PATTERNS OF LEXICAL BORROWING IN CHICHEWA

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Abstract

Lexical borrowing is an important aspect of language change. The study of loanwords can give important insights into the cultural and socio-historical circumstances of a language. This paper examines lexical borrowing patterns in Chichewa/Chinyanja. Using data from the Chinyanja monolingual dictionary, the paper attempts to determine the kinds of borrowings that are common, the degree of lexical borrowability, and the common source languages for the loanwords, and how these borrowings compare with borrowing patterns in other languages. The paper also shows that words are borrowed even when native equivalents are available in the target language. This leads to semantic narrowing for some of the words.

Keywords: loanwords, Chichewa/Chinyanja, borrowability, lexicon

1. Introduction

Chichewa is a Bantu language widely spoken in Malawi and in parts of Zambia, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe where it is commonly known as Chinyanja. The language was also known as Chinyanja in Malawi prior to the 1968 Malawi Congress Party annual convention where it was changed to Chichewa to reflect Malawi's demographically dominant tribe, the Chewa (see Matiki 1998 for more discussion). It is classified by Guthrie (1971) as belonging to Zone N language group. Chichewa, like other languages, has assimilated a considerable number of words from other languages, particularly from English. The study of the way loanwords are assigned to various semantic fields has obvious advantages in providing insights into the dynamics of borrowing in particular, and language change in general.

It is well known among sociolinguists that in any language contact situation one language tends to have socio-political dominance over others, and that linguistic borrowing tends to flow from the more dominant (donor) language to the less dominant (recipient) language. Eifring (2005) notes that there are essentially two major types of borrowing, namely, cultural borrowing and core borrowing. The former involves cases where a language borrows words from another language in order to fill lexical gaps. The latter type, on the other hand, involves borrowing words that have native equivalents in the recipient language. These borrowings generally "start their lives as foreign elements in code-switching, but are gradually felt to be parts of the indigenous language" (Eifring 2005: 3)

There have been numerous studies on loanwords in Bantu languages. The majority of these studies have focused on the class assignment of loanwords as well as on the linguistic integration of these words into the recipient languages. The present study intends to contribute to this debate by documenting the nature of borrowing in Chichewa in terms of semantic field, word classes and source languages. Specifically, the study attempts to find out which semantic fields are likely to attract loanwords; from which source languages is Chichewa likely to borrow and how these loanwords are integrated in the nominal class system of Chichewa.

2. Malawi's linguistic profile and Chichewa contact situations

Malawi has not had any national language surveys. In the absence of such surveys, scholars have generally relied on census data (see Kayambazinthu 1998; Kishindo 2002; Matiki 1998; Stubbs 1972). Admittedly, census data on languages are not always accurate. As Schiffman (1995) points out, language questions on national population censuses often elicit declarations of ethnic loyalty rather than the respondents' linguistic habits. In spite of this shortfall, census data do provide useful indicators of patterns of language use in the absence of comprehensive sociolinguistic data. Schiffman's (1995) use of census data in determining language shift in Tamil communities in Malaysia and Singapore is quite insightful, for instance.

2.1 Local languages

Malawi has more than 14 Bantu languages (National Statistics Office 1966, 1998). The 1998 Malawi Population and Housing Census shows that the majority languages are Chichewa, with 70% of the population claiming this language as the most commonly used language for communication in the households; Chiyao with 10.1% and Chitumbuka with 9.5%. The other languages were enumerated as having less than 3% of speakers and include Chilomwe, Chisena, Chikhokhola, Chitonga, Chingoni, Chinkhonde, Chilambya, Chisukwa, Chinyakyusa, Chimambwe, Chibandia, Chinyiha and Chindali. Both the 1966 and 1998 censuses noted that Chichewa is the most understood language (76.6%). The number of people for whom Chichewa is the first language or the primary language (in terms of competence, importance and usage frequency) is more than 76.6% and rapidly growing in the urban centres. Globally, Chichewa is spoken by approximately 9.35 million people in Malawi, Zambia, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe. The majority of the speakers are in Malawi (see Ethnologue online).

