Comments received for
ISO 639-3 Change Request
2016-034

Outcome: Rejected
Effective date: January 23, 2017
Registration Authority decision on Change Request no. 2016-034: to create the code element [shf] for Sheng.

The request to create the code [shf] for Sheng is rejected. This decision was deferred for one year to allow the RA to work on defining the criteria that will govern requests for emerging languages to fit within the framework of the current TC 37 work for revising standards in the ISO 639 family. There is now a draft statement on the 639-3 website to establish the criteria for recognition as a “full” language. This is being used for the first time in 2017 as a basis for decisions to create language codes. This statement was also presented to the Technical Committee 37 / Subcommittee 2 of ISO at their meetings in June 2017, and they approved its use as part of the decision criteria. Thus in a case like this, the change request must demonstrate that a new language meets the new criteria for being a full language, as well as meeting the existing criteria for being adequately distinct from all other languages that already have a code. In consulting the available literature, we were heavily influenced by the research of Maik Gibson (https://www.academia.edu/9756856/The_urban_vernacular_s_of_Nairobi_speakers_representations_and_beliefs_about_Swahili_and_Sheng) who conducted interviews in Nairobi among speakers of “Sheng”. He found that the same label is used in reference to two different things: a Nairobi dialect of Swahili and an urban youth language (sometimes called Deep Sheng to distinguish it from the other kind of Sheng). In terms of our criteria, the Nairobi Swahili is not mutually unintelligible with standard Swahili and thus not different enough to be considered a different language. By contrast, Deep Sheng is different enough not to be intelligible, but that is because it is deliberately used as a secret street language by the youth. Thus it does not qualify by the new set of criteria for what it means to be a full language. Therefore the current request for a code [shf] for Sheng has been rejected since there does not appear to be a language variety that meets both sets of criteria. When research into the speech of children shows that a Sheng that is not intelligible to Swahili speakers is being creolized and used across generations in a variety of domains, then the RA would encourage the resubmission of a request for Sheng.