Redefining Nairobi’s Streets: A Study of Slang, Marginalization, and Identity

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Abstract

This study attempts an analysis of a restructured Swahili variety spoken by Nairobi’s street community: Kinoki. Adapting tools of sociolinguistic inquiry and focusing on Kinoki’s divergence from the dominant urban slang, Sheng, the study discusses attitudes toward divergent terms referencing the street community, street activities, and law enforcement officials. Results indicate that street children, unlike their school-going peers living in the city’s low-income neighborhoods, redefine pejoratives that devalue and stigmatize street people and their lifestyle. Instead, Kinoki empowers the marginalized community to construct a positive identity, to ameliorate representations of street lifestyle, and to redefine neologisms that reference in-group (us) and out-group (them) experiences. Further, the study situates Kinoki within Nairobi’s complex linguistic environment and explores its social roles.

Beyond the glitter, glamour, and allure of modern cosmopolitan cities such as Nairobi lies the undeniable reality of extreme urban poverty. Homeless individuals, beggars, and street children eke out a living by begging, stealing, directing motorists into parking spaces, and washing cars. The drastic increase in the number of street children in Nairobi in the last two decades can be attributed to factors that include rapid rural-urban migration, the ravaging effects of HIV/AIDS, the effects of the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) that were forced on African countries by the Brentwood institutions, and the economic mismanagement that characterized the 1980s and 1990s.

Nairobians commonly refer to street children as chokora mapipa (those who scavenge in the dustbins) or simply, chokora. Chokora is the most common
term, but certainly not the only term that reflects the attitudes of society toward the poor and unkempt youngsters living in the city’s back alleys and streets. General disdain and apathy toward this community’s lifestyle are further reflected in the use of more harsh labels: wakora (thugs), wanyang’anyi (snatchers), and Malaya (prostitutes). In an attempt to avoid the use of such devaluing self-referencing terms, street children appropriate resources in the multilingual environment to redefine their world and to accentuate the lines of solidarity between those who participate in the harsh street life and those who stigmatize the street lifestyle. In so doing street children have made contributions toward the overall growth of the prestige of Nairobi slang by adding fresh lexical items to Sheng. Indeed, the relationship between Kinoki and Sheng is bidirectional: Each variety may provide new items to be transformed by the other with modified structure or altered meaning.

This paper highlights the agency of Nairobi’s street children in contesting imposed, negatively represented labels by constructing positive identity of the group. Based on the language attitudes toward Sheng and Kinoki words elicited from a controlled sample of pupils from Nairobi’s low-income schools and homeless street children, clear distinctions emerge in the way both social groups relate to the pejoratives and coinages referencing the street life. Specifically, while Sheng is widely perceived to index urban sophistication and an association with the lower class, Kinoki indexes street sophistication and membership of a different group of the lower class: those with a shared knowledge of the experiences and harsh realities of homelessness.

In order to understand the social demarcations and linguistic variation manifested in the use of the street slang, this paper begins by situating Kinoki and its speakers within the densely multilingual city. Then an analysis of attitudes toward street coinages elicited from a carefully selected sample of school pupils and street children is made. Conclusions are drawn based on a measurement of language attitudes using an adapted semantic differential scale.

**Background**

In order to better understand how a marginal group, otherized by the dominant culture, appropriates language in order to redefine itself, it may suffice to focus, albeit briefly, on literature that discusses identity construction and the social functions of pejoratives.

