SHENG: SOME PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATIONS INTO A RECENTLY EMERGED NAIROBI STREET LANGUAGE

I

Over the last thirty or forty years, a street language has been developing in Nairobi, the capital of Kenya. It has come to be known by many as 'Sheng', although not all its speakers are aware of the term. My interest in this language was initially aroused in the summer of 1985 while I was in Nairobi carrying out research for my M.Litt. thesis on local 'parking boys' or street urchins - a recent urban phenomenon in Kenya. It has been suggested that the term 'Sheng' has been coined from a combination of the letters 's' and 'h' in Swahili, and the 'eng' of English (Sheng 1985).

'Parking boy' is a common term for boys ('parking girls' also exist), aged roughly between five and sixteen, who come from slum areas, are not in school, and who usually earn themselves a living in more than one way. However, they are distinctly recognizable and identified by their parking business, which involves both directing motorists, for a fee or tip, into empty parking spaces, and watching over parked cars, in return for which the driver either pays or else risks damage to his car. These children number several hundred, although no one knows exactly how many there are, and they typically form small gangs comprised of not more than about twenty members each. One sees them in the centre of Nairobi in groups of between three and, say, eight members. The gangs are territorial and in the majority of cases have a leader,

I wish to thank Mr J. Arensen, Dr W. James, Dr N.J. Allen, Mr S. Raychaudhury and Miss F. Taraporewala for their helpful suggestions and comments. I also acknowledge the invaluable assistance of Maina wa Mwangi in identifying the roots of some Sheng words. The transcription is in IPA.

who is normally the oldest and biggest boy in the group.

This kind of organization is flexible and relatively unsophisticated, lacking, in most instances, any adult control, and exhibiting, to a small extent only, the control of children over other children. My own investigations suggest, for example, that there is certainly no general pattern whereby children do *not* keep their own earnings, despite some evidence that the contrary sometimes occurs. We may think of the parking-boy phenomenon as being located towards the more unsophisticated end of a continuum, the other end of which is represented by highly organized and sophisticated street gangs, such as those found in New York and in a number of other large American, European and Indian cities.

Parking boys, I suggest, have their own 'sub-culture', one aspect of which is their use of Sheng. There appear to be three dominant modes of communication among them - Sheng, Kikuyu and Swahili. Swahili, however, does not seem to be used as much as Sheng and Kikuyu. Most of the boys belong to the Kikuyu, the host people of Nairobi, and speak the language. Those who are not Kikuyu have learnt it in order to be assimilated into the world of parking boys. Most parking boys have at some stage been to school - some have obtained a minimum level of education, and others have had to leave school for various reasons, at a relatively more advanced level, usually that of primary school.

Whiteley claims that the importance of taking language diversity into consideration has been realized in anthropology only since the 1950s. In his paper on multilingualism (1971) he illustrates the kind of neglect that prevailed prior to this with the example of Mitchell writing about a gossip network without actually specifying the language spoken. The importance of taking an anthropological approach which relies, in part, on linguistic data, is stressed by both Whiteley and Tonkin (1971: 147). Certainly, a study of language reveals much about the society in question. I aim to show how this might apply in the case of Sheng.

The rest of this paper focuses on what may be gleaned from the speculative history of the language in terms of its emergence and development to date. In the last section I present some selected examples of Sheng vocabulary, obtained from a number of the parking boys themselves. Wherever possible, I attempt to identify the linguistic components of the words.

II

In 1985, an article appeared in *The Standard* newspaper on the emergence of Sheng in Nairobi some thirty to forty years ago (Sheng 1985). It has since stimulated more journalistic interest in Sheng and, in recent months, several more newspaper articles have been written about it. Through their presentation and discussion of certain Sheng terms, these articles may, to some extent, be providing and determining the standardization of what does not

appear to be a standardized mode of communication.

One of the questions that must be asked concerns the nature of this street language: is it an argot, a slang, a pidgin, a creole or what?

According to one sociolinguistic definition, a pidgin is a language defined in terms of its supposed history - '"a reduced" version of a "source" or "base" language' (quoted in Tonkin 1971: 129). There is not necessarily only one 'base' language, and pidgin speakers do not necessarily know the 'base' language or languages themselves. Such pidgins have emerged and developed among culturally and linguistically diverse peoples as a means of communication between them (ibid.).

