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A Case Study of the Stigmatized Code Sheng: The AUYL Syndrome

Philip W. Rudd

Abstract

African urban youth language (AUYL) syndrome is a sociolinguistic phenomenon. Its most distinguishing symptom is the investment of African youths in a stigmatized variety to the exclusion of more prestigious languages. AUYLs have long stumped educators, policy makers and teachers of standard languages, spawning cursory descriptions, numerous complaints, and pleas for eradication. A case study of the symptoms associated with the stigmatized code Sheng (Nairobi, Kenya), reveals generalities for other AUYLs. Detractors worry that embracing the variety will damn the youth to failure in examinations, to denial of further educational attainment, to the loss of life-long goals, such as social mobility, and perhaps even to criminality. This article examines the concept of the culture-bound syndrome—a collection of social symptoms that reflect cultural fears—and the manner in which it may be applied to Sheng and other AUYLs. An interdisciplinary exploration of colonial history, language ecosystem, language ideology and conventional wisdom provide a rationale for a sociolinguistic defense. The data disclose that the symptoms reveal more about the plaintiff than the defendant. Overcoming what is but a standard language ideological bias requires Africanists in all academic disciplines to legitimize AUYLs through continued research.

I. Introduction

A generation past the decade of independence for many African countries, mass media reports¹ have surfaced revealing complaints about and derision for African Urban and Youth Language (AUYL)—an unwieldy acronym but one that rolls off the tongue when metathesized as [əjul].² Increasing numbers of researchers since Kiessling & Mous and the first AUYL conference at

the University of Cape Town in 2013 are focusing on these vernaculars.³ However, though descriptions of the languages and their speakers are growing, little research has concentrated on complaints about these varieties. If indeed a social epidemic is occurring across the continent of Africa, as denouncements of AUYL suggest, then an analysis of the phenomena should illuminate explanations from theory and research in sociolinguistics.

In particular, opposition to Sheng, an urban vernacular of Nairobi, Kenya, can be compared to a culture-bound syndrome involving the fears of a middle class that is burgeoning like many others in the expanding cities of Africa. Those who condemn AUYL varieties treat them as though they are not typical of human behavior. As this paper attempts to demonstrate, however, AUYL speakers are not actually threatening; rather, they are themselves being marginalized. In addition, though some complaints have implied that AUYL usage affects social mobility, no evidence of this connection has been disclosed.⁴ Students may be failing exams, but reasons other than non-standard usage may be to blame.⁵

This article has the following structure. Section II presents a framework for understanding a culture-bound syndrome, including a justification for a sociolinguistic defense of AUYL in section II.A and an explanation of language ideology in section II.B. An exploration of the linguistic ecosystem in section III considers conventional wisdom in III.A and shared social reality in III.B. Section IV refutes the impertinence of youth, while section V airs a few final thoughts on limitations and implications of this study.

II. Conceptual Framework

Although AUYLs have sparked study in the linguistic and education communities, little attention has been given to discrimination against their speakers and possible violations of Linguistic Human Rights (LHRs). The notion of LHRs revolves around the relationship between particular minority groups and their associated mother tongues.⁶ The arguments pro and con LHRs are beyond the scope of this paper and will not be dealt with here. This paper, does, however, embrace the stance of Stroud,⁷ who offers the concept of ‘linguistic citizenship,’ which extends the idea of citizenship to language by expanding its meaning to include “belonging,

equal protection of the law, equal rights in employment, parenting, access to social welfare provision and education.”⁸ This study seeks to expand this perspective to speakers of AUYLs by presenting a summary and rebuttal of the various criticisms of Sheng.

Psychiatry defines “culture-bound syndromes” as follows: “mental conditions or psychiatric syndromes whose occurrence or manifestation are closely related to cultural factors and which thus warrant understanding and management from a cultural perspective.”⁹ This paper has the title it does for it is indeed about a syndrome, a collection of conditions or signs that indicate the existence of a particular social condition. The following quotation from a descriptive work on an urban language discloses the typical attitude towards Camfranglais (Cameroon), Nouchi (Ivory Coast), Sheng (Kenya), Tsotsitaal (South Africa), and other AUYLs: “Some think it was born as a kind of secret language, mainly used by thieves and little criminals (crooks, pickpockets, pimps, small smugglers, etc.) in order not to allow policemen, or coppers, to understand them,” explains Santipolo.¹⁰ Dismay at the implausibility of the negative descriptions of Sheng and its speakers (quotes from Ayelabola, Micheni, and Mutiga convey the caustic nature of these well) and the incongruity of those perspectives with my own experiences drove me to the keyboard.

A. Sociolinguistic Defense

This article presents a possible explanation for this negative collective behavior. The *principle of error correction* provides my main motivation and explication. As Labov advised, “A scientist who becomes aware of a widespread idea or social practice with important consequences that is invalidated by his own data is obligated to bring this error to the attention of the widest possible audience.”¹¹ Moreover, having spent the academic year 2005-2006 working with AUYL speakers and collecting data on Sheng, I felt compelled by the *principle of debt incurred*. Labov elaborates: “An investigator who has obtained linguistic data from members of a speech community has an obligation to use the knowledge based on that data for benefit of the community, when it has need of it.”¹² Similarly, the *principle of linguistic gratuity*, described as follows, further drove me: “Investigators who have obtained linguistic data from members of a speech community should actively

pursue ways in which they can return linguistic favors to the community.”¹³ Presently the question of what sociological view could take into account the phenomena and explain the collective behavior toward Sheng comes to the fore.

