On Lexicalization in Sheng
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ABSTRACT

The present article tries to unravel how lexemes are sourced and meaning is encoded in Sheng. Sheng is a language variety that has been in use, especially among the urban youth in Kenya for over twenty years now. Whereas many of the surface morphemes of Sheng look like Kiswahili morphemes and thus lead to claims that Sheng is Kiswahili-based, counter-claims also exist. Some of the lexemes are alien to Kiswahili or any other language in the speech community where Sheng is spoken. In addition, it is difficult for the non-initiated, including Kiswahili speakers, to follow a conversation in Sheng. Against this background, an attempt is made to unravel the source(s) of Sheng lexemes and to trace the diachronic changes that have taken place where a concept has been represented by more than one lexeme. Above all, the paper attempts to deconstruct the logic and essence of embedding sense in the Sheng lexemes.

Keywords: Sheng, lexicalization, lexemes, sense, and meaning

1. INTRODUCTION AND VIEWS FROM THE LITERATURE

This is an investigation into the way lexemes are created and how meaning (hereafter referred to as lexicalization) is encoded in Sheng. For almost two decades, sociolinguists, journalists and anthropologists have reported and/or studied an unstable language variety that is largely associated with the urban youths in Kenya (e.g. Osinde 1986; Spyropoulos 1987; Kembo-Sure 1992; Myers-Scotton 1993; Mazrui 1995; Kiessling & Mous 2001; Ngesa 2002; Ogechi 2002; Shitemi 2002). Various theories exist about the origins of Sheng. For instance, on the one hand, Osinde (1986) and Abdulaziz & Osinde (1997) aver that Sheng emerged as a peer youth code in the low socio-economic eastern suburbs of Nairobi in the 1970s. It is also claimed that Sheng arose in the low-class estates of Nairobi, where children who shared a single or two-room housing with parents and had their privacy infringed into, coined a code to conceal their secrets from parents (Kembo-Sure 1992: 26–27). On the other hand, Mazrui & Mphande's (1990) and Mazrui's (1995) studies suggest that a Sheng-like code existed as far back as the early 1930s in the Nairobi underworld among the pickpockets. Further, Spyropoulos (1987: 130) posits that Sheng was used as early as the beginning of the 1950s but became pronounced in the early 1970s. Regardless of this lack of consensus on origins, it is accepted that there is a variety that sounds like Kiswahili (Ngesa 2002) but with a distinct and an unstable vocabulary.

The language variety sources its lexicon from the various Kenyan languages with Kiswahili, English, Dholuo, Kamba and Gikuyu as the prominent lexifiers.[1] Spyropoulos (1987: 128) reports that some Sheng words also originate from Hindi, American westerners and karate and break dance films. The borrowed Sheng lexemes are usually manipulated while more are continuously coined. (1) is an example[2] of a conversation with Sheng lexicon:

1.
[[Hi-zo *digolo* **ni** *poa*] **[zi-na-*kindwa** *rwabi ngovo* **duka-ni]]**
DET-CL10   sunglasses COP cool CL10-NONPST-sell hundred five   shop-in
'Those sunglasses are really nice. They go for five hundred shillings in the shops.'
(Waithira 2001: 37)

The surface morphemes in (1) are sourced from Kiswahili apart from the bold italicised items. However, the bold italicised ***poa*** ('cool') is a also a Kiswahili surface morpheme. Thus one might be tempted to conclude that (1) is a variety of Kiswahili. This is not true. The interpretation of the two clauses is based on Sheng encoding of sense. To begin with, besides knowing that ***digolo*** means sunglasses, one has to also know that the Kiswahili surface morpheme ***poa*** does not mean cool in the Kiswahili sense; rather, it is understood from the informal English interpretation of cool which refers to nice or impressive. As for the second clause, one has to know what -***kindwa*** ('sell'), ***rwabi*** ('hundred') and ***ngovo*** ('five') mean in Sheng.

To date, the studies have either concentrated on the sociolinguistics of the Sheng variety (e.g. Shitemi 2002), its word formation processes (e.g. Echessa 1990; King'ei 2001) or they have attempted to unravel what its matrix language (ML)[3] is (e.g. Mazrui & Mphande 1990; Kiessling & Mous 2001; Ogechi 2002). The consensus among scholars is that Sheng is based on Kiswahili grammar as Myers-Scotton (1993: 39) summed up:

> ….My field-work showed much codeswitching among children. In Nairobi it is especially common in the Eastleigh area, a working class estate. A slang variety called 'Sheng' also exists in such areas; it is an

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[1]   A lexifier language, especially in pidgin and creole studies, refers to the source language from which much of the lexicon comes (Thomason 2001: 74).

[2]   In all examples, Sheng is presented in ***bold italics,*** Kiswahili is in **bold** face while English is in normal font. Given that there is no standard Sheng orthography, I spell Sheng words the way they are spoken as in Kiswahili.

[3]   According to Myers-Scotton (2002), a matrix language in codeswitching is the language which sets the grammar of a clause, i.e.

    ma-lecturer   **wa-me**-strike
    CL5-lecturer   CL6-PRF-strike
    'Lecturers have gone on strike'.

Here is codeswitching between English and Kiswahili where Kiswahili is the matrix language (ML). This is because all the system morphemes (class and tense markers) are drawn from Kiswahili.

innovative *melánge* of Swahili as a matrix language with English embeddings.

