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Verbal extensions in Sheng: an examination of variation in form and function

Abstract: This paper investigates verbal extensions in Sheng, a youth language originating in Nairobi, Kenya. Sheng has received scholarly attention since the 1980s, primarily with a focus on its sociolinguistic traits. Our study aims to advance the linguistic description of Sheng and its morphosyntax by investigating verbal extensions in Sheng. Specifically, we look at the causative, applicative, reciprocal, and passive suffixes, as they are applied to coined and metathesized verbs and verbs which have their origins in Swahili, English, or Gikuyu. We present examples from speakers in Kibera and Umoja neighbourhoods of Nairobi. We find that, while many of the extensions can be applied to elicited verbs, such examples were often considered odd by speakers. In some cases, our consultants suggested alternative strategies, typically employing the use of periphrastic constructions or different verb forms. The use of verbal extensions sometimes resulted in changes in interpretation, requiring us to re-consider the function of these extensions in Sheng more broadly.

Keywords: verbal extensions; applicative; causative; passive; reciprocal; youth language

Upienga: Ihi iroa inaida kupiga urazii juu ya lingo yetuye "Sheng". Wanaida kunga'no Sheng na kumatuia Sheng. Sheng ni lingo ya mayout wa Kenya sana sana wa Kanairo. Sheng imewai rada ya warazi since 80s, sana sana wanaida kuimatuia, kuboronja na kuinga'no. Fom ni hawana rada venye mayout humatuiaya kusocialize na kuoperate. Itshii shitstem inaida kumasku lingo ya Sheng videdly. Rada ni shitstem inaida kuboronja na kuinga'no Sheng viamba nasa. So tuko na rada ya ilimochoka wea na rada yake na fom ya maoriginator ni wadhii wa Ujamo na Kibich, na hizi ni mareae za Kanairo. Warazi wanaida si humiatu Sheng vidiffnt kulingana na rada yao. So inawabidi waevaluate na wapige urazi kuhusu Sheng ndivyo itumike kibroadly kuboronja au kuaroro.

Madiwa bwakubwaku: verbal extensions; applicative; causative; passive; reciprocal; lingo ya mayout

1 Introduction

This paper examines verbal extensions in Sheng – a youth language variety originating in Nairobi, Kenya. Sheng has received scholarly attention since the 1980s (e.g. Abdulaziz and Osinde 1997; Spyropoulos 1987). However, much of the literature to date focuses on sociolinguistic traits of Sheng and there has not been detailed examination of its morphosyntactic properties (Shinagawa 2007).

Sheng is structurally based on Swahili, although it lexically draws on a number of other languages, including English, Gikuyu, and Dholuo (Abdulaziz and Osinde 1997; Kioko 2015). Scholars have posited Sheng as a variety of Swahili for both linguistic (Bosire 2006; Shinagawa 2007) and metalinguistic (Githiora 2018; Kiessling and Mous 2004) reasons, while perceptual research has shown that speakers often do not see Sheng as related to Swahili (Jelpke 2020). For the purposes of this study, we adopt a broad definition of Sheng as a variety of Kenyan Swahili, while also acknowledging its important social function and the distinct identity it has for its speakers.

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Previous studies have often focused on Sheng's fast changing and ephemeral lexicon (Githinji 2022), features which are often thought to be typical of urban youth languages. This is also due in part to its rapidly growing speaker communities. Although Sheng is commonly characterized as a youth language, it is now spoken by a broader range of age groups and social classes (Githiora 2018) and its use has spread outside of Nairobi to other urban centres in Kenya (Githinji 2022). Kanana et al. (2022: 83) have also challenged the assumption that an urban-rural divide characterizes Sheng, and claim these contrasts are diminishing due to increased use of digital media, urbanization, and globalization.

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the description of Sheng, with a focus on verbal extensions. We address the following two questions:

 (i) Do verbal extensions in Sheng combine with verbs differently depending on the origin of the verb?
(ii) Do verbal extensions behave differently in Sheng compared to Swahili?

It is crucial to gain insights into morphosyntactic phenomena occurring in "non-standard" language varieties such as Sheng, in order to develop our understanding of the ways in which language contact and change impact morphosyntax, which is currently based primarily on standard and well-described languages.

