

# Morphosyntactic retention and innovation in Sheng, a youth language or stylect of Kenya

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This paper examines the morphosyntax of the East African Swahili-based urban youth language or stylect Sheng. Research on urban youth languages has often focused on these varieties as sites of rapid change and linguistic creativity. However, we show that many of the structural features which appear to make Sheng stand out when compared to (Standard) Swahili are widespread across East African Bantu languages. We examine nominal and verbal domains, as well as clausal syntax, and highlight areas in which Sheng exhibits features in common with its contact languages, as well as features which appear to reflect instances of independent innovation. The study shows that Sheng is not a “simplified” version of Swahili which deviates from the grammar of Swahili in a range of ad hoc ways. Rather, the language exhibits features of retention and contact-induced borrowing, as well as systematic changes which are reflective of variation across the Bantu languages.

**Keywords:** language contact, youth languages, morphosyntax, Sheng, Swahili

## 1. Introduction

Since the early twentieth century, the existence of slang phenomena has been reported from various urban centres across Africa (Hurst 2009; Kießling & Mous 2004; Mazrui & Mazrui 1995). This has been followed by the appearance of urban youth languages, which deviate more from the base language than slang, but which nonetheless have their origins in another language (or languages) spoken in the city. Urban youth languages can broadly be thought of as those languages

which are developed by young speakers in urban areas in order to set themselves apart from older speakers (Kießling & Mous 2004). Urban youth varieties are known for their innovation, particularly in the domain of the lexicon, with semantic change and borrowing, as well as extensive use of code-switching which are often considered to be defining features of these registers. As such, urban youth varieties are often thought of as sites – and drivers of – innovation, characterised by linguistic creativity, rapid changes and ephemeral vocabulary (e.g. Beck 2010).

The study of young people's speech in Africa, often subsumed under the label of "youth language", began in the late 1980s (Dumestre 1985; Sesep 1990, Spyropoulos 1987). Some of the early works treated youth languages as pidginised or "hybrid" forms of language (Bosire 2006 and Ferrari 2004 on the Sheng of Nairobi; Goyvaerts 1988 on Indoubill in Bukavu, Democratic Republic of the Congo). The notions of pidginization or hybridity in these studies is often used to refer to changes in the concordance systems, a simplification of tense-aspect systems, and a multiplicity of linguistic manipulations. Other early studies examined youth language primarily from a contact perspective, focusing on codemixing or codeswitching as guiding concepts (see, among others, Abdulaziz & Osinde 1997; Mazrui 1995; Slabbert & Myers-Scotton 1997).

Kießling & Mous's (2004) seminal paper constitutes the first overview paper, which brought increased attention to youth languages in Africa. Subsequently, distinctive "youth languages" were described in various parts of the continent, often following Kießling & Mous (2004) in (i) their identification of linguistic manipulations (predominantly on a phonological, morphological and lexical level) and (ii) their application of sociolinguistic theory, including a focus on anti-language (Halliday 1976) and resistance identity. Numerous more recent studies build on this popular model of analysis (Barasa & Mous 2017; Hurst 2008; Hurst & Mesthrie 2013; Namyalo 2015; Reuster-Jahn & Kießling 2006, amongst others). A number of ethnographically oriented studies have also been carried out (e.g. Samper 2002; Wairungu 2014; Wilson 2015).

However, less attention has been paid to the morphosyntactic aspects of urban youth languages. Exceptions to this include Beck (2015); Gunnink (2014); Shinagawa (2007) and more recently Nassenstein & Bose (2020). This is also true of Sheng for which, despite the presence of a number of descriptive linguistic works on the topic (Beck 2015; Bosire 2006, 2008; Ferrari 2004, 2009; Githinji 2006; Githiora 2002; Mbaabu & Nzunga 2003; Nassenstein & Hollington 2015; Ogechi 2005; Shinagawa 2006, 2007), the area of morphosyntax remains under-examined (although see Githiora 2018: Chapter 4).

This paper aims to address this gap with a discussion of morphosyntactic features of Sheng, an urban youth language or "stylect" spoken in Kenya (see

Section 3 for a discussion of different ways of referring to Sheng). The goal of this paper is three-fold: firstly, to provide a more detailed account of the morphosyntax of Sheng, complementing the previous studies which have focused primarily on other aspects of the variety. Secondly, to examine features of Sheng morphosyntax against the comparative backdrop of Bantu languages and the variation found in the language family. Thirdly, the paper draws on examples from Sheng to examine processes of language contact and change more broadly.

Sheng data discussed in the paper are taken from published sources while Swahili data are based on the authors' own knowledge unless otherwise indicated. At present there is no published corpus of Sheng and so for this paper we draw on data from previous work, discussed in more detail in Section 3. This means that examples in the paper typically result from interviews, focus group discussions or participant observation, in addition to some written sources such as newspaper columns in Sheng. For example, Githiora (2018), which is probably the most extensive study of Sheng to date, used a variety of methods ranging from short interviews involving 950 respondents in different locations in Nairobi to more in-depth interviews based on recordings or translation tasks with groups of around 20 participants, often teenagers (Githiora 2018: 58–80). It should also be noted that Sheng is only one of a number of Swahili-based youth languages which are found across East Africa. These include also *Lugha ya Mitaani* (Dar es Salaam, Tanzania), *Yabacrâne* (Goma in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)) and *Kindubile* (Lubumbashi, DRC). While in this paper we focus on Sheng, comparable studies drawing on either one of the other Swahili-based youth languages or drawing comparisons across the languages would also be welcome avenues for future research.

We examine case studies from the verbal domain, nominal domain and clausal syntax, and show that, despite innovation in a number of areas, Sheng morphosyntax tends to retain the complex structures of its Bantu source languages. We claim that many of the structural features which appear to make Sheng stand out when compared to so-called Standard Swahili are features which are widespread across other Bantu languages, including those of East Africa (cf. Edelsten et al. 2022).

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 explores contact and convergence in Bantu languages, introducing the notions of centrifugal and centripetal convergence developed by Marten (2013). Section 3 presents an overview of Sheng, providing the relevant sociolinguistic background necessary to understand the subsequent discussion. Section 4 focuses on the nominal domain, Section 5 examines the verbal domain, while Section 6 examines syntax. Section 7 constitutes a concise conclusion, highlighting the findings of the paper, as well as avenues for future research.

## 2. Contact and convergence in Bantu

Many models of language relationship assume that languages change and become more different over time. This employs the notion of (linguistic) divergence and assumes that over time and space, languages become less similar to each other as they become increasingly removed from their locus of origin and, by extension, from one and other. This is the model of language change commonly reflected in language family trees. However, the assumption that languages become more different over time is only partially borne out and depends to a large extent on the sociolinguistic and historical conditions under which this process – or processes – takes place. In many ways, the idea that languages (only) become more different over time assumes that the speakers of different varieties no longer communicate with each other. However, languages may also become more similar to each other over time due to language contact, particularly in multilingual contexts. Speakers may continue to be in sustained contact with each other – or may in fact reflect portions of the same speech community. In such contexts, processes of language change can instead also represent processes of linguistic convergence, as features of the language are maintained, reinforced or reintroduced, especially in instances in which the languages are quite similar as a result of close genetic relatedness.

Language contact and convergence can therefore have contrasting effects depending on the languages involved. Following Möhlig (1979), Marten (2013) notes that contact between related languages may lead to increased structural similarity overall – i.e. “centripetal convergence” – while contact between unrelated languages may lead to decreased structural similarity between languages involved in the contact situation and those which are not – i.e. “centrifugal convergence”.

(1) **Centripetal convergence**

Structural convergence effects which lead to increased similarity of the languages involved in the contact situation, and also to increased similarity with related languages outside of the contact situation

(2) **Centrifugal convergence**

Structural convergence effects which lead to increased similarity of the languages involved in the contact situation, but to decreased similarity with related languages outside of the contact situation

Marten (2013) employs the notions of “centripetal” and “centrifugal” convergence to capture the nature of the effects of contact between Bantu languages with other Bantu languages on the one hand and contact between Bantu and non-Bantu languages on the other hand (cf. Möhlig 1979:133). The Bantu languages are a group of some 450–600 languages spoken across much of Central, Eastern and Southern Africa (Van de Velde et al. 2019). Many of the areas in which Bantu lan-

guages are spoken are characterised by widespread multilingualism, with speakers often employing more than one Bantu language. The prevalence of these multilingual ecologies, with Bantu languages often in contact with other Bantu languages (as well as in some instances with non-Bantu languages) is proposed to have an impact on the nature of contact-induced change and structural transfer.

