Emerging Language Trends and the Intellectually Challenged Youth in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Educating the intellectually challenged (I.C) youth has been a great challenge in Kenya over the years. The emergence of several forms of youth languages has made it even more challenging. Just like other regular youth, the I.C youth find themselves caged into the euphoria of emerging languages like Sheng'. Unfortunately, most of them are not even able to make sense out of the language they use due to their mental incapability. The study sought to find out what causes the I.C youth get carried away with emerging youth languages and how these languages affected their education, either positively or negatively. The study utilized the social theory of language by Herbert Blumer (1969). The theory posits that it is not true that the full expanse of society, in any human society, is but an expression of pre-established forms of joint action. New situations are constantly arising within the scope of group life that are problematic and for which existing rules are inadequate. These new situations constantly arising bring about changes in all spheres of society, language being one of them. The study was carried out in Kiambu County. It targeted I.C youth in special schools located in urban centres. Five boys and five girls of between 14-20 years were sampled purposively. Two teachers of the I.C youth are also sampled purposively. This enables the researcher to get respondents who could give required data. Interview guide was used to collect data from all the respondents. Data was analyzed qualitatively through description and explanation in prose.

Key words: Urban youth, language, intellectually challenged, education

Introduction

Education is important to everybody as it is key in all life matters. Education is central to development and to the improvement of the lives of young people globally, and as such has been identified as a priority area in internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals and the World Programme of Action for Youth (UN 2000). Education is important in eradicating poverty and hunger and in promoting sustained, inclusive and equitable economic growth and sustainable development. Increased efforts towards education accessibility, quality and affordability are central to global development efforts (UNESCO, 2013). The youth form the backbone of every country as they constitute the largest percent of the population. Besides, they are energetic and at the prime of their life. Kenya Population Situation Analysis carried out in July 2013 by the National Council for Population Development (NCPD) established that Kenyan youth by the year 2009 stood at, 10-14 years- 13%; 15-19 years – 10.8%; 20-24 years – 9.8 %; a total of 32.8% of the whole population. This being the case, youth need to be educated to enable them meet their social obligations and take the country to the next level.

Among the youth tabulated above include the Intellectually Challenged. These are youth who experience mental impairments who comprise a minority of the larger group. However, their Educational needs need to be accounted for to enable them make ends meet and become self reliant. Moreover, the Darkar conference (UNESCO 2000) proposed Education For All (EFA) irrespective of gender, race, religion, disability or background affiliations.

Language is a tool that is used to disseminate education. Njoroge (2009) terms it as a tool of development. Language plays an vital role in the education sector. Pinnock (2009) noted that All those working to improve the quality and reach of education now have an opportunity to recognize the vital role that children's language plays in learning, and to put genuine investment and commitment into good quality multilingual education. This shows that language will influence the dissemination of education either positively or negatively.

Emerging youth languages affect all youth. Mainly, those youth in the urban settings will elicit high affiliation to emerging languages as they live in more affluent homes. They wish to associate with the changing world and cultures. The youth with mental incapabilities are not left behind because they live in the same environments and will in most instances wish to conform to their peers and age-mates. Unfortunately, due to their intellectual challenge, sometimes they pick and speak terms that are meaningless or pass wrong information.

SHENG AND THE INTELLECTUALLY CHALLENGED

According to (Momanyi 2009), many urban youth who are Sheng' speakers do not know or at best are not fluent in the languages of their ethnicity the languages in which their family values, behaviour patterns, skills and the whole cultural output is coached. People who get caught up in mass culture operate in subtraction and exclusion rather than addition of their cultural orientation. They tend to use mixed or hybrid languages and these serve as in-group markers.