The discussion that follows is of necessity interdisciplinary, relying on and referencing research literature from the disciplines of anthropology, history, linguistics, psychology, and sociology. Also inspiring are the fascinatingly analogous and historically curious episodes of social delusions,¹⁴ ranging from sightings of monsters like the Sasquatch¹⁵ and the Jersey Devil¹⁶ to mass hysteria over devil worship,¹⁷ sex,¹⁸ and ghost gassers like the Phantom Anesthetist.¹⁹ All these phenomena may be explained by the concepts of “mass social delusion”²⁰ and “culture-bound syndrome.”²¹ Even as it is obvious that complaints about non-standard language varieties reflect the social anxieties of the complainer, the causes of the syndrome may lie elsewhere. The complainer is like a patient who describes symptoms that bother her; the linguist must be the health-care practitioner who reads the medical signs in order to diagnose the condition.

B. Language Ideology

As urban usage is widely associated with criminality, it is no surprise that AUYLs have caught the attention of authorities. The response to this usage would appear to be the crucial first step to limiting outrage against speakers. From the language practitioner’s perspective, the important point to note about any response is that the AUYL is frequently framed as the product of criminal activity rather than as a linguistic phenomenon. To advance understanding of the linguistic phenomenon, the allegations themselves need to be framed as misperception. Even the ‘educated’ frame AUYL usage as the product of criminal activity. In fact, as will be discussed in the section about conventional wisdom for AUYL contempt [III], this construal reflects a misunderstanding.

The basic scenario that emerges from media accounts has left a gap of how else to explain the AUYL.²² Critics of AUYL claim that speakers are immoral. One perceived motive for Sheng is the “divided house” interpretation. “Sheng can only serve the purpose of fun and nothing else. A dividing language can never become a unifying force,” admonishes Ayelabola.²³ According to

this explanation, gangs of anarchic, unruly adolescents abuse language and employ it to engage in unsavory and illicit activities. Another perceived underlying motive for speaking Sheng is to keep parents and authorities in the dark. A Kenyan university student confessed: "My father used to call it a gangster code and always discouraged us from using it saying it would contaminate the English language taught in school and lower our performance in language exams."²⁴ Reflecting the attitude that the use of African Urban Youth Language represents persons who have lost their self-worth, Mutiga laments: "This is a significant role in the breakdown of many social structures and can be observed in scenes where, for example, crime has increased to very high levels in Kenya, especially in Nairobi and its peripheries, and it is on record that the culprits are usually young people in their 20s and 30s.²⁵ Rape of older women and very young girls, as well as homosexual behavior, has also escalated in a society where it did not exist." Such a stance reflects a nostalgic attitude for a Golden Age of Africa, a time before cities, colonialism, and immorality.

More puzzling, this attitude reveals an ignorance about human behavior. For instance, though a layperson can accept that the Church has never encouraged pedophilia, media coverage of scandals might make it challenging to convince an outsider otherwise.²⁶ Increased use of Sheng represents a cultural shift, and with such change comes requisite fear and resistance. Although such beliefs may sound delusory, it is often those who are educated who are the most convinced by them. From their perspective, belief in the criminality of Sheng is no more deluded than belief in the right to live in a moral society. In addition to specific beliefs about perceived immorality in usage, there is also a more general construction of covert prestige. For example, urban youth of the lower half of the socioeconomic hierarchy of Nairobi, mirroring the Belten High 'burnouts' of Detroit, appear to reject unaffordable schools as centers of social life and identity; rather, they base their identities and social networks in the *mitaa* or ghettos where they live, thereby driving urban variant usage.²⁷ In a similar fashion, allegations of criminality from the middle class may reflect a perception that this rejection is more immoral than any specific act the youth engage in.

Even though a comprehensive discussion of morality and ethics of language ideology is beyond the scope of the present

paper, it is important to emphasize the extent to which being an upright, moral citizen is crucial to the recently educated and emergent denizen of the middle class.²⁸ Regardless of whether one believes any particular language usage is moral, social expectations about uprightness constitute consensual realities that propose means for speaking morally (i.e., adherence to standard usage) and motivation for stigmatization (i.e., punishing the immoral).²⁹ Correspondingly, a desire to disparage non-standard users is a consequence of the self-perceived moral individual's participation in the maintenance of a society's consensual reality. This sense of a fundamental connection between speaking the standard and being moral promotes accusations of criminality, reflecting a new African reality of urban ambivalence and conflict.

III. The Ecosystem of Language

The AUYL syndrome manifests in urban centers, where the "sociolinguistics of globalization" and "superdiversity" of contemporary Africa occur. First, let us consider the city an ecosystem of languages.³⁰ Since our sample case is from Kenya, where wildlife tourism is the largest source of foreign currency income, we may consider the Nairobi linguistic ecosystem a national park. In a game park, of course, there are flora, fauna, and predators. One may also find the *mganga*, or witch doctor, one of the predators.³¹ In the urban ecosystem of language, no licensed practitioners exist, yet the jungle is full of bonesetters, herbalists, high priests, general-purpose *waganga*, whom Bolinger lumps together and calls shamans, who diagnose illnesses as follows: (a) As Kamau cannot read and write properly, "the craft is not being learned"; (b) Since the unlearned are corrupting the language, "the craft is in peril."³² These literary *waganga* preach a dialectology of the standard, an ideology of the standard.