Duszak (2002) contends that people construct their social identities on the basis of various socially and culturally relevant parameters such as ethnicity, nationality, gender, age, and style of living. Although the sense of belonging to a group fulfills human desires as people share things with other people, such
aligning also facilitates a sense of detachment, distance, and even hostility from others. The detachment and hostility are usually manifested in language and specifically so in the use of pejoratives. Allen (1991) argues that pejoratives directed at a social group have both immediate and delayed indirect social effects: “Name-calling is a social act in speech, a weapon used against out-groups and their individual members…. All terms of abuse for unlike social groups serve to establish, justify, and maintain the social pecking order, or to protest it.” More significantly, Allen (1991, pp. 217-21) observes:

The thinking that underlies name-calling is that They are not Us, and that We take our identity in part as not-Them. They are the opposite of Us, or at best somewhere between Us and Them. When the informal name of a social out-group or in-group is uttered, it is understood in relation to its unspoken opposite. To name Them implicitly names Us, if only as Us. Or to name Us with an ironic epithet given to Us by Them… implicitly names Them. Each name makes sense in relation to other names in this aggregate-level discourse.

Thus, the communal efforts by a stigmatized group to challenge externally imposed, negative labels of itself through the construction of positive identities are as socially important as those of the dominant culture in stigmatizing the social Other.

Studies in urban slang have shown that young people living in language contact situations engage in ingenious strategies geared toward lexicalizing the local (Alim, 2004). Specifically, urban youths have the propensity to create new forms of expression to serve specific needs in society. Sorning (1981, p. 62) relates this ingenuity among urban youths to “situations in which a new kind of consciousness and identity arises … new experiences demand new expressive means … familiar concepts are given new, sometimes unfamiliar names, because they are seen from a different perspective.” Sorning’s explanation is applicable in understanding the distinct nature of Kinoki, a form of expression that is certainly engendered by unique experiences and perceptive of the street lifestyle.

Prominent studies focusing on communicative situations that give rise to distinct urban slang include accounts of Black American street speech (Alim, 2004; Baugh, 1984; Smitherman, 2000); London slang that manifests influences from Jamaican Creole and Punjabi (Rampton, 1995); and Verlan, a French street slang with influences of North African Arabic. Further the nature and functions of Brazilian slang are documented in Roth-Gordon’s (2002) study. These and other studies point to the widespread use of creative expression among young urban dwellers.
Linguists are also increasingly interested in understanding the nature and growth of mixed varieties emerging in the densely multilingual cities in Africa. Among the documented urban codes include Tsotsitaal in Soweto (Makhudu, 2002); Urban Wolof in Dakar, Peul in Yaounde, and Sango in Bangui (Leigh, 1994); Indoubil in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Goyvaerts, 1988); Camfranglais in Cameroon (Kouega, 2003); and Sheng in Nairobi (Abdulaziz & Osinde, 1997; Githiora, 2002; Mbaabu, 2003; Spyropoulos, 1987). The current study complements these African studies, the one of Nairobi Sheng in particular, by illuminating a crucial, though largely overlooked, language use among the homeless street children. The reported creative use of language by these children to redefine a stigmatized lifestyle and to ameliorate the hazards of street life further reinforces Thiong’o’s (1986, p.15) argument that language functions as a carrier of culture, an image-forming agent that provides a group with a whole conception of itself as a group. Similarly, it echoes Duszak’s (2002, p.1) contention that “language gives us a most powerful tool of conveying social identities, for telling (and making) friends and foes.” Thus, Sheng facilitates the transmission of the culture and reality of Nairobi’s lower class, but Kinoki provides the homeless community with a tool to help form its own images and perspectives of the world, and to distinguish friend from foe.

Global and Local Factors Influence Urban Slang

Granted that the distinct nature of any slang is shaped by local conditions, the global influences that contribute to the shaping of the mixed code can hardly be discounted. The extensive reach of information technology coupled with enhanced social mobility and interactions has precipitated the contact between different languages and cultures. Inevitably, forms of expression among urban youths in Africa manifest varied degrees of influences from urban Black culture in the diaspora. Notably, the appropriation and subsequent localization of the American hip-hop and Caribbean reggae cultures in poor neighborhoods in many African cities point to the expansive linguistic and cultural fusions.