Verbs in Sheng can be formed through one of three processes: coinage, metathesis, and "borrowing".[1] This paper examines the patterns that emerge when the causative, applicative, reciprocal, and passive suffixes from Standard Swahili are added to verbs which are derived through three distinct word formation processes. We also consider whether the language of origin of these verbs has an impact on the form and function of verbal extensions in Sheng.[2]

We show that, while all four extensions can be applied to many of the verbs that were elicited in the current study, the resulting verb forms show a range of differences in terms of their acceptability, their function, and semantic changes from their base form. In the case of the causative extension, speakers often preferred alternative ways of expressing causative meaning. Passives behaved somewhat more regularly than causatives when compared to corresponding Standard Swahili structures, although in some cases where a passive might have been expected, it was considered ungrammatical. While the applicative sometimes brought about the expected change in semantics and argument structure, many examples exhibited unexpected semantic change, while the use of the applicative as an intensifier was also recorded. Similarly, the reciprocal was acceptable to some speakers, but its use resulted in a change in meaning with a number of verbs.

In general, our data echo Shinagawa's findings that Sheng's morphosyntactic frame has a preference for isolating-analytic forms, reflective of a general "synthetic to analytic change" (2007: 161).

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: in Section 2, we present the methodology employed; in Section 3, we summarize relevant Sheng word formation strategies; in Section 4, we outline previous descriptions of Sheng verbal derivation and our data for the four verbal extensions under examination; in Section 5 we present a number of observations on speakers' perceptions and metalinguistic awareness of constructions with verbal extensions; and in Section 6 we summarize our main findings and suggest areas of further research.

2 Methodology

The data for this paper were collected in 2022 through a combination of elicitation sessions and informal conversations with five speakers of varying ages, all of whom have spoken Sheng their whole lives.[3] Participants were identified through the researchers' local networks. The first data collection session took place in Umoja, a middle-class estate in the Eastlands area of Nairobi, which is considered the birthplace of Sheng (Githiora 2018).

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1 Note that the notion of 'borrowing' provides something of a challenge due to the nature of Sheng. This is a point to which we will return later in the paper.

2 This is not to suggest that speakers are always aware of the origins of the verbs in question or that all verbs of a given origin will behave the same way. Rather, this reflects the range of linguistic repertoires from which Sheng speakers draw lexical items.

3 This applies to all data presented here unless otherwise indicated.

This session featured three men, one in his 30s, one in his 40s, and one in his 70s, all residents of Umoja, and data were collected by way of a group elicitation session. The second session featured a man in his 20s from Kibera, Kenya's biggest high-density informal settlement. As Sheng is considered to vary widely from estate to estate (Jelpke 2020), we were interested in including speakers from two different areas. Data from these four speakers were complemented by examples provided by the first author – Annah Kariuki – a Sheng speaker herself.

It is important to remember that Sheng changes rapidly (Githiora 2018) and can vary depending on the broader language repertoire of the speaker (Kioko 2015). Generational variation is also increasingly prevalent (Kariuki 2016). We do not explore this variation in detail here, although we do mention some generational tendencies in our discussion, and we believe it is an important aspect of Sheng which requires further research.

Despite the growing interest in Sheng, only limited data are available to linguists and, to our knowledge, there is no formal linguistic corpus of Sheng. One of the goals of this paper is therefore to contribute to making Sheng data available to the wider research community for further analysis. All elicitation sessions and conversations were conducted in what speakers themselves identified as Sheng. Recordings were transcribed and translated by the authors. There is no standard orthography for Sheng (but see Shinagawa [2007] for how further detail on Sheng's analytical tendencies can be reflected in orthography). As such, examples were transcribed according to the views and experience of the Sheng-speaking authors in combination with Swahili orthographic transcription conventions.

3 Sheng word formation processes

In this section we present the three types of word formation process in Sheng which are under examination in the current study: borrowing, metathesis, and coinage.

Kanana and Ny'onga view lexical borrowing as "perhaps the most salient feature of Sheng" (2019: 47), with words originating mostly from Swahili and English, but also Gikuyu and a number of other Kenyan languages. Borrowed lexical items are adapted into the Sheng morphophonology to various degrees. Shinagawa (2007) discusses the occurrence of verbal extensions based on whether verbs represent "pure borrowings" or "lexicalized forms". He reports a very low occurrence of verbal extensions in a study of written Sheng texts and attributes the different range of occurrence of these suffixes to different degrees of lexicalization. Non-Swahili verbs which are more adapted to Sheng morphophonology are more able to take verbal extensions. This contrasts with "purely borrowed items" which are less likely to take verbal extensions (Shinagawa 2007). The decision to group verbs according to their origin in this study therefore builds on this observation.