However, Ogechi (2002: 89ff) asserts that the ML of Sheng varies depending on what is the language of wider communication in the environment where the Sheng data is collected. Besides, Abdulaziz & Osinde (1997) claim that whereas Sheng is based on Kiswahili, there exists another language variety, Engsh, that is based on the English frame which is spoken in the Westlands area of Nairobi – a much higher socio-economic class estate. Engsh also has a high density of English surface morphemes as in (2):

2. **Si** you **akina** pass for mwa morrows in your wheels, we do a swallow at them Vuras.
   'Come for me tomorrow in your car so that we can go for a drink at the Carnivore'
   (*mwa* 'me'; *morrows* 'tomorrow'; *them Vuras* 'Carnivore Restaurant')
   (Abdulaziz & Osinde 1997: 55)

Whereas it has been shown that Sheng has several lexifying languages (e.g. Osinde 1986; Echessa 1990; Abdulaziz & Osinde 1997; Waithira 2001; Ogechi 2002), it is true that once the lexemes leave their source language(s) and are used in Sheng, they assume a new meaning (sense) altogether. How this new sense is encoded has, to the best of my knowledge, been rarely studied and when investigated, the description offered is either limited or lacks an in-depth explanation. Thus although one can safely argue that there is documentation of the structure and the sociolinguistics of Sheng, lexicalization in Sheng, the subject of the present study, has been least attempted. In addition, it has been claimed that Sheng is largely identified at the lexeme level (Waithira 2001: 109; Ogechi 2002: 100); and that the lexemes are unstable since they keep on changing their meaning (sense). At times, their surface form might resemble that in the source language yet they carry a completely different sense from what they mean in the source language. Given this scenario, can one diagnostically identify the patterns and/or series of different lexemes used for a given concept? If so, in which parts of speech do the words manifest themselves? How is lexicalization achieved in the lexemes? Is serial change of meaning also attested in Sheng categories that are larger than the lexeme? The present article seeks answers to the foregoing questions. However, it limits itself to word semantics.[4] Meaning in Sheng categories larger than a single lexeme (sentence semantics) falls outside the scope of my conceptualisation of lexicalization (c.f. 2) and could be the subject of another paper. Here, an attempt is made to identify the source language of a word.

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[4] Although Lipka (1990: 52) argues that word semantics (studied under structural semantics) is not confined to isolated items but focuses on lexical fields and paradigmatic semantic relations between words generally, I largely restrict myself to isolated items.

The manipulative procedures it undergoes are also explained including how its meaning is encoded. I have also tried to explain the (different) conditions of use of the words in Sheng.

The paper is divided into five sections. In Section 2, I attempt an operational conceptualisation of lexicalization. I describe the methods of data collection and analysis in Section 3. Section 4 treats lexicalization in the various parts of speech in Sheng, while Section 5 is the conclusion.

2. LEXICALISATION

I attempt an operational conceptualisation of lexicalization for two reasons. First, lexicalization is one of those terms which linguists do not use in the same way and according to Lipka (1990: 95) there is no single, correct definition of the term. Secondly, if not clearly explained, some readers might not distinguish between lexicalization and lexification.

Thus several uses of lexicalization have been noted. Trask (http://www.linguist.org/~ask-ling/archive-1997.10/msg01859.html 14 Nov 2003) identifies two senses of lexicalization. One, lexicalization is the act of creating a word to express some meaning. This explanation closely tallies with Silva's (http://www.linguist.org/~ask-ling/archive-1997.10/msg01859.html 14 Nov 2003) definition, namely: lexicalization is the process through which concepts are put into words in a given language. In this case, Trask and Silva seem to be subscribing to Saussure's (1916) dichotomy of 'signifie' and 'signifiant'. In the dichotomy, 'signifiant' refers to a concept, idea or thing while 'signifie' refers to a sound of language that is used to represent that idea or thing. Thus lexicalization comes in when humans either deliberately or effortlessly assign sounds of language to express phenomena. Second, Trask argues that in historical linguistics, the term 'lexicalization' is sometimes given to a process in which a sequence of words is reduced to a single-word. In this case, he appears to be saying that lexicalization refers to a process of diachronic change in which a notion which had previously been expressed by more than one word is now represented by a single word. Lipka puts it more succinctly:

> …I would like to define *lexicalization* as the phenomenon that a complex lexeme once coined tends to become a single complete lexical unit, a simple lexeme. Through this process it loses the character of a syntagma to a greater or lesser degree. (c.f. Lipka 1981b: 120). In my definition an essential condition and a prerequisite for this gradual diachronic process is the fact that a particular complex lexeme is used frequently. (Lipka 1990: 95)

The present study closely follows the foregoing definitions of lexicalization but with a slight modification. I use lexicalization in reference to the manner in which Sheng vocabulary has over time been unstable (changed) either in form

(emergence of new surface morphemes) or meaning (same surface morpheme assuming a new sense).

Lexicalization can be achieved at the phonological and morphological levels. At the phonological level, there can be the reduction and/or addition of a sound in a word. At the morphological level lexicalization may involve morphological motivation or demotivation. For instance, citing German, Lipka (1990: 97) argues that *handtuch* is a hand towel but a towel can also be used for feet. Hence a second motivator comes in to determine the interpretation of the word as seen in *Gästehandtuch* (visitor's towel). Lexicalization may also result from semantic change involving a small degree of idiomatization whereby two or three words are combined in an idiomlike compound word to produce one compound word whose sense is derived from the entire compound word as one, i.e., trousersuit, callgirl etc.

The present discourse also distinguishes between lexicalization and lexification in the sense that while the former deals with encoding of meaning to words, the latter refers to the source and/or processes of creating the words:

3.   **-pata *doo poa***
       get money cold   'earn good money'

(3) is lexified by two languages. The source language of **pata** and **poa** is Kiswahili. While -**pata** literally translates to 'get' in Kiswahili, it means 'earn' in Sheng. As for ***doo***, it is sourced from English *dough* whose informal meaning is money. Sheng takes on this informal meaning. Finally, while the adjective ***poa*** refers to cool in Kiswahili, the process of lexicalization in Sheng changes its sense to *good*. This signals semantic borrowing from English where *cool* informally means impressive or when used with an amount of money, *cool* emphasises how large the money is. So the Sheng phrase -**pata *doo poa*** 'earn good money' has undergone both the lexification and lexicalization processes.

