Bazes and Their Shibboleths: Lexical Variation and Sheng Speakers' Identity in Nairobi

PETER GITHINJI
Ohio University, United States

ABSTRACT

This paper examines Sheng's shibboleths that mark speakers as members of different social categories. Attention is paid to how these shibboleths are used in the *bazes* — local hang out joints, where the bulk of members' interaction takes place in Sheng. The concept 'baze' carries the dual sense of members of these social groups, and the social spaces in which different images of 'we' vs. 'them' are constructed and negotiated. The relevance of lexical semantic differences is regarded as a consequence of deliberate strategies in which members of different bazes manipulate the meaning of words to draw categorical boundaries. Following this scenario, it can be concluded that with different bazes having their own shibboleths, Nairobi is not a melting pot where different languages converge to produce a single language. The traditional ethnic categories are displaced by the emergence of social categories which are as divisive as ethnic groups.

Keywords: Sheng, variation, social reality, identity

1. INTRODUCTION

The majority of established variationists' work dealing with identity, e.g., (Fischer 1958) study of [ŋ/n] variation in a New England village, and Labov's (1972) famous study of glide centralization in Martha's Vineyard tend to focus on phonological variation. Fisher for instance, showed that the velar [-ŋ] nasal was the preferred variant identified with 'model' boys while the coronal [n] nasal was identified with 'typical' boys. On his part, Labov showed that the respondents who used the raised onsets of [au] and [ai] were island oriented regardless of their other sociolinguistic identities. Vocabulary, on the other hand, has had very little such treatment, and when it has, it is often an insider relying on knowledge of their own speech community. A good example is Smitherman's (1977) study of various aspects of Black Semantics. Smitherman discussed the dual level meaning of English words among African Americans. The word 'bad,' for instance, has a negative meaning in the mainstream when used in an expression such as *I got a bad cold.* When the same word is used in an expression like *he is a bad dude,* it gets a positive meaning because it has now moved to the subcultural encoding of sense in Black semantics, which operates outside the boundaries of the mainstream. Nevertheless, it needs to be

pointed out that all African Americans do not speak the same way. However, studies in internal variation of non-standard dialects such as African American Vernacular English (AAVE) have not received much attention. A similar scenario also applies to Sheng — an urban code spoken in Kenya. While various works mention identity as one of Sheng's major functions, only Samper's (2002) work specifically focuses on identity. In spite of mentioning its internal variations (p.8), such intricacies were not the object of his study. The present paper seeks to build on Samper's work by focusing on Sheng's lexical variation in relation to the identity of its speakers. The questions I seek to answer are 1) What is responsible for lexical variation? 2) How do lexical differences manifest themselves in Sheng? and 3) What are the implications of lexical and semantic differences on the identities of different Sheng speakers? My research draws inspiration from cognitive social psychology where identities are conceived as cognitive schemas or internally stored social information and meaning, serving as a framework for interpreting experience (Stryker and Burke 2000). Experience itself is viewed in the context of discursive social practices that are intersubjectively negotiated through language. Through these social negotiations different aspects of Sheng speaker's identities come to the fore.

This paper is organized as follows: In Section 2, I give a linguistic description of Sheng, which clarifies what should be regarded as Sheng in the rest of the paper. Section 3 lays the groundwork by discussing the relationship between language and identity within the background of different social realities that Sheng speakers confront, and the lexicalization processes responsible for lexical variation. In section 4, I discuss the methods used in data collection. I also present the results and discuss the implications of these data with respect to the identity of Sheng speakers. Section 5 talks about conscious linguistic practices, while Section 6 concludes this paper.

2. WHAT IS SHENG?

Sheng, popularly defined as an acronym for "Swahili-English slang," e.g. (Mazrui 1995) is a hybrid linguistic code that is believed to have evolved in Nairobi in the 1960s and 1970s. Its evolution and use has been attributed to a variety of factors ranging from language contact to inadequate knowledge of standard languages, i.e. (Swahili and English), identity, e.g. (Osinde 1986, Samper 2002, 2004), obfuscation of meaning (Mbugua 2003, Githiora 2002), and cognitive efficiency (Kang'ethe 2004) among others. According to Mazrui (1995), Sheng defies the classification categories such as pidgin, creole, slang (in spite of the acronym), or jargon. This is because although it exhibits features that characterize all these categories, none can be said to exhaustively capture its various peculiarities. It is unanimously believed that Sheng began in the poor residential areas of Nairobi's Eastlands, before gradually spreading to other poor residential areas of Nairobi and its environs. Today, it has become a

characteristic linguistic phenomenon of Nairobi and other multiethnic urban areas in Kenya, though the degree of competence and participation differs from individual to individual among different categories of speakers. Sheng's lexical composition can be attributed to a variety of sources (with Swahili and English and the most dominant languages), though its structure is basically Swahili. This is illustrated by the two opening lines from the Sheng track 'Bumba Train' by Nameless and the late E-Sir in (1):

1. (a) Tu-me-ku-j-a   ku-party   DJ hebu weka tracky
         3pl-perf-inf-*come*-fv   inf-*party*   DJ *just put   track*
         'We've come to party, DJ play the music'

    (b) Tu-ku-l-e   hepi,   halafu   tu-fungu-e sakafu
         3pl-inf-*eat*-subj   *happy*, *then*   3pl-*open*-subj *floor*
         'We celebrate, and then we open the (dance) floor'

In Standard Swahili, the two lines can be glossed as:

2. (a) Tu-me-ku-j-a   ku-furah- i- a   DJ hebu cheza   muziki
         3pl perf-inf-*come*-fv inf-*happy*-appl-fv DJ *just play   music*
         'We've come to party, DJ play the music'

    (b) Tu-burudik-e   halafu   tu-fungu-e   sakafu
         3pl-*relax* -subj   *then*   3pl *open*-subj   *floor*
         'We celebrate, then we open the (dance)floor'[1]

Sentences (1a) and (2a) are exactly the same apart from the lexical differences between the pairs *ku-party/ku-furahia* 'to party', and *weka tracky/cheza muziki* 'play music'. Similarly, sentences (1b) and (2b) only differ by virtue of the lexical contrasts between *tukule hepi* and *tuburudike*, both meaning 'we celebrate'. In the Sheng word *ku-party* in (1a), the Swahili infinitive marker **-ku** precedes the English deverbative 'party', just like it does in the standard Swahili word *ku-furahia* in (2a). We also note that in the Sheng construction *tu-kule hepi*, the third person plural marker **tu**- is present, just like in the Standard Swahili construction *tu-burudike*. In addition, vowel **-e** at the end of both verbs indicates that both VPs are subjunctive constructions. Due to such grammatical similarity, one may ask what makes the sentences in (1) Sheng and those in (2) Swahili. Clearly, variation results from the English lexical insertions rather than grammatical differences. This insertion of English material into Swahili grammar validates Githiora's (2002: 176) proposal that Sheng is an age-marked urban dialect of Kenyan Swahili.

---

[1] Abreviation used in the paper. **numerals** = Personal pronouns or Noun classes, **cop** = copular, **pl** = plural, **sg** = singular, **perf** = Perfect tense, **prog** = progressive aspect, **inf** = Infinitive, **fv** = Final vowel, **subj** = subjunctive, **appl** = applicative, **neg** = negation **hab** = habitual, **dem** demonstrative.

The Swahili base of Sheng can be systematically determined by applying Myers-Scotton's (1993a) Matrix Language Frame (MLF) model as a diagnostic test for determining the base language in mixed codes. The MLF model spells out the asymmetry between the matrix language (ML) and the embedded language (EL). According to this model, both the matrix and embedded languages contribute the content morphemes, but only the matrix language sets the morphosyntactic frame of the mixed constituents. This is well captured by the system morpheme principle:

3.   *The system morpheme Principle:*
      In ML+EL constituents, all system morphemes which have grammatical relations external to their head constituents (i.e. which participate in the sentence's thematic grid) will come from the ML.

Examples (1) and (2) above confirm that all the elements with grammatical relevance such as inflection, articles, subjunctive, and other agreement morphemes are supplied by Swahili.