Another well documented word formation process in Sheng is metathesis. Cross-linguistically, this is a process whereby syllables (or phonemes) are reordered within a word and metathesis is commonly used in lexical creation in urban youth languages (Kiessling and Mous 2004). In Sheng, too, speakers rearrange the order of syllables in a word to make their variety a distinct code (Kanana and Ny'onga 2019). In example (1) we can see the word *shoke* 'tomorrow' (derived from the Swahili *kesho* 'tomorrow'), *kukawa* 'drink alcohol' (derived from *kuwaka* 'burn'), and *kukibleh* 'to black out' (derived from *kubleki*, itself based on the English word 'black out') as examples of metathesis.[4]

(1) *Shoke*   *na-dai*   *ku-kawa*   *hadi*   *ni-kibleh*
     tomorrow   SM1SG.PRES-feel   INF-drink_alcohol   until   1SG.SBJV-black_out
     'Tomorrow, I feel like drinking alcohol until I black out'

The third word formation process we examine is coinage. This process of word formation is common in Sheng (Kanana and Ny'onga 2019; Ogechi 2005). In example (2), the verb *-kinda* 'sell' is a newly coined word in Sheng according to our participants.

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4 Examples follow the Leipzig Glossing Rules. Abbreviations used: 1, 2, 3 noun class; 1SG/2SG first/second person singular; 1PL first person plural; APPL applicative; CAUS causative; DEM demonstrative; FV final vowel; IMP imperative; INF infinitive; LOC locative; NARR narrative; OM object marker; PASS passive; PRF perfective; POSS possessive; PRS present; PST past; RECP reciprocal; SBJV subjunctive; SM subject marker.

(2)   *A-li-kind-a   ka-tululu   k-ake*
        SM1-PST-sell-FV   12-phone   12-POSS1
        'He sold his analogue phone'

In the next section, we consider these three word formation strategies and how they combine with verbal extensions and words which have different origins.

4 Sheng verbal extensions

Ferrari (2012) presents a brief overview and description of derivational extensions in Sheng. The study shows that some verbal extension in Sheng follow the patterns found in Swahili, albeit with some morphophonological details which are particular to Sheng (e.g. the realization of suffixes for verbs ending in consonants, generally not found in Swahili). Although Ferrari gives a few examples for each verbal extension, no difference is presented for various types of verbs.

An overview from Ferrari (2009) is presented in Table 1, which shows how each verbal extension combines with verbs of various endings, such as C, VCV, V, and so on.

In the current study, we examine how patterns found in Sheng relate to those of Swahili, and the impact of different word formation processes and source languages on the form and function of verbal extensions in Sheng. An overview of our findings is presented in Table 2. Verbs are grouped by formation process, that is, whether they are coined, metathesized, or borrowed. Forms with an asterisk are not accepted.

4.1 Passives

In Swahili, the passive suffix occurs as *-w-* with a vowel-final verb (e.g. *kata* 'cut' > *katwa* 'be cut'); as *-liw-* ~ *-lew-* (depending on vowel harmony) when the verb ends in two vowels; or as *-iwa*, *-ewa*, or *-liwa* for verbs of Arabic origin (Ashton 1947: 223). The passive derivational extension in Sheng mainly follows the same pattern as Swahili, employing the suffix *-w-*. Examples (3)–(5) show the Sheng passive with metathesized, coined, and Swahili origin verbs respectively.

(3)   *Mfiengo   i-li-kapi-**w**-a*
        food   SM9-PST-cook-PASS-FV
        'The food was cooked'

(4)   *A-me-kanj-**w**-a   doo*
        SM1-PRF-pay-PASS-FV   money
        'He's been paid some money'

Table 1: Overview of Sheng verbal extensions (based on Ferrari 2009: 112, our translation).

Extension	Verb ending							
	-C	*-aCa, -iCa,* or *-uCa*	*-eCa* or *-oCa*	*-ia, -aa,* or *-ua*	*-ea* or *-oa*	*-i, -o,* or *-u*	*-e*	*-au*
Applicative	*-ia*	*-ia*	*-ea*	*-lia*	*-lea*	*-ia*	*-ea*	*-aulia*
Passive	*-iwa*	*-wa*	*-wa*	*-liwa/-iwa*	*-lewa/-ewa*	*-iwa*	*-ewa*	*-auliwa*
Causative	*-isha*	*-isha/-iza*	*-esha/-eza*	*-sha/-za*	*-sha/-za*	*-isha*	*-esha*	*-aulisha*
Stative	*-ika*	*-ika*	*-eka*	*-ka/-lika*	*-ka/-leka*	*-ika*	*-eka*	*-aulika*
Reciprocal	*-iana*	*-ana*	*-ana*	*-iana*	*-eana*	*-iana*	*-eana*	*-auliana*
Reversive	Ø	*-ua*	*-oa*	*-ua*	Ø	Ø	Ø	Ø
Intensive	*-ingi*	*-anga*	*-anga*	*-anga*	*-anga*	*-inga*	*-anga*	*-auinga*

Table 2: Verbal extensions with different verb types.