3. THE DATA

Only primary data were analysed for the present paper. The data consist of lexemes comprising verbs, nouns and adjectives:

Table 1. The Data Analysed

Lexical category	Number	%
Nouns	93	70
Verbs	37	28
Adjectives	2	2
Total	**132**	**100**

These data were collected over a two-week period in the month of October 2003 at the main campus of Moi University, Kenya, where I work. I assigned two Sheng-speaking university students, a male (aged 22) and a female (aged 21), the task of collecting as much Sheng vocabulary as they could either through self generation or from fellow students. The two were students of linguistics who, through an introductory course in sociolinguistics, know what Sheng is. However, most university students who speak Sheng can identify Sheng vocabulary. Thus the two assistants collected the 132 Sheng material and provided the literal glosses to each item. From the translations, only three parts of speech were represented in the data. So I classified the data into nouns, verbs and adjectives. One assistant claimed to have collected Nairobi Sheng words while another claimed that the linguistic material he provided was from Mombasa.[5] Hence the fieldworkers were agreed that there exist regional dialects of Sheng.

On the whole, in some instances, two, three or four words were used to refer to the same concept or object. This was witnessed as a result of the regional Sheng dialects although in some cases, several words referring to same concept or object could be used in data collected from the same region. Suffice to also note that some words could be used with the same meaning in the different regions. Since I could not systematically and concretely establish the dialects, I treated the words as synonyms.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 NOUNS

Nouns constitute the largest share of items in my Sheng corpus, 93 lexemes. These items fall into four patterns depending on the number of synonyms a word has. That is, some words have two, three or four synonyms referring to the same concept while other items have no synonyms:

4.   ***dish → mdemo*** 'food'
        doo → ganji → manyamoo 'money'
        chik → dem → kenge → manzi 'girlfriend'

The linguistic material on nouns had patterns distributed as shown in Table 2.

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[5]   Nairobi and Mombasa are multi-ethnic cities. The former is the capital city and is locked in the inland while Mombasa is a coastal town and lies on what constitutes part of the native Swahili community.

Table 2. Noun Patterns

Synonym	Number	%
1	39	42
2	30	32
3	12	13
4	12	13
Total	**93**	**100**

Unique characteristics obtain in the lexification and lexicalization of the four patterns.

4.1.1 Single Words

As Table 2 shows, this category constitutes 42% (N = 39) of the nouns collected. In this category, there is a manipulation of the surface form of almost all the words collected except those that are direct loanwords from the lexifying language. Subsequently, five sub-patterns based on the process of lexification emerge.

Reversing of Syllables

It has been noted that in its attempts to remain a distinctive code for peers only, Sheng speakers resort to the reversal or swapping of syllables in a word (Ngesa 2002). Usually a word is sourced from one of the languages in the speech community where Sheng is used. However, when the word is introduced into Sheng, its surface form is manipulated so that the resulting word looks completely new and unique from that in the source language. The noun *dika* ('card') has such a form. It appears that the word is sourced from English *card* that is Bantuized[6] in pronunciation as **kadi.** The word's two syllables swap places so that **kadi** yields *dika.* Its meaning in English is however retained in Sheng, i.e. it still means card in Sheng.

Truncation

Truncation of the surface form of words is the most popular practice since it comprises 41% (N = 16) of the noun corpus. Here one notices that a word is first borrowed from one of the local languages in the Sheng-speaking speech community. Secondly, the word is Bantuized. Thirdly, the resulting Bantuized form of the word is truncated either in its initial or final syllable(s) depending on

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[6]   For lack of a correct term, I use Bantuization to refer to the process through which a word whose syllable does not follow the Bantu primitive syllable of consonant-vowel (CV) is manipulated and adjusted to the Bantu CV syllable structure.

whether it is a compound noun or not. Fourth, the truncated form may be suffixed either a coined syllable or sound to complete its marking for Sheng. Thus the meaning of the resulting word is not interpreted by the non-initiated speakers until they learn it from the Sheng speakers themselves. ***Finje*** ('fifty'), ***buufee*** ('bus fare'), ***saaya*** ('science'), ***tizi*** ('practice'), ***preeso*** ('president'), ***hasii*** ('husband') and ***goe*** ('ghost') among others are instances to cite in this category.

Finje ('fifty') is sourced from English *fifty*. This is Bantuized to **fifti**. The last sounds -**fti** snaps and the initial syllable **fi-** is retained. However, the dropped syllable is compensated for by ***-nje*** to yield ***finje. Finje***, however, has a special meaning in Sheng. It does not refer to the literal numeral fifty; rather it is a preserve of fifty shillings[7] in Sheng.

Buufee is another noun that is borrowed from English *bus fare*. This complex noun appears to have undergone several processes in its lexification. First, ***buu*** is sourced from English *bus* in its written form. In its spoken form, the word could have surfaced as **bas** and therefore could have been Bantuized as **basi**. However, by surfacing as ***buu*** in Sheng, the word must have originated in the English written form *bus* and was Bantuized as **busi**. The second syllable is truncated and the remaining syllable takes on compensatory lengthening to yield ***buu***. The second portion of the compound noun ***buufee*** also has an English source *fare* most probably in its spoken form **fea**. So the final form of these processes is the Sheng word ***buufee***, which means *bus fare* – the money a passenger pays to a bus conductor for boarding the bus.

Tizi is an interesting example among the truncated Sheng nouns. While most words sourced from English lose the suffixial syllables, ***tizi*** is a result of a prefixial truncation. It is sourced from the English noun *practice* Bantuized as **praktizi**. This Bantuized form loses the initial syllables while the penultimate and final syllables ***tizi*** are retained to carry the concept of practice. However, the word has a restricted meaning in Sheng, namely, it means physical exercises that one does in sports. It does not refer to practice in its entirety.