In terms of the official, overt language policy, Malawi has a three-language structure, comprising in-group languages: the local vernaculars used in everyday lives of Malawians; out-group language(s): Chichewa, used as a lingua franca in the marketplace and urban areas for communication between speakers of different vernaculars; and languages of specialised information: English, primarily used in the formal or secondary domains of national life. Thus, Chichewa fills a wide range of functions. It is spoken at home, in the market and in shops, at work, at religious and political meetings, in school, on the radio and television, among many other domains.

2.2 The case of English

English in Malawi has a colonial past and is closely tied to the presence of the British colonial administration, missionary educators, and the Shire Highlands planters. At the turn of the 20th century, Britain appropriated Malawi, then called Nyasaland, as its protectorate in order to protect British nationals who were living in Malawi. English became the official language to be used by this small group of colonialists for purposes of administration, education, and commerce, among other formal functions. Chichewa and the other indigenous languages were reserved for use with and among the local masses. The advent of Christianity and secular education further entrenched the position of English vis-à-vis local languages (see Matiki 2001b). The pattern of English usage in present Malawi reflects, to a larger extent, this mode of arrival and spread.

2.3 The case of Chingoni

One of the groups of migrants that entered present-day Malawi was the militant Ngoni. These are descendants of one of several Zulu warrior groups who were dissatisfied with the autocratic rule of Shaka Zulu and broke away from him. The breakaway tribe of the Ngoni moved northwards and eventually settled in the area southeast of Lake Tanganyika. From there the group sent out branches northwards and to the southeast. Some of the groups settled in northern and central Malawi in the 1830's. Those who settled in the north settled among the Tumbuka and the Tonga, whom they subjugated, while the central Ngoni settled among the Chewa. The Ngoni wanderings were quite devastating as they conquered every tribe that they came across and incorporated most of these conquered people into their army (see Thompson 1981).

In terms of linguistic practices, the Ngoni were very punctilious about etiquette, and especially about the linguistic terms required by good manners for all kinds of social interactions with other people. One of the requirements in Ngoni families was the need for a uniform standard of verbal politeness to accompany correct behavior in posture (Read 1956: 22-23). Being so particular about language, it is not surprising, therefore, that the Ngoni tried to suppress all other languages and make Chingoni, which they considered to be a stately language, the only language to be spoken in the territories they controlled (see Fraser 1914). They did this in spite of the many different languages spoken by the slave population. In all the conversations of the rulers, and all lawsuits, on public occasions and generally in village life, Chingoni was used. Chingoni was effectively the official language of Ngoniland.

With time, however, the Ngoni began to lose their grip on the slave populations. Through numerous wars against other tribes, the Ngoni ranks were considerably weakened. As Read (1956) notes, when Ngoni warfare ended, the Ngoni could no longer force the people they conquered and subjugated to accept their rule and their cultural institutions. As a result, the Ngoni acquiesced in considerable cultural and linguistic heterogeneity.

The Ngoni who settled among the Chewa in central Malawi did not impose their language on the Chewa but instead adopted Chichewa and many of the Chewa customs (see Harding 1966). One of the prices that the Ngoni paid for adopting Chitumbuka and Chichewa was the loss of their own language. Pachai (1973, also see Read 1956; Read 1960) rightly asserts that most of the Ngoni groups in Malawi are in name only.

The Ngoni language has been reduced to a ceremonial role and only the old people have some fragmentary knowledge of their mother tongue. Linguistically, therefore, the Ngoni of Malawi are either Tumbuka or Chewa.

3. Loanword Studies in Chichewa

Although Chichewa is a well-studied language, particularly with regard to syntax (Mchombo 2004), phonology (Mtenje 1980, 1986) and sociolinguistics (Kayambazinthu 1998), its lexicon, including loanwords, has not received that much attention. There are only two studies of note which will be reviewed here, albeit briefly.

Simango's (2000) study has shown that once a loan word is borrowed, it is modified in various ways to fit the grammatical structure as well as the cultural requirements of the recipient language. This revelation lends support to the findings of earlier studies on borrowing which show that borrowed items "are adapted into the existing patterns" (Poplack et al. 1988: 62) and "are incorporated into the grammatical system of the borrowing language" (Gumperz 1982: 66). Furthermore, the study has shown that borrowing does not only induce modifications to the syntactic and semantic properties of the foreign expressions, but also modifications to the semantic and syntactic properties and possible displacement of some indigenous expressions.