Sheng verb	Origin	Meaning	Causative	Applicative	Reciprocal	Passive
Metathesized verbs[a]						
kukapi	kupika 'to cook' (Swahili)	'to cook'	*kukapisha	kukapia	(*)kukapiana	kukapiwa
kuracho	kuchora 'to draw' (Swahili)	'to write'	*kurachoisha	kurachoia	*kurachoana, kurachoiana[b]	kurachoiwa
kumochoa	kuchoma 'to burn' (Swahili)	'to be drunk'	kumochelesha	kumocholea	*kumocholeana, kumocholeshana	kumocholewa
Verbs of Swahili origin						
kuchanua	kuchana 'to comb'	'to teach, make street smart'	kuchanusha	*kuchanulia	kuchanuana	kuchanuliwa
kuchora	kuchora 'to draw'	'to hide'	kuchoresha	kuchorea	kuchorana, kuchoreana	kuchorwa
kudunga	kudunga 'to sting'	'to rob, dress well'	kudungisha	kudungia	kudungana, kudungiana, kudungishana	kudungwa
kugota	kugota 'to knock'	'to greet, fist bump'	kugotesha	kugotea	*kugotana	*kugotwa
Verbs of Gikuyu origin[c]						
kukanja	kukanja 'to give'	'to pay'	*kukanjisha	kukanjia	kukanjana	kukanjwa
kuthoka	kuthoka 'to spoil'	'to go bad, become tough'	*kuthokesha	kuthokia,[d] *kuthokea	kuthokiana, *kuthokana	*kuthokwa
kuumeera	kuumeera 'to leave'	'to leave, be successful'	*kuumeeresha	kuumeeria	*kuumeerana	*kuumeerwa
kugoroka	kugoroko 'to go mad'	'to go mad'	kugorokisha	kugorokia	*kugorokana	*kugorokwa
Verbs of English origin						
kucheki	to check (verb)	'to look at, check, see'	*kuchekisha	kuchekia	kuchekiana	kuchekiwa
kudedi, kudedia	dead (adjective)	'to die, desire'	kudedisha 'to kill'	*kudedia	kudediana 'to desire each other'	kudedishwa 'to be killed', kudediwa 'to be wanted'
kubuy	to buy (verb)	'to buy'	*kubuyisha	kubuyia	*kubuyana, kubuyiana	kubuyiwa
Coined verbs[e]						
kukinda		'to sell, hide'	*kukindisha	kukindia	*kukindana, kukindiana	kukindwa
kusunda		'to sell, hide'	*kusundisha	kusundia	*kusundana, kusundiana	kusundwa
kuminya[f]		'to give'	*kuminyisha	*kuminyia	kuminyana	*kuminywa

Notes. [a]All of our examples of metathesized verbs are verbs of Swahili origin. We are not currently sure whether verbs of Swahili origin are more likely to be metathesized or whether this is just an accidental feature of our data. However, this would be an interesting area to look at in future research. [b]While we do not present all forms with combined verbal extensions, we have included some combinations of the reciprocal with the applicative and causative as this is relevant to our discussion. [c]While we are aware that these verbs exist in many Central Kenyan Bantu languages, we have listed them as being of Gikuyu origin because the speakers from whom they were elicited are all Gikuyu speakers and their account is that these verbs were borrowed from Gikuyu. This has also been noted in the literature (e.g. Githiora 2018). [d]This form is phonologically irregular, since we expect the applicative form *kuthokea 'to go bad (for), become tough (for)', which was considered ungrammatical by the speakers. [e]To our knowledge, these verbs represent coinages directly into Sheng. [f]Our colleague Dr. Fridah Kanana Erastus (pers. comm.) noted that this verb could in fact be a borrowing from Meru, where it means 'to give extravagantly' or 'to be wasteful'. We have it listed as a coined verb because this is how the speakers described it.

(5) Tu-me-chanu-**liw**-a   na   beshti   y-etu   Tito
     SM1PL-PRF-teach-PASS-FV by   friend   9-POSS1PL   Tito
     'We've been taught/made street smart by our friend Tito'

In the same was as in Swahili, the passive in Sheng can be combined with other suffixes, such as the applicative, as in (6).

