

ASPECTS OF THE VOCABULARY OF KENYAN ENGLISH: AN OVERVIEW

Alfred Buregeya
University of Nairobi

From a variety of sources, this paper has gleaned a substantial amount of information on specific aspects of the vocabulary of the Kenyan English variety. This information provides evidence that as a second language variety Kenyan English has developed its vocabulary through the main processes of a) borrowing from indigenous languages, b) coining its own words and phrases, and c) giving, to a number of international English words, additional meanings that are specific to it. The loan words from indigenous languages are no doubt more visible than the other two components of Kenyan English vocabulary, but they are numerically much less important than these two.

1. Introduction

There must be very few (if any) writings on Kenyan English that have not touched on the vocabulary of Kenyan English. Even those that are explicitly said to be “grammatical” (like Schmied [2004] and Buregeya [2001]) are likely to mention a special meaning in Kenyan English given to such-and-such international English word, or a word used in English that originates from one of the indigenous languages of Kenya. The aim of the present piece of writing is to disseminate the information on the meanings and usages of words and phrases that have already been discussed in the existing literature which I was able to lay my hands on and those that have not yet, presumably because they had gone unnoticed.

So far I know of only two books that have been entirely devoted to the vocabulary of Kenyan English and its special meanings. The first was published by Paul Skandera in 2003, under the title: *Drawing a Map of Africa: Idiom in Kenyan English*. The second is a Master’s degree thesis written by Alati R. Atichi for the University of Nairobi in 2004 and titled “The semantic distinctiveness of Kenyan English”. Atichi seems to have drawn his topic from one of Skandera’s (2003) “suggestions for further research”, specifically one

that invites a study that could order Kenyan English features “along a continuum expressing their degrees of preference...” (p. 207).

To my knowledge, Skandera’s (2003) book is the most scholarly discussion of meanings of Kenyan English vocabulary to date, even though it deals only with meanings of idioms. Roughly, the term “idiom” refers to a combination of at least two words whose meaning is not the sum total of the meanings of the individual words that compose it. (Skandera devotes an entire chapter, Chapter 2, on what an idiom is, and gives a definition summarizing the discussion on p.60.) The book is relevant to the present paper in two respects: first, there is the fact that Skandera has identified special meanings of what he refers to as standard “International English idioms” that are used in African and, by inclusion, Kenyan English (see chapters 5-7), and the meanings of what he calls “Kenyan English idioms” (see chapters 8-10). In the category of “StdIntE” idioms he includes expressions like *extended family*, *bride-price*, and *witch doctor*. He considers them as StdIntE idioms because they appear as lexical entries in standard international English dictionaries. In the category of “KenE” idioms he includes expressions like *wife inheritance*, *queue-voting*, *parking boy*, *to draw a map of Africa/Kenya*, *to flag off*, *slowly by slowly*, *nyama choma*, *jua kali*, *kitu kidogo*, *to look at somebody with bad eyes*, and *bed net*. Second, Skandera’s book has categorized meanings of idioms on the basis of processes that explain how the meanings in question came about, which the present study will do as well. Those are processes like “semantic expansion”, which refers to the fact of acquiring additional meanings; “semantic shift”, which refers to a change of meaning; coining new words and idioms; and borrowing words and idioms from indigenous Kenyan languages.

Atichi’s (2004) Master’s thesis contains a chapter (Chapter 3) that will greatly inform the present study. The chapter discusses Kenyan English meanings of forty words and the rate of their acceptance by a sample of forty-one university students and lecturers and secondary school teachers. Atichi divided the meanings in question into four categories: “altered meanings”, “added meanings”, “word-formation meanings”, and meanings of

“words borrowed from indigenous Kenyan languages”. It is evident that these categories mirror those used by Skandera (2003).

The present study will follow a categorization that is broadly similar to that used by the two studies. It will divide the Kenyan English vocabulary into three components: a) loan words from indigenous languages of Kenya, b) words and phrases that have been coined by Kenyan English users but which are not (yet) lexical entries in standard international English dictionaries, and c) those that are lexical entries in StdIntE dictionaries but have acquired additional meanings which do not appear in these same dictionaries.

2. Three main components of the Kenyan English vocabulary

2.1 *Loan expressions from indigenous languages of Kenya*

Most of such expressions have been borrowed from Kiswahili. The following thirteen words, their language of origin (given in parentheses) and their definitions were taken from a list of fourteen examples given in Atichi (2004: 54-55)¹:

1. a *panga* (Swahili): a kind of machete
2. a *shamba* (Swahili): a farm
3. a *baraza* (Swahili): an official gathering meant to educate and solve conflicts
4. a *manamba* (Sheng): a tout on [a] public service vehicle
5. *chang'aa* (Swahili): a kind of illicit [spirit]
6. *githeri* (Kikuyu): a cooked meal from a mixture of maize and beans
7. a *mwananchi* (Swahili): an ordinary citizen
8. a *moran* (Maasai): a warrior waiting to be an elder
9. a *duka* (Swahili): a shop
10. an *askari* (Swahili): a soldier, policeman or guard

¹ The fourteenth word in Atichi's list is *kiosk*, which he claims is from Kiswahili. This information does not seem to be corroborated by International English dictionaries, which have the word as an entry. Furthermore, the word *kiosk* is not an entry e.g. in the *Kamusi ya Kiswahili-Kiingereza / Swahili-English Dictionary (2001)* hereafter the KKK (2001).

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11. a *kanzu* (Swahili): a flowing robe worn for religious purposes
12. *harambee* (Swahili): ... a way of raising funds
13. a *shuka* (Swahili): a piece of garment ... that women cover their waist with

Some of the above examples appear also in Okoth (1987: 46), where the following, all from Kiswahili, are also listed, though not defined: *rungu*, *wazees* [sic], *debe*, *safari*².

14. *rungu* has two meanings in the *Kamusi ya Kiswahili-Kiingereza/Swahili-English Dictionary (2001)*, namely a ‘club’ and a ‘knobkerrie’;
15. *wazee* is the plural for *mzee*, which has four meanings in the *KKK (2001)* two of which are ‘an old person’, and ‘a respected person’;
16. *debe* is defined in the *KKK (2001)* as ‘a tin container of 20 litres’;
17. *safari*, originally from Kiswahili, entered the English language a long time ago. We could even say that it does no longer really fit in the category of “special” Kenyan English vocabulary. Notice that its “StdIntE” meaning is actually slightly different from its typical Kenyan English one of ‘any trip or journey made from one point to another...’ Atichi (2004: 101). According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (7th edition, 2005—hereafter the OALD, 2005)*, for instance, the word *safari* means ‘a trip to see or hunt wild animals, especially in east or southern Africa’. The dictionary gives also what it refers to as its East African English meaning, which is basically the same as that quoted above from Atichi (2004). And, quite relevantly, notice that the *KKK (2001)* defines the Kiswahili word *safari* as ‘safari, journey, trip’, a definition which captures the idea of ‘any’ in Atichi’s definition.