Apart from Swahili, other languages may also constitute Sheng's ML. According to Ogechi (2005), the ML of Sheng varies depending on the language of wider communication in the area where Sheng data is collected. Although I do not have data on studies done on this area, *Engsh* as described by Abulaziz and Osinde (1997) offers a good illustration. Abdulaziz and Osinde (p. 50) report that *Engsh* is spoken in the affluent neighborhoods of Nairobi's Westlands, where the speech of the middle class residents is characterized by a heavy use of English. In their account, *Engsh*, derived from inverting the letters in the word Sheng, reverses the asymmetry between the matrix language and embedded language. English seems to dominate *Engsh* construction as seen in their examples in (4) below;

4.   (a)   *Si*   we   burst *Dagoo*   for *nyaks*   *chom*
            neg   we   go   Dagoretti   for   meat   roast
            'Lets go to Dagoretti for roast meat'

      (b)   I will be heading/go-thie-ing ruraya-s moros
            I will be heading/inf-go-prog abroad tomorrow.
            'I will be going abroad tomorrow'

The request in (4a) is hedged on Swahili discourse marker *si*. Such English sentences beginning with *si* feature prominently in the English discourse of the educated people in Nairobi. Although the English structure seems to take over from there on, we cannot help noticing the lack of directional preposition *'to'* after the verb "burst". This is in accordance with the Swahili structure that does

not insert prepositions in such environments[2]. The 'phonotactic Anglicization,' and the closed syllables[3] in *nyaks chom* 'roast meat', derived from Swahili *nyama choma,* are pointers to the operation of English structure at other linguistic levels. In contrast, the phonotactics of *Dagoo* — a clipping from Dagoretti[4] has a Sheng flavor. This structural alternation is evidence of the sharing of grammatical relations between the two languages that make up 'Engsh'. Similar observations can be made about (4b), where the Kikuyu verb '*gũ-thiĩ'*, 'to go' phonetically realized as [*go-thie*] is suffixed with English progressive aspect *-ing* to agree with the future auxiliary 'will be'. Also noticeable is the absence of the directional preposition *'to'* before the locational noun *rurayas* just like in (4a). In addition, the English plural morpheme *-s* in the words *rũrayas* [roraya] 'abroad' in Kikuyu, and *moros*, a reduction of the English word '{to}morrow' serves no specific grammatical function. From these examples, we can see that if the *system morpheme principle* was to be the sole criteria in determining the ML, the presence of the functional elements such as discourse markers and absence of some functional morphemes would pose some problems. How do we then determine the ML if the grammatical elements are shared by the two participating languages? More data is therefore needed before a strong claim of the English base of *Engsh* can be made. This might partly be the reason Githiora (2002: 176) dismisses *Engsh* as slang.

Can't Sheng then be simply treated as instances of codeswitching? To answer this question, it should first be appreciated that codeswitching constitute a very important part of Sheng discourse, but as Ogechi (2005: 336) notes, "once the lexemes leave their source language(s), and are used in Sheng, they assume a new meaning (sense) altogether". If Ogechi's claim is correct, then such borrowed words should be treated as Sheng words, just like the way Sheng speakers do. At this juncture, I restate my claim in Githinji (2005) that Sheng is a lexical issue and that the lexicon is the most productive area in the study of identity negotiation in Sheng. In this respect, the perspective of investigating identity construction in Sheng only based on the speakers' desire to identify with the solidarity and status values associated with lexifier languages (e.g. Myers-Scotton 1993b) will be too restrictive. On the other hand, regarding Sheng as a code in its own right makes it possible to pay more attention to its lexical variations and the way they are used by different groups of speakers as markers of their identity. With this clarification, I begin my discussion by illustrating the relationship between language and identity.

---

[2] Like other Bantu languages, use of preposition is limited. Instead, there is heavy use of applicative construction to expressed grammatical relations served by preposition in languages such as English.

[3] Swahili does not allow complex syllables. The only possible syllables are V, CV. There exist very rare cases of CCV and CVC as in *hospitali* [ho.spi.ta.li] 'hospital' and *sharti* [shar.ti] 'condition', borrowed from English and Arabic respectively.

[4] An area in the outskirts of Nairobi where the slaughterhouses that supply the city and its environs are located.

3. LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

The relationship between language and identity has mostly been perceived in terms of ethno-cultural vitality. While some scholars adopt the absolutist view where native languages are seen as the 'identity cards' of their speakers, e.g. (Macaulay 1997), others like Myhill (2003: 83–6) argue that ethno-cultural vitality can still be maintained long after the loss of native language. In his criticism of Fishman's (1972: 40–55) claim that X (native language) is essential for one to be considered an Xman (ethnicity), Myhill cites the case of Jews in the diaspora as a classic example of people who have retained their ethnicity in spite of using different languages. His argument tallies with Edwards (1985: 7) who contends that language is just one of the characteristics of defining one's ethnic identity besides others such as racial, geographical, religious, ancestral, etc. Myhill offers very valid arguments against the essentialism of mother-tongues in ethno-cultural identity; however, the role between language and social identity cannot be downplayed. Nothing illustrates this better than the biblical account of a conflict between the Ephraimites and the Gileadites in Judges (12: 1–6). Joshua, the leader of the Gileadites, was returning home after vanquishing his enemy the Ammonites. On his way home he was accosted by the Ephraimites who accused the victorious Gileadites of not seeking their help. In the ensuing fight, the Ephraimites were defeated, but some managed to escape. Verses 5–6 are the most relevant as far as language and identity is concerned:

> And the Gileadites took the passages of Jordan before the Ephraimites: and it was so, that when those Ephraimites which were escaped said, Let me go over; that the men of Gilead said unto him, Art thou an Ephraimite? If he said, Nay; Then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth: and he said Sibboleth: for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan: and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand.
>
> <div align="right">Judges 12: 5–6</div>

The Gileadites were well aware of the Ephraimites' incapability in the phonetic production of the alveo-palatal sibilant [š], hence pronouncing [sh]ibboleth as [s]ibboleth. This linguistic test proved effective in distinguishing the genuine Gileadites from the Ephraimite imposters and shows how linguistic differences can be deployed to draw ethnic boundaries. Consequently, a 'shibboleth' has become a technical term that refers to the linguistic items that can be used to distinguish one group of people from another. This bible passage will be the scaffold in my discussion on how linguistic variation is used to draw group boundaries among Sheng speakers.

Two reasons that have been cited as the major motivations why people identify themselves as groups are 1) subjective uncertainty reduction and 2) enhancement of self-esteem (Hornsey and Hogg 2000: 144). Speakers are

usually aware that they are judged more favorably by accommodating to the linguistic norms of their interlocutors. This logic guides the arguments of the proponents of the speech accommodation theory, e.g. (Giles and Powesland 1975, Giles and Copeland 1991), which is essentially a theory of speech modification. Speakers modify their speech to either converge or diverge from the speech norms of their interlocutors depending on the expected cost and rewards. The ultimate goal is to minimize cost and maximize rewards which vary according to the interaction contexts (see Meyer-Scotton 1993b). These works and others not cited, show that speech accommodation operates from the premise that there is an exemplary module of communicating that applies across the board to all members of the group. Certain linguistic features are identified as typical and are hence regarded as the shibboleths of that particular group. Although these differences are often exaggerated, it does not imply total rejection of the claim of linguistic differences among members of different social categories. It is these differences that are the focus of this study. Just like the articulation differences between the Ephraimites and the Gileadites highlighted above were enough to identify who belonged to which ethnic category, lexical variation will be used to draw the group boundaries of Sheng speakers. The words that different groups use are vital to our understanding of their social realities.

3.1. LANGUAGE: A GUIDE TO SOCIAL REALITY

Linguistic determinism and linguistic relativity have been hotly contested issues in linguistic anthropology since Whorf's (1939) article 'The relation of habitual thought and behavior to language'. The major bone of contention in what came to be dubbed the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is the strong proposal that language orients people to think in a certain way. This has been rejected by linguists like Jackendoff (1994: 185) who prefers to separate language from thought. The skepticism is mainly due to the implication that some languages are better endowed in expressing certain concepts and ideas and hence more superior than others. However, some researchers on linguistic relativity, e.g., Lucy (1992, 1997) provides empirical framework that shows how linguistic relativity can contribute to scholarly inquiry on the relation between language and thought. While the pros and cons of this debate are beyond the scope of this paper, I find Sapir's celebrated quote on the relationship between language and social reality quite fitting in the discussion of Sheng's shibboleths:

> Language is a guide to "social reality." …Human beings do not live in objective worlds alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular languages which has become the medium of expression of their society. …The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built upon the language habits of a group. No two

languages are sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.

