

## LANGUAGE, COMMUNICATION AND MARKETING: CONTEXUALIZING THE USE OF SHENG LANGUAGE IN ADVERTISING IN KENYA.

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### ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the impact of Sheng language on advertising and marketing in Kenya. The paper observes the evolvement of Sheng as a language in Kenya and its growing importance in advertising and marketing. I will use secondary data to shed more light on the use of Sheng language in advertising in Kenya to contribute to knowledge and awareness on the issue. While at first Sheng was dismissed as a language of the lowly, underprivileged urban youth, it has grown to a language of commerce, social discourse, and politics. This has made advertisers realize that they just have to embrace it to reach the youth who are the potential and actual consumers of goods and services. With the population of youth estimated at 60%, it is a segment that advertisers cannot afford to ignore. The youth represent a significant demographic; -well educated, high spending and care-free. Their consumption habits are exploited by advertisers and marketers to tap them using the Sheng language with simple, catchy and memorable messages.

**Key words:** sheng; advertising; marketing; multinationals

## INTRODUCTION

Advertisers are aware that a good advertising campaign influences and affects people in a considerable manner. According to Belch (2009), the ability of advertising to deliver carefully prepared messages to target audiences has given it a major role in the marketing programmes of most organizations.

Language and communication provide advertisers with what Schrank calls "psychological hooks" that serve as persuasive techniques that aid in marketing of products and services. Through the use of careful choice of words, advertisers make claims and promises about their products and services that are meant to allure customers and aid in marketing.

There are techniques that advertisers use to make claims and promises through language and communications about their products and services. Rossiter and Percy (1997) say advertising communications are often regarded as relatively indirect form of persuasion, based on information or emotional appeals about product benefits, designed to create favourable mental impressions that "turn the mind toward" purchase.

Up until recently, advertisements in Kenya have been in either English or Standard Swahili. Mutonya (2008) says that before 1980s, the Kenyan market was dominated by a few multinational monopolies and foreign-owned advertising agencies that did not face any serious competition. He argues that this changed in the 1990s with the entry of competing products from the common market of the Eastern and Southern African countries.

Due to the heightened competition, marketers had to look for ways to keep and reach for new consumers. Since the youth in Kenya is conservatively estimated to comprise of about 60% of the population, advertisers did not need much prodding to revert to the language of the youth, "sheng", to reach out to this important market segment.

Laura (2013) says Sheng is a Swahili-based slang, with bits of English thrown in alongside other Kenyan and Non-Kenyan languages. Okombo (1987) asserts that the word Sheng possibly suggests that the language is a mixture of Swahili and English. He adds that Kiswahili provides the grammatical framework within which Sheng operates, but has words that come from all sorts of languages spoken in Kenya - English being the major source.

This paper will contextualize the rise of Sheng language in advertising in Kenya. The paper will be guided by the realization that advertisers must adjust to lifestyle changes to keep their desirabilities. Martineau (1957) argues that advertisers' products must be seen to fit into new currents, to have an image that acquires some aspects of the changing directions, tastes and beliefs not to lose its desirabilities.

### **Sheng the Language**

Various researchers have come up with different definitions of Sheng over the years. Mazrui (1995) calls it a hybrid linguistic code; Githiora (2002) a Kiswahili-based patois influenced by many languages; Laura (2013) a Swahili-based slang, with bits of English thrown in alongside other Kenyan and Non-Kenyan languages.

Okombo (1987) avers that the word Sheng is possibly used to suggest that the language is a mixture of Swahili and English. He continues to call Sheng a unique language with the characteristics of a pidgin, even if only a newly evolved one. Iraki (2004) calls Sheng an idiom that fundamentally employs Swahili syntax drawn from African languages and English.

Controversy, however, has been ranging whether Sheng can be really classified as a language or not. Iraki (2004) says some scholars see Sheng as nothing but a hodgepodge of

words used by lazy youth to hide their evil intentions from adults. It has been criticized as not a language per se since it has no community of speakers; keeps changing regularly; it has no grammar and is different from one group to another.

