

# A DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF CHIBRAZI, THE URBAN CONTACT VERNACULAR LANGUAGE OF MALAWI – A FOCUS ON THE LEXICON AND SEMANTICS FINAL

by

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## **Abstract**

*This paper discusses what Chibrazi is. The paper uses some of the findings of a study that provides a basic descriptive analysis of the emerging new contact language with the aim of demonstrating that there is a new mixed language that is emerging within Malawi. The study was designed as a mixed method research that was both theoretical and empirical in nature. Data was collected through a questionnaire, interviews, observation, and literature review. The linguistic data that is presented in the paper was analysed through personal intuition of Chibrazi to illustrate the lexical shift from Malawian languages that is happening through Chibrazi.*

**Key words:** Chibrazi, language manipulation processes, lexical shift, Malawi, *mfana*, *tsado*, urban contact vernacular language, *vadi*

## **Introduction**

Apart from the traditional ethnic languages of Malawi, there is a language practice or speech style that is generally characterised by the mixing of elements from different languages such that meaning is encoded by inserting vocabulary drawn from a unique body of lexical items into the grammatical structures of the traditional ethnic languages. The mixed language does not have a particular name that is ‘agreed upon’ probably because it is not necessarily attached to any ethnic group and because it is fairly new. Kamanga (2015, 2014, 2009) refers to the mixed language as Chibrazi. The term *Chibrazi* was coined by combining the prefix *chi-*, which is used to encode the meaning “the language of the ... tribe or group” and the word *brazi*, a vernacularisation of the English word brother. The term *brazi* is one of the many terms that male speakers of Chibrazi typically use to address one

another. Thus, the name Chibrazi essentially implies “the language of brothers”.

The name is used as an expression of the solidarity that is assumed among speakers of Chibrazi by virtue of belonging to the same community of speech. However, while the term *Chibrazi* may, on the basis of this, give the impression that it excludes females, this is not the case. Although Chibrazi is very popular, the literature seems to suggest the existence of an attitude of oblivion about Chibrazi. For instance, Chibrazi is conspicuously absent from the four sociolinguistic surveys that were conducted between 1996 and 1998, which informed the language policy review process in the country (see Pfaffe, 2004, 2003, 2001, 2000; Kamwendo, 2000; and Kamwendo, Mtenje and Sanhaas, 1999). Even in the national language symposia that were organised in light of the implementation of the new language policy in education, Chibrazi is absent. The same is true of Kayambazinthu’s (1995) sociolinguistic investigation on the patterns of language use in Malawi.

It is thus not surprising that Chibrazi does not appear in prominent publications on African urban youth languages such as Beck (2010), McLaughlin (2009) and Kiessling and Mous, (2004). For instance, Beck (2010: 14) actually points out that Malawi has not yet developed an urban language. It can thus be concluded that Chibrazi has not received adequate scholarly attention. In light of this state of affairs, a study was conducted with the aim of providing a basic descriptive analysis of Chibrazi thereby demonstrating that there is a new mixed language that is emerging in Malawi. This paper presents the findings of that research in terms of what Chibrazi is.

### **Conceptual framework**

Chibrazi fits what Winford (2003) identifies as one of the outcomes of contact induced language change; that is, the creation of new contact languages. On that basis, Chibrazi is taken to be an emerging new contact language, a mixed language, which is one of the products of contact induced language change that involves extreme restructuring and or mixture of elements from more than one language (Winford, 2003). Chibrazi is referred to as an urban contact vernacular language following Sebba’s (1997) typology of pidgin. Chibrazi also fits what Kiessling and Mous (2004) refer to as *urban youth languages of Africa*, which are in a way perceived to be antilanguages. The term *antilanguage*, which emanates from the concept *antisociety*, and is used to denote a society within a society, is defined as a sociolect that expresses conscious social and linguistic opposition, putting emphasis on the interpersonal function at the expense of the referential function of language (Halliday, 1978).