Consider for instance the creative appropriation of the hip-hop genre in articulating issues of concern to African youths. Although African hip-hop reflects the rhythm, style, and persona of the American genre, African artists use urban slangs such as Sheng, Tsotsitaal, and Urban Wolof to articulate themes relevant to the lives of urban youths in their respective regions. For example, the social agency of African hip-hop is effective in promoting HIV/AIDS awareness and illuminating the plight of the urban poor. The promotion of Sheng through this popular music genre has enhanced its social status and prestige in Nairobi to the extent that advertisers and politicians are increasingly recognizing the
urban slang as an effective agent of social change. All in all, the complexity of the language context in multilingual African cities warrants the use of essential tools in navigating the heavily contested linguistic space and for satisfying local needs. And so, Kinoki appropriates features from Swahili, English, Sheng, and other African languages; creatively lexicalizes the images and realities of a homeless and harsh world in the streets; and serves as a necessary tool for marking identity and reinforcing solidarity among members of the street community. A brief look at the complexity of Nairobi’s linguistic profile will further illuminate the place Kinoki occupies within the contested space.

Situating Kinoki within Nairobi’s Linguistic Space

Nairobi, Kenya’s capital city, with an estimated population of 2.8 million residents, is endowed with a complex milieu of languages, dialects, and mixed codes. The multiple languages in contact create an ideal environment for the growth of varied language varieties as residents from diverse linguistic backgrounds interact in public spaces. As a matter of fact, a majority of Kenya’s 42 indigenous languages, plus those from neighboring Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Uganda, coexist with English and Swahili in the city.

While English serves as the official language of government and medium of instruction in schools, Swahili functions as the national language, lingua franca, and language of solidarity for interethnic communication. As a result, contact-induced interactions in the city’s public spaces have produced complex Swahili varieties. The outcome and nature of these varieties are largely determined by factors that include the number of languages in contact, the size of the speech community, and the level of education, age, and social class of the principal agents of linguistic change.

In general, nonstandard Swahili varieties spoken in Nairobi fall into four broad categories: Mama Njeri, Kajibhai, Afande, and Sheng. Firstly, the Mama Njeri variety refers to any nonstandard Swahili variety characterized by distinct interferences of the idiosyncratic features of a speech community’s first language. For instance, speakers of a language such as Kalenjin that voices labial [p] and velar [k] in intervocalic positions transfer the phonological rule in their production of Swahili. Commonly identified with recent rural immigrants the category comprises subvarieties identified with a speaker’s ethnic language, hence Gikuyu-Swahili, Luo-Swahili, Kalenjin-Swahili, and so forth. Secondly, the Kajibhai variety refers to the attenuated Swahili variety spoken by Nairobi residents of Asian descent. The heavily accented and simplified Swahili is a carry-on from Kihindi, the Swahili used by Asian settlers for communication with African farmhands in colonial Kenya. Thirdly, Afande Swahili, a unique
variety spoken by police and members of the armed forces, can be traced to the military Swahili spoken by the 3rd and 5th King’s African Rifles regiments in the 1920s. Finally, there are varieties of Sheng that continue to grow in prestige and social acceptance. Although further analysis of these varieties is relevant to the understanding of Nairobi’s linguistic profile, the specific concern here is with the understanding of the development of youth varieties with specific attention being paid to the language of street youth.

Emerging Youth Varieties

Faced with realities of an urban experience that demands ingenuity and accommodation for a successful negotiation of the complex linguistic terrain, the Nairobi youth have developed forms of expression that facilitate group identity and interethnic communication in communal spaces. Sheng, Engsh, and other emergent subvarieties function as beacons of a city’s identity. Coinages from these nonstandard varieties are increasingly transcending social and linguistic boundaries and carving a niche in brand advertising, sports, political campaigns, and entertainment.