(Sapir 1929, in Mandelbaum 1949)

Sapir's quote captures the dialectic relationship between language and culture because social reality is intricately linked to the speakers' culture. Social reality enriches the language's lexical stock by providing phenomena and concepts that require linguistic encoding. At the same time, it benefits from the language that gives it a channel for its expression and transmission across social categories. Speakers inhabit different socio-physical environments that affect their worldview. However, it is important to recognize that speakers are also agents who participate in the construction of their social reality in the sense of Berger and Luckman (1966). If we accept that the social construction of reality is negotiated in the course of human interaction, then it becomes possible to understand the centrality of language in the construction of this shared meaning. With respect to Sheng, linguistic pluralism and the need for self-definition provide a fertile ground for the mixing of languages by speakers who inhabit different social worlds. Since these social worlds are separated from each other through space and time, the kind of shibboleths their inhabitants construct to define who they are in relation to others are very different. Since these shibboleths are the focus of this study, it is important to look at how they are created.

3.2 LEXIFICATION IN SHENG: THE CREATION OF THE SHIBBOLETHS

For Sheng to retain its function as a marker of ingroup identity, it must be constantly revitalized. Old words that have been used for a long time are continuously replaced with new ones which are not accessible to the majority. Lexification is used here to refer to the word formation processes (Ogechi 2005: 338) achieved through borrowing, arbitrary coinage and (re)lexicalization. Work on diachronic linguistics (e.g. Trask 1996, Aitchison 2001) have shown that these processes are also active in mainstream languages and have been chiefly responsible for linguistic change. Coming to Sheng's lexification using the lexical frequency criteria, English and Swahili comes out as the dominant lexifier languages. Other languages, both local and international also participate but they are usually rendered opaque through morpho-phonological treatment. The word formation processes outlined below represent only a small part of all the lexification processes that operate in Sheng.

(i)   **Borrowing** — e.g. *gothie* 'to go' from Kikuyu *gũthiĩ*, *nyaks chom* roasted meat from Swahili *nyamachoma* also meaning roasted meat

(ii) **Affixation** — e.g. *m-less* 'child' where conversion from English adjective *less* is accomplished by prefixation with a Swahili animate marker [m]; *anti-nyita* 'one who can understand' from English negation prefix *anti,* and the Kikuyu verb *nyita* 'catch'. Note that *nyita* in Kikuyu may also mean 'understand'

(iii) **Compounding** — *zeiks-man* 'father' from a Sheng word *zeiks* 'old man' which is in turn derived from the Swahili word *mzee* 'elder' and English 'man', *kuuma vako* 'to rest' from the Swahili verb *ku-uma* 'to bite' and the Sheng word *vako* 'fake'

(iv) **Clipping** — *Dagoo*, from 'Dagoretti'— a residential area at the outskirt of Nairobi where slaughterhouses are located; *hao* from 'house' *dashi* 'breasts' from previous Sheng word *dashboard* also meaning 'breast'

(v) **Arbitrary coinage** — *weng* 'tyre', *makabelo* 'teeth'— these two words have no previous history apart from the indications of metaphorical origins[5].

(vi) **Syllable inversion** — *jake* 'house,' from Sheng word *keja* with similar meaning, which was in turn derived from the English word 'cage'; *mdiki* 'child,' from *mkidi* formed by adding a Swahili nominalizing prefix [m] to the English noun 'kid'; *nzima* 'girl' from the Sheng word *manzi* with similar meaning.

(vii) **Initialization** — *D* for 'Dandora', *CD* from 'condom'

Apart from cases of arbitrary coinage, the highlighted examples show that lexification makes use of existing linguistic material. These might include previous Sheng words or words borrowed from other languages, which are modified to fit Sheng's morpho-phonological template. These lexification processes over-generate Sheng's vocabulary and are responsible for its variation. They allow speakers to coin new words which might, or might not become acceptable by all the other speakers. When conducting this research, the respondents informed the researcher that people who coined new words could easily convince their friends that it was the word in vogue. This would leave their friends with no alternative but to use the new word, since failure to do so would mean they are unable to keep up with the current trends — a situation that could lead to loss of face and self esteem. Such cases are also responsible for the over-generation of Sheng's lexical stock. With this background in mind, it is time to move on to the main goal of this paper by outlining the method used in

---

[5] According to the coiner of *makabelo,* he was inspired by a radio broadcaster who had 'funny teeth' called Makabelo.

collecting data before proceed to the discussions of these data in relation to the identity of the Sheng speakers.

4. THE RESEARCH

Data in this research were collected in Nairobi during the summer of 2004. A total of 266 respondents were interviewed. Out of these, 212 were students and 54 were non-students. All the students were interviewed in their respective schools, while the non-students were interviewed in their local hang-out joints. Two sets of questionnaires were used, one for the students and another for non-students. It was important to make the students' task simpler than that of the non-students. A simple questionnaire would take less time to complete thus enabling students to participate without the exercise interfering with their school program. Furthermore, a complex questionnaire such as the one administered to non-students would have required signing of consent forms to ensure the protection of participants' rights. Since the protocol requires parents to sign consent forms for respondents under 18 years, it would have led in unwelcome delays which could have slowed down the study. Below, I begin with the data collected from schools among the student respondents, before presenting the data collected from the non-student respondents.

4.1 THE STUDENT RESPONDENTS: ELICITATION OF LEXICAL VARIANTS

The 212 student respondents comprised of both primary and secondary schools, most of them are located in Nairobi's Eastlands area. The questionnaire elicited demographic information such as age, sex, neighborhood and education as well as linguistic backgrounds, all of which were thought to have an influence in the kind of lexical items used by the students. The respondents were also given a list of stimulus words and asked to write down the Sheng equivalents that they used. Data was then entered into excel spreadsheet, which was later converted into 3.0 workbook. Finally, the workbook files were imported into sytart program for the calculation of variant citation frequencies. These results will be discussed below.

4.1.1 Variation in Stimulus Words

The stimulus words were dividend into nouns and verbs. The nouns were: 'father', 'mother', 'boy', 'girl', 'money', 'policeman', 'thief', 'fool', 'teacher', 'music', 'house', 'car' and 'child.' The verbs were: 'rest', 'sleep', 'eat', and 'go'. The high number of nouns as opposed to verbs reflects the reality in

natural languages where nouns far outnumber other lexical categories. Table 1 below summarizes the number of variants for each stimulus word.

Table 1. Number of variants per stimulus word.

	stimulus word	No: of variants
1	fool	52
2	girl	45
3	rest	40
4	go	37
5	eat	27
6	mother	25
7	boy	23
8	policeman	23
9	thief	22
10	music	22
11	teacher	21
12	father	18
13	car	17
14	house	15
15	child	14

These data show that some words generate more variants as compared to others. The high variation in 'fool', 'girl' and 'rest' may be attributed to the fact that these words feature prominently in the daily discourse of Sheng speakers. Using similar logic, the low variation in 'car', 'house' and 'child' may be attributed to the low appearance of those terms in the respondents' discourse. This account mirrors similar findings in Appel and Schoonen's (2005) Holland study, where street language names with the highest frequency of use were tied to the occurrence of those names in the young people's discourse. In their study, Appel and Schoonen found out that when words for 'girl', 'very good' and 'money' were given as stimulant words, the percentage of correct translation into street language as *chick, cool* and *duku* was very high, but when 'pig' was given as the stimulant word there was very low percentage of correct translation into street language. Proceeding from this account, we can reason that 'fool', 'girl' and 'rest' are important markers of group affiliation and need to be changed from time to time to obscure them in order to function as shibboleths. In their interviews, the non-student respondents confirmed that the word for 'fool' *fala*, did not just mean a foolish person, but also a person who is outside the circle of friends. During ingroup interaction, outsiders are referred to as *mafala* 'fools' due to their inability to comprehend the group's lingo. The high variation of 'girl' may be accounted by the fact that sex topics feature a lot in Sheng speakers' group talk. Considering that Sheng is spoken more by males as compared to females, it becomes understandable why 'girl' has to be masked. On the other hand, there is no major motivation for masking the names with low

variation such as car, house or child. These words appear with low number of variants because students do not need to mask them. Since speakers do not own cars, or houses, and they probably don't take care of kids, such words don't feature prominently in their group talks.