Contact between Bantu and non-Bantu languages may lead the Bantu language in question to exhibit decreased structural similarity with other Bantu languages (centrifugal convergence). Centrifugal convergence will therefore lead to what are also described as periphery effects. Those Bantu languages which are in contact with non-Bantu languages potentially show more divergent features in all linguistic domains. This is indeed what has been noted at some of the “peripheries” of the Bantu zone, including in northern Tanzania where Bantu languages are in contact with non-Bantu languages such as Cushitic and Nilotic languages. In this region, signs of centrifugal convergence have been observed. The Bantu language Rangi, for example, has been in sustained contact with non-Bantu languages in the area, including representatives from the Cushitic and Nilotic language families, as well as the language isolates Hadza and Sandawe. It has been shown that certain features of Rangi morphosyntax are the result of contact with non-Bantu languages found in the areas (Gibson & Marten 2019). There are a number of regions in which Bantu languages come into contact with non-Bantu languages. This includes areas where Bantu and non-Bantu languages are found in the same linguistic ecologies – such as in Kenya where Sheng is spoken. It also includes those at the northern edges of the Bantu around Cameroon where the languages are in contact with Nilo-Saharan, Nilotic languages and Afro-Asiatic languages, as well as the so-called “Khoisan” languages in Southern Africa (cf. case studies in Heine & Nurse 2008).

In contrast, contact between Bantu languages may lead to increased structural similarity with other Bantu languages (centripetal convergence), particularly at the centre of the Bantu language region (cf. Guthrie 1962; Möhlig 1979, 1981). For example, in so-called “Mainland Colloquial Swahili” (Kihore et al. 2001), the introduction of the habitual suffix *-ag* and the diminutive prefixes *ka-/tu-* has been attributed to second-language Swahili speakers who have similar features in their first language (King’ei 2000; Marten 2013; Marten & Gibson 2024; Rugemalira 2007). These are features which are not found in Standard Swahili and which are not regularly associated with coastal Swahili varieties. However, their presence in Mainland Colloquial Swahili appears to reflect the structural effects of language contact between Swahili and other Bantu languages which have these markers as part of their grammars. This will also be seen to be the case for Sheng in the current paper.

Applying the notions of centrifugal and centripetal convergence to the case of Sheng, the question is therefore: How are processes of morphosyntactic innovation in Sheng situated within the wider context of contact, change and convergence, particularly in relation to Bantu languages? The discussion of features of the morphosyntax of Sheng across the nominal, verbal and clausal domain examined in the following sections will seek to answer this question. This study represents the first of its kind and is the first to apply the lens of centripetal and centrifugal convergence to Sheng data.

### 3. Sheng: A background

Sheng is most commonly described as an urban youth language. Opinions vary in relation to its genesis. Some describe the origins of Sheng as dating back to as early as the 1930s (Abdulaziz & Osinde 1997; Mazrui 1995), while other accounts suggest Sheng emerged in the 1950s (Spyropoulos 1987: 30). The label Sheng certainly appeared in early studies of the subject including those of Spyropoulos (1987) and Mazrui (1995), and Myers-Scotton (1993: 93) notes in reference to Nairobi working class areas such as Eastleigh that a “slang variety called ‘Sheng’ also exists in those areas; it is an innovative *mélange* of Swahili as a matrix language with English embeddings”. There is general agreement that Sheng originated in the Eastlands estates of Nairobi (Githiora 2018: 31) and that it can be considered as a distinct way of speaking Swahili which is indexical of a particular set of speaker identities. As a low-income residential area of Nairobi, Eastlands was – and continues to be – a multilingual, multi-ethnic part of the city and is reflective of its inhabitants’ complex and often fluid identities.

Although initially associated with youth populations living in the Kenyan urban centre of Nairobi, recent years have seen the spread of Sheng into other cities in Kenya as well as rural areas. Sheng is also increasingly used by a wider range of speakers from different age groups and socioeconomic backgrounds (Githiora 2018; Nassenstein & Bose 2020). Recent years have also seen an increase in the visibility of Sheng, including in advertising and the media. Since 2013, for example *The Nairobiian* has been publishing a weekly column in Sheng (Githiora 2018: 128) and there are Sheng activist groups such as GoSheng and a radio station Ghetto FM which brands itself as the “official Sheng station” and “Voice of the Youth”. There is also a growth in interest in the study of Sheng (see e.g. Beck 2015; Bosire 2006; Githiora 2018; Kanana Erastus & Hurst-Harosh 2019; Kanana Erastus & Kebeya 2018; Kanana Erastus & Nyong’a 2019; Nassenstein & Bose 2020, amongst others).

In structural terms, some authors have described Sheng as close to Swahili, with a morphosyntax based on Swahili. Others view it more akin to a practice of code-switching involving Swahili and English (Mazrui 1995), where Swahili is the matrix language (Bosire 2015). Others have described it as a pidgin (Chimerah 1998), an approach which the current account does not adopt. Githiora (2018) describes the grammar of Sheng as “straightforwardly that of Swahili”, a point which we will return to over the course of the paper. The linguistic context of Kenya contributes to the structural and lexical properties of Sheng, which draw on influences from other languages found in the region, including, for example, other Bantu languages like Gikuyu and Nilotic languages like Dholuo, but also Indo-European languages like English, and Gujarati which is widely used by the Kenyan Asian community. Another relevant observation is that the linguistic landscape in Kenya involves what may appropriately be considered a continuum of speech codes. There exists a Kenyan Swahili, which is characterised by specific morphosyntactic and lexical features and which differs from, for example, so called Standard Swahili, with Sheng exhibiting yet different features again from both of these varieties. Sheng therefore exists somewhere along this continuum and the way in which speakers use it reflects both this continuum and speakers’ broader linguistic repertoires. The majority of Kenyan Swahili speakers use at least one other language in addition to their “first language”. This means that many people use Swahili, another Kenyan language and English on a regular basis in a broad range of domains in a fluid manner, often without clear boundaries between discrete codes in ways that have been described more widely as translanguaging (Caragarajah 2011; García & Wei 2014; Williams 1994).

Another concept which will be shown to be central to the current discussion is that of “stylect” – a term coined by Hurst (2008) for Tsotsitaal, an urban language of South Africa (see also Hurst-Harosh 2019, 2020). Here we follow the approach taken by Hurst (2008) and consider Sheng to be a “stylect” of Swahili. This means that it is a variety that is heavily linked to a performative practice that allows for a “range of identity alignments which are reflected in the linguistic range” (Hurst 2008: 2). Githiora (2018: 31) notes that “Sheng talk” is a helpful term to describe the “distinctive ways of speaking Swahili, which is indexed to social identity and language ideologies of Kenya”. Githiora (2018) also argues that this identity-based approach is crucial to the study of Sheng which he describes as closely indexed to “style” and therefore encourages us to move away from employing both the terms “youth” and “urban” in our descriptions of Sheng, whilst still acknowledging the role of both of these concepts in the dynamics of the emergence of Sheng within the broader ecology of Swahili.

A couple of brief terminological points are in order here. We use the term “Sheng” to describe the Swahili-based broad linguistic practice or stylect which

has traditionally been associated with urban youth populations, whilst recognising also its broader contemporary use. We use the term “Standard Swahili” to refer to a codified form of Swahili which was historically based on the southern urban dialect of Zanzibar known as Kiunguja. Standardisation efforts were heavily influenced by the adoption of Swahili as the language of administration by German and British colonial administrations in Tanzania and Kenya, as well as subsequent, and in many ways ongoing, codification and standardisation activities which are reinforced by its use in education across the region (cf. Mugane 2015). We use terms such as “Colloquial (Mainland) Swahili” to refer to varieties of spoken Swahili which are found in East Africa which are distinct from the Standard. We further use terms such as “Kenyan Swahili” or “Lubumbashi Swahili” to describe regiolectal or city-specific varieties. We are conscious however that in many ways youth languages and youth language practices are social phenomena which often cannot be demarcated or indicated on maps (or ascribed to cities) in purely geographic terms. We are also aware that the use of such labels is not without broader problems in terms of essentialisation or reification of such languages (see, e.g. Lüpke & Storch 2013 for further discussion). Where these considerations impact on the structures and analysis under development this will be discussed. However, for the broader purposes of this paper, these are helpful labels which do play a role in being able to refer to the specific varieties under examination.

#### 4. Features of Sheng morphosyntax: The nominal domain

##### 4.1 Noun class assignment and semantics

Bantu languages are characterised by systems of noun classes. Nouns are assigned to noun classes, which are often analysed as grammatical genders (see e.g. Maho 1999; Marten 2021). These noun classes are assigned by convention and are often written as pairs of classes, for example classes 1/2 i.e. class 1 and 2 or classes 7/8 i.e. class 7 and class 8. These noun classes are commonly associated with nominal prefixes and trigger agreement across a range of dependent elements such as adjectival, numeral and other modifiers. Agreement with the appropriate noun class is also seen through subject and object marking, with subject and object markers cross-referencing arguments of the verb.