Some of the words mentioned above are also listed in Schmied (1991: 80-81) to illustrate “domains of lexical Africanisms in East African English”. Those are: *githeri*, *askari*, *kanga*, *panga*, *shamba*, *manamba*, *kanzu*, *debe*, *duka*, *harambee*, and *safari*. It should be noted, though, that some of

² Okoth’s list of “cases where indigenous words have been made part of the vocabulary of [Kenyan English]” also contains the word *ayah*. But this word does not seem to come from an “indigenous” Kenyan language. For one thing, it does not seem to be from Kiswahili; it is not an entry in the *KKK (2001)*, and the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (7th edition, 2005)* informs us that it is a noun from Indian English, which means ‘a woman whose job is caring for children, doing domestic work, etc.’.

Schmied's definitions differ from those above. For instance, his definition of *manamba* is 'labourer', while that provided by Atichi (2004) is 'a tout on [a] public service vehicle'. From the way the word is currently used in Kenya, the latter is more appropriate. Schmied's list contains much more terms (seventy-four to be exact) some of which are hardly used in Kenyan English. (Only three of the seventy-four are marked as being specifically used in Tanzania). Those I can remember having heard being used (in my ten years of careful observation of Kenyan English) are listed below, together with their definitions as provided by Schmied (1991). They are all from Kiswahili.

18. *dudu(s)*: insects
19. *jembe*: hoe
20. *chai*: tea
21. [*mandazi*]: wheat cakes
22. *baba*: man
23. *bwana*: Mister
24. *buibui*: Islamic veil
25. *kanga*: cloth
26. *ugali*: staple maize dish
27. *uji*: porridge
28. *fundi*: craftsman
29. *mzee*: (old man's title)
30. *mzungu*: white man
31. *Mwalimu*: [the late] President Nyerere [the first President of Tanzania]
32. *mabati* [house]: corrugated iron (sheets) [house]
33. *pole*: expression of sympathy
34. *magendo*: black market
35. *nyayo*: [a type of] national philosophy [in Kenyan politics]
36. *wananchi*: fellow countrymen [This is the plural of *mwananchi* mentioned previously as No. 7.]
37. *pole pole*: slowly
38. *sufuria*: cooking pan

Below are other words which were borrowed from Kiswahili, but which do not appear in the lists mentioned above, although some of them are separately mentioned, e.g. in Schmied (1991). Where necessary the source of the definition is indicated as well.

39. *matatu*: a public transport minibus in Kenya

40. *sukumawiki*: “literally ‘push (the) week’ in Swahili, denoting spinach-like greens that are affordable and available [in Kenya] on every day of the week” (Skandera, 2003:171)

41. *manyata*: makeshift settlement/village (definition given in the *KKK* (2001))

42. *majimbo* [plural for *jimbo* (province)]: the “*majimbo* (system)”, also known as *majimboism*, is a system of governance advocated by some politicians to promote “ethnic regionalism”—to borrow the term from Skandera (p. 59)

43. *panya* route: a ‘roundabout route’ or ‘secret path’ (see Skandera p. 172) of achieving a certain goal—the Kiswahili word *panya* means ‘rat’)

44. *jua kali*: “literally ‘hot sun’ in Swahili ... denotes Kenya’s informal private sector” (Skandera, p. 175)

45. *nyama choma* [this is actually an incomplete version of *nyama ya kuchoma* (meat for roasting)]: roast meat

46. *jiko*: a stove that burns charcoal

47. *mitumba*, which is the plural of *mtumba* (a second-hand article), appears in Schmied (2004: 939) where it is defined as “used/second-hand clothes, but sometimes transferred to ‘second-hand in general’, as in *mitumba cars* or even *mitumba mentality*”.

For her part, Zuengler (1982: 116) points out some of the words already mentioned (*sufuria*, *ugali*, *sukumawiki*, *jembe*, *rungu*, *panga*, *shamba*, *baba*, *majengo*, *wananchi*, *harambee*, *uhuru* and *baraza*) as examples of what she calls “direct lexical transfers”. Among these she includes several others (viz. *irio*, ‘food’ in Kikuyu; *busaa*, a kind of ‘homebrewed beer’; *kuni*, ‘firewood’ in Kiswahili), which once in a while can indeed be heard used in English, and several others (none of which is from Kiswahili) I cannot remember hearing

used in English. That said, the author collected all her examples from published literary works and gives specific evidence for this.

Although all the “indigenous” words mentioned in the preceding paragraphs are used here to illustrate the special nature of Kenyan English, only a few of them can be said to be “only Kenyan”. That is the case of *matatu* and *githeri*, and *nyayo*. The vast majority of them are considered as “East African” by Schmied (1991), the *Oxford Primary Dictionary for East Africa* (1999), the *OALD* (2005), among others. It may be worth noting that of all the close-to-fifty words and phrases listed in the previous paragraphs, only the following sixteen are not entries in either of these two dictionaries: *dudu*, *githeri*, *uji*, *manamba*, *mzungu*, *mabati*, *nyayo*, *pole*, *pole pole*, *magendo*, *uhuru*, *moran*, *manyata*, *majimbo (system)*, *panya (route)*, and *nyama choma*. (The words *boma* and *panga* are even said by the *OALD*, 2005, to be used in South African English as well. And *jembe* is said to be used also in West African English, although with a different meaning from its East African English one.)

2.2 Expressions which seem to be coinages of Kenyan English

Single words and phrases in this category do not appear as lexical entries in general standard international English dictionaries, or specialized dictionaries like the *Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms* (1998). But this is not the same thing as saying that no native speaker uses them. And although they are not lexical entries, almost all of them were formed from existing standard English words.

A good number of the expressions under consideration are those presented as idioms in Skandera (2003). All the first fifty-five in the list below, together with their definitions, are discussed or used for illustration in chapters 5 to 11 of this book (see especially chapters 8 to 10 for their discussion). The illustrative sentences accompanying some of expressions are from Skandera as well. Although I will lump together all the fifty-five expressions under the same heading of “coined” expressions, Skandera (2003) divided them into three main sub-groups: “coinages” (see chapter 8),

“**borrowings** from substrate languages” (see chapter 9), and “**loan translations** from substrate languages” (see chapter 10). I have used, in square brackets [], the letter C to indicate which ones Skandera considers as coinages, the letter B the one he considers as a borrowing, and the letters LT those he considers as loan translations. In addition, I have used the letters GLLS to designate those he considers (see chapters 6 and 11) as having come about as a result of “general language-learning strategies”. In other words, the expressions in this last category could have been “coined” by any learner of English as a second language anywhere, not necessarily in Kenya. I have grouped all the four sub-groups together because in some sense they all have been “coined” after all, albeit using different strategies.