Daaroo is a truncation that is sourced from Kiswahili **darasa** ('class'). It loses its final syllable **-sa** while the initial two syllables **dara-** remain. However, **dara-** undergoes manipulation whereby the vowel of the first syllable **da-** is lengthened to **daa-** while the vowel of the second syllable **-ra** is replaced by 'o' and also lengthened to **-roo**. The result is ***daaroo.*** The word's concept (class) in Kiswahili is also retained in Sheng.

Diiroo is another example of a Kiswahili-sourced truncation. The surface form of the word in Kiswahili is **dirisha** ('window'). The final syllable **-sha** falls off and **diri-** remains. The vowel of the first syllable **di-** is lengthened to **dii-** while the vowel in the second syllable is replaced by 'o' and also lengthened to **-roo**. The result is a new Sheng noun ***diiroo,*** which means window just as it does in the lexifying language.

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[7]   Monetary currency used in Kenya.

Coining

Coining is a process through which a word is formed (not sourced from or based on another existing word) to express a concept or object. 32% (N = 12) of my Sheng corpus has coined nouns:

5.   **burungo** 'things'   **deepa** 'headteacher'
           kerende 'crowd of people'   **mnoma** 'genius'
           nyagu 'meat'   **rwabe** '200 shillings'
           kifungu 'grandfather'   **tenje** 'radio'
           blingbling 'chain'   **ocha** 'home'
           mboch 'househelp'

Although it is difficult to speculate the basis of coining of the Sheng nouns, two observations can be made about the nouns. One, some of the coined nouns have a restricted meaning. For instance, while **rwabe** refers to two hundred, it does not just mean two hundred; rather, it strictly means 200 Kenya shilling note, i.e. money. In the same vein **ocha** specifically refers to one's rural home[8] and not home in its general sense. That is, if one is asked 'where is **ocha**?', the possessive 'your' is implicit and the respondent does not interpret any fuzziness in this statement. S/he knows that the **ocha** referred to is her/his rural domicile.

A second observation about the coined nouns is that mimicry of the characteristics of the object named might be invoked. A case in point is **blingbling**, which refers to a chain. The reduplication of **bling** in the noun **blingbling** might be onomatopeaic of the echo made by a chain especially a metal chain.

Borrowing

Borrowing here refers to instances where Sheng vocabulary is lexified by an existing stable language. My corpus has 10% (N = 4) of Sheng nouns that are borrowed either from Gikuyu,[9] i.e. **ngiri** ('one thousand'), **wathii** ('travellers') and **mathafu/githafu** ('maths') or English, namely **stoori** ('story').

Ngiri is borrowed from Gikuyu where it refers to one thousand. However, in Sheng the noun is restricted in its meaning since it specifically refers to one thousand shillings. This should be distinguished from a *jirongo*,[10] which refers to a five hundred Kenya shilling currency note. A **ngiri** in Sheng refers to the sum

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[8]   Most African Kenyans, especially those working/living in towns, have two homes, namely: the home they live in town and a rural home where they were born and brought up and possibly where one's parents live.

[9]   A Bantu-speaking and largest ethnic group in Kenya.

[10]   A *jirongo* is a thousand shillings note that came to circulation in 1991, following the first multi-party election in Kenya, when one Jirongo led a high profile and heavily financed campaign for the then ruling party KANU when the currency note was introduced.

involved regardless of whether it results from coins and notes of various denominations.

Mathafu/githafu is an interesting loanword in Sheng. Its original source is Kiswahili **hesabu** (counting, maths). However, in Gikuyu phonology the [s] sound in its loanwords takes on [ð] while [b] takes on [f], hence *mathafu/githafu*. Note that the initial syllable *ma-/gi-* is a manipulation that identifies the noun in Sheng.

Stoori is sourced from English 'story'. It is, however, manipulated through Bantuization to *stoori* and the vowel in the first syllable *sto-* is lengthened so that *stoori* surfaces. Nevertheless, its sense is expanded through the following process. To begin with, the word means story just as it does in English. However, in its expanded meaning it may refer to news. For instance, when two people meet and exchange greetings one might ask the other, *Stoori?* In this case, *stoori* is a request for any new information that the respondent is expected to give the questioner. *Stoori* also sometimes refers to remarks such as *What's up?* Or *What are your plans for the day?*

Semantic Expansion

Semantic expansion comprises 15% (N = 6) of the Sheng nouns that have no synonyms. Here, the nouns sourced from either Kiswahili, i.e., *chuo* ('college'), *msee* [Mzee in Standard Kiswahili] ('old man'), *mng'aro* ('shinning') and *teke* ('kick') or English, i.e., *keja* ('cage') and *disk* ('disc') assume an expanded sense. That is, the noun's sense in the lexifying language is used as a base of conceptualising the noun in Sheng.

Chuo refers to 'college' in Kiswahili. A college usually has learners and teachers. In the Kenyan context of using Kiswahili, *chuo* could refer to post-secondary institutions excluding universities. However, in Sheng *chuo* refers to school (either primary or secondary) and any middle level college where learners and teachers interact. Thus, while the composition of learners and teachers is retained, the *chuo* in Sheng now refers to institutions of learning normally not included in the term **chuo** when used in the Kiswahili sense.

Msee [mzee in Standard Kiswahili] refers to an old person (usually male) in Kiswahili. **Mzee** in Kiswahili denotes respect so that even a young leader (e.g. a member of parliament) could be called **mzee**. However, in Sheng a *msee* is a male acquaintance (usually a colleague in *chuo*). A female acquaintance is called *kisee.* *Msee* should be distinguished from *mazee* which is rhetorically used in Sheng to call for one's attention regardless of whether the person is female or male, i.e., *Mazee nilijiroga vinoma* 'My friend, I ate a lot'.