Halliday (1978) states that an anti-language is a metaphor for an everyday language and that this metaphorical quality appears throughout the system. Thus, an antilanguage produces phonological metaphors, grammatical metaphors, morphological metaphors, semantic metaphor, and syntactic metaphors as well. Using Labov's assertion that "language change involves a disturbance of the form/meaning relationship so that people affected by the change no longer signal meaning in the same way as others not affected ..." (1994: 9); Chibrazi is interpreted as a manifestation of semantic change or semantic manipulation, which is one instance of metaphoric manipulation.

### **Previous studies**

Most of the studies that have been conducted on language change in Malawi appear in dissertations of students of the Chancellor College constituency of the University of Malawi. These studies are categorised into two. The first category is labelled as studies on language change in the Chichewa of Chancellor College because they look at the Chichewa of Chancellor College as one dialect or variety of Chichewa. These include Tchesa (2009), Nawata (2000), Jalasi (1999) Kamowa (1994) and Lekera (1994). Some of these studies focus on the sociolinguistics of the language variety, while others focus on the lexical and semantic change of the variety and yet other studies explore the linguistic processes through which the change in the Chichewa of Chancellor College manifests. The second category comprises Moto (2001), which asserts that there is a 'new language' that has emerged in the country. In making this assertion, Moto makes reference to Jalasi (1999), Kamowa (1994) and Lekera (1994). The paper describes the 'new language' in terms of a number of aspects, including its origins, its spread and its survival.

### **Methodology**

This paper is informed by data that was taken from a mixed method study that was both theoretical and empirical in nature. The theoretical aspect of the research includes some of the basic and most important theoretical concepts that were employed to explain Chibrazi theoretically. This information comes from a review of literature on contact induced language change or African urban contact vernaculars. The empirical component of the research is made up of naturally occurring Chibrazi speech and vocabulary. The empirical data was collected using interviews, participant observation, and non-participant observation. The data was analysed thematically using my personal knowledge of Chibrazi and other Malawian languages, especially Chichewa, Chitonga and Chitumbuka.

## Examples of Chibrazi

Over two thousand words that are recognised as part of the Chibrazi lexicon were collected through the research that informs this paper. Each of the words is produced through a unique language manipulation process or a combination of such processes. The examples of Chibrazi in this paper are presented in the context of semantic manipulation in order to demonstrate the lexical shift from the original meaning to Chibrazi meaning that manifests. The examples are presented in two ways. Firstly, individual words are presented in two tables. The first table, which follows below, shows examples of Chibrazi that are borrowed from languages that are spoken outside of Malawi. Chibrazi words are presented in the first column. Then, the origins of the words are identified. Thereafter, the original meanings of the words are given. The fourth column supplies the meanings that the Chibrazi words adopt. The last column provides the ‘equivalent’ words in Chichewa thereby demonstrating the lexical shift that has taken place.

**Table 1: Chibrazi vocabulary showing contact with languages from outside Malawi**

Chibrazi word	Origin	Original meaning	Chibrazi meaning	Chichewa word
<i>mfana</i>	isiZulu <i>Mfana</i> or Chingoni <i>Mfana</i>	“boy”	“young person”	<i>mwana</i>
<i>boo</i>	Chishona <i>Boo</i> or French <i>Bon</i>	“fine”	“fine”	<i>bwino</i>
<i>pombe</i>	Kiswahili <i>Pombe</i>	“beer”	“beer “or “alcohol”	<i>mowa</i>
<i>seveja</i>	Portuguese <i>Cerveja</i>	“beer”	“beer “or “alcohol”	<i>mowa</i>
<i>kawalala</i>	Chibemba <i>Kawalala</i>	“thief”	“thief” or “criminal”	<i>wakuba</i> or <i>wambanda</i>
<i>brazi</i>	English <b>Brother</b>	“brother”	“brother”	<i>mchimwene</i>
<i>doshmaki</i>	German <i>Deutse Mark</i>	“German currency”	“money”	<i>ndalama</i> or <i>makobili</i>
<i>vadi</i>	Afrikaans <i>Water</i>	“water”	“water”	<i>madzi</i>
<i>igwe</i>	Igbo <i>Igwe</i>	“chief”	“outstanding person”	<i>katswili</i>

All the examples of Chibrazi that are presented in the second table below originate from English and they all fall under the domain of education. The presentation of the examples in this table is similar to that followed in the first table. It can be seen from the two columns on the extreme ends of the table that there has been lexical shift from the Chichewa words to the Chibrazi words.

