It's kuloo tu: recent developments in Kenya's Englishes

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On identity construction in multilingual environments

Introduction

In most areas where English is spoken today, it is part of a multilingual context. English is one component of the sociolinguistic profile of many nations. In nations where English is a mother tongue or first language for the majority of the population, other speech communities contribute further languages to the linguistic environment. And in contexts where the majority speak a language other than English, it may serve as a language of administration or as a medium of instruction in the educational domain. Over the past few decades, speech communities have also increasingly been influenced by languages usually spoken outside the community. A particular case is the spread of English via music and films through the radio, television, and the internet. As a result, English is part of the linguistic repertoire of many nations and the individuals living in them.

These multilingual contexts have in common the fact that individuals can draw on the various languages to meet their diverse communicative needs and to construct their identities. This article describes how this may result in changes to the English language and even in the emergence of new linguistic forms, with particular reference to the post-colonial nation of Kenya.

English and multilingualism in post-colonial spaces

As a result of earlier Western colonial expansion and the colonial powers' imposition of borders which often respected neither cultural nor linguistic realities, post-colonial nation states – particularly in Africa – have highly heterogeneous populations. Often, these nations have established a multilingual language policy, which promotes several languages as national or official languages or as media of instruction, to accommodate linguistic diversity. Kenya, for example, has chosen to use Kiswahili as the country's national language, and English serves as the official language of administration, law, and higher education.

Part of the population commands both Kiswahili and English, albeit often at different levels of competence. For others, multilingualism in Kenya may involve several local languages, for example Maasai and Kikuyu. In all individuals' linguistic performance, language contact finds expression in the form of borrowing and transfer of not only lexical items but also in sound patterns and grammatical structures which are transported from one language



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doi:10.1017/S0266078409000029
English Today 97, Vol. 25, No. 1 (March 2009). Printed in the United Kingdom © 2009 Cambridge University Press

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078409000029 Published online by Cambridge University Press

into the other. This is also the case in Kenyan English (KenE), which is characterized by a reduced vowel system, a tendency of diphthongs to be replaced by monophthongs, and a merger of the sounds /r/ and /l/ to a sound intermediate between the two at the pronunciation level (cf. Trudgill & Hannah, 2002; Schmied, 2004a). As regards grammar, speakers of KenE tend to extend the use of the progressive, to omit articles, to use female and male pronouns indiscriminately and to employ prepositions differently from speakers of other varieties of English. These characteristics reveal that KenE is 'adapted to local or regional linguistic conditions' (Bokamba, 1982:92). The English language has been indigenized, or 'altered so suit its new African surroundings' (Achebe, 1975:62), and it acquires cultural identity through Africanization (Kachru, 2001:523).

Besides the development of indigenized Englishes, language contact also results in code-switching, code-mixing, and in the development of mixed languages. Code-switching and code-mixing involve alternating between two or more languages for social, situational, or stylistic purposes. By contrast, mixed languages are contact languages in which mixing is obligatory rather than optional (cf. Muysken, 2001:481) and in which 'the presence of elements from two languages marks the resulting language as reflecting a double identity' (Muysken,2001:482; see also Golovko, 2003:191). They are created by bilinguals and arise 'within a single social or ethnic group because of a desire, or perhaps even a need, for an in-group language' (Thomason, 2001:198). As Webb & Kembo-Sure (2000:41) point out, they develop 'mainly due to intense language contact, which results from urbanization and industrialization, as well as migrant labour'.

In Kenya, two mixed languages, Sheng and Engsh, have arisen over the last decades. The next section serves to locate the two within the linguistic ecology of Kenya.

The linguistic ecology of Kenya

Kenya's sociolinguistic profile

According to Webb & Kembo-Sure (2000:47), Kenya has a population of approximately 24 million and is home to 42 languages, which largely correspond to the 40 ethnic groups plus Kiswahili and English. Several of these languages have a sizeable number of speakers, for example Kikuyu (spoken by 20% of the population), Dholuo (spoken by 14%), Luluya (spoken by 13%), Kikamba (spoken by 11 %), Kalenjin (also spoken by 11%), Ekigusi (spoken by 6.5%), and Kimeru (spoken by 5% of the population). Kiswahili has a long history as a lingua franca in the area, and it had already been present as such for several centuries, when English was introduced to the area in the nineteenth century (cf. Michieka, 2005:176). At that time, British settlers arrived, following the establishment of trade with the region. As a result, English was used in administration, in law and in the many institutions of education which the British established (cf. Zuengler, 1982; Mazrui & Mazrui, 1996; and more recently Michieka, 2005).