(6)   *A-li-sund-**i**-**w**-a*   *iyo*   stuff
       SM1-PST-sell-APPL-PASS-FV   DEM.9   stuff
       'He was sold that stuff'

However, for some verbs where we might expect the passive to be possible semantically, it was considered ungrammatical by our speakers, at least when used on its own. For example, the passive of *kugota* 'to greet' can only occur with the applicative to mean 'to be greeted', while the form **kugotwa* was considered ill formed.

(7)   *U-me-got-**e**-**w**-a*   *na*   *Tapis*
       SM2SG-PRF-greet-APPL-PASS-FV   by   Tapis
       'You've been greeted by Tapis'

Some of these constraints can be explained by changes in transitivity. For example, the passive form of *kudedi* (from the English 'dead') is grammatical only with the meaning 'like/desire romantically', as in (8), and not when meaning 'to die'.

(8)   *Ni-me-dedi-**w**-a*   *na*   *ma-dem*
       SM1SG-PRF-desire-PASS-FV   by   6-girl
       'The girls want me'

The passive of the verb *kuminya* 'to give' was not accepted despite no obvious semantic or morphological restrictions, as seen in (9). Considering the common Swahili verbs *kupa* 'to give' and *kupewa* 'to be given', we might expect the Sheng equivalents to be fairly frequently used. However, for any of our attempts at using the form *kuminywa* 'to be given', our consultants consistently rephrased it using the active voice with a different lexical verb such as *-jenga* 'give', as in (10).[5] This appears to be an example of the avoidance of the use of verbal extensions in Sheng.

(9)   **Ni-me-miny-**w**-a*   *ki-tu*
       SM1SG-PRF-give-PASS-FV   7-thing
       (Intended: 'I have been given something')

(10)   *A-li-tu-jeng-a*   *ka-ki-tu*
       SM1-PST-OM1PL-give-FV   12-7-thing
        'He gave us some something'

An exception to this dispreference appears to be in the popular idiomatic expression *kuminya kakitu* 'to give some money', which can appear either in the base form seen in (11), or with the passive extension, as in (12).

(11)   *A-li-ni-miny-a*   *ka-ki-tu*
       SM1-PST-OM1SG-give-FV   12-7-thing
       'He gave me some money'

(12)   *Tu-li-miny-**w**-a*   *ka-ki-tu*
       SM1PL-PST-give-PASS-FV   12-7-thing
       'We were given some money'

Another area of difference from Standard Swahili involves the use of the passive suffix *-w-* as an intensifier when applied to the metathesized verb *kumochoa* 'be drunk'. Here the suffix does not alter the argument structure of the verb, but rather serves to intensify the verbal meaning.

(13)   *Ni-ka-mocho-**lew**-a*   *kabisa*
       SM1SG-NARR-be_drunk-PASS-FV   completely
       'I got so completely drunk'

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5 This use of the verb *-jenga* is different from its meaning 'build' in Standard Swahili.

This is not unusual in Bantu languages, where verbal extensions, including the applicative (see Section 4.4), have been noted to perform functions beyond adding or removing an argument of the verb, especially in connection to semantic and pragmatic factors (cf. Marten and Mous 2017).

4.2 Reciprocals

In Swahili, the reciprocal is formed with the suffix *-an-*, and is used to express reciprocity, as well as (less frequently) concerted action, interaction, interdependence, and disassociation (Ashton 1947: 240). In our Sheng data, the reciprocal is often combined with the applicative, as in examples (14)–(16), due to the resulting transitivity of the verb or the animacy properties of its prototypical arguments.

(14)   *Tu-na-ez-a*   *racho-**i-an**-a*   *SMS*
         SM1PL-PRS-can-FV   send/write-APPL-RECP-FV   text
         'We can text each other'

(15)   *Wa-me-dung-**i-an**-a*
         SM2-PRF-dress_well-APPL-RECP-FV
         'They've dressed nicely for each other'

(16)   *Wa-me-gorok-**i-an**-a*
         SM2-PRF-go_mad-APPL-RECP-FV
         'They're madly in love with each other'

Not all speakers agreed on the acceptability of some of the reciprocal forms. For example, while the form *kukapiana* 'to cook for each other' was not considered completely ungrammatical, it was described as sounding "odd" by the younger consultants.

(17)   *Wa-li-kap-i-**an**-a*   *difu*
         SM2-PST-cook-APPL-RECP-FV   food
         'They cooked food for each other'

Similarly, participants did not accept the verb *kuminya* 'to give' combined with the reciprocal, although example (18) shows a possible use in a specific context. Interestingly, this is the same verb for which we noted an idiomatic use of the passive in Section 4.1 (see examples [11] and [12]).