It should be clear then that dialects can be labeled "non-standard" only if another variety has already received recognition as the standard.³³ Milroy puts forth the argument in his 2001 paper that for most educated people, who happen to have a culture of a standard language and who happen to worry about usage, "*no justification is needed*" because "this is just how it is."³⁴ It is taken as common sense, the conventional wisdom. Average ordinary people are unsure about their usage; therefore, they freely admit making

mistakes and not being competent standard language users. Having an understanding that the average ordinary person admits to needing “privileged authorities” (i.e., the literary *waganga*) to guide her usage is essential to grasping the full consequences of the standard ideology.³⁵ This ideology holds that native speaker intuition is irrelevant, and only a precious few have privileged access to the mysteries of language. This perception “tends toward the primordialization of languages . . . which are thus conceived as authentic, timeless, ‘stable depositor[ies] of culture.’”³⁶ Language becomes a sacred cultural possession and a matter that is not only social but also moral; in other words, language usage becomes a measure of morality. Such a moral stance creates a blind side.

A. Conventional Wisdom

In the comfortable, complacent world of the middle class, what is right and wrong has been established so that members may continue their lives oblivious to inconvenient fact. Not long after Kenyan independence in the 1960s, only three percent of Nairobi residents were born there.³⁷ Most residents at that time straddled work life in the city and home life in the country. Dwellers of the city were there temporarily to earn income to invest back upcountry. For many, the rural home provided moral sanctuary, while the urban workplace was hardly the locus of community. As Lonsdale observed, “Jomo Kenyatta generally referred to Nairobi, or indeed, any town, as *Gecombaini*, a place of strangers.”³⁸ Kenyatta’s leadership position endowed him with the privilege to dictate the conventional wisdom of the people.

Nevertheless, many straddlers became successful in this strange environment, whereas others became stranded in the no man’s land of the informal settlements. As the rural home areas were seen as the source of community and morality, changing understandings of what it meant to live in town, to be an urbanite, and to embrace modernity were hidden beneath a façade of rural probity. As Galbraith warns, “the hallmark of conventional wisdom is acceptability. It has approval of those to whom it is addressed. . . . It serves the ego: the individual has the satisfaction of knowing that other and more famous people share his conclusions.”³⁹ Though it must be comforting, convenient, and simple, the conventional wisdom does not have to be true.⁴⁰ As colonialism

was coming to an end, the British government, as a result of the Mau Mau State of Emergency, developed an appetite to end the “colour bar” and stabilize the indigenous population by creating an African middle class. “White-collar workers developed a so-called ‘karani complex’ (*karani* = clerk) differentiating the educated (*asomi*) from the uneducated,” attests Odhiambo.⁴¹ These elites disfavored Swahili “as the language that colonialists used to communicate with servants” and favored English because it was required for most of the higher-level civil service positions.⁴² The consequence was that a class society among indigenous Kenyans emerged with a white-collar elite at the top, poised to take the reins at the transfer of power. However, though post-Independence Nairobi’s population increased by 5.8% annually, the new African overlords did less to provide housing than their imperial predecessors, resulting in Kenya’s capital becoming a town surrounded by a city of shanties.⁴³ In what is not just an African phenomenon, powerful people, “fail to respond to other people’s suffering . . . for the simple reason that they do not perceive that suffering.”⁴⁴ Despite being rather more stranded in the shanties, less educated in the schools, and utterly invisible to the prosperous straddlers, the residents of the slums were and continue to be the largest proportion of the urban populace.⁴⁵ According to Amnesty International, “Nairobi’s slums are the consequence of both explicit government policy and decades of official indifference.⁴⁶ In particular, informal settlements were excluded from . . . planning and budgeting . . . as if they did not exist.” Though invisible, this niche provides “a third hybridized space,”⁴⁷ in which the residents had to create “the values, rules, and definitions.”⁴⁸

The AUYL then appears “. . . to derive from a shared social experience of living in a postcolonial urban environment. In order to survive in the African city, one has to improvise, and this improvisation extends to language use.⁴⁹ Becoming urban means being able to adopt a new identity.”⁵⁰ Neither constrained by the traditional nor oppressed by the imperial,⁵¹ the young urbanites design their own destiny. Put another way, “Kenyan urban youth have negotiated a third space position between the local and the global in . . . the blurring of the boundaries. . . . Sheng is used by these youth to internalize and express a culture that has defined them,” postulates Karanja.⁵²

Now though the AUYL is the consequence of multitudes of people sharing the same social experience of living in a post-colonial African metropolis, though this shared social reality has become a cultural legacy, and though the urban vernacular has been given market recognition, it has no institutional recognition.⁵³ This denial has profound implications for educational policy.⁵⁴ On September 13, 2007, the UN General Assembly adopted a Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, in which Article 14 acknowledges the right of indigenous peoples to education in their own languages.⁵⁵ Despite African educators' awareness of LHRs, few authorities acknowledge that native speakers of AYULs exist.⁵⁶ Sure and Ogechi expend 176 pages to drive home how important native language instruction should be to language policy of the education system of Kenya, yet not one mention is made of Sheng or its native speakers.⁵⁷

B. Shared Social Reality

Nairobi witnessed a surge in population growth after independence and with the dissolution of restrictions against indigenous Kenyans living in the city. This growth remained mostly unnoticed because it occurred in the slums. Ngau details that the “number of dwellings in informal settlements thus rose from an estimated 500 in 1952 to 22,000 in 1972, and multiplied to 111,000 in 1979.”⁵⁸ The point is that most of the slums that exist today were created after the transfer of power. Githinji calculates that more than 68% of the nation's total household income is controlled by a mere 10% of the population, making Kenya a nation of millions of beggars and few millionaires.⁵⁹ Today's yuppies are the grandchildren of earlier migrant workers, who educated their children in the mission schools during the final 20 years of colonialism.⁶⁰ The mission schools operated as a “transmission belt—or at least reinforcer—of middle-class norms” to establish the colonial ideal of a new African class system, in which the children's tribal language would have been at least recognized if not employed in the teaching of the standard.⁶¹ By contrast, children born in the slums since Independence have not been allowed to attend mission schools. Even if some of these children have received some formal education, no one has recognized their first language, Sheng.

