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Escaping the Margins of Society: New Media and Youth Language Practices across the Rural Urban Divide in Kenya

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Abstract

In Kenya, among the youth, traditionally there were established language practice differences where youth in the rural areas would speak the domicile mother tongue while the urban youth re-designed their identity by creating and communicating in 'Sheng'. This is no longer the case as the rural-urban language divide is linguistically flattening due to increased use of digital media, urbanization of rural spaces and globalization. This paper describes new digital media language trends among Kenyan urban youth and explains how globalization and digital media have become the unifying factor between rural and urban youth language practices. The paper contends that the narrowing of the urban-rural dichotomy in language use seems to have created semi-homogenous language practices among the youth in both rural and urban areas. This has been made possible by affordable internet which gives the rural youth access to urban culture and global trends. The paper also describes how urbanization of rural towns and rural-urban-urban-rural migration has created pathways that carry urban language practices to previously rural areas and created a form of African modernity and urbanity in these spaces.

Keywords: Language practices, Digital Media, Globalization

INTRODUCTION

The notion of 'youth languages' has been around in literature and research for quite some time now. Androutsopoulos and Scholz (1998), Bulot (2004), Caubet et al. (2004), Jørgensen (2010), Kiessling and Mous (2004), and Ledegen (2001) allude to a class of languages characterizable as youth languages. The distinction is underpinned by 'youth' who distinguish themselves from 'others' in a given anthropo-social space (neighbourhood, city, region, country) by the ways they speak. These ways of speaking have specificities that adhere to linguistic processes such as morphological and semantic manipulations, borrowing, incorporation of slang and neologisms. Yet, such distinctions are problematic and counterintuitive in that they are also stigmatized and stereotyped. Thus, in an era of oversensitivity to perceived discrimination, stigmatization, and stereotyping, we must ask why such distinctions should be made, and how useful they are to linguistic inquiry.

Bourdieu (1993: 95) observes, 'Age is a biological datum, socially manipulated and manipulable; and [. . .] the merely talking about 'the young' as a social unit, […] is in itself an obvious manipulation'. By extension, 'youth' can be viewed both socially and biologically. Biologically, it is an age group (usually 12-35 in most countries); sociologically, it is quite nebulous and fluid. It varies, like other sociological concepts, from society to society.

Youth languages could be spoken by youth regardless of the geographical location, while urban languages are defined solely by geographical location (de Féral, 2012). Yet youth languages are inherently urban phenomena. The city is 'a place of language variation and contact' (Calvet 2002: 48), spawning langues urbaines (Bulot and Bauvois 2002), parlers urbains (Billiez 1999, Calvet 1994) or, 'urban vernaculars' (McLaughlin 2009; Beck 2010). For Calvet (1994: 62), the 'parlers urbains' [are] subject to two contradictory tendencies, one in being used as a lingua franca and the other the desire for speakers to follow a group or to identify with a group.' Thus, 'urban vehicular forms' differ from 'forms related to identity'(Calvet 1994: 63–7). In this paper youth languages in Africa are viewed as central to modern urban youth identities, representing 'new generations of Africans intersected by global culture but with their own cultural practices and creativity woven into the fabric of their language use' (Hurst-Harosh and Kanana Erastus 2018: 1). Linguistic innovations occur mostly on digitally enabled communication platforms in music and style.

In this article, we illustrate how Kenyan youth in rural and urban spaces make sense of the world around them in ingenious ways through creative use of language via digital media. The global is localized while African modernity, 'globality' and urban-ness, is maintained. New media language trends, including emojis, memes, acronyms, and other digital forms, migration patterns (rural-urban-urban- rural), music and popular culture have challenged the rural – urban dichotomies and created a (semi) homogenous unifying language among the youth.

Kanana and Hurst-Harosh (2019: 38) opine that rural-urban migration and resultant multilingualism in urban centres is partly the cause of the emergence of African Urban Youth Languages (AUYLs), but reverse or circular migration from urban to rural areas can also be credited with their spread. In Kenya, for instance, rural towns

