

## **MCHONGOANO AND THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF COMMUNICATION**

**Claudius Patrick KIHARA**  
**Heinrich-Heine-Universität, Düsseldorf**

This paper is an attempt to give an ethnographic description of *mchongoano* in order to understand how it achieves its objectives. *Mchongoano* is a verbal duelling game popular with young people in Kenya but also appreciated by many adults for its humorous content. It has been compared to the American dozens and sounds (Githinji, 2006, 2007; Kihara & Schröder, 2012). This article analyses *mchongoano* with specific reference to the Ethnography-of-Communication framework first proposed by Dell Hymes (1974) and represented by the mnemonic acronym *SPEAKING*. The description and analyses of *mchongoano* offered in this paper show that *mchongoano* is a communicative event in its own right.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Research in verbal duels has thrived in many societies. These verbal duels involve verbal exchanges between two or more people. Studies done on verbal duels in the USA have referred to them as “sounds”, “dozens”, or “playing the dozens” (see e.g. Abrahams, 1964; Labov, 1972; Smitherman, 1995; Percelay et al., 1995). Schwegler (2007) also carried out similar verbal duels in the Americas among the Palenque and the El Chota peoples. For their part, Dundes et al. (1970) reported on verbal duelling among Turkish boys.

On the African front, Chimezie (1976), in support of the claim that American dozens originated from Africa, showed that the Igbo of Nigeria had equivalent speech events similar to African Americans’ “dozens”, which, he claimed, could have been carried to America by Africans during the slave trade. However, Chimezie did not discuss the *Ikocha Nkocha* (the “local” name for the verbal duelling game) in detail. Schwegler (2007: 177) also cited claims of the presence of *Biensa* and *Nsosani*, which are names given to the verbal duels among the Bakongo of central Africa. Kihara & Schröder

(2012) noted that in Kenya the Kikuyu had *Huhi*, the Luo *Nyung'rwok*, and the Luhya *Okhuchayana*. As far as I am aware, none of these three forms has been given serious academic consideration. The verbal duel called *mchongoano* has been discussed by Githinji (2007, 2006a), Kihara & Schröder (2012), and Kihara (2013). Here is an example of a *mchongoano* utterance:

(1) *Ati wewe ni kichwa ngumu hadi ile siku ulizaliwa ulisema, "sitoki bila nguo."*

'That you are so stubborn that when you were born you said, "I am not coming out without clothes"'

This example implies that the addressee could talk before birth and actually "refused to be born" because he/she could not "come out naked"! The exaggeration and incongruity in it are characteristic of *mchongoano*, and it is they that are expected to give humour to the utterance.

Otieno (2006) and Githinji (2007) were the first writers to give *mchongoano* serious academic attention. Otieno (ibid.) advocated for *mchongoano* to be considered as part of modern oral literature and be included in the Kenya schools' drama festivals. Githinji (2007) lamented that *mchongoano* had not been given the serious academic attention it deserved by scholars. His seminal article not only challenged the negative view of *mchongoano* but also drew serious scholarly attention to the genre for the first time. He suggested that *mchongoano* could be studied within the framework of Hymes's (1972) Ethnography of Communication. A similar proposal had been made by Labov (1972: 305) on American "sounds" ("dozens"), claiming that they were a well organised speech event worth being described within Hymes's (1962) ethnography of speaking model. In the present paper, I decided to take up the challenge of describing *mchongoano* in relation to Hymes's Ethnography of Communication, encapsulated in the acronym *SPEAKING*, in which the letter *S* stands for "Scene/setting", *P* for "Participants", *E* for "Ends", *A* for "Act sequence", *K* for "Key", *I* for "Instrumentalities", *N* for "Norms of interaction and interpretation", and *G* for "Genre".

## 2. INTRODUCTION TO THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF COMMUNICATION

The development of the Ethnography of Communication was started in the sixties by Dell Hathaway Hymes as a reaction to Chomsky's linguistic theorizations. Hymes (1962) proposed a framework that could be used to analyse and describe communicative behaviour within a community. The framework has had refinements over the years since its conception. It came to be variously known as the "ethnography of communication", "ethnography of speaking", "ways of speaking", etc.

