

# Neologism: A Narrowing or a Broadening Process, a Case of Sheng

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## Abstract

This study is meant to test lexical pragmatic process of broadening using Sheng<sup>1</sup> data. Sheng is such an emotive language phenomenon that both linguists and non-linguists have grappled with for a long time. In this paper, Sheng is handled as a tool for communication used by the Kenyan youth in their daily interaction, all other contending views notwithstanding. It is also important to state from the onset that we handle Sheng from a functional grammar<sup>2</sup> point of view. This study employed a Lexical Pragmatics theory as proposed by Blutner (1998) and indeed many other scholars, who view neologism as a broadening process. In this study, we have a different view on neologism albeit. Thus, we argue that in fact neologism is a narrowing process in Sheng, according to the data on Sheng. Neologism here is used as defined by Crystal (2001) and Kate (2001)<sup>3</sup>. Data used in this paper was gathered through questionnaires issued to speakers of Sheng in Jericho Estate in the Eastland's area of Nairobi. The data was later analyzed within lexical pragmatic theoretical framework. This study recommends a further investigation into the various seemingly dialectical variations of Sheng.

**Keywords:** Broadening, narrowing, neologism, lexical pragmatics, word, Sheng

## 1. Introduction

This study is basically aimed at exploring different views on neologism as handled within lexical pragmatics. Essentially, Blutner (1998), Wilson and Sparber (1998), and Wilson (2003) identifies two major lexical pragmatics process. These are narrowing and broadening. Narrowing according to proponents of this theory is a situation where a lexical item (word) communicates (decodes) a more specific meaning as compared to the meaning assigned to it by grammar. All these process are context dependent<sup>4</sup>.

The broadening process is further sub-divided into other process namely approximation, categorical extensions and neologism. It is neologism that is of specific interest in the present study. Neologism has been categorized as broadening by Blutner (1998) from an understanding that when a new sense is added to an already existing lexical item, then that lexical item becomes polysemous (having more meanings). Polysemous words have a high tendency of being ambiguous and context is critical in the disambiguation.

Additionally, when neologism presents itself as a new lexical item getting into language, it is viewed as broadening due to the semantic process of meaning addition in the language. It is noteworthy that Blutner (1998)<sup>5</sup> himself did not do much in handling neologism, other than listing it as one of the broadening processes within lexical pragmatic theoretical framework.

## 1.2 Problem Statement

Many attempts have been made to study Sheng from various theoretical perspectives. Some of these have been discussed in the section handling literature and data. However, not much has been done to adequately cover Sheng, not just from theoretical leanings but also in sociolinguistics. Even so, no research has been done to

<sup>1</sup> Considered as a youth jargon, code, language spoken by the youth in the urban settlements in Kenya.

<sup>2</sup> A theory of grammar concerned with how the social, cognitive, and pragmatic functions of language relate to structure.

<sup>3</sup> Crystal (2001) defines neologism as the creation of new lexical items in the language

<sup>4</sup> There is need for inference to be made to the situation of use for correct understanding of the word

<sup>5</sup> Blutner (1998) observes that there are two major context dependent process within lexical pragmatic theory.

<sup>5</sup> Unstable language is language that changes rapidly within a short span of time.

challenge the broadening process in lexical pragmatics, which is why this research was carried out.

### 1.3 Research Questions

This research was guided by the following research questions:

1. Is neologism evident as a word formation process in Sheng?
2. Is neologism a broadening or a narrowing lexical pragmatics process?

### 1.4 Scope

This study was restricted to handling Sheng lexemes within lexical pragmatics. Neologism was identified as an aspect of broadening and tested using Sheng data. We tested the proposition by Blutner (1998) that neologism is an aspect broadening. We limited ourselves to broadening as theoretical underpinning. Sheng data that was analyzed was collected from the Eastern part of Nairobi, Kenya.

