

The Evolution of a Sociolect to a Political Tool: The Role of Sheng in the Rejection of Finance Bill 2024, in Kenya's Political Context

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ABSTRACT

A sociolect is a linguistic variety associated with a particular social group, defined by factors such as socioeconomic status, profession, ethnicity, or age. Based on socioeconomic status and age, Sheng has been classified as a sociolect. As a social linguistic code, it has evolved from a sociolect of the youth into a potent tool in political discourse. This paper examines the evolution of Sheng from a youth -linguistic code to a political tool. The paper illustrates how sociolect varieties spoken by particular social groups can influence and transform political discourse. The study explores the socio-political significance of Sheng, and how it has been appropriated into political language, analysing the implications for both political communication and socio - linguistic identity. Through the use of Political Discourse Analysis Theory, the paper examines how political language shapes and is shaped by societal issues, ideologies, and identities. The analysed data was obtained from media and digital platforms that were purposefully sampled. In particular, the paper examines the role of Sheng in the recent rejection of the controversial Finance Bill of 2024 in Kenya. The study investigates how sheng functions as a medium of expression and social resistance in contemporary Kenya.

INTRODUCTION

Language reflects the socio-cultural context in which it is used. Sociolects or social dialects, represent the linguistic characteristics shared by particular social groups. Over time, these sociolects can influence broader linguistic trends, including political discourse, political jargons, or specialised language used within political contexts. Political discourse often incorporates elements from various sociolects which can shape and reflect political ideologies, strategies and identities.

Sheng is a contemporary sociolect that emerged in Nairobi, Kenya, during the late 20th century. It represents a fusion of Swahili, English, and various Kenyan's foreign and indigenous languages, primarily used by urban youth. Initially a marker of urban identity and social group cohesion, it has evolved to influence the broader Kenyan society including political discourse. As Kenya's cities grow, Sheng has become a prevalent form of communication among urban youth, who come from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

Kenya's linguistic landscape is characterised by a rich tapestry of ethnic languages, each associated with different tribal communities. Amid this diversity, Sheng has emerged as a unique communication code that cuts across tribal lines. Initially developed in Nairobi as a sociolect among urban youth, the code has grown to serve as a bridge between Kenya's various ethnic groups. This paper investigates how Sheng transitioned from a sociolect to a political tool and explores the implications of this shift on Kenyan politics and linguistic identity.

Sheng's Historical Background and Linguistic Features

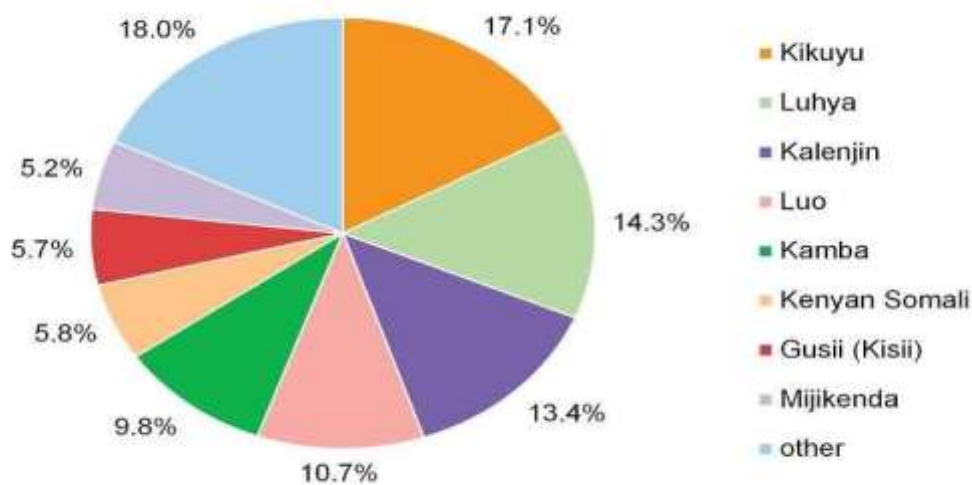
Sheng is a code created by young people not only as a badge of identity but also to exclude adults. It is used as a shibboleth to distinguish those who belong to the group and those who do not. Its growth is attributed to the need by young people for an alternative lingua franca. According to Halliday (1978), linguistic codes function as "means of expressing social meanings, reflecting the values and norms of the group." These codes are often created and maintained by groups as a way of distinguishing themselves from others.

