

Background and History



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BACKGROUND ON CHICHEWA AND RELATED LANGUAGES

Chichewa is a language of the Bantu language family, spoken in parts of East, Central, and Southern Africa. It is spoken in Malawi where, from 1968 until recently, it has served as the national language. It is also spoken in Mozambique, especially in the provinces of Tete and Niassa, in Zambia (especially in the Eastern Province), as well as in Zimbabwe where, according to some estimates, it ranks as the third most widely used local language, after Shona and Ndebele. The countries of Malawi, Zambia, and Mozambique constitute the central location of Chichewa.

Because of the national language policy adopted by the **Malawi** government, which promoted Chichewa through active educational programs, media usage and, other research activities carried out under the auspices of the Chichewa Board, out of a population of around 9 million, upwards of 65% have functional literacy or active command of this language.

In **Mozambique**, the language goes by the name of Chinyanja, and it is native to 3.3% of a population numbering approximately 11.5 million. In Tete province it is spoken by 41.7% of a population of 777,426 and, it is the first language of 7.2% of the population of Niassa province, whose population totals 506,974 (see Firmino, 1995).

In **Zambia** with a population of 9.1 million, Chinyanja is the first language of 16% of the population and is used and/or understood by at least 42% of the population, according to a survey conducted in 1978 (cf. Kashoki, M 1978). It is one of the main languages of Zambia, ranking second after Chibemba. In fact, out of the 9.1m people of that country, it is estimated that 36% are Bemba, 18% Nyanja, 15% Tonga, 8% Barotze, and the remainder consisting of the other ethnic groups including the Mombwe, Tumbuka, and the Northwestern peoples (see Kalipeni, 1996).

The figures show that at least upwards of 6 million people have fluent command of Chichewa/Chinyanja. As indicated, the language is identified by the label Chinyanja, certainly in all the countries mentioned above except, until recently, in Malawi. It is commonplace to see many publications or former school examinations that refer to the language as Chinyanja/Chichewa. The factors that led to such multiplicity of labels should probably be spelt out in order to appreciate the situation. This demands comment on some aspect of the history and origins of the language.

HISTORY OF THE ACHEWA

The people who speak Chi-Chewa, known as A-Chewa, trace their origins to a group of people known as the Maravi (according to some Portuguese records) who migrated from the lower basin of the Congo in Central Africa and eventually settled in the land mass now covered by Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Pushed by wars, disease and other maladies from the Congo area the Maravi were the first group of Bantu peoples to move and settle in present day Malawi in the 16th century. Other Bantu groups such as the Tumbuka, Tonga, Yao, Lomwe, and Ngoni moved into Malawi long after the Maravi group had successfully established itself (see Kalipeni, E. 1996). According to Young (1949), the Maravi are by lineage the aristocrats of this part of Africa. The label Chewa was, according to some accounts, one they acquired during a sojourn in Zambia before they pressed on and made their way into Malawi. According to Kamuzu Banda, the former President of the Republic of Malawi, the name Chewa derives from the word Cheva or Sheva or Seva which was applied to them as a migrating group and had the meaning of "foreigner". The name was apparently adopted and subsequent phonological changes resulted in the word Chewa, with the language becoming Chichewa.

The leader of these Chewa, who led them into Malawi, was Kalonga and, he founded in Malawi what later came to be called the Maravi empire. In Malawi he established his headquarters or seat in a place called Mankhamba. Once settled, he decided to extend his influence by acquiring more land and have it settled by his subjects. To this end he despatched a number of his matrilineal relatives to establish settlements in various parts of the country. Among the relatives who travelled on were such chiefs as Mwase, who moved into the area called Kasungu, Kaphwiti and Lunda who settled in the Lower Shire Valley. As they spread throughout the central and southern part of the country, into eastern Zambia and, into parts of Mozambique, including along the Zambezi River, their language spread too.

The dispersion of Kalonga's relatives and the ensuing Chewa diaspora resulted in a proliferation of regional varieties of the language. The distinct names that the regional varieties acquired created the impression of the existence of a multiplicity of ethnic groups. Some of the groups identified themselves by making reference to significant features of their habitat. For instance, nearly 20% of the land mass of Malawi is covered by a huge lake which ranks as the third largest lake in Africa, after Victoria, Nyanza, and Lake Tanganyika, and is the twelfth largest in the world. From the southern tip of this lake flows a river, the Shire River, which runs through southern Malawi into Mozambique where it flows into the Zambezi River. In the early version of the Chewa diaspora, some of the people settled along the shores of the lake and along the Shire River, while others moved into the Malawi hinterland. The Chichewa word for a large expanse of water is *nyanja*, and the word for tall grass (savanna) is *chipeta*. The people who settled along the lakeshores and along the banks of the Shire River referred to themselves as aNyanja, the "lake people", and their particular variety of Chichewa came to be called Chi-Nyanja, or simply Nyanja, the language of the lake people. Those who moved into the interior, the area of tall grass, called themselves aChipeta, the dwellers of the savanna land.

