

Notes on the contribution of classical languages to the Chichewa lexicon

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Introduction

Since the establishment of the Classics department in the University of Malawi many people have been skeptical about its relevance in an underdeveloped country like Malawi. The politics involved in the establishment of the department have been ably discussed by Alexander (1991) and subsequently reacted to by Chappel (2003) and Abodunrin (2005). Chappel (2002: 99) puts the question of relevance succinctly when he asks: "What is the point of teaching people ancient verbs or plays of Aeschylus in a country where many people do not even have enough to eat?" However, the issue of whether people have enough to eat or not trivializes the point. We do not intend to join this interesting debate, except to say that in our view the issue of relevance cannot be legislated. Our objective in this paper, however, is to discuss the contribution that Classical languages, Greek and Latin, have made to the lexicons of African languages particularly Chichewa, the national language of Malawi. The contribution of Classical language to African languages is not very well known because research and commentary has hitherto been skewed towards the former's contribution to European languages (Robins 1957; 1964). In his defence for teaching classics in Malawi, in a paper already referred to, for example, Chappel says "Classics has close links with subjects such as history, philosophy, theology, English and law." In a similar vein Poffyn (1992:18) adds that a study of the classics is important in "learning, the roots of nearly all modern European languages." The choice of some examples is perhaps informative. It shows the limited perspective of some of those involved in the 'relevance' debate. It perhaps never occurred to Chappel or Poffyn for that matter that the Classical languages could have contributed something to African languages.

This paper will discuss Greek and Latin words which have found their way into the Chichewa lexicon. We will concentrate only on those words which are in general parlance and those which have been so indigenized that ordinary speakers do not even recognize them as being foreign. Therefore words which are clearly recognized as foreign, regardless of their origin in the Classical languages will not be discussed. This will exclude religious terms such as *ekeleziya* (ecclesia) from Greek *ekklesia* via English and *batiza* from Latin *baptizare* via English 'baptize', ultimately from Greek *baptizein* 'to dip'. Three criteria will be used to determine whether a word is a loan or not. These are: the shape of the lexical item (its morphophonemic form), its meaning, and the extent to which similar forms are found in neighboring languages. Before we discuss these lexical items, a word about Chichewa and borrowing will be in order.

Chichewa

Chichewa is a Bantu language (Guthrie's N31) widely spoken in South-East Central Africa as a lingua franca. It has been Malawi national language since 1968. The language is spoken in Zambia, Mozambique and Zimbabwe by a large migrant group, where it is known as Chinyanja. This language and its speakers were already known by the Portuguese explorers of the seventeenth century, as Alpers (1968: 17) observes: "the people who the Portuguese knew as Maravi in the early seventeenth century are fragmented into various distinct groups who are called Nsenga, Cikunda, Cewa, Zimba, Cipeta, Mtumba, Mbo, Mang'anja and Nyasa. All of them except the Nsenga, in the extreme South West, speak a common Bantu language which is Nyanja." In this paper, the name Chichewa will be used as a cover term for the language so variously named and Chewa, for the speakers of the language.¹

Lexical expansion

Lexical expansion refers to a process by which lexical items are added to the already existing lexicon in a particular language. Using the available resources in the language, the lexicon can be expanded through the process of lexical derivation. However, sometimes lexical expansion is perpetuated by borrowing. Borrowing is the importation of linguistic elements from one language/dialect into another (Swilla 2000: 298). The importing language is referred to as a target language (TL) and the language from which items are borrowed is the source language (SL). Borrowing is a feature of all languages

which enriches and helps a language to grow. The borrowed item is known as a borrowed word or loanword.² Once lexical items are borrowed into a language, they become part of the vocabulary of the TL and are spelt and pronounced just like the indigenous words. In the case of Chichewa, besides the phonemic adjustments, syllable adjustments are also implemented. A common feature of Bantu languages is the skeletal syllabic structure of Consonant Vowel Consonant Vowel (CVCV) e.g. *siya* (leave). All syllables thus end in vowels. The acceptable syllable structure is therefore CV, V and C consisting of a syllabic nasal, e.g. *m* in *mbale* (relative). All borrowed words, therefore, have to conform to this syllable structure.

