

# **Language and Societal Attitudes: A Study of Malawi's 'New Language'<sup>1</sup>**

FRANCIS MOTO

*University of Malawi, Malawi*

## ABSTRACT

Listening to modern Malawian popular music and listening to the speeches of boys and girls, young men and women and sometimes older men and women in Malawi today, one is soon struck by the fact that the speeches contain words, phrases and sometimes whole sentences which sound like a foreign language. Even going through the columns of some newspapers and magazines, one soon discovers that there is a new language that has gained currency. The new language has even broken into the creative arts such as poetry. The fact of the matter is that Malawi has a new speech community that uses what I am going to call in this paper Malawi's 'new language'. This 'new language' is made up of words that are newly coined from Malawi's indigenous languages and a vernacularization of the words of some foreign languages such as French and English as well as the dead language Latin. My concern in this paper is to demonstrate the following. First, that the said language is an instrument for establishing a social bond and identity. Second, perhaps more importantly, I observe that more than just being a system of communication the new language reflects deep-seated attitudes towards particular perceptions, and behavioural tendencies of the speech community that uses the 'new language'. In other words I wish to demonstrate that this 'new language' directly mirrors contemporary societal activities and the direction in which the society's values are gravitating. Through the study of the 'new language' one sees a Malawi in a clearly marked state of flux. I suggest for instance, that through the use of the 'new language' Malawian youth are interrogating, in very non-compromising ways sometimes, the perceived wisdom of the call for the youth to respect society's elders and recognising and accepting authority, i.e. the new language should also be seen as a form of protest against established societal norms. In addition, I show that the language records the society's reactions to corrupt practices, the infiltration of foreign ways of life and cultural values, sexual attitudes, sexual practices, and alcohol and drug abuse. I also observe that, in linguistic terms, the 'new language', is a manifestation of a linguistic phenomenon commonly known as language change. This may be seen by linguistic 'pursuits' as a form of societal decadence that needs protection. I conclude by observing that through knowledge of the 'new language' society may assist in devising mechanisms for the introduction of intervening programmes to arrest practices that are detrimental to the positive cultural attitudes, values and practice of the Malawian society as revealed in the 'new language'.

*Keywords:* Language, societal attitudes, youth, new language.

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## INTRODUCTION

It is generally agreed that in discussing issues of education, communication, science and technology as well as development in whatever manner and form, language cannot be ignored. What this implies then is that language plays a very vital role indeed so that one cannot possibly discuss issues of education and communication and even science and technology, for that matter, without making reference to language. Apart from serving as a vehicle for recording a people's history, facilitating social intercourse, storing a people's culture and general knowledge, language singly stands out as one of the mostly easily identifiable characteristics of any community. In addition to the above language it also has been suggested can serve as a mirror of the mind.

The aim of this paper is to examine some speech forms of boys and girls, young men and young women and in certain cases, older men and older women. Such speech forms are made up of lexical items (words) and phrases that use some familiar linguistic forms with a new meaning or simply use borrowed lexical items and import the original meaning of the word or phrase from the donor language or indeed change completely or modify the original meaning. It is this type of language that I am calling Malawi's new language in this paper. This new language has words which are coined by semantic extension of Malawi's indigenous language and the vernacularization of the words that are from foreign languages such as Shona, French, English and, sometimes, Latin.

The conclusion reached is that the language serves some vital purposes. The first is communication and the establishment of a strong social bond, identity and the expression of solidarity. Second, and perhaps more importantly, is that the new language reflects well-entrenched and deep-seated attitudes towards particular perceptions and behavioural tendencies of the speech community that uses the new language. In other words, I observe that the new language directly mirrors contemporary Malawian society and the general direction in which its cultural and social values, among other facets of Malawian life, are gravitating. The language, I also observe, marks Malawi as a society in a state of economic, cultural, social, educational and may be political transfiguration.

Through the use of the new language we see the youth interrogating, in very non-compromising ways sometimes, the perceived wisdom of the call for the youth to respect society's elders and the need to recognise and accept authority without too many questions. Put differently, the new language and its use should be seen as a form of protest against established and enshrined societal norms. The paper also shows that the new language records the society's reactions to corrupt practices, the overwhelming infiltration of foreign ways of life and cultural values, sexual attitudes, sexual practices and an excessive consumption of alcohol and drug trafficking and drug abuse. In linguistic terms, the presence of the new language is a manifestation of a linguistic phenomenon commonly known as language change that may be seen by language purists as a form of

societal decadence that needs protection. Finally, I observe that through knowledge of the new language, society may assist in devising mechanisms for the introduction of intervening programmes to arrest practices which are detrimental to the positive cultural attitudes, values and practices of the Malawian society as revealed in the 'new language'.

## 1. SOME PREVIOUS STUDIES

Lekera (1994) and Jalasi (1999) have studied aspects of the language under the headings 'Chirunga language: a preliminary discussion' and 'Semantic shift in Chichewa among Chancellor College students' respectively. The former study purported "...to explore... and relate it to some aspects of sociolinguistics" (Lekera 1994: 1). The latter purported "...to show how Chancellor College students have changed meanings of some words in Chichewa" (Jalasi 1999: 2).

In relation to these earlier studies the present study reports that the language examined and discussed in Lekera (1994) and Jalasi (1999) is far from being an exclusive linguistic property of Chancellor College students alone. As indicated above the language has at the present stage found its way to the larger speech community than simply the students of Chancellor College in Zomba. Even more important is the conclusion that the new language studied here is a pointer of a society grappling with immense social health and educational problems.

## 2. THE NEW LANGUAGE

Among some of the questions that the present paper wishes to provide answers for are the following.

- (a) What is the new language?
- (b) What are the linguistic characteristics of the new language?
- (c) What are the origins of the new language?
- (d) Who uses the new language?
- (e) Is the new language really a new language?
- (f) What is the linguistic significance of the new language?
- (g) What is the social significance of the new language?
- (h) Are gender issues being raised in the use of the new language?
- (i) Is the new language being reinforced and has it got any future?