Sheng. Widely spoken across social groups, this variety was earlier associated with low-income youths who were marginalized by mainstream society and deprived of opportunities to integrate with society (Spyropoulos, 1987). A mixed code that relies on Swahili for structure and a variety of local and foreign languages for lexis (Abdulaziz & Osinde, 1997), Sheng is the principal form of expression for the majority of Nairobi’s youth and other low-income residents. Contrary to earlier literature that projected Sheng to be a monolithic slang and a recent linguistic phenomenon, Mutonya and Parson’s (2004) account of KiKAR, a Swahili variety spoken in the 1920s, suggests a much older progenitor for contemporary Nairobi slang. Features that range from lexical substitution to semantic extension of borrowed words characterize Sheng vocabulary.

Kinoki

That harsh and stigmatized experiences demand unique interpretations of the street lifestyle is axiomatic. This derivative of Sheng obscures in-group activities and intentions from nonparticipants of street life.

Street children live in complex networks with members of the larger speech community, particularly the lower income social groups. The network relations facilitate contact between Sheng and Kinoki as well as the transmission of new lexical terms across the boundaries of the homeless and those who reside in lower income neighborhoods. Consider, for instance, the fact that during the
day, community life for the street youth blends with the community life of other poor people for whom the street is also a vital means of livelihood. As *jua kali* workers (mechanics, blacksmiths, and hawkers) practice their trade, outdoors, in city streets, they, too, face economic insecurities and frequent harassment by city council askaris (Kilbride, Njeru and Suda, 2000). A strong bond drawn from shared experiences and interdependence in the art of street survival is manifested in shared use of the secret street code. Moreover, many of these children are themselves offspring of the same poor adults eking out a living on the streets. Newly coined lexical items and other linguistic changes are, therefore, easily transmitted through the fuzzy linguistic boundaries. The agency of such marginalized communities in shaping the conventional slang is hardly acknowledged in extant literature. Nevertheless, this study suggests that unique experiences demand constant creation of new expressions in order to foster the survival of speakers in the hostile street environment.

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. Contesting such references, the community defines itself through Kinoki, which similar to what Alim (2003) observes in the *Black American Hip-Hop Artists* serves as a “strategic construction of street conscious identity” that includes “sets of values, morals, and cultural aesthetics that govern life in the streets” (Alim, 2003, pp. 44-45).

Kinoki is also intended to obscure in-group activities and intentions from nonparticipants of the street life. In order to survive the harsh lifestyle of homelessness, street children engage in antisocial activities such as purse snatching, pickpocketing, and other illegal methods of acquiring money for sustenance.

The challenges facing a researcher seeking to decode coinages and semantic extensions of a language variety intended to obscure information from nonparticipants can hardly be overstated. It is with the assistance of social workers who have earned the trust of the street community and even learned the linguistic nuances of the variety that data collection and interpretation become plausible.

**Data Collection**

The analysis draws on data collected through participant observation, spontaneous discourses, and an interactive survey over several months. Two samples of Nairobi dwellers aged 10-14 years participated in the study. The first was a group of 20 children, transitioning between homelessness and rehabilitation centers, and proficient in Kinoki. The second comprised 20 schoolchildren who spoke Sheng as their first language. Social workers who have earned the trust and confidence of the street community facilitated entry into the community and provided valuable
assistance in sampling and interviews. In addition, former street children who had lived in the institution for longer periods helped recruit participants for the study.

Collecting data from a speech community whose specialized code is intended to conceal critical meaning presents obvious challenges. A researcher is compelled to devise appropriate methods of data collection sensitive to the lives of such a community while still striving to elicit intended language attitudes. Time spent engaging in general talk, listening to conversations, and playing games with the children proved beneficial in establishing rapport and minimizing any misgivings the respondents may have had toward this researcher. Discussions revolving around the popular Swahili hip-hop music and nicknames given to city neighborhoods provided animated debates, and more importantly, unguarded slang talk among school and street children. The researcher’s admission of ignorance to the urban slang used in the songs spurred lessons about the meaning of the slang words contained in the song. Loyalty, pride, and a sense of identity with residential areas or base are expressed enthusiastically with gestures imitating favorite rap artists. Swahili hip-hop artists, themselves products of the lower class neighborhoods and speakers of Sheng, articulate pressing urban themes in a slang that the youth speak. Having cultivated familiarity among children in the target schools and homes, the researcher began extensive data collection. Such opportunities were ideal for eliciting target data without concern for Observer’s Paradox.

