Ambivalent Attitudes: Perception of Sheng and its Speakers

PETER GITHINJI
Ohio University, United States of America

ABSTRACT

Studies in intergroup relations e.g., Tajfel (1982) and Hornsey and Hogg (2000) have pointed out that people engage in social comparisons to cultivate a positive self esteem and preserve their distinctiveness. In turn, this social comparison and subsequent categorization becomes the basis for positive self evaluation and biased evaluation of others. Language as one of the key markers of social categorization becomes a key target of subjective attitudes and stereotype towards the unlike others, or the out-group. This study examines the mixed attitudes on a formerly stigmatized speech variety called Sheng. The perceptual ambivalence of Sheng and its speakers is attributed to raters' co-membership of overlapping communities of practice that inhibits strict adherence to the norms of a single social category.

Keywords: Sheng, language attitudes, stereotypes

1. INTRODUCTION

A rich research tradition on the relationship between language and social identity and language attitudes has underscored the connection between Language and speakers' perceptions. In fact, Williams et al., (1976) identified the relationship between cultural stereotypes and the personality characteristics that people associate with different cultural and ethnic groups as one of the robust areas of investigation on language and attitudes. This interest stems from the realization that "language attitudes are invoked every time interlocutors encounter a variety of speech they have heard (or heard of) before" (Cargile and Bradac 2001: 348). Advancing a similar argument, Preston (2002: 40) notes that "attitudes towards languages and their varieties seem to be tied to attitudes towards groups of people." It has also been shown in the work of Milroy and Mclanagan (1977) that linguistic meaning may be constructed from the characteristics that have been transferred from stereotypes of their speakers. This is further underscored by Dittmar and Schlobinski's (1988) assertion that attitudes toward the language determine the way it is evaluated in the speech community and also dictate the status it enjoys and the kind of people likely to use it.

Since languages function as forms of symbolic wealth spent during social negotiations in the linguistic marketplace (Bourdieu 1991), they have different values assigned by their respective speech communities. In turn, speakers are evaluated according to the language(s) they speak. Typically, speakers of

standard languages are evaluated positively along status enhancing attributes such as *educated, rich, successful, competent* and *intelligent*, while speakers of non-standard languages are positively evaluated on the solidarity enhancing attributes such as *trustworthy, friendly, kind* and *benevolent* (Krauss and Chiu 1998, see also Edwards 1982, and Purdie et al., 2002).

The association of standard languages with power, status and upward mobility enhances their favorable rating in both the mainstream and alternative linguistic markets. Speakers of standard language thus negotiate their status by advocating for the retention of the status quo. On the other hand, speakers of non-standard varieties, who harbor ambitions of upward mobility and status also perpetuate the status quo by aspiring for both the material and symbolic rewards afforded by standard languages. Outside the mainstream linguistic market, however, non-standard languages retain their vitality through their use in interpersonal negotiations. These non-standard languages, though stigmatized in the mainstream, find favorable evaluations especially amongst the marginalized groups due to their perception as indices of local identity as well as resources for negotiating local solidarity.

When the use of a non-standard variety extends beyond the stereotypical groups normally associated with it, attitudes towards such a variety are bound to be inconsistent as a result of the different symbolisms associated with it by different categories of speakers. The extension of a language's domain does not eliminate the boundaries that define existing social stratification. Instead it symbolizes a convergence point for members of different communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) in the exploitation of a linguistic resource for different ends. Since these ends do not normally converge, the language is bound to elicit different perceptions with respect to how raters perceive themselves within the overlapping communities of practice. Such fluidity creates ambivalence in peoples' attitudes that defy broad stereotypical generalizations as raters' attentions shift from personal, others, and idealized others' characterization of speakers of such a code. This is what happens in Sheng as will be discussed in the rest of this paper.

1.1 BACKGROUND OF SHENG

Sheng is a hybrid linguistic code (Bosire 2005, Samper 2002) spoken in Nairobi and other urban areas of Kenya, which presumably derives its name from the phrase "Swahili English Slang" (Mazrui 1995, Abdulaziz and Osinde 1997, Mbaabu and Nzuga 2003)[1]. Its dominance in the urban areas puts it at par with similar codes such as Camfranglais in Cameroon (Kouega 2003, 2004), Town Bemba in Zambia (Spitulnik 1999), Urban Wolof (Ngom 2004), the new language in Malawi (Moto 2001) and Tsotsitaal or Flaaitaal (Makhundu 1995)

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[1]   Philip Rudd (personal communication) attributes the name to syllabic inversion of the word "English", i.e. Eng-lish > lish-Eng > ~~li~~Sheng > Sheng.

in South Africa among others. It has been observed in Githiora (2002) and Bosire (2005) that it exhibits varying features of pidgins, Creoles, argots, and jargons but it does not fit into any one of these categories. Although its vocabulary is drawn from various Kenyan languages such as Dholuo, Gikuyu, Luhya, Kamba² etc (Githiora 2002, Ogechi 2005, and Githinji 2006), it embodies Swahili morphosyntax (Mbaabu and Nzuga 2003) which prompts Githiora (ibid) to call it an urban dialect of Kenyan Swahili. It is unanimous that English and Swahili are the most prominent lexical donors in Sheng e.g. Kiama (1990) and Abdulaziz and Osinde (1997) among others. Although its emergence is usually traced to the late 1960s and early 1970s e.g., Spyropoulos (1987), Abdulaziz and Osinde (1997) Moga and Fee (1993), work by Mazrui (1995) citing Karanja (1993) suggests that it may have existed from as early as the 1930s.