In the recent past, Sheng' has been a concern of most teachers, parents and educators as it has emerged forcefully into Kenyan youth almost leaving them off balance. Many Language scholars have delved into research to find

out what can be done to deal with this forceful language. In fact, many have found that it is getting acceptance by many in various sectors (Githiora,2012; Iraki,2010,2014; Mutiga, 2013). Some of these sectors that identify with Sheng' include local media; television and radio; business and advertising; Safaricom and Airtel; education; Secondary and University students; transport industry and in the church (Mutiga, 2013). Some families have also been trapped into using Sheng' as the language of communication where parents are lured into using it by their influential adolescent children. Mutiga (2013) notes that:

> ' the earliest speakers of Sheng', the youth of the 1960s and 70s ,
> are now men and women in their late forties and early-fifties, some
> of these parents have completely shifted from speaking the languages
> of their ethnicity and now speak Sheng' as their primary language. The
> children of these people have therefore not been exposed to the ethnic
> languages and have not then acquired them as their primary languages;
> instead they have acquired Sheng' which for this group is the language
> of the home. Later on they learn Kiswahili and English through
> exposure to the wider society and through the school system.'

This being the case, the Intellectually Challenged youth do not live in isolation, but are members of these societies, so they are deemed to be affected as well. This paper explored the effect of Sheng' language as an emerging youth language in Kenya on the Education of the Intellectually Challenged youth.

There has been an outcry on the performance especially in English and Kiswahili. Since English Language is the carrier of all other subjects in the curriculum except Kiswahili, it is evident that Sheng' affects learning. The Standard Newspaper of 29th December 2011 blamed Sheng' on the poor performance of languages as stated below:

> ' Education Minister Sam Ongeri blamed poor performance in Kiswahili
> and English to extensive use of Sheng, which he warned is spreading
> to senior members of society. In the results, pupils from rural schools
> performed better in languages than their counterparts in towns, where
> Sheng is prevalent. "Our suspicion is that adulteration of Kiswahili
> and English, where even senior members of the society, including
> top politicians, have turned to talk Sheng to endear themselves to the
> youths has affected performance in the two subjects," said Ongeri'.

Researchers have unanimously concurred that for any second language take place, some strategies have to be employed. Hypothesis formation which includes transfer, overgeneralization and simplification (Balcom, 2001; Ellis 2001, 1994, Herschensohn, 2000). Most of them argue that one thinks in the native language before transferring or generalizing the concept in the target language i.e use of L1 properties in the L2.

The mother-tongue or native language (L1) of urban youth, as seen earlier, is Sheng' as most have been born and brought up in a metropolitan setting. This being the case, they first think in Sheng before transferring the concept in

the target language i.e English or Kiswahili. If Sheng' has been affecting the learning of L2 in regular learners, then it is worse for learners who are Intellectually Challenged.

Methodology

Taking two schools of the Intellectually Challenged from Thika Municipality, Kiambu County, an urban set-up, ten I.C learners were sampled purposefully, five boys and five girls. This was done with the help of their two teachers for two reasons. One, to find I.C learners who have fluent speech and are not shy to speak out spontaneously and two, to enable them to be free with the researcher who is a stranger to them owing to the fact that they gain their confidence to strangers gradually. The teachers listened to the participants and recorded Sheng' terminologies used in their spontaneous speech. Teachers also verified whether the I.C learners made meaning. of the Sheng' terminologies they used. The two teachers of the I.C learners were interviewed regarding the effect of Sheng' language on the I.C learning.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

There were a number of observations in the findings. First, There were many Sheng' terminologies that refer to one English or Kiswahili term. For example;

ENGLISH TERM	SHENG' TERMS
Police	Masense, makarao,makops
Food	Kerome, difu
Teacher	Demako, mode
Cap	Ngepa, para
Mother	Mokoro, masa, mathee
Father	Buda, maze

There was a challenge for the I.C learners as each interpreted these terminologies differently. Due to their mental challenge, the I.C were unable to make meaning to all terminologies and each would pick just one Sheng' terminology and would be unaware of the rest. When the unknown Sheng' terminologies were used, the I.C would look lost. The challenge arises because the learners recognize these terms invariably i.e some have zero concepts for some Sheng' terminologies.