For many Kenyans, this array of languages implies that they can potentially draw on all of these various resources to conduct their communicative activities depending on situational demands. Below is a quote from Webb & Kembo-Sure (2000:100), who envisage what this might look like for one young Kenyan:

> An urban Kenyan boy will wake up on a Sunday morning and use his mother tongue (maybe Kikuyu, Dholuo, Suba, Maasai, or Tugen) with his family, go out to buy bread from a nearby shop and use Kiswahili to negotiate the purchase with the vendor. On his way home from the kiosk, he meets a friend with whom he might speak Sheng, or a mixture of Sheng, Kiswahili, and English. After breakfast, he goes to church, where the service may be in English or Kiswahili, depending on the socio-economic status of the family and the surrounding community. At school the next day, he speaks English in all his lessons except for the Kiswahili lesson. On the playground, depending on the type of school he attends, he uses Kiswahili and English. If it is a high-cost private school, the usual playground language is English, whereas at the less expensive public schools it may be either English or Kiswahili. When he goes to the headmaster's office, the boy may use Kiswahili to address the secretary, but he will certainly speak English to the headmaster.

However, it is largely privileged individuals who have a high command of several languages, including English and the different forms it assumes in Kenya but also abroad. They can choose from a wide spectrum of linguistic features and select those features which

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078409000029 Published online by Cambridge University Press

they consider suitable to construct their identities. But this is not the case for large parts of the population. The linguistic repertoire of a Kenyan individual 'is largely determined by the speaker's ethnic background (which usually correlates with regional origin), social and economic status, and educational achievement' (Skandera, 2003:18). Webb & Kembo-Sure, (2000:47) estimate that approximately 16% of Kenyans know English as a second language. At the same time, English is 'assumed to be of little importance' (Skandera, 2003:19) for those 90% of the Kenyan population who live outside of the larger Kenyan cities, although Kenyans who have attended school will generally have some knowledge of English, since the educational system implies the use of English as a medium of instruction from year four onwards. By many, then, 'English is acquired only through the educational system' (Kanyoro, 1991:415; Michieka, 2005), which implies that for most Kenyans access to English is restricted to the input they receive from their teachers.

Overt prestige is associated with KenE, the endonormative variety of English which has developed in Kenya (cf. Kembo-Sure, 1991). Besides this indigenized form, American English has started to play an increasingly important role, due to its presence in the media and in popular culture. Especially in the urban centers of Kenya, the younger generations identify with what might be called a global hip-hop culture which is transmitted via music and also by the promotional videos accompanying the individual songs, and by interviews with hip-hop and rap artists. Lately, Americanized forms – or even forms which originate from African American Vernacular English – have also been found to occur frequently in SMSes (cf. Thurlow, 2003; Frehner, 2008). Besides English, members of the affluent middle class also encounter a variety of other non-local languages, not only through the media but also through deliberate, instructed language learning.

In addition to the languages that have already been mentioned, the above quote introduces a code called Sheng, one of the two mixed languages which exist in Kenya today.

Sheng

Sheng emerged in the Eastern suburbs of Nairobi, probably in Kaloleni or Kibera (Mazrui, 1995:174), approximately forty years ago (Abdulaziz & Osinde, 1997:47). It has been described as slang or code-switching (Mazrui, 1995), as a pidgin (Githiora, 2002 and Shitemi, 2002, but see Abdulaziz & Osinde, 1997, who reject this view) and as a youth language (e.g. Abdulaziz & Osinde, 1997), and it has been related to the secret language used by pickpockets in the 1930s (Mazrui, 1995). Over time, Sheng has spread to most other urban areas of Kenya. It is spoken and understood by people younger than forty of all social classes, including university lecturers and students. Although public opinion regarding Sheng is frequently negative, rappers enjoy great success in all social classes when performing in Sheng (cf. Githiora, 2002). Several FM radio stations broadcast in Sheng, and the code is making its way into literature, as for example in the magazine *Kwani?*, in which young up-and-coming writers publish their work.