Noun classes can also be exploited for semantic effects across Bantu. For example, many Bantu languages employ specific noun classes to encode diminutive and augmentative meanings (Gibson et al. 2017), as well as (sometimes by extension) pejorative or ameliorative senses. Diminutives in Bantu are thought to have been historically expressed as part of the noun class system, and several

noun classes have been reconstructed as including diminutive meanings (Maho 1999). The reconstructed Proto-Bantu class 12 prefix *\*ka* is widely associated with diminutives, and a corresponding diminutive plural in class 13, with the prefix *\*tu*, has also been proposed (Bleek 1862/9; Maho 1999; Meeussen 1967; Meinhof 1899). The noun class pairings 19/20, represented by *\*pì* and *\*yù* respectively, and 7/8 *\*kì* and *\*βì* respectively, have also been reconstructed as diminutive classes in Bantu, although with a more restricted distribution (Gibson et al. 2017; Maho 1999).

The use of class 12 for encoding diminutives can be seen in the examples from the Tanzanian Bantu languages Nyamwezi and Chindamba below. In Nyamwezi, the diminutive prefix *ka-* appears instead of the class 1 prefix *ngwa-*, yielding the form *kaaná* ‘small child’ (3b) in contrast to *ngwaaná* ‘child’ in (3a). Similarly, in Chindamba, the class 12 prefix *ka-* yields the form *kapiki* ‘small tree’ (4b), which is derived from *lipiki* ‘tree’ (4a).

#### NYAMWEZI

- (3) a. *ngwa-aná* ‘child’ (class 1)  
 b. *ka-aná* ‘small child’ (class 12)

(Maganga & Schadeberg 1992: 63)

#### CHINDAMBA

- (4) a. *li-piki* ‘tree’ (class 5)  
 b. *ka-piki* ‘small tree’ (class 12)

(Edelsten & Lijongwa 2010: 36–38)

Swahili also makes use of noun classes to encode diminutive meanings. However, the language has lost the historical diminutive classes 12 and 13 which synchronically have been replaced by classes 7/8 with the prefixes *ki-* and *vi-* (Kihore et al. 2001; King’ei 2000: 85/86). This can be seen in the examples in (5) below where the class 7 and 8 prefixes *ki-* and *vi-* are used to form the singular diminutive form *kitoto* ‘small child’ (5c) and the plural diminutive form *vitoto* ‘small children’ (5d).

#### STANDARD SWAHILI

- (5) a. *m-toto* ‘child’ (class 1)  
 b. *wa-toto* ‘children’ (class 2)  
 c. *ki-toto* ‘small child’ (class 7)  
 d. *vi-toto* ‘small children’ (class 8)

(Kihore et al. 2001)

In contrast to the situation in Standard Swahili, in Sheng we see the use of class 12/13 to encode diminutive meanings. This can be seen in (6) by the presence of the class 12 prefix *ka-* on the nominal *kamanoo* ‘little man’, as well as in the class

12 form of the demonstrative *hako*. As can also be seen on examination of (7), the diminutive meaning in Sheng is commonly associated with pejorative meanings. Class 12 morphology is found on the noun in forms such as *kamanoo* ‘little man’ in (6) and *kasimu* ‘little phone’ in (7), as a verbal prefix as in *kalikuwa* ‘it was’ in (8), and as an object marker *ka-* in *unakaona* ‘you see it’ in (9). The nominal form *kakitu* ‘little thing’ in (9) also shows that the *ka-* prefix can appear in addition to the inherent class prefix of the noun (in this case the class 7 prefix *ki-*).

#### SHENG

- (6) *Ha-ko ka-manoo ka-na-katishi-ang-a*  
 DEM-12 12-man 12-PROG-annoy-HAB-FV  
 ‘That little man is (always) so annoying’ (Bosire 2015)
- (7) ... *uzuri ni-li-kuwa na ka-simu ke-ngine.*  
 11.good SM1SG-PST-be CON 12-phone 12-other  
 ‘...luckily I had a little (cheap) phone’ (Githiora 2018: 87)
- (8) *Ka-li-kuwa ka-toto ka-dogo*  
 SM12-PST-be 12-child 12-small  
 ‘It was a (mere) little child’ (Githiora 2018: 87)
- (9) *Sasa u-na-ka-on-a ka-ki-tu ka-dogo huku*  
 now SM2SG-PRS-OM12-see-FV 12-7-thing 12-small here  
 ‘Now you see it, a small thing here’ (Nassenstein & Bose 2020: 4)

Since the *ka-* diminutive prefix is not found in Swahili, its presence in Sheng represents reintroduction of morphosyntactic marking. The proposal here is that the marker is assumed to have existed at some point in the historical development of Swahili but to have been lost (with *ki-* used in present day Swahili rather than *ka-*) before being “reintroduced” into Sheng. In this case, Sheng is drawing on the noun class system of neighbouring Bantu languages (for example, Gikuyu, Luhya and Meru are Kenyan Bantu languages all of which employ the *ka-* diminutive prefix) with which it is in contact and draws on for lexical and morphological material.

It also seems that the “reintroduction” of the historical class 12/13 diminutive marking system in Sheng is mirrored in the Swahili-based youth languages *Lugha ya Mitaani*, *Kindubile* and *Yabacrâne* (Nassenstein & Bose 2020), as well as in *Colloquial Mainland Swahili* (Marten & Gibson 2014). This is an interesting recurring pattern in which Swahili spoken in areas which have a high proportion

of speakers of other Bantu languages with this diminutive strategy in their linguistic repertoire have made use of comparable strategies that are available.<sup>1</sup>

Also in the domain of noun class semantics and class assignment, Sheng employs the prefix *ki-* to express augmentative meaning. The use of *ki-* in Sheng is in contrast to Standard Swahili where *ki-* is the diminutive prefix and augmentatives are formed using the class 5 prefix *ji-*. Githiora (2018:86) observes that Sheng, and Kenyan Swahili more broadly, “overwhelmingly prefers the prefix *ka-* (plural: *tu-*) only, to express diminutive or affectionate meanings, and *ki-* alone for augmentatives”. Examples of the use of *ki-* for augmentatives in Sheng include *kijua* ‘lots of hot burning sunshine’ or *kimtu* ‘a big (bad, ugly, unpleasant) person’ (in contrast to *kamtu* ‘a small person’), as in (10) below.

#### SHENG

- (10) *Ki-m-tu ki-li-kuj-a hapa jana*  
 7-1-person SM7-PST-come-FV here yesterday  
 ‘A big [bad, ugly, unpleasant] person came here yesterday’ (Githiora 2018: 86)

The use of class 12/13 diminutive strategies in Sheng can therefore be seen to represent an instance of language contact. Whilst the use of class 12/13 for diminutive purposes represents a deviation from Standard Swahili, this is a pattern seen widely across the Bantu languages and so reflects an increased similarity between Sheng and other Bantu languages as a result of contact.

#### 4.2 Nominal agreement

In previous accounts, Sheng has been noted to exhibit reduced systems of agreement in comparison to Standard Swahili (see e.g. Bosire 2008; Ferrari 2004; Myers-Scotton 1979; Nassenstein & Bose 2020; Shinagawa 2007).<sup>2</sup> This was observed as early as Myers-Scotton (1979) who noted reduced agreement in (invariant) adjectival forms such as *baridi mingi* ‘lots of cold’, *maji mingi* ‘lots of water’ and *watu mingi* ‘lots of people’,<sup>3</sup> all of which exhibit the same concord of *-ingi* despite the nominals belonging to different noun classes (class 9, class 6 and

1. Evaluative morphology therefore seems to be particularly interesting in this regard. For example, Swahili-speaking youth from the Democratic Republic of the Congo reveal very diverse diminutive patterns (e.g. noun class pairings 12/13, 12/14, 12/19 and the use of non-morphological strategies).

2. Reduced agreement in the verbal domain, particularly in relation to subject-verb agreement, has also been described for contact varieties of Swahili. See De Rooij (1995:187) for Shaba Swahili and Nassenstein (2015:79–80) for Kisangani Swahili.

3. In present-day varieties of Sheng, we note that while *baridi mingi* and *maji mingi* are widespread, the form *watu mingi* is not a form that we have heard before.

class 2 respectively), and so the Standard Swahili forms would be *baridi nyingi*, *maji mengi* and *watu wengi*, respectively. This agreement pattern can also be seen on examination of the examples in (11) below which show the noun *kitu* ‘thing’, which would be a class 7/8 noun in Standard Swahili, triggering agreement with what would be analysed as class 9 in examples (11a)–(c) and class 10 in example (11d).