Sheng's emergence in the poor residential areas of Nairobi and its adoption as the youth's secret code accounts for the stigma associated with its speakers. It has since spread its tentacles out of the inner city to various parts of the country in addition to becoming increasingly popular in the media and popular culture; see Samper (2002) and Mbugua (2003). Sheng's pervasiveness in the daily discourse of the Nairobi people is demonstrated by the irony exhibited by many people who use it unconsciously while denying its knowledge or use (Githinji 2003). Outright condemnation, therefore, would not only amount to self condemnation, but would also be ignoring the reality regarding the function the code serves in Kenya's linguistic market, especially amongst the youth in their identity project and some criminals who use it as a secret code (Githiora 2003, Spyropoulos 1987).

In spite of these functions, its negative effect on school performance in English and Swahili, the two standard languages in both primary and secondary school levels has been a thorn in the flesh for the parents and language pedagogists (Samper 2002: 166, Fink 2005: 32). Driven by need to prevent the corruption of languages and the endeavor to teach 'proper' languages that enhance the learners' career opportunities, such stakeholders are usually harsh in their evaluation of Sheng and its speakers. Among the speakers, on the other hand, perceptions on Sheng fluctuates depending on whether they are peripheral or core speakers, and their motivations for using Sheng. In appreciation of these concerns, this study was undertaken to investigate if there was a disparity in perceptions towards Sheng on one hand, and its speakers on the other, based on respondents' social categories. More specifically, the study sought to establish whether Nairobi raters draw a distinction between Sheng as a linguistic system and Sheng speakers as a social category.

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² Some of the dominant ethnic languages in Kenya.

1.2 Previous Study on Attitudes Towards Sheng

Although many studies on Sheng have mentioned the negative attitudes and stereotypes associated with Sheng and its speakers, only Migunda-Attyang's (2007) study has specifically addressed the issue in depth. In Githiora (2002) for instance, attitudes towards Sheng oscillated between the positive and the negative extremes. On one hand, the Sheng enthusiasts argued that it was an important code for youth communication because it breaks down ethnic barriers. Sheng opponents, on the other hand disliked its unintelligibility by adults and its negative interference with school learning. These two extremes are further explored in Fink (2005), whose work is a global survey of language attitudes, covering the perceptual interaction between Swahili, English, Sheng and mother tongues. She examines variables such as age, gender, and socioeconomic background and concludes that young people preferred English to Mother tongues while the reverse was the case for adults. She takes this as evidence of language shift in Kenya. Her study also reveals that although females and high-class people exhibited preference for English, males from lover socio-economic background in poor residential areas of the Eastlands demonstrated higher preference for Sheng.

More recently, Migunda Attyang's (2007) study has looked at the people's beliefs about Sheng's structure, its usefulness, functions, and the speakers' proficiency across age and social economic status categories. She found out that when respondents were presented with both positive and negative statements on Sheng, negative statements received higher scores than the positive ones. Surprisingly, the young people who speak Sheng displayed the most negative attitudes towards it. This study builds on Fink (2005) and Migunda Attyang's (2007) studies but it goes further by identifying specific groups of speakers as well as increasing the variables under investigation. While these two studies give specific conclusions on whether the attitudes were positive or negative, this study shows a circularity of opinions depending on the respondents' perception of themselves as within, outside or at the peripheries of the Sheng discourse. Further, the study also employed a different investigative methodology that enriches the interpretational paradigms, thus contributing to the growing literature on attitudes towards Sheng. The rest of the paper discusses the outcome of this study with insight from other relevant work.

2. The study

The study involved 29 respondents, 12 females and 17 males. All were over 18 years old and were selected from a convenient sample reflecting age, gender and status categories. Although the main focus was on different status groups, a fair representation of age and sex was also considered (though it did not constitute any significant difference in the results). The five status groups in the study were

1. six students from the University of Nairobi, 2. six primary school teachers, 3. six downmarket residents (lower class speakers), 4. five upmarket residents (middle class and higher status speakers) and 5. six Touts (also know as *manamba*[3], a key group in the use of Sheng and also responsible for a lot of lexical coinage (See Mbugua 2003).

All respondents completed a questionnaire in the presence of the researcher. After providing their demographic information, they were asked to perform three different tasks. The first task involved giving single sentence responses to subjective statements regarding Sheng and its speakers. In the second task, the respondents were given rough sketches of Nairobi maps with names of different residential areas and asked to identify areas where they believed Sheng was spoken. This method was inspired by Preston's work in folk dialectology in which respondents were asked to identify different dialect areas on the US maps and then rate the different varieties of US English (see Preston 1988, 1996 and 1999). The final task involved rating Sheng and its speakers along seven-point semantic differential scales. One scale rated the Sheng speakers and the other rated Sheng as a language. Since the findings in the first two tasks are consistent with Githiora (2002), Fink (2005) and Migunda Attyang's (2007) findings, this paper will mostly concentrate on responses to the two semantic differential scales.

2.1 SEMANTIC DIFFERENTIAL SCALES

Researchers working in language attitudes use the indirect methods in order to circumvent the observer's paradox[4]. The semantic differential scales developed by Osgood and associates, and the matched guise technique used by Lambert et al., (see Fasold 1984) have been widely used in many language attitudes studies. Though both are normally used together, only the semantic differential scale is used in this study. In the semantic differential scales, respondents rate different variables using bipolar adjectival descriptors drawn on the scale. In this study, the two sets of descriptors (one for speakers and one for the language) were derived from a pilot study in which respondents were asked to suggest words that described Sheng and its speakers. This approach was taken to ensure that local meanings and not the more general ones from previously used semantic differential scales were used. This cautious step was taken to forestall the problem noted in Mutonya's (1997) study of attitudes to varieties of African

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[3] The word *manamba* as used in Samper (2002) and Mbugua (2003) is a combination of class 6 plural prefix in Swahili *ma-* and phonological equivalent of the borrowed English word, *number*. The words refer to the referents' responsibilities of urging passengers to board their vehicle by shouting and displaying the route number that the matatu in question serves.