Mng'aro is a deverbalized noun formed from the verb *ng'ara* ('shine'). The shininess could result from a shiny metal, glass, water, etc. A shiny object would usually attract the attention of people. The attraction for admiration is attributed to a dress which is called *mng'aro* in Sheng. What is interesting is that the dress

must be so good, neatly tailored and usually worn by a woman. Seldom is the noun ***mng'aro*** used to mean a man's dress.

Teke refers to 'kick' in Standard Kiswahili. It is reminiscent of the Kiswahili saying **asante ya punda ni mateke** 'a donkey's thank you is kicks'. ***Teke*** in Sheng refers to a woman, usually a beautiful lady. One criterion for determining a lady's beauty among many Kenyan men is whether or not a lady's legs are attractive, i.e. neither thin nor too thick. It is these legs that one uses to kick. So when one says ***teke,*** he is metonymically referring to a beautiful girl.

Keja is sourced from English 'cage' [kedg]. However, to conceal the noun and fashion it in accordance with Sheng, it is suffixed and Bantuized to ***keja***. A cage here refers to a wire mesh cage where domestic birds are kept. The Kiswahili translation of cage is **kizimba** or **tundu**, which figuratively means a prison. Sheng has expanded this figurative meaning and applied it to an ordinary human abode so that ***keja*** implies a room that one occupies. It could also refer to one's room in a big house or hostel in a college.

Disk is an interesting noun. It is sourced from English *disc* where it means a small flat circular object in a square plastic case that can be used for storing information from a computer and can be easily moved from one computer to another. The important characteristics that Sheng has taken on are flat circular forms. This circular form characterises a Kenyan delicacy – *chapati* – a flat, slightly hard, circular pan cake that is cooked. A chapati is thus a ***disk*** in Sheng.

4.1.2 Bi-synonym Nouns

Fifteen pairs of nouns are synonyms in the Sheng corpus treated. For all the examples, it is possible to give a diachronic transition in that one of the two nouns was used at an earlier stage of Sheng than the other:

6.	***jamaa***	→	***chalii***	'boyfriend'
	mathee	→	***masa***	'mother'
	ndhom(bomu)	→	***shada***	'bhang'
	njaaro	→	***mchoro***	'plan'
	kobole	→	***ngovo***	'five shilling coin'
	ngoma	→	***mahewa***	'music'
	paoo	→	***bluu***	'twenty shilling note'
	soo	→	***nyanga***	'one hundred shillings'
	beshte	→	***beshti***	'intimate friend'
	ugangaa	→	***sembe***	'maize flour'
	msunye	→	***ngoso***	'white person'
	brathee	→	***bro***	'brother'
	sistee	→	***siz***	'sister'
	kazee	→	***kazoo***	'cousin'

Chalii in the pair *chalii → jamaa* is a predecessor of *jamaa* in use. *Chalii,* which is a coining for boyfriend, was used at a time when *chik* underwent transition through several synonyms (c.f. 4.1.4). *Chalii* survived until it was replaced by *jamaa*. *Jamaa* is sourced from Kiswahili **jamaa** 'fellow' or 'relative'. Only women/girls use *jamaa*. Otherwise, if a man used it, he could be considered gay. Hence, when a lady says *jamaa wa maen* she does not imply her relative; rather her boyfriend – an intimate person to her.

Njaaro → mchoro is another pair with a coined and a Kiswahili-sourced formation. *Njaaro* preceded *mchoro* in use. *Njaaro* is coined while *mchoro* is sourced from Kiswahili where it means a drawing. In Sheng the two words imply a plan, usually arrangements that a boyfriend and a girlfriend make for an evening or weekend outing. At times this is called a 'plot' arising out of the nature of the outing. That is, seldom is the outing given the parents' blessings.

The *ngoma → mahewa* dichotomy has a Kiswahili-based form. *Ngoma* is a drum while *hewa* (root of *mahewa*) is air. A **ngoma** is a very important musical instrument in Kenya so that the Sheng speakers readily associate it with music and for a long time music has been synonymous with **ngoma**. However with time, music especially CD and/or cassette-recorded music has come to be associated with air since no drums are played as in live concerts; one only receives the music through sounds in the air, hence *mahewa*.

4.1.3 Tri-synonym Nouns

My corpus yielded 12 nouns, which were categorised into four groups with three synonyms each:

7.
doo → ganji/ganzi → manyamoo	'money'
mozo → fegi → fwaka	'cigarette'
ashara → ashuu → kindee	'ten shillings'
motii/buu → dinga → dai	'vehicle'

The *doo → ganji/ganzi → manyamoo* synonyms represent an English-Hindi-Gikuyu lexification. *Doo* is sourced from English *dough* where it means money as shown in (3). *Doo* was used in Sheng for a long time so that an expression such as *pata doo noma* meant 'earn good money'. At some later stage, *doo* was replaced by *ganji*. Perhaps *ganji* is sourced from the Hindi word *ganji* or from West Indies *ganja*, which means opium. Opium is an illegal drug in Kenya but it fetches a lot of money in the black market. Hence *ganji* is a metonym for the so much money one gets from opium trafficking. *Manyamoo* is sourced from Gikuyu *-nyamoo* ('thing'). It is expanded in meaning to refer to money in Sheng. The prefix *ma-* is a class 6 noun marker for plurality – a lot.

Mozo → fegi → fwaka is yet another chain of tri-synonym nouns that refers to cigarette. Here, the words are coined since it is not possible to identify their lexifying language(s) while *fegi* is sourced from English *fag* ('cigarette').