### 1.5. Methodology

This research used stratified random sampling to identify respondents. The respondents were asked to provide an inventory of Sheng lexemes alongside their meanings as used in Sheng. The respondents were 10 in number and were all considered fluent speakers of Sheng. The data collected was then analyzed within the premises of lexical pragmatics theory. Importantly, the respondents were asked to indicate, the origin of some of the lexemes they listed. An independent Sheng speaker was identified on purpose to provide clarifications on some of the lexemes.

### 1.6 Literature Review and Data Analysis

Various views have been presented by various scholars especially with regard to lexical productivity in Sheng. In fact, Mukhwana (2008) asserts that Sheng and English are language varieties that exhibit regular creation of new vocabulary. The same view is shared by Spyropolous (1987:129). Sheng is viewed by various scholars as a language variety that undergoes frequent changes to the extent that it has been loosely crowned unstable<sup>5</sup>. This view is also held by Ngesa (2002). However, this study maintains the view that Sheng has a considerable level of lexical stability. We hold this view based on research done by Warambo (2011) that had a diachronic leaning in both data collection and analysis. Predominant in Warambo (2011) is the lexical and semantic development of Sheng that its speakers still use presently. Warambo (2011) argues that what has possibly changed has to do with the sense of those words, a phenomenon that is not unique to Sheng alone but cut across languages of the world. Further, it is a simplistic view to think that the change in lexical items automatically makes Sheng unstable. The changes are highly due to dialectical variations, a view that Warambo (2011) adopts in his introductory chapter as he explores contending views on Sheng.

#### 1a) Lexical Pragmatic Processes

##### Broadening

Generally and indeed from Blutner's (1998) treatment, broadening is a case where a word is used in a broader sense than the encoded meaning. There are situations where when a word is used, it may be understood in a broader meaning than the grammatical meaning. Grammatical meaning here stands for the rules for standard use of words. For instance:

Example 1. *Msee namfeel demu wa mine.*

Gloss: (Friend, I feel (intimately) my girlfriend)

The Sheng word 'feel' (borrowed from English) is conceptualized from the point of view of the lexifying language (Ogechi, 2005). In this case, the language is English. Hence, the lexeme 'feel' is generally understood to mean having an experience with external stimuli. In Sheng, 'feel' simply means understanding someone's intention in feelings. In example 1 above, the word 'feel' communicates a broader meaning in Sheng as compared to its linguistic meaning in English. It can, therefore, be deduced that 'feel' in 1 means to identify with someone's feelings, know one's aspirations, intentions and feelings. Therefore, the word 'feel' can only be understood in its broader sense as used above. Broadening constitutes other sub-processes which includes; approximations, categorical extensions, hyperbole, metaphorical extensions and neologism. Noteworthy, is that because of the broadening of meaning, context is paramount in understanding the intended specific meaning.

##### Narrowing

This is a case where a lexical item is used in a more specific sense than the encoded sense, resulting in a narrowing of the linguistically specified denotations. There are some illustrations with Sheng data below:

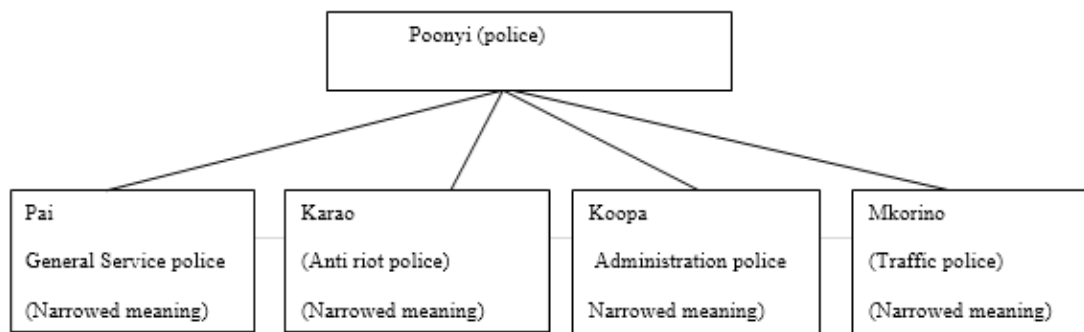
Example 2. *Buda huwasha.*

The Sheng word '*washa*' means a penumbra of things; such as drinking water, beer, chewing miraa and being cruel as a result of some insult. In some contexts, it may mean abusing drugs. As used above, '*washa*' means drinking beer. It is through narrowing that we are able to decode the meaning as drinking beer. Narrowing facilitates picking on the meaning that is narrower and leaves all the other possible meanings out.