have urbanized in the last decade due to the expansion of higher education and the change of governance to a devolved system. Decentralization of governance and power structures increased movements from a large metropolis like Nairobi as people accept employment in the counties (federal states). Moreover, the expansion of higher education lured young people of different languages and cultures for purposes of work and study. Consequently, the country has experienced rapid growth of rural and peri-urban towns. As infrastructure expanded, so did communication that connects these spaces to life in the cities. This growth directly impacts language use and youth language practices. The immediate outcome is complex multilingualism, and new aspects of youth language practices are quickly adopted by the local youth as a way of expressing modernity, urban-ness and elitism. Considering this background, we advance the argument that globalization as a result of growth in communication technology in Africa has aided the growth of urban youth languages. The youth in Africa, who are the main consumers of technology and technologically aided modes of communication, are active innovators in the globalized linguistic space. They use language dynamically and construct vocabulary through a complex blend of local and popular global culture and trends. Accordingly, urban youth in Africa are not victims of global change but sophisticated agents of globalization. 'The urban youth like to live a life which is modern in orientation,' explains Bogopa (1996:113), 'and their thinking as well as their lifestyle is based on modern technology; for example, the clothes and the hairstyle they wear and the music they play and so on.'. This paper outlines some trends of youth participation in linguistic change in Africa, as well as raising questions about the ways youth linguistic cultures are emerging in urban and rural spaces.

LITERATURE ON (URBAN) YOUTH LANGUAGES

'African Urban Youth languages', 'African Youth Languages' or 'African Youth Language Practices' simply refer to the linguistic practices of young Africans (Hurst-Harosh and Kanana Erastus 2018: 2). These practices stray from the 'standard' or 'traditional language'. In many countries, names have been ascribed to them and some of these languages have received considerable attention in (socio-) linguistic studies, e.g., Sheng (Kenya), Nouchi (Ivory Coast) Camfranglais (Cameroon), Tsotsitaal (South Africa). Other less famous examples have also been a subject of socio- linguistic inquiry, including Luyaaye (Uganda), Yanke, Kindubile and Langila (Democratic Republic of Congo) Yarada K'wak'wa (Ethiopia) etc. According to Hurst-Harosh and Kanana Erastus (2018: 3),

> 'not all AYL phenomena receive 'names', because they primarily exist as language resources, registers or styles utilized by a multilingual youthful population, and which form part of the repertoire, in which young people may also have access to vernaculars; 'standard' forms such as those taught in national education systems, and indigenous languages spoken in the family and community'. …

They argue that the names ascribed to these youth languages represent

> 'linguistic and generational attitudes and ideologies – the young, modern, urban youth

> who recognize and incorporate African traditional forms and languages, but blend them with a range of other resources, national, continental and global' (59). …

The African youth is therefore not a victim of the linguistic space he/she finds himself/herself in; they are fully aware of their environment, which Nassenstein (2016: 242) explains is why their 'repertoires are organized differently from those of older speakers who do not have access to the same resources and practices'.

Features characterizing African urban youth languages include: extreme multilingualism and lexical innovation; originating from argots; marking modernity and urban-ness; borrowing from or based on colonial languages but manipulating syntax and morphology; they have an associated extralinguistic style involving wider communicative strategies such as clothing, gestures, body language, ways of walking that serve to communicate modern street wise identities and urban sophistication (See Hurst-Harosh (2020) and Hurst- Harosh and Kanana Erastus 2018).

One sociolinguistic aspect and general characteristic of youth languages in Africa is that they act as in-group and out-group markers of identity. These codes construct social groups and spaces in which different images of 'we' vs. 'them' emerge. Coining new words is one strategy to 'draw and enhance categorical boundaries' (Kioko 2015: 128) selectively to distinguish the in-group from the out-group.

In Africa, accounts describe young males as dominant or primary speakers (Slabbert 1994), (Slabbert and Meyers-Scotton 1996), (Kiessling and Mous 2004), (Mesthrie and Hurst 2013), (Brookes 2014), Nassenstein (2014) among others. Kiessling and Mous (2004) classify them as antilanguages, which express an opposition to the larger society. According to Reuster-Jan and Kiessling (2006), 'this group identity might at first be based on a core group of marginalised speakers, sometimes also described as criminals or as street children, and will then spread to a larger group, becoming a more general marker of youth culture in multiethnic urban contexts, including different social strata'.

This kind of spread has been described for Congo (DRC) (Goyvaerts 1988), Côte d'Ivoire (Kube-Barth 2009, KouadioN'Guessan 2006), Kenya (Abdulaziz and Osinde 1997) among others. Kiessling and Mous (2004) suggest association of youth languages with urban youth culture might yield to urbanity in general. In multilingual Africa, especially in language rich contact areas, the diffusion of youth languages not only marks youth culture but also indicates a multi- or even post-ethnic modernity. Looking closely at Kenya, Kioko (2015) demonstrates how larger towns in areas traditionally considered rural are influenced and impacted by language practices from larger neighbouring urban centres. In 'Shengnised Kamba', the base language is Kamba, a dominant Bantu language spoken in the area. This new form spreads urban forms to more urbanized centres in rural areas. The infiltration of rural towns makes the rural and urban dichotomy permeable, and not as absolute as the moniker 'Urban Youth Language' suggests.