Here is the list of coined expressions:

1. *wife inheritance*—a tradition whereby a man automatically becomes the husband of his brother’s wife if his brother dies [C]
2. *a co-wife*—a woman who is married to the same man as another woman in a polygamous society [C]
3. *to talk nicely*—to give a bribe [C]
4. *queue-voting*—an electoral system whereby voters publicly line up behind a symbol or picture of [or the person himself/herself] they choose to vote [C]
5. *a youth-winger*—a young party member [C]
6. *to lie low like an envelope*—to behave in an inconspicuous way, to keep a low profile [C]
7. *to sing somebody’s tune/song*—to praise or support sb/sth enthusiastically (and sometimes uncritically) [C]
8. *the big five*—the five most sought-after, though not necessarily the biggest, animal species in Kenya’s national parks and reserves. [They are]: elephant, rhinoceros, buffalo, lion, and leopard [C]
9. *the members’ day*—refers to [Friday evening when especially men gather in bars to drink to end the working week] [C]
10. *the City in the Sun*—a name for Nairobi [C]
11. *a parking boy*—a street child [or man] who presses drivers for money in return for guarding their parked cars [C]

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12. *a turn-boy*—a person who collects fares on a bus or other public vehicle [or who assists a truck driver on long journeys] [C]
13. *We shall meet/talk (again)*—[this is said as] a farewell formula [C]
14. *(to go for) a short or long call*—[this is] a euphemism for ‘to go to urinate’ and ‘to go to defecate’, respectively [C]
15. *to have a godfather*—to know an influential person [C]
16. *to have a tall relative*—to know an influential person [C]
17. *to give sb a push*—to accompany sb part of the way [C]
18. *to push with sb*—[usually for young people] to have an amorous relationship with, to go out with sb [C]
19. *to read from*—to spend time learning in or at, as in *I am going to read from my room* [C]
20. *to pen off*—to stop writing, especially at the end of letters [C]
21. *to flag off*—to give the starting signal for [C]
22. *(to know sth) off head*—offhand, by heart [C]
23. *to be past tense*—to be no longer relevant, effective, important or existent [C]
24. *life chances*—opportunities one has to make the most of one’s life [C]
25. *something small*—a bribe [cf. the Kiswahili *kitu kidogo*] [B/LT]
26. *to look at somebody with bad eyes*—to give sb the evil eye [LT]
27. *a bed net*—a mosquito net [LT]
28. *to have a clean heart*—to have a good heart [LT]
29. *to be with*—to come together with, to meet, to see, as in *I was with David recently, he is fine* [LT]
30. *to stay with*—to keep, as in *You stayed with my notes for more than eight hours, and each and every minute means a lot to me* [LT]
31. *to have long hands*—to have a tendency to steal (small things) [LT]
32. *to be sat on (by his wife)*—(for a man) to be controlled, dominated, or influenced by (his wife) [LT]
33. *to see fire / dust*—to deal with the unpleasant consequences of one’s actions [LT]
34. *(to be) another one*—(to be) a one, as in *John is another one! First he promised to help me, and now he says he’s busy with something else.* [LT]

35. *to add salt to injury*—to add **insult** to injury [GLLS]³
36. *vicious cycle*—vicious circle [GLLS]
37. *to borrow a leaf from sb*—to **take** a leaf out of/from sb's book [GLLS]
38. *to sail in the same boat*—to **be** in the same boat [GLLS]
39. *to paint sb / sb's name black*—to **blacken** sb's name [GLLS]
40. *quite fine*—quite well [GLLS]
41. *as fast as lightening*—as **quick** as lightening [GLLS]
42. *to spread like bushfire*—to spread like **wildfire** [GLLS]
43. *to be on talking terms*—to be on **speaking** terms [GLLS]
44. *to develop cold feet*—to **get/have** cold feet [GLLS]
45. *smooth sailing*—plain sailing [GLLS]
46. *extension worker / officer*—extension **agent** (StdAmE)
47. *to be in hot soup*—to be in hot **water**, to be in the soup [GLLS]
48. *to make a mountain out of an anthill*—to make a mountain out of a **molehill** [GLLS]
49. *Have a nice time*—Have a nice **day** [GLLS]
50. *to put sth into consideration*—to **take** sth into consideration [GLLS]
51. *face towel*—face cloth, face **flannel** [StdBrE] [GLLS]
52. *to get a child, a baby*—to **have** a child, a baby [GLLS]
53. *to grease sb's hand/hands*—to grease sb's **palm** [GLLS]
54. *leave alone* [in the sense of 'not to speak of']—**let** alone [GLLS]
55. *slowly by slowly*—little by little [GLLS]

Skandera's (2003) list of Kenyan English idioms is much longer than the fifty-five. (Their forms and an indication of their frequency of use are presented on pages 118 to 123.) Those I did not include are more grammatical than semantic in nature: for example, in the use, in Kenyan English, of *at par with* instead of StdIntE *on a par with*, the issue is clearly that of a different preposition being used and an article being dropped. In *to keep abreast with* instead of *to keep abreast of*, it is just a question of a

³ For the expressions from No. 35 in the list I have chosen to highlight, in bold face, the words that are different in the Kenyan English constructions, rather than define them, since their meanings are exactly the same as those of their StdIntE counterparts on the right hand side.

different preposition being used. And in *to cope up* instead of *to cope*, it is just the particle *up* that has been added to make it a phrasal verb. I did not also include those expressions of which Skandera himself says are

those phenomena that are alleged to be typical of KenE or EAfrE, but upon systematic reexamination are better regarded as ad hoc or idiolectal uses, or simply as mistakes (p. 203).

One such example is the use of the verb *to overlisten* used for *to overhear*.

But there are much more expressions to complement the above list from Skandera (2003). Some of these (e.g. *to wreck havoc*) are idiom-like, others (e.g. *bicycle taxi*) are composed of non-idiomatic collocates, while some others (e.g. *oftenly*) are just single words. This additional list first comprises the following seven (from 56 to 62) which were pointed out and defined by Atichi (2004: 50-54):

56. *mob justice*—an attack or harm meted out to a criminal or suspect by a crowd of people

57. *flag-bearer*—one who represents a group, party, country in a competition or election ⁴

58. *bicycle taxi*—a means of transport; a bicycle that is hired for a charge that is based on the length and time of the journey

59. *out-grower*—a small scale farmer commissioned by a factory to grow a cash crop, outside its nucleus or premises with the support of that factory, for example, a sugar cane out-grower

60. *to be saved*—to be born again, to accept Jesus as a saviour

Further, Atichi (pp. 75-76), adds the following and offers their definitions as well:

61. *to bring sb into the fold*—to make sb support ideas... of a group ...to which one belongs

⁴ *Flag-bearer* is actually mentioned in Atichi (2004) only as “another KenE coined compound” that is “closely related to ‘torch-bearer’” (p. 53). It is *torch-bearer* that the author discusses. But I did not include this word in my list because it appears as a lexical entry in the *Collins English Dictionary* (7th edition, 2005). Atichi notes that “the two formations [i.e. *torch-bearer* and *flag-bearer*] are used interchangeably in KenE” (p. 53).