**Methods**

Data collection was carried out in four stages. In the first phase, the researcher compiled a select list of popular slang terms documented in extant Sheng dictionaries (Fee & Moga, 1997) and other Sheng literature. Using questionnaire and interview methods, a random sample of 62 young Nairobians was carried out to determine familiarity, novelty, or the lack thereof, of each word. Respondents were further instructed to suggest alternative vocabulary to any perceived “stale, outdated” terms. Analysis of responses guided us to the areas of greatest lexical variability.

In the second phase of the pilot study, alternate words elicited in the first stage were pretested using a sample of school and street children aged 8-15 years. Respondents in each group were asked to identify individuals or groups living in Nairobi that were most likely to use each of the recorded speech samples. Effort was made to use an accomplished speaker capable of approximating various language variants. Subsequently, a list was compiled drawing from the distinct terms from each group.

In phase three, adapting a matched-guise technique, a recording was made of five marked lexical items associated with the following social groups: recent rural immigrant (RI), pupil from low-income Eastlands (LC), pupil from affluent Westlands (UP), street youth (SY), and standard-Swahili speaker (SS). The list
was recorded using an accomplished speaker capable of imitating the speech patterns of each group. The recorded randomized list was played back to the LC and SY groups. For every recorded word each respondent was asked to say whatever impressions came to mind upon hearing each word. The intention of this part of the research was to identify the affective terms to be used in a semantic differential scale. Among the most frequently used adjectives were *Mbabi* (rich person, literally Babylonian), *Fala* (uncultured person), *Mshamba* (rural dweller, country bumpkin), *Mdosi* (rich person), *beshte* (buddy, friend), *Chokora* (street urchin, scavenger), and *Manamba* (tout).

The final part of data collection for this study was the indirect elicitation of language attitudes using the Semantic Differential Scale (SDS). Typically, a SDS involves the evaluation of concepts comprised of adjectival opposites (Williams, 1983). For instance, a scale testing whether a language variety evokes in its listeners a sense of social closeness or distance may contain a scale with adjectives such as “friendly,” “humble,” “trustworthy,” and so on (Mutonya, 1997). In this study, however, the indirect elicitation allows the respondents to reveal familiarity with, usage of, and attitudes toward other varieties of Sheng without being overtly conscious of participating in a language attitude task.

**Eliciting Language Attitudes**

As in a traditional SDS, each slot on the scale is assigned a numerical value (1-7) in an ascending order from the point/symbol representing “furthest from me” which is assigned a 1, to the closest one. Sheng and Kinoki being language varieties of the urban poor, the social group that is deemed furthest in speech behavior is the one furthest in terms of economic and social status: *Mbabi* (rich child) who lives in the affluent sections of the city.

However, cognizant of the complexity of the tool to younger children and in particular the street children, many of whom have little, if any, formal education, the SDS was adapted to suit the circumstances. First, members of the speech community were given many copies of local newspapers and asked to work as a group in identifying and cutting out pictures of individuals who, in their view, best represented the social categories mentioned above. Subsequently, respondents were provided with dolls, crayons, paint, paper, and pieces of clothing and asked to provide a representation, in the creative form of their choice, of the following individuals: *Ka (ma) mimi* (like me), *beshte* (best friend), *mshamba* (rural immigrant), *fala* (uninitiated in urban ways, uncouth) *mbabi* (rich person), *manamba* (tout), *chokora* (street urchin, scavenger), *Mtoi wa shule* (pupil).

Having ranked and positioned seven dolls or pictures in order of *anaongea ka’ mimi* (speaks like me) to *haongei ka’ mimi* (does not speak like me), each
respondent listened to the voice recording and was asked to place a pebble next to the caricature of the likely user of the recorded term.