Youth language practices globally share features and strategies described above, but what makes those in Africa interesting sociolinguistically is high multilingualism and intense language contact. Major urban centres experience

intense language contact, which has been intensified in the last decade by popular technology, music, and movies. Digital communication plays a key role in contact that differentiates language practices of the youth from those of older generations. Modern, urban youth culture sets itself apart from traditional ethnic speech communities of older generations. Socially, modern youth access digital spaces which are not limited to geographical space – neither local nor rural – to keep in touch with global trends and culture, manifested in the language. Trending global fashions, movies, music, and stories are easily adopted and localized through language, images, and memes, albeit with a local, contextualised flavour.

The concept of new (social) media describes interactive digital media platforms that allow the creation and sharing of user-generated content (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, and Silvestre 2011). Overall Africa has an internet penetration rate of around 15.6% and continues to grow daily (Internet World Stats, 2012[1]). East African rates are 28% for Kenya, 13% Uganda, 12% Tanzania, 7% Rwanda, and 1.7% Burundi. One third of the internet users are said to be Facebook users. Various social media inter alia YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Whatsapp, and Twitter can be used to create, access, and share information or skills within social and across geographic audiences. According to Owiny, Mehta and Maretzki (2014), most social media do not require specialized skills or training. However, 'some social media technologies require reading and writing abilities, so they are accessible only to literate individuals and are, therefore, limited to urban and educated rural populations' (238). Access to cell phones in sub-Saharan Africa has increased dramatically with more than 30 mobile phones per 100 people, on average, in sub-Saharan Africa, and 60% of the population has mobile phone coverage (World Bank, 2009, Aker and Mbiti, 2010, Owiny et al. 2014). Thus, an Internet-capable cellphone enables the use of social media tools to connect and share interests, experiences, and circumstances.

Specific browsing habits and characteristics of Kenyans in 2017, according to Consumer Barometer,[2] estimates that of the 25,683,800 Kenyans who access the internet 18,899,400 do so daily (State of the Internet in Kenya 2017 report). Nendo[3], a Kenyan digital strategy, research and training agency, provides the following estimated monthly browsing data of active users per platform based on smartphone penetration as of September 2017:

WhatsApp	12 million
Facebook	7.1 million
YouTube	8 million
Instagram	4 million
LinkedIn	1 million
Twitter	1 million
Snapchat	0.25 million

The Communication Authority of Kenya (2017) intimates that 90% of internet usage in Kenya is on mobile phones. As companies in Kenya compete for the market share, costs of internet and smartphones significantly drop and companies have innovative ways of selling bandwidth to the youth.

Whilst the digital space is growing tremendously, human language is evolving too, to meet demands of the digital era. Most people use emojis, GIFs, logograms, pictograms, acronyms, abbreviations, neologisms, initialisms, emoticons, omitted letters, shortenings, and nonstandard language to communicate. Examples that have gained significance among the youth

include smileys and other symbols which express feelings of happiness, sadness, anger, or disappointment. Some emojis have meanings other than what they literally depict. The eggplant and raindrops occur in Kenyan memes and witty jokes to connotate sexual themes. Moreover, Facebook and WhatsApp offer an array of expressive emojis.

A combination of language features is the 21st century means of expressing meaning and emotions in text and other digital information. It is an increasingly rich form of communication and a manifestation of the playfulness and visual nature of digital culture. Digital language varies by geography, age, gender, and social class – just like dialects or regional accents. Friend groups fall into the habit of using certain emojis and emoticons, for example, just as they develop new slangs. The youth will use new digital features, just like they start using different words which spread outside of their usual social circles. It is for this reason we sought to investigate this digital 'dialect' which has a few hieroglyphs (codes comprehensible only to initiates) and a range of meaning-making processes in the rural and urban youth discourses.