62. *to put out of sb*—to be no longer on [speaking] terms [with sb], to disagree [with] or hate somebody.

And then there are expressions that are not reported in either Skandera (2003) or Atichi (2004). As I did for an earlier list, I will put in bold face the words that are different in the Kenyan English constructions, rather than define them, since their meanings are exactly the same as those of their StdIntE counterparts on the right hand side. The latter are in bold face, too. (Only expression 73 does not seem to have a counterpart in the form of idiomatic expression or phrase made up of collocates⁵.)

63. *to wreck havoc*—to **wreak** havoc

64. *more...as opposed to/(as) compared to*—more...**than**

65. *How do you call it?*—**What** do you call it?

66. *to be in for a rude shock*—to be in for a rude **awakening**

67. *to lead by example*—to **set a** (good) example (cf. also *to lead the way*)

68. *to be cast in stone*—to be **carved/set** in stone

69. *to shift the goalposts*—to **move** the goalposts

70. *the top guns*—the top **brass**

71. *failure to which*—failure **to do** that

72. *failing which*—failing **that**

73. *a sitting allowance*—an allowance that people, especially Members of Parliament, get for attending a meeting/a parliamentary session

And to this “new” set I can add the following term pointed out by Mwangi (2003: 16):

74. *best maid*—bridesmaid

and the following idiomatic saying, pointed out by Schmied (2004: 941):

75. *Silence means consent*—Silence **gives** consent.

In addition to the expressions listed so far, all of which are phrases, there are several single unit words that are used in Kenyan English but which do not appear as lexical entries in international English dictionaries. Two of them are

76. *oftenly*—**often**

⁵ Note that the expression *attendance allowance* exists, but it means something totally different from the Kenyan English *sitting allowance*.

and

77. *anyhowly*—*anyhow*

Clearly, whoever coined *oftenly* and *anyhowly* seems simply to have wrongly applied the rule of adding the suffix *-ly* to some adjectives to form adverbs of manner, unaware that *often* and *anyhow* were already correct adverbs and not adjectives. The occurrence of the two wrong adverbs seems to have gone largely unnoticed in the literature on Kenyan English. For instance, none among Hocking (1974), Schmied (1991), Skandera (2003) and Atichi (2004) mentions them. But the popularity of at least *anyhowly* was ascertained by Buregeya (2006; see Table 5 on p. 216) using a measure of acceptability ratings of written Kenyan English grammatical and lexical forms. I would claim that the two are even more frequent in spoken Kenyan English. Atichi discusses (on p.51), instead, the adverb *majorly*, which indeed does not exist for instance in editions of the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* earlier than the 6th edition (of 2000). He observes that *majorly* means 'mainly, chiefly, principally' in Kenyan English, while in American and Canadian English, where it is used as a slang expression, it means 'very; extremely'.

An additional word, pointed out by Hancock and Angogo (1982: 318), is

78. *joblessly*—without a job⁶.

And one word that is definitely frequently used in Kenyan English (which was recently brought to my attention by Pharaoh Ochichi, a former student of mine, in personal communication) is the verb

79. *to overspeed*—to speed

Interestingly, the word *overspeeding* is listed by Fisher (2000) among "Ugandanisms", which he defines as "words found only in Uganda or East Africa" (p. 59).

⁶ There are other words pointed out by Hancock and Angogo (1982: 317-318) which I would hesitate to include in my list simply because I have not seen or heard them used yet. One such word is the verb *to overlisten* (used for 'to eavesdrop'), which I have quoted as an example of those that Skandera (2003) considers to be either ad hoc uses or simply mistakes. Another is the verb *to pedestrate* (used for 'to walk'). Note in passing that there are two words, *kempt* (used for 'neat and tidy in appearance') and *impressment* (used for 'a burden') which Hancock and Angogo (1982) suggest did not exist, but which are lexical entries in the *Collins English Dictionary* (7th edition, 2005—hereafter the *CED*, 2005), although the latter word has a different meaning.

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And, finally, there is the word

80. ***shrubbing***—pronunciation of English that is influenced by one’s mother tongue.

The word was for instance used in an article called “Urbanites are not immune to pronunciation blunders”, written by Willice Ochieng in the *Sunday Standard* of 23 February 2003. There are two occurrences of the word in the article, the second of which actually defines the word:

What actually left me laughing was the implication that only rural dwellers are victims of mothertongue [sic] interference which is commonly referred to as “shrubbing”.

According to a former student of mine, Marianne Munyao (in personal communication, September 2007), the word *shrubbing* tends to be used by young people, and comes from the verb *to shrub*, which is not a lexical entry in international English dictionaries.

2.3 Expressions which have acquired additional meanings in Kenyan English

After giving examples of what they refer to as “calqued forms based upon indigenous languages” and “international English forms with local interpretations” (p. 316), Hancock and Angogo (1982) conclude:

Examples like these in which international English words are used in special senses account for the bulk of lexical differences between East African English and other varieties; a complete list would fill many pages. (p. 318)

Although these examples the authors are talking about number only twenty-five, from my own observation there seems to be a lot of sense in this quotation, especially today—that is, more than two decades on. And even though nobody knows how many there are such words, it would not be a wild hypothesis to suggest that there are hundreds of standard international English words that have either a clearly different meaning or at least a different shade of meaning in Kenyan English. Unfortunately, it might require

close to “lifelong observation”—to borrow the term from Skandera (2003: 208)—to test such a hypothesis.

What I am trying to say is that people will be surprised to discover how many StdIntEng words are used in Kenyan English with meanings that are limited either to just Kenya or East Africa. Atichi (2004) used a questionnaire—which appears as an appendix on pp. 86-105 of his book—to test the rate of acceptance of various meanings of fifty-four words, none of which was pointed out by Hancock and Angogo (1982). On pages 34 to 54 he points out and illustrates the specific Kenyan English meanings of thirty of them, and for many of these he speculates about how the special meanings came about. Below I reproduce his definitions for twenty-eight of the thirty. (For some of them I also reproduce the illustrative examples he used.) The two I will leave out are *mob justice* and *bicycle taxi*, which were included, in the preceding sub-section, in the list of coined expressions that do not exist in StdIntE dictionaries.