Hymes (1974) identified seventeen components of speech found in ethnographic materials but noted that not all of them were instantiated. He discussed (pp. 54-62) the components and derived an eight-letter mnemonic acronym, *S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G*, for the components (p. 65). He later noted that this acronym "has nothing to do with the form of the eventual model or theory" (Hymes, 2003, p. 40). This means that the arrangement of the acronym does not follow from the occurrence of the components.

The need to describe folklore material(s) within the ethnography of communication was underscored by Saville-Troike (2003, p. 142) who contends that "The wedding of the ethnography of communication with research on folklore has yielded a productive model which is performance-centred and analyses folkloristic events as they involve setting, performer, audience and the other components of communication". Before Saville-Troike (2003), Arewa & Dundes (1964, p. 73) had suggested that proverbs, just like riddles and jokes, which are short forms of folklore, could be discussed within the ethnography of speaking folklore. Arewa & Dundes (1964) discussed Yoruba proverbs within the then current framework proposed in Hymes (1962). It is worth applying the later version of the ethnography of speaking on *mchongoano*, as a sample of Kenyan folklore, in order to find out the extent to which it can fit into Hymes's framework.

### 3. *MCHONGOANO* AND THE COMPONENTS OF *S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G*

#### 3.1 *Mchongoano* with reference to *S* (for “setting and scene”)

The time when and the place where a speech event takes place, including the physical circumstances, form the *setting* of the speech event. Saville-Troike (2003: 110) proposes that *setting* should indicate not only the physical location, but also time of day, season of the year and any other arrangement of the location of performance. With regard to *scene*, Hymes (2003: 41) argues that it is a “psychological setting”, while Saville-Troike (2003: 111) calls it the “extra-personal *context* of the event”. *Scene* is an abstract psychological setting of an event that is culturally defined (Wardhaugh, 2010, p. 259). *Scene* establishes whether an event is appropriate in a context. In our case, *setting* encompasses the time, physical location and the performance arrangement, while *scene* is about the appropriateness (content and place) of a *mchongoano* performance.

*Mchongoano* has been traditionally performed on schools’ playing fields and in their classrooms. At home, the youth will engage in *mchongoano* with the others in their backyards in the neighbourhoods (also called “bazes” by Githinji, 2006b, p. 1). Since they usually do not have space to play, they hang around family compounds, roadsides, or communal playgrounds, from where they engage in this pastime which does not require much physical space. However, we have lately seen *mchongoano* being played in electronic and print media as well. Whereas it would be hard to define a specific time when *mchongoano* is performed, one thing is certain: it is when the participants are more or less idle, e.g. during break times, games time for those who do not participate in sports, when going home after school, class time if there is no teacher in the classroom, and any other free time available in school.

The performance is determined by the availability of time and willing participants. The time deemed most appropriate is during the day. Notable is the fact that the presence of an adult, e.g. parent, teacher, may affect the *scene* in the sense that there are those types of *mchongoano* that may not be considered appropriate either because they talk about these very adults or

are vulgar in content (e.g. have sexual overtones). So, when some verbal duel involves an adult, the attention will shift to the appropriateness of the content. This is consistent with Farah's (1998: 125) observation that "speakers of a language in particular communities are able to communicate with each other in a manner which is not only correct but also appropriate to the socio-cultural context".

The *scene* of most *mchongoano* is expected to be jocular and impersonal because the insults are not supposed to be taken as true or reflect some known truth about a participant. Here is an example where the *scene* component is invoked.

(2) *Budako ni fala hadi alipoenda kununua ng'ombe akaiona ikikojoa akasema, "Sitaki hiyo imetoboka."*

'Your father is such a stupid person that when he went to buy a cow and saw it urinating, he said, "I don't want that one that is ruptured."

This example could be addressed to a participant who probably has no father. Nevertheless, it would not be taken beyond the joke it is meant to be, regardless of whether in reality the hearer does or does not have a father. In any case, it is highly unlikely that the statement is true because of the utter exaggeration about a father who would be so stupid that he could not tell when a cow was passing urine!