DATA AND METHODS

Data presented to support our arguments in this paper were primarily collected from social media sites, especially public Facebook pages and Whatsapp groups, with the consent of group members and individuals. Additional data were drawn from public spaces on You Tube and group forwards. Moreover, data from interviews with youth (18-35 years), examples from previous publications, and the African Urban Youth Language network's pool of data collected since the establishment of the network in 2013 were also used. The interviews were carried out in order to understand the meaning making process among the urban and rural youth. Public page names and other public information on the data are retained but all personal names are anonymized. A major limitation of the methodological approach adopted lies in the fact that data were collected only from social media sites and social media users. Neither all urban nor all rural youths are active on these social media sites. However, we argue that contextually, most of the meanings presented here will be understood by the youth in rural and urban spaces as the interpretations are mainly linked to daily experiences and happenings in the country.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This section considers data core to addressing the question of the rural-urban dichotomy in youth language practice. We examine common discourses in rural and urban spaces by way of presenting expressions and metaphors that have become conventionalized and as part of the national youth lexicon. We also seek to provide empirical data to support the proposition that globalisation, new media, and the Internet contribute to the flattening of the rural-urban dichotomy – the global is localized, contextualized, and given new meaning. Lastly, migration patterns viz., rural-urban-rural, and how these too impact and aid in bridging the rural-urban dichotomy are examined.

Common urban and rural discourses

Social media in Kenya have contributed to vocabulary for everyday use, in both rural and urban areas. Whilst we consider urban spaces as main centres of innovation, it does not take long before a new word, an expression or even a metaphor finds relevance beyond the hood. While some of these may not be strictly considered Sheng, they have evolved to conventional use and mirror the experiences of the youth. *Pambana na hali yako* 'deal with your situation', was first used by a youthful politician who was battling a terminal illness; this has been extended to mean deal with whatever situation and adversities faced positively; *hata sijaskia vibaya* 'I have not even felt bad' was used to disapprove of peers who may want to show off by posting their flashy lifestyles, holiday pictures and expensive eateries; *bora uhai* 'the most important thing is life' was a political slogan after the contested Kenyan election of 2017 meaning to avoid political unrest and subsequent loss of life (a common experience since 2007). What matters most is life not winning the election, but today, the term extends to mean resigning to one's fate and resolving to stop fighting. *Mzinga in ita madem niko na mzinga* 'invite ladies (girls) I have a drink' refers to a '(bee)hive' in Kiswahili, or cannon in English. The youth in the rural spaces use the term to refer to any form of alcohol (including the local brew) while the urban youth use it to refer to whisky and to any strong liquor. It emerged from the middle-class urban youth wishing to show opulence and treat friends to parties. Etymologically, the term could be borrowed from the making of traditional brew in which honey (from the hives) was used as a main ingredient in rural areas.

The examples disclose a sub-conscious adoption of the forms by the outside group and spread of the terminologies and expressions even further to outliers. After the new linguistic features have been accepted, they become the new norm. Nassenstein (2015: 95), while describing Langila, a youth language spoken in Congo, notes that the process of innovation 'repeats itself and a new social group models itself on the social group that has adopted the linguistic innovations.' Outsiders, who speak standard or restructured urban Swahili in Kenya then adopt some Sheng that comes to describe local experiences and daily challenges.

A desire for exclusiveness catalyzes a common motivation for innovation as speakers seek to distance themselves from society and make linguistic practices as distinctive as possible, a process referred to as 'esoterogeny' (Dimmendaal 2011: 359), leading to assimilation, elision, lexical changes and borrowing. Rural youth too desire urban life and sophistication by adopting features to create their distinct space. Speakers therefore choose to make their linguistic practice as special as possible (Nassenstein 2015: 96). If creative and outstanding enough, innovations will be adapted and adopted in both rural and urban spaces.

Global trends localized

Steger (2003) describes globalisation as a social process characterized by the existence of global, economic, political, cultural, linguistic and environmental interconnections that make borders and boundaries irrelevant. McLuhan (1962) predicted the world would enter a fourth, electronic age, characterized by homogeneity of global experiences facilitated by technology. Pop culture is manifested around the world through

entertainment and consumer goods. American culture dominates pop cultural exports into Kenya. One striking feature of American pop culture on Kenyan social media is urban language practices. Acronyms like *Yolo* ('you only live once'), *Krump* (a dance characterized by high energy body movement), *bootylicious* (a description of a woman with a huge behind), *diss* (make fun of someone, usually to belittle them), *twerk* (vigorous hip movements and squatting stances seen in music videos), *bling* (jewelry worn by celebrities to signify wealth), *bad n bougie* (a reference to a woman with expensive tastes or a man who spends time and money on classy women), *sophistirachet* (a sophisticated and well-educated person eloquent in speech and conversant with modern trends and streetwise mannerisms) – originally in music videos, they have found their way to Kenyan lingo via cable TV. Others come from African American Reality stars like Tamar Braxton (Braxton Values), Tammy Roman (Bonnet Chronicles on YouTube) who have their own vocabulary and conversation mannerisms, characterized by loudmouth smacking, finger snapping and 'stare downs'. Phrases include, 'You've tried it!', 'Get your life' and 'have several seats'; 'We in dis bitch, finna get crunk, eyebrows on fleek, dafuq!'. Use of 'you are on fleek' in Kenyan urban lingo means 'you look good, you are beautiful or dressed well'.