(18)   *Tu-li-miny-**an**-a*   *digits*
         SM1PL-PST-give-RECP-FV   digits
         'We exchanged phone numbers'

In some instances, the reciprocal was acceptable, but its use resulted in a specific semantic interpretation. For example, the reciprocal of the verb *kuthoka* 'to go bad, become tough' is grammatical if combined with the applicative, and the resulting meaning is to 'fall out with each other', as in (19).

(19)   *Wa-me-thok-**i-an**-a*
         SM2-PRF-go_bad-APPL-RECP-FV
         'They have fallen out with each other'

Overall, in our reciprocal data, verbs of Swahili origin followed the patterns also found in Swahili reciprocals. Coined and metathesized verbs, as well as verbs of Gikuyu and English origin showed some irregularities with the reciprocal, with many forms being considered ungrammatical or dispreferred (see Table 2) or resulting in a change in meaning as discussed above.

4.3 Causatives

The causative exhibits the highest degree of difference from Standard Swahili of the four verbal extensions under examination here. The Swahili causative is formed through the suffix *-sh-/-z-* and expresses compulsive, permissive, persuasive, helpful, or simple causation (Ashton 1947: 232). The causative changes the argument structure of the verb by adding a causer subject. Our data show that for more than half of the verbs, the addition of the causative results in ungrammaticality (see Table 2).

The following examples show the expected causative forms with verbs from English (*kudedi*) in (20), Swahili (*kudunga*) in (21), Gikuyu (*kugoroka*) in (23), and a metathesized verb (*kumochoa*) in (22).

(20) *A-ka-dedi-**sh**-a*   *beshti*   *y-ake*
      SM1-NARR-OM1-die-CAUS-FV   friend   9-POSS1
      'He killed his friend'

(21) *A-li-m-dung-**ish**-a*
      SM1-PST-OM1-rob-CAUS-FV
      'He set him up to be robbed'

(22) *Chrome*   *i-li-m-mocho-**lesh**-a*   *a-ka-dund-a*   *kwa*   *karai*
      Chrome   SM9-PST-OM1-get_drunk-CAUS-FV   SM1-NARR-fall-FV   LOC   sink
      'Chrome got him drunk and he fell in the sink'

(23) *A-li-gorok-**ish**-a*   *dem*   *y-ake*
      SM1-PST-go_mad-CAUS-FV   girl   9-POSS1
      'He made his girl fall madly in love'

With some verbs, participants insisted that the causative would be expressed using a periphrastic construction based on the verb *-fanya* 'do', as in (24), which is also possible in Swahili (Song 2013).

(24) *Iyo*   *mi-stari*   *i-li-ni-fany-a*   *ni-ku-medi*
      DEM9   4-song   SM9-PST-OM1SG-make-FV   SM1SG-OM2SG-think_about
      'That song made me think of you'

This was true for all Sheng coined verbs we collected, none of which took the causative extension but for which the causative was expressed instead using a periphrastic causative. This appears to be reflective of a general preference for the use of periphrastic constructions over verbal extensions in Sheng.

(25) **Ni-li-m-kind-**ish**-a*   *nyumba*   *y-ake*
      SM1SG-PST-OM1-sell-CAUS-FV   house   9-POSS1
      (Intended: 'I made him sell his house')

(26) *Ni-li-m-fany-a*   *a-kind-e*   *nyumba*   *y-ake*
      SM1SG-PST-OM1-make-FV   SM1-sell-SBJV   house   9-POSS1
      'I made him sell his house'

An attempt at using the causative extension with the metathesized verbs *kuracho* and *kukapi* resulted in ungrammaticality (see Table 2). Although semantically the causative forms of *-kapi* 'cook' and *-racho* 'write' might not come up frequently in everyday conversations, we would expect these forms to be possible, further supported by the existing corresponding forms in Swahili (*kupikisha* and *kuchoresha*). However, these forms are seen as ill-formed by Sheng speakers. Many of the verbs from English were also considered ungrammatical with the causative (e.g. *kumedi* 'to think about', *kucheki* 'to look', *kubuy* 'to buy', and *kubring* 'to bring').

Our data also show a high level of interchangeability between the causative, the base form, and/or the applicative in some verbs of Swahili origin without any resulting change in argument structure and meaning. For

example, with *kuchora* 'to hide', the base, applicative, and causative forms can be used interchangeably, as seen in (27)–(29) respectively, with the applicative more common, according to our consultants.