Each informant intermittently judged a total of 29 guises: 12 for terms referencing street community; 12 referencing streets activities, and 5 lexical items representing adversarial action. Each lexical item and guise was judged by 20 informants, in each sample group, on an adapted quantitative scale ranging from 1 to 7 with each numeral representing a category of slang speakers in Nairobi elicited from Sheng and Kinoki speakers. While the value of each numeral was slightly different for street and school children, 7 represented a close association with the judge’s own speech patterns while 1 indicated a strong disassociation with the lexical item. Subsequently, the number obtained for each guise was multiplied by the corresponding value and the total divided by 20 to obtain the mean score.

Results

Data indicate that members of the street community avoid using pejorative terms referencing the street community but instead create terms that ameliorate the harsh conditions of their lifestyle. Furthermore, it is evident that a symbiotic relationship exists between Sheng and Kinoki, particularly with regard to lexical change.

Each result reflects the evaluator’s association of each word with a particular social group, and by inference gives an indication of the listener’s attitude toward the lexical item: the higher the score the closer the association to the speech pattern of the judge and his immediate social networks. Inversely, a lower mean score implies the judge’s disassociation with the slang term.

For instance, a mean score between 6 and 7 means the group identified the word as likely spoken by Mimi (me) and 4 and 5 by a beshte (my best friend) while 2 or 3 is an association with a speaker who is uninitiated and unsophisticated with respect to urban life: mshamba (rural immigrant) and fala (unsophisticated).
The results in Figure 1 indicate that terms referencing the street community that street children strongly identify with (5-7 SDS points) are Manoki, Kauzi, mtegaji, mchapalegi, and NARC. Conversely, they disassociate with the demeaning terms for street people: chokora, mgodi, kuroo, and wakora. Terms considered as being along the margins of tolerance and rejection are mgodi, kuroo, and houka. School children for their part seem to acknowledge the words are street terms and aptly associate the guises with the street community. However, the pupils’ term Manoki is a term used to refer to street children by ordinary folk, presumably those uninitiated in urban youth talk. That the term is widely used to refer to mental patients may explain this attribution. Further, it strongly suggests that at the time of conducting the research, the
term was relatively new and had not yet permeated beyond the boundaries of the street community network. Moreover, SC reflects a general tendency of associating neologisms and old Sheng terms with manamba. Whether that indicates a sense of linguistic insecurity or an acknowledgement of the pivotal role widely attributed to the social group, manamba, as innovators and purveyors of linguistic change in the Sheng community is a worthy topic for future research.

That pupils in this study tend to rate degrading terms referencing the street community more favorably can be explained using Allen’s (1993) view of pejoratives. Specifically, he contends that pejoratives serve not only to reinforce and justify the existing social boundaries between in-groups and out-groups but also to identify a group in relation to another: “They are not Us, and that We take our identity in part as not-Them” (pp. 217-218).

Cognizant of Allen’s contention, I thought that the self-deprecating Manoki (the crazy ones) used by the street children seemed to negate the otherwise positive projection of the street community. However, upon closer interviewing of respondents, I realized that the usage bore the endearing and “tough guy” interpretation, similar to contemporary African American Vernacular English (AAVE) street speech. Smitherman (1994, p. 100) notes that “crazy” is used synonymously with “mad” which means, among other things, “going against conventional behavior for African Americans, particularly against European Americans’ conventions and expectations for Blacks.” As one respondent clarified, “Manoki means a ‘good-crazy’ not a ‘bad-crazy’.”

The high ratings for the items on a 7-point scale indicate that SY judges identify strongly with usage of these words. Inversely, SY judges dissociated themselves and members of the broader street community from the use of the terms chokora, mgodi, kuroo, wakora, and houka. On the basis of SDS, SY judges associated these popular Sheng words with the unsophisticated Nairobi dwellers (mshamba and fala), a negative association.