**Table 2: Chibrazi vocabulary from education**

<b>Chibrazi word</b>	<b>Origin (English)</b>	<b>Chibrazi meaning</b>	<b>Chichewa</b>
<i>Jiyoloje or Jiyo</i>	Geology	“To stone”	<i>Kugenda</i>
<i>Tsado</i>	Mathematics	“Mathematics”	<i>Masamu</i>
<i>Lekchido</i>	Lecturer	“Lecturer”	<i>Mphunzitsi</i>
<i>Lekcha</i>	Lecture	“Lie” or “Lies”	<i>Bodza</i>
<i>Brenzi or Brenzoo</i>	Brain	“Intelligence”	<i>Nzelu</i>
<i>Gatsi</i>	Guts	“Intelligence”	<i>Nzelu</i>
<i>Peri</i>	Periphery	“A girl or boy friend from outside campus”	<i>Chibwenzi cha kunja kwa sukulu</i>
<i>Yaro</i>	Year one to the power zero	“First year student”	<i>Wophunzila wa mchaka choyamba</i>
<i>Konti</i>	Continuing	“Continuing student”	<i>Wophunzila wa mzaka za pakati</i>
<i>Finale</i>	Final	“Final year student”	<i>Wophunzila wa mchaka chomaliza</i>

The rest of the examples of Chibrazi that were presented in this paper are taken from conversations that were recorded in the course of the research. The examples demonstrate how Chibrazi is used in grammatical construction. In addition to that, the examples demonstrate that Chibrazi uses the grammatical structures of different languages. Three examples are chosen in this regard.

The first example is *Afana Mystic adya boo tsado koyamba*. This utterance means “Mystic has performed well in mathematics for the first time.” This utterance is a combination of Chichewa, Chingoni or isiZulu, Chishona or

French and English. Literary, this utterance means “The young man Mystic has eaten mathematics well for the first time.”

*Afana* is borrowed from isiZulu of South Africa or Chingoni of Malawi and it means “young man” or “friend” as used here. Mystic is a person’s name. *Adya* literary means “have eaten”. The combination is created through semantic extension in which eating is metaphorically used to represent achievement. Notice that both here and in *afana* the plural third person prefix *a-* (that is, the honorific form in this case) is used instead of *wa-*, the third person singular prefix. The honorific form is one of the common features in Chibrazi that distinguish it from its source languages. The singular form *mfana* would be used under “normal” circumstances. The utterance would thus read: *Mfana Mystic wadya boo tsado koyamba*. Or *Mystic wadya boo tsado koyamba*.

The word *boo*, which means “well”, is borrowed from either Chishona *bo* or French *bon*, both of which mean “good” or “well”. It is rather difficult to determine which of the two the loanword originates from. One might argue that this can be determined on the basis of proximity of the loanword to Malawian languages, but proximity itself is ambiguous in as far as the two languages are concerned. Chishona might be said to be closer to Malawian languages in terms of geographical as well as social distance, but French can also be said to be close to Malawian language because it is taught in some schools within the country. *Tsado*, which means “mathematics”, comes from the word *samu* (singular) or *masamu* (plural). The word was transferred into Chichewa from the English word “sum” through semantic extension. *Koyamba*, which means “for the first time”, is another combination that is borrowed from Chichewa. If this utterance were to be rendered in Chichewa, it would be *Mystic wakhonza bwino masamu koyamba*. There is a clear difference between the Chibrazi utterance and the Chichewa one. The main difference is in terms of the vocabulary that is used. However, the grammatical structure that is used in both utterances is that of Chichewa, which makes it a Chichewa Chibrazi utterance.

