

# **A Case Study of the Application of the Kenyan “Sheng” Language in Marketing**

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*As societies evolve, different demographic groups come up with their own vocabulary for social interaction. The young generation of a society uses a language usually made up of special words and phrases for communication to fit their needs. The language of the youth is often derived from a standard language that is widely used in the community. This paper explores the language used by Kenyan youth called “Sheng”, which is developed from Swahili and English. We will discuss the use of “Sheng” in advertisements and its connection to two major marketing strategies – blue ocean strategy and marketing myopia.*

*Keywords: Language, Sheng, Advertisement, Marketing, Blue Ocean Strategy, Marketing Myopia, Kenya*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Sheng is most popularly defined as an acronym for “Swahili-English slang” and it is an urban language that emerged in the 1960s during the metropolitan multicultural society of Nairobi – the capital city of Kenya (Ferrari, 2013, p. 2). Sheng is majorly derived from Swahili and English languages, which are the national and official languages respectively. However, other native languages spoken in Kenya such as Kikuyu, Luhya, Dholuo, Maasai and Kamba are also used to originate Sheng vocabulary. Kenya is a unique society because it has over 40 recognized languages spoken by its citizens. In addition to this, almost three quarters of the Kenyan population is under the age of 30 (“Kenya Population 2019 Demographics, Maps, Graphs”). Even though widely spoken by the youth, Sheng’s linguistic flexibility has kept it far from acquiring official status. Sheng has been a language of communication for people who come from different regions of Kenya and now need a common language to communicate, yet, today, many people recognize Sheng as their first language, which they learnt since they were born (Ferrari, 2013, p. 2).

Sheng language has been attracting academic attention as more people study its use. Major studies have focused on the structure of the Sheng language, how words are formed and the sophisticated

linguistic characteristics of the language. Other studies have studied Sheng as an emerging language or dialect and whether or not it fits as a language worth recognition as official and even injected into school curriculum. Older studies also consider whether Sheng corrupts Swahili and English languages, producing a young generation who cannot speak an official language due to a large exposure to the slang often perceived as having a ghetto and impure semantic touch. Due to the diverse society that Kenya is, researchers have also considered possibility of Sheng neutralizing ethnicity, which becomes a major point of division especially during politics seasons. A few researchers are now interested in the use of Sheng in advertisements by companies, using examples of companies, the advertisement pieces and the meanings in formal English.

In this study, we describe how and where Sheng language originated. We then give examples of Sheng words and their English and Swahili derivations. While borrowing from previously conducted research, we sample companies that have used Sheng as part of their advertisements with real case examples. To set the paper apart, we go further to consider Sheng language used in advertisements in relation to marketing myopia and blue ocean strategies as introduced by (Levitt, 1984) and (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005) respectively. We consider elements and concepts of these two marketing strategy theories, while relating them to how Sheng language used in advertisements is an epic marketing strategy and how it satisfies this notion.

This study aims to explore how the use of Sheng language in advertisements fits as a marketing strategy and how it satisfies the concepts of blue ocean strategy and avoiding marketing myopia for publicizing products.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Abdulaziz and Osinde (1977) in their research claimed that Sheng language in part originated from the Nairobi Eastlands area of Kaloleni, before spreading to its neighborhoods and the rest of the city. In another research by Spyropoulos (1987), Sheng is suggested to have originated from the early independence days of 1963, when immigrant casual laborers working for the colonial masters in Eastlands Nairobi coined an innovative code of communication among themselves due to the wide multilingual urban environment that they found themselves in. From here, she suggests that the Sheng language then spread to the rest of Nairobi informally through hawkers, shoeshine boys, curio sellers, and parking boys (Kariuki, Kanana, & Kebeya, 2015, p. 230).