In answering question (a) I will outline some of the areas that are covered by the new language and a sample of some speech forms is given below under seven sub-topics namely:

- (a) language about succeeding success and failure
- (b) language on beauty, general appearances, general behaviour and body make up
- (c) language on health, illness and death
- (d) language on malpractices before and during examinations
- (e) vocabulary about illicit deals and corrupt practices
- (f) vocabulary about alcohol intake and the smoking, buying and selling of illegal drugs
- (g) language on sex, sexual attitudes and sexual activities.

**(a) Language about succeeding, success and failure**

- (i) kudya 'to get high marks'
- (ii) kubeba 'to be attractive, to gain ground, to be pleasing'
- (iii) kufoyila 'to fail, to become mad'
- (iv) kuwida 'to withdraw someone from college'
- (v) kukhwana 'to do things in the best way, to be ahead of others'
- (vi) kupala 'to fail an examination'
- (vii) phawa 'well ahead of others'
- (viii) nyatwa 'problems'

(Lekera 1994: 19-21)

**(b) Language on beauty, general appearances, general behaviour and body make up**

- (i) kilumikiza 'to wear (dress) attractively'
- (ii) heyazi 'hair tread fed with chemical'
- (iii) yoo 'well to do and showy person'
- (iv) kugiyabo 'to dress smartly'
- (v) wahito 'beautiful girl'
- (vi) buleti 'beautiful girl'
- (vii) ulusi 'attractive garments'
- (viii) kuyuza 'to use cosmetics'

(Lekera 1994: 20-24)

**(c) Language on health, illness, and death**

- (i) kupusha 'to die'
- (ii) kukrashika 'to fall sick'
- (iii) kuvaya 'to die'
- (iv) kuduwa 'to die'
- (v) kudweta 'to die'
- (vi) kuchakachika 'to be very ill'

**(d) Language on malpractices before and during examinations**

- (i) likasa 'responses to questions derived from marks'

- (ii) pangozi 'in case of emergency'
- (iii) jeke 'jack'

(e) **Vocabulary about illicit deals and corrupt practices**

- (i) katangale 'corruption'
- (ii) la fanta 'something with which to by fanta'
- (iii) kangachepe 'a little something'
- (iv) zili ndi inu 'it is up to you'

(f) **Vocabulary about alcohol intake and the smoking/buying/selling of illegal drugs**

- (i) kuyaka 'to get high on alcohol or drugs'
- (ii) kubuka 'to get high on alcohol or drugs'
- (iii) nanzi 'marijuana'
- (iv) kusweka 'to be high on marijuana'
- (v) kuphulika 'to be high on marijuana'

(ibid)

(g) **Language on sex, sexual attitudes and sexual activities**

- (i) ekezailo 'to be kept out of one's own room'
- (ii) kutheresa 'to be visited by a lover usually from some other place'
- (iii) kugwira 'to win a lover'
- (iv) kubunyula 'to masturbate'
- (v) kukhwakhwa 'to make love to a woman'
- (vi) kukakonda 'to visit a lover'
- (vii) kung'adza 'to have sexual intercourse with a woman'
- (viii) boilo 'to have sex without using a condom'

(ibid)

### 3. DISCUSSION OF THE SAMPLE LANGUAGE IN (A) - (G) ABOVE

In the examples given in (a), there are three words that are of foreign origin while two are from the local language Chichewa or Chinyanja. Apart from the infinitive/progressive marker **ku** the word **beba** is from French, whereas **foyila**, **wida**, **phawa**, are from English. **Dya**, **khwana** and **pata** are from Chichewa. **Nyatwa** on the other hand is from Chisena, another Malawian language that is mainly spoken in Chikwawa and Nsanje districts in Southern Malawi.

For university students of the early and mid '70s an earlier meaning of the expression, **kudya** was 'to have sex' or 'make love to a woman' and **kudya milomo** 'to eat lips' meant 'to kiss intimately'. The earlier meaning of **kudya** with its reading of where it is the male that eats the female is an expression of a

power relation where the males do the 'eating' while the females are 'eaten' so to speak. In a largely male dominated society the perceived superiority of the male is reinforced by the use of such expressions. This expression continues to be used to this day as evidenced in a Chichewa question such as: **Kodi akudyamo ndani m'menemu?** (Who is having sex with him/her or who is bedding her these days?) A recent popular song has the lyric 'Ndidya mommo, modulamo' (literally I will eat in there, where it is expensive, meaning 'I will have sex with her although she charges a lot of money for it').

Of linguistic interest is the pronunciation of the words **kukhwana** and **phawa** in (v) and (vii) respectively. **Kukhwana** is a word derived from a word that is usually spelled as **kwana**. The inclusion of the **h** in **kukhwana** signals the fact that the word is aspirated and its absence in **kwana** signals non-aspiration. The question is why should it be the case that the new word has acquired the phonological feature of aspiration. This question is of linguistic importance because in Chichewa, aspiration or lack of it serves to differentiate meaning. The answer lies outside a linguistic explanation. I wish to observe here that in some cases, the users of the 'new language' find it fashionable to change the phonetic or phonological characteristics of particular words for no apparent linguistic reason.

While many Malawian languages have aspirated and non-aspirated sounds such as: /p/, /ph/; /t/, /t<sup>h</sup>/; and /k/, /k<sup>h</sup>/, it is also true that most Malawian speakers of English find it difficult to aspirate most English sounds such as **put**, **pat**, **cat**, **team**, and **kiss**. This fact notwithstanding, the users of the new language find it socially fashionable to aspirate the sounds which they fail to do in English and for that matter aspirate sounds which are not aspirated in the local language such as **kwana** 'to fit' as in the case of clothes or 'to have had enough to eat or drink'. Aspiration in **kukhwana** stops serving a phonological function, rather it serves a sociolinguistic one. This change in the phonetic make up of the original word is also noticed in **foyila** that in some cases becomes **poyila**. There appears to be no straightforward explanation as to why the voiceless fricative /f/ in **foyila** should change to a voiceless bilabial stop /p/ and I will not risk any speculation here.

The language as presented in (a), it can be said, largely indicates that Malawians enjoy and like to be successful and shun failure. In b(i), the word **kulumikiza** originally means 'to join together'. In the new language though, a kind of semantic shift has taken place. The expression means not only to dress smartly but also the ability to match various colours of ones clothes. Jalasi (1999) states that, according to the students (i.e. Chancellor College students) the word means to "... put on nice clothes" and "consistently doing things correctly" (Jalasi 1999: 31).