The second example is taken from Chitonga Chibrazi in which two friends were discussing a third person that they were drinking with.

Speaker A: *Ayimwi; mfana yuwa wanguphoza yapa wavaya nunkhu?*  
“My friend; where did that guy who was sitting here go?”

Speaker B: *Weke wavaya padeni pawu*. “He said he has gone to his home.”

Speaker A: *Wavaya ndi dola yangu*. “He has gone with my money.”

*Ayimwi* is a Chitonga combination that means “friend” or “my friend”. *Mfana* is a Chibrazi word and it is used in a similar manner to the way it is used in the Chichewa Chibrazi example presented above and it carries similar

ambiguity. The word *yuwa* is a borrowing from Chitonga and it means “that one”. The combination *wanguphoza* comprises *wa*, “who” *ngu*, “did”, and *phoza*, “sit”. While the first two segments are from Chitonga, the latter is a typical Chibrazi word. The Chibrazi word is a manipulation of the English word *pose*. *Yapa*, “here” and *nunkhu*, “where” are also borrowings from Chitonga. The word *vaya* in *wavaya* might be a borrowing from other African urban contact vernaculars; for instance, Tsotsitaal, in which it is also used to mean “go”. A good example of this word in Tsotsitaal is found in the name of the Johannesburg City’s Bus Rapid Transit System (RBT) *ReaVaya*, which translates as “we are going”. But, it might as well be a semantic manipulation of the English word **via**.

Two other Chibrazi words appear in the conversation. These are *padeni* and *dola*. *Dola* is a semantic manipulation, semantic shift, to be more precise, of the English word **dollar** that is used to denote currency, which means “money”. The rest of the components in the conversation are from Chitonga. *Weke* means “he said”; *pawu* means “his”; *ndi* means “with”; and *yangu* means “mine”.

If this exchange were to be rendered in Chitonga, it would be something like:

Speaker A: *Ayimwi; mfana yuwa wanguja yapa waluta nunkhu?*

Speaker B: *Weke waluta (or waya) kunyumba kwawu.*

Speaker A: *Waluta ndi ndalama yangu (or zangu).*

Again, in this exchange, the basic difference between the Chibrazi utterances and their Chitonga equivalents lies in the vocabulary that is used. The grammatical structure that is used in both versions is that of Chitonga.

The third example that we will look at is the conversation:

Speaker A: *Mani; nkhuwaya padeni. Tithaimanenge lethu.* “My friend; I am going

home. We will meet later.”

Speaker B: *Yonse mani.* “Okay my friend.”

The utterances in this exchange were produced when two friends were parting ways to see each other again later in the day. One way in which the exchange would be rendered in Chitumbuka is:

*Speaker A: “Akulu (or any other word that could replace mani as in the explanation above); nkhuwaya kunyumba. Tikumanenge mwene kale”.*

*Speaker B: Yewo akulu.*

The word *mani* is borrowed from the English word **man** and it is used to mean “friend”. *Nkhu* is a Chitumbuka verbal prefix that means “I am”. This is added to the stem for *vaya*, a Chibrazi word that means “go” or in Chitumbuka “luta”.

*Pa* is a Chitumbuka preposition that means “at”. *Deni* is a Chibrazi word that is borrowed from the English word “den”. In Chibrazi, the word is used to mean “home” or “house”. The former is applicable in this instance.

*Tithaimanenge* contains the components *ti*, *thaima* and *nenge*. *Ti* is the plural subject marker that means “we”. It is used as an honorific marker. *Thaima* is a Chibrazi manipulation of the English word **time** that is morphophonological as well as semantic by nature. In Chibrazi, this word is used to mean “see”. The word undergoes some phonological changes in Chibrazi. The segment *nenge* is a future tense marker. The word *letha* is a vernacularisation of the English word **later**, in which the original meaning is maintained. The expression *yonse*, which speaker B uses, is a common Chibrazi expression that is used in a variety of ways. The expression originates from the Chichewa word *yonse*, which means “the whole of it”. In this instance, the expression is used to mean “okay”. It is also clear here that the difference between the Chibrazi utterance and its Chitumbuka ‘equivalent’ is vocabulary. The grammatical structure that is used in both cases is that of Chitumbuka.