Sheng is a relatively recent phenomenon having originated from the less affluent estates of Eastlands in Nairobi. Osinde (1986) says the estates are mainly Muthurwa, Landline-Mawe, Jericho, Maringo, Kaloleni, Mbotela, Bahati, Jerusalem, Makongeni, Hamza and Makadara. The speakers were mainly the youth who chose to defy the norm by inventing their own code of group identity. It was also associated with waywardness and gangsterism, he adds.

Momanyi (2009) calls the mixed code unstable, random and fluid. Abdulaziz and Osinde (1994) argue that Sheng was a basic code used by youths as an in-group maker, a solidarity building language and one used to shut out the older folk out of the conversation of the youth.

With this view of the genesis of Sheng, the criticism seems to be justified since the other languages comparatively are more stable and have had a history that is as old as the native speakers. Abdulaziz and Osinde (1996) observe that the genesis of Sheng is argotic and its inventors truants from school who experimented with smoking bhang and drinking alcohol.

Those who support Sheng however see it as the future language of Kenya, a new neutral language amidst the tribal languages in Kenya. Iraki (2004) says Sheng not only integrates the major Kenyan languages in an innovative and practical fashion but also reflects the creative spirit of the youth. He continue to declare that Sheng makes sense and does not suffer the negative images of vernacular and Kiswahili.

According to Momanyi (2009) Sheng has developed more systematic patterns of usage of phonological, morphological and syntactic levels. She continues to say that now Sheng is used in the complex multilingual and multicultural setting of the major towns of Kenya, and is therefore a reflection of the linguistic complexities that exist in Kenya's major towns.

These arguments for and against Sheng, no doubt demonstrate the importance of the Sheng phenomenon. That it has attracted such intense debate shows that it is an eventuality which can no longer be ignored. As a matter of fact, school teachers, politicians and advertisers have taken notice.

As Iraki (2004) points out, in the economic arena, commercials targeting the youth in Kenya are in Sheng. He says it is a language that is devoid of the structures of Swahili and the snobbishness of English making it appealing to the youth.

### **Sheng and Communication.**

The youth in Kenya have taken Sheng as their main tool of communication and interaction. They use it for socializing, relaxing, and bonding with peers. Sheng is an independent language for the youth and they are lost without it.

Sheng has grown exponentially among the youth in Kenya. It is no longer restricted to the low-end estates of Eastlands in Nairobi. Mutiga (2013) says Sheng has become the vernacular for the youth in both urban and rural areas in Kenya. Its influence is felt across Kenya's social strata.....learnt and used, even within education systems such as schools and colleges, Mutiga (2013) adds.

According to research, university students in Kenya; secondary and primary pupils all are using Sheng as their language of social interaction and principle language outside the classroom. Mutiga (2013) also says there is a growing number of adult populations that is using Sheng in

certain social business contexts such as transport industry and traders in the informal sector.

Observations have also shown that more and more Kenyan families are using Sheng as their language at home. The original speakers of Sheng growing up in the 1970s have now matured and many have completely shifted to Sheng from their original languages of their ethnicity. It follows then that naturally their children acquire Sheng as their first language and they become native speakers of Sheng.

According to Iraki (2004), socially Sheng's image has improved tremendously to the extent of attracting membership from the elite classes. Many up-market youths are now using Sheng as their preferred language of communication amongst themselves, he adds.

Sheng has also become very popular in short message texting (SMS), social media and even local media of radio and television. A growing trend among presenters is to use it in order to connect with the large and steadily increasing Sheng-speaking social class that transcends the language and social status.

Iraki (2010) observes that the popularity and ubiquity of Sheng among the youth makes it an ideal language through which we can begin to dialogue with them. He adds that the language is a powerful identity tool; a signature language for the youth denoting ideological affinity, social class, in-group identity, coolness, generational rebellion, linguistic innovation and rejection of tribal identity.

Ngugi (1986) says language, as communication carries three roles - a carrier of culture, an image forming agent that provides the group with a whole conception of themselves, individually and collectively, and as a transmitter of the images of the world and reality.