1. *a docket*—the portfolio or jurisdiction of an official, especially of government [as in] *Prisons fall under the docket of the Minister for Home Affairs.*
2. *to retrench*—(of government, firm or organization) to lay off workers against their wish and before they are due for retirement
3. *to avail*—to make something available; present something or oneself...
4. *to surcharge*—to deduct or withhold a part of money or benefits that an individual or group is entitled to [because of some misconduct or failure to discharge one’s duties]
5. *severally*—more than a few but not very many [i.e. ‘several times’]
6. *a crusade*—a Christian public worship session that is not limited to members of their sect only
7. *a dame*—a young unmarried female [as in] *The young man came home with a dame.*
8. *to rhyme*—[said] of things that look alike [as in] *Their shirts rhyme in colour.*
[It also means] ‘to get along with somebody...’ [as in] *I don’t rhyme with my maths teacher.*

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9. *to interdict*—to stop or prevent somebody for a while from discharging duties that go with his or her position, job or employment in order to investigate suspected or alleged misconduct

10. [an] *otherwise*—an alternative, another option [as in] *We'll rely on our school bus because we have no otherwise.*

(Note that the word *otherwise* is used here as a noun, a usage which is not an option in StdIntE dictionaries.)

11. *to clear*—to complete,... be through with an exercise, task or process

12. *to bounce*—to fail to [find] somebody or something at an [expected] place... [as in] *I bounced my brother yesterday.*

13. *to land*—to arrive, reach a place [as in] *When we landed home, the guests were just leaving.*

(Note that in this Kenyan English meaning the speaker is not suggesting at all they arrived home by plane or boat, which would be implied in its corresponding StdIntE meaning.)

14. *to escort*—to accompany a friend, visitor [as] a courteous gesture of [seeing them] off

15. *upcoming*—with a promising future...

16. *to criss-cross*—to move extensively to different parts [of an area] to gather information, campaign, educate the public, propagate an ideology or policy

17. *to hibernate*—to be away from the public in order to rest, to be inactive

18. *to be pressed*—[to be] in an urgent need to relieve oneself [as in] *I am...pressed; I have to go out.*

19. *to assume*—to ignore; [to pretend to not] have seen or recognized a person [as in] *I tried to greet her but she assumed me.*

20. *a double-decker*—a bed with two levels [i.e. 'a bunk bed']

21. *to demarcate*—to divide land into portions or sections

22. *to befriend*—to get into an intimate relationship with a member of the opposite sex with the purpose of getting married [as in] *He befriended her for two years before getting married to her.*

23. *upstairs*—[used to refer to] human intelligence [as in] *John is very smart upstairs.*

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24. *a pastoralist*—one who [raises] sheep, goats, camels, cattle... on pasture for survival (Note that Atichi is aware that some dictionaries, e.g. the *CED*, 2005, say that the word *pastoralist* exists in Australian English with almost the same meaning as in Kenyan English.)

25. *an out-grower*—a small scale farmer commissioned by a factory to grow a cash crop, outside its nucleus or premises with the support of that factory, for example, a sugar cane out-grower

26. *majorly*—mainly, chiefly, principally

27. *to be saved*—to be born again, to accept Jesus as [one's] saviour

28. *torch-bearer*—one who represents a group, party, country in a competition or election

For the remaining twenty-four words, Atichi (2004), in the questionnaire appearing as an appendix, mixes their Kenyan English meanings with their StdIntE ones, and leaves it to the reader to work out what the former are. Using two dictionaries (the *CED*, 2005 and the *OALD*, 2005), I was able to do that for only the following twelve words. Once again, both the definitions and examples—where given—are from Atichi's book.

29. *to rewind*—to repeat a class or course in a school or college

30. *dues*—money that should be paid by somebody as a result of a court order (Note that the word *dues* is used in Kenyan English probably even more frequently to refer to 'severance pay', as in (my own example): *He was summarily dismissed and paid his dues soon afterwards.*)

31. *to backslide*—[for a born-again Christian, this verb means to go] back to sinful ways

32. *to offset*—to clear bills, debts

33. *dowry*—the property and money a man brings to his wife's family in marriage

(Note, however, that although indeed many dictionaries, e.g. the *CED*, 2005, do not offer this definition, the *OALD*, 2005, does.)

34. *to tarmac*—to look for employment...after completing studies

35. *a safari*—any trip or journey made from one point to another...by road, air, rail, etc.

36. *Madam*—a title reserved for professional women'

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37. *a lady*—any woman [as in] *I gave the book to that silly lady.*

38. *transport*—[an] amount of money that enables somebody to travel by public means; fare

39. *a saloon*—a hairdressing shop...

40. *whereby*—where

The remaining twelve words, whose Kenyan English meanings I was not able to work out from the definitions offered by Atichi, are: *a stake-holder*, *upkeep*, *a torch*, *a beetle*, *to pocket*, *a street girl*, *a mobile*, *sexy*, *a bursary*, *presently*, *learning*, and *thrice*. For these words, I found all the several definitions proposed by Atichi for each one of them given in both or either of the two dictionaries I checked them in. Note, however, that regarding *thrice* Atichi's concern was that this word does not exist in StdIntE dictionaries. But it does. It is simply variously referred to as "archaic", "old use" or "formal", by dictionaries⁷.

It can be noticed that Atichi's list includes expressions which most people would not have thought of as being used with an additional, different meaning in Kenyan English. I guess this is the case for the verbs *to criss-cross*, *to hibernate*, *to escort* and the nouns *a double-decker*, *a crusade*, and *a pastoralist*. Some of these words are hardly used to start with—which is the case of *to hibernate*, while others are so frequently used that nobody would have thought of "questioning" their meanings—which is the case of *a double-decker*.

I will elongate Atichi's (2003) list by adding the words below, which, from my own observation, are also, and frequently, used with an additional meaning in Kenyan English. Together with them I provide, to the right, those additional meanings that I claim are typical of Kenyan English, and, where necessary, a sentence to illustrate the context of the particular meaning. (Most of the illustrative examples were invented by me. For those which were not, the source is indicated.)

⁷ Talking of using "archaic", "overly formal", poetic, etc., terms, Zuengler (1982: 117) rightly notes the frequent use in Kenyan English of the verb *to alight* (from a bus), meaning 'to get off' (a bus). I will add my own observation: the frequent use of *thro'*, in lieu of *through*, in official, formal letters, a word which the *Collins English Dictionary*, 2005 refers to as "informal or poetic".