The second observation was that there were Sheng' terminologies with various meanings. For instance the term;

Kushow will mean - tell you, show you, explain, understand, inform

A lot of learning takes place during interactions with peers. I.C learners were not able to understand these differentiations in meaning and mainly they got lost and floated in conversation with their regular peers.. This caused the regular learners to laugh at their I.C peers. The I.C learners therefore withdrew from their regular peers who are very instrumental towards the I.C learning. This is the reason why schools or special units are placed in the regular schools to allows I.C learners interact with their regular peers and hence learn social skills.

Another observation was that were reversal of the terms . for example, food is reversed into "difu" and 'fundi' Kiswahili for tailor is ' ndifu'. The I.C learners could not differentiate these reversals especially when they are adopted from different languages.

Another observation was the pronunciation of some words. The I.C learners fail to get the correct pronunciations of the Sheng terminologies yet, they go ahead using them. A good example of these Sheng terminology is "*masanse*' meaning police. The I.C pronounce it as '*masense*' others '*mashense*' others '*machenze*'. All these are different terms. The regular peers fail to understand them due to these differentiations and instead brush them off.
Other words noted were;

I.C sheng' pronunciation	Correct sheng' pronunciation	Meaning
ngṹru	ngṹrṹ	five bob
mushae	Maze	Father
kuso	Kuzo	Cousin

The teachers found that once the I.C learnt these terms, even when they are wrong, unlearning them was very difficult. They are not able to correct themselves and take the correct pronunciation like the regular learners do. This makes it very difficult for I.C learners to communicate with their peers who are agents of socialization and learning.

Another observation was that in Thika Municipality, the Sheng' language spoken by young people is borrowed from many ethnic backgrounds. For instance, the following table shows Sheng' words and the ethnic background they have been borrowed from.

Sheng' word	Ethnic background
Difu	English – reversed
Makops	Kiswahili +English
mathee	English
mokoro	Gikuyu (derogative)
demako	onomatopeia+ luhya ending
kushow	Kiswahili+ English
Ndifu	Kiswahili – reversed
Mtaa	Kiswahili

Other Sheng' terminologies are coined from experiences and what they display in real life. We call the onomatopoeic words . Some of such words are;
Makarau –policemen - their nature of being rough
Ngepa, para   -cap - the way it looks when placed on the head.
Mzae, buda - father or men of fatherly age – show of age and being rich (with money)
Kerome -food - act of eating in the Gikuyu language

It was also observed that Sheng' language is growing so rapidly. New terminologies are being coined every day and in different situations. A situation that is confusing the regular learners. There are no rules of formation and every person is allowed to bring in new terminology. The I.C are not able to cope

with this rapid change due to their mental incapability. This affects their learning as those that act as their mirrors (the regular learners) cannot cope with their slow pace of learning these terms. Besides, the regular learners are also challenged by the speed of new terminologies finding their way into the Sheng' language.

Going by the social learning theory, (Blumer, 1969), the emergence of Sheng' language among the youth has changed the language rules completely. The change has not only carried away the regular youth, the I.C youth but also the children and the adult. This is seen in the literature where Mutiga (2013) argues that parents have been lured by their influential adolescent children into using Sheng' language at home. The I.C youth cannot remain rigid on the use of language. They have to change and conform to the changing trends being set up by other youth in their environment. As these emerging language (Sheng') adversely affect the education of the regular youth, the I.C are not spared. What will heal the regular youth from the effect of Sheng' on their education will also be applied to the I.C youth. This is because the I.C youth ape the regular youth in all areas as they want to be seen as regular youth. The regular youth act as a mirror to the I.C youth.

Sheng is seen as an unstoppable phenomenon. We recommend that sheng language standardized and be allowed to be taught in schools just like other languages. This will allow I.C learners differentiate the languages, the same way they differentiate other languages.

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