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POPULARITY OF SHENG TO THE GRAMMATICAL ACCURACY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN KENYA

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ABSTRACT

Sheng, a hybrid language combining English, Swahili, and local dialects, is widely used among urban youths, particularly school-going students. This language serves as a means of identification, secrecy, and socialization, influencing the students' English grammar usage. While numerous studies have explored the effect of Sheng on native and official languages as well as societal perceptions, there has been limited research on its influence on the learning of English grammar in public secondary schools. Therefore, this paper focuses on the contributing factors to the widespread use of Sheng and subsequent poor performance of English grammar, in public secondary schools at Roysambu Sub-County in Nairobi County, Kenya. Universal Grammar Theory of Second Language Learning by Chomsky (1985) is used as an analytical tool. The research aims to determine how the popularity of Sheng influences students' grammatical usage in English, examine its effect on grammar performance, and evaluate its contribution to poor grammatical competence among learners in public secondary schools. The findings reveal that school location and student's social background lead to the spread of sheng in the learning institution. This leads to a negative attitude towards English grammar hence poor performance. The findings hold significance for the Ministry of Education and public secondary principals in identifying causes of the widespread use of Sheng in learning institutions, leading to poor performance in English grammar. Additionally, the findings provide a foundation for future studies and inform curriculum developers in devising strategies to address the prevalent usage of Sheng in learning institutions.

KEYWORDS: *Sheng, English grammar, secondary school, grammatical competence*

1. INTRODUCTION

The English language is a vital tool for communication and is widely used in various sectors in Kenya. However, the pervasive use of Sheng' (a hybrid language that combines different local languages with English) has posed challenges to the grammatical accuracy of English among students in public secondary schools. Mazrui (1995) defines Sheng' as a hybrid linguistic code that originated in Nairobi during the 1960s and 70s. Githiora (2002) further characterizes it as a Swahili-based patois influenced by multiple languages, while Wairungu (2014) refers to it as a versatile language. Sheng, a hybrid linguistic code that combines elements of English and Swahili, originated in the outskirts of Nairobi city in the 1950s. Over time, it has evolved and gained popularity among Kenyan youths, particularly students. Initially used for communication, Sheng found widespread usage among hip-hop artists, contributing to its spread beyond urban areas as explained in Erastus et al. (2023). Sheng's influence grew further when it was used in Kenya's broadcasting cooperation, with radio presenters incorporating Sheng phrases into their shows as noted in Mukasa (2022), which postulates that Sheng has become prevalent in media houses across the country. While Sheng draws heavily from Swahili in terms of grammar, syntax, and vocabulary, it also incorporates words from other local languages such as Gikuyu, Luhya, Dholuo, and English. This unique language has fostered the formation of a new social group and community in Kenya, with the use of Sheng serving as a defining characteristic of the group members' identity and social belonging.

According to Mazrui (1995), language is an influential symbol of identity, and Sheng's role in shaping social group membership is significant. Abdulaziz and Osinde (1997) note that Sheng originated as a basic code used by youth as an in-group marker and a tool to exclude older generations from their conversations. This exclusivity has contributed to Sheng being seen as a secret language understood only by those familiar with its structure and meaning. However, Sheng is also stigmatized, as Momanyi (2009) observes, being associated with marginalized individuals and societal misfits. Despite this stigma, Sheng continues to thrive and evolve, reflecting the dynamic nature of language and its role in shaping social interactions and identity formation. Kioko (2015) suggests that Sheng may have originated as different varieties in different residential estates in the Eastland regions of Nairobi. Each variety, such as the one spoken in

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Kaloleni estate versus Bahati estate, is believed by its speakers to be the most authentic form of Sheng. Since there is no standardized form of Sheng, each variety is considered correct in the eyes of its speakers. However, the school plays a crucial role in the social development of a child and should prioritize the use of grammatical English over Sheng. Students should be guided towards proper English usage to excel academically, and ample learning environment should be provided to support their journey towards improving their grammar skills.