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41. *to learn*—to study, to attend a class, to teach, as in *She is learning at the University of Nairobi.*

(Remember the noun *learning* mentioned by Atichi, which, in Kenyan English, also means ‘education’, among other things, as in *Head teachers blame falling standards on free learning.* [*Daily Nation*, 30 Dec. 2004, p. 4])

42. *to school*—to study, to go to school, as in *He schooled with Andrew at Starehe Boys’ Centre.*

43. *a merry-go-round*—a self-help system by which especially women give each other money in rotation

44. *to be within*—to be around, to be on the premises, as in *You can wait for the chairman, he’s just within.*

45. *a flyover*—a footbridge to allow pedestrians to go to the other side of the road

46. *to attempt (an exam question)*—to do, to answer, as in *I managed to attempt only two questions out of the required four on the exam.*

47. *to ambush*—to catch sb unprepared, especially for an interview

48. *to be compromised*—to be bribed, as in *The journalist’s biased reporting led people to believe that he had been compromised.*

49. *a (police) abstract*—a document issued by the police to attest to loss or theft of documents, etc.

50. *to record (a statement with the police)*—to make a statement to the police

Example: *The politician has been summoned by the police to record a statement.*

51. *to communicate*—to get in touch, as in *Bye for now. I’ll communicate later.*

52. *gadget*—this term is used to cover not just ‘a small mechanical device or appliance’ (see the *CED*, 2005), but a mechanical device or appliance of any size, as in *Thieves broke into the house and stole a variety of gadgets, including a TV set.*

53. *slippers*—flip-flops

54. *an academician*—an academic, as in *Most academicians at the University of Nairobi have to teach every month of the year.*

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(Note that the *Reader's Digest Illustrated Oxford Dictionary* (1998) says that the word indeed means 'an academic, an intellectual' in US English.)

55. *slang*—a mixture of languages, especially of English and some other language in informal speech, seen as corrupted language, as in *That's not English; it's slang*.

56. *stream*—if a class is too big to be taught in one classroom and is divided into two or more, each one of them is a stream, as in *She teaches English to one of the streams of Form Four at X school*.

(Note, according to the *CED*, 2005, that the nuance in British English is twofold: it refers specifically to 'schoolchildren' and those 'grouped together because of similar ability'.)

57. *joy-rider*—someone who joins a team or a party with no (significant) role to play in it

58. *(a) fair (exam)*—an easy exam

(Note that by the same token, *(an) unfair (exam)* means 'a difficult exam'.)

59. *Sample this!*—Take this as an example!

60. *semester*—any academic term of study, as in *The University of Nairobi runs three semesters a year*

61. *foolscap*—an A4-size, lined paper

(Note that according to the *CED*, 2005, its size is 13½ inches by 17 inches or 13¼ by 16½ inches, while an A4 is 8.27 by 11.69 inches.)

62. *(He's) a joker*—(he's) not serious

63. *academy*—a private, prestigious (especially) primary school

64. *to offload*—to lay off workers

65. *dummy copy* vs. *a live copy*—with reference to the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education examinations, a *dummy copy* is a photocopy of a student's copy which an examiner marks by way of practice before marking the "real thing"; by contrast, this original copy is referred to as the *live copy*

66. *a supplementary (exam)*— e.g. at the University of Nairobi, an exam that used to be given (usually in September) as a resit.

67. *a tutor*—a teacher of a college (Note this close definition of *tutor* given by the *OALD*, 2005 and said to be North American English: 'an assistant LECTURER in a college'.)

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68. *a take-away* (term paper, assignment)—a paper, assignment which students are given to ‘take home’ instead of doing it in class

69. *a make-up* continuous assessment test (CAT)—a test given to students who missed or failed an earlier one

(Note the different nuance in this definition, from the *OALD*, 2005, of the noun *make-up* used alone: ‘a special exam taken by students who missed or failed an earlier one’. Notice that this definition is more or less the same as that of *a supplementary* given above.)

70. *to shift*—to move house

71. *my follower*—the sibling that follows me

72. *never*—used simply as ‘not’, as in *Sometimes we never do that* or *I looked for you yesterday, but I never found you*.

(There is a note of usage at the entry *never* in the *CED*, 2005, which reads like this:

In informal speech and writing, *never* can be used instead of *not* with the simple past tenses of certain verbs for emphasis (*I never said that; I never realized how clever he was*), but this usage should be avoided in serious writing.

73. *sometimes back*—sometime (back)

74. *to prefer*—to choose, to use, as in *To conduct the study, the test method was preferred*.

75. *a butchery*—a butcher’s shop

76. *a (bus) stage*—any bus stop designated as such, but not necessarily one with a fixed fare

(The word *but* here is in reference to the definition of *stage* given by the *CED*, 2005, as ‘a division of a bus route for which there is a fixed fare’, a meaning which is not available in the *OALD*, 2005)

77. *an exhibition*—one of a group of stalls sheltered in a bigger ‘shop’ partitioned into such smaller shops

78. *a cool* (e.g. one million shillings)—the adjective ‘cool’ is used in Kenyan English to stress that one is talking of a big amount of money, especially money won by somebody.

79. *a hotel*—a restaurant

(Note that its meaning is also mentioned in Skandera (2003: 147) and Schmieid (2004: 942))

80. *Phase I, Phase II*, etc.—a housing estate built at the stage indicated in the construction of the adjacent housing estates designated by the same name and differentiated by the word *phase* plus the number indicated, as in *Buruburu Estate Phase I, Buruburu Estate Phase II... up to Buruburu Phase V*.

81. *You are lost*—this expression is used to tell the addressee that you have not seen him/her for a long time.

82. (a) *come-we-stay* “marriage”—this is a relationship in which a couple live together as husband and wife but without being officially married yet.

The list can further be complemented by the following words and phrases, which are part of about thirty expressions whose Kenyan English meanings are discussed in detail in Skandera (2003, chapters 5 and 7). The expressions I am giving here are those which the author could establish—through the kinds of tests he used—to be indeed popular with his Kenyan English users who served as respondents, and those whose frequent use I too am aware of. Next to the expressions in question I give the meanings, and in some cases illustrative examples, provided by Skandera himself.

83. *a headman*—According to Skandera (p. 134), in most dictionaries the term *headman* refers to ‘chief’, but in Kenyan English it specifically refers to ‘the leader of a sublocation’. The significance of this lies in the fact that in Kenya a chief is the leader of a location, which is an administrative unit above a sub-location. However, according to Atichi (in personal communication, 15 July 2007), a *headman* is a village elder elected by villagers, not the leader of a sublocation. This latter is an *assistant chief*.

84. *to sideline*—‘to put out of action’, not talking of a player, but of any person. From his observations from the existing Corpus of Kenyan English (CKE), Skandera notes that

While the verb [*to sideline*] is usually used in a sports context and in the passive voice in [Standard American English], it is not used a single time in connection with sports in the CKE and 5 of [its 11 occurrences in the corpus are] in the active voice. (p. 108)

It should be noted that the fact that the verb *to sideline* does not seem to appear in a sports context seems to be what is typical of Kenyan English. Otherwise, that the verb is used in other varieties to refer to any person is attested by the fact that both the *OALD* (2005) and the *CED* (2005) provide this other meaning. The latter dictionary, for instance, gives the following as a second definition of the word *sideline* used as a verb: 'to prevent (a person) from pursuing a particular activity, operation, career, etc.'