[4] Coined by William Labov (1966) to refer to the fieldworkers' dilemma where in an effort to capture natural speech, his/her mere presence prevents the subjects from producing the natural speech.

English where he discovered that general attitudinal labels do not necessarily capture the local meanings and called for a need to collect labels from local respondents. He found out for instance, that the term "proud" (with the negative sense of 'arrogant") was a frequently mentioned attribute, but this item is not found in the list of attributes in any other language attitude study that I am aware of. The pilot study yielded the following attributes for the Sheng speakers and for Sheng as a language.

For Speakers		**For Sheng**	
Creative	Not creative	Inclusive	Exclusive
Friendly	Unfriendly	Easy	Hard
Polite	Rude	Important	Trivial
Respectful	Disrespectful	Pleasant	Unpleasant
Law Abiding	Unlawful	Attractive	Ugly
Educated	Uneducated	Good	Bad
Serious	Not serious	Intimidating	Less intimidating
Less tribalistic	More tribalistic	Interesting	Uninteresting
Well Behaved	Ill behaved	Respectful	Disrespectful
Trustworthy	Untrustworthy		
Rough	Gentle		

As we can see, the bipolar adjectives used in the rating of Sheng speakers differed from those used in the rating of Sheng itself. This difference creates a problem of harmonizing the descriptors for language and those of the speakers which becomes apparent especially when we pursue the argument that attitudes towards the speakers of a speech variety normally extend to their speech variety, or vice versa. Therefore, there is need for thorough and careful interpretations of data, which in this study will be achieved in 2 steps — mean score ranking and factor analysis.

2.1 GENERAL MEAN SCORES

In rating the attributes along the seven point scales, the overall means were calculated by taking the average rating for each attribute from all respondents. Table 2 further below provides a summary of the ratings for each attribute.

For Speakers		For Sheng	
Scores above 3.5		*Scores above 3.5*	
1. Serious	5.69	1. Easy	5.69
2. Law-Abiding	5.66	2. Pleasant	5.62
3. Less Tribalistic	5.62	3. Attractive	4.59
4. Polite	4.17	4. Good	4.10
5. Well-Behaved	4.10	5. Respectful	3.86
6. Rough	3.86	6. Inclusive	3.72
7. Creative	3.79		
8.5 Respectful	3.62	*Scores below 3.5*	
8.5 Educated	3.62	7. Intimidating	3.28
		8. Interesting	3.24
Scores below 3.5		9. Important	3.00
10. Friendly	3.34		
11. Trustworthy	3.24		

Table 1. *Mean ranking of attributes on a scale of 1–7.*

In general, then, raters find speakers of Sheng to be rather "serious," "law-abiding," and "less tribalistic," the last perhaps a reference to their integration into the multi-ethnic Nairobi urban speech community. On the other hand, they get slightly above average ratings for many other characteristics (including, surprisingly, "rough". We also note that even the below average rating of "friendly" and "trustworthy" is not as dramatic as might be expected considering the stigma associated with Sheng speakers. These ratings seem to counter the oft cited positive rating of speakers of non-standard languages along the solidarity attributes (Edwards 1992, 1999). This may be attributed to the diverse backgrounds of the raters and the varied rating patterns of different categories. It is also important to note here that not all raters claimed to be speakers of Sheng. As such solidarity concerns might therefore not have been the issue.

For the language itself, the respondents give it high ratings for "easy," "pleasant," and "attractive." This romantic charm associated with Sheng will be discussed in detail when looking at factor analytic responses by individual groups. More noticeable is the unexpected below average rating of Sheng for "Intimidating," "Important" and, oddly, "Interesting" features. This contradicts the typical pattern in various attitude studies that normally give favorable ratings to vernaculars and non-standard varieties in such features due to their association with intergroup negotiation and in-group solidarity functions, or simply their romantic charm. As far as this study is concerned, this may have something to do with the diverse backgrounds of the respondents and the conflation of averages without paying attention to specific ratings of individual groups.

We thus see that the overall evaluation for both speakers and the language is much more positive than one would expect for a lower-status stigmatized variety. This may be attributed to the spread of Sheng across different status groups, its widespread use in the mass media (radios, newspapers etc), and its appropriation by rap artists in the Kenyan burgeoning hip-hop culture (Samper

2003). In addition, its different varieties indexed by the use of different shibboleths (Githinji 2006) serve as identity markers for different groups of speakers both in the poor and affluent areas. For more specific interpretation of these data, we take a look at the features that are positively or negatively rated by each category by paying attention to the mean rates of different features by each respondent group. These will be considered in turn.

2.2 MEAN RATING FOR SHENG SPEAKERS

Unlike the general mean scores, mean scores for each respondent group give a more realistic representation of the different perceptions of Sheng speakers. Differences in ordered ranking as well as the differences in mean scores give us the idea of which attributes of Sheng speakers are positively or negatively rated by each respondent group.

	Students	Teachers	D/market	U/market	Touts
Creative	3.16	4.00	4.00	3.60	4.30
Friendly	3.50	3.66	3.80	2.40	3.16
Polite	4.50	3.66	4.16	4.60	4.00
Responsible	2.83	3.16	3.83	3.00	5.16
L. Abiding	6.00	5.16	5.33	6.60	5.16
Educated	3.50	3.33	3.66	5.00	2.83
Serious	4.80	6.66	5.00	6.60	5.50
L. Tribalistic	4.66	5.50	6.00	5.40	6.50
W. Behaved	3.83	4.33	4.16	4.20	4.00
Trustworthy	3.16	3.50	4.33	2.20	2.83
Rough	2.83	3.00	4.33	4.80	4.66

Table 2. *Average means for Sheng speakers by different groups.*

As these rankings illustrate, Sheng speakers are positively rated by all status groups. From Table 2 we can see that only five ratings fall below "3" on the scale of 1 – 7. These are:

Attribute	**Raters**	**Mean average**
Education	touts	2.83
Respectful	students	2.83
Responsible	students	2.83
Friendly	upmarket raters	2.40
Trustworthy	upmarket raters	2.20

The downmarket raters and the teachers do not rate Sheng speakers below 3 in any of the attributes. On the opposite end of the scale, each of the respondent

group has at least one positive attribute with a mean average in the higher margins in the 1–7 scale.