*Setting* also encompasses the performance arrangement, e.g. sitting arrangement (Saville-Troike, 2003, p. 111). With regard to *mchongoano*, the standard practice is for the performers to sit or stand in a circle, with the two active participants on either side, flanked by their "supporters" (who are the audience), but not so close as to be able to touch each other. Also, the participants are not expected to shout so as to be heard outside their circle because a certain level of "privacy" is assumed in order to exclude unwanted people (e.g. parents, teachers). Sometimes, in a school situation, boys would not want girls to overhear the vulgar insults which they consider a domain for boys but not girls.

### 3.2 *Mchongoano* with reference to *P* (for “participants”)

The participants’ identity covers age, sex, social status, and relationship with each other (Farah, 1998, p. 126). The social status of the *mchongoano* participants is characteristically that of children from middle- and low-class families, bearing in mind that Sheng<sup>1</sup>, the typical language of *mchongoano*, originated from them. However, the audience of *mchongoano* comes from across the different social classes.

*Mchongoano* is more prevalent among boys than girls; the latter participate in this type of conversation less frequently. This most likely has to do with the fact that girls naturally avoid topics that are vulgar, particularly in the presence of boys. However, Kihara (2013) observes that girls participate in *mchongoano* with other girls. And in the few instances where they contest against boys, they can even outdo the latter.

In a face-to-face *mchongoano* session, there is the speaker and a target hearer and the audience. Since *mchongoano* requires turn-taking, there will be a change of roles: one participant listens first as the other speaks, and then awaits his turn. It is important to stress here that this should not be understood in the sense of a normal conversation because there is no coherence intended: indeed, the contestant is not required to follow the opponent’s topic when replying to the latter’s joke. The session remains an exchange that is held together by the jokes whose topics vary and may be totally unrelated.

The audience in a live *mchongoano* session are the listeners who are meant to judge and encourage the contestants. They are required to listen passively, but also to applaud when a contestant outdoes the opponent. But when the contestant appears beaten or overwhelmed, they can contribute to making him withdraw from the contest to avoid further “embarrassment / punishment”. The audience’s *boos*, *ohs* and *ahs* during the contest are significant because they determine whether the duelling session should continue or not.

---

<sup>1</sup> While the debate continues about whether Sheng is a language of its own or a (youth) dialect of Kiswahili, my personal point of view is that it is the latter.

Participants can directly address an opponent, as in, *Wewe ni ...* ('you are...'), as the audience listens. But they can also lessen the "injury" by involving the audience more actively. They do this by addressing the joke to the audience rather than directly to the opponent, as in this opening: *Mnaona huyu chali ...* ('You see this lad ...'). In such a case, the audience plays both the roles of participants and judge, even though the insult is not directly addressed to them. At times, a *mchongoano* utterance is presented as if the speaker was just reporting what he once heard. The hearsay marker, *ati* ('that'), which will start the utterance, as in example [1] above, renders it more indirect.

### 3.3 *Mchongoano* with reference to *E* (for "ends")

Hymes (1974/2003) suggests that purposes are both goals and outcomes; he refers to them as "ends", represented by *E* in his SPEAKING formula. Fasold (1990: 44) points out that outcomes are the purposes of an event from a cultural point of view, while goals are the purposes of an individual participant. However, Wardhaugh (2010) sees them as one and the same thing: "[the notion of] *ends* refers to the conventionally recognized and expected outcomes of an exchange as well as to the personal goals that participants seek to accomplish on particular occasions" (p. 260).

*Mchongoano* is said to fulfil several functions, such as entertainment, socialization, social control, a record of past events, identity, psychological release, display of verbal skills (see Kihara, 2013). It can even be looked at as a measure of levels of knowledge and experience. For instance, a participant may want to show that he knows something that his opponent and the audience do not know, e.g. by using a word in Sheng which he assumes they cannot understand, with the aim of inviting the audience to ask for its meaning.

In example (3) below, the speaker's goal is to show he does not share the same status with his opponent. The speaker is an urban dweller and his opponent a rural one.

- (3) *Siku yako ya kwanza kuingia mat ulitoa viatu na kusalimia kila mtu na mkono*

‘On your first day to board a *matatu* you removed your shoes and shook everyone’s hand.