The adoption of these labels, reflecting significant features of their environment, began to obscure the nature of their relationship, except by similarity of their languages. The situation got further complicated by the introduction of yet other variations to the labels. Thus, when the Portuguese began to move into the interior from South-Eastern Africa in the seventeenth century, they came across such ethnic groups as the Xhosa, the Nyika, the Tchangani, etc., who referred to themselves as amaXhosa, amaNyika, amaTchangani, etc. Apparently when the Portuguese encountered aChewa living in Mozambique, who had already adopted the label of aNyanja, they modelled their terminology on the morphological structure of the names of the other ethnic groups they had encountered and thus referred to them as amaNyanja (see Banda, 1974). Then, under the influence of Portuguese phonology, the sound *ny*, a palatal nasal, got velarized to *ng*. This gave rise to an ostensibly nondistinct and nonexistent ethnic group of amaNg'anja, whose language was called Chi-

mang'anja. This label remained in use and, for many years, contributed to the rather erroneous view that they were a separate ethnic group whose language just happened to be similar to Chinyanja and Chichewa.

Meanwhile, the Chewa who had settled around the southern end of Lake Malawi and spread into the southeast of Malawi to the area surrounding Lake Chirwa and to the Mozambique part of the shores of Lake Malawi, encountered another ethnic group, a Yao. The Yao word for a large expanse of water is *nyasa*. The Yao referred to these Nyanja people a-Nyasa. That original dispersion had come to give rise to groups identified as aChewa, aChipeta, amaNg'anja, aNyanja, and aNyasa. The last designation appears to have contributed to British colonialists' eventual designation of the country as Nyasaland. The story goes that the British adventurer or explorer who "discovered" the lake happened to have arrived there in a predominantly Yao speaking part of the country. An inquiry into the name of the lake which, unfortunately, took the form, "What do you call that?," elicited the response, "Nyasa," the Yao word for 'lake' or 'sea' or simply 'large expanse of water'. From that, without hint of irony, the lake got its name of Lake Nyasa and, the country around it got its name of Nyasaland, which it had until independence in 1964, when the name of Malawi, the modern pronunciation of the erstwhile Maravi, was then restored. After independence the lake became Lake Malawi, at least within Malawi.

For political reasons that will be touched upon below, Tanzania did not adopt the label, as it refused to acknowledge Malawi's sovereignty over the entire lake. As a result, in Tanzania the lake continues to be called Lake Nyasa, a fact that is dutifully recorded in the maps that are sold in Tanzania. Map publishers who target both Tanzania and Malawi markets resolve the problem of choice of name for the lake by labeling it Lake Nyasa/Lake Malawi. The same political differences account for the retention of the label Chinyanja in all the other countries except Malawi, a topic to be taken up directly.

THE ASCENDANCY OF CHINYANJA

The foregoing account conveys the impression that Chichewa has historical claim to being the parent language which spawned off the regional varieties of Chimang'anja, Chinyanja, Chipeta, Chinyasa as well as Cinsenga, a dialect of Chinyanja, as pointed out in a recent classification of the regional languages by NELIMO (Ncleo de Estudo de Lambicanas) (see Firmino, 1995). Despite this historical record conventional wisdom, fostered by the policies and practices of the British colonialists and missionaries in Central Africa in general and in Malawi in particular, is that Chinyanja is the main language with Chichewa as a dialectal variant, alongside the others.

In fact, while the description of Chinyanja goes back to at least 1875, the first significant work can be traced to Alexander Riddel's publication in 1880 of *A Grammar of Chinyanja as Spoken at Lake Nyasa, with Chinyanja-English Vocabulary*. This work, while not very linguistically significant, was followed in 1891 with the publication of George Henry's *A Grammar of Chinyanja: a Language Spoken in British Central Africa on and near the Shores of Lake Nyasa*. This was more comprehensive than the work by Riddel. In 1892 David Scott's *A Cyclopaedic Dictionary of the MangUanja Language Spoken in British Central Africa* appeared, a work that was later to be revised and enlarged by Alexander Hetherwick in 1929 as *Dictionary of the Nyanja Language* which still remains the definitive and authoritative dictionary of the language. Previously, in 1901, Hetherwick produced *A Practical Manual for the Nyanja Language*.