Although this article does not undertake to explore the controversy surrounding the classifications of 'pidgins' and 'creoles', it is nevertheless important to mention it. In so far as the debate concerns the distinction between them, the argument proposed by Tonkin, that pidgins and creoles lie along the same continuum, seems more convincing than the linguists' view that they are linguistically distinct. Tonkin argues, furthermore, that creoles, according to LePage's definition, do not exist in multilingual situations, a creole being:

> the second stage of development [which] occurs when the 'pidgin' becomes so widely used that it is a more valuable instrument than the mother-tongues; parents then use it to their children, the children grow up speaking 'pidgin' as their first language. (LePage quoted by Tonkin 1971: 131)

This latter argument, if applied to the Nairobi situation, seems plausible, in view of my later discussion of the various language spheres existing in Nairobi, which suggests that there is no evidence of creolization happening as a general phenomenon. Nor is it likely to reach this stage; first, because Sheng is not introduced to children in the home but at a later stage of life; and secondly, because Swahili and English are both taught in schools and are used widely in the city.

Nor is it likely that Sheng is a pidgin either. Pidgins are characteristically associated with contexts of trade and other practical business in which it is essential for the participating parties - of diverse cultural and linguistic origins - to be able to communicate with one another. Pidgins have developed as compromise languages in these situations in response to the need for a common language and are indispensable to the parties concerned. By contrast, it is not essential for people to speak Sheng, and for this reason it may not be described as a classic pidgin.[1]

In Kenya, whereas the 'true' or 'correct' Swahili is that spoken at the coast, the interior is characterized by the existence of many corrupted forms of the language. Sheng may be regarded as the most recent of these forms - as yet another development in the language ferment of the interior.

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[1] I am grateful to Wendy James for this suggestion.

Despite this sociological distinction between Sheng and classic pidgins, it is useful, nonetheless, to compare them as hybrid forms of communication. In order to do so, Sheng will be compared with pidgins in West Africa.

Sheng is 'moulded within the Kiswahili and English syntactical framework' (Sheng 1985), and as well as being a mixture of Kiswahili and English, it has contributions from the languages of the major ethnic groups of its speakers - for example, Luo, Luhyia and Kamba, as well as Kikuyu. It also has a number of words with origins as diverse as Hindi, American westerns, and karate and breakdance films - all of which are highly popular with young people in Nairobi. Sheng in fact does seem to be associated mainly with young people, i.e. children and young adults, although not exclusively so. It also appears to be associated more with people engaged in the informal sector than with those engaged in formal sector occupations. It is a creative, spontaneous, and fast-evolving language, which varies according to situation and speaker within the city of Nairobi.

Interestingly, the way in which Sheng has emerged in Kenya seems to be the exact opposite of what has happened with pidgins in West Africa which have a comparatively longer history. While the emergence of both is associated with European contact, in the West African case pidgins have spread inland from the coast, whereas in Kenya, Sheng has emerged inland and has really remained a Nairobi phenomenon. However, it is interesting to consider here what is happening in the other large urban centres in Kenya, namely Mombasa, on the coast, Nakuru, in the Rift Valley, and Kisumu, an important port on Lake Victoria. Sheng has not become widespread in any of these towns, despite the fact that many Nairobi residents are able to take advantage of the good transport system, consisting largely of *matatu* services (privately owned taxi-vans), and so maintain links with their relatives and friends living in rural and other urban areas. However, to a small extent, Sheng *is* transported outside Nairobi, some of the main agents being the *matatu* operators themselves (*manambas*). In fact *manamba* is itself a Sheng word, derived from the Swahili prefix *ma-* and the English word 'number', which originally referred to the number of the service.

Why, then, has Sheng not become widespread in these other towns? In the case of Mombasa and the coast generally, Kiswahili is the dominant language, with English used in addition. There is here a certain language clarity that is lacking in Nairobi - a city culturally and linguistically far more diverse. Nakuru is an ethnically heterogeneous town, but the majority are Kikuyu, and either Kikuyu or Kiswahili is spoken. In Kisumu, again ethnically heterogeneous, Luo form the dominant group, and Luo and Kiswahili are the main languages used. Nairobi, however, is in a class all of its own, being both much larger and more cosmopolitan than the other towns and thus not under the linguistic dominance of any one group.[2] These features, I believe, hold the key to

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[2] In 1980, for instance, Nairobi's population had far exceeded a

this question, for such conditions are suitable for the emergence of hybrid languages.

Why, and amongst whom, did Sheng emerge in Nairobi? Despite the fact that the historical evidence is very limited, it is possible to say a number of things about the emergence of this street language, and to raise a number of questions.