Jalasi (ibid) goes on to state that the expression also means to make sense out of what might be a muddled situation or a story told in a mumble jumble manner or fashion. This word has a similar meaning to the expression **kugiya bo**. This expression in (b)(iv) is made up from the English word **gear** and the French word **bon** meaning 'good' or 'well'.

Things have happened to the word 'gear' as a result of being borrowed into the 'new language'. The first is that it has changed its grammatical category, namely from the noun **gear** to the verbal expression **kugiya** 'to dress smartly'. Secondly the word '**giya**' had originally meant 'clothes'. So the expression 'Ali ndi giya' simply meant 'S/He has got nice or fashionable clothes' and not just any type of clothes.

The use of the word **gear** is an interesting one. The gears of a car assist the driver to manoeuvre the car in several ways. The current meaning is from the interpretation to engage the gears correctly and hence achieve positive results and is also clear evidence of the consequence of language in contact.

(b)(ii) is an interesting word in the sense that in its English form as **hair** one does not often hear of the plural **hairs**. One detects derogatory connotations in the reference to hair that is treated with chemicals. Malawi is largely a conservative society and sometimes frowns upon behaviour that is perceived as deviating from Malawi's expected norms however watered down such norms may be. Hair treated with chemicals sets the owner of the hair apart from those whose hair is not treated. Something can be said about the use of the term. In the negative connotation, it is a means for ridiculing those who treat their hair. For those who hold this view, see the treatment of hair as a way, not of moving forward, but that of demeaning natural looks and what may be considered traditional looks which represent some ideal situation (see Unalidi Nasuwema in Malunga: 1994).

Nearer to the meaning of **heyazi** suggested above, is the expression in (b)(viii). **Kuyuza** is derived from the English word **use**. As is the case with **heyazi**, those who use cosmetics are sometimes perceived as running away from their natural looks and to say of someone **amayuzza** 'H/She use cosmetics' may not always be complimentary. Said about a girl or a woman the word may simply be stating a fact that one uses skin-bleaching chemicals. Said of a male, however, the intention is usually one of ridicule and disapproval of the practice. This again is an instance where years of socialisation have entrenched the perception that the act of beautifying oneself is mainly the domain of females and not males. Any male therefore who indulges in acts meant for females is not favourably perceived.

The point b(iii) has partly been given a positive as well as a negative reading. Its original meaning is a young offender (to yield yoo). To be a **yoo**, to the users of the new language, does not necessarily mean one is bad or wicked but rather someone who is 'well to do' and doing the right things as perceived by the youth and other users of the new language.

The points b(v) and b(vi) need no further elaboration except to point out that **wahito** has found its way into the 'new language' via a song made popular by West African entertainer Kanda Bongoman in a song of the same title while **buleti** is from the English word bullet. The point b(vii) is again straightforward and nothing more will be said about it.

In recent years Malawi has witnessed an unprecedented number of ill people and thousands dying from HIV/AIDS related ailments. A recent newspaper

article revealed that the nation slowly has to accept to break the silence on revealing the causes of deaths. A front page headline of the Daily Times of Thursday, August 10, 2000 screamed to the readers "MPs dying from HIV/AIDS" and continued to reveal that: "About 29 Members of Parliament have died from HIV/AIDS related diseases, Speaker of the National Assembly Sam Mpasu disclosed yesterday" (Daily Times, 10 August, 2000: 1). The sample expressions in (c) bear witness to this daunting reality. (c)(i), (iii), (iv), (v) all make reference to dying whereas (c)(ii) and (vi) make reference to state of serious physical illness. The expressions in (c)(i)-(ii) are from the English words **push** and **crash** whereas (c)(iii) is from the Latin word **via**. Nothing more will be said about these words except to point out what I have already observed about aspiration and non-aspiration. The phonological feature of aspiration is again used in **kuphusha** and **kukhrashika** as manifested through the spelling of those words with the [h].

The words in (d) mark the state of education in Malawi. It has been observed in the Malawian media that from around 1994, which coincidentally is the year a democratically elected government came into power, there was massive evidence of cheating and examination malpractices during examinations that are administered by the Malawi National Examinations Board (MANEB).

Given the fierce competition for school and college places due to the increase in the population of school and college going youth and the failure by government as well as the private sector to provide sufficient secondary and college places, it was discovered that students, teachers, examination officials as well as parents have all been involved in some kind of cheating in order to let pupils pass the various examinations sat at the end of primary school, and in forms two and four in order for them to pass on to the next classes and eventually go for tertiary education. This state of educational affairs is translated through the use of **likasa** probably derived from the English word **marks** pronounced in Chichewa as **malikisi**. **Likasa** means pieces of ready prepared answers to examination questions illegally obtained earlier. The real meaning of the word **likasa** then is 'that which will earn you good or high marks'.

It may be noted in passing that the new word has somehow lost a high tone which is associated with the syllables **ma** and **li** in **málíkisi** in which the acute accent ['] indicates a high tone.

(d)(ii) is taken from notices which appear in public vehicles which read as follows:

**Pangozi kankhani galasi ili**  
(In emergency push this glass)

The keyword in the above notice is the word emergency. The students who describe the ready made notes to examination questions as **pangozi** treat examination questions as some form of emergency or accident. In other words, it can be said that the students are not very well prepared for the examinations and therefore treat them as an accident or some kind of emergency. The underlying

meaning of the term is that the pupils and students get ready for the examination by preparing for an accident as it were because of lack of systematic preparation for the examination for a whole host of reasons which we need not go into here.

d(iii) which is derived from the English word **jack** is again a disguising term for the already prepared notes to examination questions. In the same manner a motorist gets prepared for tyre punctures and the need to have a motor-car lifting equipment, some pupils and students also get ready for any eventuality in the examination room.