### Neologism

Broadly speaking, neologism is a process where a new lexical item comes into use in a language or when a word acquires a new sense. According to Katie (2001:265) neologism refers to newly invented words in a language. Neologism is motivated by pragmatic need in the language. In this paper, we adopt the definition by Katie (2001) as our operational definition, though with a little modification. Hence, in this study, neologism is a process where a new sense is added to an already existing word. This does not necessarily mean that the old sense is dropped. Such a word could have just become polysemous.

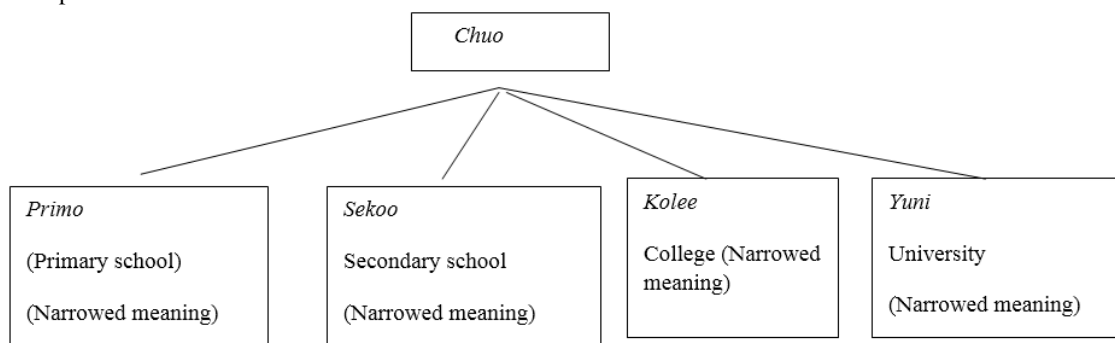
Busman (1996:324) observes that neologism includes any newly formed linguistic expression (word or phrase) that is recognized by the least part, if not all the language community, as a way to denote new object or state of affairs, be it in technology, industry, politics, culture or science. Sheng is considered as a language form that exhibits high levels of neologism to the extent that new lexical items are often added to it through the creativity of the speaker(s). Sheng's neologism is evident through conventional word formation processes as well as unique processes (see Shitemi, 2002, Ngesa, 2003 and Warambo, 2011). It has been argued before that Sheng is synonymous to neologism. This study, however, is of the view that it has a high tendency towards neologism. The thesis of this study is that neologism is a narrowing process as proposed by Blutner (1998). In Sheng, a lexeme such as '*chuo*' means a learning institution such as a primary school, a secondary school, a college or a university (Ogechi, 2003). For that reason, in a situation of use *chuo* becomes ambiguous and hence the context of usage is used to disambiguate it. It is important to note here that speakers of Sheng have invented new words as a strategy for disambiguation and hence narrow the remaining of an already existing polysemous words. Example 3.



Initially, Sheng speakers used '*poonyi*' to denote policeman. As speakers continued to use this word, it became loosely attached to various senses associated with the word. Arguably, speakers invented other words to try and come up with narrow sense of the broad sense word '*poonyi*' whose synonym is '*gava*'.