Educators tracking students' performance on the national and standard examinations have begun to notice that performances were not matching desired expectations.⁶² Eventually, they will have to acknowledge that another language might be causing interference and begin to investigate urban vernaculars that "have been rendered spoken languages in search of legitimacy."⁶³ The case of the AUYL presents a paradox. Skeptics can reasonably ask: If there are multitudinous urban econiches incubating these urban vernaculars and multitudes of native speakers, why have they not made themselves known? Where is everybody? The simple answer is that everybody is here. The educated choose to ignore them because native speakers are like the "lumpen elements" of the African metropolis, who called the early Nairobi, white-collar wannabes "the not so flattering sobriquet of 'tai-tai'—wearers of ties."⁶⁴ As the identity of AUYL speakers is new and their ancestry is traceable to some known tribe or tribes, they are inappropriately categorized and reduced to "an ethnic essentialization"; or even as "a challenge to the socioeconomic and ruling elite."⁶⁵

There may be a perception that the only reason urban dwellers claim a new identity is to wage a class war on the established elites. Kenya has a record of anti-urban history, the evidence for which is frequently ignored. In 1960, a young, educated Luo man asked the crowd at Nairobi's then-largest-ever political rally, "Whose Kenya is it?"⁶⁶ The answer may have discomfited more than the white settler and thus influenced Tom Mboya's fate. As Lonsdale ponders, "Coming to more recent, post-colonial times, one cannot help but wonder whether one of the reasons for Tom Mboya's assassination in 1969 was that, for an otherwise rurally-based political elite, he had a disturbing ability to appeal, trans-ethnically, to Nairobi's townsmen and women."⁶⁷

IV. Impertinent Youth

These common AUYL syndrome symptoms signal a clarion call and reflect a belief that the precious heritage of the standard has to be protected from corruption and decay.⁶⁸ Educated people in particular have a social obligation because to resist corruption is a moral duty. Therefore, though the elite may recognize on some level that the urban poor suffer as a result of their actions, they are

able to justify such suffering as accomplishing the greater good. People who have a higher sense of power experience less distress and less compassion and exhibit greater autonomic emotion regulation when confronted with another participant's suffering.⁶⁹ That is, the affluent find it easy to turn a blind eye to the needs and sufferings of the needy. As Piff et al. reason, "increased resources and independence from others cause people to prioritize self-interest over others' welfare and perceive greed as positive and beneficial, which in turn gives rise to increased unethical behavior."⁷⁰ That the children in slums might make language choices that affect the entire community has gone unnoticed because the views of the youth and the poor are often not taken seriously.

Numerous are the tales of immigrants who speak a native tongue to their children, who themselves respond in a non-heritage language. Many are the parents who complain about the language spoken by their children's generation. Indeed, the influence of peers on child language acquisition is profound. Thousands of normal-hearing children, being raised by profoundly deaf parents, appear to learn fluent English in a manner that can only be described as the same as that of a seven-year-old immigrant boy who within a year began speaking the non-heritage language of his new home.⁷¹ It is a myth that parents teach their children language. Children acquire their language in large part from their peers.⁷² Youth are not naturally impertinent. Instead, of all the ages of human beings, the youth appear to be the most desirous of conformity. The label of impertinence comes from the shock that they wish to conform to their peers, not their elders.

Now we have a clue as to how and why the scions of the elites and the bourgeoisie of Africa are beginning to speak AUYLs. It is markedly surprising how closely juxtaposed these affluent, urban youth are to the speakers of AUYLs. Consider the layout of Kenya's capital. K'Akumu & Olima point out, "An aerial view of the city of Nairobi reveals the mismatch in human settlement—a phenomenon that borders on the bizarre. . . . virtually all the upmarket and middle-class houses share boundaries with the slums,"⁷³ University campuses in Kenya often border on the bizarre as well, with informal settlements, or *sukuma wiki* villages,⁷⁴ popping up next to campuses to provide inexpensive restaurant food, illicit brew pubs, and various other cheap and/or

illicit products and services that university students might be willing to spend their boon and other monies on.⁷⁵

Furthermore, for three years in Nairobi, Spronk studied a cohort of young urban professionals who are distinguished by a cosmopolitanism that appears to be the direct consequence “of the introduction of the multiparty system of 1992.”⁷⁶ As these Nairobi yuppies are furthering their education or building their careers, they sometimes slum for a while in the “traditionally lower-class neighborhoods” of Eastlands, where they have exposure to Sheng, “part of their commitment to overcome ‘tribalism,’ perceived as one of the worst sociopolitical maladies in postcolonial Kenya.”