Of course it is unimaginable for one to remove their shoes before boarding a *matatu* (since most *matatus* will be dirty anyway!). It is even more unusual for anyone to shake *all* the passengers’ hands in a *matatu*. The aim here is to show that the addressee has no urban experience and has a rural mentality of politeness, coupled with what would appear to be backwardness in the eyes of the urban dwellers.

The outcome of *mchongoano* is a generally about leisure: killing time. By hanging about and passing time together, the participants identify with each other as a group sharing a given identity. Sometimes, they dare others who do not belong to their group to a contest.

Normally, a *mchongoano* speech event is meant to come to a peaceful end, with the winner celebrating and the loser vowing to win another day, or proposing the name of another contestant considered to be better prepared to take on the winner. But of course there are those who no one wants to challenge; they are seen as the automatic leaders.

Sometimes *mchongoano* contains obscene jokes, especially those with sexual overtones. Such jokes are meant to be vehicles for the participants to attain their goal to comment on taboo topics in public. Take the following example, taken from Githinji (2007: 101).

- (4) *Dame wa Toni ni kuro(langa) huko K-Street ana p\*\*y mbili, moja ya kionjo alafu moja ni ya kulipa.*

‘Toni’s girlfriend is a prostitute on Koinange Street<sup>2</sup>; she has two vaginas one for trying out and the other for charging.’

---

<sup>2</sup> Koinange Street, though located in the central business district of the City of Nairobi, has been dubbed the “red light district” by the local media (Githinji, 2007, p. 108, endnote 8).

Obscene jokes such as this help the young to explore the not-so-familiar world of sex. *Mchongoano* utterances with such content offer them a chance to utter words or mention parts of the body which ordinarily would not be uttered or mentioned in everyday public conversation. When they are involved in a *mchongoano* type of conversation, they are beyond adult or parental sphere of authority; so, the use of obscene words becomes a way for them to let out repressed feelings. After all, Freud (1960: 169) noted that the purpose and function of jokes was to liberate pleasure through the lifting of inhibitions

### 3.4 *Mchongoano* with reference to A (for “act sequence”)

*Act sequence* encompasses message-form (how something is said) and message-content (what is said) (Hymes, 1974, p.55), p. 55). He observes that these two components are interdependent and important for the discussion of a speech event, especially its syntactic structure. According to Wardhaugh (2010: 260), *act sequence* is “the actual form and content of what is said: the precise words used, how they are used, and the relationship of what is said to the actual topic at hand”. *Message-form* includes the channels and the codes used and the relationship of what is said to the topic being talked about. For its part, *message-content* is the surface-level denotative references (Saville-Troike, 2003, p. 110).

Some forms of *mchongoano* are indirect structures, while others are direct quotations, or a mixture of both, as illustrated in the following examples.

- (5) *Unamacho red hadi ukiangalia nyama kwa butchery inaiva*  
‘Your eyes are so red that when you look at meat at a butcher’s, it gets cooked’
- (6) *Unamacho bigi hadi ukiblink ndani ya nyumba, buda wenu anakwambia, “wacha kucheza na stima”*  
‘Your eyes are so big that when you blink in the house your father tells you, “Don’t play with electricity”’
- (7) *Ati simu yako imesota hadi ile snake ya game imekufa*

(Literal: That your phone is so broke that the snake found in the phone's game is dead)

'There is no calling credit left in your phone to the extent that the snake found in the games is dead'

Example (5) is wholly reported and only the content is given, while in (6) it is a combination of both direct and indirect speech. Example (7) has the word *ati* ('that') considered by Kihara (2013) as a "hearsay marker". It serves to show that the speaker is not the originator of the utterance but is only reporting the message from another speaker so that he is not held responsible for the truth or reliability of the utterance.

While *message-content* is useful in the maintenance and change of topic(s) and in maintaining discourse coherence, in *mchongoano* there is no one topic that is followed continuously. Though *mchongoano* appears "conversational" in nature, the jokes around which it is built do not follow one single topic at any one time. This gives *mchongoano* discourse a structurally incoherent structure, with the only aspect that makes it conversational being the turn-taking between contestants. Otherwise, one joke may be about one thing while the next one is about a totally different topic.