The evolution of pop music in Kenya has also been significantly influenced by the high internet subscription among the youth, both in urban and rural areas. According to Odipodev (2019),[4]

'One just needs to take a look at how much YouTube's Kenya home page has changed over the years. The col-lective action of the majority tends to push certain pieces of content to the top, hence the word 'trending'. As more and more of the mainstream audience began to access the Internet, they changed the entire fabric of what was popular, or trending based on their own interests'.

Access to digitally enabled global fabric has led to creation of content and new genres that are not perceived as mainstream. Since YouTube allows creation of inexhaustible content ranging from vlogs, choreography, make-up lessons, music videos, do-it-yourself tips on almost anything, we can glimpse how content varies. As youth create content and, in an effort to make it 'trend', there is deliberate manipulation to suit different purposes, situations, and people. Most manipulations also have a time-geographic component, which makes content understood in context. If the context is removed, meaning would be difficult to grasp. Borrowings from global culture and trends then are localized and linked to the daily experiences.

A deeper assessment demonstrates how 'urban spaces' are created in the larger rural and peri-urban areas in Kenya, where Sheng has gradually extended, especially since professional prowess is unrequired. For instance, on the Google powered platform 'Sheng' is dominantly used in advertising, music, and interviews, e.g., *Sheng Talk kama kawa*[5] or 'Sheng talk like normal' has between 16,000- 40,000 viewers. Run by youth, the show interviews young people on business ideas and *matatu* culture in Nairobi's Eastlands, where Sheng is the norm. Moreover, the platform[6] allows the audience to exchange and share ideas on how content can be made more interesting and consolidated. YouTube Kenya also enables anyone interested in acquiring knowledge of Sheng through subscriptions. Popular comedians, radio

presenters, e.g., *Mulamua*, *Kartelo* and *Mbusi* (Ghetto Radio presenter who claims to only speak Sheng), musicians like *Boondocks*, *Ethics*, *Mejja*, *Kaligraph Jones*, *Timmy Tdata* among others whose YouTube pages sport massive subscriptions,[7] are a rich resource and pathway for the spread of Sheng.

Music produced locally has seen an influx of Sheng coded messages and graphic choreography created by young women to emphasize the context of the songs. Various songs have made rounds online owing to famous and catchy chants and lyrics. For example, a hit song titled *Wamlambez and Wamnyonyez*[8] (with over 4 million views) became a hit even after it was banned from public space as inappropriate. Across the country, the two phrases even when not related to the context of the song, have created a frenzy on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram as the *#Wamlambezchallenge*[9], a top video in 2019. Another *Odi Pop* or *Odi Dance*[10] is a modern dance performance not only for secular but also gospel songs. Localized hip-hop draws from reggae and dancehall to build on an African rhythm in a sing along urban Kiswahili and Sheng. The odi dance challenges on YouTube invite displays of dancing prowess. A group 'Odi Dance Challenge Deli Teens Umoja' is an example in which youth dance to secular and gospel music. The lyrics *dance imeshika mashinani* 'the dance has seized rural places' means the dance is everywhere for everybody. *Shina* in Swahili means a stem or a political cell leader, but in Kenyan politics *mashinani* refers to rural and remote areas.