Linguistically, the grammatical structure of Sheng is based on Kiswahili, and its lexical items originate in Kiswahili, several indigenous Kenyan languages (e.g. Dholuo or Kikuyu) and English. The following example gives a first indication, of what Sheng looks like.

1 Woyee tichee usiniruande – buu ndio ilinileitisha. (Abdulaziz & Osinde, 1997)

The example translates as 'Please teacher, do not beat me – I am late because of the bus.' It contains three lexical items which originate in English but have been altered: *tichee*, which derived from 'teacher', *buu*, altered from 'bus', and *leit* in *ilinileitisha* from 'late'[1]. As Kang'ethe-Iraki (2004:57) explains, these alterations result from the fact that Sheng adapts borrowed items to the Kiswahili syllabic structure. As a consequence, *bike*, taken from English, becomes *baiki*, and *chokra*, taken from Hindi, changes to *chokora*. But frequently, 'borrowings can also be modified either by reducing the number of or inverting the syllables. For instance, *Basketball, Nairobi, zamani* (early), and *Safari* give rise to *bake, Nai, zamo* and *safo*.' The words *zamo* and *safo* also point towards a further characteristic of Sheng: as Abdulaziz & Osinde (1997:57) point out, '[s]ome of the most preferred sounds are *o*, *sh*, *ny*, *e*, and *I*', which give Sheng its uniqueness. 'The sound o, perhaps from Dholuo influence, is quite common; it normally simplifies difficult pronunciation and gives words a Sheng quality.' Inversion is more subtle. *Mother* was

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Table 1: Lexical strategies in Sheng[2]

Sheng flavours Strategy & example	original word	meaning
Semantic change *dedi*	*dead*	'finish'
Clipping *tizi*	*practice*	'physical exercise in sports'
Syllable Inversion *dika*	*card*	'card'
Sound additions *oparo*	*para para* (Kiswahili)	'road'

matha in the 60s; then in the 90s, another transformation occurred and *matha* mutated to *masa*, and finally to *sama* (Kang'ethe-Iraki 2004:57).

Table 1 presents a number of Sheng words which indicate the particular flavour achieved by strategies such as clipping words, inverting syllables, and adding sounds/letters to individual lexemes.

At the levels of morphology and syntax, Sheng also makes a number of changes to the system of its underlying language Kiswahili. Kang'ethe-Iraki (2004) points out that verbs are frequently not marked for the past tense and that relative pronouns are often left out. The example below reveals that, nonetheless, many of the Kiswahili morphemes are retained in Sheng, for example the possessive pronoun *wa* and the tense-aspect markers *li* (describing past events) and *na* (indicating that an event is happening at speech time)[3].

2 Teacher wa-mine ndiyo a-li-kuwa
Teacher of mine DEM he-TAM-be
My teacher is the one
a-na-tu-tell hizo storo.
he-TAM-us-tell those stories.
who was telling us those stories.
(Kang'ethe-Iraki, 2004:63)

The widespread use of Sheng has recently influenced speakers in the upper social classes and affected the way they use English in another mixed code.

Engsh

A second mixed form of language, Engsh, has evolved more recently in the affluent Westlands and Parklands areas of Nairobi[4] and is spoken by speakers who have a different social and economic status than those who use Sheng. 'The African children in these areas have English as their first and primary language of daily communication, at home, at school, and in social domains' and Engsh serves as 'a class marker, which draws a distinction between itself and the lower-class Sheng' (Abdulaziz & Osinde, 1997:54). As the map in Figure 1 shows, the areas are somewhat distant from each other. Whereas Kibera and Kaloleni are typical slum areas, characterised by a lack of sanitation and electricity, poor housing conditions, poverty and unemployment, Westlands and Parklands are home to Nairobi's affluent middle class, well-appointed detached houses and abundant green areas. See Fig. 1.

Different from what is the case with Sheng, the syntactic structure of Engsh is English (cf. Abdulaziz & Osinde, 1997; Nzunga, 2002; Ogechi, 2005), although there is a tendency to creatively alter the word order. This is the case in example (3), which is an exchange of greetings, taken from Abdulaziz & Osinde (1997:58f.), where the initial question has a declarative word order.