4.1.2 Citation Frequency: Which Variants Constitute The Shibboleth?

Since the respondents were asked to write down all the words that they used for each stimulus word, every word had a chance of being cited by all the 212 respondents. However, some variants were cited at a higher frequency as compared to others. Examination of linear hierarchy in terms of citation frequency showed that for each stimulus word, the first two or three variants had a high citation frequency while the last two or three variants had a low citation frequency. Some were cited by only one respondent. Table 2 below summarizes the citation frequencies for 10 variants of six stimulus words:

Table 2. Citation frequencies for the first 10 variants for 6 stimulus words.

	father		mother		rest		police		girl		boy	
1.	mbuyu	141	masa	103	pozi	34	karao	115	manzi	132	chali	178
2.	buda	62	mathe	55	tulia	27	gava	43	dem	36	jamaa	8
3.	fatha	17	muthama	25	tuliza	26	ponyi	16	shore	17	boi	6
4.	mdagala	4	matha	22	relax	12	mabeast	14	mroro	13	kijana	5
5.	mdabu	3	mathor	5	poa	11	sanse	10	mshi	5	msee	3
6.	mzae	2	myasa	3	bangaiza	10	pai	6	mbus	5	licha	1
7.	budeng'	1	mnyaka	3	rest	5	sinya	4	chile	3	bro	1
8.	fusebox	1	therma	2	chill	3	banga	4	chik	3	mthi	1
9.	zeiksman	1	munthre	1	dozi	3	goshogi	2	mandu	3	beshte	1
10	kize	1	muthes	1	tuna	3	vedi	2	mshe	3	hommie	1

Words with a higher citation frequency represent the most popular terms. The citation frequency for 'father' for instance, shows that *mbuyu* (141) and *buda* (62) are the most popular variants, while *mzae* (2) *zeiksman* (1) and *kize* (1) are among the least popular. For all the 6 stimulus words above, the dominant variants are used across the board by various social groups, while the marginal variants have limited usage. Variants with high citations constitute the shibboleths of macro categories such as Sheng speakers vs. non-Sheng speakers, males vs. females, young vs. old, or rural vs. urban, etc. As a result, discourse practices that target large scale audiences such as hip hop music (Samper 2002, 2004), radio broadcasts, internet, and newspaper writings employ these popular terms due to their accessibility. By using such popular variants as an expressive idiom, the Kenyan urban youth create a modern identity that transcends their

parent's ethnic loyalties. In contrast, the variants with low citation frequencies are less accessible to the majority of Sheng speakers and are normally restricted to local network clusters. During inter-group transactions, small groups of Sheng speakers exploit the advantage of the restricted use of these marginal variants to draw group distinctions. Among these small clusters, popular terms such as *mbuyu, masa, pozi, karao, manzi* and *dinga* in Table 2 above are considered *oldskool.*

4.1.3 Clarifying 'oldskool'

The concept *oldskool*, used to refer to the lexical items that are no longer in popular use, can be viewed from two perspectives: At the meta-category level, it refers to words that were popular but have now been abandoned in favor of new innovations. At the sub-group level, it refers to those terms that everybody knows. From this understanding, two assumptions can be drawn from the variants with low citation:

1.   They are the former popular terms that have been used for a long time but are now drifting towards *oldskool,* or gradually getting phased out.
2.   They are the newest innovations that are fighting for prominence in the hierarchy scale.

These assumptions reflect parallelism as well as convergence. Since lexical opacity is an important ingredient in identity construction, the dominant terms may be regarded as *oldskool* because they are known by everyone, while the former *oldskool* terms might be regarded as hip because they have been abandoned. Use of *oldskool* variants may be taken as indicators of 'frozen' categories and identities, such as older speakers who failed to keep up with innovations. However, after such words have moved out of the mainstream, certain groups may retain them as markers of their group's identity due to their restricted use. Whether such words are used by older people or younger people does not diminish their function as shibboleths due to their ability to distinguish different categories of speakers.

At a different level, *oldskool* terms might negotiate their way into social discourse in a difference form. Some of the lexification processes mentioned earlier such as 'clipping', 'compounding' and 'syllabic inversion' play a prominent role in the repackaging of older terms. Although these remodified words retain some sort of identity with the older form, their appearance is greatly altered. In the variant *mdabu* for 'father' for instance, the syllables of the word *buda* are inverted yielding *dabu*. Later, a Swahili class 1 nominal prefix [m] is added to the *dabu* to derive *mdabu*. Some of the other cases of syllabic inversion in the sample are:

5.   jake   'house'   from *keja*
      nzima   'girl'   from *manzi*
      oraka   'policeman'   from *karao*
      licha   'boy'   from *chali*

A final note on citation frequency is that although they were all elicited in schools, they reflect what goes on outside the school. Since the schools under survey were all day schools, it is likely that students interact with other Sheng speakers in the evenings and weekends. They might even be members of small neighborhood groups, though this line of investigation was not pursued in this study. All the same, viewing the hierarchy of lexical usage as reflecting what happens outside the school compound sets the arena for discussing how non-student respondents use the shibboleths in their discourse.

4.2 THE NON-STUDENT RESPONDENTS: BAZES AND THEIR SHIBBOLETHS

The questionnaire administered to non-student respondents covered the range of question in the questionnaire administered to their student counterparts. Unlike these students, however, the stimulus words were not provided, but rather, questions that required detailed responses were added. These questions sought to elicit the words the respondents used amongst themselves, and which they thought were not used by other speakers of Sheng outside their local interaction groups. Their responses were all recorded. In addition, the respondents were asked to engage in an open discussion on a topic of their choice, or narrate about their personal experiences. The recording of these sessions yielded about 20 hours of recordings, most of which was transcribed, summarized, or coded. Milroy's (1980) 'friend of a friend' method was used to contact the 54 non-student respondents in their hang out joints called *bazes*. The concept 'baze' here refers to local network clusters where Sheng is normally used as the 'official language' of the members. The baze members call each other *beshte*—an English clipping from the concept 'best friend'. Collectively, they refer to themselves as *mabeshte,* which is derived by adding *ma-*, the Swahili class 6 nominal prefix. I used *baze* because it captures the dual property of the peer group and the places where peer discourse is carried out in these local networks. A close approximate of *baze* is Horton's (1972) concept of a 'set' among the African American, which he defines as:

> The more or less organized center of the street life is the 'set'— meaning both the *peer group* and the *places* where it hangs out. It is the stage and central marketplace of activity, where to find out what's happening" P 21 [*emphasis mine*]

In all, 10 *bazes* were interviewed. Out of these, 2 *bazes* comprised only female respondents, 2 *bazes* were mixed and 6 *bazes* were all males. The number of

respondents interviewed in each baze ranged between 3 to 8 members, because carrying out a coherent interview with a larger number was considered implausible. From my sample of 54 non-student respondents, 41 were males and 13 were females. The following is a brief summary of these *bazes'* composition. The number after the name of the *baze* indicates the number of respondents in that *baze*.

(i)   2 female bazes — Sinai 3, Kariobangi 5.
(ii)   2 mixed bazes — Montecarlos 2 males, 2 females, Eastleigh 3 females, 1 male
(iii)   6 male bazes — Kariobangi 4, South C 8, Kibera 5, Kabete 4, Buruburu 6, Makadara 4, Ngara 3, Shaurimoyo 4

Most of these *bazes* are located in the Eastland areas of Nairobi because it is the undisputed cradle of Sheng. As such, it was hypothesized that this area would display more lexical variability as compared to areas where Sheng has spread only recently. Ethnographic analysis of respondents' linguistic practices showed their discourse varied according to the topics discussed, which in turn affected the kinds of words used. However, there were cases where similar topics could be discussed using different lexical items depending on the baze in question. Some of these variations are discussed below.