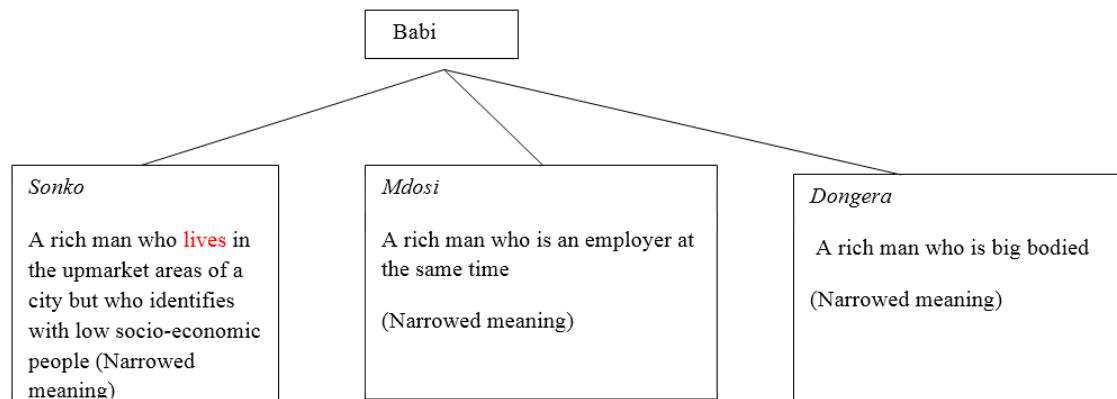
Consider, again '*chuo*',

Example 4.



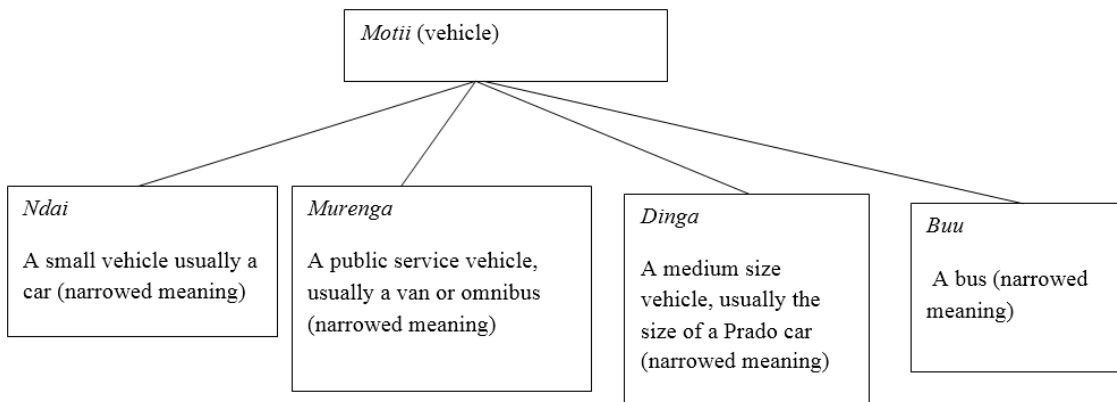
By the invention of *primo*, *sekoo*, *kole* and *yuni*, the word has been disambiguated.

Example 5.