3 You are how?
'How are you?'
It's kuloo tu.

The example also illustrates some of the particularities which characterize Engsh at the lexical level: similar to Sheng, Engsh incorporates lexical items from other local languages, but also from American slang and various other sources. In (3), the item *kuloo* developed from *cool*, and *tu*, meaning 'just fine', has been borrowed from Kiswahili. Whereas example (3) is easily understandable due to its mainly English lexical material, example (4) is somewhat more difficult to process: it translates as 'Come for me tomorrow in your car so that we can go for a drink at the Carnivore.'

4 Si you akina pass for mwa morrows in your wheels, we do a swallow at them vuras.[5]

Akina is Kiswahili and refers to the company one is keeping, *mwa* means 'me', the item *morrows* 'tomorrow', and *them vuras* refers to the Carnivore Restaurant, a popular restaurant and nightclub on the outskirts of Nairobi. The sentence reveals some of the alterations that speakers make when they combine lexical

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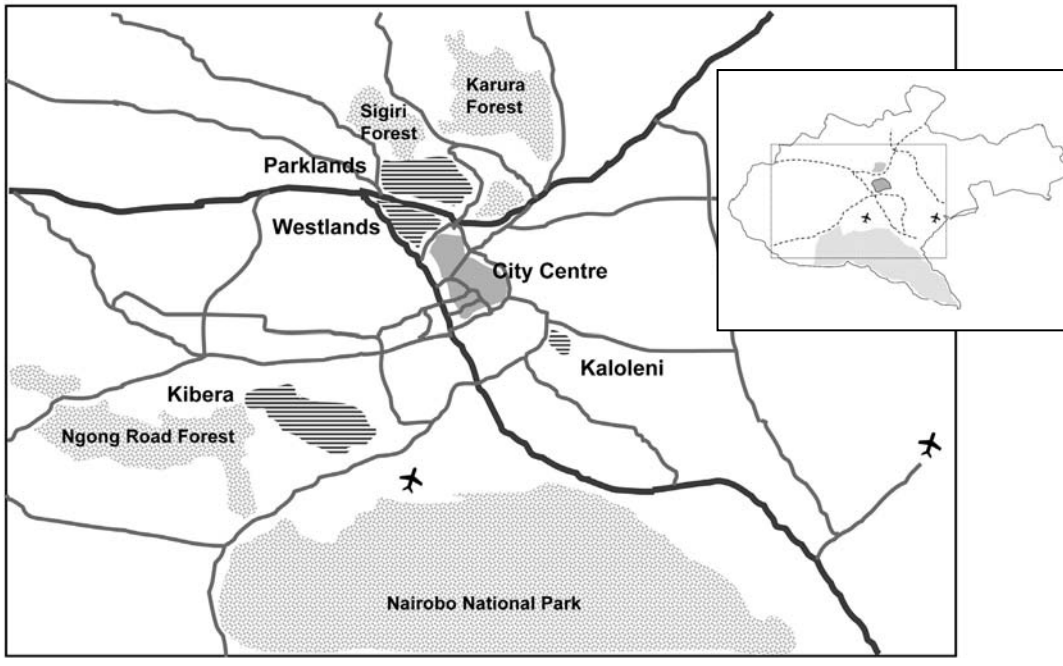


Figure 1: Location of Kibera, Kaloleni, Parklands, and Westlands in Nairobi

items and grammatical structures of different languages into Engsh. The originally English word *tomorrow* is abbreviated on the one hand, and at the same time the letter <s> is added at the end of the word. *Wheels* has undergone semantic change from referring to 'a circular frame of hard material that may be solid, partly solid, or spoked and that is capable of turning on an axle' in Standard English towards denoting 'a car' in the example. Similarly, the noun *swallow* has semantically changed from 'an amount that can be swallowed at one time' to 'a drink'.

In the following, I will describe how the different strategies are used in three weekend supplements to Kenya's quality newspapers. The *Daily Nation*'s[6] weekend edition, *Sunday Nation*, includes a pull-out called *Buzz*, and *The Standard*[7] distributes the four-page pull-out *Teen Talk* as well as its weekend magazine *Pulse*. Engsh does not occur in *Buzz* which, however, has Sheng on its back-cover page. *Teen Talk* has both Sheng and Engsh on its back-cover page. *Pulse* has Engsh both in a column called *Smitta Smitten's* on page 5, as well as in the various photo stories on page 7. The rest of the texts in these pull-outs and magazines are orthographically in Standard British English.