4.2.1 Different Realities, Different Shibboleths

Although drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes and marijuana, sex, encounter with thugs, or police at night, chewing khat[6], and death of close friends were recurring topics in most of the *bazes*, there were topics that were unique to certain *bazes*. This can be attributed to the fact that the reality in those *bazes* does not exist in other *bazes*. If 'different societies' from Sapir's quote above is substituted with 'different bazes,' it can be claimed that different *bazes* evolve different linguistic resources in accord with the types of discourses that members engage in. Whether such differences take geographical, ethnic composition, sex, age or status manifestations, they should be reflected in the *bazes'* interaction norms. If this connection is correct, different *bazes* should have certain words or linguistic practices that are linked to their local reality. This assumption is confirmed after paying attention to some of the vocabulary used by members of some select *bazes*. Members of Ngara *baze* who were taking computer courses called caressing a girl *'browsing'* — a shared term reflecting their heavy internet use. Likewise, members of Shauri Moyo *baze*, who were engaged in informal self employment as car washers innovated lexical items related to their daily activities. The following are some of the words they used:

---

[6] *celastrus edulis*. These are green twigs used as to dispel feelings of hunger and fatigue. For more information see http://www.a1b2c3.com/drugs/khat1.htm

6. *word used*   *gloss*
    weng   car tire
    mapapa   belly of the car
    pesa hafifu/pesa nyepesi   little money
    kupamba   to perform a shoddy job
    kufunga kazi   getting a lot of money

It is interesting that these terms are all tied to the economic activity that these respondents engaged in. The literal translation of *pesa hafifu* and *pesa nyepesi* is 'weak money' and 'light money' respectively, but their meaning is accessed at the metaphorical level through semantic mapping that draws on the similarity between the concepts 'weak' and 'light' on one hand, and 'little' on the other. The same can be said of *ku-pamba* and *ku-funga kazi* which in standard Swahili means 'to cover' or 'to adorn' and 'to close work' respectively. In the former, performing a shoddy job is equated to covering the job-giver's eyes, while in the latter, getting a lot of money as payment for performance of a job implies that one has made enough to money to retire (close down) for the day. Considering the domain-specific vocabulary used by this group shows that bazes shibboleths can also be examined within the context of register.

Exploiting the idea of *baze* specific discourse and the accompanying lexical items also explains the use of vulgar language among the female respondents in Sinai. As petty prostitutes, appeals to them to avoid salacious topics failed because that was like telling them to describe reality they didn't know. They claimed that there is no kind of Sheng that they could not understand. Knowledge of many varieties was what enabled them to interact with different clients. Their occupation required a lot of wit, especially since some of their clients were violent and possessive. Therefore, they had to negotiate a balance between pleasing their regular clients while also guarding their freedom to take other clients. As a group, covering for their friends was an important solidarity practice, which they perfected through altering the existing linguistic resources in order to pass coded messages without raising alarm. This may partly account for the high frequency of syllabic inversion in their vocabulary as in the following words:

7. *word used*   *derived from*   *gloss*
    hanaku nei   hakuna any   there is nothing
    kunywaku ndimu   kukunywa mundi   drinking illicit alcohol
    iningri   green   10 shillings (from its green color)
    imiku   ikumi   10 shillings (from Kikuyu ikũmi)

In addition, the Sinai females had a high number of variants for various denominations of money. Although this was not unique to their *baze,*[7] the nature of their business should be taken into account since it involved monetary transactions. It is equally important to take into account the value of money with higher enumeration terms.

8.   5 shilling   ngovo, kobole, punch
      10 shilling   iningri, ashu, ashara imiku, ikongo
      20 shillings   mbuluu, lumbu, kautwenty, mbao
      50 shillings   jet, finje, hamsa, guoko, ndege, kaufifty
      100 shilling   soo, iratathi
      200 shilling   soo mbili, rwabe
      500 shillings   soo tano
      1000 shillings   tenga, mote, thao

The money denominations with the value of below a hundred shillings display more variation compared to those with the value above one hundred shillings. This is because the transaction involving more that 100 shillings are not common in Sinai. They claimed they could buy a fish for five shillings (In the local kiosk where I conducted interview, I bought lunch for the three for less than 50 shillings). The lexification process of syllabic inversion is a negotiating strategy in petty prostitution, and the proliferation of low-value monetary terms further confirm that different social realities breed different discourses, which influence lexical innovations that are in turn used in identifying different speakers.

4.2.2 Lexical Differences: Some Examples

While discussing citation frequency, we saw that certain stimulus words elicit a high rate of variation. In addition to different *bazes* having peculiar words to describe their peculiar reality, they may also use different words to represent the same concept. In 9 and 10 below, we see two representations of the same concept in two different *bazes*. In 9, the researcher seeks clarification of the phrasal idiom *kula ndimu,* which has been mentioned by one of the respondents, while in 10, a respondent was narrating about a confrontation when the phrasal idiom *shika mbulu* comes up.

9.   P.G: **ku-la ndimu**   ni ku-fanya nini?
            inf-*eat* 9*lemon* cop inf-*do*   *what*?
            What do you man by 'kula ndimu'

---

[7] Mbugua (2003) mentioned the high number of enumerative terms for money among the *matatu* crew. He claims that they were deliberately created so that the *manamba* (*matatu* crew who charged fares) could hike fares without the passenger's knowledge.

Tash: Ni ***ku-jam,***   ku-kasirika   yaani
cop inf-*angry*,   inf-*get angry*,   *that is*
It means to get angry.

10.   Kui: ***A-ko na nare***   tu mbaya sana,   a- me-***shika mbulu***…
1sm-poss *with 9fire only bad very*,   1sm-perf-*catch mbulu*'
'He is in a very bad rage, he was very angry'

Five idioms are used to express the concept of getting angry in both 9 and 10; *kula ndimu, kujam, kukasirika, kuwa na nare*, and *kushika mbulu*. In 9, Tash, a male respondent from Kariobangi, paraphrases the group term *kula ndimu*, literally 'to eat lemons' with *kujam*, a common Sheng expression, and *kukasirika*, its Standard Swahili counterpart. Evidence that *kula ndimu* is an ingroup term comes from the Sinai girl's failure to use the same expression for a similar concept in 10. Instead, Kui, a female respondent, begins with *ako na nare* 'he has fire' (he was angry) and then paraphrases it with *ameshika mbulu* — a term they had earlier claimed was unique to their group. The switch from the popular idiom to the group specific idiom is a deliberate undertaking intended to define the boundary between her and her fellow *baze* members on one hand, and the researcher and his companions on the other. *Kujam* and *kuwa na nare* are now *oldskool* terms that are easily parsed by the majority of Sheng speakers irrespective of their group affiliation.

Similar differences were observed in other *bazes*. Among the Ngara respondents for instance, 'caressing a girl' was referred to as *browsing*, certainly influenced by their taking of computer classes. In addition, all of them belonged to the Luo ethnic group, which was reflected in their use of a Swahili-Dholuo codeswitched constituent *ame-chiek*, to describe a beautiful girl. The same terms are described differently by members of Shauri Moyo *baze* who called 'caressing a girl' *tracing*, while using the popular Sheng expression *ameiva* to describe a beautiful girl. Since none of the Shauri Moyo respondents belonged to the Luo ethnic group, *amechiek* was not likely to make any sense, unless there was considerable interaction between them and their Ngara counterparts. Bearing in mind that the expressions *kujam* and *kukasirika* were available to Tash in 9, why then did he opt for *kula ndimu?* Likewise, why did Kui find it necessary in 10, to add *ameshika mbulu* while she could have stopped at *ako na nare* and still get her message across? Certainly, the use of shibboleths was not motivated by the need to achieve communication goals, instead, they were deliberately used to make identity statements. This makes sense when viewed within the context of the Rational Choice (RC) model (e.g., Bolonyai 2005, Myers-Scotton and Bolonyai 2001), where making of linguistic choices is regarded as reflecting speakers' cognitive calculation to present a specific persona when interacting with others. In a later Section, I will demonstrate that not all linguistic choices are consciously activated. Even so, the examples above show that distinctive lexical features are important markers of a group's identity.

4.2.3 Semantic Differences: Lexical Ambiguity in The Bazes

Apart from lexical variation, a speakers' identity can be constructed around the meanings of words. Lexical ambiguity, defined in terms of the different senses that a single word might have in different contexts, is a crucial strategy in the negotiation of identity. My concern here is not just the various senses a word may have among members of the same baze, but also the different senses the same word might have among members of different bazes. My point of departure will be Samper's (2002: 102) observation of the different meaning of the following words according to different estates.