Several factors have contributed towards the development of Sheng. We begin by going back some forty years to pre-independence Kenya. This was a time of very rapid growth for Nairobi as many migrants came to the city to search for jobs. This ethnically heterogeneous population of workers came to live side-by-side with each other in Nairobi's Eastlands, in areas which today are large slums containing almost half of Nairobi's population. Examples of such locations are Buru Buru, Kariobangi, Jericho, Majengo, Kaloleni, Mathare Valley, Muthurwa, Bahati and Lumumba. It is possible that the children of these workers first started to create Sheng, for while their parents remained linguistically, culturally and associationally Kikuyu, Luo etc., they had been born or brought into a completely new and different environment, characterized by multilingualism and the beginnings of a particular kind of class formation.

Three languages, operating on three different levels, may be identified in the Eastlands. The first is the 'mother' or ethnic tongue, used within domestic and ethnic units; the second is Kiswahili, used outside these spheres; and the third is English, taught in schools in addition to Swahili and carrying greater status as the colonial tongue. It is no wonder, then, that a hybrid language comprised of components from all these levels emerged in Nairobi's Eastlands, the need for a common language being an important underlying impetus. It is important to stress that not all members of these diverse language groups could communicate with one another in Kiswahili or English if they did not speak the same vernacular.

It has also been suggested that an important contributory factor in the emergence of Sheng is the lack of clarity in Kenya's language policy, whereby Swahili is used for national purposes and English for official purposes (Sheng 1985). It is argued that this goes back to the British strategy of 'divide and rule' and their resistance to homogeneity, especially where language was concerned. The result of this was the use of two languages - English, with its status and utilitarian value on the one hand, and Kiswahili, with its connotations of social inclusiveness, brotherhood, solidarity, neutrality and lower status on the other (Parkin 1974). It is, in fact, only very recently that the Kenyan President, Daniel Arap Moi, has decreed that Swahili be made examinable in schools. Sheng, therefore, seems to have emerged partly as a result of the ambiguity concerning the status of Swahili and of the freedom it offers to its speakers to borrow and adapt words from other languages.

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million, and while that of Mombasa was almost half a million, Kisumu's was only 124,000, and Nakuru's just under 80,000 (Ominde 1984: 63).

In her paper on West African pidgins, Tonkin (1971) points to the need for a common language through which African and European - in this case, initially Portuguese - could communicate with one another as an important factor in their emergence. This does not appear to have been the case in Nairobi, however. Rather, in Kenya a Swahili 'dialect' known as *Kisettla* emerged amongst British settlers, who, in one view, did not want to speak correct Swahili. An example of *Kisettla* is the sign *mbwa kali* which was, and still is, often placed on the drive gates of British homes. This is a warning meaning 'fierce dog', which ought to read *mbwa mkali*. The settlers are seen by many Africans as having bastardized the Swahili language deliberately so as not to have to lower themselves to the level of the 'natives'. Thus, the development of Sheng is not rooted in *Kisettla* Swahili, despite the fact that English is incorporated.

III

It is clear, therefore, that a combination of factors have contributed to the emergence of Sheng. Its subsequent development and spread are the next foci of this paper.

It is possible that Sheng was being used as early as the beginnings of the 1950s. It became more pronounced however, in the early 1970s, but was not really recognized until even more recently. Initially, as mentioned earlier, it was associated with a particular socio-economic group consisting of migrant labourers, as well as Kikuyu ex-Mau Mau detainees and their relations, school drop-outs and the like. Within the socio-economic structure of the society, these people were at the lower end of the hierarchy. However, since then the use of Sheng has filtered upwards, and its association is no longer limited to one specific section of the population. The functions or uses it serves have also diversified. It is important to bear in mind that this has happened alongside a massive increase in the size of Nairobi, the population of which, over the period 1969-80, increased at the rate of 7% per annum, that is, from 509,000 to 1,098,000 inhabitants (Ominde 1984: 63).

The use of Sheng has spread beyond the Eastlands to become a street language used widely in the city by many Africans engaged in the informal sector, including shoe-shine boys, curio-sellers, hawkers and parking boys, to name but a few. In addition, it has become a fashionable or 'hip' language among many of the more well-to-do youth of Nairobi. For example, Sheng, or a local version of it, is spoken by many children attending some of the private and most prestigious schools in Nairobi. These children come from either middle-class or elite backgrounds. It may be that speaking and creating Sheng is part of being 'clever' and shows also that one is really 'in' on what is happening. Sheng is even used by some university students in certain situations, for example, at football practice.