(27)   *Chor-a   hii   stori*
        hide-FV   DEM9   story
        'Keep this story secret'

(28)   *Chor-e-a   hii   stori*
        hide-APPL-FV   DEM9   story
        'Keep this story secret'

(29)   *Chor-esh-a   iyo   plan*
        hide-CAUS-FV   DEM9   plan
        'Keep this plan secret'

The interchangeable use seems to be true for *kuchanua* 'to teach', *kudunga* 'to dress', and *kugota* 'to greet' as well, representing a similar pattern found for verbs from Swahili.

(30)   *A-li-ni-chanu-a   ati   blah blah*
        SM1-PST-OM1SG-teach-FV   that   blah_blah
        'He told me something [boring]'

(31)   *A-li-ni-chanu-sh-a*
        SM1-PST-OM1SG-teach-CAUS-FV
        'He told me [made me aware]'

(32)   *U-me-dung-a!*
        SM2SG-PRF-dress_well-FV
        'You look good!'

(33)   *U-me-dung-ish-a!*
        SM2SG-PRF-dress_well-CAUS-FV
        'You look good!'

(34)   *Gota!*
        greet.IMP
        'Greetings!'

(35)   *Ni-got-e-e*
        SM1SG-greet-APPL-SBJV
        'Greet me' [fist bump me]

(36)   *Ni-got-esh-e*
        SM1SG-greet-CAUS-SBJV
        'Greet me' [fist bump me]

In the case of *kuchanua* 'teach', however, the causative form could also be used to mean 'to enlighten someone who is completely in the dark', with an intensity reading.

(37)   *U-na-ez-a   m-chanu-sh-a*
        SM2SG-PRS-can-FV   OM1-teach-CAUS-FV
        'You can enlighten them'

Overall, the causative suffix seems to be much more restricted than other verbal extensions. It also appears to be less acceptable for the younger speaker, perhaps indicating intergenerational variation (we return to this in Section 5).

4.4 Applicatives

Some of the applicative forms follow the patterns found in Swahili, where the applicative suffix *-(l)ia* or *-(l)ea* is used to express a benefactive meaning, motion, purpose, or finality (Ashton 1947: 217–220), accompanied by a change in argument structure. Example (38) shows the addition of a benefactive argument with a Sheng coined verb.

(38)   *Ni-li-m-sund-**i**-a*   *iyo*   stuff
        SM1SG-PST-OM1-hide-APPL-FV   DEM9   stuff
        'I hid that stuff for him'

However, note the slightly different semantics of the applicative in example (39) when combined with the reciprocal.

(39)   *Tu-li-sund-**i-an**-a*   *mutaratara*
        SM1PL-PST-hide-APPL-RECP-FV   plan
        'We hid our plans from each other'

Applicative forms of English-borrowed and metathesized verbs also follow those found in Swahili. Example (40) shows the addition of a beneficiary and example (41) the addition of a locative noun.

(40)   *Ni-ku-buy-**i**-e*   *soda?*
        SM1SG-OM2SG-buy-APPL-SBJV   soda
        'Shall I buy you a soda?'

(41)   *A-li-mocho-**le**-a*   *stadi*
        SM1-PST-get_drunk-APPL-FV   stadium
        'She got drunk at the stadium'

The applicative of the Swahili-borrowed verb *kuchora* 'hide' can be used interchangeably with the base form of the verb without increasing the valency of the verb (see also examples [27]–[29] in Section 4.2).

(42)   *Chor-a*   *hii*   *stori*
        hide-FV   DEM9   story
        'Keep this story secret'

(43)   *Chor-**e**-a*   *hii*   *stori*
        hide-APPL-FV   DEM9   story
        'Keep this story secret'

In other cases, we find the more regular valency-increasing use of the applicative which can have two different – almost opposite – interpretations. For example, both 'keep something secret', as in (44), and 'letting someone in on a secret', as in (45).

(44)   *Ni-chor-**e**-e*   *hii*   *stori*
        OM1SG-hide-APPL-SBJV   DEM9   story
        'Keep this story a secret for me'

(45)   *Na-ku-chor-**e**-a*   *hii*   *stori*
        PRS-OM2SG-hide-APPL-FV   DEM9   story
        'I'll let you in on this [secret] story'

For the Gikuyu-borrowed verb *-goroka* 'go mad', the applicative has the same meaning as the causative (cf. Section 4.3).[6]

(46)   *A-li-gorok-**i**-a*   *dem*   *y-ake*
        SM1-PST-go_mad-APPL-FV   girl   9-POSS1
        'He made his girl fall madly in love'

Finally, for the Gikuyu-borrowed verb *-umeera* 'leave', the applicative seems to change the meaning (rather than increase its valency), adding a permanent and negative connotation implying 'to leave for good', as seen in (47).