Matiki (2001a) set out to show that the classification of loanwords in Chichewa is a function of the type frequency of the noun classes. Although semantics has been heralded as the best approach to the classification of nouns (see Denny & Creider 1986, Spitulnik 1987), the study showed that only the human class is somewhat semantically coherent. Human loanwords are consistently assigned to the 'human' class even though such nouns seek their plurality in class 6. The study also showed that the largest number of loanwords is assigned to classes that have a high type frequency. This is quite consistent with studies that have established the role of type frequency in the determination of productivity (see Bybee 1985). The study also revealed that the current state of nouns in Chichewa, as in many other Bantu languages, shows a layering of different classification systems, providing evidence for the diachronic changes that the system has gone through. Understanding the current class membership of the nouns entails an understanding of these changes. The best approach, needless to say, is one that recognizes these multiple sources of the layering.

4. The data

The data for this study comprised loanwords collected from *Mtanthauziramawu wa Chinyanja/Chichewa,* a Chichewa monolingual dictionary published by the University of Malawi's Centre for Language Studies (CLS) (2000). The dictionary identifies loanwords in Chichewa by indicating their source language. A total of 391 loanwords are identified by the dictionary. It should, however, be pointed out that the dictionary does not identify all loanwords partly because linguists have not studied Chichewa extensively to isolate all loanwords and the fact that the compilers of the Chichewa dictionary did not invest more time on identifying borrowings. As Tadmor (2009: 55) rightly notes, "lexical borrowing rates … reflect varying degrees of knowledge about each language." In some cases the problem in identifying loanwords is exacerbated by the degree of integration of the loanword into the Chichewa linguistic system. The dictionary, for instance, does not identify *galimoto* (car) as a loanword even though it comes from the

English 'motor car'[1]. Schadeberg (2009: 76) points out another related problem by noting that "identifying loanwords from other Bantu languages is not easy because they are, more often than not, indistinguishable from cognates." Thus, two languages may share similar words because of a common ancestor language. It is very likely, therefore, that the lexicographers working on *Mtanthauziramawu wa Chinyanja* may not have marked some loanwords from other Bantu languages.

In collecting lexicographic data, there is also the risk of including code-switches as instances of loanwords. An often followed principle in such cases of doubt is that loanwords show all kinds of phonological and morphological adaptation; code switches do not. This, of course, is not full proof as "both established loans and singly-occurring code-switching forms are subject to similar patterns of morphological and syntactic integration" (Simango 2000: 505). Another often cited criterion is that code-switched forms only occur in the speeches of bilinguals, while borrowed forms appear in the speech of both bilinguals and monolinguals.

The loanwords were tallied and classified according to their source language, noun class membership, and semantic field. Simple frequencies were then calculated for each of these categories to determine borrowability rates.

5. Results and discussion

5.1. Borrowability by word class

As indicated above, the loanwords were grouped according to the part of speech affiliation. This was done to ascertain the Chichewa class which is prone to more borrowing. The results of that classification are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Borrowability by word class

Word Class	**N**	**%**	**Examples**
Adverbs	2	0.51	*bule* (Swahili), *chitetete* (Yao)
Conjunctions	1	0.26	*olo* (English)
Nouns	359	91.82	*bandeji* (English), *buluku* (Afrikaans), *galeta* (Dutch), *linunda* (Ngoni), *likwata* (Yao), *kapitawo* (Portuguese)
Verbs	29	7.42	*popa*, *wina* (English), *khuza* (Zulu), *umbala* (Yao)
Total	**391**	**100**	

It is clear from Table 1 that nouns are the most borrowable lexical items. This is not particularly surprising as the literature is awash with evidence that nouns are more borrowable than all other word classes, including verbs. For instance, 31% of all the nouns in the Loanword Typology database, involving 41 languages, (Haspelmath and Tadmor 2009) are loanwords. Walter (1999) also shows that the majority of loanwords in French are nouns.

[1] This is probably a loan translation involving *gali* from *car* and *moto*, a Chichewa word for *fire*. The fact that a *motorcycle* is called *njinga ya moto* in Chichewa (literally *a bicycle of fire*) lends credence to this interpretation.