The cartoon presented in Figure 2 has been taken from the July 15, 2007 issue of *Teen Talk*. It illustrates the function which Engsh assumes in these papers: it is not merely used for entertainment purposes, but also when serious topics are addressed – in this case the difficulty graduates face to meet the demands of future employers as expressed in companies' job advertisements.

The sentences in the cartoon draw on various languages. The headline is a phrase in Kiswahili (*hakuna kazi bila* meaning 'there is no job without…'), and an insert which zooms in on part of the job advertisement the character Nancy is contemplating is in Standard English. The main message, however, is presented in sentences which draw on English for their grammar and most of their vocabulary, but which also incorporate non-English elements.

In the clause *Nancy has been applying for jobos*, the lexical item *jobos*, meaning 'jobs', is a word which was originally borrowed from English into Sheng. To create the special Sheng character, the letter <o> was added, and the item has been taken into Engsh. Borrowing is also evident in the second half of the sentence, *she thinks she won't pata one coz she's bila experience* (which means 'she thinks she won't get one because she's without experience'). Here the words *pata* ('get') and *bila* ('without') have been borrowed from Kiswahili.[8]

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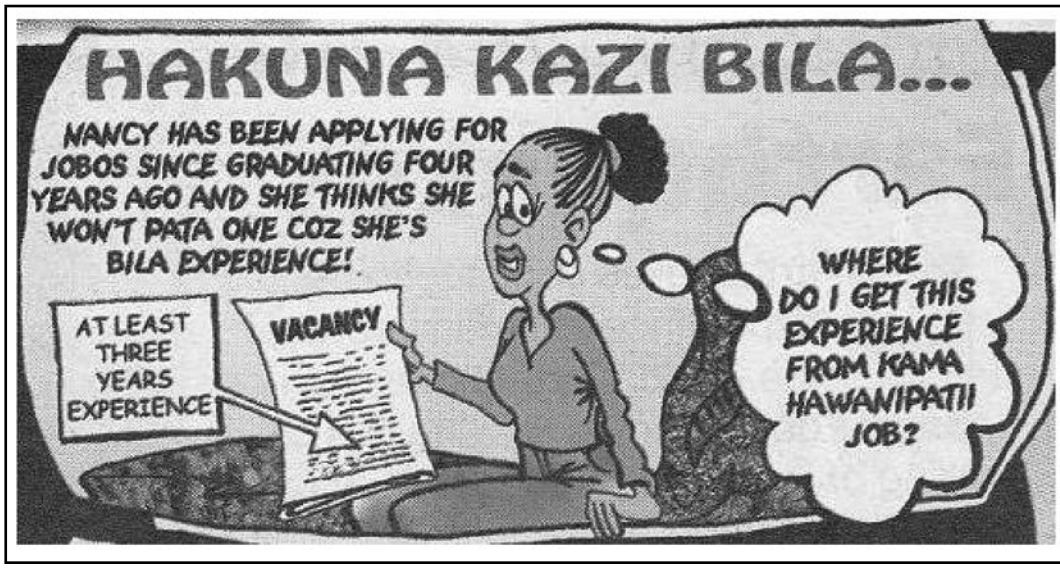


Figure 2: Cartoon in *Teen Talk*

Besides borrowing from Kiswahili and Sheng, a number of further characteristics occur at the lexical level as the following example illustrates. There are abbreviated lexical items (*compe* for *competition*), mock phonology as in *diss* and *nex*, influence from SMS writing in the form of numeral use (*b4*) and a particular use of the Slavic suffix *–ski* in *Russki*.

5 Speaking which, watu wengi ('a lot of people', Kiswahili) have been sayin' I toa maoni ('offer my opinion') on the Penny Karibe / Lilly Muli 'Whose Hotter? Debate!' P'sonally, I think the compe should be 'tween our Mwanaishs Chidzugs and Metro TV's diss bunny Myra, but let's hold the thought till I'm safely ensconced in Russki nex month b4 I unsleash my full list.

Pulse, Friday, May 4, 2007

Examples (6) to (11) are further examples which illustrate these different features.

6 Like, yaani, mumejuana kutoka zamani, y'know what I mean?
7 The smitta waz into this Sheila huko kedo standard 3, when our paros would take us guys swimming.