Three theories have been advanced to explain the origin of Sheng. One claim suggests that it emerged from a complex multilingual and multicultural situation coupled with housing problems that were prevalent in Nairobi's middle-class estates in the early 1970s. Mbaabu (2003: ii) supports this idea by arguing that it was started by the urban youth as a secret code to communicate among themselves. Inadequate housing among the urban dwellers curtailed their freedom and personal privacy. This compelled the youth to take advantage of the multilingual situation to secretly pass messages among themselves while keeping the adults in the dark.

The second postulation was put forward by Abdulaziz and Osinde (1997). They claim that Sheng originated from the deviant behavior of the youth living in the near-slum estates of Nairobi's East land areas. Since the wider community did not approve of their behaviour, they devised a code of communication that was understandable only by its members, known as *wakora* in Kiswahili. This group conducted its illegal business under the immunity provided by Sheng's incomprehensibility among the other members of society.

The third suggestion was advanced by Brian Tetley (1984). He postulates that Sheng is an amalgamation of various Kenyan languages, brought about by a communication need by the ethnically heterogeneous urban youth. Studies on language contact show that cities often serve as melting pots where speakers of different languages and dialects interact leading to the formation of new linguistic structures. In these urban spaces, individuals with varied linguistic backgrounds are exposed to multiple languages on a daily basis, which encourages the borrowing, blending, and adaptation of words (Meakins & Stewart, 2013). Worthy to note is that Kenya has roughly forty-two languages that are extensively used in various sociocultural settings. The major ones that are said to contribute to the Sheng's lexical and syntactic elements are as shown below:

Kenya ethnic composition (2019)



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This claim tends to classify Sheng under pidgin, an idea that has been disputed by several researchers. A pidgin has been defined as a simplified form of linguistic communication that is usually a mixture of two or more languages, has a rudimentary grammar and vocabulary expressing social relationships and personal attitudes. Both characteristics are quite evident in the manner that Sheng is used. However, the pidgin hypothesis in the origin of Sheng is controversial, not only because the terms pidgin and creoles are controversial in the academy, but also because in the case of Sheng, it sprang up in areas where English and Swahili were already established as lingua francas and therefore there was no dire need for a compromise medium of communication, a view also shared by Mkangi (2018).

Sheng is not a pidgin and has no possibility of becoming one. Its amorphous nature remains a big hindrance to its attainment of the status of a pidgin. More so, it has no recognised dictionary or group of dictionaries, which embody standardised spelling. It also has no recognised record of grammatical forms and rules which guide its usage and it has no standard system of pronunciation. It has borrowed heavily from Kiswahili morphological and syntactical elements.

Mbaabu and Nzuga (2003) states that the term Sheng is a blend of two words derived from Kiswahili and English. Kiswahili contributes *sh* while English contributes *eng* to form the term, Sheng. Kaviti (2013) concurs with Mbaabu by saying that it is a blended form derived from the compounds 'Swahili and English. Sheng incorporates slang and expressions that reflect the experiences and values of urban youth, such as terms related to street life and popular culture. It is highly dynamic, with new terms emerging as social, political and cultural contexts change.

Sheng functions as a powerful marker of youth identity in Kenya. It fosters a sense of belonging among young people, providing them with a shared linguistic code that distinguishes them from other age groups and social classes. Through Sheng, urban youth express their experiences, values, and attitudes, reflecting their unique cultural and social realities. It serves as a means of empowerment, allowing the young people to assert their identity and challenge political and traditional power structures. The integration of Sheng into political discourse represents a significant shift in Kenya's political communication.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was guided by Political Discourse Analysis Theory framework. Political Discourse Analysis (PDA) as a distinct theoretical approach emerged from a confluence of ideas in the late 20th century. Key contributions came from several influential thinkers like Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Their 1985 book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* introduced a post-Marxist approach to discourse, emphasising the contingent and constructed nature of political identities and ideologies. Also important in the development of this theoretical framework is David Howarth. In 1998, he published work that synthesised these ideas into a coherent framework for analysing political discourse, helping formalise PDA as a methodological tool.

PDA Theory is a framework used to examine how language is employed in political contexts to shape meaning, influence opinion, and construct social realities. It draws from linguistics, sociology and political science to understand the interplay between language and power. When applied to Sheng, Political Discourse Analysis Theory examines how the code mediates political orientation and participation. The core concepts of PDA Theory and their theoretical applications are:

Discourse: Refers to structured forms of language use that reflect and shape social and political ideologies.