(47)   *Dem*   *y-ake*   *a-li-umeer-**i**-a*
        girl   9-POSS1   SM1-PST-leave-APPL-FV
        a-ka-mw-ach-a   *kwa*   *mataa*
        SM1-NARR-OM1-leave-FV   by   traffic_lights
        'His girl has gone for good, she left him by the traffic lights [idiomatic]'

5 Perception, observations, and metalinguistic awareness

In this section, we present a few metalinguistic observations which emerged in our interviews with participants.

In our elicitation sessions, all our consultants repeatedly reported forms with verbal extensions as sounding "weird" or "odd" or as being rarely used.[7] When asked how speakers might say something, rather than giving the targeted extension, they would rephrase the sentence to avoid using the given suffix. Overall, it appears that where there is an alternative to using a verbal extension, the alternative is preferred.

In terms of variation between the speakers, the younger consultant in his early 20s suggested that metathesis is associated with older Sheng speakers and is not really used by the youth, who find it "embarrassing". This comment points again to the generational variation that emerges in our discussion. Recall also that for the younger consultant in his early 20s from the Kibera area of Nairobi, the causative in particular seemed odd and he considered 16 out of 18 elicited verbs with the causative as unacceptable, preferring periphrastic strategies throughout. This contrasts with the older speakers, who found more of the causative forms acceptable (as indicated in Table 2). Where the causative was possible for the younger speaker, it then had the same meaning as the base and applicative form (e.g. for *kuchanua* 'to teach' and *kuchora* 'hide', as discussed in Section 4.3).

Beyond the younger participant viewing causatives as being generally ungrammatical, there is also a perception that the use of causatives without the associated Standard Swahili grammatical function is specific to the way people in Nairobi speak. One consultant was amused by the utterance from co-author Tom Jelpke (who is white British) in (48), because it sounded funny for a foreigner to say something that was reported to be "in such a Kenyan way" (i.e. using the causative suffix unnecessarily).

(48)   *Kiswahili i-na-saidi-a*   *ku-elew-**an-ish**-a*   *na*   *wa-tu*
        Kiswahili SM9-PRS-help-FV   INF-understand-RECP-CAUS-FV   with   2-person
        'Swahili helps people to relate to each other'

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6 It is worth noting that these Gikuyu borrowings might come as wholesale borrowings along with their applicative morphology (or interpretation) already in place. Therefore, what appears to be a similarity between the applicative and the causative may actually reflect the origin of the verb forms.

7 Although we do not have statistics to reflect this as it was a small-scale, qualitative study, we believe perceptual insights are invaluable for better understanding the language, especially considering the important social functions Sheng holds for its speakers and their identity.

6 Conclusion and future prospects

This paper set out the address the following two questions: (i) Do verbal extensions in Sheng combine with verbs differently depending on the origin of the verb? And (ii) do verbal extensions behave differently in Sheng compared to Swahili?

Overall, our data show that verbal extensions in Sheng do not combine differently with verbs depending on the origin of the verb. Rather we found that all groups of verbs in Sheng followed the broad Swahili patterns to a certain extent in their verbal derivation. Even though we did not find any significant differences between the individual groups, some interesting tendencies emerged.

Verbs of Swahili origin behaved the most regularly in our data with no "unexplained" ungrammatical forms. Given that the extensions themselves are forms from Swahili, this is in many ways unsurprising. Verbs of English and Gikuyu origin, as well as coined and metathesized ones, all revealed numerous differences and were used in non-standard constructions.

Several constructions with extensions such as the passive or applicative involve a change in interpretation without changing the valency of the verb. However, this is not uncommon across Bantu (see, e.g., Marten and Mous 2017) and therefore their occurrence in Sheng perhaps points to a broader need to re-consider the breadth of functions of Bantu verbal extensions.

The causative construction displayed the highest number of divergences from expected (Swahili) forms and meanings. A notable difference is where the causative suffix is added without changing the meaning of the verb and/or without adding a new argument. For other suffixes – in particular, the reciprocal and applicative – we found instances where we would expect a derivational form semantically, but the form is ungrammatical, and other instances where the two extensions could be used interchangeably with no apparent difference in meaning.

On a few occasions, there was a split among our consultants in terms of the acceptability of verbal extension and their use, which points to a possible generational variation within Sheng.

We believe more work on verbal extensions is needed to understand the relation between Sheng linguistic structures and Sheng speakers' language practices and perceptions. A deeper knowledge of Sheng language structures will also allow us to better understand its relation to Swahili.

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