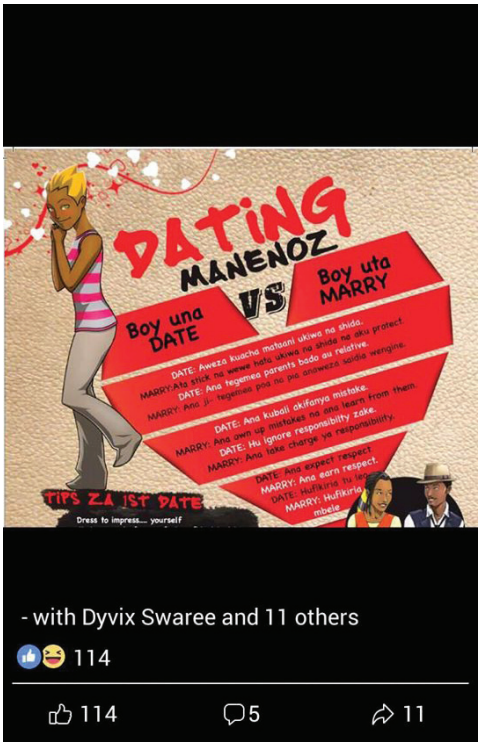
In some cases, even politicians have been hurling Sheng to create humour or stir controversy like *Peleka na Rieng*, a Sheng hit song released in 2019. It belongs to a genre of music called *Gengetone*[11].The word itself (*rieng*) means staying or being alert on what is happening, hence *peleka na Rieng* is more of a request for an update on what is happening. The phrase was first used in a political space by a governor during a hometown (rural) rally and other politicians afterwards followed his trend.

Catchy Sheng has found audiences in advertising of consumer goods and services. Online content has been used to promote values and create awareness of upholding moral standards and leading responsible lives e.g., in safe sex and health campaigns, expressions such as *Chukua Selfie* 'take a selfie', a common practice among the youth, is used metaphorically to mean 'reflect' before indulging in unprotected sex. The campaign was steered by local celebrities in a song advocating for use of HIV self-testing kits, being faithful to one partner, or using condoms (Gichovi 2019). Here the global trend of 'taking selfies' is localized and contextualized to communicate an important message on safe sex embodied in a metaphor.

Internet enabled gadgets are not just for gathering information, but are great for entertainment, social interactions and sharing pleasurable experiences in the form of status updates, pictures, and videos. In addition, Sheng is growing in local gospel and secular music, recitals, whose fan base comprise the youth, and whose content is influenced by global trends e.g., way of dressing, walking, body language and style. Most posts can be categorized as informal; most users ignore proper spelling or sentences are poorly constructed. On most platforms communication takes place using non formal or non-verbal cues such as emoticons, emoji, memes, and gifs[12] to elicit connotations or comic relief. Non-verbal cues have revolutionalised the virtual space as a means of indicating euphemism, sarcasm, hints, and affection, previously difficult to convey

in a text. Not quite a universal form of communication, meanings are malleable and develop in unique ways as we build relationships while texting or tweeting. Sometimes, meanings are assigned differently, for instance, to the same emojis based on inside jokes, moods, and situations. Facebook, for example, has various groups which apply memes and gifs exclusively to create fun or stir discussions among followers. Examples are: Top Trending Jokes in Kenya-Jokes + MEMES HUB which has over 20,000 likes; *Kenya Sitoki Wallhahi* 'I am not leaving Kenya, I swear', with 50,000 likes; *Kenya Funny Memes* with 37,000 likes.

These pages depict celebrities and politicians in awkward situations with the aim of evoking humor while reflecting current happenings. Thus, memes are a classic example of how language goes beyond the conventional and breaks barriers. Most satirized events are quickly shared or retweeted whilst contextualizing the event in both urban and rural spaces. Examples include memes and gifs like *mimi kwa harusi yangu wataromboseana sitaki ujinga* 'at my wedding they will twerk, I do not want foolishness'. While the phrase contains Swahili words, the Sheng *romboseana* should be taken to mean 'twerk' a common dancing style tracing its origin to hip hop, although its roots are said to be in a West African dance called Mapouka. Another example would be *lakini Bro-zone inakuanga mbaya sana, Galdem anaweza change mbele yako ju anajua hakuna kitu unaweza fanya* 'but brother zone is very bad, a girl can change in front of you because she knows [that] you cannot do anything [to her]'. The word bro-zone, as used by the youth, is taken to mean friendship or a relationship which cannot advance to a romantic one, that is, a 'brotherly relationship'. Thus, the meme brings out the fact that a lady (referred to here as *galdem*) can change her clothes in the presence of a man who is not supposed to react in a manner that suggests a romantic relationship. Graphic evidence that the deployment of social media has metamorphosized how Kenyan youth both in rural and



Source: https://www.kenyans.co.ke/news/47546-sonkos-ksh53k-t-shirt-gets-kenyans-talking

urban areas deploy language to express themselves with memes and gifs in order to create humor or political satire is depicted by the following memes:

The first meme depicts Nairobi's former Governor Mike Mbuvi Sonko who at the time had been arrested for causing drama between himself and the law. His T-shirt was alleged to have cost KES 50,000, which evoked talk and mockery in various comments such as: *Na polis amerarua tisat ya pesa ivo?* by a Kenyan on Twitter.