Power and Ideology: PDA investigates how political language reinforces or challenges power structures and ideological positions. In the context of this study, the Sheng lexical items and phrases that were identified were used to project the ideological positioning. Some of the identified items revealed and outright rejection of the Finance Bill of 2024. A case in point is '*Zakayo ashuke*' phrase which was used to evoke a tax collection imagery and '*anguka nayo*,' a term used to metaphorically mean take a risk. This term was used by the youth to urge their colleagues who they referred to as '*mbogi*' to move on regardless of the risk.

Identity and Representation: It explores how political actors construct identities and represent themselves or others through language. This tenet was used in exploring how Sheng build youth identity and fostered unity of purpose of diverse urban youth and like-minded political elite. The study explored ways in which the players reframed politics from elite domains to a youthful street activism.

METHODOLOGY

A number of Sheng lexical items, linguistic expressions and slogans were identified and collected from youth used social media, digital platforms and observed media reportage. The researcher identified the patterns and tones of these items to determine whether they portrayed unity, rejection, rebellion or resistance.

The third stage was to interpret contextually the overt and covert meanings of the used Sheng lexical items in order to link or delink them with the political discourse.

Sheng Use in the Kenya's Politics Arena

During the early 2000s, Sheng terms began appearing in political discourse, often used by politicians to connect with urban youth. Phrases like "hustler" and "mtaani" (a term for the neighborhood) were adopted by politicians to resonate with younger, urban voters.

During the 2012 and 2017 elections, Sheng was increasingly employed by politicians to appeal to the urban electorate. The adoption of Sheng terms was a strategic move to enhance reputability and engagement. Politicians used terms such as "*buda*" (meaning "old man" or "elder") and "*muriu*" (meaning "youngster" or "guy") to appeal to different demographics. These terms were not only used in speeches but also featured prominently in campaign slogans and social media.

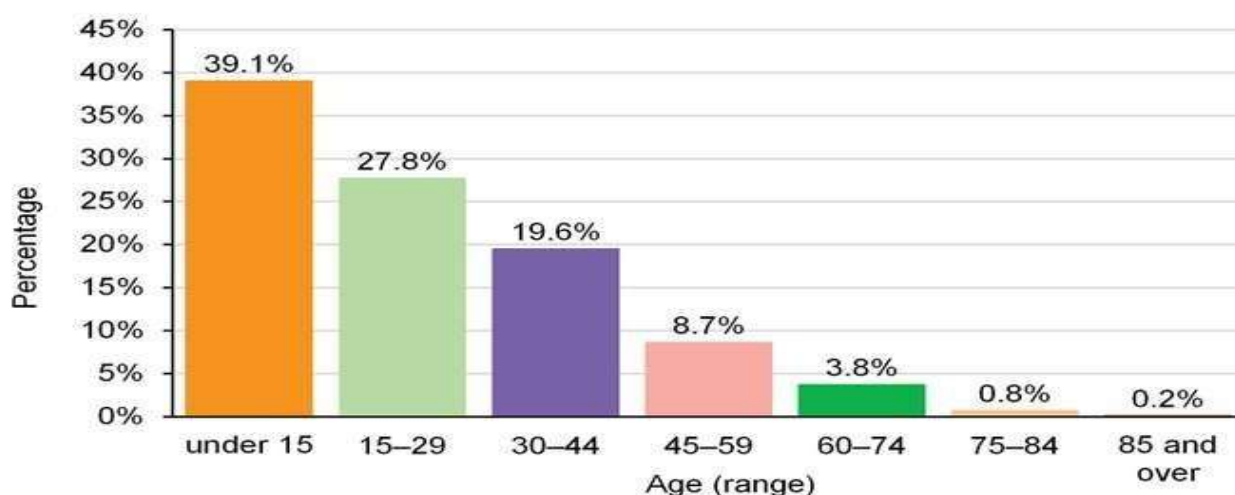
The 2022 presidential campaign saw a significant shift in the use of Sheng. It was used more strategically to frame political narratives and construct political identities. The term "hustler" was prominently used by the current President to frame his image as a champion of the common people and to contrast himself with his opponents. Media platforms, including social media, played a crucial role in popularising Sheng terms and politicians strategically adopted it to build rapport with younger, urban voters. By incorporating it into their rhetoric, they aimed to appear more relatable and in touch with contemporary issues. Politicians adopted it to appear more connected to the concerns and identities of young voters. Those who used it were able to position themselves as allies of the youth, gaining credibility and support.