Embakasi is a major town of Eastlands neighborhood of Nairobi city. From Embakasi, Sheng spread to other parts of Nairobi city, then to other parts of the country informally. The spread of Sheng was fueled by the increased migration and daily movement of people into Nairobi city to search for jobs, then return home to different towns in the evening (Spyropoulos, 1987). With time, the media facilitated the spread of Sheng through music sang by the youth, or shows hosted by the youth. Today, Sheng is so prominent that there is a radio station called Ghetto Radio, which is fully fledged operated using Sheng language, including its news and bulleting readings. Unconsciously, the bigger population of Kenyan society is speaking small bits of Sheng today picked up from informal environments. Sheng has become a part of Kenyan identity and it takes more effort to speak formal English or Swahili than to speak Sheng (Githiora, 2002).

As Ferrari (2013) concludes, it is impossible to deny that Sheng is spreading in an unstoppable way. A Sheng CD called "Ultimate Sheng" containing words and phrases of Sheng is sold in supermarkets for the public to buy. The target for these CDs include parents who need to 'bond' with their children and tourists who want to know and understand what is happening around them. Corporate marketers also buy the CDs to target the youth better. Politicians also hope to attract the youth majority vote by speaking in their language and connect to them this way.

**TABLE 1**  
**EXAMPLES OF “SHENG” VOCABULARY AND TRANSLATIONS**

Swahili	English`	Sheng
Alikuja	He/she came	Alikam
Sina kitu	I don't have any	Sina eni
Kutania	Kidding	Ku-kidi
Basi	Bus	Buu
Biashara	Business	Bizna

Table 1 above shows examples of words in Swahili and English that are combined to create Sheng vocabulary. As described before, the word Sheng is formed from the words English and Swahili: Sh + Eng = Sheng. From the examples above, Swahili and English versions of words and phrases are directly merged to form Sheng words. For example, the Swahili words ‘sina kitu’ which mean ‘I don’t have any’ in English are combined to form a Sheng phrase with the same meaning – ‘Sina eni’. The same happens when ‘biashara’ in Swahili is twisted and merged with its meaning in English ‘business’, to form the Sheng word – ‘bizna’. ‘Basi’ and ‘bus’ are combined to derive the Sheng word ‘buu’ with the same meaning.

**TABLE 2**  
**EXAMPLES OF “SHENG” LANGUAGE ADVERTISEMENTS**

Company's Name	Advertisement in Sheng	Meaning in English
Del monte	Win mara that that with Delmonte	Win instantly with Delmonte
Safaricom	Bamba ubambike	Get/grab it and be happy
Airtel	Kwachua na Airtel	Win with Airtel
Equity Bank	Na-manage account yangu	I manage my account

The advertisements above from renowned companies in Eastern Africa use Sheng in their advertisements as part of their marketing strategy. Using Sheng language in advertisements helps to link products with looked-for traits such as change, novelty, youthfulness and urban sophistication (Mutonya, 2008). People who converge by the use of Sheng are viewed to be informed and not left behind by trends in a dynamic world.

Del Monte Quality Kenya Limited is a food processing company that deals with cultivating, producing, and canning pineapple products such as fresh juice in Kenya for commercial luxury sale. They hope to connect with the young people and possibly convince them to buy their luxury juices because young people love impressions when dating or having a good time at the bar or restaurant. They also give an offer to win prizes in Sheng language, which breaks the ice and makes the targeted audience apparent.

Safaricom and Airtel are both telecommunication companies that sell phone services such as mobile data and talk time. Safaricom started to use Sheng in their advertisements before Airtel. This is partly because Safaricom has its headquarters in Kenya and therefore were more conscious about the needs of the market and its dynamics. In contrast, the headquarters of Airtel is in New Delhi, India. Safaricom was able to sweep the youth successfully and holds about 65% of the mobile services market share in Kenya today (Nyaga Andrew Ileri, 2016, p. 7). Airtel picked up the use of Sheng language in their advertisements after they saw its success by their competitor. Airtel has since then been digging into Safaricom's market share with a small impact being seen yearly.