Example (6) illustrates borrowing from Kiswahili: *yaani, mumejuana kutoka zamani* translates into 'in other words, knowing one's husband since long.' The sentence in (7) also contains a borrowed item from Kiswahili: *huko kedo*, meaning 'since', and it further includes a lexical item taken from Sheng: *paros* ('parents'). *Paro* once illustrates the tendency of Sheng items to end in <o>. In example (7) we also find an instance of mock phonology in *waz*, and we find additional instances of this characteristic feature in (8), with *whaccha* and *lookin*.

8 Whaccha lookin 4ward to, tonight?

Example (8) furthermore displays the use of numerals in the item *4ward*. Examples (9) and (10) indicate that Engsh borrows from various languages. *Mamasitas* is Spanish and *you'se* is frequently encountered in Black Vernacular English. Both borrowings indicate that Engsh users are influenced by language use in America – probably through the vast presence of American English in the media. Additionally, (11) displays a peculiar use of the Slavic suffix *–ski*, apparently without any particular meaning attached to it here in *eveski*.

9 She's a lil shy, one of our marketing mamasitas tole me.
10 Like you'se a fan of her fanny.
11 I decided to take a nap in Oduor's car before the yet-to-unfold events of eveski.

Table 2 presents an summary of the different features which characterize Engsh.

Besides the various strategies which characterize the use of Engsh at the lexical level, the publications also contained instances of some

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Table 2: Lexical strategies in Engsh

Engsh flavours Strategy	original word	meaning
Borrowing *nada*	*nada* (Spanish)	'nothing'
Mock phonology *juzz*	*just*	'just'
Abbreviation *fab*	*fabulous*	'fabulous'
Numerals *b4*	*b four*	'before'
Sound additions *capo*	*couple*	'couple'

of those grammatical particularities which have been observed with KenE (e.g. by Schmied, 2004b). In *Don't she know I'm getting down wid Odiero?* the auxiliary is not used in concord with the subject *she*. Also, there is an omission of the article in *Let me show you bongo-fea-va-move for getting a Pwani redy*. On the other hand, there was:

- no indiscriminate use of male and female pronouns, which would be more typical of KenE as opposed to general slang,
- no particular use of prepositions, no unmarked adverbs, no characteristic patterns of phrasal and prepositional verbs different from those used in British Standard English,
- no characteristic patterns of verb complementation as in *Would you mind to tell us uh a brief background about ICAC and uh what uh are you going to discuss in Arusha,*
- no extended use of the *–s* plural to include non-countables, e.g. *luggages* or an extended use of the progressive form as in *It is really very toxic to the user because it produces a lot of smoke heavy smoke and it is smelling*.

For this reason, I would propose that the few grammatical particularities rather reflect non-standard language use in general.

Although the above examples document that Engsh is a form of language which incorporates many diverse features to express its users' identity, these are used at very different frequencies. An analysis of the different magazines has revealed that some features occur at a very high ratio, whereas others appear to be only of marginal importance. Figure 3 indicates the share of the different particularities within the total of those features found in the individual magazines.

In total, there were 260 instances of the different features. *Teen Talk* and *Pulse* have fairly high amounts of borrowing from Kiswahili, which is not as pronounced in the *Smitta Smitten* columns. The share of borrowings from

