# *Kiswahili ya Jela:* The Features of the Kenyan Prison Argot

**Ogutu Peter Okoth**[*], **Opande Nilson Isaac, Oluoch Stephen**

Department of Language and Linguistics, Kisii University, Kisii, Kenya

**Email address:**
Pitarion2@yahoo.com (O. P. Okoth), Opanislon@gmail.com (O. N. Isaac), Yahuma1976@yahoo.com (O. Stephen)
[*]Corresponding author

**Abstract:** Many scholars have attempted to analyze prison argot in different countries in the world. Nevertheless, the features of this variety of language have been fragmentary treated. Furthermore, in the Kenyan context, the area of prison argot has received the total silence of scholars in the linguistic field. The main aim of this study is to analyze the features of the Kenyan prison argot which is generally referred to as *Kiswahili ya jela*. *Kiswahili ya jela* is an ungrammatical Swahili phrase which in standard usage should mean the Swahili language of prisons. However, in the prison context, *Kiswahili ya jela* means a language full of tricks or lies. Thirty prisoners were randomly selected from Kibos and Kisumu Maximum Prisons to participate in the study. The contextual-dynamic method was used to collect data from the respondents. This method mainly involves the use of observation and dialogue. Because of its qualitative nature, the data is subjected to content analysis. From this work, the following features are evident; borrowing of terms from other languages, reversing of syllables, coining of new prison-contextual lexemes and the formation of argot terms through affixation. This study also reveals that the Kenyan prison argot exhibits code-mixing and the use of ungrammatical structures. Synonymy and polysemy as semantic features are also revealed. This paper thus concludes that the Kenyan prison argot is a highly creative slang.

**Keywords:** Prison, Argot, Lexemes, Word Formation, Slang

## 1. Introduction

Worldwide, many linguists have attempted to account for and explain the various types of argot. Studies on this type of jargon have been approached from various points of view and resulting in publications from foreign scholars such as [1-8] among many others. In the field of lexicography, the dictionary of the Underworld by Eric Partridge remains the most referenced book.

Gohodzi [9] in analyzing the Prison argot in Zimbabwe notes that most of the studies concerning this slang have majorly been done in European countries. Scholars in Africa have neglected prison argot which is a rich linguistic vessel. In Kenya, many studies concerning slang and argot have been carried out by different scholars [10]. However, these studies have majorly been done in the free world. Binyanya [10] explains that most studies on the varieties of Swahili have been carried in the field of religion, politics and in transport. For example, Nyakundi [11] studied the morpho-phonological process in *Egesemba* argot among the Ekegusii

speaking males in Western Kenya. Mugendi [2] on the other hand carried out a study of the *Gatamanyana* argot of the matatu crew in Embu town. These studies are important as they give the present study a direction concerning the usage of argot. However, they involve a different speech community compared to this study. In this study, the prisoners are the speech community.

It is important to note that, within a particular language, there are some vocabularies that are specialized which result in slang, dialects, regionalisms, and jargons. At this point, therefore, it is important to define argot and differentiate it from the other argot related linguistic codes. Argot is the jargon which systematically distorts the words of the vernacular, in a manner that is transparent and open only to the people who hold the key. On the other hand, Harris [13] explains that argots are some special kinds of vocabulary which are possessed and used by a small clique of people in society. Argots are mostly used by criminals and thieves, though other specific groups and classes of people can also use argots [14].

Prison argot is a lingo or vocabularies which are specific to prisoners in prison [1]. The lingo of the prisoners emerged as a way of concealing information from prison warders in the prison environment. Prison argots differ according to gender [6]. This study analyzes the argot used only by the male prisoners. Ito & Mester [15] posit that the purpose of argot formation is found in its characteristic distortion of the input through certain modifications including reversal. The present study aims at analyzing the modifications that characterize the Kenyan prison argot.

Yule [16] observes that jargon is a technical vocabulary which is used with a particular group of people in a society and it aids them in connecting with those who form the insiders of that group. With the jargon, the group members are able to exclude the outsiders. Yule [17] explains that a jargon is a kind of language which is used by a particular group of people or professionals in a given field. It's a language that doesn't die like other varieties of language. It is the usage of vocabularies in a particular field. Yule [17] explains that jargon helps in the identification of a person i.e. he or she is from which field or profession. For example, lawyers have got a jargon which identifies them as lawyers.

Mencken [18] explains that slang came up in England, during the 18th century, having similar meaning with cant. He defines cant as a special kind of vocabulary or language used by a set of people of low character. According to him, slang is a highly colloquial type of language which is taken to be below the acceptable standard language. It consists of new words or current words which are employed in a special way. Eble [19] observes that slang is a set of colloquial words or language which is ever changing and that speakers use it to reinforce their social identity within a group in the society. According to Green [20], one thing that is formidable to slang is that it changes rapidly such that it is almost impossible to provide an accurate account of slang items which are used currently.

Coleman [21] in attempting to differentiate the various types of non-standard language posits that slang is normally short lived and always belongs to a particular age or social clique. It is a fashion like language which is used to define in-groups and stem out out-groups. She says that a jargon is a form of specialized language which belongs to a particular profession or interest group. It functions to include as well as excluding. Cant is the secret language of thieves and beggars. It is used for concealing information or deceiving. This study analyzes the argot terms used by prisoners at the Kibos and Kisumu maximum prisons in Kisumu County, Kenya.