**SHENG**

- (11) a. *hi-i ki-tu i-le*  
 DEM-9 7-thing 9-DEM  
 ‘the thing’
- b. *ki-tu hi-yo*  
 7-thing 9-DEM  
 ‘the thing mentioned’
- c. *hi-i ki-tu*  
 DEM-9 7-thing  
 ‘this thing, the thing’
- d. *zi-le vi-tu*  
 10-DEM 8-thing  
 ‘those things’
- (Beck 2015: 67)

In example (12) the noun *vitu* ‘things’ is prefixed with the class 6 marker *ma-*, representing another deviation from Standard Swahili agreement patterns. In (13) despite the presence of the plural class 8 form *vitu*, the agreement triggered on the verb is *zi-* which is associated with class 10 in Standard Swahili. This is also reflected in the adjectival agreement in example (14) with the form *mbaya* ‘bad’ (with class prefix *m-*, associated in Standard Swahili with classes 1, 3, 9, 10, and 18).

**SHENG**

- (12) *ma-vi-tu*  
 6-8-thing  
 ‘things’
- (Beck 2015: 67)
- (13) *vi-tu ha-zi-kam*  
 8-thing NEG-10-occur  
 ‘the things don’t occur’
- (Beck 2015: 67)
- (14) *ki-tu first m-baya*  
 7-thing first 1-bad  
 ‘the first bad thing’
- (Beck 2015: 67)

Githiora (2018:89) also notes that Kenyan Swahili deviates substantially from Standard Swahili in terms of agreement and concord. He notes that a common

feature of Kenyan Swahili is the invariable use of class 9/10 agreement markers, representing a “drastic simplification of the elaborate noun classification of Standard Swahili” (Githiora 2018: 89). Under such an approach, despite the presence of the prefixes *ki-* and *vi-* on the nominal forms (which in Standard Swahili would be analysed as class 7/8 markers) these nouns all find their agreement with the Swahili classes 9/10 in Sheng.

Nassenstein & Bose (2020: 6) also note the use of non-agreeing forms in Sheng which would in Swahili otherwise show agreement with the head noun. For example *-ngine* ‘other’ appears to have developed into a non-agreeing form in Sheng which always appears as *ngine* regardless of the noun class of the nominal it modifies as, for example, seen in (15). This contrasts with the case in (Standard) Swahili more broadly where the *ngine* form would be considered to show class 9 agreement and if it modifies a class 7 noun such as *kitu* ‘thing’ for example, would exhibit class 7 agreement, as shown in (16).

#### SHENG

- (15) *ki-tu i-ngine*  
 7-thing 9-other  
 ‘another thing’ (Beck 2015: 67)

#### STANDARD SWAHILI

- (16) *ki-tu ki-ngine*  
 7-thing 7-other  
 ‘another thing’

Class 6 concord also plays a significant role in the nominal system of Sheng and a range of Swahili-based youth languages. Nassenstein & Bose (2020: 5) suggest that the Standard Swahili class 6 prefix *ma-* may be developing into a “general plural marker” where it is used extensively in the formation of plurals with loanwords. However, there is variation in Sheng, and indeed between Kenyan Swahili and Tanzanian Swahili, in this regard. Alongside the use of the class 6 plural prefix *ma-*, we also see concord with the “underlying” class of the noun. Consider example (17) below where the class 9 noun *nyumba* hosts the plural class 6 prefix but the agreement on the possessive takes the form of the class 10 marker *z-* reflecting class 10 (plural of class 9) agreement with the class 9/10 noun.

#### SHENG

- (17) *Tu-me-build ma-nyumba z-etu*  
 SM1PL-PRF-build 6-9.house 10-POSS.1PL  
 ‘We have built our houses.’ (Nassenstein & Bose 2020: 5)

This apparent reduced system could easily be analysed as a simplification in Sheng in which nominals take agreement in a reduced number of classes (see

also Jerro 2018 and Marten et al. 2024, who explore notions of simplification and complexification in Swahili). This is the case, for example, in Lingala, a contact language that emerged from a pidginised form of Bobangi in the Congo Basin towards the end of the 19th century which shows a simplified agreement system (Meeuwis 2020).

### 4.3 Demonstratives

The main area of variation in demonstratives in Sheng relates to their position within the noun phrase. There is variation amongst Bantu languages in terms of the position of the demonstrative relative to the noun. Some languages permit only Noun-Dem order in pragmatically unmarked contexts, other languages show a preference for Dem-Noun while some allow both Noun-Dem and Dem-Noun (see Van de Velde 2005). Other languages employ so-called circum-demonstratives in which a demonstrative form appears either side of the noun (see Taji 2021, 2024 for Yao, Van der Wal 2009 for Makhuwa).

In Swahili, demonstratives typically appear after the noun they modify, yielding Noun-Dem order (18). However, Swahili also allows Dem-Noun ordering, where the difference appears to relate to specificity or definiteness (Ashton 1947: 59, Van de Velde 2005).

#### SWAHILI

- (18) a. *ki-tabu ki-le*  
 7-book 7-DEM  
 ‘That book’ (far from us)
- b. *ki-le ki-tabu*  
 7-DEM 7-book  
 ‘The book’ (known to both of us) (Van de Velde 2005: 436)

In Sheng there are also examples in which the demonstrative appears pre-nominally (19)–(21).<sup>4</sup>

#### SHENG

- (19) *u-u dem m-supu*  
 DEM-1 9.girl 1-super  
 ‘the good-looking girl’ (Beck 2015: 68)

4. In example (20) from Beck (2015), we present the data with the original translation as given in the source. However, in our understanding *chali* means simply ‘boy’, so the translation of the word as ‘lover’ might be a contextual interpretation.

(20) *ha-wa ma-chali*  
 DEM-2 6-boy/lover  
 ‘the lovers’ (Beck 2015: 68)

(21) *hi-i picha*  
 DEM-9 9.picture  
 ‘the picture’ (Beck 2015: 69)

However, in terms of nominal modification more broadly, there are examples of post-nominal numerals, as in example (22), and of both prenominal (23a) and post-nominal modifiers (23b).<sup>5</sup>

#### SHENG

(22) *ma-chali wa-sita*  
 6-boy/lover 2-six  
 ‘six lovers’ (Beck 2015: 68)

(23) a. *hu-o chali*  
 DEM-1 5.boy/lover  
 ‘this lover’  
 b. *chali hu-yu*  
 5.boy/lover DEM-1  
 ‘this lover’ (Beck 2015: 68)

It therefore appears that there is a degree of variation in Sheng in terms of the placement of modifiers within the noun phrase. For Sheng, the widespread use of Dem-Noun order may reflect influence from English where Dem-Noun dominates. However, it may also reflect influence from other Bantu languages which allow flexibility of noun-modifier order and/or an awareness of the pragmatic effect of changes in word order in Swahili. It is therefore difficult to conclude whether this feature represents either a case of contact-induced change or is an independent innovation, albeit one that reflects the variation found across Bantu more broadly.

#### 4.4 Locative nouns

Bantu languages are known for their widespread use of locative noun classes. These are often indicated through the use of nominal prefixes and verbal agreement. In

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5. The alternative, and more common, demonstrative form used in expressions such as (23a) would be the proximal demonstrative *huyu* (i.e., *huyu chali*) as shown in (23b). The form in *huo* given in (23) appears to be a class 3 anaphoric demonstrative. Further investigation is needed on this point.

Swahili, locatives are also indicated through the use of the locative suffix *-ni* (see Samsom & Schadeberg 1994 for the historical origins of the suffix and its reconstruction). In Swahili there are a number of rules governing where the suffix can and cannot appear. The suffix can be used widely with nominal forms – such as *nyumbani* ‘home’ and *mezani* ‘on the table.’ However, proper nouns appear without the locative suffix, see (24a), (25a) and the attempt at using the suffix with a city or country name results in unacceptability, see (24b), (25b).

#### STANDARD SWAHILI

- (24) a. *Ni-ko Mombasa*  
SM1SG-LOC.COP Mombasa  
‘I’m in Mombasa.’  
b. \**Ni-ko Mombasa-ni*  
SM1SG-LOC.COP Mombasa-LOC  
Intd. ‘I’m in Mombasa.’

#### STANDARD SWAHILI

- (25) a. *Tu-na-som-a shule-ni*  
SM1PL-PROG-read-FV school-LOC  
‘We study at school.’  
b. \**Tu-na-som-a Dar es Salaam-ni*  
SM1PL-PROG-read-FV Dar es Salaam-LOC  
Intd. ‘We study in Dar es Salaam’

In Sheng however, there are examples of the locative suffix *-ni* appearing on proper nouns such as the place name *Mombasa* as can be seen in example (26) below.

#### SHENG

- (26) *Mambo vipi huko Mombasa-ni?*  
6.things how DEM.17 Mombasa-LOC  
‘How are things over there in Mombasa?’ (Githiora 2018: 86)

One possible analysis here is that this form represents transfer from locative classes which in Bantu languages other than Swahili often combine with place names. Beyond East Africa we find *kuLusaka* ‘to/in Lusaka’ in the Bantu language Bemba, spoken in Zambia, for example. However, it is not clear how common this is in East African Bantu languages and the languages we are aware of and familiar with do not employ this strategy. An alternative analysis therefore would be that that this represents an extension or overgeneralisation in the Standard Swahili locative suffixation system. This would mean simply that the Sheng speakers are aware of *-ni* as a locative suffix and generalise this use to all forms, irrespective of whether the form denotes a location or not, meaning that the prohibition of adding *-ni* to place names is not operative.