### 3.5 *Mchongoano* with reference to *K* (for "key")

According to Wardhaugh (2010: 260), *key* "refers to the tone, manner, or spirit in which a particular message is conveyed: light-hearted, serious, precise, pedantic, mocking, sarcastic, pompous, and so on." Choice of language or variety, non-verbal cues (e.g. wink or posture), paralinguistic features (e.g. aspiration), and so on, can characterize *Key* (Saville-Troike, 2003, p. 113).

All those adjectives are reflected in a live performance of *mchongoano*: participants can be sarcastic, they can dramatise to capture the intended *key*, they can mimic others in a bid to create an intended impression, etc. Saville-Troike (2003: 113) argues that in English, *key* is seen along these contrasts: teasing vs. serious, sincere vs. sarcastic, friendly vs. hostile,

sympathetic vs. threatening, and perfunctory vs. painstaking. From these adjectives, *mchongoano* can be described as sarcastic, teasing, and friendly. For example, the tone in (8) is sarcastic.

(8) *Ati nyinyi ni wadosi mpaka mnapeleka kuku shule*

‘That you [your family] are so rich that you take chickens to school’

The content of the above example mocks the opponent’s family’s senseless excesses in spite of their wealth: chickens cannot go to a school. But the example is still appropriate as a *mchongoano* utterance, a more plausible utterance but which is likely to be taken personally as an insult by the opponent should be avoided. That is why most participants avoid using jokes that may be a true or partial reflection of the other participant’s situation. In relation to this, Labov (1972: 349) reports of an incident that ended tragically when one person committed suicide after a sound about the unfaithfulness of his wife was thrown to him. What was unknown to the others was that, in reality, the man’s wife was unfaithful. This “realism” in the joke could have led to the death. Such an incident lends support to Hymes’s (2003: 43) observation that “when [key] is in conflict with the overt content of an act, it often overrides the latter”.

Saville-Troike (2003: 113) argues that *key* could be captured by the choice of language or variety. Sheng is the language of *mchongoano*. It is largely perceived by its users as a language of play, one that has fun in it. It is indeed funny when you talk about someone in their presence, and yet they cannot tell that you are talking about them. In such a case the jocular nature of the speech event is supported by the code used.

It should be noted, however, that *key* can be intentionally disregarded or violated by participants. With *mchongoano* being a means of establishing social and group hierarchy among the participants, some of these may violate the *key* with the intention of provoking the addressee to a physical fight. However, once this becomes the intention, the jocular spirit of *mchongoano* is lost. The component *key* is the one that holds the performance of *mchongoano* together since it is the humour in this type of discourse that is

of primary importance. So, if it is violated, the whole performance is no longer a typical *mchongoano* performance.

### 3.6 *Mchongoano* with reference to *I* (for “instrumentalities”)

According to Wardhaugh (2010: 260), the notion of *instrumentalities* “refers to the choice of channel, e.g., oral, written, or telegraphic, and to the actual forms of speech employed, such as the language, dialect, code, or register that is chosen.” *Mchongoano* developed as a verbal duelling game, similar to those found in the traditional African oral literature. But today *mchongoano* has acquired a written form as well, as noted by Githinji (2006a, 2007) and Kihara & Schröder (2012). It is now found in print form, such as pullout magazines (e.g. *Shujaa*, which is a pullout in the Kenyan *Saturday Nation* newspaper), school magazines, advertisements and on the Internet, e.g. at [www.kichizi.com](http://www.kichizi.com) and [www.mchongoano.com](http://www.mchongoano.com). Still, the oral channel remains the prevalent one in the performance of *mchongoano*.

With regard to the language used in *mchongoano*, as another aspect of *instrumentalities*, it is typically Sheng, as indicated previously (in 3.2). In this connection, Githinji (2006a) uses the phrase “Sheng’s *mchongoano*”, to mean that *mchongoano* is very much connected to Sheng.

But, elsewhere, Githinji (2007: 106) argues that it is the code-switching (between English, Sheng, and Kiswahili) in *mchongoano* that maintains the humour which would otherwise be lost had it been in Standard English. Examples (9) and (10) illustrate code-switching:

(9) *Ati we ni mrui mpaka ukiwa mtoi ulikuwa ukinyonya na straw.*

‘That you are such a hardcore (criminal) that when you were baby you would suckle with a straw’

The word *mrui* is a coinage of Sheng which means ‘a hardened and tough criminal’, while *mtoi* comes from the Kiswahili word *mtoto* ‘child’. In Sheng, the last syllable *-to* in *mtoto* got clipped (or truncated, according to Bosire, 2009, p. 89) and replaced with ‘-i’.