**Street Activities**

Figure 2 represents school and street children’s evaluation of the synonyms pipaa/taraa (dumpster), glue/kabier (shoe glue), camero/buu ya taka (dumpster truck), mbota/rolex (watch), base/parsee (territory), seng’enge/bling (golden chain). Street children identify with taraa (nest), kabier (small beer), camero (Toyota-car model), mbota (bottle cap), base (as in military base), and seng’enge (barbed wire). Conversely, school children disassociate themselves from these words identifying the words with the unsophisticated rural immigrants. Camero, mbota, base, and seng’enge are particularly perceived by pupils as non-Sheng
terms but rather poor approximations of Sheng by the new rural immigrants. Kinoki’s intent to conceal activities that are crucial for street survival seems to be effective. The appropriation of common terms with strongly rural affiliations such as *seng’enge* (barbed wire) and *mbota* (also used to mean a spinning game popular with boys in rural areas) to refer to high-value items (jewelry and watch, respectively) points to the ingenuity and creativity that characterize Kinoki.

**Figure 2. Street Youth (SY) and School Children’s (SC) Evaluation of Terms Referencing Street Activities**

![Chart](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SY and SC attitudes terms referencing street activities</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pipaa (dumpster)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taraa (nest)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>glu (glue)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kabier (beer)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camaro (Toyota car)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bub ya daka (trash truck)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mhisa (brand name)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role (brand name)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lola (Dance)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paali ( Parsee)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>seger’enge (barbed wire)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blingbling (jewellery)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7 = like me; 6 = close friend; 5 = tout; 4 = school/street kid; 3 = ordinary folk; 2 = uninitiated in city; 1 = rich kid

**Law Enforcement Officials**

Members of the street community engage in a myriad of activities that are deemed antisocial by society, but considered inevitable for those who seek to survival the harsh street life. The activities include sniffing glue and petrol, smoking bhang, stealing, pick-pocketing, peddling drugs and illicit brew, prostitution, trafficking, and vagrancy. Understandably, law enforcement officers see a threat to public security in these acts (Shorter & Onyancha, 1999, p. 38). Needless to say, the children are preoccupied with fears of police harassment and negative
reaction from the public. They have a strong sense of community in their social organization and engage in “identity-talk” as a form of social negotiation to enhance their self-esteem (7).

Figure 3. Street Youth (SY) and School Children's (SC) Evaluation of Terms Naming Law Enforcement Officials talk” as a form of social negotiation to enhance their self-esteem (7).

The ranking of law enforcement officers as indicated in Figure 3 present interesting results. That the word *kasheshe* ‘spy’, is identified by SY as an in-group code, while SC associate the term with rural immigrants, suggests that the term is relatively unfamiliar beyond the street network. Indeed, the word is derived from the new Swahili tabloid, popular for unearthing scandals and revealing the private lives of the rich and famous in Eastern Africa. *Msororaji* (spy) is identified as a familiar term used by both social groups, which suggests the SY is possibly replacing the widely known word with the new and seemingly unfamiliar *kasheshe*. However, *mafedi* (federal agents) and *maciae* (CIA), referents for undercover police officers, are associated with *manamba*. Similarly, *kanjoo* (city council police) and *gava* (government officers) are considered with *manamba*.

The uniformity in the ranking poses three possible interpretations. First, both groups may have similar terms referring to law enforcement officers considering their shared experiences in the crime-prone low-income neighborhoods. Second, the difference shown in the use of *kasheshe* may emanate from the unique gang life in the street in which a member of a rival...
gang may be sent to spy on another. Finally, one wonders whether street groups would readily reveal such crucial information to a researcher, an out-group member, who could possibly be an adversary.