However, *mozo* could be sourced from Kiswahili **moto** ('fire') that is derived from the fire that burns a cigarette. Cigarette smoking is not encouraged among the youths (approximately up to age 20) in Kenya. So those who smoke, try hard to hide from being seen by their parents. To ensure that the parents do not understand them when they are talking about cigarettes, the youth started off by using *mozo*. When the word was no more a secret they changed to *fegi*, which is sourced from informal English *fag*. This word must have served them well since it is not commonly used in Kenyan English. Nevertheless, with time *fegi* became obsolete and a new word *fwaka* came into being. *Fwaka* might be sourced from the Kiswahili verb *-waka* which means burn. This could denote the burning of a cigarette. However, to conceal the word the Sheng speakers must have corrupted it to *fwaka,* the word presently in use.

In the *ashara → ashuu → kindee* tri-synonym nouns, one notices a diachronic change from a Kiswahili word that is later truncated and finally gets replaced by a coined noun. Here the initial noun to be used was *ashara*, which is a Kiswahili word for ten. However, *ashara* in Sheng specifically refers to ten shillings. At a later stage, the noun was replaced by *ashuu*. *Ashara* must have lost the final syllable *-ra*, which was compensated for by a long 'u' resulting in *ashuu*. *Kindee*, the noun presently in circulation, is coined as no language source can be identified as its source.

Motii/buu → dinga → dai is a chain of tri-synonyms that refers to an automobile. *Motii*, which is the truncated form of motor, is used to refer to a car while *buu* is the truncated form of bus (c.f. 4.1.1). The two nouns were the very first to be used in Sheng and it appears that there was initially a distinction between the different sizes of an automobile in question. The two nouns (*motii* and *buu*) were replaced by a general noun *dinga*, which means a vehicle and thus does not differentiate the vehicles. *Dinga* is perhaps sourced from Dholuo *ndiga* ('bicycle'). The sounds 'n' and 'g' have exchanged places in **dinga**. Besides, there is semantic expansion so that the concept of a bicycle as a means of transport is transferred and applied on the auto. *Dai* is the noun presently in use. Interestingly, **dai** means 'claim' in Kiswahili. Thus much as *dai* means a vehicle in Sheng, it has no meaning relationship whatsoever with the Kiswahili **dai** ('claim').

4.1.4 Quadri-synonym Nouns

A quadri-synonym noun is that noun which has three equivalents. My corpus has three nouns, which yielded three synonyms each:

8.   *chik → dem → kenge → manzi*   'girlfriend'
        poonyi → pai → karau → koopa   'police officer'
        ushaago → shaake → shags → ocha   'home'

Chik and *dem* in the *chik → dem → kenge → manzi* synonyms are probably lexified by English. The equivalents of *chik* and *dem* in English are *chick* and *dame* respectively. The attachment of meaning to these two nouns is, however, interesting. A chick is a tender and most adored baby of a chicken. One who owns a chick jealously takes care of it so that it grows to a mature chicken. These traits are applied to one's girlfriend. She is not only loved but also adored and jealously taken care of. Hence, she is a *chik* to the boyfriend. *Chik* was later replaced by *dem*, which is sourced from English *dame*. Dame is a woman who has been given special honour by the British government. Dame is used in front of the name of such a woman. The characteristics of great honour for a British lady are bestowed on a girlfriend who is adoringly called *dem* in Sheng. *Dem* was later replaced by *kenge*. The word is probably sourced from Kiswahili **kenge** ('monitor lizard'). A monitor lizard is not an ordinary reptile, which one gets anywhere; rather it is a rare creature that lives in hot climates and even here, it does not expose itself carelessly. In the same way, a dear girlfriend is not considered an ordinary human being but a special creature. Thus she is a *kenge*. *Kenge* has also been replaced by *manzi*. It is probably sourced from Kiswahili **manzili** ('house') which must have undergone truncation of its last syllable **-li** to yield **manzi**. If that is the case, then the characteristics of **manzili** as a place that guarantees one warmth, security and homeliness are attributed to a girlfriend.

A lot of manipulation is involved in creating and lexicalizing the nouns in the *poonyi → pai → karau → koopa* synonyms used to refer to 'police officer'. The essence of such manipulation is to conceal the identity of the police especially when they are the subject of discussion (p.c. Kivuva,[11] November 2003). *Poonyi* is a truncated form of 'police' whereby the last two syllables are shed off. However, a manipulation is done involving compensatory lengthening of the vowel in the first syllable and then an extra syllable **-nyi** is added to produce *poonyi*. *Poonyi*'s succesor *pai* is coined following the same procedure in order to conceal the subject. In the crime-ridden Eastlands area of Nairobi where Sheng first flourished, the residents live in constant fear of the police who could come around at any time camouflaged to monitor ('spy') the occurrence of crime. Thus people associate the police with espionage and have nicknamed them spies. However, to hide the identity of the noun, they have truncated it through the loss of the first sound 's' leaving 'py' which is pronounced as *pai*. This is the word they use to warn each other whenever they notice them *(pai)* in their neighbourhood. The successor of *pai* is *karau*. It originates from Kiswahili **karaya** – metal or glass shield used by the anti-riot police when they are quelling riots. So the adoption of *karau* stems from the association of the police with carrying of the **karaya**. But to remain discrete and restricted to the in-group of Sheng-speakers, the last syllable

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[11]   An employee of Moi University now aged 50 and who lived in the Eastlands area of Nairobi at its formative stages. According to him, the police were cruel disciplinarians as were the mothers of the children in the Eastlands who could spank their children for playing and soiling clothes. So when playing and if the children saw a mother to one of them, they could shout *poonyi* to warn that a person as cruel as the police officer was approaching.

of **karaya** is truncated and replaced by 'u' to yield **karau**. Finally, the advent of **koopa**, which is in circulation at present, traces to *copper*, which is the informal old-fashioned English for police officer. What has been done here is to lengthen the vowel of the first syllable and the Bantuization of the entire noun in order to produce **koopa**. The vowel lengthening is perhaps the influence of Bantu phonology whereby stress comes in the penultimate syllable of a word.