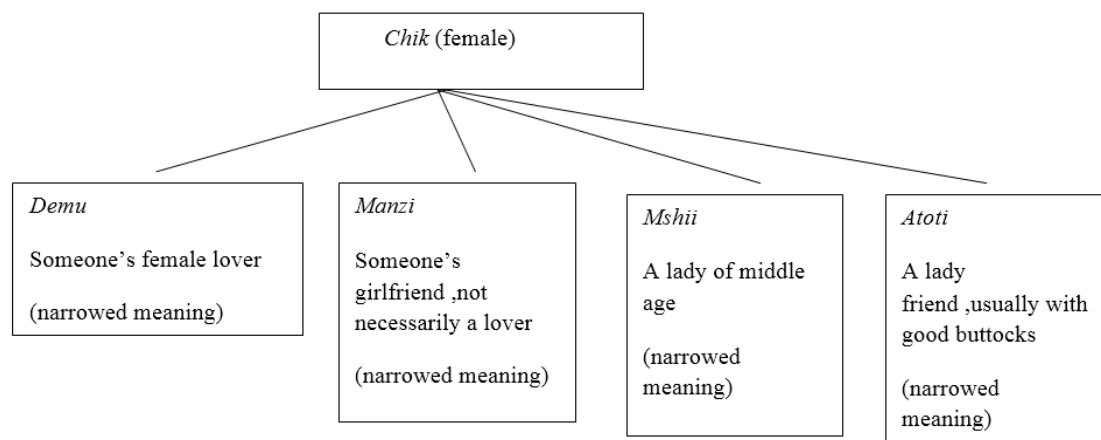


For a long period of time, the word 'babi' was used to refer to various senses of a rich man until it became so ambiguous to use. In a way the word is polysemous, but speakers have since invented other words using various processes as a way of breaking the ambiguity. The same linguistic processes can be said to have been used in lexemes such as *motii* (vehicle), and *ticha* (teacher).

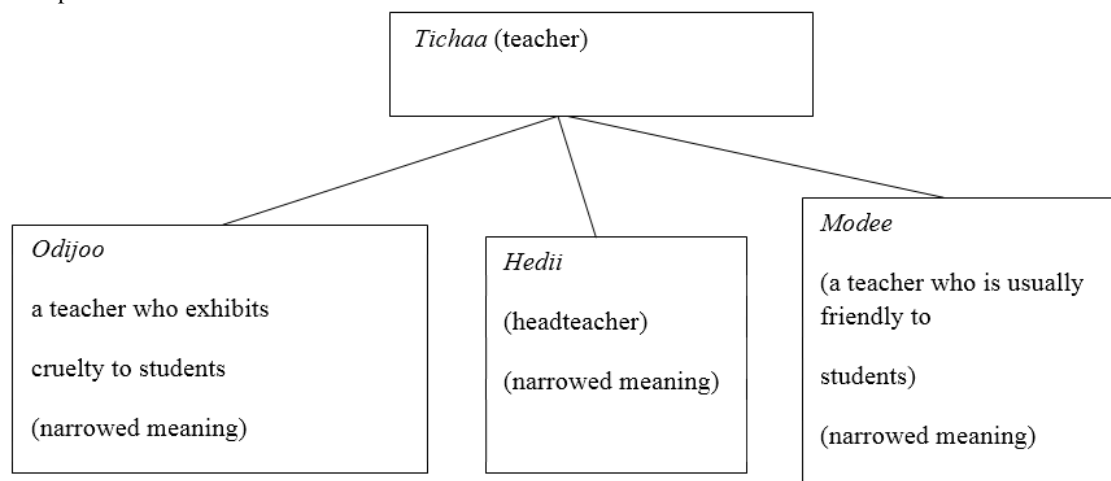
Example 6.



Example 7.



Example 8.



### Word Formation Processes in Sheng's Neologism

Other than the traditional word formation processes, Sheng uses other unique processes of word formations. However, it is important to note that in the traditional word formation processes there are those that have a high productivity in Sheng than others. Borrowing and adaptation for example seem to be more productive to Sheng than back formation. In the proceeding sections, we discuss in brief some of these processes with examples from Sheng data.

#### a) Borrowing and Adaptation

According to Joseph (1996:28), borrowing is a situation where a lexeme or a set of lexemes or an item is transferred from one language to another or from one dialect of a language to another. Loan words can be borrowed either without adaptation or with adaptations to fit in the morphological frame of the recipient language. Hence, as Mathews (1997:7) observes, adaption only occurs when certain morphological or otherwise characteristics are manipulated to agree with the grammar rules of the recipient language. Adaptation has also been described as naturalization by Arloto (1972:184).

Borrowing is necessitated by various factors such as lexical needs in the recipient language as well as status. In a situation where other languages exist in neighborhood, borrowing tends to be more prevalent due to interaction. Sheng has found itself in a complex scenario, where it has borrowed from various languages in its neighborhood. There is a popular view that Sheng has highly borrowed from Kiswahili than any other language. That view is not adopted in this study because it lacks any research backing. However, one fact remains undisputed, that like any other language, Sheng has lexically borrowed from Kenyan languages (see Ogechi 2005, for more discussions and examples on this).

Example 9.