At the morphological level, a Chichewa noun has to belong to a noun class. Chichewa nouns are typical of Bantu nominal system. The citation forms of the vast majority of nouns in Bantu languages typically involve an overt noun prefix and a stem. Not only does the prefix indicate the class of the noun but also encodes grammatical information such as number and agreement. In some cases the class prefix may be fused to the noun stem to such an extent that the distinction between an affix and a stem is obscured. Other nouns are marked by a null prefix. It should also be observed that nouns which have a null prefix in the singular may require overt prefixation in the plural. Thus any loanword coming into Chichewa will have to belong to one of the 18 noun classes designated for Chichewa. It may, therefore, be given a prefix which it did not have in the original SL.

Lexical borrowing takes place whenever there is contact between different cultures. This contact may be direct or indirect. Ordinarily the borrowing is from the more prestigious and advanced language to a less prestigious and less developed one. Considering the geography and the fact that the Classical languages have been extinct for centuries, clearly the contact between the Chewa and Classical cultures could only have been an indirect one. In the subsequent sections we will discuss the results of this indirect contact in relation to contributions made to the Chichewa lexicon.

Chichewa lexicon and the Classical languages

The aggregate of loanwords in a language provides a fair picture of the material and cultural acquisition of its speakers since they settled in a given part of the world, or became accessible to trade and exchange of ideas. The linguist can usually establish the route which lexical items have taken through Africa and also the relative age of the loanwords, as Knappert (1970) points out. An example to help us illustrate the type of cultural-historical evidence that we can draw from loanwords is the following: the Chichewa word for a "roll of cloth" is *pesa* which is derived from Kiswahili *pesa* (coin/money) via Hindustani from Portuguese *pesa*. The ultimate origin of this lexical item is Latin, i.e. *pensa* (weight) from *pendere* (to hang). That the lexical item has traveled to East Africa via India is evidenced by its phonological shape. Had it been borrowed directly from Portuguese it would have been pronounced with a final [z] instead of [s]. This is demonstrated by comparing Kiswahili *meza* (table) via Portuguese *mesa* from Latin *mensa*. In Hindustani, this type of [z] coalesces with the [s] phoneme. How then is the change of meaning explained? The answer lies in the uses a piece of cloth was put to. In the pre-colonial days a roll of cloth was a major currency in the exchange of goods. Even in contemporary society, a piece of cloth may be used for making payments in exchange for labour where such a commodity is not readily available. It may also be used as part of the payment of a bride price. We can thus fairly date the use of loanword *pesa* to the time the Portuguese started appearing on the East African Coast on their way to and from India. A number of words from the Classical languages have entered Chichewa through Portuguese including those discussed below.

The word for sheet-metal in Chichewa *lata* (sg)/*malata* (pl) derives from Latin *prata* (silver) via Portuguese (*prata*). In the process the Chichewa form lost the initial *p*. The Chichewa word refers to sheet-metal used for roofing and related metal work. This material is invariably silvery in appearance hence the name *lata*.

As the money economy was taking root among the Chewa there was need to have a word for money. The Chichewa word for money in coin form is *kobiri* (sg) / *makobiri* (pl). The word is derived from Latin *cyprium aes* (Cyprian metal) via Portuguese *cobre*. The ultimate origin, however, is Greek *kupris* (*Cyprus*). Money in form of coins is known as *makobiri* because the lower denomination coins had and still have a reddish-brown colour of copper. The

phonological shape stops us from claiming that the word arrived into Chichewa via English. Were English the source, the expected form would have been *kopiri*.

The word for rubber/ball, *mpira* (sg)/*mipira* (pl), is a loan from Kiswahili via Portuguese and ultimately, from Latin *pila* (ball). This lexical item also gave rise to the Dutch word *pils* (pill), with its diminutive form *pilletje*. The diminutive form arrived in Chichewa via Shona as *pilitisi* (sg) or *mapilitisi* (pl). Shona has a considerable number of words from Afrikaans, a language related to Dutch, that have trickled in from the south, many of them evidently via Zulu. Some of these words found their way into Chichewa. The Zambezi River did not prove to be a linguistic barrier. The result has been, therefore, two Chichewa words of different meanings, arriving along different routes; many centuries after Latin became extinct.

The word in Chichewa for bed is *kama*. Tradition shows that the Chewa did not use beds for sleeping. Rather they preferred to sleep on the floor. Through contact with other cultures, possibly the Portuguese, the Chewa acquired the habit of sleeping on beds. The term *kama* found its way into Chichewa from Latin *cama* via Portuguese.