The examples of Chibrazi presented here demonstrate that in terms of linguistic structure, Chibrazi generally comprises two components. The first component of Chibrazi is the *grammatical base*. This component comprises the language that supplies the grammatical structure. On the basis of the grammatical base, there are different varieties of Chibrazi as demonstrated in the examples above. The examples presented represent Chichewa based Chibrazi, Chitonga based Chibrazi, and Chitumbuka based Chibrazi respectively. Using such a distinction, it can be argued that there are various dialects of Chibrazi based on the concept of grammatical base.

### **What is Chibrazi?**

Chibrazi can be defined as an emerging mixed language or a hybrid language that has evolved in Malawian urban settings among linguistically and ethnically diverse communities as a result of large scale migration from the countryside to the urban areas. It is a language practice or speech style in which meaning is encoded by inserting vocabulary drawn from a body of unique lexical items into the grammatical structures of the traditional ethnic languages of Malawi. Within the realm of new contact languages, Chibrazi belongs to the category that is referred to as bilingual mixed language, but considering that Chibrazi uses numerous languages as its sources, it is more accurate to refer to it as a multilingual mixed language. While Chibrazi is a customary mode of communication for a significant number of Malawians in some communities of the country, it is not commonly used by the mainstream of Malawian society. In addition to that, Chibrazi is not a readily acceptable

mode of communication in formal domains, although it appears therein sometimes.

It is important to note that Chibrazi is equipped with all the elements that are required for communication to take place, although it draws on other languages in order to achieve that purpose. To borrow the words of Whiteman (1980: v), Chibrazi is a rule-governed language system, which is “different from, but not deficient in respect to” Malawian languages from which it grows, although it is not legitimised. Chibrazi contains all the elements that are required for communication to take place. Chibrazi is not substandard, although it has been marginalised on the basis of the circumstances of its origin and the attitudes that some people have towards it. It is also important to note that Chibrazi is not necessarily a dialect of Chichewa or any other Malawian language. However, if the mixed language has to be seen as a dialect, then perhaps it can be seen as a distinct and definable version of Malawian languages collectively, which is different from the Malawian languages mainly on the basis of vocabulary.

There is a considerable amount of variation within Chibrazi on the basis of different factors that include geographical location, grammatical base, occupation, gender and age. In this regard, Chibrazi can be said to be a general cover term for different language practices in contemporary Malawi that encompass different phenomena within the realm of language change in general and the creation of new languages in particular. One may argue that such variations are tantamount to the existence of different varieties or dialects of Chibrazi. However, it is difficult to come up with a clear demarcation of the varieties or dialects of Chibrazi because there is always crossing among speakers of the different varieties to the extent that they always share information. The one type of variation that is most obvious is that which is caused by differences in grammatical base. This paper has presented three varieties on the basis of grammatical base: Chichewa Chibrazi, Chitonga Chibrazi, and Chitumbuka Chibrazi.

## **Conclusion**

Looking at the current linguistic situation in Malawi, it is clear that Chibrazi is part and parcel of the country’s language profile and that it has gained currency and developed in structure. Currently, it is commonplace to hear or see Chibrazi in many domains where it was not present before. Some of these are politics, the music industry, the print and electronic media, education and religion. Chibrazi is no longer restricted to urban locations; or just to the youth; it has now penetrated almost all spheres of life in the country. Since its emergence, the urban contact vernacular language of Malawi has continued to

spread to the extent that it can now be said to transcend not only the bounds of sociolectal classification, but also geographical and socio-economic classification. This strongly suggests that Chibrazi might play some socio-economic part in the country. In light of that, this paper demonstrates what Chibrazi is.

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