Equity Bank on the other hand broke all boundaries with their Sheng advert encouraging people to manage their own account. Previously, other banks had set high standards for people to register with them for a bank account. The youth ended up not having bank accounts. Equity bank with the above advertisement were able to reach out to the youth who opened bank accounts for free and without having to deposit any amount prior to having an active account. Despite being a young bank established in 2014, Equity bank has been able to rank high nationally and internationally, leading and sharing insight on how to extend financial services to the unbanked and low income segment population around the world (Communications Authority of Kenya, 2018, p. 9).

## **CASE STUDY OF SHENG LANGUAGE USAGE IN MARKETING**

### **Blue Ocean Strategy and Sheng Language Usage in Marketing**

This is an approach to business that aims at curving out a niche and operating away from the gruesome battle for the market among competitors. Innovation is at the center of the blue ocean strategy as thought is put into policy and tactics that could help a business create their blue ocean. The opposite of a blue ocean is the red ocean strategy, which entails competing in existing markets with an intention to beat the competition. The rush in a red ocean is to exploit available demand rather than create new demand. In a red ocean, businesses chose either low cost or differentiation as their strategy, while in the blue ocean, both low costs and differentiation are approaches selected. The blue ocean in business today can be considered to be all the industries or businesses that are not yet in existence, no competition is happening there and the market space is unknown, until it is created by skillful innovative managers (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005).

An example of the blue ocean strategy in action is the rapid growth of cirques which is an area that is well unlikely and thought to be on the decline today. There are more media of entertainment that make it illogical for a circus to survive anymore. This has been fueled by the consistent improvement in technology over the years. The circus industry was quickly drowning in decreased business and increasing costs. This only happened until circus was reinvented to cut a path away from its substitutes and competition. Circus turned to focus on a market that it did not deal with traditionally, clients who previously went for ballets, theater, and opera and were willing to pay even more for circus shows. Sheng language and its use in advertisements in the same way cuts a path into untroubled waters by companies reaching out to the youth and differentiating their products to fit the needs of this class of consumers. Companies that use Sheng in advertisements reinvent themselves in a manner that causes a new market category to get distracted, paid attention and listened to.

Red ocean strategy focuses in combating the opponent and driving them off a battlefield of limited territory. In contrast, blue ocean strategy is doing business where there is no competitors (Kim & Mauborgne, 2017). Creating new land, an uncontested market space instead of sharing existing land is a strategy that companies like Safaricom and Equity bank used by their bold step to advertise using Sheng language, which had been negatively stereotyped for a long time. As described, the two companies remarkably took over a large segment of the market that other companies did not care much about before. The companies refused to accept the constraining factors and explored the opportunity of a new market space that is uncontested.

Restructuring industry boundaries as expressed by (Kim & Mauborgne, 2015) enables for solving multiple issues by giving a single solution that competitors are unwilling to trade in for, making

competition irrelevant. Making the competition inapt is founded on simplicity. In our example, Equity bank cut out the sophistications of opening a bank account. With Equity bank, youths no longer needed a rich guarantor and a huge sum of money to deposit and maintain a minimum amount in an account that would face monthly charges. Equity bank made their competition irrelevant by making account opening easy for a huge population of Kenya - the youth, who make up 60 percent of the nation's population.

Instead of exploiting the existing demand, blue ocean strategy focuses on creating and capturing new demand (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005, p. 5). This imperative calls for keeping the net wider rather than deeper. Instead of focusing to get everything from the rich and middle class who could afford the high end Del Monte products, the company decided to create new demand by appealing to the young generation in their own language – Sheng. The incorporation of a message that involves winning with buying the Del Monte products is a double strategy to capture new demand from people who would previously not consider getting the products.