The seriousness of this problem led the examination board, referred to earlier, to employ a cross-section of the country's citizens to invigilate the 1999 Malawi School Certificate of Education examinations (MSCE) whose results were a national disaster with only 13% of all the candidates who wrote the examinations obtaining full certificates. It is not clear at the moment whether or not the invigilation and monitoring by a large cross-section of the citizenry assisted in curbing the rampant cheating as revealed in the language just discussed above. What is clear, however, is that 87% of the pupils who sat the 1999 MSCE failed the examinations and an outcry that followed the dismal performance compelled the Head of State to institute a Commission of Enquiry to probe for answers as to why there were such poor results. With the youth using words such as **likasa**, **pangozi** and **jeke** one of the answers that the commission of inquiry should be well known from the onset.

The vocabulary and expressions in (e) describe illicit deals and corrupt practices in both past and contemporary Malawian society. Of all the expressions that describe corruption and corrupt practices **katangale** is now perhaps oldest and the best known. **Katangale's** origin is a basket that was weaned from reeds and palm leaves. The basket, which was usually deep and varying in sizes from a foot wide to around a meter long, was used for selling various items such as fish, meat and vegetables. The word caught on its illicit connotations through the fact that due to the basket's depth one was never sure what was inside. The additional meaning of the term stemmed from the uncertainty of what the basket might contain. An element of cheating began to creep in the total meanings of the word. With cheating, uncertainty and the trickery that may be involved when someone is advertising and selling wares which are out of sight, the act of buying items at a lower price than one at which a reasonable profit could be made, or simply dealing in any trade where cheating and theft was suspected or was actually happening quickly became known as **katangale**. Anyone who was known to be involved in illicit deals was referred to as **wakatangale**. Any person getting rich with no well-known source or sources of income may therefore be referred to as **wakatangale**. The confirmation that corruption makes people gather a lot of wealth than they might otherwise do if they were involved in fair deals, was the pronouncement that **katangale aposa salale** (illicit deals make you more money than a salary).

The expression in (e)(ii) **la fanta** 'money for purchasing fanta' is also a manifestation of a case where an illicit deal or corrupt practice is being carried out. The expression has a wider social and economic implication. The drinking

of fanta is a sign of affluence and it is usually only those who have money to spare after purchasing essential household items that can afford to buy and drink fanta. The use of this expression is a clear mark of economic discrepancies where the gap between the haves and have-nots is very wide and keeps on growing by the day. Hence those who do not have sufficient sums of money to afford their essential commodities ask for **kangachepe** 'a little something' in order to provide goods and services as shown in (e)(iii).

Those who are involved in corrupt practices are supposed to be aware of what is happening in the word of business and in the delivery of goods and services. If a deal is not going through or there is failure to deliver goods and services one of the party may utter the words: **zili ndi inu** 'it is up to you' meaning 'unless you bribe me' i.e. give me **kangachepe** as in e(iii) the deal will not go through. To the list of expressions given in (e) the word **dila** from the English word 'dealer' has come, not only to mean, to deal in an acceptable and straightforward manner, rather that one is carrying out trade activities in illicit and illegal ways. That the practice is far from being controlled, let alone, being stamped out altogether is evidenced by the proliferation of yet other expressions referring to the same. See the list of expressions below.

h. (i)	Tionane pambali	'Let's see each other on the side'
(ii)	Style ndiwe mwini	'You decide on how to do things in your own style'
(iii)	Tagwirani apa	'Hold on to this'
(iv)	There is one paper missing	'There is no vernacular equivalent provided'
(v)	Kajunior	'One for Junior'
(vi)	Mukagule lanchi	'Have this for your lunch'
(vii)	Tapangani express	'Make it express'
(viii)	Mutiganizirekotu	'Please consider us'
(ix)	Mungotisiyasiya?	'Are you going to leave just like this?'
(x)	Tingokuthandizani	'We help you but you are of no help to us'
(xi)	Yam'manja nanga?	'What about out of pocket cash'
(xii)	Kasopo aka	'Get this for your soap'
(xiii)	Mutithandiza bwanji?	'How are you going to assist us?'

(Anti-Corruption Bureau Flier: 2000)

The data above can be split into two categories. There are expressions that are uttered by the persons offering a particular service and those that are uttered by persons who are receiving or have been offered a given service. To the former belong the expressions in (iv), (vii), (viii), (ix), (x), (xi) and (xii). The expressions that belong to the latter category are in (i), (ii), (iii), (iv), (v), and (xii).

These two categories are not exactly watertight demarcations because some of the expressions such as those in (b) and (e) can be uttered by persons in both categories. What needs to be emphasised here, however, is the fact that there is such a proliferation of expressions, which indicates how widely spread and deeply entrenched the practice of **katangale** is in Malawi. More expressions, there is no doubt exist and there and many more will be coined.

That corruption is rampant in Malawi contemporary society is evidenced by more recent newspaper articles. The Nation of the 12th of July, 2000 stated that: "MPs nearly trade blows: attack on high - level corruption rifles feathers" (The Nation, 12 July, 2000:1). In the article cited above it was observed that government was shielding some top politicians who were suspected of being involved in corrupt practices. The concerned member of parliament is quoted as having said that:

"For all the corrupt scandals at PCC, it cannot be the general manager alone. All these people, including the former minister for parastatals and the then Chair of PCC, must have been involved. Now why are they being shielded? They should all be brought to book so that justice must take its course, not just picking on the general manager" (The Nation, July 12, 2000:1).

Kamwendo (1999) also observes

... that corruption was one of the regular topics in the various issues of the newspaper under study. This is not a surprise given that, since the advent of multiparty politics in Malawi in 1993, corruption has featured highly on the young democracy's agenda (Kamwendo 1999: 162). At the time of preparing this paper for publication a very politically damaging corruption scandal has been unveiled in government in which it is alleged that government officials ranging from cabinet ministers and deputy ministers and members of parliament and other officials have directed millions of Kwachas which were meant to finance Malawi's basic education programmes. A former Principal Secretary at the Ministry of Education has since been arrested in connection with the massive corruption scandal and many more arrests of high ranking government officials it is said will soon follow.

As the country awaits those other arrests the state president has meanwhile ordered his lawyers to sue one newspaper in the country, which connects the corruption to the state president. The president's lawyer has called the newspaper story "Unfounded Scandalous and defamatory" (The Nation, 20 September, 2000:1) while the Media Council of Malawi has said the report is "most unfair to President Muluzi" (The Nation, 20 September 2000:3).