These descriptions of Chinyanja and the functional utility that the language enjoyed underscored its legitimacy to the status of a major language or lingua franca. The subsequent adoption of the colonialists' language policy

which recognized the position of Chinyanja in Central Africa, especially in Malawi, eliminated further detractors to its status. The establishment of the colonial administration in Malawi at the turn of the century provided extra impetus to the promotion of Chinyanja with the encouragement for the documentation and study of important local languages. This led to the appearance of more works on Chinyanja and the emergence of more literary works and newspapers, such as *Msimbi*, a weekly Chinyanja newspaper that flourished for several years beginning 1951.

Under the circumstances, the confusion created by the multiplicity of labels, as noted above, contributed not to the obscuring of the status of Chichewa but, rather, of Chinyanja, as noted by various scholars. Thus, Young remarks about the language Nyanja that

"it is the language of a people scattered over a large South-east-central African area, the aMaravi, who today live under at least six different names according to the area in which Europeans found them in the closing decades of the last century. And they were more or less on the same ground at least 300 years earlier since the Portuguese records give some of them the same names as they bear to-day" (Young 1949: 53).

Earlier, Hetherwick had stated that "on the Shire River they are called MangUanja, a merely local pronunciation of the word A-Nyanja. Around Lake Shirwa they are best known by their Yao name A-Nyasa." (Hetherwick, 1901: 15).

The position of Chinyanja as the main language, with Chichewa as one of its dialects, derives further support from work on the classification of Bantu languages. Thus, although Chichewa is widely spoken in South-East-Central Africa, spreading over the land mass that includes Eastern Zambia, Malawi, Mozambique, parts of Tanzania and Zimbabwe, Greenberg (1966) does not mention it in his classification of African languages. Guthrie (1948) has Chichewa and Chimang'anja as two dialect variations of Nyanja. He classifies Chichewa as belonging to zone N31b, being identified as the second dialect of the main language. What circumstances account for the treatment of Chichewa as a dialect of Chinyanja and how did the situation change in Malawi?

The ascendancy of chi-Nyanja was the direct result of actions of the missionaries and the British colonialists. For effective government the British resolved to promote understanding between them as the rulers and the local population as the ruled. This could be more readily achieved if a local language were adopted and Chinyanja came to be adopted for use in some parts of the country. To facilitate the learning of the language it was proposed to adopt it as the official language by the government. Further justification for this move was based on the observation that "in Nyasaland...the Nyanja speakers not only outnumber those of other areas, but their dialects have a much longer history of literary use" (Price, 1940: 129). The adoption of Nyanja as the official language provided the boost required for it to attain the status of main language or lingua franca. It had to be taught in schools and knowledge of the language was required for government duties or employment. As Hailey observed about the situation in the then Nyasaland, "...Nyanja has been adopted as the official language by the government. Knowledge of it is compulsory for departmental examinations and it is intended to introduce it into all schools after two years instruction in the vernacular" (Hailey, 1938: 75). The production of publications in and on this language, of grammars and dictionaries, went a long way toward giving it the profile of a major language while the other varieties, including Chichewa, acquired dialect status.

The missionaries contributed their share to the promotion of Chinyanja. The mission of spreading Christianity led to the establishment of a number of denominations in Central Africa, including those of the Church of Scotland (locally known as the Church of Central African Presbyterian (CCAP)), the Church of England (the Anglican Church but which, apparently, because of its active program of recruitment of young graduates in British universities for missionary work, was known as the Universities Mission to Central Africa (UMCA)), the Catholic Church, as well as other denominations. Some of these, especially the Anglican church, were initially drawn to the task of abolishing slavery, then being engaged in by, inter alia, Arab slave traders who

sailed down the lake from Tanzania to get slaves for the Arabian slave market. The task of deterring the Arab slave traders and of abolishing slavery placed the Anglican missionaries squarely in the lake regions or Nyanja locations, among the Chinyanja speakers. Among the earliest converts to Christianity were freed slaves who, consequently, fell under the patronage of the missionaries and adopted Christianity. The aNyanja were among the first to receive formal education and became instrumental in the supplementation of the descriptions of Chinyanja and the development of a literary tradition by contributing translations of parts of the Bible, hymns and other religious literature into Chinyanja. They, thus, contributed to the endowment of the language with the educational prospects and social mobility advantages that accrued from its enhanced profile. The establishment of the Church of Scotland or CCAP headquarter in Blantyre, among the people who lived not far from the banks of the Shire river and who spoke ChimangUanja (or Chinyanja) served to strengthen the case for the ascendancy of Chinyanja. Subsequent migration of the people of Mozambique and Malawi to Zambia and Zimbabwe (as well as Tanzania, as was the case with a lot of people from the Niassa province of Mozambique) to make their fortune as office clerks, miners, farm-workers, medical workers, etc., made easier in the fifties by the introduction of a federal government which brought together the three countries of Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe, called the British Central African Federation, or the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, made for a new wave of the spread of Chinyanja to those countries.