Attributes	Raters' mean average
Law abiding:	students 6.00, upmarket raters 6.60
Serious:	teachers 6.66, upmarket raters 6.60
Less tribalistic:	touts 6.50, downmarket raters 6.00

Amongst the high ranked attributes, "law abiding," "serious" and "less tribalistic" take the top three positions in all the status groups, though in a different order. It is perhaps not surprising that all eleven attributes are rated above average by the downmarket raters bearing in mind the key role that Sheng plays in their daily lives[5]. Two attributes, "serious" and "law abiding" are the highest ranked attributes by the upmarket raters. The high perception of Sheng speakers as "serious" is also shared by the teachers, while "law abiding" is the highest ranked feature by both the students and the upmarket judges. In contrast, "Less tribalistic" is the highest ranked attribute amongst the downmarket raters and the touts, perhaps in reference to Sheng's perceived ethnic neutrality.

Apart from the downmarket raters who rank all the attributes above average (3.5 out of 7), the rest of the groups have either three or four attributes ranked below average. Attributes "educated", "trustworthy" and "responsible" for instance, are ranked below average by three respondent groups while "friendly" and "rough" are ranked below average by two respondents groups. In spite of this apparent uniformity, it should be noted that the ordering of these low ranked attributes differ from one group to another.

In explaining the high ranking of "rough" by the touts, downmarket and upmarket raters, it is important to consider that "rough" may or may not be a favorable attribute. On one extreme, it may invoke notions of crudeness, violence and impoliteness, while on the other extreme, it may be associated with the positive qualities of toughness and strength — positive qualities necessary to survive in the impoverished environments that characterize the daily existence of the majority of Sheng speakers e.g. the parking boys evasion of the police in Nairobi (Spyropuolos 1987), and survival in the crime ridden environment in Nairobi's informal settlements. To harmonize the different ratings of "rough" we capitalize on the notion of covert prestige where "rough" is transformed from a negative to a positive attribute by touts, downmarket and upmarket raters. This brings it in synch with the teachers and the students' low ranking of "Rough". Considering that the majority of the students admitted to being ardent Sheng speakers, they were probably invoking the overt meaning of "rough" in order to avoid self-condemnation. On the other hand, the teachers who claimed to not use

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5 Various studies e.g., Abdulaziz and Osinde (1997), Osinde (1986) and Githiora (2002) trace the emergence of Sheng in these Downmarket areas. The favorable rating of Sheng speakers by these judges may stem from the fact that the majority in these neighborhoods speaks Sheng. Speakers are everyday people, not a marked group.

Sheng could be invoking the overt meaning of "rough" with their students or their children as the reference points. More about this attribute will be discussed in factor analysis, for now, let us shift our attention to the mean ranking for Sheng in Table 3 below.

2.3 MEAN RATING FOR SHENG

Languages often act as scapegoats in which the stereotypes of a group of people are expressed. Rejecting someone's speech style is in effect a rejection of that person's value system. Raters might avoid overt stereotyping of a language speaker but mask their negative perceptions of the same speakers by denigrating their language. Is Sheng rated more positively than its speakers by Nairobi people? Table 3 shows how different traits were rated by different groups.

	Students	Teachers	D/market	U/market	Touts
Inclusive	3.50	4.16	4.00	2.40	4.33
Easy	4.83	6.66	5.00	6.60	5.50
Important	3.16	3.16	3.00	2.60	3.00
Pleasant	4.66	5.50	6.00	5.40	6.50
Attractive	4.33	3.83	4.50	5.40	5.00
Good	3.83	4.33	4.16	4.20	4.00
Intimidating	3.66	3.00	3.83	4.00	2.00
Interesting	3.16	3.50	4.33	2.20	2.83
Respectful	2.83	3.00	4.33	4.40	4.66

Table 3. *Average means for Sheng by different groups.*

Similar to the rating of the speakers above, three attributes stand out in the ranking of Sheng as a language. All the groups view Sheng as "easy" "pleasant" and "attractive". It is only amongst the teachers that "good" displaces "attractive" from the top three positions in the ranking of all the nine attributes. Nevertheless, they still give "attractive" an above average rating—an indication that Sheng's attractiveness is a unanimous perception. Almost similar to the way they rated the Sheng speakers, the downmarket raters rank all attributes except one above average. In contrast, each of the other respondent groups has at least three attributes ranked below average.

We also notice the poor ranking of "Important" by all groups, perhaps an echo of the poor perception of Sheng within the mainstream linguistic market. These ratings are consistent with Migunda Attyang's (2007) findings where responses to the statement "Sheng will never be an important language in Kenya" received a slightly over 3 out of 5, mostly buoyed by the young raters since the middle aged and the over 40 age groups ranked Sheng below 3. Contradicting the charming qualities expressed by "Pleasant" and "attractive" by the four groups, the low ranking of "interesting" by students, upmarket raters

and the touts demonstrates a lack of consistency, alluding to the ambivalent perception of Sheng.