Not only has the development of the language involved a spread geographically and socially, but the language itself has been continually changing and evolving as an increasing number of words from an increasing number of language reservoirs have been adapted and incorporated. No single form of Sheng has emerged out of this; rather, there are many versions, which vary according to area, situation and speaker. For instance, the version spoken by parking boys is different from that spoken by schoolchildren from relatively well-off families. The type of Sheng spoken by the former group is, by contrast, highly specialized. There are, for example, a relatively large number of terms for 'police', 'marihuana', 'prostitute', 'cigarette' and so forth, which would not be found in the latter case. Clearly, such words have more relevance in the life of a parking boy, and in this respect Sheng has the features of an argot. Despite such variation, however, there does seem to be a certain amount of standardization. For instance, the term **/mu:dəusi:/** is understood by all Sheng speakers to mean 'rich person'.

A further recent development is the popularization of Sheng. Kenyan writers such as Thomas Okare have incorporated the use of Sheng in their works. It is possible, indeed likely, that in future Kenyan literature will take the path already paved by many West African writers, for instance, who have long made use of pidgins in their writing.

In this paper, a number of comparisons have been drawn between Kenyan and West African material. Sheng and West African pidgins have both emerged within the context of European contact, though this happened much earlier in West Africa; for while Sheng is probably not more than forty years old, pidgin Portuguese emerged some time around 1440 in West Africa, and pidgin English some 200 years later (Tonkin 1971: 132). Many similarities concerning the emergence and subsequent development of pidgin exist in these regions, but there are also differences in the particular historical circumstances and events that have affected them. It is, however, important to note that pidgins have also emerged in situations without European influence. Tonkin claims that this area has been neglected and cites two examples. The first is 'Town Bemba', a Copperbelt pidgin based on CiBemba which is spoken among equals. In so far as it is a marker identifying the modern townsman, it is similar to Sheng. Sango, a pidgin of the Central African Republic, is Tonkin's second example. According to Samarin, Sango is spoken by the 'man who has just left the bush but has not enough education to speak French' (quoted in Tonkin 1971: 132). Tonkin argues that in both cases speakers are using pidgin as part of their attempt to join a group.

What this paper has not yet dealt with is the use of pidgin or street language as part of gang 'sub-culture', except to indicate that as far as Sheng is concerned the parking boys' use of it appears to be relatively specialized. For them, it also serves specific functions related to the necessities and hazards of their particular life-style. For example, parking boys find Sheng useful for warning one another of approaching police. By continually inventing new terms for 'police' as the police find out the old

ones, effective warning is enabled. In addition, the use made of Sheng by the parking boys as a group is relatively intensive, to the extent that it is often the only language spoken for hours on end. It appears that Sheng is being used to the extent that in the future it might become their 'mother' tongue. However, whether this will occur will depend, for one thing, on the level of education such children in future years will have had prior to becoming parking boys. The phenomenon of street children is in fact very closely linked to certain problems of the educational system, which cause, for one thing, a large drop-out rate from schools. This has become recognized as a serious problem, as more and more of Nairobi's youth have joined the officially unemployed, and as crime rates in the city have risen. Whether or not Sheng will become a 'mother' tongue might also depend on whether the future offspring of parking boys and girls hear Sheng used extensively in the home.

Presented below are some of the Sheng terms collected from a number of parking boys during my field trip to Nairobi in 1985. The extent to which their Sheng deviates from that used by other speakers of Sheng is a question that needs investigation, but my guess, and there is some evidence to support it, is that while there is a certain amount of overlap, there is always a certain amount that is exclusively parking boy Sheng. Moreover, there also appears to be some variation among the parking boys themselves in their use of Sheng.

IV

I now turn to some examples of the kind of Sheng spoken by the parking boys with whom I became acquainted in Nairobi. The words were obtained by asking my twenty informants to give me as many words as possible in the language they normally use amongst themselves. I offered them no assistance whatsoever, but waited for what was offered, unprompted, to me.

Out of this emerged a collection of words from which it is possible, to a certain extent, to construct a reasonable sketch of the kind of street life led by parking boys. I suggest also that it is possible to regard terms for which there are several words in Sheng, such as 'policeman', 'marihuana', 'prostitute', 'cigarettes' and others, as indicative of the things that have a prominent role in their lives.