# 2. Features of Argot

Hui [22] gives the features of argot as; is used by a small group of people who are in a kind of conflict with the main society, it is used to conceal information, entails code mixing, it's dependent, it's alive and easy for someone to learn. Any anti-language has got two components. First, it entails the creation of new words for the ones which already exist. Words used by people in the main society are changed and new words are formed by the people in the sub-society. In this manner, the words in the main society undergo lexical changes [23]. In the case of prison argot, these lexical changes are partial and not total. Not all words in the main society have their synonyms in the prison argot. The second element of an anti-language is, words from the main society are given more words and meaning. For example, the prison warder is referred to by many names by the prisoners.

Kingei & Kobia [24] in explaining the features of sheng, which is a slang they say that, the users of sheng form words referring to people and places by adding the suffix –ish. For example, *Namanga* becomes *Namash*. They say that most of the words borrowed from English are normally clipped to form shorter words. For example, the word *tao* is formed by shortening *town*. Ball, which may refer to pregnancy, is referred to as *boli*.

The above scholars attempt to explain the features of slang. They do this by looking into the word formation processes. The above studies are important to this study as they lay a basis upon which to analyze the Kenyan prison argot. Looser [25] explains that the clearest way of identifying the distinctive nature of slang is by looking into the linguistic mechanism which constructs the language. Based on that, this paper examines the features that make up the contemporary *Kiswahili ya jela*. At this point, therefore, it is important to discuss some of the word formation processes.

## *2.1. Borrowing*

According to Yule [26], borrowing is the taking over words from other languages. The forms which have been borrowed are normally adapted to the phonology of the borrowing language. According to Wisniewski [27], borrowing is simply taking a word from one language and then incorporating the word into another. Cornelius [28] affirms that borrowing takes place when a word is imported from another language. This is the explanation that The Free Encyclopedia [29] gives, that, when a word is taken from a particular language into another and then adapted to its vocabulary, the process is termed as borrowing. In the context of this study, borrowing refers to instances in which the prison argot terms are lexified by the existing stable language.

This process is considered as a linguistic phenomenon which appears in all languages universally. This means that all languages that are living do borrow words, and this borrowing increases the vocabulary of those languages.

The English language has, for instance, borrowed a vast number of words acquired from other languages. For this, it is well known for its flexibility to most of the foreign languages [28]. In this regard, Wisnieski [27] explains that 'English has been absorbent of words all over the world'. This paper seeks to investigate how this applies in the context of the Kenyan prison argot.

## *2.2. Reversing of Syllables*

Other scholars refer to this process as vowel alteration

[30]. The vowel alteration can also be referred to as modification. In this morphological process, changes occur in the words arising from modification or changes in the vowels or the entire word. It, therefore, goes that this is a morphological process which entails the base modification.

Modification or what Ogechi [30] calls vowel alteration is another process of creating words that appear in the Kenyan prison argot. Ruf'ai [31] explains that the process takes place when the base of the original word is dropped or changed with another derivational vowel. This is supported by Fagge [32] who also refers to it as vowel alteration. He defines it as a process in which certain nouns are created through the alteration of roots, prefix or suffix.

### 2.3. Coining

Ogechi [30] explains that coining is a process in which a word is formed to express a concept or object. He explains that it is not sourced from another word or based on another existing word. These are words which are created to fit the specific demands of the users of that language. Yule [26] appears to affirm that coinage involves forming new words only that he explains that the new words can come from the old uses.

This process of word formation can also be known as the adoption of brand names. Brand names are formed and then they become the names of the items or the processes which are associated with the brand name. It is a process of creating distinctly new words [27].

In this study, Wisniewski's explanation of coinage appears to be more firm and explicit. It is his definition that enabled the study to identify new argot terms which are not originally Swahili or English standard words.

### 2.4. Affixation

An affix [29] is a morpheme which is attached to the stem to form a word. Rubba [34] explains that an affix is a bound morpheme which attaches to the root or stem. Agezi [33] posits that affixation is a collective term for the formative types which can only be used when it's added to another morpheme. The morpheme here is the root or stem. A root of a word is that part of a word which is left when all the other affixes are removed. For example, 'faith' is the root in 'faithful'. On the other hand, a stem is a minimal unit in which affixes apply. It may consist of just a single root morpheme (faith) or two root morphemes (blackbird). In a simpler definition, Rubba [34] defines affixation as the addition of a derivational affix to a word. There are different affixations processes. Agezi [33] divides them into pre-fixation, suffixation, and in-fixation. This depends on whether the particular affix is added after the base, before it or at times determined point within it. Pre-fixation takes place when the prefix is placed at the front of the stem.

### 2.5. Code Mixing

According to Muysken [35], code mixing refers to all the cases where the lexical items and the grammatical features from two languages appear in the same sentence. Code-mixing which is also referred to as intra-sentential code-

switching is the switching from one language to another within the same sentence or utterance. This has become a common feature in most communities where people speak more than two languages for communication. It is important to explain code-switching at this level.

According to Bullock & Toribio [36], code-switching is the ability of a bilingual to alternate effortlessly between two languages. It is the use of words and structures from more than one language or linguistic variety by the same coder within the same utterance. Yow & Li [37] explain that code-switching in bilingual adults is not a demonstration of a lack of fluency but a sign of bilingual competence.

Different reasons have been given for code-mixing [38]. Among the most common reason is that bilinguals mix languages because of the lack of proper words from the other language they may be using. Because of the lack of vocabulary, they mix the codes. Heredia & Altarriba [38] however suggest that the absence of the vocabulary or lexical knowledge may not be the actual reason for it. Rather, they say that the problem may be with the difficulty in retrieval.