Sheng (loan word)	Lexifying language	Gloss
<i>Mwasi</i>	Lingala	A lady
<i>Buda</i>	Gujarati	Father
<i>Ngiri</i>	Kikuyu	A thousand (mostly for money)
<i>Wodee</i>	English	Water
<i>Nyoora</i>	Ekegusii	urinating

The structure of Sheng is highly Bantu and hence most of the borrowed lexicon is adapted into the bantu morphological framework. One thing that is evident from the data is that Sheng borrows from various languages and adaptation is not a very strict rule.

#### b) Clipping

Basically, clipping is shortening of an already existing word. Lexemes with more syllables are reduced into fewer syllables. The clipping can be fore-clipping or in-clipping. As a process, clipping does not restrict a language to any of the aforementioned types. One very important characteristic of clipping in Sheng is that a word is first borrowed and morphologically adapted into a Bantu syllable structure such as that of Kiswahili, Kikuyu or Luhya and finally clipped. There is also a tendency to elongate the final vowel, in some lexemes as show below.

Example 10.

Lexifying language	Sheng Loan word	Gloss
English	Sato/Satoo	Saturday
English	Fadhe/Fadhee	Father
Kiswahili	Mathe/Mathee	Mother

### c) Affixation

Mathews (1997:7) observes that affixation is a process of adding a letter, sound or a set of sounds to the root. Mathew (1997) further posits that the addition changes the meaning and function of the word. Richards et al (1985) on the other hand concurs that affixation is the process of addition of affixes to the root of the word. At the moment, the highly productive affixation process in Sheng is that of prefixation as exemplified below.

#### Example 11.

Prefix	Root	Sheng	Gloss
M	+ <i>Supa</i>	<i>Msupa</i>	A girl
M	+ <i>Shii</i>	<i>Mshii</i>	A girl
M	+ <i>Ngoso</i>	<i>Mngoso</i>	An Englishman
M	+ <i>Renga</i>	<i>Mrenga</i>	A matatu

### d) Coinages

Coinage is a process or a result of lexical creation of a totally new lexical item from the existing morphological items. This is one of the productive word formation processes in Sheng. When Sheng is mentioned, one of the processes that comes to mind is coinage. A casual look at Sheng lexemes may make one assume that all lexemes are coined.

#### Example 12.

Sheng (Coined lexeme)	Gloss
<i>Njeve</i>	Cold
<i>Mboch</i>	House help (girl)
<i>Rasa</i>	Buttocks
<i>Ndula</i>	Shoes
<i>Gondi</i>	Thief
<i>Rwabe</i>	Two hundred (shillings)

Coinage enriches a language internally. This process is viewed by scholars as one that makes a language to remain “unpolluted”<sup>1</sup>. A language that uses coinage largely is considered a rich one. Contrary to the popular opinion among non-speakers of Sheng that Sheng is a haphazard coinage of some kind, coinage in Sheng and as Ogechi (2003:354), asserts has some inherent logic, something that points to the system that Sheng exhibits.

### e) Syllable reversing

This is a situation where syllables that already exist in a lexeme exchange positions. In Sheng, this is a very unique process, in that the lexemes that have been borrowed from Kiswahili are reversed but the ones borrowed from non-Bantu languages such as English are adapted into Kiswahili structure before reversing the syllables.

#### Example 13.

Word	Adaptation	Reversed	Gloss
English			
Card	Kadi	<i>Dika</i>	Card
Story	Stori	<i>Risto</i>	Story
Bread	Bredi	<i>Dibre</i>	Bread
Kiswahili			
<i>Moja</i>	<i>Moja</i>	<i>Jamo</i>	One
<i>Nyumba</i>	<i>Nyumba</i>	<i>Mbanyu</i>	House
<i>Mbele</i>	<i>Mbele</i>	<i>Lembe</i>	Informed/infront

What makes this process different from metathesis is that in some instances the syllable exceeds two. In metathesis, according to Tuki (1990:40), two syllables exchange positions in a word. Noteworthy is that in Sheng, reversing is accompanied by semantic borrowing in the lexicons although with minimal semantic shifts.