Unlike nouns, verbs are not as borrowable because they tend to be more complex and part of a rigid system (see Tadmor 2009, Simango 2000). The few verbs in the data are mostly from English (Table 2) and cover activities that are not indigenous to Chichewa culture, e.g. *batiza* (baptize), *tayipa* (type, as in typing or word processing), *fola* (queue, from the word *follow*), among others. It is quite interesting here that Chichewa has borrowed *fola* to avoid the more circuitous *imani pa nzere* (stand in a queue). Thus, one of the motivations for borrowing is to avoid complex words or expessions.

One of the earliest scholars to discuss why most languages have difficulties borrowing verbs than nouns was Moravcsik (1975). She claimed, on the basis of the few languages she studied, that verbs are not borrowed as such, but are rather borrowed as nouns which are then verbalized in the recipient language. Tadmor (2009) shows, however, that this is not always the case. He notes that structural constraints do indeed play a role in the borrowability of verbs, because

> the more isolating the recipient language, the less morphosyntactic adaptation is necessary for borrowing verbs as such; conversely, the more synthetic the language , the more adaptation is required. It is therefore much easier to borrow verbs into isolating languages than it is into synthetic languages (p. 63)

given that the latter are complex and part of a rigid system (also see Hock 1991, Simango 2000). Moravcsik's assertion on the borrowability of verbs is not interrogated in this study. In general, languages borrow more nouns than verbs, not for grammatical reasons, but for social reasons (see Tadmor 2009). Things and concepts are easily adopted across cultures along with the words for them.

5.2. Borrowability by word class and source language

The analysis also classified the loanwords with respect to their word classes (i.e. part of speech classification) and donor language. Although the dictionary indicates the donor language for each loanword, it is important to note that these languages may not be the original donors. Instead, they represent a more recent point in a borrowing chain. Thus, a loanword tagged as coming from English may in fact have come into English via another language.

The results, summarized in Table 2, shows that English is by far the biggest contributor of loanwords to the Chichewa lexicon, accounting for 67.77% of all the loanwords in the data. As noted earlier, Chichewa-English bilingualism is quite pervasive among educated Malawians. Given the association of English with modernity, globalization and its position in the social market (Matiki 2001b), Chichewa is under enormous superstratum pressure to borrow from it. As O'Grady et al. (1997) note, this kind of influence is replicated in other colonial situations around the world.

Table 2: Borrowability by word class and source language

Source Language	nouns	verbs	adverbs	conjunctions	Total (N)	%
Afrikaans	6				6	1.53
Arabic	2				2	0.51
Dutch	1				1	0.26
English	252	12		1	265	67.77
Hebrew	2				2	0.52
Nsenga/Senga	2	1			3	0.77
Portuguese	14				14	3.58
Sena	4				4	1.02
Shona	14	3			17	4.35
Swahili	25	2	1		28	7.16
Tumbuka	1				1	0.26
Yao	8	1	1		10	2.56
Zulu/Ngoni	27	10			37	9.47
Unspecified	1				1	0.26
Total	**359**	**29**	**2**	**1**	**391**	**100**
% of loans	**91.82**	**7.42**	**0.51**	**0.26**	**100**	

The sociolinguistic factors that underlie borrowing from English are diverse and varied. These factors can be summarized as follows: bilingualism between Chichewa and English, especially among the educated; the economic and socio-political dominance of English over Chichewa; the relative short written history of Chichewa which makes it less understood compared to English (which is well known and therefore makes it easy to identify loanwords from it); permissiveness towards borrowing as there is no academy that prescribes purism in Chichewa; and, related to the point above, there is no enforcement on the use of standard Chichewa in the mass media.

It is also interesting to note from Table 2 that Chichewa has had very little need to borrow from the other Malawian languages. Due to the substratum influence, the other languages are politically and/or culturally non-dominant on Chichewa. The few borrowings from Chiyao, Chingoni and Chinsenga are restricted to unfamiliar items and concepts.

5.3. Borrowability by semantic field

Tables 3 and 4 demonstrate that the semantic fields of *modern world* as well as *clothing and grooming* have the highest borrowed words (a combined 46.8%) and that a majority of these come from English. Although, cross-linguistically, languages tend to borrow words into similar semantic fields, the pattern in this data contrasts quite remarkably with the data in the Loanword Typology project (LWT project) which has *religion and belief* as the semantic field with the highest number of loanwords (41.2%). Understandably, the majority of the languages in the LWT project come from developed countries – countries that might be said to be the pioneers of the *modern world.* For a developing nation like Malawi, the semantic fields of *modern world* as well as *clothing and grooming* correspond to the domains which

have typically been most affected by intercultural influence. The language has had to cope with technological advances through borrowing of words from English. The fact that formal education in Malawi is conducted through the medium of English may also explain the dominance of this semantic field. It is important to note that there has not been any deliberate attempt in Malawi to develop appropriate terminology for science and technology to cover borrowed objects and concepts in these fields.