In a classroom setting, where students come from diverse backgrounds, the need for communication and interaction leads them to adopt a common language that suits their needs, often opting for Sheng. The desire to communicate in Sheng, however, can distract them from using grammatically correct English, thus affecting their proficiency in the language. According to Abdulaziz and Osinde (1997), Sheng originated from the deviant behavior of youth living in slum estates in Nairobi such as Eastland. To create a communication code that only the members could understand, they devised Sheng. The social environment plays a significant role in the use of Sheng, as individuals strive to fit in and feel accepted and comfortable. Therefore, it is necessary to research the influence of Sheng in the use of grammatical English to guide students toward success.

Literature review

School-going students' constant use of sheng greatly impacts their grammatical use of English in communication and speech. They incorporate these words into their conversations and speech, creating a unique blend of languages. However, this constant use of sheng can hurt students' grammatical use of English. Mazrui (1995) examines the formation and use of Sheng in different contexts through code-mixing and code-switching. The findings show that the main languages used in the formation of sheng vocabulary are English and Kiswahili, along with native languages, to create specific dialects of Sheng. However, the current research focuses on how students use words coined from other languages in their daily activities within an official school setting and how this affects their grammatical use of English.

Furthermore, exposure to Sheng in daily activities can limit students' vocabulary in English. Momanyi (2009) investigates the effects of sheng in the teaching of Kiswahili in Kenyan schools. She claims that the similarities in structure and lexicon between Sheng and Kiswahili can affect students' ability to learn Kiswahili. This means that students may rely heavily on Sheng rather than expanding their English vocabulary. As a result, their communication in Kiswahili may be more limited compared to students who do not speak Sheng. Despite attempts by the national government and education stakeholders to limit the use of Sheng in official settings, it has still found its way into Kenyan classrooms. Exposure to Sheng through local television and radio programs can have a lasting effect on student's performance, as they tend to identify with the characters who use Sheng. In this regard, Momanyi did not address the issue of grammaticality due to students' exposure to Sheng, which is the focus of this article. Similar challenges may exist when learning English grammar, as Sheng often deviates from standard grammatical rules. Students who consistently use Sheng to explain concepts in English may make major grammatical errors that impact their overall communication skills.

Kariuki and Githui (2001) claim that sheng influences word formation processes and patterns in speaking and writing. Students tend to truncate final syllables and add coined syllables, altering the meaning of words. This alteration of words can change their meaning and often leads to grammatical errors. For example, a student may use a Sheng that is not acceptable in grammatical writing, affecting their choice and use of vocabulary in composition writing. Students may also use words that are not acceptable in grammatical writing, affecting their choice and use of vocabulary in composition writing. Students who use Sheng to explain concepts in English often make major grammatical errors. Additionally, their vocabulary may be more limited than those who do not speak Sheng as the research seeks to investigate. Sheng' has gained popularity among Kenyan youth. It is important to understand how the use of Sheng' affects the learning and usage of the English language in formal educational settings.

The Theory of Universal Grammar

This article adopts the Universal Grammar Theory proposed by Chomsky (1985). This theory suggests that humans are born with an innate ability to acquire language. The theory also posits that all human languages share a common underlying structure, which Chomsky refers to as universal grammar. Universal grammar is an inherent feature of the human brain, enabling children to learn any language they are exposed to. Children are equipped with an innate grammatical framework that guides language learning, making the process more efficient and less reliant on external stimuli. Hulin and Na (2014) explore the application of Chomsky's universal grammar in second language acquisition. In their study, they focus on the acquisition of English articles (a, an, the) by Mandarin-speaking learners. The theory of universal grammar is also relevant to analyze the influence of Sheng' on the grammatical accuracy of the English language this paper addresses.

In the context of English language learning in Kenya, students who are exposed to Sheng' may apply some of its unique features and constraints on English grammar. This theory is used to consider the influence of Sheng' on aspects of English language acquisition. Sheng' may incorporate different phonetic sounds and patterns that may impact the pronunciation of English words. Students who frequently use Sheng' may struggle with English phonetic rules, leading to inaccuracies in pronunciation. The theory of universal grammar provides a framework to analyze the influence of Sheng' on the grammatical accuracy of the English language in secondary schools in Kenya.