### Sheng and advertising

Mutonya (2008) avers that advertisers are increasingly using slang and other non-standard forms of Swahili to reach out to a broader audience in the densely multilingual Nairobi. Mutiga (2013) adds that commercial advertisers have also recently turned to extensive use of Sheng to market their products. There is evidently a gradual shift towards advertising in Sheng. Roadside billboards, television advertisements are increasingly being crafted in Sheng, as advertisers transform their messages and discourses to reach out to new customers and keep old ones.

Mutonya (2008) argues that advertisers are changing their advertising discourse to reinterpret the identity of their products and enhance societal attitudes in them. Martineau (1957), contests that every advertiser has to adjust to lifestyle shifts because unless his product is seen as fitting these new currents, unless the image can acquire some aspects of these changing directions in our tastes and beliefs, it can lose its desirabilities.

Studies by Piler (2001) in Germany; Lee (2006) in Korea; Bhatt (2003) in India; Martin (2002, 2006) in France and Callon and McDonald (2006) in the USA discuss local factors and incentives that drive the advertiser to make unique linguistic choices in the promotion of their products with varying and social and linguistic choices affecting the particular choice taken in each society. Bhatia (2006) observes that the adoption of local languages has allowed marketers to expand their horizons and to reach new consumers.

Sheng seems to be everywhere -in radio-call-in shows, Facebook posts, topics on Twitter and applications like Whatsapp. Due to this ubiquity of sheng, its terms have become the preferred vocabulary of persuasion by marketers and advertisers. Marketers and advertisers are alive to the fact that effective communication to a specific target audience is the key to making

advertisements get results. It is also to be remembered that there is a lot of advertisement from every considerable place and space which has led to clutter or 'supersaturization' in advertising.

In view of this, marketers and advertisers are using Sheng to reach out to the youth which is conservatively estimated at 60% of Kenya's population. Burriss and Medi (2013), intimate that successful communication in an advertisement involves focusing on a certain audience with information that meets this group's needs. They continue to give three main reactions that a good ad should trigger from the target audience First is emotional response, to get the target audience to feel something; the second is for potential audience to think about what you have to say and thirdly to encourage them to take action, such as purchasing the product or using the service.

Mutonya (2008) observes that advertising in non-standard Swahili like Sheng is a trend spurred by competition from goods from the region, as trade agreements of a common market allowed unhindered movement of goods across regional boundaries. These were followed by vigorous marketing strategies for new and old products leading advertisers to adapt their language to aspects of casual speech.

To begin with, Mutonya (2008) continues, advertisers used Sheng to try to sell new products that were less costly in order to appeal to the younger and working poor. He says the trend changed later and began to target the city's labour force and consuming public which was shifting to the younger, Sheng-speaking demographic. Many blue-collar and informal sectors, the younger, well-educated and high spending city residents had grown up with Sheng sensibilities.

Mutonya (2008) did a random survey among Nairobians and found that the youth favoured advertisements in Sheng. Some said it was 'cool'; others said that it makes ads 'fresh' and 'enjoyable' while others commended it since it is 'our language; our group as teenagers'.



Using Sheng in advertising also plays an essential role of localizing the product or service. Martineau (1957) notes that identifying with popular social and linguistic trends, advertisers echo the new tastes and beliefs in the ads: admiration of youthfulness, trend to casual, desire to be different, greater sophistication in behaviour, seeking new adventure, seeking opportunities for self-expression and being modern. Using Sheng in ads also helps to associate the products with desirable traits of novelty, vitality, change, urban sophistication and youthfulness.

## CONCLUSION

Traditionally in Kenya, advertising has been conducted in the English language and standard Swahili. However of late, advertisers and marketers have reverted to using urban slang and other non-standard forms of Swahili to reach out to a broader audience, as Mutonya (2008) observes. This has been brought about by the exigencies of the emergent target audience of advertising, the youth.

Sheng, as we have seen in the foregoing observations in this paper, has arisen as an important language of communication in which advertisers and marketers can no longer ignore. It has become the language to embrace to reach the youthful segment of our population estimated at a healthy 60%. Mutiga (2013) observes that commercial advertisers have recently turned to an extensive use of Sheng to market their products. There are many advantages that Sheng presents as the language of the youth.

Serious marketers like the mobile phone services providers, banks, automobile dealers, and other service providers are all seriously embracing Sheng as the language of choice when advertising and marketing their goods and services.

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