Table 3: Borrowability by semantic field

	Semantic Field	**N**	**%**	**Examples**
1	The physical world	8	2.05	balasuku (Portuguese), chigodi (Zulu), fumira (Nsenga), golide (English), malasha (Shona), mgodi (Ngoni)
2	Kinship	5	1.28	dada, kaka (Swahili), mferekazi, ndoda, shanzi (Ngoni)
3	Animals	8	2.05	bulu (Portuguese), ganda (Swahili), , liphondo, (Zulu), linunda (Ngoni)
4	The body	4	1.02	kolo (Sena), magazi (Ngoni), phirikaniro (Yao), vuzi (Shona)
5	Food and drink	35	8.95	ayisikirimu, buledi (English), chingwa (Shona), gombo (Yao), kachasu (Portuguese), gwayi (Zulu)
6	Clothing and grooming	46	11.76	lenikoti, siketi (English), chempha (Shona), chibete (Zulu), duku (Afrikaans), gwanda (Swahili)
7	The house	27	6.91	bafa (English), balaza (Swahili), kama (Portuguese) mfumba (Sena)
8	Agriculture and vegetation	21	5.37	bulugamu (English), jembe (Swahili), ligonero (Yao), thena (Ngoni)
9	Basic actions and technology	18	4.60	injini, firiji (English), kamata (Swahili), mgwazo (Shona)
10	Motion	1	0.26	likwata (Yao)
11	Possession	2	0.51	chitundu (Yao), umphawi (Shona)
12	Spatial relations	3	0.77	ekala, inchesi, yadi (English)
13	Quantity	2	0.51	nambala, paundi (English)
14	Time	10	2.56	disembala,okutobala (English); sabata (Hebrew)
15	Sense perception	2	0.51	chitetete (Yao), jujuka (Swahili)
16	Emotions and values	3	0.77	hohoza (Shona), khuza (Zulu), uhule (English)
17	Cognition	0	0.00	
18	Speech and language	2	0.51	galamala (English), thula (Ngoni)
19	Social and political relations	23	5.88	bwana, bwanamkubwa (Swahili); mdala (Zulu), shasha (Shona), mkaladi (English)

20	Warfare and hunting	13	3.32	bomba (English), chishango (Zulu), kalitushu (Portuguese), khokota (Sena)
21	Law	7	1.79	apiro, voti (English); boma (Swahili)
22	Religion and belief	12	3.075	sadaka (Arabic), baibulo (English), kabuli (Swahili), lasha (Zulu)
23	The modern world	137	35.04	wailesi, telefoni, sipanala (English); pinto (Portuguese), mesa (Afrikaans), ngolo (Shona)
24	Function words	2	0.51	bule (Swahili), olo (English)
	Total	**391**	**100**	

The second highest semantic field both in this study and in the Loanword Typology project is *Clothing and grooming*. Similar to the factors that have led to the adoption of a high number of loanwords in the *modern world*, "colonialism and globalization have contributed to the spread and adoption of garments which were worn only in Europe" (Tadmor 2009). These include such garments and items as *suti*, *juzi*, *wotchi* (from English *suit*, *jersey* and *wrist watch*, respectively), duku (from Afrikaans *doek*).

The other fields have fewer loanwords because they are made up of concepts that are universal. Thus, every language can be expected to have indigenous words for such concepts as kinship, cognition, sense, perception, and so on. This is also a point that Greenberg (1957: 39) observed, namely that "fundamental vocabulary is proof against mass borrowing." Basic vocabulary is much less susceptible to borrowing than non-basic cultural vocabulary.