### 2.6. Acronym

Many linguists have recognized and explained this as one of the word formation processes. Aronoff & Fudeman [39] observe that acronyms are found by taking the initial letters of string words and then combining them to form a new one. Therefore, it is a word formation process which is orthographically based. Yule [26] explains that acronyms are formed from the initial letters of the set of other words. Therefore, this is a process in which we form words by picking the initials of the set of words.

Other than the features that arise from the word formation processes this study investigates other features that make up the *Kiswahili ya jela*.

### 2.7. Synonymy

This refers to the semantic identity between words. According to Murphy [40], if we invent a new word that represents the same thing as an existing word in the same language, the new word is a synonym of the older word. Two words are synonymous if they could be substituted for each other in a given context while retaining the semantic value of the expression as a whole [41]. For example, one can say, where is his dad? Or where is his father? The two words, father, and dad are synonymous. More examples of synonyms are these pairs of words; broad/wide, taxi/cab, sofa/couch, purchase/ buy [17].

In synonyms, lexical items have sense relations. The two or more words do not need to have identical meanings i.e interchangeable meanings in all contexts for them to be synonymous. If lexical items are close enough in their meaning to the extent that someone can choose between the two in some contexts, without altering the meaning, they can be said to be synonymous. In deciding whether lexemes are synonyms, linguists have stressed the importance of contexts [42].

## 2.8. Polysemy

It is now evident that in synonymy, we have relations among the lexical units, polysemy, on the other hand, refers to one lexical unit having multiple meanings. Kovacs [43] argues that polysemous words are taken to be semantically related and the transfer of meaning can be witnessed by a metaphor or metonymy. In this sense, semantic relatedness is an important factor for identifying polysemous words. A polysemous word has many meanings which are separable though with a basis in similarity [44]. When a term has two or more meanings it is referred to as polysemic or multivalent. Mwangi & Mukhwana [45] explain that polysemy is a word which has an additional meaning. A good example is the Swahili word *mzee* which means an old man. Today, however, the word *mzee* has an additional meaning to refer to anyone with some high social status regardless of his age.

## 3. Method

A design that is fairly flexible was chosen so as to add more data as they emerged. This helped in improving the authenticity and quality of the findings [46]. This method enabled the researchers to reach some contents which they did not earlier expect to reach. The contextual-dynamic method was used to collect data from the respondents. Slama-Cazacu [47] explains that this method mainly concerns observation and dialogue. The interviews were based on certain laid down guideline to ensure that the respondents were subject to similar stimuli.

## 4. Population

Thirty respondents were randomly selected to participate in this study. All of the respondents were male and had served their sentence in the prison for more than three years.

## 5. Procedure

Data were collected within two weeks. Each interview lasted for not more 30 minutes. The interviews took place in the offices which were provided by each of the prison administrations. More data were however collected as the researchers interacted with the prisoners within the prison environments. The respondents were assured that the research was being carried out only for academic purposes. Argot terms were noted down in a book by the researchers throughout the interview process.

## 6. Data Analysis

Given that the data in this study is qualitative in nature, it shall be subjected to content analysis [48]. The argot terms are categorized according to the feature they exhibit: affixation, acronyms, borrowed argots, reversed argots, synonyms, polysemy, argots with code mixing, shifting of meaning, ungrammatical argots. This analysis is therefore thematic based upon the contents in each section.

## 7. Results and Discussion

### 7.1. Prison Argot Entails Borrowing of Words from Other Languages

***Table 1.*** *Borrowed lexemes.*

| Borrowed word | Source word | Contextual meaning | Source language |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Kairo* | Cairo | Prisoners who clean toilets | English |
| *Karao/Krauni* | Crown | Police/prison warder | English |
| *Buti* | Boot | Buttock/to hide something | English |
| *Mablue* | Blue | Trustee prisoner | English |
| *Geng'* | Gang | Group of prisoners with a specific task | English |
| *Wode* | Water | Alcohol | English |
| *Kurutu* | Recruit | An imbecile | English |
| *Biskuti* | Biscuit | Rotten maize | English |
| *Hoteli* | Hotel | Kitchen | English |
| *Neti* | Net | Prison | English |
| *Trekta* | Tractor | New/ fresh prisoner | English |
| *Waya* | Wire | An instrument for lighting cigarette | English |
| *Frayola* | Fried | Fried food | English |
| *Redio* | Radio | Phone | English |
| *Wadhii* | Watu | Prisoners | Swahili |
| *Ongosh* | Ongogo | Homosexual partner (who acts as a husband) | Luo |

The above table shows the argot terms which have been borrowed from different languages. It is important to note that, the borrowed lexemes must not have the exact meaning which it had in the donor language. For example, the term *neti* is borrowed from the English word net but then it's given a totally different meaning. In the prison context, *neti* means a prison. The word Cairo, which means the capital city of Egypt is also borrowed but given a totally different meaning. In the Kenyan prisons, *kairo* are the prisoners who are mandated with the responsibility of cleaning the toilets. Similarly, the argot term *wadhii* is borrowed from the Swahili word people. However, in the prisoners' communication, the people are specifically the prisoners.

*Biskuti* is also borrowed from the English word biscuit but

given a different meaning of rotten maize. *Hoteli* is borrowed from the English word hotel but in the prison environment, it's used to mean a kitchen. The same applies to *trekta* which is taken from the English word tractor. Then, it's given a different meaning, prisoners who have just been brought in the prison. Mostly they are expected to do a lot of work.