11.　magong'o:　stupid person, male or female, in Kayole
　　　　　　　　a lazy person in Umoja,
　　　　　　　　stupid girl in Mbotela
　　　shore　　　a cute girl in Kayole,
　　　　　　　　an illiterate girl in Jericho,
　　　　　　　　derogatory for stupid girl in Majengo
　　　sanganga:　buttocks in Majengo,
　　　　　　　　gold in Umoja

Similar observations were made in this study. However, unlike Samper, I use the *baze* instead of estate as a locus for my study out of recognition that one estate can have different bazes, each governed by its own norms which might not be used by other members of the same estate. The word *mufatari*, a Kikuyu deverbative that means 'the needy', from the verb *batara* [fatara] 'need', is a good illustration of lexical ambiguity. According to Mbugua (2003) *mufatari* was used by the manamba[8] to refer to policemen. In this study, *mufatari* was used by the three females from the Sinai *baze* to mean a manamba. The semantic reversal of this particular lexical item is an interesting case where 'the needy' person is determined by who engages in the act of solicitation. The policeman becomes a *mufatari* to a manamba due to his contemptuous habit of soliciting bribes from the matatu[9] operators. From a similar perspective, a manamba becomes a *mufatari* to the Sinai females who indulge in petty prostitution because of his solicitation of sex. Semantic variation was also noted in the following lexical items;

---

[8] These are conductors in private passenger vehicles known as *matatus* in Kenya. The work of a manamba includes calling on passengers to board the matatu, collecting fares, helping passengers disembark, and generally assisting the driver. For a better understanding of the discourse of *matatus* and manamba the reader is referred to two dissertations Mbugua (2003), and Samper (2002).

[9] See footnote 6.

12.   manga: eat and /or sexual intercourse, especially in Sinai
                     steal in Kibera
       kizee: boyfriend in Kariobangi and Sinai
                     father in Shaurimoyo and Kibera
       ghetto: slums in majority of bazes
                     house in Kabete

The word *manga* is a Romance borrowing from the French verb *manger*. In a majority of *bazes*, it means 'eat' and 'having sex'. However, members of Kibera *baze* use *manga* to mean 'steal' on top of its two widespread meanings. The different semantics of the word *kizee* comes from the ambiguity associated with the *ki* or the 7th nominal class in Swahili[10]. I am not concerned here with the generic nouns that fall under this class; instead, my interest is in the derivation of diminutive nouns from ordinary nouns through the addition of the ki-prefix. Cross-linguistically, diminutives may indicate smallness, or a primitive state with the negative connotation of contempt. But diminutives are also used to indicate affection. In view of the fact that Sheng is mostly regarded as the youth code, it can be deduced that when *kizee* is used affectively by girls, it will mean boyfriend, but when used by both genders, it can be regarded as a show of contempt towards the 'father' who is an outsider in the youth networks. This does not rule out cases when father might be perceived in affectionate terms. The 'slum' meaning in *ghetto* is straightforward. In fact, the Kabete respondents' use of *ghetto* for 'house' might be viewed as arising from the concept of slum since the majority of the houses in Kabete are similar to those found in other slums in Nairobi.

   Another interesting example is the word *manyake*. It is derived from the Swahili word *nyama* 'meat', a class 9 noun according to Bleek's (1862: 282–4). This is then prefixed with a class 6 nominal prefix ma- to yield *manyake*. Depending on the baze and its composition, *manyake* can mean 'women in general', 'women with hanging flesh', 'butts', or it may even refer to 'female genitals'. In 13 below, the respondents from Ngara had given *manyake* as one of the words for girls. The researcher, PG, had been told in a different *baze* that *manyake* was and insult. Using that knowledge he asks whether it could be a polite word. In 14, the researcher asks the Sinai respondents whether *manyake* was used to mean 'girl' in their *baze*.

---

[10] In the Bantu classification (e.g. Bleek 1862: 282-4) the diminutives belong to the KA/TU or the 13/12 noun class. In Swahili, this noun class is has disappeared and all the diminutive nouns have been collapsed into the KI/VI or 7/8 nominal classes. However, Ki is an augmentative prefix in Kikuyu, and since Kikuyu has a major influence in Sheng, the 'father' meaning in *kizee*, might be a semantic carry over from Kikuyu.

13. PG: *lakini* ku-*na*   m-*tu*   a-me-*sem*-a   ma-*nyake*   ni ma-*tusi*
          but   expl-*is* 1sm-*person* 1sm-perf-*say*-fv 6-sm-*meat*   cop 6-*insult*
          'But there is someone who said manyake is an *insult*'

    Josh: si ma-*tusi*… ma-*tusi*   i-na-ku-*j*-a   tu-ki-*sem*-a ma-*tyre*.
           neg 6-*insult*…6sm-*insults* 9sm-pres-inf-*come*-fv 3pl-cond-*say*-fv 6sm-*tyre*
           'Its is not insult…it only becomes insults when we say tyres'

14. PG: *na*   ma-*nyake*?
          and   6sm-*meat*?
          'What about manyake?
    Joy: ma-nyake ni   *senye*.
          6sm-*meat* cop   9*vagina*
          'manyake is vagina'
    Liz: ma-*nyake* ni   hizi   ma-*nyama za*   huku ... (laughs).
          6sm-*nyake* cop dem   6sm-*meat of*   dem
          'Manyake are these flesh here. (indicating her butt).

Ngara respondents use *manyake* with a neutral meaning for 'girl', as reflected elsewhere in Josh' statement *manyake ni ile kitu imebeba vipoa...sio tu ati kimti kinapita* 'manyake refer to something that is well formed, not just any passing log'. To these males, their conception of a beatiful girl is a plump girl who is not a skinny one, but not fat either. In contrasts, *manyake* is a contested lexical item among the Sinai females. When Joy replies that *manyake* means 'vagina' in extract 14, Liz, her colleague immediately protests, contending that it refers to 'butt'. Bearing in mind that these girls were petty prostitutes, it is possible that they were reluctant to share the ingroup meaning with an outsider who might use it contemptuosly to sigmatize their way of life. A good comparison is the jocular use of 'nigger' amongst the African Americans, but which is considered out of bound for the Whites due to its association with the ignominous past of slavery. The Ngara males on the other hand were not tied by such a stigma. In any case, the researcher shared a male identity with them, which might have minimized the intergroup differences. But it is not only the males who use *manyake* in a positive way as Shiro's statement below illustrates:

15. Shiro: *…si*   hu-*wa* tu-na-*it*-w-a   ma-*nyake*
              …we   hab-*be* 3pl-pres-*call*-pass-fv 6sm-*meat*
              '… we are normally called manyake'

It is not clear whether there is a consensus on the use of this term. In a formal interview, Shiro does not claim to use the term, nor does her fellow *baze* members. Her statement 'we are normally called *manyake*' means that it is the outsiders who call them, but they don't call each other so. Women object to being objectified through equation with 'hanging masses of flesh'. However, the

'vagina' sense seems to be acceptable by these Kariobangi females, as evidenced in 16.

16.	Edee:	yule kizee alisemaje?
	Shiro:	ah huyo kizee anadai tu…eee hizo vitu (laughs)
	Pame:	si anadai manyake?
	Shiro:	 manyake (laughs)
		(others laugh)
	Sera:	si ndiyo
	Shiro:	ee, anadai hizo manyake

Translation
	Edee:	what did that guy say?
	Shiro:	Oh, that guy is asking for just…yes those things (laughs)
	Pame:	is he not asking for vagina?
	Shiro:	vagina (laughs)
		(others laugh)
	Sera:	isn't it?
	Shiro:	yes, he is asking for the vagina.

The use of *manyake* to refer to their privates by Pame and Shiro fits into Labov's (1972: 208) definition of vernacular ― the form of speech where minimum attention is paid to the monitoring of speech. The girls were very comfortable when using the word in a free conversation, but there was hesitation in a question and answer format, where they claimed that it was a word that guys used on them. This can be interpreted as their unwillingness to admit an outsider (the researcher) into their intimate discussions, just as in the case with the Sinai girls. A final point on *manyake* is that its use in popular culture via the song 'Juala' by the Circuite and Jo-el duo, which advocates the use of condoms, has raised controversy due to its ambiguity. Listeners do not know whether the ingroup or mainstream interpretation is intended.

    From the foregoing discussion, it is clear that shibboleths also operate at a semantic level. To an outsider, ambiguity is more problematic than lexical variation because if ingroup members employ a different word, an outsider can easily tell that s/he is being excluded. However, when ingroup members use a familiar word, outsiders might think that they are following the discussion, only to be embarrassed after realizing that the topic under discussion has changed. Only the members of a baze who share the norms of interpretation (Fairclough 1989) are able to disambiguate problematic words in such changing contexts.