Only the upmarket respondents give Sheng a low rating on "inclusive". In fact, they see Sheng as "intimidating", perhaps because they do not understand the in-group *deep Sheng* (Samper 2002). They speak the *basic Sheng*, or what a number of respondents called 'slang'— a watered down variety of Sheng (Githinji, 2003). Although inclusiveness in Sheng is applied to highlight its ability to bring people of diverse ethnic backgrounds together, the use of different shibboleths by different social categories (Githinji 2006 b) complicates the picture because it alienates the out-groups who do not understands a group's shibboleth. In this case, the upmarket raters are normally regarded as the out-groups and are derogatorily labeled *mababi* by the speakers of *deep Sheng* in the poor neighborhoods (Githinji 2006 a).

Like "rough" discussed above, "intimidating" is a negative attribute whose high ranking implies Sheng's alienating tendencies. Although it is rated above average by three groups, it also receives the lowest score in Table 3. It is important that the low rating of "intimidating comes from the touts, a group that could be considered as constituting weak networks in the sense of Milroy (1980) on account of its high mobility which makes them receptive to new innovations. As both innovators and early adopters, the touts are able to negotiate with other road users (e.g., passengers and other touts) without getting intimidated.[6]

A discussion of all the peculiarities in these data is a gargantuan task that goes beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, from these few generalizations, it is evident that the rating of Sheng is not different from the rating of its speakers. This leads to the conclusion that the respondents' attitudes toward the language and its speakers are not so different. The raters do not make a radical distinction between Speakers as a social category and Sheng as a linguistic code. This statement, however, needs to be regarded with caution in light of the fact that different descriptors were used in the two scales. For more discussion about these descriptors, we now turn to factors analysis where different attributes will be interpreted according to the way they load for each status group.

3. FACTOR ANALYSIS

Factor analysis teases out common elements of ratings which are not revealed in the mean scores. Factors, as defined by Biber (1998), are clusters of attributes that represent areas of high variance in the data. If several attributes express the same underlying or closely related idea, they tend to cluster together under one

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[6] But the touts also employ Sheng as a resource to alienate passengers especially in their conspiracy to raise fares impromptly. Mbugua (2003) considers this as an aspect of their trickster character. Masking who there really are is a ruse they deliberately employ so that their transgression can be overlooked.

factor. For instance, adjectives such as "law abiding," "humble," and "disciplined" might cluster together because these features express a closely related idea. In this study, factors were extracted using the Varimax rotation pattern where maximum weight is slightly less than 1. This paper only discusses the loadings whose weight is .30 and above. All the Analyses for each status group were run independently, and based on the loading of features under study; three factors were extracted from the rating of speakers, while two were extracted from the rating of Sheng. Although some groups had more than three factors for Speakers and two for Sheng, the extra factors were ignored for the sake of uniformity. Table 5 below illustrates how this was arrived at for the five status groups.

	SD Scales	features	Status groups	No of Factors
Attitudes	Speakers	Creative Friendly Polite Respectful Law Abiding Educated Serious Less tribalistic Well Behaved Trustworthy Rough	Students Teachers Downmarket Upmarket Touts	3 3 3 3 3
	Sheng	Inclusive Easy Important Pleasant Attractive Good Intimidating Interesting Respectful	Students Teachers Downmarket Upmarket Touts	2 2 2 2 2

Table 4. *The summary of factor analysis.*

3.1 FACTOR ANALYSIS OF SHENG SPEAKERS

Looking at the attributes that cluster together, it is possible to explain the underlying perceptions of the respondents by interpreting the general ideas that are emphasized under each factor. The clustering of attributes under Factor one are shown in Table 5 below.

	Students	Teachers	D/market	U/market	Touts
Creative	.60	.77	.58		
Friendly	.50	.95	.91	.45	-.79
Polite	-.95		.46		.92
Responsible		.54		.90	
L. abiding		.46			.42
Educated	.91	.82		.66	.33
Serious	.91	.78	.87	.34	-.96
L. tribalistic				.83	.34
W. behaved		.54	.36	.42	
Trustworthy	.60	.37		-.89	
Rough	.50	.79	93		. 64

Table 5. *Rating of Sheng speakers – Factor 1*.

Two features that stand out in Factor 1 are "friendly" and "serious." Not only are their loadings significant for all status groups, but also, both load negatively under the touts. Creativity here refers to Sheng's innovative quality manifested in lexical coinage and syntactic and phonological manipulation to suit different communicative needs. Creativity is a default perception with educational dimensions among the students and teachers, and that is why it loads with attributes such as "educated" and "serious", both connected with intellectualism. Such a clustering ties well with the academic orientation of these two respondent groups. This differs from the downmarket respondents, where "educated" fail to cluster with "creative" and "serious", a suggestion that among the downmarket group, Sheng's is an unmarked code that is used for solidarity purposes — a function not associated with intellectualism.

The negative loading on "polite" under the students points to the negative stereotype associated with Sheng speakers by Nairobi people (Migunda-Attyang 2007). Perception of Sheng as impolite echoes the oft cited stereotype of Sheng as the language of criminals and other deviants. This is not surprising when we note that the feature "rough" also has a significant loading under the students. Following Tajfel's (1982) theory of intergroup relations, we may explain this ambivalent perception of Sheng speakers by the students as indicated by the clustering of positive and negative traits to be a reflection of both self and other evaluations. On one hand, they make a self commentary that highlight their intellectual standing, but also draw a distinction between themselves (university students) versus ordinary speakers of Sheng such as downmarket residents or touts who are impolite and rough.

Since the teachers claimed not to speak Sheng, it may be argued that their favorable ratings are driven by an attempt to present a more objective picture of Sheng speakers. They are more informed to know that speaking Sheng does not necessarily imply bad behavior. They could not for instance, outrightly condemn their students, or their children for the mere fact of speaking Sheng, though in oral interviews, they deplored its negative interference in language learning.

Their ambivalence is nevertheless reflected in their common perception of Sheng speakers as wayward and antisocial, a perception shared with other members of Nairobi speech community.