The combined efforts of the missionaries' work and the colonial administrators' language policy of making Chinyanja the official language gave Chinyanja the prominence that it attained and retains, changed only in Malawi when, in 1968, a different language policy was adopted. The national language policy that reversed the roles of Chichewa and Chinyanja in Malawi, requires comment.

ON THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE CHOICE

In the play *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare put in the mouth of Juliet the following celebrated line that focuses on aspects of linguistic meaning: "What's in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet" (Act II, Scene II). The line highlights the difference between the denotations and the connotations of words in natural language. In their denotations words may convey their meanings with neutrality. However, words also have emotive meanings, connotations as it were, that evoke various emotions towards the objects referred to.

In 1968, four years after Malawi got its independence from Britain and President Hastings Kamuzu Banda had taken over the reins of government, a national language policy was formulated and adopted. This was done at the annual political convention of the then ruling and sole political party in the country, the Malawi Congress Party. It was resolved to restore Chichewa as the main language and to accord it the status of "national language" while the label Chinyanja was to be dropped or only used for designation of a certain local variety of Chichewa. The use of the label Chinyanja effectively disappeared in Malawi as a consequence of the policy. The obvious question that arises must be, why bother?

While professional linguists regard the concept of "language" as abstract, even epiphenomenal, as the linguist Noam Chomsky has indicated (see Chomsky 1986), and linguistics students get treated to the jocular characterization of "language" being simply a "dialect with an army and a navy" (i.e., the variety spoken by those in power), the truth remains that for most people the characterization is not frivolous. Thus, regardless of what professional linguists maintain about language versus dialect distinction, to the general public the two words have different connotations. A language is assumed to be a "developed" system, with grammatical rules, a rich lexicon, used in education and in various transactions in the modern civilized, industrialized and technological world. It also has a literary heritage. Dialects, on the other hand, are viewed as undeveloped primitive systems, without grammatical rules, etc. Downright absurd, of course, but a painful

reality about attitudes.

Chichewa as a dialect had to be one of such primitive languages of the backward and the uncivilized. Probably inconsequential until one realizes that Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda, the individual who led the country to independence and became its first president, is a Chewa and a very nationalistic one at that. During the period when publications focused on Chinyanja, there was one notable exception. In 1937, Mark Hanna Watkins, an African American anthropologist who had worked with Edward Sapir, had a language dissertation published by the Linguistic Society of America as a supplement to the journal *Language*. The language dissertation had the title *A Grammar of Chichewa. A Bantu Language of British Central Africa*. While Mark Hanna Watkins notes that "the Achewa ...are a division of the Nyanja group" (p.5) and that Chichewa is "only a variant" of the Nyanja language, the fact that it had to be Chichewa rather than Chinyanja that he described was significant for a reason later to become relevant. This was that "all the information was obtained from Kamuzu Banda, a native Chewa, while he was in attendance at the University of Chicago, from 1930 to 1932" (ibid. 7). This is the same "native Chewa" who, later, became the first president of Malawi. With that, Chichewa effectively became the Tdialect with an army and a navyU giving it the political clout for ascendancy to the status of language, relegating Chinyanja to obscurity. In fact, President Banda who, on many occasions, lectured to the staff of the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation about the promotion and use of Chichewa remarked more than once that Chichewa is not a dialect but a language with grammatical rules.

The political differences between Malawi on the one hand, and Zambia and Tanzania on the other, had been sparked by the latters' granting of political asylum to politicians who fell out with Banda immediately after independence in 1964. Kamuzu Banda construed that and their subsequent reluctance to repatriate those "rebels" as at best an affront. The situation was later exarcebated by an abortive effort by the said rebels to unseat Banda militarily in 1967, having received logistical support from those other countries and, later, by Banda's claim that the original boundaries of Malawi encompassed the eastern part of Zambia, stretched as far south as Quelimane in Mozambique, and included the whole of Lake Malawi. This was further compounded by Kamuzu BandaUa decision to have open diplomatic relations with the apartheid regime in South Africa and with the Portuguese in Mozambique, when the rest of independent Africa supported nationalist fighters (see Mchombo, S. 1996). The political animosity that developed and prevailed in the relations between Malawi and its neighbors to the north and the west effectively guaranteed negative responses from those other countries towards Malawi's policies, especially its foreign policy as well as its language policy, given the political overtones to the adoption of the label Chichewa. They did not follow Banda's example to replace Nyanja with Chewa.