I have roughly classified these Sheng words according to their meaning and possible origin, in terms of verbs, food and drink, and clothing.

Some of the most prominent features to note are the following: the way in which terms are coined from components of different languages; the fact that a number of terms are often English words pronounced with a heavy emphasis, frequently on the last syllable; onomatopœic words; the host of synonyms for certain things, and what these things are; the use of certain altered

Kikuyu elements which really have no meaning and have been attached to a noun to form a Sheng word; and finally, the way in which the creators of Sheng have condensed what are sometimes fairly complex meanings or phenomena into a single term.

Verbs include /ku:seti:/, 'to put', derived from the English 'to set' and the Swahili verb prefix *ku-*; and /ku:sʌfaɪf/, 'to live' or 'survive', derived from the English 'to survive' and the same Swahili prefix. Then there is the rather impolite term /njʊkwɔɪti:na:/, 'to pester', derived from the Kikuyu *nyukwa* for 'mother', and *tina*, also Kikuyu, meaning 'backside'. /ɒku:ku:/ is Sheng for 'to beat' and is onamatopœic The verb 'to boast' is /ku:dʒi:du:/, derived from the first part of Swahili *kujifanya*, 'to be vain' and the English word 'do', which is in fact a literal translation of *-fanya*. /kəʊhæmi:ʃa:/ is Sheng for 'to steal' and is derived from the Swahili *kuhamisha*, 'to move'. /kɒma:rəʊ/ is 'to arrest', quite possibly derived from the Swahili verb *kamata*, with the same meaning.

There are also a number of examples associated with food and drink. For instance, there is /ʃu:geɪ/, obviously derived from 'sugar', but with emphasis on the final syllable. Sheng for 'chips' is /dʒi:va:/, a word which may be derived from the name of the Jivanjee Gardens, close to which the first fish-and-chips shops in the city existed.[3] /ma:rɒti:/ means 'tea-leaves', the first two syllables being simply a Kikuyu intensifier. /tʃæm/ is Sheng for *chang'aa*, an illegal local brew and possibly also the root of the term. There are, and indeed have been, many names for this brew - for instance it used to be referred to as 'CX3, the petrol that takes you miles'; another term is *machozi ya simba* meaning, in Swahili, 'tears of the lion', which possibly identifies the strength of the lion with that of the brew, which is indeed very potent.

In the clothes category, /kəʊsi:/ is Sheng for 'shorts'. It is derived from the Swahili, *kikosi*, for 'a group of military', who, years ago in Kenya, wore shorts as part of their uniform. For 'long trousers', the boys would say /lɒŋgi:/, which has an obvious English derivation. However, one may also refer to trousers as /beri:/, originally from the 'bell' in 'bell-bottoms'. ('l' and 'r' are interchangeable in a number of Kenyan languages, including Kikuyu.)

As for synonyms, /si:nja:/, /mɛdænzeɪ/ and /sɒnji:/ are some of the Sheng words for 'policeman'. Of these words only the root of /si:nja:/, which clearly derives from the English term 'senior', is known to me. There are also many words in Sheng for 'marihuana' or *bhang*, as it is most commonly known; among them /i:təʊni:/, /gu:ʃ/, /kaɪja:/, /zaɪjɒn/ and /pi:wa:/. /zaɪjɒn/ may be derived from the song 'Zion Train', by the reggae singer Bob Marley. /kaɪja:/ is Jamaican slang for 'grass' or marihuana. Although the derivation of the term /pi:wa:/ is unknown to me, it actually means '*bhang* when you see treble'.[4] There are also various words

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[3] Personal communication from Maina wa Mwangi.

[4] Personal communication from Maina wa Mwangi.

for 'cigarettes'. They are sometimes referred to as **/fegi:/**, from the English slang 'fag'; or, alternatively, they may be called **/ori:dʒi:nɒ rɒsta:/**, from the name of one of the cheapest brands of local cigarettes, 'Original Rooster', very strong filterless cigarettes which are often smoked by the parking boys. **/spɒnjeɪ/** and **/spɔ:ti:/** are both Sheng terms derived from the name of yet another brand, 'Sportsman'. 'Sweet Menthol' cigarettes are referred to as **/esi:/**. **/ŋgɒti:ra:/** means 'cigarette butt', and derives from the Kikuyu, *ngwatira*, which means 'hold this little thing for me'.