#### 4.5 Summary of Sheng features in the nominal domain

To summarise, in the nominal domain we examined noun class assignment and associated noun class semantics where we saw variation in regard to noun class agreement between Sheng and Swahili. For both the reduced nominal agreement and the relative flexibility of the ordering of elements in the nominal domain (where Sheng allows both Dem-N and N-Dem order) we analysed these as an independent innovation which is likely to be the result of language contact. In the case of reduced agreement, this mirrors processes of “simplification” observed with contact varieties of Bantu languages such as Lingala, as well as cross-linguistic patterns of reduced agreement in contact languages. In this case, it may also reflect the high number of second language speakers of Swahili. For the variability of word order, this is the result of contact with speakers of languages which have either Dem-N or both Dem-N and N-Dem order in their grammars. Finally, the option of proper nouns hosting the locative suffix in Sheng, which is prohibited in Swahili, is proposed to result from generalisation of the Standard Swahili system, or from contact with other Bantu languages or indeed English, with consistent locative or prepositional marking across different nouns. This is summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Summary of nominal features analysed

Domain	Feature	Change type
Noun classes	Noun class assignment and semantics	Contact
Agreement	Nominal agreement: Reduced or default agreement system	Contact
Nominals	Nominal modification: Dem-N and N-Dem order	Independent innovation/ contact
Locative nouns	Locative nouns: Locative suffix <i>-ni</i> on proper nouns	Independent innovation/ contact

### 5. The verbal domain

Bantu languages commonly employ a range of simple and complex verbal forms to encode a range of tense-aspect-mood distinctions. Simple verb forms consist of a single verbal form which may be inflected for tense, aspect, or polarity information, along with other affixes which may cross-reference the arguments of the verb – such as subject and object arguments. Complex verb forms comprising an auxiliary and a main verb form are also widespread throughout Bantu and typi-

cally enable the encoding of a broader range of tense-aspect distinctions than may otherwise be available with single verb forms. This section explores instances of innovation and structural retention in Sheng in the verbal domain.

## 5.1 Tense-aspect-mood distinctions

### 5.1.1 The habitual *-ag*

Many Bantu languages employ some variation of the form *\*-ag* to encode imperfective, repetitive or habitual meanings (e.g. Meeussen 1967:110, Nurse 2008; Sebasoni 1967). This can be seen in the examples below from Kagulu, which employs *-ag* (27), and Meru, which employs *-ang* (28).

#### KAGULU

- (27) *Ha-ka-ij-ag-a ka-mwendu kwa wiki*  
 PST-SM1.PST-COME-IPFV-FV NUM-one per week  
 ‘S/he came once per week.’ (Petzell 2008: 118)

#### MERU

- (28) *A-rija-ang-aa ntuti mono*  
 SM1-eat-HAB-FV fast very  
 ‘He/she eats very quickly (habitually).’ (Kanana Erastus, *field notes*)

However, in Standard Swahili, the historic Proto-Bantu suffix *\*-ag* has been lost and has instead been replaced by a new habitual formative *hu-* (Nurse & Hinnebusch 1993: 405, 414/5, Schadeberg 1992: 25). The use of this habitual prefix *hu-* can be seen in example (29a) where it is prefixed onto the verb stem *-la* ‘eat’ and (29b) where it is used with the verb *-enda* ‘go’.

#### STANDARD SWAHILI

- (29) a. *Wewe hu-l-a wapi?*  
 you HAB-eat-FV where  
 ‘Where do you (usually) eat?’  
 b. *Mimi hu-end-a shule-ni kwa mi-guu*  
 I HAB-go-FV 9.school-LOC with 4-foot  
 ‘I (usually) go to school by foot.’

Significantly for our purposes, the habitual suffix *-ag* is found in Congo varieties of Swahili (Nassenstein & Bose 2020), as well as being reported to be widespread in colloquial use across the Swahili-speaking area (Abe 2009). The use of the suffix *-ag* in Colloquial Swahili can be seen in example (30a) and (30b).

## COLLOQUIAL SWAHILI

- (30) a. *U-na-ku-l-ag-a wapi?*  
 SM2SG-PROG-STM-eat-HAB-FV where  
 ‘Where do you (usually) eat?’ (Rugemalira 2010: 232)
- b. *Kosa l-a ku-ni-omb-a m-samaha, ha-ku-n-ag-a*  
 5.mistake 5-of INF-OM1SG-ask-FV 3-forgiveness NEG-SM17-be-HAB-FV  
 ‘You don’t ask me for forgiveness, [but] it doesn’t matter.’ [lit. ‘there is nothing’]  
 (Suma Lee 2011, *Hakunaga*)

This introduction is significant enough to have led to the following observation and commentary: “Standard Swahili may be reclaiming productive inflection *-ag* and its wide occurrence in colloquial Swahili seems to be unstoppable” (Rugemalira 2010: 232). A similar situation seems to have arisen in Sheng, presumably also as a result of influence from contact with Bantu languages in which the suffix *-ag* is present. Indeed, this is the proposal put forward by Bosire (2008: 113–116) who accounts for the presence of *-ag* in Sheng as the result of borrowing from other Kenyan Bantu languages such as Gikuyu and Lubukusu. As can be seen on examination of examples (31)–(32) below, in Sheng the habitual suffix *-ag* ~ *-ang* can be added to verb forms and conveys a habitual meaning.

## SHENG

- (31) *Siku moja ni-li-kuwa na-end-ag-a na ha-po hi-vo*  
 day one SM1SG-PST-be SM1SG.PROG-go-HAB-FV CON DEM-16 DEM-9  
*Dandoo ...*  
 Dandoo  
 ‘One day I was going about there in Dandora ...’ (Githiora 2018: 114)
- (32) *a-na-fany-ang-a kazi tu kwa ofisi y-a gavaa*  
 SM1-PROG-do-HAB-FV work just for 9.office 9-of government  
 ‘He just works in a government office’ (Githiora 2018: 85)

Interestingly, in examples (33) and (34) below the Standard Swahili habitual prefix *hu-* co-occurs with the innovative habitual suffix *-ang*, perhaps reflecting an ongoing process of change where the *hu-* prefix is becoming semantically bleached of its meaning therefore leading to the addition of the *-a(n)g* suffix.

## SHENG

- (33) *yee hu-kuj-ang-a ha-pa kila siku*  
 s/he HAB-come-HAB-FV DEM-16 every day  
 ‘He comes here every day’ (Githiora 2018: 85)
- (34) *Ni venye ha-wa ma-karao hu-mad-ang-a ma-jamaa hu-ku*  
 COP how DEM-2 6-cops HAB-murder-HAB-FV 6-guys DEM-17  
 ‘It’s how these cops kill guys around here’ (Githiora 2018: 114)

Such a process would in some ways be reminiscent of the Jespersen's Cycle of the development of negative markers (Jespersen 1917, cf. van der Auwera 2009), in which material is added to “reinforce” negation before losing its emphatic weight and the construction as a whole becoming a regular part of the negation strategy. The idea here would be that *hu-* and *-anga* combine, with speakers reinforcing the habitual aspect of the event. Alternatively, one of the affixes could be considered as bleached of its habitual semantics (perhaps instead as being reanalysed as a default, invariant agreement prefix) and therefore the “additional” habitual suffix is needed to encode habituality. A similar process can be observed in the grammaticalization of the new Swahili perfect marker *sha-* (from *-isha* ‘finish’) in the context of the older marker *me-* in complex forms like *mekwisha-* and *mesha-* (see Marten 1998, and the discussion below).

A note can also be made here in terms of the difference in form between the suffixes *-ag* and *-ang*. Example (31) shows the presence of the marker *-ag* while (32), (33) and (34) employ the marker *-ang*. From a synchronic perspective, there is variation within Bantu in terms of which form of the marker is exhibited. As shown above, Kagulu has the form *-ag*, while in Kimeru both forms, *-ag* and *-ang*, are used, although in (28), we show the *-ang* form. It is perhaps unsurprising then that the variation across Bantu languages is also reflected within Sheng. This can be assumed to result from different influences operative on Sheng: speakers may well be familiar with this variation if they speak a language (or languages) which has the marker *-ag* and have heard speakers of other languages using *-ang*. Similarly, there may be awareness that both forms are accepted in Sheng, with no difference in meaning conveyed through the formal distinction between *-ag* and *-ang*. However, a systematic study of this would need to be conducted to see the patterns of variation between *-ag* and *-ang*.