A blue ocean is created where the actions of a company affect its value proposition to buyers and its cost structure favorably, in what is identified as breaking the value-cost trade off. The extra costs that come from the factors that the rest of the market is competing over are cut. Buyer value on the other hand is improved by offering elements that the overall industry has not offered before. From our advertisements examples, Equity Bank is seen to cut costs that would have been used to pay sales people who were supposed to visit working class people and try to convince them to open an account with a bank. The huge piles of paperwork previously used were cut and an easy process that could be done in 5 minutes was incorporated to keep the process simple. The buyer value was also increased since finally, even the 'lowly' in Kenya could own their own bank account and have their funds securely stored or invested with a bank.

### **Marketing Myopia and Sheng Language Usage in Marketing**

The term that was developed by Theodore Levitt, depicting shortsightedness in relation to marketing by businesses trying to gain competitive advantage. It is a narrow minded way of marketing that does not consider long range goals but only aspects of a product, leaving the attributes and needs of customers unconsidered. This theory suggests that for businesses to be successful, the needs of the customers should be their central consideration. To avoid marketing myopia, Levitt suggests that the management of the business must recognize the scope of their business by focusing on the benefits to their customers while carrying out continued research to consider perceptions of customers to the organization. The business should also carry out frequent reviews composed of strengths and weaknesses in comparison to their competitors. Having a long-term mindset when setting goals is paramount to avoiding marketing myopia (Levitt, 1984).

Almost every industry that is successful today and offers a solution in production of goods and services is a result of overcoming marketing myopia. It involves a series of change that is dynamic and heavily customer oriented / driven. It is assumed that such businesses were successful because there were no substitutes for them. However, these businesses were actually successful because they were able to triumph and replace the substitute that they replaced. For example, supermarkets effectively replaced the corner store. Kerosene lights were replaced by the incandescent lamps, which were then replaced by the water wheel and steam engines to provide electricity. It now seems like monopolies run by the government control the electric utilities market, however, inventions are still ongoing, and research is now focusing on having a powerful small chemical fuel cell that can be installed in houses to provide electricity remotely. This would cut the many costs used in setting up electricity poles, transformers, environment degradation, and even disruptions due to severe weather. This describes how marketing myopia is a continued exercise of remaining open to what the consumers want and would benefit from. The Apple iPhone today works just like a computer, in hand. It has everything from a calculator, health tracker, video recorder, voice recorder, music player and more. All these could only be found in a studio in the basement of companies decades ago. It is a great example of what going around marketing myopia can influence businesses and way of doing things (Luke C. Ng, 2016).

Marketing myopia occurs when sellers of a product pay too much attention on specific products that they offer to their customers, than to the experiences and benefits produced by the products from the consumers' perspective. This way, companies focus on their wants and lose sight of the consumer needs. Lack of innovation and consciousness to changing consumer lifestyle in the current digital age causes marketing myopia (Levitt, 1984, pp 13). To avoid marketing myopia, companies must define their goals broadly while considering consumer needs.

With marketing myopia, it is easy for companies to be tied into a self-deceiving cycle without a vision and slowly leading to failure (Levitt, 1984, pp 5). Companies are tied into the belief that growth is assured so long as population of customers increase and their affluence improve. This may sound right but it is an evidence of depravity of ideas and foresight because of marketing myopia. Together with this belief, companies buy into concluding that there were no competitive substitutes in the industry for their product. To push the deceiving cycle further, companies gain too much faith in mass production and in its advantage of economies of scale as output rises. Companies that have significant success are at risk of being affected by marketing myopia as they are drawn to get preoccupied with the carefully controlled scientific experiments aimed at improving a product and reducing production cost. On the other side, a whole world of possibilities are left unconsidered, and if explored by competitors, a huge chunk of the market share could be at risk of sinking.

Equity bank breaking from the crowd of uptight banks shows their broadly defined goal that is not limited by other actors in the industry. The bank has continued to keep their goals broadly defined, which has seen them climb the ladder of organizational success from one step to another. Safaricom Company has also been dynamic, taking the use of Sheng language in advertisements as a part of their identity, yet maintaining a respected, official outlook, and reputation. Safaricom has shown how it is possible to be focused on goals even while beating marketing myopia by focusing on customer needs and their benefits while broadening company goals.