Not surprisingly, downmarket respondents, themselves more adept in Sheng, find a large positive set of values for Factor 1. Sheng speakers are "creative," "friendly," "polite," "serious," "less tribalistic," "well-behaved," but "rough," although the covertly prestigious value of roughness may not be too surprising among these raters. On their part, the upmarket respondents give an odd mixture in Factor 1, showing more dramatically the ambivalence of attitudes towards Sheng speakers. The clustering of "friendly", "responsible" "educated" "serious" less tribalistic" and "well-behaved" paints quite a favorable picture of Sheng speakers. However, the high negative loading of "trustworthy" indicates outsider reference. In oral interview, the upmarket judges constantly claimed not to be 'typical' Sheng speakers, trying to distinguish themselves from people from the poor backgrounds who are identified as typical speakers of Sheng. According to them typical speakers, i.e. those who speak *deep Sheng* for in-group purposes are untrustworthy, because they use it to transmit coded messages intended to isolate non-members.

It is, however, the clustering of attributes by the touts which is most surprising. Three negative attributes cluster with three positive features. Sheng speakers are "polite" "law abiding" and "somehow educated". However, they are also neither "friendly" nor "serious" and they are "rough". This kind of clustering is not easy to explain unless we invoke the in-group and out-group demarcation to explain this ambivalence. Normally, positive features should be viewed as self evaluation aimed at projecting a positive self image while negative features should point to out-group bias. However, this would ignore the dynamics of *matatu* discourse as well as the trickster nature of the touts as analyzed by Mbugua (2003). According to Mbugua, the touts employ different subversive strategies to mask their transgression of social norms. Hence, the clustering of positive factors can be explained as the touts' attempt to project the image of innocent ordinary citizens who are unfairly vilified and marginalized by the society through denial of opportunities to make a living in the formal sector. On the other hand, they have to project a non-friendly, rough character in order to intimidate commuters who might otherwise refuse to pay the exorbitant fare they sometimes charge. The 'bad boy' image is thus a valued symbolic instrument that also helps them to negotiate with rival touts, police, or extortionist cartels like *kamjesh* and *mungiki*[7], all of whom in one way or another stand in their line of work.

In short, the perception of Sheng speakers as shown in this strongest first Factor is not at all what one would expect to find among teachers, students, and higher-status speakers. It confirms, I believe, the emerging amelioration of

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[7] Self styled route managers who extort 'fees' from matatu operator in order to allow them to operate. Non- cooperation might result in denial of a 'license' to operate, and sometimes physical harm or even death.

attitudes towards what was once considered a low-status, extremely prejudiced against linguistic variety. The ratings of its speakers here do not uniformly point in that direction. We now turn to Factor 2 for a different kind of explanation.

	Students	Teachers	D/market	U/market	Touts
Creative		.44	.35		.88
Friendly	.36			-.88	
Polite		.99		.94	
Responsible		.82	.98	.30	.93
L. abiding		.30		.89	
Educated			.70		.32
Serious					
L. tribalistic					-.92
W. behaved	.82	.35		.30	
Trustworthy	.94	.54	.65		
Rough	.88			.66	.40

Table 6. *Rating of Sheng speakers – Factor 2.*

In Factor 2, the clustering of three positive features by the students continues the self evaluation trend that we observed in Factor 1. If the feature "rough" is interpreted positively as covert prestige (Trudgill 1972), then we can conclude that the overall students' perception of Sheng speakers under this factor is positive. However, negative interpretation of "rough" would mean that the students continue to mark their boundary with the core speakers of Sheng. The teachers continue to demonstrate their liberal attitudes towards Sheng speakers, in spite of their stated dislike of Sheng speakers. They seem to draw the distinction between the Sheng as a linguistic code and speakers as a social category. They are also aware of their position as educators charged with teaching their students standard languages—Swahili and English. In this mission, they are against Sheng, not its speakers.

Under Factor 2, the negative perception of Sheng speakers by the upmarket group comes to the fore. Most of the upmarket respondents speak *basic Sheng* called "Engsh" (Abdulaziz and Osinde 1997). This is their own variety of Sheng[8], (a variety one might compare to white people's AAVE—like slang in the equivalent upmarket venues of US society). The high loading of "rough" and the high negative loading of "friendly" seems to be at odds with the high loading of features like "polite", and "law abiding" as well as borderline features like "responsible" and "well-behaved". This mixed rating just like under Factor 1 might be attributed to the rating of two different set of speakers; speakers of *Engsh (*in-group) and Speakers of *Sheng* (out-group).

Turning to the touts, we find an unexpected negative loading of "less tribalistic" attribute. This is rather surprising because Sheng is usually hailed for

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8   Apart from drawing the distinction between *deep Sheng* and *basic Sheng*, Samper 2005 also uses the terms *maghetto* and *mababi* to refer to Sheng and Engsh respectfully.

its ethnic neutrality with ability to unify people of diverse ethnic backgrounds. Recalling from Factor 1 that the tout's overall rating is affected by their occupational realities; we may conclude that to them, speaking Sheng has nothing to do with ethnic affiliation. Ethnic identity can be independent of language. Indeed, in many *matatus* in Nairobi, rarely, do you find one with touts from different ethnic groups. With this in mind, we now turn to Factor 3, the last factor on Sheng speakers.

	Students	Teachers	D/market	U/market	Touts
Creative	.77	.44	.34	.95	
Friendly	.71				
Polite			.84		
Responsible	.95				.30
L. abiding	.99	.37			-.58
Educated		.45		.46	
Serious	.40	.33			
L. tribalistic	.92	.93	.40		
W. behaved	-.52	.69	.93	.80	.89
Trustworthy		.61			
Rough	.41	.36	.32	-.52	-.33

Table 7. *Rating of Sheng speakers – Factor 3*.