The habitual marker in Standard Swahili differs from other tense-aspect-mood markers in that it appears as a prefix in the subject agreement slot and so cannot be used alongside other subject agreement markers. The standard, invariant habitual prefix occurs as *hu-* in all contexts and due to the lack of any overt agreement marking requires an overt subject to disambiguate between possible referents. This differs from other TAM forms where the TAM marker is typically preceded by the subject agreement marker with different forms indicating noun class and/or person and number. Another characteristic of the habitual in Standard Swahili is that it is not available for negation, with the corresponding negative form in the TAM paradigm usually assumed to be the present negative. However, in contrast, the habitual/imperfective suffix *-a(n)g* in Sheng can be negated. This is expressed by the negative post-final suffix *-i* (used in Standard Swahili for present tense negation), meaning that it can appear after the habitual form *-a(n)g* yielding the negative habitual form *-angi*, as seen in example (35).



Another feature of Sheng which is also widespread in Kenyan Swahili is the use of the Swahili future tense marker *ta-* to encode conditional meanings. This can be seen in example (38) where the translation provides either the future tense ('How will you feel?') or conditional ('How would you feel?').

**SHENG**

- (38) *U-ta-feel-aje?*  
 SM2SG-TA-feel-how  
 'How will/would you feel?' (Githiora 2018: 129)

**5.1.3 The verbal stem marker *ku-***

Bosire (2006: 189) notes that in Sheng the verbal stem marker *ku-*, historically a class 15 infinitive marker, can be found in all tenses, aspects and moods both in the negative and the affirmative. This contrasts with the TAM system in Swahili where the use of *ku-* is more restricted and only appears with certain affirmative/negative tense-aspect-combinations (cf. Marten 2002). For example, while in the Sheng example in (39) the stem marker *ku-* is used alongside the negative perfect marker *ja-*, in Swahili, the *ku-* stem would be omitted in constructions involving *ja-*.

**SHENG**

- (39) *Ha-ja-ku-w-a* VCT.  
 SM1.NEG-CXP-STM-be-FV VCT  
 'She hasn't been to the VCT [Voluntary Testing and Counselling] yet.'  
 (Beck 2015: 60)

Similarly, in example (40) the subjunctive form includes the *ku-* stem marker which is omitted in Swahili, as shown in (41).

**SHENG**

- (40) *A-ku-l-e* *mboga*  
 SM1-STM-eat-SBJV 10.vegetable  
 'She should eat vegetables.'  
 (Beck 2015: 60)

**SWAHILI**

- (41) *Ni-li-mw-amb-i-a* *a-l-e* *mboga*  
 SM1SG-PST-OM1-tell-APPL-FV SM1-eat-SBJV 10.vegetables  
 'I told him/her to eat vegetables.'

Beck (2015: 60) proposes that the rules prescribing that *ku-* must precede all verbs containing just a single syllable have likely been "copied" from neighbouring Bantu contact languages. However, we know that this rule does not hold for Gikuyu for example. It also seems equally plausible that what can be seen in Sheng is an instance of analogical levelling, that is, an erosion of the rule relating

to the presence or absence of the stem marker which has been generalised to appear across all tense-aspect-mood and polarity distinctions as part of an independent process of language change. This would therefore contrast with the situation in Swahili where the presence is TAM-specific, but would be in keeping with a contact-induced change in the language resulting in a simplification (i.e., generalisation) of this aspect of the syntax.

While the use of the stem marker in inflected verb forms in Sheng has been generalised to all tense-aspects, there is an interesting parallel development in complex verb forms. In these contexts, the class 15 infinitival marker can often be omitted from the non-finite verb form in Sheng, where this would not be possible in Standard Swahili. In the examples (42) below the verb *-endelea* ‘continue’ appears with the infinitival prefix *ku-* in Standard Swahili, as in (42a), while in Sheng it is used without the prefix *ku-*, as in (42b). Variation in the use and marking of infinitival complements often occur in the context of grammaticalization of modal and auxiliary verbs and is also a relatively widespread feature across Bantu (cf. Botne 2004; Gibson 2012).

#### SWAHILI

- (42a) ... *wa-toto w-etu hawa-wez-i ku-endele-a bila*  
 2-children 2-our NEG.SM2-able-PRS.NEG INF-continue-FV without  
*wa-limu*  
 2-teachers

#### SHENG

- (b) ... *wa-toto w-etu hawa-wez-i endele-a bila wa-limu*  
 2-children 2-our NEG.SM2-able-PRS.NEG continue-FV without 2-teachers  
 ‘...our children cannot continue without teachers’ (Githiora 2018: 128)<sup>6</sup>

### 5.2 Co-occurrence of object markers

In addition to subject agreement, Bantu languages also exhibit object agreement which appears as a series of object markers within the verb which serve to cross-reference the arguments of the verb. Bantu languages vary with respect to the number and kind of object markers they permit (e.g. Marlo 2015; Marten & Kula 2012). Standard Swahili, in common with many other Bantu languages, only allows a maximum of one object marker per verb. This can be seen in the examples below where (43a) with a single object marker is grammatical, whereas (43b)

6. Original text is from *The Nairobiian* 5–11 July 2013.

and (43c), both of which attempt to include two markers (attempting the two possible orders), are ill-formed.<sup>7</sup>

#### SWAHILI

- (43) a. *ni-li-m-p-a*  
SM1SG-PST-OM1-give-FV  
'I gave him/her (it).'
- b. \**ni-li-i-m-p-a*  
SM1SG-PST-OM9-OM1-give-FV  
Intd. 'I gave him/her it.'
- c. \**ni-li-m-i-p-a*  
SM1SG-PST-OM1-OM9-give-FV  
Intd. 'I gave him/her it.' (Marten et al. 2007: 263/4)

Despite this restriction in Swahili, Sheng permits multiple object markers. This can be seen in example (44) which shows the presence of both the first person singular marker *ni-* and the class 1 marker *m(w)-* before the verb stem.

#### SHENG

- (44) *si u-ni-mw-it-i-e?*  
NEG SM2SG-OM1SG-OM1-call-APPL-SBJV  
'Why don't you call him/her for me?' (Githiora 2018: 91)

While the system of multiple object markers in Sheng deviates from that found in Swahili, numerous other Bantu languages do allow the co-occurrence of object markers, as described extensively in Marlo (2015). This is the case in Gikuyu, for example, which is part of the linguistic ecologies in which Sheng has developed and has had an influence on Sheng. In Gikuyu, multiple object markers are also possible as can be seen in the example in (45) which hosts both the class 1 object marker *mũ-* and the first person singular object marker *nj-*.

#### GIKUYU

- (45) *Mũ-nj-ĩĩ-r-e*  
OM1-OM1SG-call-APPL-FV  
'Call him/her for me.' (Githiora 2018: 91)

Although multiple object markers are not possible in Standard Swahili, the presence of multiple object markers in the broader contact languages for Sheng leads us to analyse this feature as the result of language contact. Bantu languages vary in relation to the possibility of allowing multiple object markers to co-occur or for object marking to be limited to only a single marker. If we take Sheng to be

7. Although see also the work of Gibson et al. (2020) who note that there are reasons to think that the situation, even in Standard Swahili, is more complex than this.

a Swahili-based variety, then this feature can be considered as the result of contact with Bantu languages which allow multiple object markers. The result is an increased morphosyntactic similarity between Sheng and other Bantu languages of the region, in contrast to Swahili.

### 5.3 Summary of features of Sheng in the verbal domain

In this section we have examined a number of features in the verbal domain. Table 2 summarises these features and the type of change they represents.

**Table 2.** Account of Sheng features in the verbal domain

Domain	Feature	Change type
TAM	New TAM distinctions	Independent innovation
TAM	Presence of the habitual suffix <i>-a(n)ga</i>	Contact
Verbal template	Presence of <i>ku-</i> stem marker throughout	Contact/analogical levelling
Co-occurrence of multiple object markers	Co-occurrence of multiple object markers	Contact

We considered the presence of the habitual suffix *-a(n)g* to constitute a clear case of language contact. The suffix is not found in Standard Swahili and its presence in Sheng is reflective of contact with Bantu languages in the area which have this marker. In this respect then, Sheng is more similar to other Bantu languages in exhibiting this form which has also been reconstructed for Proto-Bantu but which has been lost in Swahili. The presence of the stem marker *ku-* in the verb form in Sheng in instances where it would not be found in Swahili is also analysed as the result of language contact with the syntactic conditioning triggering the presences or absence of the marker *ku-* eroded in this variety. This can be considered either to be the result of transfer from other Bantu languages in which the stem marker *ku-* is consistently present or the influence of second language speakers of Swahili who generalise over such patterns of “variation” and irregularity in the target language.

The presence of multiple object markers in a single verb form (possible in Sheng but prohibited in Swahili) is also taken to be reflective of language contact with many Bantu languages of East African which allow multiple object markers.