As time became increasingly valuable in the lives of the Chewa, it became important to divide it into manageable chunks. The word for hour, *ola*, was therefore borrowed. It is clear that this is a foreign innovation. The Chewa did not divide time in terms of minutes, hours, weeks or years (of 365 calendar days) rather they divided it into days and seasons. The word *ola* is derived from Portuguese *hora* which ultimately derives from the Greek *hōra* or Latin *hora* which interestingly does not only mean 'hour' but also 'season'.

A fairly large number of terms dealing with technical innovations have been borrowed from Classical languages into Chichewa via Portuguese. This is not surprising considering that Africa has always lagged behind in the domain of technology. The word for machine, for example, in Chichewa is *makina*. The phonology of this word suggests that it is a loan from Portuguese *māquina* rather than English machine. Were the term borrowed from English, the expected form would be *mashini*. The term derives from Latin *machina* which ultimately derives from Doric Greek *makhana* (pulley) which is related to *makhos* (device/contrivance). Within the same domain of technology, Chichewa has the term *bomba* for explosive device. This derives from the

Portuguese *bomba* which ultimately derives from Latin *bombus* or Greek *bombos*. However, not all explosives are called *bomba*, gunpowder, for example, is known as *onga*, from Kiswahili *unga* meaning 'flour'. Chichewa has its own word for flour which is *ufa*. To differentiate gunpowder from flour or powder in a special sense of 'gunpowder', possibly for euphemistic reasons *onga* was adopted. This suggests that the Chewa learned the art of gunnery from the Swahili and as such learned it possibly prior to the arrival of the Portuguese. This is confirmed by other words in the same cultural context, such as *mzinga*, Kiswahili for cannon.

The Arabs brought a fairly large number of lexical items from the Classical languages. The Chichewa word *mkanjo* (sg) or *mikanjo* (pl), a free-flowing robe, worn mostly by moslems and the Christian clergy, is derived from Arabic *hanzu* via Kiswahili *kanzu*. This word, according to Knappert (1970: 87) despite the seemingly different phonology, ultimately comes from Latin *camisa*. The Chichewa word *ngalawa* is also derived from Arabic *ngarava* 'boat'. This boat is contrasted with the local *bwato* 'dug-out canoe.' The *ngalawa* is used to designate outrigger boat which once upon a time used to carry slaves on Lake Malawi and ideally suited for navigation on the Indian Ocean. The term *ngalawa* according to Knappert, ultimately derives from Greek *karabos*. Although he does not provide evidence of derivation from the source, by this method of historical interpretation we can explain why a language adopts a foreign word even though a native one was originally available.

The Chichewa word *ndarama* (money) comes from the Arabic word for money *dirham* (still used as the name of their currency in some Arab states, for example, Morocco and Tunisia). This term also refers to various silver coins minted in the maghreb at various periods. This money found its way into sub-Saharan Africa and eventually Malawi. This word ultimately comes from the Greek *drachma* (gold). This is perhaps not surprising considering that gold throughout the ages has been the ultimate currency.

Problematic lexical items: phono-semantic lookalikes

For anyone who has worked in a linguistic diffusional environment, it seems self-evident that large portions of even a language's basic vocabulary and grammar can quickly and easily be remodeled under the influence of any language with which it comes into contact, whether or not such contact language were genetically related to it in the first place (Matisoff 1990:109). Borrowing/conflation/contamination/blending, folk etymology, semantic slippage, calquing, backloans—all kinds of phenomena complicate the picture. As a result genetic pathways of words can become obscure. When one examines a large number of lexical items from different languages as have done, one finds a large number of 'phono-semantic look-alikes'; forms which more or less resemble each other in sound and meaning. A comparison of Chichewa and the classical languages yields a fair amount of these 'phono-semantic lookalikes'. Consider the following terms:

Latin		Chichewa	
cardo/mundare	'clear bush'	munda	'garden'
cingo/cingere	'surround'	tchinga	'surround to protect'
paro/parare	'weed/prepare'	pala/palira	'scrape/weed'
Greek		Chichewa	
lalatēs	'talker/prater'	lalata	'prattle'
lussa	'rage'	lusa	'rage'
thakos	'seat'	thako	'buttock'