The current turn of scandalous events serve to cement the earlier observations made about the rampant corruption that has taken deep root in poverty stricken Malawi.

The data in (f) covers vocabulary about alcohol intake and the smoking and getting high on chamba/marijuana and the buying and selling of outlawed drugs. f(i) and (ii) refer to getting drunk whereas f(iii) and (iv) refer to getting high on **nanzi** which is the word in f(v). The growing and smoking of **chamba**/marijuana is not a new phenomenon in Malawi. It is grown in almost all the areas of the country with the highest concentration in the border districts of Nkhotakota in central Malawi and Mzimba in the north. According to the Laws of Malawi it is an offence to grow, be in illegal possession and to smoke **chamba**.

The availability of considerable vocabulary about the illicit drug is evidence enough of its availability and that many persons, especially the youth, like to smoke it. The social consequences of the **chamba** smoking habit are worrisome. The Malawi media does carry stories where crimes are said to be committed when persons are under the influence of **chamba**.

It is also interesting to note here that during the last sitting of the Malawian Parliament one member of parliament suggested that the country should seriously be cultivating and marketing a non-narcotic version of Chamba so that the government and Malawians can make some money in the face of the orchestrated anti-smoking and anti-tobacco campaign. To add fuel to the smoking of chamba have been stories in the Malawian press in which Rastafarians are claiming and arguing that the smoking of chamba for them is like receiving Holy Communion and that they should not be prosecuted if found in possession or smoking **dzitsotso**.

It is also an open secret that many school and college going youths smoke the illicit drug. The language they use to describe the drug and its inevitable consequences is ample evidence of such a practice. The social and educational consequences of excessive smoking are criminal activities and poor and deploring examination results in some cases as evidenced by the disastrous Malawi School Certificate Examinations results of 1999 and the academic years 2000 and 2001.

Lastly, I discuss the sample data in (g) which covers sex, sexual attitudes and sexual practices. (g)(ii)-(iii) and (g)(vii) all make reference to activities that lead to sexual activities. (g)(v) and (viii) translate as 'to make love to a woman' and 'to have sexual intercourse with a woman'. These two expressions deserve comment.

I have stated above that some of the new language does throw vital light and insight into how the genders relate in Malawian society. The meanings of the verbs in (g)(v) and (viii) indicate the perceived relationship that holds between the sexes. In these expressions it ought to be obvious that the female is seen and described as a passive partner in the sexual act. From the structure of the sentence it is implied that it is the males 'who make love to the women' or it is

they who 'have sexual intercourse with the women'. The perception of a patriarchal society where the males are supposed to be dominant over the female at all times after a carefully orchestrated socialization process is laid bare in these expressions.

I will close this section with a brief discussion on the vocabulary in g(i) and g(ix). **Ekezailo** means to be kept out of one's own room while a roommate is entertaining a lover. **Ekezailo** is derived or borrowed from the English word **exile**. When someone goes into exile in the original meaning it implies there is some kind of problem or conflict in one's country, and being in exile implies, in most cases, discomfort, suffering and the missing of one's home, relatives, friends and sometimes even loved ones. The kind of **exile** being expressed in **ekezailo** is surely less stressful than the type referred to above. It does point towards one thing though that the users of the language realize the need for privacy when two lovers meet. Apart from this social requirement, it is also obvious that there has been a semantic shift in the meaning of the word.

**Boilo** in g(ix) is derived from the English word boil. The meaning in the current usage is 'to have sex without using a condom' or to have unsafe sex. I have stated above that Malawi is reeling from HIV/AIDS related caused ailments and deaths. Through the use of this word it may mean that many persons engage in unsafe sexual activities. If this interpretation is correct, then the hope that the spread of HIV/AIDS will continue unabated is wishful thinking. One other inference that can be made is that the messages that are heard several times every day on the country's radio station about the dangers of having 'unsafe sex' are not being taken as seriously as they should.

In conclusion I wish to attempt an explanation at the origin of the word **boilo**. It could be possible that the meaning of this word comes from boiled eggs or indeed any food item that is cooked by simply boiling it in water. A boiled egg may therefore be seen as pure because there are no other ingredients or spices added whereas a fried egg or scrambled eggs and an omelette have ingredients and spices added.\* It is important to note here that while persons who are obsessed with watching what they eat and their weight eating boiled food is a commendable, having 'sex ya boilo' i.e. having sex without using condom is very detrimental.

What needs to be emphasized, however, is the fact that the perceived purity of the boiled egg cannot be equated with any kind of purity in the current health context of HIV/AIDS. In actual fact, even before the advent of HIV/AIDS 'sex ya boilo' i.e. sex without a condom, still risked the possible contraction of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and sometimes unwanted and unplanned pregnancies. The fact still remains however that through the use of the word **boilo** it can be concluded that there are persons out there who have sex without condoms. Needless to mention here that I am aware of the debates that centre on

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\* I am indebted to Stanley Khaila who pointed to me the possible connection of the use of the word **boilo** with boiled eggs.

how safe condom use is and will not dwell on that matter in this work. Below I discuss the linguistic characteristics of the new language.

#### 4. LINGUISTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NEW LANGUAGE

As is the case in most instances of language contact the borrowing languages generally impose their own linguistic properties on the items that have been borrowed. For instance, languages that have a CV syllable make up tend to impose such a syllabic structure on words, which come from a language, or languages with a syllable structure, which deviates from their own, make up such as VCC, CCVV, CVC, and VCCVCCV as in the examples shown below:

VCC	→	ask	/ask/
CCVV	→	cry	/krai/
CVC	→	sit	/sit/
VCCVCCV	→	extra	/ekstra/

It should be pointed out here that it is not always the case that Chichewa adheres to the **cv** syllable configuration as has been stated over the years. Mchombo (2000) notes that Mtenje (1980) had argued that "...Chichewa syllables are essentially of a **cv** nature" (Mtenje 1980 cited in Mchombo 2000:4). Mchombo (ibid) goes on to point out that Mtenje in the work referred to here "... argues for the functional unity or conspiracy of phonological rules in Chichewa" (Mchombo: ibid). The said phonological rules are "... primarily motivated by the need to destroy vowel sequences and to reserve the canonical syllable type **cv** ..." (Mchombo 2000: 4, citing Mtenje 1980).