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2. MATERIALS AND METHOD

Descriptive research design was used with qualitative and quantitative approaches in data collection and analysis. This was carried out at Roysambu Sub-County, Nairobi County in Kenya. This area was chosen because it has an accessible number of students speaking Sheng. The target population consisted of 17 school principals, 68 teachers of English, and 600 students from form 3 to form 4 in public secondary schools at Roysambu Sub-County in Nairobi County, Kenya. The research employed a simple random sampling technique, where each member of a population had an equal and independent chance of being selected for a sample. This allowed ease of selection, reduced bias, and transparent as well as reproducible data. 50% of the total targeted population was used which is 356 respondents. (9 principals, 34 teachers of English, and 313 students). Questionnaires and unstructured interviews were used to collect data. Content validity was used to evaluate how well questionnaires and interviews covered all relevant parts of the construct it measured. Additionally, a likert scale was used to measure the degree of agreement between the respondents. Strict adherence to anonymity was assured to the respondents selected for the study. Further, cross-examination was done to examine the accuracy, competencies, and identity of items that were answered wrongly after the collection of data. The qualitative data collected was analyzed qualitatively using content analysis based on implications and meanings ruled out in the respondents' information. Alternately, quantitative data was analyzed by the use of various statistics including measures of central tendency and dispersion. The data was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics through the research questions which sought to establish the influence of Sheng on the performance of English grammar.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section contains the analysis and interpretations of the descriptive research findings. The aim is to determine the influence of Sheng on students' English grammar in public secondary schools in Kenya. Frequencies and percentages are used to display the results which are presented in tables and charts.

Response Rate

From the 356 selected respondents who were all drawn from 9 public secondary schools in Roysambu Sub-County, Nairobi County, a total of 327 responded, forming a response rate of 91.9%. This is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Respondent's response rate

Category	Administered	Returned	Percentage
Principals	9	7	77.8%
Teachers	34	20	58.8%
Students	313	300	95.9%
Total	**356**	**327**	**91.9%**

Table 1 shows that out of the 356 questionnaires administered majority, 327 (91.9%) returned the questionnaires. The researchers managed to interview 7 school principals, 20 teachers, and 300 students. Berg (2005) states that a response rate of 70% and above is good. Therefore, the questionnaires' return rate was commendable because the researchers were able to contact most respondents.

Popularity of Sheng' in Kenyan Secondary Schools

Data was collected and analyzed following the possible factors that can contribute to the use of Sheng in secondary schools in Kenya. These were geographical factors, socialization tools, and school culture. To establish this, teachers and students were issued questionnaires regarding the school location and social background of the students.

Table 2.

Teachers' Response

Factors	Number of teachers	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Social background of the students	20	1	5	4.00	1.076
school location	20	2	5	3.90	.912

The table shows that the overall mean obtained from the social background of the students is 4.00 with Std. deviation of 1.076. The school location is 3.90 with a standard deviation of 0.912. This means that the social background of the students and the school location strongly influence the use of Sheng in school.

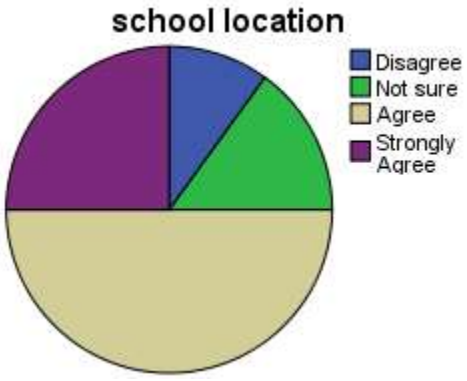
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Table 3
Frequency Table for School Location

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Disagree	2	10.0	10.0	10.0
Not sure	3	15.0	15.0	25.0
Agree	10	50.0	50.0	75.0
Strongly Agree	5	25.0	25.0	**100.0**
Total	**20**	**100.0**	**100.0**	

Table 3 shows the frequency table of respondents on school location. The scale ranged from 1-5; 1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Not Sure, 4= Agree and 5= Strongly Agree. Most of the respondents agreed that the school location with a frequency of 10 (75%) influences the use of Sheng and those who disagreed had a frequency of 2 (10%). The respondents who were not sure had a frequency of 3, representing 15% of the respondents who filled out questionnaires. This is presented in a pie chart as shown.

Figure 1.