(10) *You are so sinful that shetani akisikia ni wewe anacall upon the name of Jesus*

‘You are so sinful that when the devil hears that it is you he calls upon the name of Jesus’

The example in (10) is one of those few instances of *mchongoano* where most of the words used are in English. The verb phrase *anacall* (‘he calls’) is the result of codemixing between Kiswahili (*ana-*) and English (*-call*).

In my data, I have not come across a *mchongoano* utterance that was purely in English. But I have come across those that are entirely in Kiswahili, such as (11):

(11) *Ati kijiji yenu ni ndogo hadi mtu mmoja akikata kitunguu kila mtu anatoa machozi*

‘That your village is so small that when anyone cuts an onion all the villagers have tears in their eyes’.

A sentence like (11) would make one think of the distinction between Engsh (another, less known, youth language in Kenya) and Sheng, which lies in the fact the morphosyntax of the former is modelled on that of English while the morphosyntax of the latter is modelled on that of Kiswahili. Since Engsh is associated with the youth from well-to-do families, and Sheng associated mostly with the youth from the less affluent neighbourhoods of Nairobi, an interesting suggestion to make here (and possibly to be pursued in further research) is that there is a social-class aspect to *mchongoano*.

### 3.7 *Mchongoano* with reference to *N* (for “norms of interaction and interpretation”)

Hymes (1974) identifies two sets of norms: the norms of interaction (“rules”) and the norms of interpretation. *Norms of interaction and interpretation* “refer to the specific behaviours and properties that attach to speaking and also how these may be viewed by someone who does not share them, e.g., loudness, silence, gaze return, and so on” (Wardhaugh, 2010, p. 260). In order to capture the aspect of “rules”, Saville-Troike (2003) changes the *norms of interaction* to “rules of interaction” because they are “... an

explanation of the rules for the use of speech which are applicable to the communicative event” (p. 123). She adds that the rules are the “prescriptive statements of behaviour of how people ‘should’ act, which are tied to the shared values of the speech community” (p. 123). Regarding the *norms of interpretation*, she says that they provide information about aspects of a community’s culture which helps to understand the communicative event (p.124).

In *mchongoano*, as previously said, the participants may set rules of engagement. For instance, they can agree right from the onset that mothers, sisters, fathers, and brothers will not be the object of jokes. Usually, they will agree among themselves that the jokes should be exclusively about themselves. This agreement can be considered as the second rule of engagement, the first one being the consent to engage in *mchongoano* in the first place. In relation to this, Kihara (2013) reports that *mchongoano*, like riddles, has an opening formula to signal the start of a session, a formula that may take the form of a request like this: *Unataka ni kuchongoe?* (‘Do you want me to deride you?’) or *Tuchongoane?* (‘Shall we deride each other?’).<sup>3</sup> Normally, the addressee’s choice not to engage in the verbal duel is respected unless there is an intention on the part of the addressor to provoke him.

In addition, if during a *mchongoano* session a participant feels overwhelmed, he can choose to opt out, a choice which should be respected. Otherwise, the *mchongoano* will not be taken as a playful communicative event anymore, but a form of aggression and provocation which can end up being physical. Furthermore, contestants can choose whom to engage in *mchongoano*. There are those who, for being not adept at it, will opt to engage contestants they feel are not the very “experienced” ones.

In a *mchongoano* performance, the contestants take turns to present their jokes and rarely will a contestant throw two consecutive “insults” before the opponent has responded, that is by throwing his own, to the first one. When it happens, this is an indication that the opponent cannot think

---

<sup>3</sup> *Mchongoano* has extended the meaning of the Kiswahili verb *kuchongoa*, ‘to sharpen, to make a point sharp’, to mean ‘to sharpen one’s verbal skills’ (Kihara & Schröder 2012).

fast or is short of insult ideas, in which case he is expected (or should be advised) to openly concede defeat.