Mchombo (2000) has however also noted that "...verbal suffixes in Chichewa are indeed morphologically bound and, at the level of phonology, they do not satisfy the basic syllable structure or phonotactics of the language" (Mchombo 2000: 4). To exemplify what is stated he writes that:

The causative, applicative, passive and reciprocal extension in Chichewa, are (ignoring variants determined by vowel harmony) respectively, **-its-**, **-il-**, **-idw-**, **-ik-**, and **-an-**. Notably, all these have a phonological structure of **-vc-**, departing from the basic syllable structure of the language (Mchombo: ibid).

Moving away from the linguistic characteristics of the language one would wish to say something about the origin of the new language.

## 5. ORIGINS OF THE NEW LANGUAGE

The creation of Malawi's new language is not entirely a new socio-cultural or linguistic innovation of today's youth. Earlier generations have also had ago at creating their own linguistic codes similar to what Isola (1982) refer to as code talking in Yoruba. One of such creations is a simple syllable order distortion in a word. Examples of such syllable order distortion are given below.

iwe	→	wei	'you'
tabwera	→	talabwe	'come'
pano	→	nopa	'here'

A sentence that would in normal speech be:

Iwe tabwera pano  
'You come here'

becomes:

Wei talabwe nopa.

The syllable order distortion exercise offers essential evidence in support of claims made by autosegmental theory as formalized by Goldsmith (1976).

The essential claim being referred to above is the recognition by autosegmental phonology that phonological representations are to be multi-dimensional in nature. Such representations are said to comprise a skeletal core to which a number of independent sets of levels or tiers may be anchored. The meaning of the foregone is that tones would be represented on one tier and segments such as vowels and consonants would be represented on another.

The syllable inversion process referred to above confirms the claims made by autosegmental phonology as illustrated below.

L	H	L		L	H	L	
U	M	o	d z i	→	u	d z i	m o 'one'

	L	L	H	L		L	L	H	L	
n	d	i	k	u	f	u	n	a	f	u 'I want'

H    L        L		H        L        L
c h I m a n g a	→	m a n g a c h i 'maize'

L   L        H   L		L        L        H        L
b w i n o b w i n o	→	n o b w i n o b w i 'act carefully'

H    L    L    H    L		H    L    L        H    L
n d i m a K u k o n d a	→	n d i m a k u n d a K o 'I like/love you'

What is happening in the above examples is that while there is change at the level of the consonant and the vowel, the tonal tier or level remains intact providing crucial evidence for the claim that the tonal tier or level should be treated as independent from the segmental tier.

Another interesting aspect of the 'older language' is that it faithfully adheres to the phonological make up of the language at the tonal tier. The regular phonology of Chichewa has several tonal rules among which is one that passes on a high tone of a particular morpheme to a neighbouring tone bearing unit or to some specified tone bearing unit (cf. Moto 1989). What needs noting in concluding this section then is that while the phonology at the segmental level is considerably distorted, the phonology at the tonal tier remains intact.

## 6. A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE NEW LANGUAGE

This section attempts to date the new language. In actual fact not all the 'new language' is new. Expressions such as **kudya** meaning 'to get high marks' and **kobowa** meaning 'to bore' and **kuthanga** meaning 'to take' (Lekera 1994) were used in the early and mid 1970s when the present author was a student at Chancellor College. The last word's meaning was also combined with '**nthenzi**' in a phrase such as **kuthanga nthenzi** which also meant to contract a disease, more often than not, a sexually transmitted one. One expression which is obviously over thirty-five years old is **kufila** meaning 'to enjoy oneself', 'to feel good' or 'feel on top of the world'. I heard this expression first in the early 1960s from a group of newly trained young primary school teachers who are now in

their late fifties or early sixties. Expressions such as **heve** meaning 'very much' or **bebi** to mean 'girl' or 'woman', **kuthaima** meaning 'to deceive' or 'to outwit' (Lekera: *ibid*) cannot be Chirunga innovations because these were already in use in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the urban areas of Blantyre where I was going to school at then. **Bebi** is an old borrowing that can easily be traced to concert songs of the 50s. I knew some girls whose names were **Bebi** when I was as young as eight years of age.

At the time of writing there is an expression that one would like to label as the most recent innovation. This is **kubwera** originally meaning 'to come' but presently meaning all sorts of things and also appearing in all sorts of combinations as shown below.

kumeneko ndiye kubwera	"that is coming well"
kubwera bo	"to come well"
kubwera kumeneko	"that is coming well"
munabwera bwino	"you came fine (well)"

The next question we need to provide an answer for is whether or not the new language is widespread.

## 7. HOW WIDESPREAD IS THE NEW LANGUAGE

My study has revealed that Malawi's new language is possibly a feature of every educational institution in the country. A casual walk about around the more than a dozen educational institutions in Zomba reveals that teachers as well as pupils and students know and use the 'new language'. Knowledge and use of the language is not limited only to students, pupils and teachers. Older men some of who are over sixty years old find it fit to use words such as **kuyaka** 'to be drunk', **kukatamuka** 'to have lots of cash' or 'to be well to do'. Age does not therefore seem to be a hindering factor in the use of the 'new language'. The older people must be using the new language in order not to be considered as linguistically and socially not out of date.

The new language has also found a permanent place in folklore memory because some artists have used it in their songs that are recorded on radio cassettes. Two brothers, Pierson and Allan Ntata, sing about clothes being '**zafeki**' (fake clothes) and '**jenuwini**' (genuine). Businesspersons and advertisers have also joined to cash on the novelty and popularity of the new language as often heard on the advert that says their product is:

**jenuwini tswatswatswa orijino**

What is actually happening is that currently we are witnessing a linguistic process known in the literature as language change. The kind of language use

discussed here is not the type of borrowing which is necessitated by lexical gaps, rather the kind of borrowing that is induced by the need to be fashionable and to be seen to be knowledgeable about modern linguistic ways of communication. Some of the younger users of the language have stated that they use the language to hide what they want to speak about from elders.