## **SHENG LANGUAGE AND MARKETING IMPLICATIONS**

### **Price**

Marketing that is done with incorporation of the Sheng language is often accompanied by promotions that emphasize offers and credit conditions that have redemption periods. For example, the Safaricom 'Bamba Ubambike' promotion had an offer of making phone calls at only one Kenyan shilling per minute from 10 pm to 10 am daily. This was as opposed to the rest of the time during the day where a minute on the phone costs three shillings. Equity bank emphasized on their zero amount required to open a bank account with them. Airtel on the other hand emphasized on their 'tubonge' promotion that offered free calls to other Airtel calls, and only two shillings to call to other networks. All promotions that use Sheng language as seen from these examples have an aspect of discounts and promotion, which is an attribute of the price P of marketing mix.

### **Place**

Sheng, when used in marketing, is distributed via various channels such as SMS, TV and radio advertisements, banners, pamphlets, and road shows with branded facilities. All these channels carry the Sheng vibe that is distributed along the products. A spirit of youthfulness, strength, joy, getting things done easily and stress – free attitude is driven out to the prospective customers by use of these channels. The promotions are also made by incorporating young celebrities who the young people admire and look up to. Overall, considering the high young population of the country, these promotions have a high impact when accompanied and distributed through the right channels.

### **Promotion**

Sheng language used as a marketing strategy was mainly conveyed through a combination of some form of advertisement: PR exercise, sales promotion, free gifts, direct marketing as well as posters and exhibitions. This use of the language in promotion also led to the expansion in use of the language across

the country since it was more common. Buzzwords used in advertisements by ‘lucky’ companies managed to become a part of Sheng vocabulary and used in day to day conversations. This is ongoing, even today, as companies continue to use Sheng language in their promotions.

### **Product**

Considering that Sheng language is used mostly by the younger generation as described before, marketing that is done using it is designed to offer product utility that cuts edge on technology, brand, convenience, quality and value. The products incorporate these features with a guarantee that is meant to arouse interest and energy to buy from customers. The product packages also usually provide ease and flexibility which is a characteristic that is well associated with the younger generation. For example, mobile data subscription by Safaricom that uses Sheng language allows for sharing data to friends and being able to buy data directly from other people.

### **Globalization vs Localization**

The use of Sheng language in marketing has been a big resource for global companies that want to gain roots in Kenya. The use of Sheng language does not only show an element of understanding the language spoken by Kenyans, but also their social life and culture. Organizations such as Safaricom and Airtel, which are known for huge use of Sheng language in their marketing, have had global attachments from their commencement. Safaricom’s hugest stake owners were Vodafone Group PLC from United Kingdom and Airtel’s headquarters, which is now in New Delhi, India. These companies exploited the opportunity to penetrate into the local market of Kenya by speaking like the young generation in Sheng language. The products are also designed in a localized manner to reflect the preferences of the ‘young’ Kenyan population. After huge success, organizations such as Safaricom decided to move their headquarters and servers from the UK to Kenya for easier and more efficient provision of services. The packaging of marketing promotions in Sheng language also shows an aspect of glocalization, where products that are offered internationally are adjusted and branded to fit the local market.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

From the findings of this research, it is definite that use of Sheng language in marketing creates blue oceans for advertisers, where new demand is created, competition is made irrelevant, and an uncontested market space is captured. The research also exposes the use of Sheng language as marketing strategy as a classic example of avoiding marketing myopia in a business setting. Sheng language allows for advertising to focus on the needs of the consumers and for goals of a company to be described broadly. Future research should use the story of the growth of Sheng language and its path to successful current use in advertisements to predict future possibilities and strategic inventions by companies. Creating blue oceans and avoiding marketing myopia for successful marketing can be made easier from considering the path that Sheng language took in becoming a marketing strategy.

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