In a *mchongoano* performance, some distance between performers has to be established. Close contact with an overwhelmed contestant, like patting him on the back or touching his head, will be interpreted as provocation meant to demean the opponent. Such a norm of behaviour is in line with Saville-Troike's (2003: 123) observation that "[the] rules of interaction are often discoverable in reactions to their violation by others, and feelings that contrary behaviour is 'impolite' or 'odd' in some respect." That is why touching an opponent is viewed as provocation. Since a *mchongoano* session has to fulfil functions such as providing entertainment and cementing group cohesion, its rules are observed by the participants to guarantee its continuity.

### **3.8 *Mchongoano* with reference to G (for "genre")**

According to Wardhaugh (2010), *Genre* "refers to clearly demarcated types of utterance". It includes such things as poems, proverbs, riddles, sermons, prayers, lecture, and editorials (p. 261). Even more specifically, *genre* could be a poem, myth, tale, proverb, riddle, curse, prayer, lecture, commercial, editorial, form, letter (Hymes, 1974, p. 61) or a joke, conversation, or greeting (Saville-Troike, 2003, p. 110). Wardhaugh adds that "all these are marked in specific ways in contrast to casual speech" (p.261).

In relation to this, *mchongoano*'s structure, topics, purpose, and participants are not those of ordinary speech. In particular, the structure of *mchongoano* is specific to it, especially the use of the hearsay marker *ati* introducing some kind of reported speech.

*Mchongoano* belongs to the genre of jokes, as proposed by Kihara & Schröder (2012). It is also a type of folklore (Kihara, 2013, and Githinji, 2006a). Kihara (2013) points out the similarities between riddles (a traditional genre) and *mchongoano*. He identifies many features shared by the two genres, though *mchongoano* as an emerging type of folklore, has unique characteristics such as the use of Sheng.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

This paper set out to analyse *mchongoano* within Hymes's (1974) ethnography of communication encapsulated in the mnemonic acronym *S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G*. In relation *S* (for *scene and setting*), the paper notes that *mchongoano* has no specifically designated place of performance. To satisfy the *scene-and-setting* requirements, performers of *mchongoano* will select a time and a place that suit them. The (active) *Participants* in *mchongoano* (represented by *P*) are young people, mostly boys. They perform before a passive audience whose main role is to encourage and judge a *mchongoano* session. *E* (for *Ends*) captures the purpose or goal in *mchongoano*. The main purpose or outcome of *mchongoano* is leisure and entertainment, but it also offers the inexperienced youth an opportunity to discuss taboo topics such as sexuality. *A* (for *Act sequence*) includes the form of *mchongoano* (how it is structured) and its content (what is contained in it). It makes use of both direct and indirect speech. Although *mchongoano* is dialogic, it lacks the topical coherence found in conversations. *K* (for *Key*) marks the tone in *mchongoano*, which may be light-hearted, mocking, sarcastic, humorous, or friendly. At times there is intentional violation of the tone meant to establish dominance among the participants. *I* (for *Instrumentalities*) in *mchongoano* is mainly oral, but some instrumentalities appear in print, especially on the Internet. Sheng and Engsh, which are marked by plenty of code switching and mixing, are the two language varieties typically used in *mchongoano*. *N* (for *Norms of interaction and interpretation*) in *mchongoano* shows that participants seek the consent to duel from each other; they agree on *mchongoano* subjects, and they will concede defeat when overwhelmed. Turn-taking is the rule in *mchongoano*. *G* (for *Genre*) marks the communicative event; *mchongoano* falls into the jokes genre.

The characteristics of *mchongoano*, discussed in this paper within Hymes's *S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G* mnemonic, show that this verbal art fits well within the ethnography of communication. It transpires from the discussion that there is a great deal of inter-relatedness between those characteristics, thus blurring a clear demarcation among them. Saville-Troike (2003: 114) suggests that as the components of a communicative event are identified, questions

of how each component is related to the others should be pursued. However, this suggestion was not pursued here; it could be pursued in further research. There are other areas that call for further research on the same topic: for instance, *mchongoano* from a larger group of participants from different residential areas could be studied to illuminate expected linguistic variation related to social status, social standing, gender, and area of residence. Another piece of research could be compare and contrast *mchongoano* and other traditional verbal duels in Kenyan ethnic communities.