## 8. SEMANTIC SHIFT OF SOME TERMS

Let us look at the words **kuvaya** and **deni** in order to establish whether or not semantic shift has taken place. **Kuvaya**'s origin is the word **via** which originally means: 'to go by way of'. The current meanings of this word though are 'to go' and 'to die' where we witness an obvious case of semantic shift.

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English defines **den** as (i) 'animal's hidden lying place, e.g. a cave' (ii) secret resort: an opium den; a den of thieves. (iii)(colloq) room in which a person works and studies without being disturbed.

With the assumption that this 'new language' is an innovation of educational institutions or school pupils and college going students, the likely initial use would have been that given in the meaning in (iii) where reference is made of a room where one studies or works without being disturbed. The meaning of **den** has however been extended to include a room or indeed a house. An utterance like:

Ndikuvaya pa **deni**

expressly means 'I am going home' or 'I am going to my dwelling place'. One is also forced to surmise that the other meanings of the word **den** also find use with some sections of the youth or indeed the larger population. Youth often like to think of themselves as not wanting to follow laid down rules by the society. In that vein, the use of the word **den** may be closely associated with the wish to behave in a lawlessness manner in the way thieves do by breaking laws that outlaw theft. The meaning along the lines suggested above can also be generally inferred by the behaviour of some of Malawi's youth especially at the onset of newfound freedoms in Malawi.

Some if not most sections of the Malawi population have understood the advent of democracy and democratic processes as a licence to do what everyone pleases without due regard to what such behaviour entails on other citizens. In Moto (forthcoming) it has been stated that "In the Malawian context today, the word/concept democracy means different things to different people and it has gained such currency that it has become part of the lexicon of many Malawians regardless of their age, educational background, knowledge of how public and private institutions are managed and how various forces interact in the management of national, regional and global affairs. To some, democracy means

freedom to engage in drug trafficking, rape, armed robbery, strike action, and generally to defy authority, revealing disdain for institutions whose primary functions are to facilitate the orderly regulation of society" (Moto, forthcoming: 50). Due to behavioural tendencies which urge on uncontrolled animal behaviour it would not be surprising if the use of the word **den** does not imply an implicit reference on the part of the youth that they wish to be left alone so that they can behave like the original dwellers of the **den**, i.e. animals. Below, I examine how gender issues are reflected in the 'new language'.

## 9. GENDER AND THE 'NEW LANGUAGE'

The use of swear words by Chancellor College female students as reported by Jalasi (1999) deserves comment. Culturally, Malawi is a society that is by and large dominated by males. This cultural dominance is also reflected in language use. Females for instance are, by societal dictates, not supposed to use swear words in public at least. If such is the case, why then is it that, in public at least, Malawian women in general and some female students in Chancellor College swear after all when they ought to be aware that swearing is socially and culturally 'taboo'?

The answer may be the one Trudgil (1972, 1974) provides. Trudgil observes that women in society may be more status-conscious than males and that as a consequence they are aware of the social significance that may be attached to particular linguistic forms (Trudgil 1972, 1974 in Aitchson (1995)).

It has also been observed that swearing as has been stated above, seems to be linked with being tough and rough which in Malawian culture are characteristics associated with males rather than females.

Because the females are subjected to positions and a status of subservience and inferiority they are perhaps consciously or unconsciously attempting and striving to employ speech forms which reflect roughness and toughness such as the use of swear terms. In this instance the use of swear terms is not meant as an insult to other members of the society. Rather a means for striving to be like that which the society perceives as powerful and prestigious.

## 10. WHY INVENT A NEW LANGUAGE?

The study has revealed that the use of the new language cuts across socio-economic, educational, cultural background, ethnic, age and gender. In addition, both 'educated' and 'uneducated' citizens use the new language. I am tempted to initially observe that the language is perceived by the majority of its users as socially prestigious.

I have also made an initial observation regarding the use of the new language by many school dropouts or persons who never attended school altogether who

sell various wares on the streets of Malawi. They tend to over employ the new language. Why should such be the case? It is tempting here to tentatively conclude that the school drop outs as well as those never attended formal schools may, as was the case of Labour's Middle Class of New York, "...be socially and linguistically insecure, and anxious to change their status" (Aitchson 1995: 52). It is safe to conclude that those with a lesser 'education' and low social standing in society quickly notice what expressions are perceived as trendy and considered a mark of high status in society.

But then a question still needs to be answered. Why invent a new language when other languages are already in use? This may sound like a rhetorical question but it need not necessarily be. Whether consciously or subconsciously the youth initially had the wish to identify themselves as a separate social group. The youth perceive the other established languages as possessing and epitomising old and outdated traditional values. As more and more speakers adopt this new language one day it may become the norm and not be seen as a new language for some sections of the community at least.

Malawi's new language is, according to me, an attempt to scorn and show contempt for societal norms and established authority. The language also marks youthful defiance and a rejection of norms of societal and group control and a refusal to a means, which the youth view as of manipulation through, established linguistic usage. Apart from the wish to communicate through the use of the 'new language' the youth are also attempting to establish an air or atmosphere of self-assurance and some kind of independence.

Like in the secret language of 'nyau' initiates, the 'new language' provides Malawian youths with ways and means for creating many relating layers of meanings and to bring forth a body of fresh and new jokes as well as expressions. The youth, it can be said, are striving through the creation and use of the 'new language' to draw a line between themselves, i.e. the youth and others or outsiders, i.e. the adults who ideally are supposed to represent societal order. Through the 'new language', boundaries of a new relationship in which the youth are seeking to express some sort of disenchantment from the world of the adult, i.e. world of old fashioned ways and conservatism is redefined.

The word 'afana' (young ones) derived from one of the South African languages no longer means just being young. It has acquired new readings for itself among which are 'progressive and forward looking' and a mark of the will to abandon old boring ways of doing things generally.

The direct opposite of 'afana' is 'madala' (old men) which currently stands for father or any man but with the extended meaning of boring, restrictive, strict and all that goes with what the youth perceive to be the oppressive world of old and out of date adults. It must be noted that once upon a time the word 'madala' was made in reference to the late president of the Republic of Malawi, Hastings Banda. The essence of referring to Banda as 'Madala' was to capture the special esteem with which Malawians had held him before the onslaught of his one-party rule.