85. *matchbox*— this word “seems to refer not just to the box itself, but also to the matches contained in it” (p. 132). In other words, in the latter case it means the same thing as ‘a box of matches’.

86. *homestead*—‘an ancestral home, usually a farm, in a village or rural area’ (p. 85). What seems to be typical of Kenyan English is just the idea of “ancestral” because e.g. the two dictionaries mentioned above, plus the *Reader’s Digest Illustrated Oxford Dictionary* (1998), all provide a definition that is basically the same as the remaining part of the one above quoted from Skandera (2003). Thus the *OALD* (2005) defines *homestead* as ‘a house with the land and buildings around it, especially a farm’.

87. *up-country*—This is exactly what Skandera says:

Today, Kenyans use *up-county* to refer to their ethnic home area... as is illustrated in this excerpt from a creative literary work contained in the CKE:

On this bright morning, I was through with one week of my holidays. I had decided to spend them **upcountry** and I was enjoying myself hugely. (p. 104)

88. *caretaker*—Skandera notes that

In KenE...the meaning of *caretaker* seems to have expanded to the extent that the compound is typically used to express [‘a person employed to take care of a house or building’ (in StdBrE) and ‘a children’s nurse or a nursery school teacher’ (in StdAmE)] and related concepts [as in the following example] from published academic writing:

Staff-children ratio and physical facilities are not usually adequate and this is not good for child development. Most of the **caretakers** are also untrained. (p.131)

89. *beachboy*—‘a boy or a man who is trying to entice tourists along the coast, often rather persistently, into staying at a particular hotel, going on a safari, or buying handicrafts’ (p. 135)

90. *home guard*—Skandera writes:

In KenE, *home guard* (written with small initial letters, often as one word) refers to the approximately 20,000 Kikuyu tribesmen who were recruited to assist the British army in putting down the Mau Mau rebellion of the 1950s, and in policing the so-called protected villages.... (pp. 135-6)

91. *see red*—‘become the target of anger’ [which is a shift of meaning from the] “StdIntE” meaning of to ‘become very angry’, [as in this example]: “I’m warning you! If I catch you again around here, ... you’ll see red!” [instead of] “... I’ll see red!” (p. 137)

92. *service charge*—‘a tax that [used to be] paid to the local governments for the provision of public services...’ (p.137)

93. *grassroots*—Skandera notes that

In KenE, *grass roots* is also commonly used in connection with rural life, traditional African values, and the democratization effort, especially since the ... reintroduction of multiparty politics in 1991. (p. 90)

94. *mainstream*—‘place at the center’ [as in *They are keen to mainstream gender equality in all their activities.*]

95. *blackout*—Skandera writes:

In KenE, [the noun] *blackout* [in the sense of] ‘temporary loss of consciousness, vision, or memory’] does denote the condition of being drunk even if one’s consciousness, vision, or—afterwards—memory is merely slightly dulled’ [as in the following example]:

After a few bottles of good Kenyan beer, most people would have a *blackout*. (p. 132)

96. *hot drinks*—‘distilled alcoholic drinks’ (p. 146)

97. *in the name of*—‘in order to’, ‘for the purpose of’ [as in the following example taken from] ‘a popular science publication’: “A third mistake people make is that of taking black tea or coffee with sugar **in the name of** watching their waistline” (p. 140).

98. *according to [me]*—Skandera reports that Kenyan English uses expressions such as *according to this view* or *according to my opinion*, which “would be unacceptable in StdIntE”, and that the “most frequent” of such expressions “seems to be *according to me*, which is used to mean ‘I believe that’ or ‘in my opinion’” (p. 155). He adds the following interesting comment:

While all of the Kenyan informants described this usage as acceptable and very common, StdIntE-speakers are not only certain to consider it an error, but they may also perceive it as pompous or presumptuous... (p. 155)

This is a view supported by Swan (2005), who also labels *according to me* as an error and explains this by saying that “we do not give our own opinions with *according to*” (p. 4).

99. *by all means*—‘by any or every possible means’ [as in the following example] “taken from a personal letter: ... By the way after 128+ credits I graduate. **By all means** I’m going to do up to masters level” (p. 143).

100. *by the way*—Skandera says the following:

...the idiom can, additionally, fulfill quite a different discourse function in KenE, namely to repeat, confirm, or summarize a point that has been made, or simply to add emphasis. (p. 138)

Here are two of the examples that Skandera quotes from “direct conversations”:

[SPEAKER A:] But I was told some interview were being conducted.

[SPEAKER B:] Yeah, they conducted interviews, **by the way**...

[SPEAKER A:] Have a nice day.

[SPEAKER B:] You too, **by the way**... (p. 139)

I will add that *by-the-way* is also used as a noun in Kenyan English, to mean ‘an afterthought’, as in *That was a by-the-way*, or in this sentence from a fourth year university student’s paper: “This is viewed to be a ‘by-the-way’ in speech and is usually left out when reporting”.

101. *at least*—Skandera observes that

In StdIntE, *at least* is used to indicate that something is the minimum that can be done or expected... Conversely, in KenE, *at least* can be used to

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indicate that something is the maximum that can be done or expected...
(p. 150) (The underlining is mine.)

He gives (on p. 151) several examples illustrating the use of *at least* in its KenE usage, but I will give my own, one which I think illustrates better this idea of ‘maximum’. In early August 2007, asked by journalists if some political parties were “courting” her own with a view to forming a political alliance, a prominent woman politician in Kenya said the following: “Nobody is courting me. And I don’t know the word *courting*. **At least** I was courted once, and I got married once”. From the linguistic context surrounding the phrase *at least*, it is obvious that she meant that she was not courted more than once. But “more than once” is exactly the impression one would get if one referred to the standard international English meaning of the phrase.

And what an interesting case this is! That is, the fact that a semantic expansion or shift can lead to exactly the opposite meaning. Food for thought! I mean, for further research.

3. Conclusion

About fifty expressions borrowed from Kenyan indigenous languages, plus about eighty expressions that seem to be coinages of Kenyan English, and a hundred or so expressions that already exist as entries in standard international English dictionaries, that is the picture which the present paper seems to depict of what is special about Kenyan English in terms of its vocabulary⁸. Obviously, though, there must be those words and phrases “that have remained unnoticed”—to borrow words from Skandera (2003: 209). Expressions that may have gone unnoticed would be found particularly in the third category of expressions, as one must really be a keen reader and listener of Kenyan English to be able to discern each additional shade of meaning that a given word has acquired in Kenyan English. In this respect,

⁸ Of course here I am consciously ignoring the fact, acknowledged by e.g. Schmied (1991 and 2004) and Skandera (2003), that many of the features are equally East African, and even, for some of them, just African. For instance, expressions like *to avail*, *to bounce*, and *you are lost* are listed in the Ugandan English lexis by Fischer (2000: 59).

the task will be even more arduous if the linguist-researcher is not a native speaker of English to start with.

