

Nairobi, Sheng, and the creole-interlanguage continua

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Sheng, a non-canonical contact language spoken in the Eastlands area of Nairobi, Kenya, has its genesis in Upcountry Swahili that came to the city, and its geographic distribution reflects the continuum model of language contact developed for use in creolinguistics.

From a delineation of access to education, it is argued that Sheng as a mother-tongue is spoken in the slums of Mukuru, Kibera and Mathare; Sheng as a mesolect is spoken in Eastlands in general; lastly Sheng is spoken less fluently in the more affluent areas of Nairobi, such as in Westlands. Not only is there a continuum of varieties of Sheng, but also there is a negative correlation between income and housing and one's competence in Sheng.

Early L2 learners of Swahili had to communicate and so became a distinct social group with a distinct language. As sparse urban housing catered to African families, the process of nativization was slow, allowing substratal influence to exert itself. The 20-year interim between the year of Independence and the year of Swahili's becoming a compulsory subject on national exams not only hindered decreolization but also incubated the development of a new Kenyan social identity. Being separated from the source languages, speakers were indirectly encouraged to form a new group, whose language was 'off target' first by happenstance and later by choice.

*What separates a true mixed language from other types of language contact is evidence of a Matrix Language Turnover, occurring when traces of a composite in the morphosyntax exist. Substrate influences on Sheng are the marker *ma-* serving as the generic plural, the *-a(n)g-* suffix marking the imperfective, and the *KA-TU* prefixes forming diminutives. Because it contains more than "incidental examples of composite structure" (Myers-Scotton 2003), Sheng can be legitimately called a mixed language.*