The language that is the most cosmopolitan turns out to be the language that is stigmatized by the elite and the bourgeoisie. If privileged children are learning Sheng, they do so not so they can communicate with *ayahs*, *fundis*, *manambas*, and *wauza oduko*.⁷⁷ On the contrary, they learn it from *ayahs*, *fundis*, *manambas*, and *wauza oduko* so they too can communicate with each other in the language that has the most urban prestige.

V. Final Thoughts

The typical profile of AUYL begins within a generation after an African nation gains independence, after which there is mass migration to the urban area. Increased urban population, especially in informal settlements, brings a noticeable increase in crime. This fact alone is insufficient to explain the fear. The condition of a growing African middle class concerned with propriety and education also emerges. A member of the middle class has much political capital to gain from the promotion and perception of proper behavior. Worries (i.e., symptoms) spread when previously oblivious people suddenly begin to worry that others may look down on their language usage. Gaining impetus, the spread of such symptoms is propelled when the scapegoat cannot fight back. Though children in the informal settlements are native speakers of Sheng, they ironically have no voice in the debate. However, complainers, having identified the enemies, may relax in the knowledge that it is just to punish them. This explanation suggests that the pertinent factor is the plausibility of criminal elements in the local construction of reality and the salience of

middle-class mores that promote righteous indignation as “an idiom of distress.”⁷⁸

Accusations are a product of the individual’s engagement with the construction of a consensual reality. This sense of a fundamental connection between the upright person’s speaking the standard and being moral promotes accusations of criminality. In contrast to the righteous indignation of literary *waganga*, the explanation that should be favored by educators is that AUYLs are perfectly valid languages. The science of sociolinguistics accounts for such language stigmatization as a reflection of burgeoning bourgeois sentiment. As Mutonya asserts, “The images constructed by mainstream society to encapsulate street people and their lifestyle in a world perceived to be deviant relegates the street community to the peripheries of urban spaces and justifies the pejorative reference.”⁷⁹ Accordingly, the linguist as health-care practitioner should explain that the concept of a “culture-bound syndrome” needs its focus switched from a description of the symptoms of the defendant to those of the plaintiff. Similarly, although the syndrome is associated with African cities, reports of similar cases exist in Amsterdam, Ontario, Paris, London, and other European cities.⁸⁰ This disclosure suggests that outbreaks of disdain for non-standard language varieties could occur in the West — and they do. Typical episodes of such linguistic culture-bound syndromes involve the belief that non-standard varieties of English imply criminal behavior.⁸¹

Conceptualizing AUYL symptoms as a syndrome encourages a discussion of whether the African phenomena represent culture-specific, folk illnesses or a more universal phenomenon. Although each city has its own specific characteristics, the constructions of reality for African urbanites foster commonalities of experience that appear singular to the African bourgeoisie. Furthermore, without a standard language ideology, the AUYL syndrome breaks down. From this perspective, the current episodes of AUYL syndrome are not the consequence of unruly youths, but rather a case of the upright bourgeoisie taking up arms to defend a perceived assault to a moral and just way of life. No threat comes from those who have no class; the danger is in those who think they do. The *principle of linguistic democracy* defends AUYL. As Labov avers, “Linguists support the use of a standard dialect in so far as it is an

instrument of wider communication for the general population but oppose its use as a barrier to social mobility.”⁸²

Given that finger wagers frequently believe their accusations to be true, convincing them that language ideology is not moral will likely be somewhat unsuccessful. Rather than condemning their beliefs about social reality, a more fruitful approach might be to orchestrate a public education campaign to legitimize AUYL varieties by demonstrating that the youth exist in a culture with value and worth. Milroy emphasizes “the importance of history as a legitimizing factor.”⁸³ Urban vernaculars have remained illegitimate because research on rural vernaculars has far surpassed that of the languages of the metropolis. It was only at the end of the second half of the last century that African American Vernacular English (AAVE) acquired the attention of researchers and started down the road to legitimization.⁸⁴ All that one can do as a linguist is point this truth out and call on colleagues in other fields to continue to research, debate, and bestow “academic legitimacy” on Sheng and other African Urban Youth Languages in order that they too receive social legitimization.⁸⁵

Notes

¹ The media sensationalize societal concerns and act as “agents of moral indignation.” S. Cohen, *Folk devils and moral panics: the creation of the Mods and Rockers*, 3rd. ed. (London: Routledge 2002), 9-10. See also, M. wa. Micheni, “Sheng debate: To publish or not to publish.” *Education, The Standard*, (Wednesday, Oct. 11 2006), 4-5.

² As used here the term originates from Dr. Ellen Hurst, the principal organizer of the University of Cape Town’s 2013 African Urban & Youth Language conference, at which an earlier version of this paper was presented.

³ R. Kiessling and M. Mous “Urban youth languages in Africa,” *Anthropological Linguistics*, 46 no. 3 (2004), 303-341.

⁴ Micheni, “Sheng debate.”

⁵ A. Odour “Sheng not to blame in drop KCSE English performance, scholars claim” *Standard Digital* (Mar. 8, 2014). The Standard Group Limited. Retrieved from <http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/lifestyle/article/2000106350/sheng-not-to-blame-for-drop-in-kcse-english-performance-scholars-claim?pageNo=3>; D. Bolinger, *Language, the loaded weapon: The use and abuse of language today* (London: Longman, 1980), 49.