The Finance Bill Controversy

The Finance Bill of 2024 aimed at implementing various tax and fiscal policies in Kenya. Key aspects of the bill included increased taxation and changes in social welfare provisions. These were perceived by many and particularly by the youth as detrimental to the average Kenyan citizen who was already burdened. They were experiencing chronic poverty, growing unemployment, limited domestic purchasing power, shrinking government budgets, increased external and internal debt, poor infrastructure, and massive governmental corruption and mismanagement. Widespread protests ensued throughout the country mainly in major towns and degenerated into horrific acts of violence involving the youth. The youth repeatedly held demonstrations in busy business districts to keep its demands in the public eye and persuade the president not to sign the Finance Bill of 2024.

As a badge of identity, Sheng was used by the youth popularly known as generation Z (Gen. Z) to project these economic reality which encompassed their struggles, hustles, and survival tactics in an economy that was not favourable to them. Gen. Z is the generation born between 1997 and 2012 and are approximately 13 to 28 years old. Gen. Z is demographically dominant in Kenya as evidenced by the following table:

Kenya age breakdown (2018)



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The Role of Sheng in the Rejection of the Finance Bill of 2024

As the Finance Bill of 2024 was debated, Sheng emerged as a key tool for grassroots mobilisation. Youth and activist groups used it to communicate their opposition and rally support and politicians strategically adopted it to build rapport with the younger, urban voters. Social media platforms and community forums featured Sheng-infused slogans and hashtags, such as “#SawaHatuwezi” (translated as “We can't take it anymore”) and “#PesaZaWazee” (meaning “Old people's money”), which criticised the bill's proposed changes to social welfare. Technological advancements, particularly the rise of social media and global digital platforms, have accelerated youth protests.

Politicians and activists adopted Sheng in their speeches and public statements to connect with the urban youth. This strategic use of language helped frame the Finance Bill of 2024 as an attack on ordinary Kenyans. They used Sheng terms like “kiboko” (meaning “punishment”) to describe the bill's implications, framing it as a punitive measure against the working class. The bill was depicted as an elitist agenda, disconnected from the realities of ordinary citizens. Its presence in social media and traditional media amplified public dissent against the finance bill. It allowed for rapid dissemination of anti-bill messages and created a platform for collective action. Sheng shaped the interaction between youths from major towns in Kenya through the influences transmitted through platforms like Twitter, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube.

The viral nature of Sheng-infused content increased its impact and helped the message gain traction among younger demographics. Memes, videos, and posts incorporating Sheng terms went viral, creating widespread awareness and fostering a sense of solidarity among opponents of the bill. It played a crucial role in engaging young people in political activism. By speaking the language of the youth, activists were able to mobilise a significant segment of the population. Youth-led protests and demonstrations utilised Sheng to communicate youth's demands and express their frustrations, making their resistance more visible and impactful. Its alignment with urban youth culture made it an effective tool for mobilising opposition. The code's familiarity helped galvanise support and articulate grievances. It resonated with opposition politicians who identified with the young people's grievances. This resonance made it a powerful tool for political communication. Its use in political discourse helped politicians align with the values and aspirations of the youth demographic. Sheng's integration into political discourse demonstrated the importance of linguistic relatability in political communication. It highlighted the need for politicians to engage with the cultural and linguistic preferences of their constituents.

During the protests on the Finance Bill of 2024, Sheng served as a form of resistance against established norms and as a means of empowerment, allowing youth to assert their identity and challenge traditional power structures. Sheng promoted social integration by allowing individuals from different ethnic groups to engage in a shared linguistic practice. The widespread use of the sociolect in urban settings helped to diminish ethnic barriers, as people from diverse backgrounds participated in the same linguistic community. It contributed to the formation of a national identity that transcended ethnic divisions and symbolised a collective urban identity and a sense of belonging to a larger Kenyan community. It was used in media, music, and popular culture to promote messages of national unity of purpose and cohesion. A case in point is the *Mbogi Genje* music group which signified a form of resistance and empowerment for urban youth, allowing them to claim space within the broader societal structure.