/mbɒki:jəʊ/ is Sheng for 'prostitute'. This is derived from Kikuyu *mwomboko*, and refers to a Kikuyu circumcision dance. In fact, *-mboko* refers to the action of 'grinding one's hips', and hence the Sheng term means 'the one who grinds her hips'.[5] **/kæri:ɒtəʊ/** and **/i:gænja:/** also mean 'prostitute', but their derivation is unknown to me.

Two words that are very much part of parking boy Sheng are **/seɪdmi:ra:/** and **/kɒtɒ/**, which both mean 'side-mirror'. While the derivation of the former is obvious, **/kɒtɒ/** is derived from the Kikuyu *gutu*, meaning 'ear'. Side-mirrors, along with hub-caps and headlights, are items that sometimes mysteriously disappear, and the culprits are often parking boys. These children are referred to as **/tʃɒkɔ:ra:/** in Sheng, a term possibly derived from Kikuyu *mukora*, meaning 'thug', though the Sheng term is applied more specifically to parking boys, who are indeed regarded as little thugs or thieves by many members of the public. Alternatively, and most likely, it may derive from the Hindi term *chokkra*, which has a meaning ranging from 'boy' or 'little brat' to 'street urchin'.[6] It is likely that Indian traders have long employed street children as casual labour and have applied their own name to them.[7] These, then, are a few examples of the type of Sheng as spoken by parking boys in Nairobi. There is great scope for further investigation.

V

At this juncture it is important to note some work carried out over a decade ago on 'language-switching' in Nairobi by David Parkin. In his paper (1974) Parkin discusses 'transactional conversations' in which 'bits' of different languages are transacted between the speakers in a 'language game'. This game is characterized by 'challenges, counter-challenges and concessions', usually made in jocular fashion. Hence, it is possible to an extent, argues Parkin, to resolve contradictions which may be inherent in the relationship between the speakers by virtue of their ethnic and/or status identity.

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[5] Personal communication from Maina wa Mwangi.

[6] Personal communication from S. Raychaudhury and F. Taraporewala.

[7] I am grateful to Dr Wendy James for this suggestion.

The general context being referred to is one of ethnic and socio-economic diversity, and indeed, ethnic affiliation and personal socio-economic status are, says Parkin, the two basic principles of the language game. He argues that 'transactional conversations' have two possible effects: first, the various values associated with the languages employed are 'publicized'; and secondly, since such conversations require imagination and innovation, 'new contextual sets of "meaning"' are formed and are also 'publicized'.

Parkin's paper is undoubtedly relevant here. Bearing in mind that it was written over a decade ago, the following question suggests itself: might not the street language spoken in Nairobi today in fact comprise, at least in part, the so-called 'new contextual sets of "meaning"' which have developed over some years from these 'transactional conversations' as a result of the requisite inventiveness to which Parkin refers? If this is the case, it should follow that the kind of street language spoken amongst parking boys is more than just 'language-switching'. The latter involves the juxtaposition of whole words from different languages such that, depending on the linguistic ability and intentions of the speaker, a single sentence may, for example, contain a Kikuyu word or words, succeeded by a Luo word or words, which precede, perhaps, an English word, followed by a Swahili one. It may well be that 'language-switching' in this way is part of parking boy Sheng; however, to some extent, as we have seen the variety of forms they use is more sophisticated, involving, besides 'switching', the coining of new words and expressions out of 'bits' of words from different languages, the attribution of new meanings to old words, and more.

This paper has discussed, in broad terms, what is essentially a comparatively recent phenomenon in Nairobi. It has considered, on a superficial level, the emergence, development, uses, speakers and certain of the features of Sheng, as well as the various levels at which it may be studied. In addition, it has emphasised the importance of taking language into consideration when aiming at an ideal anthropological approach and has attempted to illustrate this, as well as the significance of linguistic data, through the example of the parking boys.

It is clear that many factors have contributed towards the development of Sheng. It has been born of a multilingual situation in the wider context of British colonialism, partly as a result of the need for a common language among linguistically diverse peoples, and partly because of a lack of clarity in language policy in Kenya. The outcome of this is an urban language which is a symbol for many Kenyans of their common identity as Nairobi city-dwellers. That Sheng is widespread in Nairobi but not in other major urban areas in Kenya may have to do with the fact that the ethnic diversity of the city is magnified by its much larger population, such that it is no longer under the linguistic dominance of the major ethnic group in the area. Sheng is a creative response, comprised of an *ad hoc* incorporation of elements from a large linguistic pool, to the ambiguities and innovative freedom

implicit in this particular multilingual situation.

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