- ⁶ L. Wee, "Intra-language discrimination and linguistic human rights: The case of Singlish," *Applied Linguistics* 26 no. 1 (2005), 48-69; T. Skutnabb-Kangas, R. Phillipson, and M. Rannut, *Linguistic human rights: Overcoming linguistic discrimination* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1995.)
- ⁷ S C. Stroud, "African mother-tongue programmes and the politics of language: Linguistic citizenship versus linguistic human rights," *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 22, no. 4(2001), 339-355.
- ⁸ Weeks 1997 as cited in Stroud, "African mother-tongue programmes and the politics of language," 346.
- ⁹ W. Tseng, "From Peculiar Psychiatric Disorders through Culture-bound Syndromes to Culture-related Specific Syndromes," *Transcultural Psychiatry* 43, no. 4 (2006): 554-576, 554.
- ¹⁰ M. Santipolo, "On the opposite sides of the continuum: Standard British English and Cockney. A historical outline of the parallel developments of the two varieties," in *Studi Linguistici e Filologici* (2003) Online. Rivista Telematica del Dipartimento di Linguistica dell'Università di Pisa, <http://www.humnet.unipi.it/slifo/1:403-441,428-429>.
- ¹¹ W. Labov, "Objectivity and commitment in linguistic science: The case of the Black English trial in Ann Arbor," *Language in Society* 11, no. 2(1982): 165-201, 172.
- ¹² Labov, "Objectivity and commitment in linguistic science," 173.
- ¹³ W. Wolfram, "Ethical considerations in language awareness programs," *Issues in Applied Linguistics* 4, no. 2 (1993): 225-255, 227
- ¹⁴ Such a delusion is a moral panic, a "condition, episode, person or group of persons [that] emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests." Cohen, *Folk devils and moral panics*.
- ¹⁵ R. E. Bartholomew and P. B. Bartholomew, "Evaluating Bigfoot Videos as an Anthropology Teaching Aid," *Anthropology of Consciousness* 2 nos. 1-2, (1991): 34-35.
- ¹⁶ J. F. McCloy and R. Miller, *The Jersey Devil* (Wallingford, Pa: Middle Atlantic Press, 1976).
- ¹⁷ David A. Samper, "Devil Worship as a Moral Discourse on Youth Culture in Kenya" in *Facts, Fictions and African Creative Imaginations*, Toyin Falola, Fallou Ngom, and Tyler Fleming, eds., (New York and London: Routledge, 2009), 105-121.
- ¹⁸ W. Kaufman, "The Great American Sex Panic of 2017," *CounterPunch* (Nov. 22 2017), Retrieved from <https://www.counterpunch.org/2017/11/22/the-great-american-sex-panic-of-2017/>; D. M. Halperin and T. Hoppe, *The War on Sex* (Durham [North Carolina]; London: Duke University Press, 2017).
- ¹⁹ D. M. Johnson, "The 'phantom anesthetist' of Mattoon: a field study of mass hysteria," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 40 (1945): 175-186.
- ²⁰ R.E. Bartholomew, "The Medicalization of Exotic Deviance: A Sociological Perspective on Epidemic Koro," *Transcultural Psychiatry* 35 (March 1998): 5-38.

- ²¹ These terms are employed in this article to refer to “non-pathological mass adherence to a false belief” Bartholomew, “The Medicalization of Exotic Deviance,” 9. *See also*, Y.P. Balhara, “Culture-bound Syndrome: Has it found its right niche?” *Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine* 33, no. 2 (2011): 210-215. doi: 10.4103/0253-7176.92055; A. Haque, “Culture-bound syndromes and healing practices in Malaysia,” *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 11.7 (2008): 685-696; V. A. Dzokoto and G. Adams, “Understanding genital-shrinking epidemics in West Africa: koro, juju, or mass psychogenic illness?” *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 29, no. 1 (March 2005): 53-78.
- ²² Odour, “Sheng not to blame”; Micheni, “Sheng debate.”
- ²³ E. Ayelabola, “Sheng Creates More Divisions Instead of Unifying People,” Op/Ed Letter, *Daily Nation* (Wednesday, October 11, 2006).
- ²⁴ Micheni, “Sheng debate.”
- ²⁵ J. Mutiga, “Effects of Language Spread on a People’ Phenomenology: The Case of Sheng’ in Kenya,” *Journal of Language, Technology & Entrepreneurship in Africa* 4, no. 1 (2013): 1-14. Retrieved from <http://www.ajol.info/index.php/jolte/article/view/88207>: 10.
- ²⁶ T. Doyle, “Report gives short shrift to clericalism,” *National Catholic Reporter*, 47, no. 17(2011), 6; Cohen, *Folk devils and moral panics*.
- ²⁷ P. Eckert, *Linguistic variation as social practice: The linguistic construction of identity in Belten High*, (Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 2000); P. Eckert, *Jocks and burnouts: Social categories and identity in the high school*, (New York: Teachers College Press, 1989).
- ²⁸ *See*, J. Milroy, “Language ideologies and the consequences of standardization,” *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 5 no. 4(2001), 530-555.
- ²⁹ K. R. Binning, “Consensual reality,” in *Encyclopedia of deception*, T. R. Levine, ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2014): 198-200.
- ³⁰ J. Blommaert, *The sociolinguistics of globalization* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010); J. Blommaert and B. Rampton, “Language and superdiversity,” *Diversities* 13, no. 2(2011): 3-21.
- ³¹ The use of the term “witch doctor” or its Swahili gloss *mganga* is meant strictly in a metaphorical sense. The pertinent point here is that villagers with pitchforks and torches are often more monstrous than the creature they pursue. For a complex discussion of how “epistemology trumps ontology” when it comes to putative witches and victims in Africa, *see* A. Ashforth, “Witchcraft, Justice, and Human Rights in Africa: Cases from Malawi,” *African Studies Review* 58 (2015): 5-38. doi:10.1017/asr.2015.2.
- ³² Bolinger, *Language, the loaded weapon*, 2.
- ³³ Milroy, “Language ideologies,” 534.
- ³⁴ Milroy, “Language ideologies,” 535. During the question session of a presentation at the 6th Annual World Congress on African Linguistics (WOCAL 6), a member of the audience, a Professor of Linguistics from Kenya, felt compelled to stand up and proclaim that his department did not teach Sheng. One can only