4.4. CASES OF 'BAZE' CROSSING: SHIFTING OF IDENTITIES

Language crossing (Rampton 2005: 28) is "the use of language varieties associated with social or ethnic groups that the speaker doesn't normally belong to". In his study, Rampton studied language crossing in terms of the use of Panjabi by youngsters of Anglos and Afro-Caribbeans descent, the use of Creole by Anglos and Panjabis, and the use of Stylized Indian English by all three in Britain. Broadly then, 'crossing' includes the use of dialects, sociolects, ethnolects, genderlects and the likes, which are different from ones's own. I apply the term 'crossing' to refer to cases where Sheng speakers from one *baze* used the shibboleths associated with other *bazes*. It emerges that there is a big disconnection between the speakers' description of their linguistic behaviors and what actually takes place, a pattern well known to sociolinguists (e.g., Trudgill 1972, but see criticism by Cameron and Coates 1988). Such sociolinguistic studies have reported that some speakers 'underreport' their use of stigmatized varieties while some actually exaggerate them. Therefore in some situations, Sheng speakers use the lexical features that they claimed they do not. Makadara respondents for instances drew a distinction between themselves and others by pointing to the different words they used for 'girl', 'shoes' and 'thief' among others, as shown in 17:

17.   *Makadara*   *other bazes*
        girl   shore   mbevo (Dandora)
        shoes   jumu   chuja (Kariobangi)
        thief   gondi   punju (Makongeni)

By pointing to these lexical differences, Makadara respondents sought to show their *baze's* Sheng variety as unique and distinct from that of Dandora, Kariobangi and Makongeni. However, in a free conversation recording soon afterwards, one of the respondents, Joe, used both *mbevo* and *chuja* unconsciously. In the same conversation Bill called thieves *mapunju*, while seeking clarification from Joe. Since they had claimed they do not use those words, such mismatches may be attributed to language crossing abilities among speakers from different bazes, who in the course of their daily transactions, have to modify their linguistic behavior in order to gain admission into various networks. Although the shibboleths they bring into their *bazes* may not become ritualized, they do feature into their interactional patterns, and gradually become engrained into their linguistic *habitus* i.e., their predisposition to act in a certain way (Bourdieu 1990). Eventually, they find their way into the speakers' synonyms and may appear when least expected. Such underreporting can be seen as a deliberate strategy in their negotiation of a distinct identity.

   This non-conscious crossing is different from Bucholtz (1999: 219) account in her study of the identity practices among the nerd girls, where Carrie's use of a non-nerd slang term *bootsy* was regarded as violating the norms of 'nerdy'

arguments. Unlike Carrie who was shunned by her peers for using a word that was inconsistent with the 'nerd' identity, Joe deviated from ritualized baze norms without being penalized by his peers. There was no evidence of Joe being at the periphery of the Makadara baze. If anything, he came out as the most talkative person who dominated the discussion of others during the interview. Joe was also a linguistic liberal who admitted listening to Kameme FM — a Kikuyu radio station, though he did not speak Kikuyu himself.

It is also possible that deviation from ritualized lexical norms went unnoticed because in these cases, there was no identity threat. In cases where the group identity is at risk, compliance with ritualized norms is strictly enforced. This was the case in Ngara, where three respondents (Mosh, Josh and Otish) were asked for the words they used for 'car'. First, Mosh volunteered the word *ndai* and Josh agreed by repeating it. But when Mosh suggested *moti* as an alternative word, he was ridiculed by Josh and Otish, who contend that they do not use that word as shown in 15.

18. PG: na gari mnaiitaje?
     Mosh: ndai,
     Josh: kuna *ndai*,
     PG: kuna lingine? (pause)
     Mosh: *moti*
     Josh: aa duh! (laughs) hapana *moti* ni ya kitambo
     Mosh: lazima... (unclear)
     Otish: *moti* ni go
     Josh: *moti* ni go, hapana, tunaita tu *ndai*

Translation
     PG: and what do you call a car?
     Mosh: ndai
     Josh: there is *ndai*
     PG: is there another word? (pause)
     Mosh: *moti*
     Josh: aa duh! (laughs) no, *moti* is an old one
     Mosh: it has to… (unclear)
     Otish: *moti* is gone
     Josh: *moti* is gone, no, we only call it *ndai*

Derived from motor-car, *moti* is the earliest word for car, but its use has decreased due to its transparency and overuse. In table 2, we saw that *ndai*, cited by 84 respondents, is the second most popular variant for 'car' after *dinga*. On the other hand, although *moti* comes third after *ndai* in terms of citation frequency, it was only cited by 11 respondents. While its transparency makes it easy to learn for people with minimal knowledge of Sheng, its connection with the older generation who are unable to catch up with new innovation is responsible for its categorization as *oldskool*. If we reason that linguistic label

may be extended to its users, we understand why the use of *oldskool* terms is a threat to the identity of young people who are eager to project an aura of sophistication and modernity. Therefore, they distance themselves as much as they can from the *oldskool* terms. The rejection of *moti* by Josh and Otish should be viewed from this perspective.

The data in 15 and 16 show instances of speakers crossing through the use of lexical items that deviates from ritualized norms. *Baze* members do not live in isolation. Belonging to a baze does not hinder a member from interacting with members of other bazes, or other social categories that use different shibboleths. Whether such shibboleths are hip or *oldskool*, when a member of a distinct baze starts using them, they begin playing a part in his/her identity practices.

5. BEYOND FORM AND CONTENT: PRACTICE

Although habitus enhances our explanatory capability when accounting for the non-conscious cases of language crossing displayed by Joe and Bill in 17, it should be stressed that language crossing is not confined to the subconscious level. Earlier, I mentioned that speakers' linguistic practices involve making rational choices in their negotiation of identity. This then implies that speakers can deliberately activate certain identities by simply engaging in linguistic practices that help them to achieve their goals. In fact, the main claim of the accommodation theory is that speakers modify their speech to be like or unlike their interlocutors depending on the goals of their interaction. However, Meyerhoff (1998: 216–18) has demonstrated that accommodation need not lead to convergence of speech norms. This may mean that converging at the psychological level where social distance is assessed and determined allows participants to understand the frame of reference that they are using. In Rampton (2005: 198) the Anglo and Afro-Caribbean youth could not share the Stylized Asian English (SAE) in certain contexts because it could be taken as pejorative stereotyping. In this case, understanding the racial hierarchization that prescribes when to use, and who should use the SAE can be regarded as an accommodative strategy. Of course, consciousness of social practices and outcomes does not mean that a speaker always consciously selects lexical items in a fully conscious way, although doubtless the most significant indicators of in group membership may awaken such a level of awareness (e.g., Preston's 1996) "whaddayaknow" article.

Cases of such interactive accommodation were not attested because the opportunity did not arise in the fieldwork. Nevertheless, the respondents gave several accounts of when and why they accommodated to the speech of others. Sheng speakers claimed to use the speech of their interlocutors depending on the prevailing circumstances. The Sinai females, for instance, claimed that they could speak the variety of Sheng associated with *mababi* (rich kids from affluent neighborhood) because if they spoke their own variety the *mababi* could not

understand them. The *mababi* themselves do not claim knowledge of 'deep' Sheng, a variety more common to poorer neighborhoods. A good illustration come from the South C respondents, who contested the label *mababi*, but at the same time admitted that they were not well versed in the Sheng spoken in the various ghettoes.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper sought to examine the nature of Sheng variations and their implications on the social identities of the speakers of different Sheng variants. I began by demonstrating what I mean by Sheng by illustrating how Sheng's lexical items appear in discourse. This was the basis of my claim that Sheng is basically a lexical issue. Therefore, variation was conceived of in terms of the lexical items elicited from the respondents in their discourse. Three major patterns of variation were discussed in the paper: 1) different words for different concepts 2) different words for the same concept, and 3) same words for different concepts. Linguistic relativity, where language was seen as a product of and therefore a guide to social reality, was used to explain Sheng's variation in relation to its speakers. Since different speakers inhabit different worlds, it was argued that they pursue different discourses which are reflected in their lexical innovation. A *baze* whose members engaged in car washing had vocabulary associated with car washing. In contrast, petty prostitutes had various words for money as compared to respondents from other *bazes*. The existence of different variants in Sheng was attributed to the lexification processes that over-generate Sheng's vocabulary. It was argued that baze members have a wide selection of lexical choices, and they adopt certain distinctive words as their shibboleths. Variant citation frequency demonstrated that some variants enjoy more frequent use than others. Variants with low citation frequency were regarded as markers of ingroup identity, because variants with high citation frequency were too common to serve ingroup purposes. Semantic variation was conceptualized in terms of meaning variation across and within *bazes*. Members of a *baze* were shown to exploit this ambiguity for identity purposes. Cases of language crossings were attributed to the interaction that takes place between members of different bazes, which has resulted in the internalization of lexical materials that feature in respondents' unmonitored discourse. This has led to the interaction of shibboleths that have contributed to the multifaceted identity of the Sheng speakers.