### f) Onomatopoeia

Crystal (2002) observes that this is a word formation process where a lexeme is created out of function, structure, sound produced or general characteristics. Through this process, Sheng has created the following lexemes.

#### Example 14

Sheng word	Gloss

<sup>1</sup> It is not possible to talk of “polluted” language because, ideally there are no such languages. Languages affect each other lexically.

<i>Bling bling</i>	Ornament	From their shininess
<i>Mng'aro</i>	Clothes	From being neat
<i>Poko</i>	Prostitute	From sound made during sexual intercourse
<i>Pang'ang'a</i>	Noise	From noise made by slapping the <i>matatu</i> body
<i>Kongkodi</i>	Matatu conductor	From beating <i>matatu</i> bodies

Just like in any other language, owing to the arbitrariness of languages, words created from onomatopoeic structures are quite few in Sheng.

### g) Compounding

In compounding, two or more lexical units, which are ordinarily free lexemes, are brought together to create a new lexical item. The result of which is a compound noun (word). It is generally accepted that the meaning of a compound word is not the sum total of meanings of the two or more lexemes brought together. Hence, knowing the meaning of the different words used in a compound word does not help one in knowing the resultant compound word (Fromkin & Rodman, 1988:137).

Example 15

Sheng words

<i>Mbara + maki</i>	→ <i>Mbaramaki</i>	mad person
<i>Dati + gati</i>	→ <i>datigati</i>	overall
<i>Buu + fee</i>	→ <i>bufee</i>	bus fare

### 1.7 Discussion

As already explained in the preceding sections, neologism can be viewed in two ways; either as new lexical items created or as old words acquiring new senses. In this study, emphasis has been on the neologism that results in new words getting into the language (see Warambo 2011 for the other phase of neologism). Sheng uses the various word formation processes, both traditional and unique to Sheng processes. Neologism in Sheng, just as in other rapidly growing languages such as Kiswahili, is an aspect of a language that has found itself in an era of technological development. To keep up with the changes in ideas, concepts and notions, new words have to be invented to encode the emerging ideas. Elsewhere, arguments have been put forth on Sheng and youth trends (Mukhwana, 2011). The youth in Nairobi and other major towns in Kenya are fashion crazy and so some of these fashions have to be coded in their youth vernacular. In so doing, Sheng ends up inventing new words both regularly and fast. It may also suffice to argue that contrary to the views of Abdulaziz and Osinde (1997) that secrecy is the force behind coinages in Sheng, Sheng coins words in response to the changes in the society. Therefore, Abdulaziz and Osinde's (1997) argument no longer holds water given the current face of Sheng. Hence, the neologism evident in Sheng can be said of any other language and of course Sheng uses other conventional word formation processes as we have seen from the foregoing data.

One feature that stands out in Sheng's neologism though is that Sheng lexemes tend to be broad in meaning, which can be taken as a system of polysemy; This hinders precision and makes communication problematic. In trying to deal with the anomaly and to facilitate complete communication in Sheng, other lexical items are invented (neologism) as a way of narrowing the meaning.

In example 6, all the lexemes like *dinga*, *murenga*, *ndai* and *buu* are a result of neologism yet when closely analyzed, *dinga* is a result of coinage, *buu* is a borrowed and adapted lexeme, *ndai* is coinage and *mathrii* is a loan translation (caleque).

### Conclusion

This study was meant to challenge the view that neologism is a form of broadening process within lexical pragmatics. Instead, we have argued that neologism is a narrowing process within lexical pragmatics theory. Sheng data was used to illustrate our claim. One thing that has been evident is that in neologism, Sheng uses conventions within linguistic theories. When Sheng creates a new lexical item, the aim is more often than not to narrow the meaning of the broader or polysemous lexical item, which initially had that sense. In earlier research such as Ngesa (2002), Ogechi (2003,5), some of these words were looked at as synonyms. This study has demonstrated that these lexemes are not just synonymous but instead new creations whose aim is to narrow the meaning of certain lexemes hence showing that neologism is a narrowing process and not an aspect of broadening.

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