imagine that this man had been admonished many times in the past for his profession not doing enough to quash troublesome urban usage.

³⁵ Milroy, "Language ideologies," 536.

³⁶ J. Fabian, *Language and colonial power: The appropriation of Swahili in the former Belgian Congo, 1880-1938* (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]: Cambridge University Press, 1986): 5; as cited in as cited in S. Makoni, J. Brutt-Griffler, and P. Mashiri, "The use of "indigenous" and urban vernaculars in Zimbabwe," *Language in Society* 36 no. 1(2007): 25-49, 26.

³⁷ J. Lonsdale, "Town Life in Colonial Kenya," in *The Urban Experience in Eastern Africa c. 1750-2000*, Andrew Burton ed., (Nairobi: British Institute in Eastern Africa, 2002): 207-222, 211.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ J. K. Galbraith, *The affluent society* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), 11.

⁴⁰ S. D. Levitt and S. J. Dubner, *Freakonomics: a rogue economist explores the hidden side of everything*, (New York: William Morrow, 2005), 90.

⁴¹ A. Odhiambo, "Kula Raha: Gendered Discourses and the Contours of Leisure in Nairobi, 1946-63," in *The Urban Experience in Eastern Africa c. 1750-2000*, Andrew Burton, ed. (Nairobi: British Institute in Eastern Africa, 2002): 254-64, 255.

⁴² D. Laitin and C. M. Eastman, "Language conflict: Transactions and games in Kenya," *Cultural Anthropology* 4, no. 1(1989): 51-72, 52.

⁴³ D.M. Anderson, "Corruption at City Hall: African housing and urban development in colonial Nairobi," in *The Urban Experience in Eastern Africa c. 1750-2000*, Andrew Burton, ed. (Nairobi: British Institute in Eastern Africa, 2002): 138-154, 154.

⁴⁴ G. A. van Kleef, C. Oveis, I. van der Löwe, A. LuoKogan, J. Goetz, and D. Keltner "Power, Distress, and Compassion: Turning a Blind Eye to the Suffering of Others," *Psychological Science (Wiley-Blackwell)* 19, no. 12 (2008): 1315-1322, 1317.

⁴⁵ "In Nairobi, Kenya," write Tooley, Dixon, and Stanfield "... about 60 percent of people live in 'unplanned informal settlements' ... [with] ... little or no public services—water, sewage, health and education." See J. P. Tooley, Dixon, and J. Stanfield, "Impact of Free Primary Education in Kenya," *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 36, no. 4 (2008): 449-469, 451.

⁴⁶ Amnesty International. *Kenya. The Unseen Majority: Nairobi's Two Million Slum Dwellers*, (London, England: Amnesty International Publications, 2009), 6.

⁴⁷ L. Karanja, "Homeless" at Home: Linguistic, Cultural, and Identity Hybridity and Third Space Positioning of Kenyan Urban Youth," *Canadian and International Education / Education canadienne et internationale*: 39 no. 2 (2010), Article 2, 2.

⁴⁸ P. W. Rudd. 2015. "Ngamia, Simba, and Mtoi: A Parable of Kenya." Paper Presented at the Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics 2013 (GURT) and the 44th Annual Conference on African Linguistics

(ACAL), convened jointly on the theme of “African Languages: Specifics and Universals” on March 07-10, 2013 in the Bunn Intercultural Center (ICC) at Georgetown University, Washington, DC, (March 08, 2013).

⁴⁹ F. McLaughlin, “Dakar Wolof and the configuration of an urban identity,” *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 14, no. 2 (2001): 153-172.

⁵⁰ Makoni et al., “The use of “indigenous” and urban,” 44.

⁵¹ As Mufwene surmises, “Only the city, in Africa at least, has come close to reducing them [ethnic languages and identities], acting like sugarcane plantations and rice fields of the Atlantic and Indian Ocean settlement colonies.” S. S. Mufwene, *Language evolution: Contact, competition and change* (London: Continuum, 2008), 217.

⁵² Karanja, “Homeless” at Home,” 12.

⁵³ A. Kariuki, F. E. Kanana, and H. Kebeya, “The growth and use of Sheng in advertisements in selected businesses in Kenya,” *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 27, no. 2 (2015): 229-246; M. Mutonya, “Swahili advertising in Nairobi: innovation and language shift. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 20, no. 1 (2008): 3-14.

⁵⁴ Makoni et al., “The use of “indigenous” and urban,” 34-35.

⁵⁵ United Nations, *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, United Nations (UN) General Assembly at the UN Headquarters (New York City, NY: United Nations Publications, 2008). Retrieved from http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf. Kenya was one of 11 abstentions (with Ukraine, Samoa, Russian Federation, Burundi, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Azerbaijan, Colombia, Georgia, and Nigeria). The United States was one of four nay votes (with New Zealand, Canada, and Australia).