Therefore, the borrowing in the Kenyan prison argot is partial. Only the word is borrowed but the meaning is not. The borrowed word is given a totally different meaning from the original lexeme. It's only a phonological borrowing but not semantic.

This is what most scholars refer to as loan shifting [31]. It involves lexical and semantic changes.

### 7.2. Prison Argot Entails Reversal of Syllables

**Table 2.** Lexemes with reversed syllables

| Argot term (Reversed) | Source word | Source language | Contextual meaning |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Gife | Fegi | Sheng | Cigarette |
| Dika | Kadi | Swahili | Prisoners identity card |
| Nogwez | Gweno | Luo | Cigarette |
| Mbwauz | Mbwa | Swahili | Dog/a foolish prisoner |
| Taukuz | Ukuta | Swahili | Prison walls |
| Kanyoz | Nyoka | Swahili | A betrayer |
| Rwanga | Ngwara | - | A piece of metal used for protection |

Table 2 shows the argot terms which have been reversed. The main purpose of reversing is to conceal information. The word *gife* is derived from sheng word *fegi* which means a cigarette. The word *dika* is derived from the Swahili word *kadi*. The word is first borrowed from the English word card to make *kadi*. *Kadi* is then reversed to *dika*. The word *nogwez* is derived from the Luo word *gweno* meaning a chicken. After it being reversed to *nogwe* a suffix -z is further added to the word to conceal it further. *Nogwez* in the prison context means a cigarette. The same process takes place in the formation of *mbwauz* which is reversed from the Swahili word *mbwa* meaning a dog. Then, the suffix –*uz* is added to it. *Ngwara,* a word coined in the prison environment is again reversed to *rwanga* so as to conceal its meaning. It is piece of metal that a prisoner uses to protect himself. Normally it is used to make cuttings on someone while fighting.

From the above table, the donating lexemes are words which are well known by both the prisoners and the staff. However, when the prisoners want to hide secrets they reverse the words and sometimes suffixes are added on them so that they may not be understood. It's important to note that, different from how reversal takes place in the sheng slang, a reversal in the Kenyan prison argot may be accompanied by a change in meaning. For example, the term *kanyoz* doesn't directly mean a snake but means a prisoner who betrays the rest of the other inmates. Ogechi [30] explains that the lexeme is borrowed then it goes through some adjustments.

### 7.3. Prison Argot Entails Coining of Words

**Table 3.** Coined lexemes.

| Coined lexemes | Meaning |
| --- | --- |
| Chebechebe | Special kind of food |
| Kibaba | Tool for weighing oil for prisoners' food |
| Gundu | Nuisance/bad omen that a prisoner has after an illegal sex in prison |
| Ngwara | An object for cutting fellow prisoner while fighting |
| Mruru | A metal plate-like object for putting food |
| Mburga | Kitchen |
| Tinga | An object for lighting cigarette |
| Kisuguu | Tower / a prisoner on watch |

The table shows examples of argot terms used by prisoners which have been coined. They have not been borrowed from any language. They have been specifically created for use in prison. Most of the coined words are nouns used to express objects. *Chebechebe* is not a word used in Swahili. It has been coined to refer to a special type of food prepared for prisoners or certain prison warders *(mwewe)* who may want to eat the prisoners' food. It includes ugali which has been cooked in oil. *Kibaba* is another word coined to refer to an object which resembles a bottle top. It's used to measure oil which is put in a prisoner's food. Probably, the name *kibaba* comes from the fact that the object is very small. *Gundu* is a nuisance that a prisoner has after having sex with another male prisoner. After the act, certain prisoners appear to be behaving like people having some kind of bad omen. He may do certain things that may make him vulnerable to the warders or do something that may make the other prisoners beat him up. *Ngwara* is also not a common word in Swahili. It's specifically coined to help to refer to an object that the prisoners use to cut a fellow prisoner while they fight.

Irwin [49] posits that the harsh environment in prisons makes the prisoners be creative to the level of making adjustments and corrections in certain words [50]. There is a creation of new words.

It's difficult to speculate the basis on which the coinage here is based on. We can, however, make an observation that the coinage takes place so as to refer to certain objects not commonly found in the free world. For example, *chebechebe* may not be a common type of food found outside the prison environment. So, words are coined to express new objects or situations in prisons. Secondly, we can deduce that coinage takes place to conceal message. The reason why a kitchen is called *mburga* is to conceal the information so that one may not understand the message spoken by the prisoners.

### 7.4. Certain Prison Argot Terms Have Undergone Affixation

*Table 4. Affixation in prison argot.*

| Affixation | Lexemes formed | Meaning |
|---|---|---|
| *Ku + kaba* | *Kukaba* | Squatting as the prisoner waits to be counted |
| *Ki + suguu* | *Kisuguu* | A tower or a prisoner on watch |
| *Ma + buluu* | *Mabuluu* | Trusted prisoners. The highest rank |
| *Ki + baba* | *Kibaba* | An object for weighing oil for prisoners' food |
| *Ki + Swahili* | *Kiswahili* | The language of tricks or lies in prison |
| *Ku + toboa* | *Kutoboa* | To finish a jail term |
| *Wa + sanii* | *Wasanii* | Prisoners |
| *Wa + dhii* | *Wadhii* | Prisoners |
| *M + sudi* | *Msudi* | A prisoner who relays secretes to the warders |
| *Ma + shujaa* | *Mashujaa* | Prisoners who have stayed in prison for long |
| *Ki + herehere* | *Kiherehere* | A prisoner who performs a supervisory role mostly makes others to be caned. In medium prisons |
| *Ma + lilio* | *Malilio* | Staff prison welfare |
| *Kanyo + z* | *Kanyoz* | A betrayer |
| *Guo + gez* | *Guogez* | A dog |

The above table shows that the Kenya prison argot exhibits this feature in their morphological process of forming words. According to the data, it is *pre-fixation* that takes place much in this slang. Pre-fixation here is used for derivational and inflectional purposes.