The second meme exhibits how *Ghetto Radio* send shout outs to counterparts who probably have nicknames coded in Sheng such as *Mlami mweusi, dush dede and panya Handsome*. *Lami* is a Sheng word that means a person with European or American origin commonly referred to as Mzungu by most Kenyans. *Dush* is Sheng for a dove. The third picture is largely satirical and the Kikuyu word *Mathogothanio* has been used to annotate ugliness or something which is bad looking from appearance. Most likely the meme aims at putting off young girls who refer to good looking public figures and celebrities as *tweenie* on the basis that they look alike though the reality could be different.

The fourth meme from the Facebook site of Shujaaz Fm reveals to Kenyan girls the differences in the characteristic between a man they will marry and a boy whom they are dating. It singles out the mistakes the youth make while dating early compared to the informed decisions made later in life. Advice in Sheng include: *Boy unadate*

anaweza kukuwacha mataani ukiwa na shida meaning the 'young boy may easily leave you in problems'; *msee unamarry anaweza jitegemea na anasadia wegine* 'a mature man depends on himself and can help others'. Promotion of abstinence among Kenyan youth aims to help them focus on educational goals first. Youth in Kenya, origins notwithstanding, greatly contribute to these discussions. The extent of asking for relationship advice or related issues hoping to get an answer from page owners who in some cases are actually celebrities is shown in the example below:

Additionally, one can conclude that platforms on social media capture a considerable portion of the youth in rural areas owing to what feedback one finds on Facebook and Instagram as illustrated below:

Source: https://www.facebook.com/malkia17/?_rdc=1&_rdr

From the above examples, the penetration of Sheng clearly has been catalysed by social media platforms. Comments on the first picture (from the Facebook site of Shujaaz F.M) makes apparent that rural youth are keen, commenting in Sheng: *Nawakilisha banja*, *Vihiga county* meaning he represents his hometown, Vihiga. Other towns mentioned show that Sheng is not only a preserve of the urban. The other picture from a rural setting with the caption: *Shosh ame-come through hata time hakuna msee side yangu* grandma has supported me when there is no one by my side'. *Shosh* is Sheng for grandmother, and the young lady simply points out the importance of taking care of her, with the hashtag ***#****Lindafam* 'protect the family'.

Furthermore, Instagram reveals more than 7 pages including *Shengnation*, *Shengnewske*, *School of Sheng Slang*, *Mbogingeje*, *ShengFamily* publish their content in Sheng. The bulk include Sheng tutorials to sharpen linguistic capabilities of thronging followers as shown below.

Source: https://www.instagram.com/shengnation/

Source:https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=150017919975317&set=pcb.150018219975287

Of these few examples, what is peculiar is the consistent utilization of emojis that emphasize the message being sent (e.g., wonder, laughter, shock, dismay, or heartbreak as depicted by emojis below):

In sum, we illustrate how an event, a joke, a global icon can be localized and understood in different contexts. In the next example, a young Nigerian uses an image of a popular American (Tami Roman, a basketballer's wife, who is known for forthrightness) to create satire by illustrating how easy it is to cause conflict in an African setting. The image has been shared in many African countries, including Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria and retweeted many times. Irrespective of the different contexts, the message was clearly grasped by the youth.

The image and contents provide a good illustration of McLuhan's (1962) globalization and prediction of the world's fourth, electronic age characterized by homogeneity of global experiences facilitated by technology. Here, globalization is characterized by the existence of global, cultural, and environmental interconnections that make existing borders and boundaries irrelevant.

Rural to urban to rural impact

In the foregoing discussion, we exemplified how youth discourses become conventionalized as daily language use in rural and urban spaces. We also described how globalization, through computer-mediated-communication and the digital virtual space, has contributed to the adaptation,

contextualization, and localization of global culture and trends. That the youth are rather mobile in jobs searching or in pursuing education and governance being devolved and higher education being decentralized has triggered the young to move to rural and emerging urban spaces. These movements bring new cultures, new ways of speaking, and the latest fashions. Locals adopt quickly to emerging trends and new ways of speaking in reaction to context and the circumstance. Rural spaces, once dominantly monolingual,[13] have experienced complex multilingualism and the manner of expressing modernity, urbanity, speech, fashion, dance, and music are impacted. Technology has contributed to the narrowing of the rural-urban dichotomy as digital spaces open up for the majority, previously considered 'the *have-nots*' and 'the *have-less*' (Deumert 2015: 563). While defining digital communication, Deumert (2015: 563) argues that

> 'digital participation is not merely about speaking/writing "in the right way," but about being able to speak/write at all. That is, having access to digital technology in order to communicate with others'.