The frequency table and pie chart show the respondents' responses regarding the influence of school location on the use of Sheng. According to the table, most of the respondents (75%) agreed that school location influences the use of Sheng. This suggests that students believe that the environment in which their school is located can affect their language choices, including the use of Sheng, which can influence their proficiency in English grammar. This is in line with Chomba (2013) which focuses on the influence of Sheng on the performance of Kiswahili composition in selected schools in Nairobi. The research finds that students in urban areas, particularly in Nairobi, are more likely to use Sheng. In this paper, we argue that this increased usage of Sheng correlates with a higher likelihood of incorporating Sheng structures into formal English grammar. On the other hand, a smaller percentage of respondents (10%) disagreed that school location influences the use of Sheng. This suggests that some students may not see a direct connection between their environment and language choices.

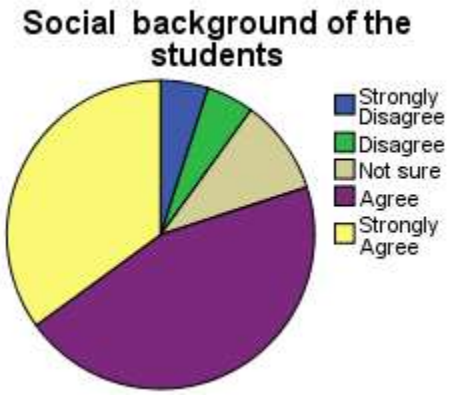
Table 4
Frequency table for social background of the students

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Disagree	1	5.0	5.0	5.0
Disagree	1	5.0	5.0	10.0
Not sure	2	10.0	10.0	20.0
Agree	9	45.0	45.0	65.0
Strongly Agree	7	35.0	35.0	**100.0**
Total	**20**	**100.0**	**100.0**	

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Table 4 shows the frequency table of respondents on social background of the students. The scale ranged from 1-5; 1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Not Sure, 4= Agree and 5= Strongly Agree. Most of the respondents agreed that the social background of the students with a frequency of 16 (75%) influence the use Sheng and those who disagreed had a frequency of 2 (10%). The respondents that were not sure had a frequency of 2 representing 10% of the respondents who filled questionnaires. This is presented in a pie chat as shown.

Figure 2



The data from Table 4 suggests that a majority of the respondents (75%) agreed that the social background of students influences the use of Sheng. This indicates that students' upbringing, cultural environment, and social interactions play a significant role in their adoption and use of the Sheng language. The results suggest that a majority of the respondents recognize the influence of social background on the use of Sheng which can influence the English grammatical accuracy of students using Sheng. This is in support of Barasa & Mous, (2017) claiming that Sheng serves as an identity marker for the urban youth in Kenya. Consequently, the youth English language draws upon Sheng and urban English slang.

Student's Response

Table 5

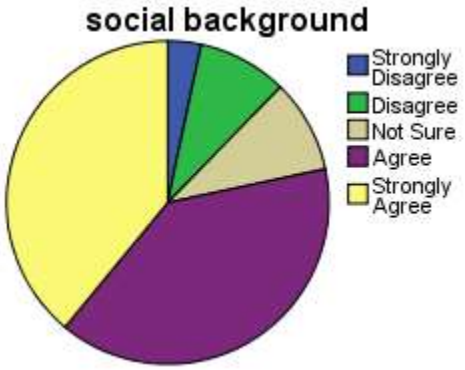
Frequency of social background of the students

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	10	3.3	3.3	3.3
	Disagree	27	9.0	9.0	12.3
	Not Sure	28	9.3	9.3	21.6
	Agree	118	39.3	39.3	60.9
	Strongly Agree	117	39.0	39.0	**100.0**
	Total	**300**	**100.0**	**100.0**	

Table 6 shows the frequency table of respondents on the social background of the students. The scale ranged from 1-5; 1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Not Sure, 4= Agree and 5= Strongly Agree. Most of the respondents agreed that the social background of the students with a frequency of 235 (78.3%) influenced the use of Sheng' and those who disagreed had a frequency of 37 (12.3%). The respondents who were not sure had a frequency of 28 representing 9.3% of the respondents who filled out questionnaires. This is presented in a pie chart as shown.