The data shows prefix *ma-* which is added to the stem or root of the word. *Ma-* in this context means 'people of'. For example, *mabuluu* literally means people of blue, the prisoners who put on blue uniforms and perform supervisory roles. *Mashujaa* means the heroes. However, in the argot, it means prisoners who have stayed in prison for long. *Malilio* means someone who receives complaints.

Prefix *m-* on the other hand, represents a person. *Msudi* is a person who relays secrets to the prison warders. The plural for *m-* is *wa-*. Therefore, *wadhii* means many prisoners. *–dhii* means people. It has been borrowed from the Swahili word *watu*.

Prefix *ki-* relays information of something being small. *Kisuguu* therefore means a small structure in which a prison warder sits in as he supervises the prisoners so that they don't jump over the prison walls (a tower). A prisoner who helps the prison warder in ensuring the prisoners do not cross the borders is also called *kisuguu*. *Ki-* could also give an idea of looking down upon. *Kiherehere* gets the prefix of *ki-* simply because this is a group of prisoners who are looked down upon because they make the other prisoners to be punished by the warders. *Kiherere* is majorly found in a medium prison.

We also found incidences when suffixation took place. In this process however, the words underwent some changes before suffixes were added to them. The word *kanyoz* is derived from the Swahili word *nyoka* which means a snake. The word is then changed to *kanyo* then the suffix *-z* is added to it. The meaning also changes from a snake to a prisoner who betrays the others. This is similar to how the term *guogez* is formed. *Guok* is a word borrowed from the Luo language meaning a dog. The prisoners borrow it then bantusize it [30]. However, it's important to note that suffixational morphemes are not common in the Kenya prison argot.

### 7.5. Code-Mixing in Prison Argot

*Table 5. Argot terms with mixed codes.*

| Argot terms | Meaning |
|---|---|
| *Ugaliya pan* | A special kind of ugali for prisoners(illegal) |
| *Mtu ordinary* | Someone who understands the processes and systems of prison |
| *Mfungwa staff* | A prisoner with high status, mostly coming from him having much money |
| *Kuingiza boot* | Hiding something in the buttocks |
| *Leta steam* | Asking for a drug/alcohol |
| *Kukula copper* | To be shot |
| *Toa finger* | Asking for a bribe |
| *Kuchange quarter* | Sexual intercourse between two homosexual partners who act female |
| *Kutower* | A prisoner being on watch so as not be caught doing something illegal |

The above table shows the argot terms which have their codes mixed. The data indicate that the languages which are mixed are English and Swahili. *Kuingiza boot*, for example, is made of a Swahili word *kuingiza* which means to insert in

and boot an English word. It's a verb phrase which means to hide something in the buttocks. *Ugali ya pan* is made of *ugali ya* which is a noun phrase meaning ugali of, and pan which is an English word. *Ugali ya pan* is a special ugali prepared for special prisoners albeit illegally. *Mtu ordinary* is made of Swahili word *mtu* meaning a person and an English word ordinary. *Mtu ordinary* refers to a person who understands prisons and their systems. *Leta steam* is made up of *leta* which is a Swahili word meaning bring and an English word steam. It means bring alcohol for drinking. *Mfungwa staff* also has a Swahili word *mfungwa* which means a prisoner. *Mfungwa staff* means a prisoner of high status possibly because he has much money. It is therefore evident that code-mixing exists in the Kenya prison argot and the main mixed languages are Swahili and English.

Different from what Raylfields [51] says that code-mixing is mostly used to stress, the data established shows that code-mixing among the prisoners is much used in the identification and expression of objects. Code-mixing also occurs in the Kenyan prison argot to conceal information. The prisoner may know the exact words in Swahili but because he may not want the prison warder to know what he is talking about, he mixes the codes. For example, *kutoa finger* is asking for a bribe from a fellow prisoner, probably so that his offense may not be reported to the warders, an event which can attract punishment. So as to evade the normal Swahili phrase *toa kitu kidogo*, the prisoner uses the expression *toa finger*.

### 7.7. Prison Argot Terms Have Synonyms

### 7.6. Shifting of Meaning

Shifting of meaning is the process in which words exchange their meanings. The data shows certain words which exchanged their meanings. A word with a different meaning takes the place of another word.

*Table 6. Argot terms with shifted meanings.*

| Argot term | Original word/meaning |
|---|---|
| *Redio* | Simu (Phone) |
| *Hoteli* | Jikoni (Kitchen) |
| *Neti* | Jela (Prisons) |
| *Randa* | Kiboko (Cain) |
| *Kwekwe* | Warders who do inspections |
| *Kiswahili* | A language of tricks/ lies |

The above table shows the argot terms which have taken the places of other words in the normal Swahili language. The word *redio* is used to refer to a phone, a totally different object. *Hoteli* which is Swahili word for hotel is used to refer to a kitchen. *Hoteli* and *jikoni* are two different places but the word *hoteli* is used to refer to *jikoni*, a kitchen. *Randa* which is a smoothening plane is used to refer to *a cane*. Again, these are two different objects but one word is used to refer to the other. Kiswahili which means the Swahili language is used to refer a language of tricks or lies. Words shift their meaning to different words.