And there are those expressions that are still to be entrenched in Kenyan English: we are likely to find many of these in special registers of the academic world, the police force, etc. One example is the dichotomous terms *Module I* and *Module II* that were introduced into the vocabulary of the University of Nairobi some time after the beginning of this century (Yes, I mean the 21st century!) *Module I* refers to what the University first called the “Regular Programme”, that is that for students who are available for classes during the day. *Module II* refers to what the University initially called the “Parallel Programme”, that is that for students who can afford to attend classes only after normal office hours (in the evening and at weekends).

An interesting observation to make in relation to the figures mentioned at the beginning of the opening paragraph is that it is not what everybody can easily notice that forms the backbone of the vocabulary of Kenyan English: anybody who has been exposed to Kenyan English must have noticed that words like *mwananchi* (‘the common citizen’) and its plural *wananchi* are used almost in every politician’s or civil society activist’s speech. Such words borrowed from especially Kiswahili are what anybody is likely to say characterizes Kenyan English. Only linguists and those who are concerned about good usage (like Philip Ochieng, a columnist in the *Daily Nation* newspaper, who, this year, came up with a column in the *Saturday Nation* baptized “Mark My Word”) are likely to notice that in terms of sheer numbers Kenyan English is actually more represented by the “less visible” features. “Less visible” because almost all the words and phrases involved either sound like standard international English or do indeed exist in StdIntE with simply additional meanings.

The term “additional” implies that users of Kenyan English are aware that the expressions concerned have other meanings the knowledge of which they share with speakers of other varieties of English. It is on this assumption that Skandera (2003) remarked, as one of his conclusions, that

...the majority of the idiom characteristics of KenE must be regarded as merely acceptable (or less acceptable) variants that could be placed in a category of features that coexist with StdIntE variants... (pp. 201-202)

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And he goes on to point out that

absolute features—that is, ones that do *not* coexist with StdIntE variants—must be assumed to be comparatively small because, in most cases, it is unlikely, and can hardly be proven, that a StdIntE variant is not still used by a sizable number of KenE-speakers. (p. 202)

This comment is most likely valid for features taken as single words or idioms, but there is some indication that when it comes to some of their specific meanings, some of these may be known by less than “a sizable number”. I am referring to Atichi’s (2004) study: it sought to check the extent to which the forty-one respondents were aware of “non-Kenyan-English” meanings of selected words. Atichi reports that for the word *double-decker*, for instance, only one respondent (i.e. only 2%) was aware of its meaning of ‘a sandwich made with three pieces of bread leaving two spaces that are filled with food’ (p.78). In fact, for the eight words whose “unfamiliar definitions” are reported (pp. 78-9), the highest “familiarity rate” was 7%, which corresponds to only 3 out of 41 respondents. A larger sample might be needed to prove my claim that certain StdIntE meanings are virtually unknown. In the meantime, though, from views I got from a class of forty-seven fourth-year university students I taught recently (May to August 2007), I can confidently hypothesize that not more than two percent of Kenyan English users know any other meaning of the word *docket* than that of ‘area of responsibility; ministerial portfolio...’. I would equally hypothesize that only a similar percentage know that *severally* does not mean ‘several times’ in StdIntE, and that *flip-flops* (in BrE) and *thongs* (in AmE) are the words given in dictionaries to refer to KenE *slippers*. In a similar vein, I was actually surprised at the relatively “low” frequency of only 53% reported in Skandera (2003: 123) of the occurrence of the expression *vicious cycle* in a completion test the researcher used to elicit either *vicious circle* or *vicious cycle*. In the above-mentioned class of forty-seven students, not more than three of them were ready to accept, without checking it up in a dictionary, that the “original” phrase was actually the one using the word *circle*.

The latter part of the above quotation from Skandera, namely “...in most cases, it is unlikely, and can hardly be proven, that a StdIntE variant is not still used by a sizable number of KenE-speakers” (p. 202), also implies that for Kenyan English speakers some of the StdIntE variants exist in their mental lexicon simply as part of their passive vocabulary. Since any speaker of any language has passive vocabulary, we would naturally expect that some typically Kenyan English meanings are passive vocabulary for Kenyan English speakers as well. I reckon that the very expression (*to draw a map of Africa*) that Skandera borrowed for the title of his (2003) book, is passive vocabulary for most speakers of Kenyan English. Not a single time have I heard it used, although some of my students told me that the expression is part of active vocabulary in “rural areas”. This detail points to the possibility—still to be investigated—that “geographical dialects” of the Kenyan English variety could as well be postulated on the basis of non-pronunciation aspects⁹.

And there is the possibility that some expressions will move from the store of active vocabulary to that of passive vocabulary and perhaps even one day become archaic and obsolete in Kenyan English. I have one good example in mind: during the campaign for the 2002 general election in Kenya, and in the few months that followed the election, the term *ubwogable*¹⁰ (used to mean ‘that cannot be intimidated’) was extremely popular. I remember the current president himself saying, sometime after the elections: “We are truly *ubwogable*”. But, all of a sudden, the term went out of use. I would reckon that already in 2004 it was no longer part of politicians’ active vocabulary. And even as I write this conclusion, less than five months before the next general election, no politician is saying (yet) that he/she is *ubwogable*. If the word was not recorded in the famous song from which it was borrowed, chances would be that it might even disappear from the language.

⁹ From Schmieid (1991_b)’s discussion of “subnational” features in the pronunciation of Kenyan English, it would not be absurd to posit the existence of such dialects on phonological grounds.

¹⁰ The term was borrowed from a famous song by a Kenyan band called “Gidi Gidi Maji Maji”, a song that was released not long before the general election. The term was coined from a combination of English and Dholuo: the Dholuo verb *bwogo* means ‘to intimidate’. The rest of the morphemes in *ubwogable* are visibly English.

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The preceding paragraph touches on the diachronic aspect of Kenyan English, which Skandera (2003: 208) wishes, and I too wish, was deeply investigated. And the more-than-ten pages of his conclusions (2003: 201-211) are a precious source of inspiration for more concluding remarks for potentially any piece of writing on Kenyan English, and, more importantly, for further research on this variety.

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Author's address

Alfred Buregeya
Dept of Linguistics and Languages
University of Nairobi
P.O. Box 30197 - 00100
Nairobi
Kenya
e-mail: aburegeya@uonbi.ac.ke