

Nairobi residents speak a wide range of indigenous and foreign languages. The complex multilingual and multicultural environment brings into contact over 40 distinct Kenya languages; other African languages from a growing number of immigrants from neighboring Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Uganda; plus Asian and Indo-European languages. Although Swahili, the indigenous lingua franca, facilitates broad cross-linguistic communication, most of its African speakers learn it informally as an L2, used principally for interethnic communication. For these Swahili speakers, the value of the language is mainly functional and the way it is spoken is not important as long as communication is accomplished (Scotton 1979:111). As a result, contact-induced interactions in residential areas, schools, markets and workplace have produced variedly complex Swahili varieties in the city.

The Swahili variety that is distinctly identifiable with Nairobi is Sheng. A mixed code that relies on Swahili for structure and a variety of local and foreign languages for lexis (Abdulaziz, 1997), Sheng is similar, but not identical, to other emergent urban codes in other African cities such as Tsotsitaal in Soweto (Makhudu, 2002), Urban Wolof in Dakar, Peul in Yaounde, and Sango in Bangui (Leigh, 1994). The uniqueness of each urban code is shaped by individual social setting and circumstances of the language contact situation.

The present study focuses on Kinoki, a nonstandard Swahili variety spoken by homeless youth and other members of the street community in Nairobi. A derivative of Sheng, Kinoki serves specific functions related to the necessities and hazards of street lifestyle.

Characterized by innovative borrowings, coinages, and vocabulary transformations, it is intended to obscure in-group activities and intentions from non-participants of street life. Kinoki also facilitates identity construction, reinforces interpersonal relationship, and is a solidarity marker within the larger community of street people, i.e. beggars, hawkers, watchmen, prostitutes. Of greater importance to this study, however, is the apparent creative use of language by this socially marginalized community, to redefine a stigmatized lifestyle and to ameliorate referents of street activities otherwise defined pejoratively by society.

The analysis draws on data collected through participant observation, spontaneous discourses and an interactive survey over a period of two years. Two samples of Nairobi dwellers aged 12-18 years participated in the study. The first is a group of twenty street children proficient in Kinoki, and living in the streets and rehabilitation centers. The second comprised of eighteen schoolchildren who spoke Sheng as their first language. Social workers who have earned the trust and confidence of the street community provided valuable assistance in sampling and interviews.

Results show that the street community avoid using pejorative terms referencing street life, but instead create terms that ameliorate the harsh conditions of their lifestyle. They will also show that a symbiotic relationship exists between Sheng and Kinoki, particularly as regards lexical change. Beyond the apparent homogeneity of the well documented urban code, Sheng, are varieties and sub-varieties shaped by in-group needs and motivations that warrant further investigations.

#### References

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