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Figure 3



Based on the frequency table provided, it seems that a majority of the respondents agreed that the social background of the students influences the use of Sheng'. This suggests that the social background of students may influence their language choices. This can lead to the influence of Sheng' on the accuracy of students' English grammar. For instance, if students predominantly interact with peers who use Sheng as their primary language, they may be more likely to adopt Sheng' as well. This is in agreement with Iraki (2004) who posits that the use of Sheng' goes beyond linguistic boundaries. Iraki further claims that Sheng fosters social cohesion and a sense of belonging among urban youth, enabling them to navigate the complexities of urban life. This can result in a decline in the proficiency in English grammar of Kenyan secondary school students.

The Influence of Sheng on the Grammatical Accuracy of the English Language

From the findings, we establish that the popularity of Sheng' may negatively influence students' English language proficiency. Students may prioritize learning and using Sheng over proper English, resulting in a decline in grammatical accuracy and proficiency. Sheng' is a dynamic and evolving form of urban slang primarily used in Kenya, especially among the youth. Its unique vocabulary, grammar, and syntax make it appealing to young people who want to identify with a specific social group or subculture. This is in support of Abdulaziz and Osinde (1997) who explain the evolution of Sheng' as an in-group youth marker. While it is understandable that students would be interested in learning and using Sheng' as an expressive form of communication, it can influence proper English grammar usage. English is a global language and is essential for academic and professional success. It is the language of instruction in most educational institutions and is widely used in business settings. Students can prioritize learning and using Sheng' over proper English. Such a preference can potentially cause a decline in grammatical accuracy and proficiency in written and spoken English.

Ogechi (2005) postulates that the grammar of Sheng' differs significantly from that of standard English. This means that students who primarily use Sheng' may struggle to use proper English grammar in their academic or professional work. Furthermore, the influence of Sheng' can also affect students' overall language development. Students who focus mainly on Sheng' may not be exposed to a wide range of vocabulary and formal language usage necessary for academic success. This is in support of Kariuki and Githui (2021) who suggest that students who frequently use Sheng' tend to have difficulties in mastering standard English grammar rules. This can lead to limited language skills in areas such as writing, reading comprehension, and formal presentations. To address this concern, educators should promote a balanced approach to language learning. Students need to be proud of their native language and cultural identities, including Sheng, but also to understand the importance of mastering proper English grammar and vocabulary. Encouraging students to read widely in English and practice writing in a formal and structured manner can help improve their English proficiency.

4. CONCLUSION

From the discussion, we conclude that the increasing popularity of Sheng' can affect students' attitudes towards English grammar. Students may develop a negative perception of English grammar as tedious or unimportant due to their proficiency in Sheng'. The impact of Sheng' on students' attitudes towards English grammar is an important aspect to consider. Further, the increasing popularity of Sheng' and the frequent code-switching between Sheng' and English may lead students to perceive English grammar as tedious or unimportant. When students are more proficient in Sheng' and use it extensively in their daily communication, they may view English as a foreign language that requires additional effort to master. Consequently, English grammar with its complex rules and structures may seem irrelevant or less significant compared to the practicality and familiarity of Sheng'. This negative attitude towards English grammar can result in a lack of motivation to learn and improve their grammatical accuracy in English. Students may prioritize communication over grammatical correctness, relying on code-switching or Sheng' elements to convey their message rather than adhering to English grammar rules. Moreover, the perception that English grammar is unimportant can also stem from societal and

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cultural factors. Students might perceive Sheng as a more culturally relevant and authentic language, while English may be seen as associated with formal education or foreign influences. This mindset can further discourage students from placing importance on mastering English grammar.

5. RECOMMENDATION

Given the findings, we suggest that it is important to highlight the significance of English grammar in various aspects of academic and professional development for students. Teachers can emphasize the importance of grammatical accuracy in English by showcasing how proper grammar enhances clear communication, promotes critical thinking skills, and improves overall language proficiency. Further, teachers should create engaging and interactive lessons that showcase the practical application of English grammar in real-life situations that can help students recognize the relevance and value of mastering it. Educators can also use examples or discussions highlighting the potential negative implications of incorrect grammar usage, such as misunderstandings, miscommunications, or reduced credibility in professional contexts. This can help students understand how grammar plays a crucial role in effective communication and success in various areas of life.

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