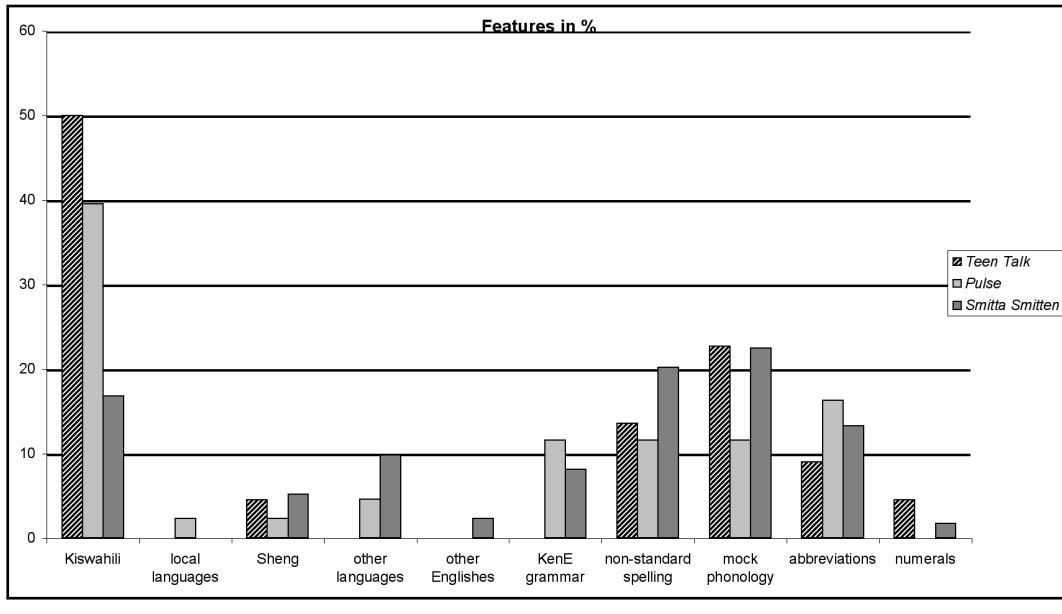


Figure 3: Engsh features in selected magazines

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Sheng and local languages is comparatively low in all publications. In the *Smitta Smitten* column and in the rest of *Pulse*, borrowings from non-local languages even outnumber them. They include, for example, *trez cool* (*trez* derives from French *très*), *funnyski*, or *headski* (in these two items, the Slavic morpheme *-ski* does not add any meaning). At times, several phenomena combine into hybrid constructions. For example *ma-celebz* ('celebrities') involves mock phonology as well as the use of the Kiswahili plural morpheme *ma*. Or in the sentence *Circute hands Joel his mic and promptly forgets that he's supposed to be performing, since he's busy katikaring with Miss Manyake*, where *katikaring* is a combination of a Sheng word *katika* ('dance') and the English progressive morpheme *–ing*.

At the same time, strategies which have been found to characterize adolescent writing across the world (cf. Thurlow, 2003 and Frehner, 2008) feature comparatively prominently, albeit at different ratios across the three publications: uses of non-standard spelling, mock phonology, abbreviations and numerals.

Conclusion

The use of Engsh in various Kenyan newspaper supplements document that language mixing has established itself as an accepted strategy for expressing one's identity linguistically. Engsh users draw both on local as well as global (often influenced by American English) resources to construct the code which they use to reflect their hybrid identities. As Muthwii & Kioko (2004:8) have explained, particularly urban communities 'have evolved the ability to tell apart the varieties of the languages within their repertoire and to use them to communicate particular wants using particular varieties'. In Kenya, it seems that the users of Engsh use the code and its various lexical components to reveal, on the one hand, their affiliation with Kenya through including large amounts of lexical material borrowed from Kiswahili and, on the other hand, their openness towards the world, particularly towards American culture. In addition, the very low amount of borrowing from local Kenyan languages might indicate that the users of Engsh construct their identities as 'young, modern city-dweller with no links to traditional African culture' (cf. Webb & Kembo-Sure, 2000:37). In sum, given the hybrid make-up of Engsh, the code seems to indicate a 'glocal' identity, which combines local, modern Kenyan and global belonging.

Notes

1 The word form *ilinileitisha* is composed of six morphemes: *i* (it) – *li* (past) – *ni* (me) – *leit* (late) – *ish* (causative) – *a* (final vowel) and can be translated as 'it made me late' (cf. Bosire, 2006:187).
2 Examples have been taken from Abdulaziz & Osinde (1997) and Kang'ethe-Iraki (2004).
3 Cf. Kang'ethe-Iraki (2004:63 & 61). DEM stands for demonstrative and TAM for tense-aspect marker.
4 The map in Figure 1 indicates the location of Kibera, Kaoleni, the Westlands and Parklands.
5 This example has been taken from Abdulaziz & Osinde (1997:55).
6 The *Sunday Nation* is the weekend edition of the *Daily Nation*, Kenya's leading independent daily newspaper.
7 *The Standard* is Kenya's oldest newspaper.
8 Also, alterations have been made to the word *because*: it has been abbreviated and its orthography has been changed to resemble the pronunciation, resulting in the form *coz*.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078409000029 Published online by Cambridge University Press