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Semantic shift in loan words and phrases into Sheng

This paper investigates the changes in meaning that have taken place in the loan words and phrases from English, Kiswahili and Gikuyu into Sheng, a language that's popular among the Kenyan youth. Unlike the common changes of either semantic narrowing or broadening, sheng loan seems to drop off the meaning of the borrowed item and pick up a completely new one. Although the morphology of the borrowed words combines morphemes from the donor languages these will be ignored for now and focus on only the meaning shifts. An example of an English loan word is mdeadly which combines the m- class marker from Kiswahili and the English adjective deadly which has the meanings of fatal or poisonous among others. However, once this word gets into sheng it has the meanings of one who is able to do something very well, "used when one wants to dare or to tease another to do something near impossible/difficult" or "to make a sarcastic reference to someone who claims to do something that they are not able to". An example of a phrase from Kiswahili is kaa/kuwa mpole whose meaning in Kiswahili "to be reserved". In sheng, however, this phrase means to be patient. The examples given here are just but a few of the loan words which seem to have lost their meanings in the process of moving to sheng. Such are the issues that are of concern in this paper. It will help to show the extent to which words shift meanings and possibly the extent to how far away the loan meanings are from the donor language. The data for analysis was collected from ten undergraduate university students, who are presumed to be among the age group of the majority of.

Key words: Sheng, semantic shift, loan words, Kiswahili, English, Gikuyu

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