The noun for home has also been experiencing changes as attested to by **ushaago → shaake → shags → ocha**. The first three equivalents, namely; **ushaago**, **shaake** and **shags** descend from Gikuyu *gicagi* 'village'. In this case, a home is associated with a village, which is one's cradle. It is in the village that one belongs and feels totally at home. Thus one's rural home is *gicagi*. Manipulation of this Gikuyu word in various ways at different stages yielded the three-some nouns **ushaago-shaake-shags** respectively. These surface forms have now been replaced by **ocha**. The lexifying language of **ocha** is not clear. Thus it is largely associated with the linguistic creativity of Sheng speakers that coins words in order to meet its linguistic needs.

4.2 VERBS

Verbs as words expressing actions or states are another part of speech that are generously represented in the linguistic material treated. Unlike nouns analysed in the foregoing section, verbs appear to have a high level of stability since 73% (N = 27) of the verbs in the corpus have no equivalents. In addition, none of the verbs has changed from an earlier form to a new one. What seems to be happening is that new verbs are appearing where no known Sheng verbs existed before.

Three patterns of verbs are identifiable, namely: verbs that are polysemous, those verbs with equivalents (synonyms) and those with no synonyms:

Table 3. Verb Patterns

Verb Type	Number	%
Polysemous	2	5
Synonyms	8	22
No synonyms	27	73
Total	**37**	**100**

4.2.1 Polysemous Verbs

These are verbs, which denote more than one sense. To begin with, **-wahi** is used to refer to outsmart or up stage one, i.e., **Nili*wahi* yule *manzi***, 'I outsmarted that girl'. **-wahi** as used in Kiswahili means to reach a place earlier than anticipated.

Thus the concept of earlier arrival is transferred to outsmarting a person in a contest.

-*wahi* is also used to refer to beating up a person as in **Nitam*wahi* huyu mzee**, 'I will beat up this old man'. Here the speaker is certain of not only outsmarting his rival but also beating him up. That is, he will outshine him first before the latter realises that he has been outshone.

-*manga* means the act of eating, i.e., **kumanga dish,** 'to eat food'. The probable source of the verb **kumanga** is not very clear although one might claim that it is sourced from English *munch.* This is then manipulated to produce **-*manga***. However, in **-*manga***'s second meaning, to have sex, it is possible to speculate the source of the verb. **Kumanga manzi** in Sheng means to have carnal knowledge of a girl. Here the infinitive verb **kumanga** might be a semantic expansion where euphemically having carnal knowledge of a woman is equated to "eating her" in most Kenyan languages. **Kumanga** for sex is used concurrently with **sukuma** (p.c. Gatwiri,[12] October 2000). -**sukuma** means push in Kiswahili. In this case, Sheng has focused on the pushing in and out of the male genital organ during coitus to lexicalize **sukuma**.

4.2.2 Synonyms

Some verbs have equivalents:

9.   ***-hanya* → *-katia***   'seduce a girl'
         -susu* → *-nyoora   'urinate'
         -wahi* → *-samba   'beat up'

In the ***-hanya* → *-katia*** synonyms, **-*hanya*** preceded **-*katia***. **-*hanya***'s source is not known (Ogechi 2002: 100ff). It is probably coined. While **-*hanya*** means the act of seducing a girl, when the verb is reduplicated as in **-*hanya hanya*** it means roaming around flirting with men and women. Thus it means prostituting oneself. **-*katia*** is the verb that has replaced **-*hanya***. **-*katia*** might be the applicative form of the Kiswahili verb **-*kata*** ('cut'). The act of seduction is associated with persuasion and choosing of nice words on the part of the man. So persuasion and diction are likened to cutting (plucking) pieces of sweet enticing words for purposes of pleasing the seduced, hence **-*katia*** ('cut for') in Sheng.

The **-*susu* → *-nyoora*** synonyms for urinating represent mimicry and borrowing in their sourcing respectively. **-*susu*** is used not only among the Sheng speakers but it is also presently predominantly used in upcountry Kenyan Kiswahili as a euphemism for urinating when talking to kids. **-*susu*** is formed through mimicking the 'ssss' sound during urination. The successor of the noun **-*susu***, **-*nyoora*** is borrowed from some Kenyan Bantu languages prominently

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[12]   Gatwiri is 25 and has spoken Sheng for over ten years.

Ekegusii[13] whose verb for urinate is -*sinyoora*. The initial syllable of the verb is truncated and only **-nyoora** remains.

In **-wahi → -samba** ('beat up'), the lexification and lexicalization of **-wahi** has already been explained (c.f. 4.2.1). It is the earlier form to be used for beat. This has been replaced by the presently popular verb form **-samba**. This verb is not traceable to any known language. Thus it is coined.

4.2.3 Verbs without Synonyms

The largest share of the Sheng verbs studied have no synonyms and they comprise 72% (N = 37). These fall into three main patterns depending upon their probable source, namely: Dholuo, English, Kiswahili or coined:

Table 4. Sources of Verbs

Source	Number	%
Dholuo	1	4
Kiswahili	12	44
English	8	30
Coining	6	22
Total	**27**	**100**

Dholuo-based Verb

Donjo means arrive in Sheng. The most probable Dholuo[14] equivalent of the verb is *donjo.* However, the Dholuo verb has a different meaning in that it means to enter or entering, say a house. So, for ***donjo*** to be used in Sheng, the Dholuo sense of entering is expanded and associated with the sense of arriving.

Kiswahili-based Verbs

These constitute the bulk of the Sheng verbs, namely 44% (N = 12). However, the Kiswahili surface form of a word does not mean that the Sheng word has the same sense it has in Kiswahili.

-dara is used in Kiswahili in the sense of touching lithely without implying intimacy. However in Sheng **-dara** means caress in a loving manner.