Implications of Sheng Usage in Kenya's Political Arena

The use of the linguistic code in political contexts highlights the importance of linguistic diversity in representation. It allows for a more nuanced expression of political identity and engages with the lived experiences of urban youth.

The adoption of Sheng into political discourse illustrates how language can be used as a tool of power. Politicians leverage Sheng to assert dominance in specific linguistic and cultural spheres, influencing public perception and voter behavior. Its integration into political language enhanced political engagement among youth by making

political messages more relatable and accessible. Politicians leveraged on Sheng to assert dominance in specific political, cultural and linguistic spheres, influencing public perception and citizens behavior.

Sheng's role in urban youth culture and activism highlights its potential as a tool for political communication and mobilisation, reflecting broader social trends and concerns. The integration of various linguistic elements in its corpus demonstrates the potential of a language to act as a medium for cultural integration and exchange.

Sheng's integration into political language reflected a shift towards more inclusive and relatable political communication. It enabled politicians to connect with specific demographic groups more effectively and engage with the lived experiences of rural and urban youth. A political discourse that reflects societal diversity can enhance the representation of marginalised groups and address their concerns. The adoption of societal terms can affect public perceptions of political issues, influencing both policy debates and voter attitudes and certain groups can gain influence through their linguistic contributions.

Mechanisms of Sheng's Impact

Several mechanisms facilitated Sheng's influence on the Finance Bill's rejection. These mechanisms include its alignment with urban youth culture. This made it an effective tool for mobilising opposition. The language's familiarity and scope helped galvanise support and articulate grievances.

The use of social media allowed for rapid dissemination of anti-bill messages and created a platform for collective action. Additionally, its integration into public discourse reflected an existing dissatisfaction with the Finance Bill, making it easier for the opposition to mobilise and articulate their position.

Use of Sheng underscores the role of language in enhancing youth engagement and activism. By speaking in the language of the youth, activists and politicians can more effectively mobilise support and drive political change. The influence of Sheng in the rejection of the Finance Bill of 2024 illustrates how language can serve as a tool of power and resistance. It provided a common code that reduced misunderstandings and promoted cooperation among youth from diverse backgrounds and socioeconomic status.

The ability to shape political narratives through language reflects broader power dynamics in society. In times of political or social unrest, Sheng can act as a unifying force, bringing people together through a common language and shared experiences.

CONCLUSION

By analysing the use of Sheng in political mobilisation, public discourse, and grassroots resistance, the study has highlighted how this sociolect has influenced political outcomes and reflects broader trends in Kenyan political communication. It has illustrated how this linguistic phenomenon has impacted political mobilisation and discourse and shaped Kenya's political landscape.

The understanding of Sheng's impact as outlined in this study has provides valuable insights into the interplay between language, culture, and politics, emphasising the importance of linguistic diversity in shaping contemporary political realities. The results highlight the significance of linguistic diversity in political communication and underscores the impact of sociolects in contemporary political landscapes. By examining historical and contemporary examples, the paper has highlighted the mechanisms through which sociolects gain political significance and the broader implications of this linguistic evolution. Understanding these processes provides insight into the interplay between language, society, and politics.

The study established that Sheng played a significant role in the rejection of Kenya's Finance Bill 2024, thus illustrating the powerful intersection of language, youth identity, and political mobilisation. It was evident from the findings that Sheng has evolved from a sociolect of the youth into a potent tool in political discourse. The transition from a sociolect to a political jargon exemplifies the dynamic interplay between language, social identity, and political strategy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper outlines the complex relationship between sociolects and political jargon. This therefore, provides a foundation for further research into how language evolves within social and political contexts.

Sheng can be used for political and civic education messaging as it makes the message feel authentic and accessible to younger generations, bridging the gap between formal political discourse and everyday life by:

1. Broadcasting messages on political issues in ghetto radios that use Sheng and in social media platforms.
2. Creating offline and online forums where young people can hold political debates and express their opinions using Sheng.
3. Mobilising and informing voters during elections. Sheng can be used to communicate campaign information registration drives and such other information.
4. Creating civic education content in Sheng.
5. Organising public forums where politicians and citizens can interact directly, with Sheng being used to facilitate more open and genuine communication.
6. Using Sheng to create political satire and commentary.
7. Publishing articles and stories with political content in Sheng.

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