The purpose of shifting is hiding or concealing the identity of certain objects or issues so that the prison warders may not be able to identify what the prisoners are talking about.

*Table 7. Synonyms in prison argot.*

| Concept | Synonyms |
|---|---|
| Homosexual partner (acting female) | *Mtoto, mwana, kijana, maua* |
| Homosexual partner (acting male) | *Mende, ongosh* |
| Tool for lighting cigarettes | *Waya, makuti, tinga* |
| Bhang | *Boza, widi, godee, bata, kochipo* |
| Free world | *Uraiani, Kenya,* |
| Beans | *Dondo, matope* |
| Prison | *Neti, ngome, chimano, boma, shamba ya mawe, nchi ya saba, Zimbabwe, dunia ingine* |
| Prisoners | *Wasanii, wadhii, wanaboma* |
| Kitchen | *Hoteli, mburga* |
| Cigarette | *Gife, fegi, nogwez, gweno* |
| Plate-like stracture | *Pengle, kipengele* |
| Aged prisoners | *Mijikumi, wazee wa nyumba* |
| Handcurfs | *Bangili, chegere* |
| Phone | *Redio, gari, ndechu, waya, mongorio* |
| Betrayer | *Nyoka, malaya,* |

The above table shows the synonyms in the Kenya prison argot. These are words which have similar meanings. The terms *mtoto, mwana, kijana* and *maua* are synonyms in that they all mean the homosexual partner who acts like a female. *Waya* and *makuti* are synonyms meaning a tool for lighting cigarettes. Bhang has many synonyms *boza, widi, godee, bata* and *kochipo*. The free world can be referred to as *uraiani* or *Kenya*. Beans have synonyms, *dondo,* and *matope*. Prison can be referred to as *neti, ngome, chimano, boma, shamba ya mawe, nchi ya saba, Zimbabwe* or *dunia ingine*. A phone, on the other hand, can be referred to as *redio, gari,*

*ndechu, waya* or *mongorio.*

This finding supports the observation by Looser [25] about the features of anti-languages. The second feature which she gives is that anti-languages have many words which refer to the same thing. Prison, for example, has many words referring to it as explained above. Our data also asserts the idea that synonyms are found in prison argot in areas that are important only. Our examples above are synonyms in areas of food, drugs and the prison itself. These are the areas that matter so much to a prisoner.

### 7.8. Polysemy in Prison Argot

**Table 8.** *Polysemes in prison argot.*

| Argot term | Original meaning (Swahili) | Additional meaning (In prison) |
|---|---|---|
| *Charaza* | To cane | Razor blade |
| *Mwewe* | Bird | Glutton prisoner/warder |
| *Mende* | Cockroach | Homosexual partner (acting male/husband) |
| *Kiswahili* | Swahili language | Tricks/lies |
| *Kunguru* | Bird | Prisoners uniform |
| *Nyoka* | Snake | A prisoner who betrays the others |
| *Mtoto/mwana* | A child | A homosexual partner in prison who acts female |
| *Gari* | A vehicle | Bhang |
| *Kuku* | Chicken | Cigarette |
| *Bangili* | Bracelets | Handcuffs |
| *Kairo* | The capital city of Egypt | Prisoners who clean toilets |
| *Kwekwe* | weeds | Warders who carry out inspection |
| *Maua* | Flower | A homosexual partner in prison who acts female |
| *Simba* | A lion | Officer in charge |
| *Malaya* | A prostitute | A betrayer |
| *Mtaro* | A tunnel | Buttocks |

Table 8 shows the lexemes with additional meanings. In Swahili, *charaza* means to cane. It's given an additional meaning of a razor blade. The term *mwewe* in Swahili refers to a bird. It is given an additional meaning of a glutton warder or prisoner. The term *mende* refers to a cockroach but in the argot, it is given an additional meaning to refer to a male homosexual partner. *Kiswahili* refers to the Swahili language. It's given an additional meaning of tricks or lies. In standard Swahili language, *nyoka* refers to a snake. It's given an additional meaning of a betrayer.

It's important to note that, in a way, this is not polysemy as explained by Mwangi & Mukhwana [45]. In the Kenyan prison argot, this is borrowing of lexeme structures from Swahili then the lexemes are given new meanings by the prisoners. Our data asserts the explanation by Ogechi [30] that the nouns undergo semantic expansion. For example, the word *mende,* which means a cockroach in standard Swahili, undergoes a semantic expansion to also mean a homosexual partner who acts as a husband.

We, therefore, agree with Einat & Einat [6] that in a prison the idea of 'one word, one meaning' does not exist. There is a continuous process of prisoners making changes to their lexemes.

### 7.9. Failure to Observe Swahili Grammar

Grammar is used here to mean the rules about how words change their form and combine with other words to make phrases or sentences. The data analysis shows that there are some argot terms which go against the Swahili grammar. This doesn't mean that the prisoners do not know the Swahili language. They only form or manipulate language for their own reasons and benefit.

