

# Understanding the Horn of Africa

## *Sheng – Youth and Language in Kenya*

Learning Objective: To gain insight on how language, identity and culture intertwine and change through learning about Sheng.

### Background:

Sheng is a hybrid language that developed among youth in Nairobi perhaps as early as the 1960s. Grammatically inspired by Kiswahili, it draws on many other languages spoken in Kenya. Identified with youth, it is constantly evolving and can be locally specific. Many code switch between Sheng, Swahili, English and other languages and using each intentionally. Originating in the estates of Nairobi and specifically the [Eastlands](#), its use is now widespread among elite, families and the media. It can be a marker of ‘exposure’ and has spread beyond Nairobi and even beyond Kenya. Some have been concerned that the use of Sheng is at the expense of literacy and fluency in Swahili, English and other Kenyan languages.

### Watch

A range of videos about or using Sheng can be found online. Here is just a sampling:

Ruvaga, Lenny, and Mary Muturi. *Kiswahili Sheng*. a24media, 2012 April 12.

<http://youtu.be/64vxt-ZMOzI>

KTN Kenya, *Sheng vs Kiswahili*, 2011 July 17. <http://youtu.be/gHgDlp6ixXo> (*News Report In Swahili*)

Kibera Kid Music Video in Sheng-Swahili, [HotSunFilms](#), 2007 October 30.

<http://youtu.be/AWERctYRK5s> .

### Listen

*GHETTO RADIO 89.5 FM*, <http://www.ghettoradio.co.ke>.

“In February 2008 the Ghetto Radio Foundation set up a radio operation in Nairobi, Kenya. The station transmits on 89.5FM to the wider area of Nairobi and has become one of the country’s most popular youth stations.”

Live stream: <http://www.thisisafrika.me/radioplayer/live/ghettoradio>

### Read:

Read one or more of the following or select others from the bibliography below.

Githiora, Chege. “Sheng: Peer Language, Swahili Dialect or Emerging Creole?” *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 15, no. 2 (2002): 159–181.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1369681022000042637>.

Karanja, Peter N. “Kiswahili Dialects Endangered: The Case of Kiamu and Kimvita.” *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 2, no. 17 (September 2012).

[http://www.ijhssnet.com/journals/Vol\\_2\\_No\\_17\\_September\\_2012/11.pdf](http://www.ijhssnet.com/journals/Vol_2_No_17_September_2012/11.pdf).



- Mutiga, Jayne. "Effects of Language Spread on a People' Phenomenology: The Case of Sheng' in Kenya." *Journal of Language, Technology & Entrepreneurship in Africa* 4, no. 1 (May 3, 2013): 1–15. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/jolte.v4i1>.
- Ogechi, Nathan Oyori. "Sheng as a Youth Identity Marker: Reality or Misconception?" In *Culture, Performance & Identity: Paths of Communication in Kenya*, 2:75, Art, Culture & Society. Twaweza Communications, Nairobi, Kenya (2008).  
[http://books.google.com/books?id=nCo\\_XzQZDD0C](http://books.google.com/books?id=nCo_XzQZDD0C)

### Discuss:

There are many points of discussion. Here are just two suggestions:

1. In what ways does Sheng signify the power of youth culture in Kenya?
2. Compare Sheng to Ebonics, Spanglish or other forms of [American English](#)
  - See Joshua Katz' work on regional dialect variation in the continental US: <http://www4.ncsu.edu/~jakatz2/project-dialect.html>
  - With many maps: <http://spark.rstudio.com/jkatz/SurveyMaps/>
  - Walter Hickey wrote an article about this for Business Insider: "22 Maps That Show How Americans Speak English Totally Differently From Each Other." *Business Insider*, June 5, 2013. <http://www.businessinsider.com/22-maps-that-show-the-deepest-linguistic-conflicts-in-america-2013-6>.

## Sheng Bibliography

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[http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Sheng\\_slang&oldid=558246680](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Sheng_slang&oldid=558246680).
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## Swahili Language Resources

1. Classic textbook: Hinnebusch, Thomas J, and Sarah M Mirza. *Kiswahili, msingi wa kusema kusoma na kuandika = Swahili, a foundation for speaking, reading, and writing*. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1998.
2. Online Swahili materials from the Five College Center for the Study of World Languages
  - <http://langmedia.fivecolleges.edu/swahili/index.html>
  - [http://langmedia.fivecolleges.edu/mentored\\_swahili.html](http://langmedia.fivecolleges.edu/mentored_swahili.html)
3. Foreign Service online course materials: <http://www.livelingua.com/fsi-swahili-course.php>

### Other links

- African South of the Sahara Selected Internet Resources: Language page <http://www-sul.stanford.edu/depts/ssrg/africa/lang.html>
- H-Swahili Network on Swahili Language and Culture <http://www.h-net.org/~swahili/>
- Swahili Links from Pennsylvania State University: <http://complit.la.psu.edu/swahili/internet.html>