**Street Hazards**

The best case of Kinoki serving to ameliorate the dangers of street life is in the use of terms that diminish the intensity of those risks. Many children have scars and wounds from fights with rival gangs or the public when they are caught stealing. They face dangers from turf-fights, road accidents, and attacks by victims of their antisocial activities, and they even get killed. The danger and gruesome nature of street life can hardly be overstated. Table 1 helps illustrate the “cushioning” of risks with euphemisms that tend to normalize, but not glorify, the imminent dangers of living in the streets.

*Table 1. Kinoki's Euphemisms for Street Hazards*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kinoki term</th>
<th>Literal meaning</th>
<th>Actual meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kuonwa kando</td>
<td>Have a small talk (tête-à-tête)</td>
<td>To be attacked by a mob</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Kuhenerio</em></td>
<td>To be beckoned</td>
<td>Shot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Kushikwashikwa</em></td>
<td>To be touched repeatedly</td>
<td>Attacked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guchunia</td>
<td>To allow one (victim) to taste</td>
<td>Steal, snatch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuzikata</td>
<td>To cut (grass blades)</td>
<td>To run away from danger</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conclusions**

The paper analyzes language use among Nairobi’s street children by comparing slang words used by two groups: street children and school children from low-income neighborhoods. In particular, the study focuses on slang words used by each group to reference the street community, street activities, and law enforcement officials.

Analysis of the data indicates that Nairobi street children contest the externally imposed, negative representations of themselves by constructing positive self-referencing identities. Language, in this case Kinoki, plays a crucial role in managing and articulating the images of the community in relation to the dominant discourse that constructs the group as the socially Other. Additionally, Kinoki marks the social boundaries among the urban poor in Nairobi by serving
as the tool for social inclusion and exclusion. Furthermore, Kinoki reinforces interpersonal relationships and is a solidarity marker within the larger community of street people, that is, beggars, hawkers, watchmen, and prostitutes.

Lexical variation between Sheng and Kinoki speakers in this study reflects the divergent attitudes and ways of apprehending the world and constructing identity. That language forms index speakers’ social categories and hearers of language respond to such identities (Preston, 1989) is evident in this study. For instance, on a 7-point evaluation scale, adapted in this study, street children identify strongly with positive terms that reference street people while school children prefer the pejoratives. Consider, for instance, the ratings of manoki (crazy ones) versus chokora (scavengers), mtegaji (trapper) versus kuroo (prostitute), mchapalegi (one who walks long distances) versus houka (hawker), and NARC (acronym for opposition coalition in 2002 general elections) versus wakora (thugs). It is interesting to note that in this study street children associated the use of popular Sheng pejoratives, with unsophisticated Nairobi dwellers (mshamba, rural dweller, and fala, country bumpkin. Thus, the use of devaluing terms against the street community serves a demarcation, at least in the eyes of the street children, for in-group and out-group members.

Suffice it to say, in the dominant discourse Sheng indexes urban sophistication and an association with the lower class. However, it is apparent in this study that the street community draws a boundary between Sheng and Kinoki. Kinoki marks group membership, loyalty, and the shared knowledge and experiences of the harsh realities of homelessness. However, the relationship between the language of the street children and Sheng is bidirectional: Each language variety may provide new items to be transformed by the other with modified structure or altered meaning. This may be a result of the fuzzy boundaries and complex networks existing between the speakers of both varieties. Put differently, some members of the street community oscillate between homelessness and life in one of the sprawling slums of Nairobi. Many of the urban poor are themselves one social or financial incident away from homelessness.

The contributions of the street community in enriching Nairobi’s linguistic landscape and particularly in enriching the dominant slang, Sheng, are hardly acknowledged. Study of the socially marginalized community in Nairobi reveals that language is essential in reclaiming a group’s identity and in overcoming the demeaning referents from out-group members. More quantitative and qualitative research should be conducted to tease out the emerging variations in Sheng that provide an even better understanding of the characteristic features of Kinoki.
References


Notes

An English-based Nairobi slang spoken in the more affluent Nairobi neighborhoods. Sheng is Swahili based and spoken in poorer neighborhoods.