The Changing Fortunes of Chichewa

The implementation of the language policy in Malawi set in motion a variety of stategies for the promotion of Chichewa. For a start, other African languages, most especially Chitumbuka, the main language spoken in the northern part of Malawi and in Zambia, ceased to be used in the media or studied in schools. Those privileges were to be reserved for Chichewa as the national language and English as the official language. Besides the inclusion of Chichewa in the school curriculum, The Chichewa Board was established to coordinate efforts on devising a standardized orthography, the production of a Chichewa dictionary, providing advice to the media on the proper or correct use of Chichewa, as well as promoting research in the language.

The University of Malawi, which opened its doors to its first intake of undergraduates in 1965, found itself being required to contribute to the effort of promoting Chichewa as an aspect of its concerns for, and

commitment to, the development of the country. The university responded by recruiting the present author, then a young undergraduate, born of Nyanja parents from the Niassa province of Mozambique, but born and raised in Malawi, to pursue graduate studies in linguistics and establish a department focusing on Chichewa in the university. In the 1970s, when the present author completed his graduate studies in linguistics at the University of London, the department was established, initially called the Department of Chichewa, but later renamed the Department of Chichewa and Linguistics.

The introduction of studies of Chichewa at university level contributed to the promotion of literary and linguistic studies of the language, the resurgence of literary activity in the language, the training of teachers of the language, and enhanced the profile of the language within African as well as general linguistic scholarship. The present author got appointed by President Banda to serve as a member of the Chichewa Board, served as a committee member of the Chichewa Syllabus Committee for the Malawi Certificate Examinations and Testing Board responsible for high school examinations and, promoted literary activity in the form of research into Chichewa poetics and writing poetry in Chichewa, poetry that received extensive coverage on the local radio station, the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation, besides morphological and syntactic studies of the language.

Although linguistic studies of, and literary activities in, Chichewa will continue to maintain visibility, it is a definite lesson in the vicissitudes of language and vindication of the linguistic joke that, with the final defeat of Kamuzu Banda at the polls in 1994, and the ascendancy of Bakili Muluzi, a Yao, to the presidency in Malawi, Chichewa has lost the political basis for its status. It is, once again, being pushed off center stage. Thus, at the University of Malawi the department has since been renamed The Department of African Languages & Linguistics, a name that had been proposed previously in 1982 by the faculty of the department when the present author was Chair, but was rejected by the University Senate on the grounds that President Kamuzu Banda had been instrumental in the establishment of the department and he had wanted it to focus on Chichewa. Further, the Chichewa Board has since been dissolved and, in 1996, the Center for Language Studies, with broader scope of activities, was created effectively to replace it.

The individual appointed to be the Director of the new center, subsequent to intense competition following a nationwide search, is Prof. Al D. Mtenje, an internationally renowned phonologist and former student and colleague of the present author. He received his Masters degree in linguistics at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, and his doctoral degree in linguistics from Universty College London. Currently a faculty member of the Department of African Languages & Linguistics, of which he is also the Chair, he is from Penga Penga in Ntcheu District, an area that is literally at the crossroads of Nyanja, Yao, and Ngoni interaction, giving him a linguistic heritage that is not core Chewa.

It is significant that the Center for Language Studies has not only displaced the Chichewa Board, but it has also literally taken over both the physical structures and the mailing address of the former Chichewa Board. Clearly, the disappearance of the Chichewa Board, the success in renaming the erstwhile Department of Chichewa and Linguistics as the Department of African Languages & Linguistics, together with the reintroduction of Chitumbuka as another language used in the media, and even the appearance of Ci-Yao in newsprint, not only downgrades the profile of Chichewa in Malawi, but speaks volumes to possible reversals to the language policy pursued by the Kamuzu Banda regime. There is even evidence of (perhaps tacit) government approval to the revamping of Kamuzu Banda's language policy and the restoration of Chinyanja as the name of the language, bringing Malawi in line with its neighboring countries, once again, relegating Chichewa to dialect status.

Perhaps when the dust stirred up by the politics of language settles, people may take another look at the message behind that question about what is in a name. Language or dialect they all serve their social or communicative functions adequately.