## 6. Further features of Sheng

A number of studies have noted that despite variation in some areas, the syntax of many urban youth languages is predominantly that of the main language on which they are based. This has been observed for urban youth varieties such as Sepitori in South Africa of which Ditsele & Mann (2014:160) say the following: “Consistent with being a mixed language, Sepitori’s syntax is the same as that of Setswana and Sepedi”. Similarly, Githiora (2002:174, 2018) notes that the grammatical structure of Sheng is “really that of mainstream Swahili”. Similarly, while there are claims that Sheng may represent a reduction or simplification of sorts (e.g., Chimera 1998), this does not seem to be the case. Githiora (2002:173) notes: “One may expect a reduced, pidginized variety to adhere less to canonical forms of its substrate but Sheng samples do not reveal any such reduction of grammatical form. In fact, many of them are as complex and used in the same ways as in Standard Swahili”. However, despite drawing heavily on the grammar of Swahili as its source language, there are features of the clausal syntax of Sheng which certainly differ from standard varieties of Swahili. In the current section we examine a number of such additional features, namely plural addressee marking, relative clause formation, copula constructions and post-verbal locative clitics.

### 6.1 Plural addressee marking

In Swahili the suffix *-ni* is used in the formation of plural imperatives. The use of a specific morphological marker to indicate a plural imperative or subjunctive form is relatively widespread across Bantu languages (Devos & Van Olmen 2013). In Sheng however, this plural suffix is also used to encode plural addressees in non-imperative contexts. This can be seen in its use with the greetings such as *ham-jamboni?* in (46) which contrasts with the Swahili form *hamjambo?*<sup>8</sup>

#### SHENG

(46) *Ha-m-jambo-ni?*

NEG-SM2PL-matter-PLA

‘How are you (pl.)?, Are you well?’

(Githiora 2018:86)

The addition of the plural addressee suffix *-ni* onto the English expression ‘How are you’ also results in the form *hawayuni?*. The use of the plural addressee marker in these examples can be seen as an innovation with respect to the Stan-

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8. This is also similar to the construction found in the South African language Zulu where the Colloquial Zulu greeting *Sanibonani* ‘Hello, good day...’, used with plural addressees, also includes the plural addressee marker *-ni*.

dard Swahili system, where the marker is found, but where its use is structurally more restricted.

## 6.2 Relative clauses

Relative clause constructions are another area in which innovation can be observed in Sheng. While Standard Swahili has been described as having three structural types of relative clauses (Schadeberg 1989), work on Sheng by Shinagawa (2019) notes the existence of five strategies for the formation of relative clauses: null marking, Relative Marker-Verb, Verb-Relative Marker, demonstrative and the use of *-enye* as a relative pronoun. While the two relative marker strategies (RM-Verb and Verb-RM) are present in both Standard Swahili and Sheng, the other three strategies are not present in Standard Swahili.

The use of a zero marked relative clause and the demonstrative strategy have also both been described for Kenyan Colloquial Swahili (Myers-Scotton 1979; Shinagawa 2019). The examples in (47) show the contrast in relative marking, where there is no overt relative clause marker in the Kenyan Colloquial Swahili example in (47a), while the Standard Swahili example in (47b) has the locative relative marker *po-*.

### KENYAN COLLOQUIAL SWAHILI

(47a) *Ha-m-ku-i-pat-a*                      *na ni-li-ku-elez-a*                      *mahali*  
 NEG-SM2PL-PST-OM9-get-FV and SM1SG-PST-OM2SG-explain-FV place  
*m-ta-i-pat-a*  
 SM2PL-FUT-OM9-get-FV

### STANDARD SWAHILI

(b) *Ha-m-ku-i-pat-a*                      *na ni-li-ku-elez-a*                      *mahali*  
 NEG-SM2PL-PST-OM9-get-FV and SM1SG-PST-OM2SG-explain-FV place  
*m-taka-po-wez-a*                      *ku-i-pat-a*  
 SM2PL-FUT.REL.REL16-able-FV INF-OM9-get-FV  
 ‘You didn’t get it and I told you the place where you will get it.’

(Myers-Scotton 1979: 120)

Example (48) shows the use of a demonstrative for the formation of a relative clause. This use of demonstratives for relative clause formation is a widespread mechanism across Bantu (cf. Nsuka Nkutsi 1982), but is not found in Standard Swahili.

## SWAHILI

- (48) *Let-e ni-on-e i-le ki-tabu u-li-sem-a*  
 bring-IMP SM1SG-see-SBJV 9-DEM 7-book SM2SG-PST-speak-FV  
 ‘Bring the book you talked about, so that I can see (it).’

(Myers-Scotton 1979: 120)

These forms already show that there is variation in different forms of Swahili in terms of relative clause structures. We have not identified a specific contact language for the potential “source” of this relative strategy. However, since Nairobi is a highly multilingual city with representatives from most linguistic communities found in Kenya, it seems reasonable to propose that one of the potential contact languages employs a demonstrative in the formation of relative clauses.

Sheng also exhibits an innovative relative clause construction based on the form *-enye*. The form *-enye* is also found in Standard Swahili, but there it is not used in relative clauses. Rather, in Standard Swahili *-enye* functions as an adnominal possessive stem and conveys the meaning ‘having’. This can be seen in the example in (49), where it is used to convey the meaning of having a high age. Similarly, the lexical items in (50) exemplify the use of *-enye* as part of a nominal compound. In (50a) we see the combination of *-enye* and the noun *kiti* ‘chair’, yielding ‘chairperson’ (lit. ‘person having the chair’), whilst in (50b) *-enye* combines with *duka* ‘shop’, resulting in ‘shop-owner’ (lit. ‘person having a shop’).

## SWAHILI

- (49) *M-tu mw-enye umri mkubwa*  
 1-person 1-having 9.age 9.big  
 ‘The/a person having a large age’

- (50) a. *mw-enye-ki-ti*  
 1-having-7-chair  
 ‘chairperson’  
 b. *mw-enye-duka*  
 1-having-5.shop  
 ‘shop-owner’

In Swahili, relative clauses are constructed through either use of a pre-stem relative marker showing concord with the relevant noun class (51a), the agreeing relative clause marker *amba-* (51b), or with the relative marker appearing as an enclitic on the verb form (51c).

## SWAHILI

- (51) a. *M-tu a-li-ye-ku-j-a jana*  
 1-person SM1-PST-REL1-STM-come-FV yesterday  
 ‘The person who came yesterday...’

- b. *M-tu amba-ye a-li-ku-j-a jana*  
 1-person REL-REL1 SM1-PST-STM-come-FV yesterday  
 ‘The person who came yesterday...’
- c. *M-tu a-j-a-ye jana*  
 1-person SM1-come-FV-REL1 yesterday  
 ‘The person who came yesterday...’

However, in Sheng (as well as in Kenyan Swahili more widely) an inflected form of *-enye* can be used in the formation of the relative clause as can be seen in the examples below where *-enye* introduces the relative clause. In the examples below, *-enye* is marked with different noun class markers: the class 1 prefix *m(w)-*, the class 7 prefix *ch-*, the class 2 prefix *w(a)-* and the class 8 prefix *v-*. The examples also show that the relative form with *-enye* can be used for modification of an overt head, with which the relative marker then agrees, as in (52) and (53), as well as in headless relative clause constructions, as in (54)–(56), where the intended referent has to be inferred. In (56), the class 8 agreement in the headless relative is used to encode manner, which is a function of class 8 also in other varieties of Swahili.

#### SHENG

- (52) *M-tu mw-enye a-li-ku-j-a hapa*  
 1-person 1-REL SM1-PST-STM-come-FV yesterday  
 ‘The person who came here’ (Githiora 2018: 88)
- (53) *Ki-tu ch-enye si-tak-i*  
 7-thing 7-REL SM1SG.NEG-want-PRS.NEG  
 ‘The thing that I don’t want’ (Githiora 2018: 88)
- (54) *Lakini w-enye wa-na-ku-hand-a si w-a ha-po ...*  
 but 2-REL SM2-PROG-OM2SG-rob-FV NEG 2-of DEM-16  
 ‘But the ones who rob you are not from here ...’ (Githiora 2018: 120)
- (55) *Lipa ch-enye u-na-like pekee*  
 pay 7-REL SM2SG-PROG-like only  
 ‘Just pay for what you like.’
- (56) *Ni v-enye ha-wa ma-karao hu-mad-ang-a ma-jamaa hu-ku*  
 COP 8-REL DEM-2 6-cops HAB-murder-HAB-FV 6-guys DEM-17  
 ‘It’s how these cops kill guys around here.’ (Githiora 2018: 114)

Whilst *-enye* has its origins in Swahili, it is used in Sheng in the formation of a relative clause, as shown in examples (52)–(56). This not only differs from its use in Swahili, as in (49) above, but also reflects a deviation from the more typical relative clause found in Swahili. The use of *-enye* as a relative marker in Sheng therefore represents an innovative morphosyntactic strategy in Sheng.