**Table 9.** *Argots with grammatical errors.*

| Argot terms with grammatical errors | Corrected form |
|---|---|
| *Ugali ya pan* | Ugali wa pani |
| *Kisuguu* | Mnara |
| *Nchi ingine* | Nchi nyingine |

| Argot terms with grammatical errors | Corrected form |
|---|---|
| *Kugenya* | Kufariki |
| *Kukaa kisuguu* | Kukaa macho |
| *Mahuru ya jela* | Mahuru wa jela |
| *Kiswahili ya jela* | Kiswahili cha jela |

The above table shows the argot terms which do not follow the Swahili grammar rules. For example, instead of *ugali wa pani* (ugali prepared in a pan), the common phrase used by prisoners is *ugali ya pan*. Ugali being in the noun class of U-U ought to be succeeded by the morpheme {wa} and not {ya}. A tower is incorrectly called *kisuguu*. Instead of *nchi nyingine* to mean free world, the term *nchi ingine* is used. *Nchi* is in the noun class of I-ZI. It ought to be succeeded by the morpheme *{nyingine}* and not *{ingine}*. Sheng word kugenya which means to die is also used instead of the standard Swahili word *kufariki* or *kufa*. A prisoner who after being freed is always re-arrested is incorrectly referred to as *mahuru ya jela* instead of *mahuru wa jela. Mahuru,* being a word referring to a human being is in the noun class of A-WA. It ought to be followed by morpheme *{wa}* and not *{ya}. Kiswahili ya jela* is incorrectly used to refer to the language of lies or tricks in prison instead of the term *Kiswahili cha jela*. Kiswahili is in the noun class of KI-VI. It ought to be succeeded by morpheme {cha} and not {ya}. *Kiswahili ya jela* also refers to the distinct language used in prisons. From the explanations, it appears that the prisoners are much influenced by the Noun Class of I-ZI. They put all nouns in this category.

### 7.10. Acronyms in Prison Argot

**Table 10.** *Acronyms in prison argot.*

| Acronym | Meaning |
|---|---|
| CPL | Corporal |
| CO1 | Chief Officer 1 |
| CO2 | Chief Officer 2 |
| SSP | Senior Superintendent of Prisons |
| 2IC | Second In Charge |
| ACP | Assistant Commissioner of Prisons |
| X | The ex-prisoners |
| DO | Duty Office |

The data shows that acronyms are a common way that phrases or expressions are encapsulated economically. Most of the acronyms according to the data stand for the titles or ranks of the prison officers. The ranks are used by both the prisoners and the staff when referring to the prison officers holding those positions. However, the respondents explained that there are times when the titles are used to refer to prisoners. A powerful prisoner, in terms of rank or financial strength, could be sometimes referred to as SSP in way of praising him or showing his financial strength.

## 8. Conclusions

This paper analyzes the features of the Kenyan prison argot as currently used at the Kibos and Kisumu Maximum Prisons in Kisumu County, Kenya. The findings show that a lingo of the prisoners exists in the prisons. The paper has managed to analyze the features of this anti-language. Ten features are discussed. The lingo has terms borrowed from other languages used in Kenya. It has been established that borrowing in this slang is majorly phonological and not semantic. Borrowed words are given new meanings in the prison context. Certain lexemes are also reversed. The paper concludes that the main purpose of reversal is to conceal information. There are also new words which are coined in the prison environment and may not be found in the Standard Swahili Dictionary. The paper has found that the main purpose for coining of words in the prison context is to refer to objects which are not found in the free world.

The study has also found out that there are lexemes which have words mixed from different languages. Code-mixing is used for expression of objects as well as for concealing information. There are also terms which are used that have shifted meanings. One word is found to be shifting its meaning to another word. The purpose for shifting is to hide secrets.

The paper has also established that the Kenya prison argot has synonyms, words which have the same meanings. In terms of polysemy, the paper concludes that words used in the prison undergo semantic expansion. They are given additional contextual meaning. Some lexemes have also been identified that go against the standard Swahili grammar. This may happen as a form of resistance to the main society. Lastly, the paper has found out that prison argot entails certain acronyms which the prisoners use to refer to themselves or the prison officers. The acronyms are majorly ranks of the prison officers. Based on the features explained, it can be concluded that the Kenyan prison argot is a highly creative lingo.

## References

[1] Sykes, M. (1958). The Society of Captives. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

[2] Cardozo-Freeman, I. (1984). The Joint: Language and Culture in a Maximum Security Prison Chares Thomas: Springfield.

[3] Rossi, J. (1989). The Gulag Handbook: An Encyclopedia Dictionary of Soviet Penitentiary Institutions and Terms Related to the Forced Labor Camps. New York: Paragon House.

[4] Moczydłowski, P. (1991). DrugieŻycieWięzienia. Warszawa:

[5] Oryńska, A. (1991). Kategorie semantyczne leksyki języka potocznego I gwarywięziennej [in:] J. Puzynina and J. Bartmiński (eds.) Język a Kultura, Zagadnienia leksykalne iaksjologiczne 2. Wrocław: Wiedza o Kulturze, pp.81:106.

[6] Einat, T. & Einat, H. (2000). "Inmate argot as an expression of prison subculture: The Israeli case". [in:] The Prison Journal 80(3), pp. 309-325.

[7] Szaszkiewicz, M. (1997). Tajemnice Grypserki. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Ekspertyz Sądowych.

[8] Einat, T. & Livnat, Z. (2012). "Words, Values, and Identities: The Israeli argot (jargon) of prisoners" [in:] International Journal of Political Science, Law and International Relations 2(2), pp. 97-118.

[9] Gohodzi, I. (2013). A critical Analysis of Prison as Discourse Communities; an Examination of Whahwa Prison Complex. Unpublished Research Project, Midlands State University.

[10] Binyanya, M. (2014). Sajili ya Maafisa wa Polisi: Tathmini ya Matumizi ya Lugha ya Kiswahili Katika Kituo cha Polisi cha Central, Nairobi. Unpublished M. A Theses, University of Nairobi.