Through Internet enabled digital communication, linguistic practice in rural spaces is no longer archaic; the gap is narrowing as increased consumption allows access to online generated content. Sheng, once construed as secretive and exclusive, is no longer a preserve of youth in urban spaces as smartphones transcend geographical boundaries and spaces. The online landscape and digital literacy make 'trending' content available in no time. Urban and global events lead to innovation of expressions, which are shared and retweeted when trending. Relevant memes and emojis accompany innovations to emphasize embodied meaning. The internet is also creating migration paths. Urban, geographic, and global experiences are borrowed, localized and given contextualization. The digitally mediated communication and its importance in narrowing the rural to urban divide cannot therefore be overemphasized.

Conclusion: linguistic permeability

This paper has focused on youth language practices in Kenya and how digital media is narrowing the rural-urban dichotomy. Online spaces are important to understand how identities are formed and expressed. Youth create fantasy, are imaginative, creatively capture moments, deal with difficult circumstances, and ridicule the ills in society. Memes and emoticons contribute to the meaning-making process, and they are interpreted and understood contextually. Internet access affects languages, linguistic diversity, global trends, and cultures. The youth are no passive recipients of global culture, they continuously innovate, and become active contributors to linguistic change. Digital spaces constitute a linguistic ecology that offers opportunities to change existing patterns of cultural practice and communication. Internet enabled cellphones revolutionalised communication, and rural areas are now included in global communication networks that enable access to global and urban cultures. Technology has therefore blurred rural-urban, social-class dichotomies.

To conclude, youth language practices have permeated rural spaces, aided by digital media, thus narrowing the rural-urban dichotomy. Further

research is needed in order to analyse and compare strategies in rural spaces and to understand the spread of innovations, processes of relexicalisation of conventional terms and lexicalisation of new terminologies and expressions. Such a study would address questions on how affordance of digital media is reshaping the questions of identity and interaction as online spaces allow youth to engage in fantasies of the self and identity play. That is to say, a conversation triggered online can disclose different personae. A person can be who he is offline, if wanted, can also pretend to be someone entirely different online. The internet is a space where youth create and re-invent identities at whim, and they can alter their personae as they wish.

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ENDNOTES

1 Internet World Stats (2012), http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm

2 https://www.consumerbarometer.com/en/trending/?countryCode=KE&category=TRN-NOFILTER-ALL

3 https://www.nendo.co.ke/

4 Retrieved from https://www.theelephant.info/culture/2019/08/29/algorithms-and-the-new-wave-of-kenyan-music/

5 The show runs on YouTube and profiles business ideas and stories of low- and middle-class urban estates and beyond.

6 Both rural and urban viewers contribute actively on YouTube or Facebook. Comments such as *ndaniiiiiii outta kimbimbi Mwea kirinyaga* county meaning 'I am totally engaged in the show and tuning in from *Kimbimbi Mwea*' a rural town in Kenya. The word *ndani* translates

to 'inside' in standard Swahili but means 'engaged' in Sheng. Several comments by active users from other rural towns in Kenya were found as well.

7 Musicians, reporters, and comedians produce content (music and comedy in Sheng) and enjoy massive following of youth across urban and rural areas. They are top celebrities in Kenya renowned for *Gengetone*– a name that is coined to refer to Kenyan music popular among youth. For instance, the comedian *Kartelo* came up with the word *mbogi* meaning group of friends. The word has replaced words like *crowd yangu* 'my crowd'.

8 *Wamlambez* and *Wamnyonyez* mean 'licking' and 'sucking' respectively. The song was banned for the sexual connotation and therefore inappropriate in public spaces. The ban instead popularized the song. The origin of 'Wamlambez Wamnyonyez' is an old ice cream shop in Eastlands, Nairobi started in 1990 under the name Ice-cream CONEnection.

9 See more details about the challenge on https://tv47.co.ke/2019/07/23/funniest-wamlambez-challenge/

10 Odi is truncated from the English 'Ordinary'.

11 In this context *genge* could be interpreted to mean the "the gang tone"

12 Emoticons are graphemes used to create pictures for an emotion or sentiment; a meme could be anything from an image to an email, idea or video file that spreads online, and gifs are animations with a witty caption (https://www.britannica.com)

13 Monolingual in that a dominant ethnic language is often spoken for intra ethnic communication.