiki	Fans
Wooza	Hujambo	Niaje	How are you
Sijimbitinga	Ujinga	Sijinga	Foolishness

Source: Focus group discussions

Table 3.1 shows common words used by students during their focus discussion on Sheng' phonology. The word *teo* meaning examination was popular among students during the discussion. The word *makombotoro* was applied and used to mean mother while *nakulombotovu* was loosely translated as I love you. The word *kizumbutungu* was applied and



used to mean English while *nakulambatata* meant I hate you. The observer was also keen to note usage of words like *mushombtosh* meaning grandmother and *wambatangu* to mean mine.

Another word used was *wambetesh* that was loosely translated to mean gang. The Sheng' phonology was a very new development thus the researcher who doubled as the observer had to seek for interpretation from a member from the focus group discussion. The discussants further used terms like *mazimbiting* to mean a girl and *mazembete* meaning father. As the researcher followed up the discussion, other words used included *wooza* meaning how are you and *sijimbitinga* to mean foolishness. These findings align with Kariuki's (2021) research, which discovered that Sheng speakers often replace words with sounds from English, Kiswahili, or other local languages.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The study found that Sheng' phonology significantly affects the learning of Kiswahili grammar in public secondary schools in Kenya. Due to the influence of Sheng', many learners struggle to use Kiswahili words correctly, leading to communication issues among Kiswahili speakers, including students and teachers. The varying meanings attached to Kiswahili words by different speakers further complicate understanding. Sheng'-related errors thus impede Kiswahili grammar learning. Addressing these issues requires careful consideration of the students' language environment to effectively correct Sheng'-related errors and improve Kiswahili grammar proficiency. Teachers are therefore advised to emphasize the importance of the application and use of official language by the learners in both speech and writing. This will result in the better academic achievement by the learners. Generally, all stakeholders in the education sector should assist in ensuring that language usage is as stipulated in the syllabus.

References

- Angalia, A. (2017). The growth of Sheng' and its Effect on Media Strategies for Targeting the Youth Market. American Journal. *Appjournal.org*.
- Barasa, S. (2021) *Sheng and English in Kenya's public spaces and media* Youth Language Practices and Urban books.google.com
- Erastus, F(2023) -*The recontextualisation of Sheng in Kenya* The Routledge Handbook books.google.com
- Gitera, R. (2016). *The Study of Morphological processes in Gitamany among Kiambu speaking youth*. urepository uonbi.com
- Githui, S.(2021) *Influence of Sheng Language on Proficiency of Mastering English Language in Primary Schools* Journal of Linguistics, iprjb.org
- Githinji, P. (2014). *Sheng' and Variation, the Construction and Negotiation of Multiple Identities*. Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Michigan State University.
- Githinji, P.(2022) - *Strategies for Identifying Sheng: What counts as Sheng?* Multilingual Margins: A journal of multilingualism from epubs.ac.za
- Githiora, C. (2018). Sheng': peer language, Swahili dialect or emerging Creole? *Journal of African Cultural Studies* Volume 15, Number 2, pp. 159–181.
- Herye, C. (2021). *Data analysis and trustworthiness in Qualitative Research* researchgate.net.
- Hussain, M.(2023) *Analyzing Code-Switching Patterns in ESL teaching practices: A critical discourse analysis* harf-o-sukhan.com
- Kakai, K. (2022). *Code-mixing of English and Sheng' on Preacher's Sermons* repository uonbi.ac.ke



- .Kanana E.(2024) Morphosyntactic retention and innovation in Sheng, a youth language or styles of Kenya Studies in jbe-platform.com
- Kariuki, E. (2021) Influence of Sheng' on Proficiency of Mastering English Language in Primary schools. International Journal of Linguistics
- KNEC (2022). *The year 2022 K.C.S.E Examination Report*. Nairobi, KNEC.
- Lederman, N. (2020). *A comprehensive Review of Instruments Measuring attitudes*. Springer.
- Obata, A. (2022). Impact of Sheng dialect on the English and Kiswahili teaching in Kenya. *European Journal of Linguistics carijournals.org*
- Obuya,J. (2020). Justifying the Qualitative case-Study in contexts dominated by Qualitative approaches. *Sage publication*
- Ochieng, O. (2021) *Beyond English: Multilingualism and Education in Kenya*, *Africa Education Review*, 18:3-4, 112-141, DOI: 10.1080/18146627.2022.2147559
- Porth, C. (2016) *Qualitative Inquiry and mixed Design*. Sage publication