⁵⁶ cf. M. Spyropoulos, “Sheng: Some Preliminary Investigations into a Recently Emerged Nairobi Street Language,” *JASO – Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford*. 18 (1987): 125-136; A. Ferrari, “Linguistic Representations of Sheng, a New Vernacular Language Spoken in Nairobi, Kenya. Unpublished Manuscript, Sociolinguistics Symposium 15, University of New Castle upon Tyne, UK. (April 01-04, 2004); P.W. Rudd, “The Ultimate Matthew Effect for Sheng,” in *African Sociolinguistics/The Study of Linguistic Behaviour as Determined by Socio-cultural Factors in Africa: Appraisal, Issues at Stake and Perspectives*, Ellen Hurst and Augustin Emmanuel Ebongue, eds. (Cham: Springer, 2017): 269-285.

⁵⁷ K. Sure and N. O. Ogechi, *Linguistic human rights and language policy in the Kenyan education system* (Addis Ababa: OSSREA, 2009).

⁵⁸ Ngau 1995 as cited in O. KAkumu and W. Olima, “The dynamics and implications of residential segregation in Nairobi,” *Habitat International* 31, no. 1 (2007): 87-99, 92. doi:10.1016/j.habitatint.2006.04.005.

⁵⁹ M. W. Githinji, *Ten millionaires and ten million beggars: A study of income distribution and development in Kenya* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000).

⁶⁰ R. Spronk, “Exploring the middle classes in Nairobi: From modes of production to modes of sophistication,” *African Studies Review*, 57, no. 1 (2014): 93-114, 101.

- ⁶¹ Bolinger, *Language, the loaded weapon*, 49.
- ⁶² Odour, "Sheng not to blame."
- ⁶³ Makoni et al., "The use of "indigenous" and urban," 35.
- ⁶⁴ Odhiambo, "Kula Raha," 255.
- ⁶⁵ Makoni et al., "The use of "indigenous" and urban," 44.
- ⁶⁶ "Kenya: Ready or Not," *Time* 75, no. 10(1960): 24.
- ⁶⁷ Lonsdale, "Town Life in Colonial Kenya," 213.
- ⁶⁸ Milroy, "Language ideologies," 550.
- ⁶⁹ van Kleef et al., "Power, Distress, and Compassion," 2008.
- ⁷⁰ P. K. Piff, D. M. Stancato, S. Côté, R. Mendoza-Denton, and D. Keltner. "Higher social class predicts increased unethical behavior," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 109, no. 11 (2012): 4086-4091. doi:10.1073/pnas.1118373109.
- ⁷¹ E. H. Lenneberg, "On explaining language," in *Biological boundaries of learning*, M.E.P. Seligman & J. L. Hager, eds., (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1972): 379-396; H. Winitz, B. Gillespie, and J. Starcev, "The development of English speech patterns of a 7-year-old Polish-speaking child," *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*. 24, no. 2 (1995): 117-143.
- ⁷² J. R. Harris, *The nurture assumption: Why children turn out the way they do*, (New York: Free Press, 1998).
- ⁷³ KAkumu and Olima, "The dynamics and implications," 96.
- ⁷⁴ The Swahili phrase *sukuma wiki* literally means "push the week" but it is also a specific name given to a green leafy vegetable (i.e., kale) that is often served when money is tight.
- ⁷⁵ M. Muiruri, "Learning to live in slums. Why villages are key to survival of public universities." *Daily Nation Inside Story*. Outlook, no. 074 (Aug. 8, 2005): 7-9.
- ⁷⁶ Spronk, "Exploring the middle classes in Nairobi," 101-103.
- ⁷⁷ The *ayahs*, *fundis*, *manambas*, and *wauza oduko* are nannies, repairmen, public transport ticket collectors, and shopkeepers respectively.
- ⁷⁸ M. Nichter, "Idioms of Distress Revisited," *Culture, Medicine & Psychiatry* 34, no. 2(2010): 401-416. doi:10.1007/s11013-010-9179-6.
- ⁷⁹ M. Mutonya, "Redefining Nairobi's Streets: A study of slang, marginalization, and identity," *Journal of Global Initiatives*, 2 no. 2(2007): 169-185, 175. Retrieved from <http://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/jgi/vol2/iss2/5/>
- ⁸⁰ See, J. Nortier and B.A. Svendsen, *Language, youth and identity in the 21st century. Linguistic practices across urban spaces* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). In fact, the famous usage of the character Eliza Doolittle in the film *My Fair Lady* was based on an urban language variety depicted in Shaw's *Pygmalion*. Incidentally, the first quotation in this paper is also about Cockney.
- ⁸¹ For example, see A. K. Spears, "African-American Language Use: Ideology and So-Called Obscenity" in *African-American English: Structure, history, and use*, Salikoko S. Mufwene, John R. Rickford, Guy Bailey, & John Baugh eds. London: Routledge, 1998): 226-250.

⁸² Labov, "Objectivity and commitment in linguistic science," 186.

⁸³ Milroy, "Language ideologies," 551.

⁸⁴ See W. Labov, *Language in the inner city: Studies in the Black English vernacular* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972; W. Labov, *The social stratification of English in New York City* (Washington: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1966).

⁸⁵ Milroy, "Language ideologies," 552.