## REFERENCES

- Arewa, E. O. and A. Dundes. 1964. "Proverbs and the ethnography of speaking folklore". *American Anthropologist*, 66 (6): 70-85. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/668162>. Accessed: 13/09/2012.
- Bosire, M. 2009. "What makes a Sheng word unique? Lexical manipulation in mixed languages". In A. Ojo and L. Moshi (eds.). *Selected Proceedings of the 39th Annual Conference on African Linguistics*, pp. 77-85.
- Burns, T. A. 1976. "Riddling: Occasion to act". *The Journal of American Folklore*, 89, (352): 139-165. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/539687>. Accessed: 21/09/2011.
- Chimezie, A. 1976. "The dozens: An African-Heritage theory". *Journal of Black Studies*, 6(4): 401-420. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2783770>. Accessed: 19/04/2012.
- Dundes, A., J. W. Leach and B. Örkök. 1970. "The strategy of Turkish boys' verbal dueling rhymes". *The Journal of American Folklore*, 83, (329): 325-349. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/538809>. Accessed: 13/09/2012.
- Fasold, R. 1990. *The Sociolinguistics of Language: Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, vol. 2. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Freud, S. 1960. *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*. London & New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

- Githinji, P. 2006a. "Insults and folk humour: Rabelaisian parodies in Sheng's *mchongoano*". Paper presented at the Michigan State University on the occasion of the Festschrift in honor of Prof. David Dwyer.
- Githinji, P. 2006b. "Bazes and their shibboleths: Lexical variation and Sheng speakers' identity in Nairobi". *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 15(4): 443-472.
- Githinji, P. 2007. "*Mchongoano* verbal duels: A risky discourse". In K. Njogu, and G. Oluoch-Olunya (eds.). *Cultural Production and Social Change in Kenya: Building Bridges. Art, Culture & Society*, 1. Nairobi: Twaweza, pp. 89-109.
- Hymes, D. 1962. "The ethnography of speaking". In T. Gladwin and W. C. Sturtevant (eds.). 1962. *Anthropology and Human Behavior*. Washington, DC: Anthropological Society of Washington, pp. 13-53.
- Hymes, D. 1974. *Foundations of Sociolinguistics: Ethnography of Speaking*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania.
- Hymes, D. 2003. "The interaction of language and social life". In C. B. Paulston, and R. G. Tucker (eds.). 2003. *Sociolinguistics: The Essential Readings*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 30-47.
- Kihara, C. P. and H. Schröder. 2012. "A relevance-theoretical analysis of aspects of *mchongoano*". *The University of Nairobi Journal of Language and Linguistics*, 2: 63-78.
- Kihara, C. P. 2013. "On *Mchongoano* and riddles". *Journal of Pan African Studies* 6(6): 100-121. Available online at: <http://www.jpanafrican.com/docs/vol6no6/6.6-Kihara.pdf>.
- Labov, W. 1972. *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Variety*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Otieno, S. P. 2006. "The urban semiotic practice and social evaluation in neo-cultural environment". In H. Indangasi (ed.). 2006. *Our landscapes, Our narratives: Proceedings of the conference on East African oral Literature*. Nairobi: Kenya Oral Literature Association, pp. 98-106.
- Perceland, J., S. Dweck, and M. Ivey (eds.). 1995. *Double Snaps*. New York: Bros. & A White Guy.

- Saville-Troike, M. 2003. *The Ethnography of Communication: An Introduction*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. London: Blackwell.
- Schwegler, A. 2007. "Black ritual insulting in the Americas: On the art of 'Vociferar' (Colombia), 'Vacilar' (Ecuador) and 'Snapping', 'Sounding' or 'Playing the Dozens' (U.S.A.). *Indiana* 24: 107-155.
- Smitherman, G. 1995. "An introduction to the art of the snap". In Percelay *et al.*, pp. 15-33.
- Wardhaugh, R. 2010. *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, 6<sup>th</sup> edn. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

***Author's address:***

Claudius P. Kihara  
Heinrich-Heine-Universität-Düsseldorf  
Universitätstraße 1  
40225 Düsseldorf  
Germany  
Email: [kiharapc@gmail.com](mailto:kiharapc@gmail.com)