When used in Kiswahili, **-sota** refers to crawling on one's buttocks and with hands, as does a crippled person. It denotes a situation of difficulty and pain. One who has no money can experience this state of difficulty and pain. Thus **-sota** in Sheng refers to financial difficulties.

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[13] Ekegusii is a Bantu language spoken in south-western Kenya.
[14] Dholuo is a Nilotic language spoken in southwestern Kenya and its speakers are numerically the third most populous community in Kenya.

-chota in Kiswahili means collecting something that is watery, i.e. fetching water in a calabash from a spring. But the phrase *chota* in Sheng means give me money. The verb *chota* does not require qualification in order to show that it refers to giving the speaker money; rather when one says *chota* the listener knows that s/he s being asked to produce money for the speaker.

-toboa is a Kiswahili-sourced verb. In the source language, *-toboa* means make a hole, say on a piece of cloth, etc. However, in Sheng *toboa* implies succeed in Sheng, i.e. *Nimetoboa,* 'I have made it, say in an exam.' *-toboa* could also mean reveal, i.e., **nito***toboa*, 'I shall reveal everything'.

-kazia is the applicative form of the verb **-kaza** in Kiswahili. **-kaza** means to tighten something such as a knot, etc. Only the applicative form of *-kazia* is used in Sheng. Here, it means make it difficult for one to do something, i.e. **yule *masa amemkazia hasii***, 'that woman has "tamed" her husband'.

English-based Verbs

These comprise 30% (N = 9) of the linguistic material studied.

chop as used in English refers to cutting, especially a piece of wood to make various shapes, such as a cooking stick, and sometimes it means eat. As one chops s/he reduces a big piece into smaller ones. When used in Sheng, *-chop* means studying as do students studying for an exam. Perhaps the act of reading and trying to learn is (in the minds of Sheng speakers) likened to 'chopping' a big piece of knowledge into small understandable pieces.

shoo is a popular verb in Sheng narration. It is probably sourced from English 'show' which means to prove that something exists or to give information you can see on a printed thing such as a map or photograph. *-shoo* as used in Sheng refers to telling, i.e., *Alinishoo* 'S/he told me.'

-dis is sourced from English dismiss. Once one is dismissed s/he ceases to perform the functions s/he was performing before the dismissal. *Dis* is the truncated form of dismiss. However when used in Sheng it means breaking a relationship between a boy and a girl. **Am***emdis manzi,* 'he has jilted the girl'.

-mada comes from the English verb 'murder'. While the English verb means kill, in Sheng *mada* means completing a task, i.e., *amemada chuo* 'she has completed studies'.

Coined Verbs

Coined verbs comprise 22% (N = 6) of the Sheng material:

10.   *-genya*   'die'
        -dooroo   'sleep'
        -sorora   'spy'
        -bonga   'speak, talk'

      -slekii   'laze around'
      -waya   'be afraid'

The language source of these verbs is not traceable. They must be learnt by heart from a Sheng speaker.

4.3 ADJECTIVES

It is noted that the data analysed had only two adjectives: *poa* and *noma*. This scarcity tends to support claims that most Bantu languages, including Kiswahili have few adjectives. The fact that adjectives are few, makes the available few Bantu adjectives to be used with many senses. The surface form of *poa* is reminiscent of Kiswahili *poa* for cool. However, *poa* in Sheng evokes several different senses largely due to semantic borrowing from English:

11.   **mtu** *poa*   'good, nice person'
12.   **pesa** *poa*   'good (a lot of) money'

Noma is also a coined and the most variantly used adjective:

13.   **mtu** *noma*   'good person'
14.   **mtu** *noma*   'a nuisance of a person'
15.   **kipindi** *noma*   'an interesting (TV, radio) programme'

The various senses of the same adjective, as demonstrated in the foregoing examples, indicate that the code has a limited vocabulary. This makes it easy to learn Sheng as it portrays Sheng as having simplicity that is a common characteristic in pidgins (Ferguson 1971). However, the thin and highly transient vocabulary makes Sheng an unstable code.

5. CONCLUSION

The goal of this paper was to take Sheng studies a notch higher than the traditional focus on the sociolinguistics and structural aspects of Sheng. By so doing, I have delved into the lexicalization of Sheng as a first step towards studying the semantics of Sheng. The analysis of the corpus has shown that at the lexical level, there is a high tendency of forming nouns followed by verbs and adjectives than any other parts of speech. It appears that largely it is open class[15]

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[15]   Open class items include nouns, verbs and adjectives which can change and admit new items (hence open) in any language. The opposite is closed class items which include function words that rarely change or admit new ones in any language.

items that contribute to and identify Sheng lexicon. Since nouns and verbs are the basic carriers of content in any conversation, it is safe to conclude that Sheng as a peer group language succeeds in isolating the non-initiated speaker because of the language's innovativeness in creating these content words (nouns and verbs). The treatment has also shown that although the speakers coin, manipulate and use the Sheng lexemes unintentionally, there is a high degree of logic involved in the process of lexicalizing Sheng lexemes.

The fact that there are synonyms that have developed over the years (according to my analysis) does not mean that the so-called predecessors are completely no longer in use; rather, some of them are still actively used or are being revived. This shows that Sheng behaves like any stable language that has its diachronic and synchronic aspects. However, the diachronic changes (as shown through bi-synonym, tri-synonym and quadri-synonyms) seem to be overwhelming within the 20 or so years of Sheng's existence. These emphases claim that Sheng is largely an unstable code.

From the study carried out here, it appears that there is need to investigate into other semantic aspects of Sheng, such as idiomaticity and sentence semantics. It would also be interesting to unravel the dialects of Sheng spoken in Kenya.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CL	noun class
COP	copula
CS	codeswitching
DET	determiner
ML	matrix language
NONPST	non-past
PRF	perfective aspect

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