Although it can be assumed that creation of Sheng as a youth code resulted in the fragmentation of the ethnic identities, the influence of ethnicity will continue to play a role in Sheng for some time to come. Not only does it contribute to shibboleths, but some of them are ethnic oriented. Still, the acceptability of these terms by members of different ethnic groups, irrespective of the ethnic origin is something to be lauded. However, such evidence of

linguistic assimilation is not enough to regard Sheng in Nairobi as a case of linguistic melting pot due to its variation. In spite of being hailed for its ethnic neutrality, it has also given rise to a new form of categorization similar to ethnicity. If ethnic loyalty can be equated to group loyalty, then the loyalty to one's ethnic language as a locus of individual identity can be compared to *baze* members' loyalty to the lexical items that make the *baze* members distinctive. In this paper, however, I have focused on the low-level linguistic characteristics of synonymy and other quantitative factors that make variation in Sheng a powerful indicator of subgroup membership in the fabric of urban Nairobi speech community. It is perhaps a commonplace in sociolinguistics that slang sets some groups apart from the mainstream society. But Sheng offers an interesting opportunity to look at subdivisions of a slang variety itself as it carries out even more delicate work through its lexical variety in the establishment of identities and stances taken in crossings in a complex urban speech community.

REFERENCES

Abdulaziz, Mohammed and Ken Osinde. 1997.
   Sheng and Engsh: Development of a mixed code among the urban youth in Kenya. **International Journal of the Sociology of Language** 125: 43–63.
Aitchison, Jean. 2001.
   Language Change: progress or Decay? Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
Appel, René and Schoonen's, Rob. 2005.
   Street language: A multilingual youth register in the Netherlands. **Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development** 26 (2): 85–117.
Berger, P. & Luckman, T. 1966.
   The social construction of reality: A treatise into the sociology of knowledge. Doubleday, Garden City, NY.
Bleek, Wilhelm Heinrich. 1862.
   Comparative Grammar of South African Langauges. Trübner and Co., London.
Bolonyai, Agnes. 2005.
   Who was the best?: Power knowledge and rationality in bilingual girls' code choices. **Journal of Sociolinguistics** 9(1): 3–27.
Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990.
   The Logic of Practice. Translated by Richard Nice. Stanford University Press, Stanford.

Bucholtz. M. 1999.
> *"Why be normal?": Language and identity practices in a community of nerd girls*. **Language in Society** 28: 203–223.

Cameron, Deborah & Coates, Jennifer. 1988.
> Some problems in the sociolinguistics explanations of differences. In: Jennifer Coates & Deborah Cameron (eds.), *Women in Their Speech Communitie,* pp. *13–26*. Longman, London.

Edwards, John. 1985.
> *Language, Society, and Identity*. Basil Blackwell, Oxford.

Fairclough, Norman. 1989.
> *Language and Power*. Longman, London.

> 1995   *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. Longman, London.

Fisher, John. 1958.
> *Social Influences on the choice of a linguistic variant*. **Word***,* 14: 47–56.

Fishman, Joshua. 1972.
> *Language and Nationalism: two Integrative Essays*. Newbury House publishers, Massachusetts.

Giles, Howard and Powesland, Peter. 1975.
> *Speech style and social evaluation*. Academic Press, London.

Githiora, Chege. 2002.
> *Sheng: Peer language, Swahili dialect or emerging Creole?* **Journal of African Cultural Studies** 15(2): 159–181.

Githinji, Peter. 2005.
> *Sheng and variation: The construction and negotiation of layered identities*. PhD dissertation, Michigan State University.

Hornsey, Mathew and Hogg, Michael. 2000**.**
> *Assimilation and diversity: An integrative model of subgroup relations*. **Personality and Social Psychology Review** 4(2): 143–156.

Horton, John. 1972.
> Time and cool people. In: Thomas Kochman (ed.), *Rappin' and Sytlin' out: Communication Urban Black America*, pp. 19–31. University of Illinois Press, Chicago.

Jackendoff, Ray. 1994.
> *Patterns in the Mind: Language and Human Nature*. BasicBooks, New York.

Kang'ethe, Iraki. 2004.
> *Cognitive Efficiency: The Sheng phenomenon in Kenya*. **Pragmatics** 14(1): 55–68.

Labov, William. 1972.
> *Sociolinguistic Patterns*. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.

Lucy, John. 1992.
> *Language Diversity and Thought: A Reformulation of the Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

  1997   *Linguistic relativity*. **Annual Review of Anthropology** 26: 291–312.

Macaulay, R.K.S. 1997.
> *Standards and Variation in Urban Speech*. John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam/Philadelphia.

Mazrui, Alamin. 1995.
> *Slang and Codeswitching: The case of Sheng in Kenya*. **Afrikanistische Arbeitspapiere***, 42: 168–179.

Mbugua wa Mungai. 2003.
> *Identity Politics in Nairobi Matatu Folklore*. PhD Dissertation. Hebrew University, Jerusalem.

Meyerhoff, M. 1998.
> *Accommodating your data: the use and misuse of accommodation theory in sociolinguistics*. **Language and Community** 18: 205–225.

Milroy, Leslie. 1980.
> *Language and Social Networks*. Blackwell, Oxford: New York.

Myers-Scotton, Carol. 1993a.
> *Dueling languages: grammatical structure in codeswitching*. Clarendon, Oxford.

  1993b   Social Motivations for Codeswitching: Evidence from Africa. In: Suzzane Romaine and P. Mulhausler (eds.), *Oxford studies in Language Contact*. Clarendon Press, Oxford.

Myers-Scotton, Carol and Bolonyai, Agnes. 2001.
> *Calculating speakers: codeswitching in a rational choice model*. **Language in Society** 31(1): 1–28.

Myhill, John. 2003.
> *The native speaker, identity and the authenticity hierarchy*. **Language Sciences** 25: 77–97.

Ogechi, Nathan. 2005.
> *On Lexicalization in Sheng*. **Nordic Journal of African Studies** 14(3): 334–355.

Preston, Dennis. 1996.
> *"Whaddayaknow": The modes of folk linguistic awareness*. **Language Awareness** 5(1): 40–74.

Rampton, B. 2005.
> *Crossing: language & ethnicity among adolescents*, 2nd ed. St. Jerome Publishers, Manchester.

Samper, David. 2002.
> *Talking Sheng: The role of a Hybrid Language in the Construction of Identity and Youth Culture in Nairobi Kenya*. PhD Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania.

  2004   *'Africa is still our mama': Kenyan rappers, youth identity and the revitalization of traditional values*. **African Identities** 2(1): 31–51.

Sapir, Edward. 1929.
> The status of linguistics as a science. In: David G. Mandelbaun (ed.), *Culture Language and Personality*, 1949: 65–77. University of California Press, Berkeley.

Smitherman, Geneva. 1977.
> *Talking and Testifying: The Language of Black America*. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston.

Stryker, Sheldon & Burke, Peter. 2000.
> *The past, present and future of identity theory*. **Social Psychology Quarterly** 63: 284–297.

Trask, R.L. 1996.
> *Historical Linguistics*. Anold, London.

Trudgill, Peter. 1972.
> *Sex, covert prestige and linguistic change in the urban dialect of Norwich*. **Language in Society** 1: 179–195.

Whorf's, Benjamin. 1939.
> The relation between habitual though and behavior to language. In: John B. Carol (ed.), *Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*, 1956: 134–159. MIT Press Massachusetts.

About the author: Peter Githinji (PhD) is an Assistant Professor in the department of linguistics at Ohio University. He is the chair of Swahili program and also the African languages coordinator. Currently, he is teaching Elementary Swahili and introduction to language and culture. This is his first year in this position. Peter Githinji's research interest includes sociolinguistics, language contact, language and identity, language and gender, language attitudes, language pedagogy and Bantu linguistics in general.