[11] Nyakundi. (2010). Motivation, Morpho-phonological Processes in Egesemba Argot Among Ekegusii-Speaking Males of Western Kenya; Unpublished MA Thesis: Kenyatta University.

[12] Mugendi, N. (2016). Morphonology of the Gitamanya argot of the Matatu Crew of Embu Town; Unpublished MA Thesis: Kenyatta University.

[13] Harris, B. (2012). What Is Argot? (n.d.). Retrieved November 20, 2012, from wise GEEK:http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-argot.htm. Conjecture Corporation.

[14] Ager, D. (1990). Socio-linguistics and Contemporary French. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[15] Ito, J. & Mester, A. (1996). Prosodic Faithfulness and Correspondence: Evidence from Japanese Argot. Lingua, 237-258

[16] Yule, G. (1996). The Study of Language. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.

[17] Yule, G. (2006). The Study of Language. 3rd. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[18] Mencken, H. (1980). The American Language: An Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States. New York.

[19] Eble, C. (1996). Slang and Sociability, London and Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press

[20] Green, J. (2002). African American English: A Linguistic Introduction. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[21] Coleman, J. (2004). A History of Cant and Slang Dictionaries: Volume II (1785-1858) Oxford: Oxford University Press

[22] Hui, W. (2009). A Brief Analysis of the Characteristics of crime Argot. Unpublished theses, Guangdong Police College; Guangzhou, China.

[23] Inimicus, T. (1995). Hell upon Earth; or the Most Pleasant and Delectable History of Whittington's Colledge, otherwise (Vulgarly) Called Newgate. London.

[24] King'ei & Kobia (2007). "Lugha Kama Kitambulisho: Changamoto ya Sheng Nchini Kenya". Nordic Journal of African Studies 16(3): 320-332.

[25] Looser, D. (2001). Boobslang: A lexicographical study of the argot of New Zealand prison inmates, in the period 1996-200. Unpublished Ph.D. theses, University of Canterbury.

[26] Yule, G. (2010). The Study of Language (4ᵗʰed.). New York: Cambridge.

[27] W WW. Google. Wisniewski, K. (2007). Linguistics – Word-formation

[28] Cornelius, P. (2008). Introduction to English Linguistics – Morphology, University of Düsseldorf.

[29] WWW.Google. Wikipedia – The Free Encyclopedia of Linguistics (2008).

[30] Ogechi, N. (2005). "Lexicalization in Sheng". Nordic Journal of African Studies 14 (3), 334-343

[31] Rufa'i, A. (1979). Principal Resources of Lexeme Formation in Hausa. Harsunan, Nigeria. No ix, C. N. S. L. Kano: Bayero University.

[32] Fagge, U. (2004). An Introduction to Hausa Morphology. Kano: Gidan Dabino Publishers.

[33] Agezi, U. (2004). A Comparative Study of English and lgbo Morphological Processes. M. A. Thesis. Department of English and Literary Studies; Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria

[34] Rubba, J. (2004). An Overview of the English Morphological System. English Department (Linguistics), California Polytechnic, State University.

[35] Muysken, P. (2000). Bilingual Speech: A Typology of Code-mixing. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[36] Bullock, B., & Toribio, A. (Eds.) (2009). "Themes In the Study of Code-switching". In The Cambridge Handbook of Linguistic Code-Switching (pp. 1–18). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press

[37] Yow, W. Q., & Li, X. (2015). "Balanced bilingualism and early age of second language acquisition as the underlying mechanisms of a bilingual executive control advantage: Why variations in bilingual experiences matter". Frontiers in Psychology, 6, 164. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00164

[38] Heredia & Altarriba (2001) "Bilingual Language Mixing: Why Do Bilingual Code-Switch?" Current Directions in Psychological Science, 10, 164-168

[39] Aronoff M. & Fudeman K. (2005). What is Morphology? United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishing Company

[40] Murphy, M. (2003). Semantic Relations and the Lexion – Antonymy, Synonymy and other Paradigms. University of Susses U.K: Cambridge University Press

[41] Geeraerts, D. (2009). "The Application of Semantic Field Theory to English Vocabulary Learning in Theory and Practice" in Language Studies, Vol. 3, No11. Finland: Academy Publisher pg 2030-2035

[42] Crystal, D. (2003). A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics. Oxford: Blackwell Publisher

[43] Kovacs, E. (2011). "Polysemy in Traditional vs. Cognitive Linguistics" in Eger Journal of English Studies xi (2011) 3-19 available at www.anglisztika.ektf.hu/...kovacs-2011pdf

[44] Malmkjær, K. (2005). Linguistics and the Language of Translation, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

[45] Mwangi & Mukhwana (2001). Isimujamii, Nairobi; Focus Publishers.

[46] Briggs, C. (1986). Learning how to ask: A sociolinguistic appraisal of the role of the interview in social science research. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press

[47] Slama-Casacu, T. (2000). Strategeme Comunicaţionale şi Manipulare, Iaşi, Polirom.

[48] Weber, R. (1990). Basic content analysis, Newbury Park, CA: Sage.      Zafiu,      Rodica.      2001. Diversitatestilisticăînrom ânaactuală.      Bucureşti:      Ed. Universităţii din Bucureşti.

[49] Irwin, J. (1980). Prisons in Turmoil. Boston: Little, Brown

[50] Anderson, L., &Trudgil, P. (1990). Bad Language. Oxford, UK: Blackwell

[51] Rayfield, J. (1970). The Languages of a Bilingual Community. The Hague; Mouton.