The knowledge and use of the 'new language' therefore is also acting as a vehicle of enculturation and incorporation into a new generation with its own social agenda. The youth are at an advantage given that they also have learnt and use the 'old languages' which have embedded in them archaic ideas and ways of doing things as seen by the present generation. Lastly, we need to determine whether or not the new language will survive.

## 11. REINFORCEMENT AND SURVIVAL OF THE NEW LANGUAGE

Is the new language likely to survive? One is likely to answer the above question in the affirmative. I am aware, as stated earlier, that various generations of youths have used their own linguistic codes in order to communicate among themselves or simply play language or linguistic games. Such languages have tended to 'to die' with the coming of age of its users. I wish to suggest here that the contemporary 'new language' may be here to stay. Why do I say this?

Whereas the other types of linguistic codes did exist at some time or the other, the situation for their widespread adoption was not there. Until relatively recently most of Malawi did not have a reliable transport network and many people tended to live in their areas from birth to death. The case is not the same today. One can easily travel the entire breadth of the country within forty-eight hours, i.e. two days. Such a state of affairs allows one linguistic innovation to travel and reach the rest of the country in a relatively record time.

Wide and quick dissemination due to a relatively improved infrastructure, is not the only reason why the 'new language' is known by more people than the earlier linguistic codes. Both the print and electronic media is also playing a vital role in bringing the 'new language' to more people than would otherwise have been the case.

Earlier, I mentioned a song by Allan and Pierson Ntata, which mentioned **zovala zafeki** (fake clothes) and **zajenuwini** (genuine ones). A currently popular traditional song has the lyrics **chikwati chobeba** (a lively and successful wedding ceremony), **kumeneko ndiye kubwera** (that's the way it should be done), **kagwere uko** (get lost or leave me alone!). Other songs also include other expressions in the new language such as: **kukatamuka** 'to have a bit of money', **kuchakachika** 'to be seriously ill' and many others. Many Malawians are illiterate but the use of the 'the new language' on the radio reaches a bigger section of the population than would otherwise be the case.

The language is also assured of survival through the printed media where certain columnists are using it in their write-ups. A careful reading of a weekend newspaper one sees the new language in constructions like those given below.

Bale yapoyira ishupika mwezi uno.  
Akubala anjiba ndani?  
Filimu itrona opa.

Ukayendera yautsiru udzabalamukapo apa.  
Dolla yashupa moti tikuganiza kuti tikatamuka bwanji. Tikubala kuti tizisake.  
Osawala ... umenye filimu yoti brazi yako yaduwa.  
Koma ndi yogwira bwanji?

The above data is given in order to give the reader the idea of how speakers (in a fictitious piece of work) can sustain a reasonably long conversation in the new language. We are surely witnessing language change in action.

Malawians, like other African people, like to sing and dance as a way of expressing varied emotions among them sorrow, sadness and happiness. The new language is also being reinforced through song and dance especially in some wedding songs. See, for example, the wedding song below.

Wapeza gaye  
Eee  
Wapeza gaye jenuwini  
Shuwa.

Wapeza dona  
Eee  
Wapeza dona jenuwini  
Shuwa

(She has found a guy  
Eee  
She found a genuine husband  
Sure.

He has found a lady  
Eee  
He has found a genuine lady  
Sure).

Given the reinforcement tools and facilities outlined above one can comfortably speculate that the new language will have a longer life span than the other linguistic codes referred to earlier. With the availability of television in Malawi and some of the songs containing lyrics with the new language the chances for survival of the 'new language' are being added on. In addition, some of the young teachers or university lecturers belong to the generation that uses the new language. The education system is one that can easily assist in particular behavioural tendencies to spread. In this case it is giving legitimacy for the use of the 'new language' given that teachers are sometimes considered to be models worth emulating.

## 12. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have observed that listening to the speeches of boys and girls, young men and women and sometimes older men and women today, one is soon struck by the fact that the speeches contain words, phrases and sometimes whole sentences which sound like a foreign language. I have gone on to state that the fact of the matter is that Malawi has a new speech community that uses what I have called Malawi's new language. I have also observed that the new language is made up of words that are newly coined from Malawi's indigenous languages and a vernacularization of the words of some foreign words such as French, English and Latin. Some of the words I have demonstrated have been borrowed from Shona, a Bantu language mainly spoken in Zimbabwe. For the youth, who speak the new language, the language is being used as tool or a linguistic manifestation for establishing a bond and identity.

I have suggested that perhaps, more importantly, more than just being a system of communication and a tool for establishing a bond and identity and a way of showing solidarity, Malawi's new language reflects deep-seated attitudes towards particular perceptions, and behavioural tendencies of the speech community that uses the new language. I have also gone to indicate that the new language directly mirrors life in contemporary Malawian society and the direction in which its values are gravitating. Through the study of the new language, I have maintained that one can visualize Malawi as being in a clearly marked state of flux. As a weapon of protest, I have suggested that through the use of the new language the youth are interrogating, in very non-compromising ways sometimes, the perceived and received wisdom of the society's call for the youth to respect society's elders, recognise, accept and respect authority. I am convinced that the new language is part of a protest agenda against society's established norms of conduct that are usually perceived as oppressive. I have also demonstrated that the language makes a stark record of the society's rampant corruption and its reaction to corrupt practices, the infiltration of foreign ways of life and cultural values, sexual attitudes, sexual practices and alcohol and drug abuse.

On a linguistic level, I have observed that the presence and use of the 'new language' in Malawi is a manifestation of a linguistic phenomenon commonly known as language change through which some meanings of some words have extended, modified or completely changed their semantic import. I conclude the paper by observing that through knowledge and a careful study of the 'new language' society can stand apart and see at what stage it is in its religious, social, economic, educational and political transition. With such knowledge at hand Malawi, can then devise mechanisms for the introduction of intervening programmes to arrest practices which are detrimental to the positive cultural attitudes and practices of the Malawian society which are obviously under immediate danger of demise as revealed through the use and knowledge of what may be imparted through the 'new language'.

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