In Factor 3, the fact that "educated" does not load under the students suggests that they are rating others and not themselves. Teachers maintain their global perception of Sheng speakers which might apply to just any speaker of Sheng. However, we note the dissipation of the negative evaluation of Sheng speakers by the upmarket respondents (who now find Sheng speakers "creative," "educated," "well-behaved" and surprisingly, not "rough"). The touts, on their part continue to show positive attitudes to Sheng speakers, as demonstrated by the high loading on "well-behaved". The not "rough," loading is a pointer that in spite of its covert prestige, the touts also share conventional meaning of rough held by the majority of Nairobi residents. However, the negative loading of "law abiding" suggests that the touts still regard Sheng as a counterculture whose main goal is to subvert the mainstream norms.

In spite of the negative evaluations of Sheng speakers by one of its primary users—the touts, all factor groups show a generally mild attitude towards Sheng speakers. This is illustrated by the combination of both positive and negative attributes in all the three factors. For students, this is perhaps not particularly surprising since interviews revealed that five out of the six student respondents classified themselves as Sheng speakers. In addition, throughout, the rating of Sheng speakers by teachers are very similar to those of students and may partly be attributed to the fact that they are aware that their pupils are Sheng speakers. Though non-speakers themselves, their mixing of many positive and few negative attributes support the view that speaker stereotypes are anchored in a

generally positive or at least not extremely negative evaluation, certainly not one closely aligned to the expected stereotype of a nonstandard variety.

The fact that "rough" is rated relatively high by touts and the downmarket raters might at first seem strange, because as stereotyped speakers of Sheng, they could be expected to display loyalty to their variety. While this downgrading might be attributed to linguistic insecurity (Labov 1966), the clustering of "rough" with other positive attributes gives more support to the possibility that these factors are more general collections of the complex and inconsistent attitudes held towards Sheng speakers. This does not exclude the possibility that "rough" is a covertly prestigious positive feature.

Since strong negative stereotypes do not emerge for any group, with the possible exception of the upmarket respondents, it could be suggested that there is a possibility of self-evaluation which can point to attitude shift, a recipe for language shift that Fink (2005) alludes to. Although students speak Sheng, they would also like to be viewed as intellectuals who are distinct from other stigmatized speakers, and the upmarket raters would certainly not like to yield the status afforded them by virtue of their socioeconomic advantage.

Since the majority of teachers don't speak Sheng, solidarity and status traits are perhaps of no consequence. The clustering of both positive and negative ratings from them, therefore, might be attributed to the conflict between social conformity (prevailing attitudes towards all Sheng speakers) and expectations (their responsibility of teaching standard languages i.e. English and Swahili) and some sort of liberalism. In short, while they are part of the society where Sheng is widespread, they are expected by the society to preserve the purity of standard languages. In addition, they are an enlightened group that can make objective judgments, especially because they also happen to be parents with children who speak Sheng.

As expected, the stigmatized downmarket respondents show a bias towards solidarity enhancing traits in all factors, perhaps to mask their insecurity, like the way Preston's Southern Indiana respondents cut themselves off from everything "Southern" (1989) in several tasks in perceptual dialectology.

The touts, most of whom come from the downmarket areas, could also be expected to display a bias towards their variety, however the loading of "serious" in Factor 1 is shared with other groups. Nevertheless, for them, Sheng is an occupational language and does not involve their being "friendly" to passengers, as shown in the same, strongest Factor 1. (They need to be firm, and sometimes downright mean while carrying out such tasks as collecting fares). Their relatively high evaluation of "polite" (Factor 1), "creative" (Factor 2), "responsible" (Factor 2), and "well-behaved" (Factor 3), present further complications. Assuming that the touts are referring to themselves, such a classification could point to linguistic insecurity which compensates for the negative perception they arouse in the wider society. This insecurity might be filtered through their socioeconomic reality; they are poor because they engage in a kind of street creativity that is not economically beneficial. But with this

creativity rating, touts may simply be noting that out-group speakers are only poor imitators of their variety.

3.2 THE RATING OF SHENG AS A LANGUAGE

The motivation behind a separate rating of Sheng is the assumption that, given the task of rating the language variety itself instead of its speakers, respondents might drop some of their reluctance for harsh ratings, one which might result from a desire to avoid both self-criticism as well as severe criticism of others. As the loading of features for Sheng illustrate, it was not markedly different from the rating of Sheng speakers. Tables 8 and 9 summarize the feature loadings for Sheng under factors 1 and 2 respectively.

	Students	Teachers	D/market	Upmarket	Touts
Inclusive		.97		-.96	.66
Easy			.88	.89	
Important	.75				.41
Pleasant	44	.58	.41	.89	-.95
Attractive	.94		.79		
Good		.49			
Intimidating	.61	.93	.51		.72
Interesting	.62	.49		-.32	
Respectful	.87		.71	.54	.48

Table 8. *Rating of Sheng – Factor 1.*

My suspicion that raters might be harsher with the language than its speakers was not realized. As feature loadings in Table 8 illustrate, students, teachers, and down and upmarket respondents all continue to evaluate Sheng favorably (although upmarket raters are harsh on Sheng's inclusiveness and interestingness). Sheng's inclusiveness does not apply to them because they are removed from the networks where *deep Sheng* is used. Their use of Sheng is not due to its being interesting, but failure to use it, a least a little bit of it would cut them off from the youth identity which is negotiated in Sheng. Under this Factor, the most dramatic score is the degree to which touts do NOT find Sheng to be "pleasant", in spite of the role it serves in their occupation.

All these positive evaluations of Sheng may indicate that students, teachers, and upmarket respondents, perhaps being forced to spend most of their symbolic linguistic capital (see Bourdieu 1991) on standard languages, seek another tool for their identity outside the mainstream Nairobi speech community. The students in particular seek a vehicle for their identification with youth culture.

