

A Cross-generational Language Study of Sheng

Variationist sociolinguistics has had a 'long-standing bias towards speech communities in Western and especially Anglophone societies' (Adli & Guy 2022, p.10, Kastaan 2017) and Ebongue and Hurst (2017, p.2) argue that the study of African languages could offer substantial benefits to the progression of sociolinguistic theory. This paper contributes towards this by drawing on speech data from Sheng – a non-standard youth language variety spoken in Kenya – to understand how African youth languages can inform our methodological approaches towards studying variation.

Youth languages are widespread in the African continent (Hurst 2017, Brookes & Kouassi 2018) and the study of African youth languages represents a growing field of research (Hurst-Harosh 2020). While Sheng has been receiving attention for over two decades (Sure 1992, Abdulaziz & Osinde 1997, Bosire 2009), there is a lack of comprehensive descriptive work on this language variety which is needed for longitudinal variationist studies. This paper proposes a first step towards conceptualising variation in Sheng and exploring how existing sociolinguistic concepts can be applied to multilingual contexts in Kenya.

Data for this study has been collected in Nairobi from two age groups of speakers: Group 1 with participants 18-35 years old; Group 2 with participants 36-55 years old. In the first instance, preliminary data was gathered from recordings of natural speech, after which corresponding structures were elicited from the two age groups (see examples 1-2). The data reveals lexical as well as morphological variation, especially involving the use of 'metathesis' – a process popular with the younger generation. Metathesis involves Sheng speakers inverting the order of syllables in a word as a way of making the variety a distinct code (Kanana & Ny'onga 2019). In these examples we see the use of metathesis on verbs (e.g. *sota* becomes *taso*) as well as temporal expressions (*kesho* becomes *shoke*). Using this dataset, we will discuss the frequency of use of metathesis across the two age groups and reflect on how useful the concepts of age-grading and the apparent time hypothesis are in describing the use of metathesis by the Sheng speech community.

This paper also explores how age as a social category and sociolinguistic variable can contribute towards studying variation in Sheng. Within the context of Africa's large youth population, Mensah (2016, p.1) suggests that categorising 'youth' in relation to age ranges does not provide an accurate definition where a number of other social and identity factors may contribute towards who is able to belong to the category of a 'young person'. While Sheng is widely conceptualized as a youth language/language variety, Githiora (2018) argues that it is now used by a broad range of age groups and social classes. We conclude by highlighting the methodological innovations which may be required to accurately study variation in Sheng, and how this can impact variationist studies across other contexts.

Examples

(1) a. [Age bracket 18-35]
Nije u-me-taso vitsyo?
how 2SG-PRF-be broke this way

b. [Age bracket 36-55]
Niaje u-me-sota hi-vyo?
How 2SG-PRF-be broke DEM-7

'How is it that you are (that) broke?'

(2) a. [Age bracket 18-35]
Shoke na-dai ku-kawa hadi ni-kibleh.
Tomorrow 1SG-feelINF-drink alcohol until 1SG.SBJV-black out

b. [Age bracket 36-55]
Kesho na-feel ku-waka hadi ni-bleki.
Tomorrow 1SG-feelINF-drink alcohol until 1SG.SUBJV-black out

'Tomorrow, I feel like drinking alcohol until I black out.'

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