### 6.3 Copula constructions

Another area of morphosyntactic innovation in Sheng are copula constructions. The morphology of the locative copula *-ko* as found in the examples below represents an independent development in Sheng. While in Standard Swahili, the class 1 inflection of the copula uses the irregular class 1 agreement form *yu-*, in Sheng, this is being replaced by the regular class 1 agreement marker *a-*. The examples below show the use of the locative copula *-ko* with the class 1 subject concord *a-*. In (57) *ako* combines with the conjunction *na* to encode possession, while in (58) *ako* is used to encode a location. This is different from the pattern in Standard Swahili, where the class 1 pronominal concord is *yu-*, as seen in (59).

#### SHENG

(57) *U-u dem a-ko na ma-chali wa-sita*  
 DEM-1 girl SM1-LOC.COP CON 6-boy/lover 2-six  
 ‘The girl has six lovers.’ (Beck 2015:61)

(58) *A-ko wera*  
 SM1-LOC work  
 ‘She is at work.’ (Githiora 2018:95)

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(59) *Yu-ko kazi-ni*  
 SM1-LOC work-LOC  
 ‘She is at work.’

Shinagawa (2007: 160) interprets the existence of forms such as *ako* as an indicator of the simplification of concords. The suggestion is that the noun class distinctions are neutralised and the agreement *a-* is used with both inflected verbs and locative predicates. This contrasts with the situation in Standard Swahili, where class 1 agreement has a more complex paradigm, distinguishing *yu-*, which is used in locative and some other grammatical contexts, from the general class 1 agreement marker *a-*. However, the examples in (60) seem to suggest that there is also variation in Sheng, since both forms are accepted as with *ako* in (60a) and *yuko* in (60b).

#### SHENG

(60) a. *A-ko kolee*  
 SM1-LOC.COP 9.college  
 ‘She is at college.’  
 b. *Yu-ko kolee*  
 SM1-LOC.COP 9.college  
 ‘She is at college.’ (Beck 2015:61)

This is perhaps to be expected given what can be presumed to be differing levels of interaction and interference from Swahili and also the availability of different comprehensible forms amongst speakers.

#### 6.4 Post-verbal locative enclitics

A feature which is present in Swahili but seems to show variation in function and meaning in Sheng is the use of the post-verbal locative enclitic *-ko*, already seen in the formation of the locative copula in the preceding section. While the locative classes 16, 17 and 18 can be encoded through an enclitic on the verb in Swahili, the widespread use of this strategy for locative marking in Sheng does seem to represent variation in this regard. Consider the construction shown in (61) below, where the locative enclitic is added to the verb *kwenda*.

##### SHENG

- (61) *Tu-na-kwenda-ko hɔm*  
 SM1PL-PROG-go-LOC home  
 ‘We are going home.’ (Githiora 2018:92)

A possible analysis of this example is that a locative noun such as ‘home’ (*nyumbani* in Swahili) would host the locative suffix *-ni* in the comparable structure in Standard Swahili yielding *tunakwenda nyumbani* ‘We are going home.’ Since the locative noun in this example is *hɔm*, a borrowing from English and not available for locative marking, the locative enclitic *-ko* is added to the verb instead. Thus, although locative clitics such as the form *-ko* in (61) are also found in Swahili, they are used more widely in Sheng, and in the construction in (61) the use of this locative enclitic is the only way to indicate (or emphasise) the locative noun since the borrowed nominal is not available for locative marking.

Similarly in (62), the Sheng example employs the locative enclitic *-ko*. While Standard Swahili does employ locative enclitics the interpretation here suggests that this is functioning as “substitutive applicative” (cf. Marten & Kula 2014 for Bemba). In such constructions, the applicative is used alongside a locative enclitic to encode a meaning along the lines of ‘instead of, in your place.’ Therefore, one interpretation of the utterance in (62) would be that the hearer gives the speaker twenty shillings to look after their car ‘instead of them’ or ‘on their behalf’.



class 1 subject agreement *a-* on the inflecting locative copula form *-ko* (which in Standard Swahili appears as *yu-* rather than *a-*) is also considered to represent an instance of independent innovation. However, this might also be reflective of language contact with second language speakers of Swahili perhaps extending the class 1 subject agreement also to the copula clause context rather than maintaining a distinct paradigm for the inflecting copula. The use of the locative enclitic *-ko* is seen as the result of contact with other Bantu languages which employ the post-verbal locative enclitic.

## 7. Summary and conclusions

The aim of this paper has been to examine features of the morphosyntax of Sheng with a view to better understanding the structural properties underlying this variety. We have also adopted the notions of centripetal and centrifugal convergence to better understand the features found in Sheng and the processes of change that may have given rise to these features. Urban youth languages are often thought to exhibit radically different and simplified syntactic structures and morphosyntactic forms compared to their source languages. However, in this paper we have shown that in fact Sheng is more conservative than is perhaps usually thought to be the case. Urban youth languages are often thought of as drivers of change and innovation. We have argued here that while this might be true of lexical material, in terms of morphosyntax the youth language – or stylet – Sheng either follows the morphosyntax of Swahili or presents instances of innovation well attested from a comparative Bantu perspective. In many of the instances in which Sheng deviates from the structures or forms found in Swahili, it has in fact moved “closer to” the syntax of other Bantu languages with which Sheng is in contact, reflecting its speakers’ multilingual repertoires and the multilingual realities of the broader speech communities who use Sheng.

This study has further supported the observation by Githiora (2018) that Sheng is not some “pidginised” or “simplified” version of Swahili which simply varies or “deviates” from the grammar of the standard language in an ad hoc way. Rather the changes in terms of grammar are systematic changes reflective of broader variation across Bantu and more specifically the Bantu languages with which Sheng speakers are in contact. The examples explored here therefore represent consistent examples of centripetal convergence where, in instances in which Sheng varies from Swahili, it converges towards other Bantu languages. A good example of this is that multiple object markers are not permitted in Swahili but are acceptable in Sheng, as they are in numerous other Bantu languages, albeit with a range of different restrictions and variation attested (see e.g. Marlo 2015; Marten

& Kula 2012). In other instances, the changes we see in Sheng which cannot be identified in neighbouring or contact languages are still reflective of and in line with universal constraints and tendencies as are observed in relation to language change. That is not to say however that there is no innovation in Sheng. There are some innovations found in the language, such as innovative relative clause structures, as would be expected and as is in line with the observations about African youth languages more widely. However, in the domain of syntax and morphosyntax more broadly, this innovation seems to be less great than is often assumed.

In this paper we focused primarily on ways in which the variation between Sheng and Swahili can be attributed to contact and prevalence of other languages, especially given the multilingual language ecology and the presence of other Bantu language in the area. An avenue for future research would be to look at the impact that non-Bantu languages have had on the grammar of Sheng. While Swahili and neighbouring East African Bantu languages often share basic morphosyntactic structures and even specific morphemes used in these structures (cf. the discussion of the notions of centripetal and centrifugal convergence in Section 2), major non-Bantu Kenyan languages such as the Nilotic languages Dholuo and Maasai are also in contact with Swahili, and are contributing to the development of Sheng. Contact effects involving these languages are likely to be different from contact involving Bantu languages, given the more distinct morphosyntactic structures, and would be worth exploring further. It would also be interesting to better understand the views of Sheng-speakers in relation to the features discussed in this paper and to what extent different features are considered indexical of Sheng. Here we have primarily compared features of Sheng to Standard Swahili. However, another important reference point for Sheng is Kenyan Swahili and so future research could aim to better understand these features in light of the broader linguistic continuum of Sheng, Kenyan Swahili and Standard Swahili. Finally, an examination of the morphosyntactic features of other East African youth languages or stylets such as *Lugha ya Mtaani* – the Tanzanian “counterpart” to Sheng – would also provide an invaluable comparative perspective and help to locate Sheng in a wider context of East African youth languages.

However, given these limitations and the caveats outlined at the start, the present study has provided insights into an often-underexplored element of the morphosyntax of Sheng, as well as processes of contact-induced change more broadly.

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## Abbreviations

1, 2, 3	noun classes	NUM	number
APPL	applicative	OM	object marker
CON	connective	PL	plural
COP	copula	PLA	plural addressee marker
CXP	counter-expectational	POSS	possessive
DEM	demonstrative	PRF	perfective
FOC	focus	PROG	progressive
FUT	future	PRS	present
FV	final vowel	PST	past
HAB	habitual	REL	relative
IMP	imperative	RM	relative marker
INF	infinitive	SBJV	subjunctive
Intd	intended	SG	singular
IPFV	imperfective	SM	subject marker
LOC	locative	STM	stem marker
NEG	negative	TA	tense-aspect marker





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