Sheng is also perceived as "easy" by the upmarket judges. Such a stereotype rationalizes its adoption by so many people and perpetuates the stereotype that Sheng is for lazy people who are unable to learn standard languages—a common

prejudiced characterization of speakers of vernaculars and other non-standard languages.

The touts, however, are even more the odd men out[9] here than they were for person ratings discussed earlier. Sheng is "inclusive" and "intimidating" which makes it an attractive in-group code. It is remarkable that "pleasant" is the only feature that loads for all status group in this factor, though it loads negatively on the touts. Such evaluations, some of it coming from the out-groups seems to suggest a sort of romanticization of the variety; a recognition of the solidarity and even local identity role it has come to play. Of course, it will not get you far, but it is a good thing, not a bad one. We now turn to Factor 2.

	Students	Teachers	D/market	Upmarket	Touts
Inclusive					
Easy					.98
Important	.49	.81	.91	-.44	
Pleasant	.82				
Attractive		.96		.93	.91
Good	-.83			.51	
Intimidating	.47		.53	.97	
Interesting			.96	-.95	-.38
Respectful		44			-.70

Table 9. *Rating of Sheng – Factor 2.*

Of all the Factors, including those for Sheng speakers, this factor has the highest number of negative loadings. The pattern observed in Factor 1 (Table 8) continues in Factor 2. The students, downmarket and upmarket respondents now recognize the "intimidating" characteristic of Sheng. It is also remarkable that in spite of the positive perception of Sheng by students, the negative loading of "good" under this Factor indicates that they still subscribe to the general perception of Sheng as bad for upward mobility. It is good as a secret code for young people (Githiora 2002) but it 'corrupts' standard languages.

To the upmarket respondents, "attractive," "good" and "intimidating" do not go together with "interesting". This clustering is an expression of their solidarity with youth culture by identifying with Sheng's attractiveness while still perceiving it as very "intimidating." Looking at the students and the downmarket respondents' ratings, we can hypothesize that in Sheng, the marginalized people invert the balance of power that puts the powerful people in society at a disadvantage. On a different note, it is striking that loading of "important" is negative among the upmarket raters, a suggestion that in spite of their appropriation of Sheng, they still value, and hence invest their symbolic linguistic capital in the languages of status and upward mobility. But

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9 Matatu work is a predominantly male profession with almost negligible number of females, whether as drivers or touts.

irrespective of their attitudes in the mainstream linguistic marketplace, they still know that Sheng has great value in the alternative linguistic market

For the touts, "easy" and "attractive" do not load together with "interesting" and "respectful." In their interviews, they claim that no variety of Sheng is too hard for them to understand. This could then suggest that in Factor 2, they are involved in 'self' rather than 'other' evaluation. Although they view Sheng as an important index of their identity, they also regard it as a resource to be exploited for occupational purposes, irrespective of its other qualities.

To sum up, we may conclude that, as with persons ratings, the judges vary in their ratings of attributes between the ratings of "others",' "self",' and even idealized and/or romanticized pictures of "self" and "other." For instance, when touts are rating their "potential self" (one not realized but what "should have been" had one only followed a better path), then their oddly diverse evaluations should be viewed as their recognition that Sheng is useless to them economically, in spite of the symbolic value it accords them. When they are rating other people, then they could be implying that Sheng is not important to the wider society outside their in-group, but neither is it "easy" to acquire and use properly for those outside the in-group.

4. CONCLUSION

The wide use of Sheng by people from different groups makes a uniform stereotype untenable. Although some traditional caricatures are still active, perhaps particularly in the upmarket group, current attitudes are more liberal, and the touts clearly stand out as the "owner" group. Since nearly all groups are interested parties in the use of Sheng, they are faced with the dilemma of making broad stereotypical or negative generalizations about the out-groups without harming themselves in the process. We see, therefore, in these ratings, a reflection of what could be the progress of Sheng up from downmarket, youth, and tout cultures, on its way to becoming a symbol of local identity, not simply one of status distinctions within the speech community. In short, its covert prestige is expanding upwards through Nairobi status groups.

We also see, however, the limited value of even locally-derived semantic differential scales. The internal protocol of judges makes an analysis of such quantitative data extremely difficult. Did these judges look at the evaluation in terms of a personal self, an "other," a "social" self, or an "idealized" or "potential" self or others? Only more sensitive, ethnographic detail allows us to sort out the findings of these tasks. It is, however, surely not a bad circularity. We learn from one procedure what the gaps are and go on to other tasks and methods of investigation. In this case, we can see, even without a full realization of other aspects of this research, that a nonstandard variety is moving surely and steadily into a more positively evaluated status in an urban speech community, one which, perhaps due to the diverse ethnicities of its inhabitants, needs such a

variety to distinguish itself from the perceived hegemony of either a colonialist or single local language.

Finally, it is important to point out that the size of the sample is a major limitation that might have affected the outcome of this study. However, the findings are consistent with other findings on attitudes towards Sheng, only that this study goes deeper into the underlying perceptions of the raters. Future studies should address this limitation by sampling a wider sample of respondents. In spite of these limitations, it is our belief that the study's methodological approach as well as the interpretive perspective is an important contribution to the growing body of work on Sheng.

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About the author: *Peter Githinji* PhD is Assistant professor of linguistics at Ohio University. He is the chair of the Swahili language program and coordinator of Swahili and other African Languages. He teaches all levels of Swahili from elementary to advanced, and also conducts independent studies in Swahili. He has also taught courses such as *Introduction to Language and cultur*e, *Nature of Language, Introduction to bilingualism and bilingual education* and *Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. Peter Githinji graduated from Michigan State University in 2005 and his interest covers all areas related to Language in Society, Language teaching and African linguistics in general.