What is interesting about these terms is that they are dealing with basic vocabulary, for example, that refers to parts of the body e.g. buttock and agriculture terms such as "garden" and common activities, for example, "prattle". Besides, they are not referring to foreign objects as those discussed elsewhere in the paper. Ordinarily, one would expect languages not to borrow the vocabulary for parts of the body because it is basic. The same would apply to basic agricultural terms. It would be expected for instance, that the Chewa being agriculturalists would have a word for say, garden. Should these Chichewa terms, therefore, be considered loans? The problem that arises here is that there is no cultural-historical evidence for their being loans. Could this then be considered as merely accidental lexical resemblance? Probably not

many language comparativists have a favourite of accidental lexical resemblances for example, Matisoff (1990:111), provides the following,

Thai	English
faj	'fire'
taaj	'die'
rim	'rim'

In fact, many scholars have attempted *reductiones ad absurdam* of megalocomparison³ of any two languages at random and finding large numbers of cognates between them often to very amusing effect (see Callaghan and Miller 1962). Given what has been discussed as regards the relationship between Classical languages and Chichewa, it would be difficult to dismiss these phono-semantic look-alikes as mere accidents of resemblances.

Excursus

Two interesting historical observation can be made from the collection of loanwords discussed above. The first observation is about the route and the direction which a word or a group of words may have followed. One finds that these words have traveled inland from the coast of East and Southern Africa, up-river along the Nile, and the Zambezi. As observed, the shapes and meanings of these words may change en route, but something else changes as well-the quantity and this factor is highly indicative not only of the direction in which a group of words have traveled, but also the extent to which the speakers of that language became accessible to the influence of foreign culture, and of the identity of the culture which brought them these particular objects.

The second and perhaps the most important result of historical interest that we have gained from this study of loanwords in a large segment of Africa - for example, East - Central Africa where the Chewa are found - is that, if one maps the extreme extent of loanwords, one can show with fair precision the sphere of influence of the source languages. In this way one observes two main spheres of influence in pre-colonial Malawi: the Portuguese influence and the Arabic influence. The Portuguese words traveled into the interior African from the East Coast. The Arabic words, too, also came into the interior from the same coast via Kiswahili. Be that as it may, these words have their origins in the Classical languages.

As regards the Arabs, it can be argued that in a sense they did not create the culture they brought to Africa. They merely acted as conduits of what they had previously acquired from other peoples, mainly the peoples of antiquity (Knappert 1970). This is why we find today in African languages words of such diverse origins from Greek and Latin, Babylonian, Syriac and Sanskrit. However, they also brought words which were genuinely Arabic, particularly in the domain of religion. The mediating role that the Arabs and the Portuguese have played between the Classical languages and African languages cannot be gainsaid. It is through the understanding of this relationship and other comparative studies that the relevance of the Classical languages can be established in Africa.

The two European languages which now have by far the most powerful influence on African languages – English and French – did not attain their full force before the nineteenth century was well in progress, and the process of borrowing from these languages accelerated during the twentieth century with advancement of technology. Before this, however, the classical influence, albeit through the Portuguese and Arabic, held sway as the discussion above has shown.

Conclusion

In this paper we have discussed the contribution of Classical languages in expanding the lexicon of Chichewa. It has been shown that although the contact between Chichewa and the Classical languages was indirect nonetheless one can establish the route by which the words in the Classical languages arrived. Because of the antiquity and the indirect way the words arrived in Chichewa, the Classical languages unlike the more modern English borrowings, are no longer recognizable as foreign. In fact, for ordinary speakers they are native words.⁴

Notes

1. For the proliferation of names see Kishindo (1990).
2. The use of the term borrowed/loanword has been found inappropriate on the grounds that a word that people have “borrowed” cannot be returned for use. Knappert (1970) prefers the German term *Fremdwort* (lit. ‘alien word’) Chimhundu (1983) prefers “adopted word.” Since the terms borrowed/loanwords are well established in the literature, we will continue using them interchangeably.
3. Matisoff (1990) claims that *microcomparison* can be practiced on close-knit families like Romance, Bantu or Thai, with a time-depth of not more than 2,000 years. *Macrocomparison*, is appropriate for farflung but demonstrably valid groupings like Indo-European or Sino-Tibetan, with time-depth of up to about 6,000 years. *Megalocomparison* on the other hand, takes on any more remote relationship, where sound-correspondences are not regular and putative, cognates are few, so that chance rivals genetic relationship as the explanation for perceived similarities.
4. This is evidenced by the fact when one asks for Chichewa translations for say ‘money’, ‘bed’, ‘hour’ etc. the words given are the ones borrowed from the classical languages.

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