Table 4: Borrowability by semantic field and source language

		Afrikaans	Arabic	Dutch	English	Hebrew	CiNgoni	CiSenga	Portuguese	CiSena	CiShona	KiSwahili	CiTumbuka	CiYao	IsiZulu	Unspecified	Freq (N)	Freq(%)
1	The physical world				1		2	1	1		2				1		8	2.05
2	Kinship						3					2					5	1.28
3	Animals				1		1		2			1			3		8	2.05
4	The body						1			1	1			1			4	1.02
5	Food and drink				20	1		1	4		2	2		3	1	1	35	8.95
6	Clothing and grooming	4			32		2				2	4			2		46	11.76
7	The house				16				2	2		7					27	6.91
8	Agriculture and vegetation				17		1					2		1			21	5.37
9	Basic actions and technology				16						1	1					18	4.60
10	Motion													1			1	0.26
11	Possession										1			1			2	0.51
12	Spatial relations				3												3	0.77
13	Quantity				2												2	0.51
14	Time				9	1											10	2.56
15	Sense perception											1		1			2	0.51
16	Emotions and values				1						1				1		3	0.77

Table 4 Borrowability by semantic field and source language (continued)

		Afrikaans	Arabic	Dutch	English	Hebrew	CiNgoni	CiSenga	Portuguese	CiSena	CiShona	KiSwahili	CiTumbuka	CiYao	IsiZulu	Unspecified	Freq (N)	Freq(%)
17	Cognition																0	0.00
18	Speech and language				1		1										2	0.51
19	Social and political relations				4		5		2		5	2	1		4		23	5.88
20	Warfare and hunting				1		1	1	1	1	1				7		13	3.32
21	Law				6							1					7	1.79
22	Religion and belief		2		5							2		2	1		12	3.075
23	The modern world	2		1	129				2		1	2					137	35.04
24	Function words				1							1					2	0.51
	Total (N)	**6**	**2**	**1**	**265**	**2**	**17**	**3**	**14**	**4**	**17**	**28**	**1**	**10**	**20**	**1**	**391**	**100**
	%	**1.53**	**0.51**	**0.26**	**67.77**	**0.52**	**4.35**	**0.77**	**3.58**	**1.02**	**4.35**	**7.16**	**0.26**	**2.56**	**5.12**	**0.26**	**100**	

5.4. Borrowability of nouns by noun class

Chichewa nouns are typical of the Bantu nominal system. The citation form of the vast majority of nouns in Bantu languages typically involves an overt gender or noun class prefix and a noun stem. Not only do these prefixes indicate the class of the noun but also encode such grammatical information as number and agreement. In such nouns, the singular form allows the analyst to predict the corresponding plural forms. 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 (see Tsonope 1987). Other nouns are marked by a null prefix. It should also be noted that some nouns which have a null prefix in the singular require overt prefixation in the plural.

Table 5 is an outline of the Chichewa noun class system as well as an illustration of the borrowability of these nouns by their classes.

Table 5: Borrowability of nouns by noun class

	Noun Class	**Agreement Prefix**	**Semantic Characteristics**	**N**	**%**
1	1-2	mu-a	People class	32	8.91
2	3-4	mu-mi	Body parts; natural objects	6	1.67
3	5-6	li-ma	Primary ‘garbage’ class; paired body parts	127	35.38
4	7-8	chi-zi	Tools, utensils etc	13	3.62
5	9-10	i-zi	Secondary ‘garbage’ class; ‘n’ class	97	27.02
6	9-10/5-6	i-zi/li-ma		27	7.52
7	14-6	u-ma	Abstract nouns; long objects	57	15.88
	Total			**359**	**100**

The various approaches to the classification of nouns in Bantu languages mirror in many respects the controversies that have generally surrounded the whole system of nominal prefixes. There is an interaction of a number of factors involved in the classification of nouns into distinct classes. These factors include the grammatical role of nominal prefixes, phonological similarity of the initial syllable to available class prefixes, the relative semantic similarity of the nouns, and the perceived semantic content of the nominal classifiers. As Kishindo (1984) notes, the prefix is used as the sole determinant of the classification of nouns in most Bantu languages. It is clear from Table 5 that the majority of the loan nouns in Chichewa fall into the so-called ‘garbage’ classes, 5-6 and 9-10, accounting for a combined 62.4% of all the loan nouns in the data. The absence of a class prefix for these classes may partly explain why they attract an inordinate number of loanwords. The basis for class assignment for a majority of the nouns, however, is indeterminate and reflects, for the most part, the usual chaos of the Bantu nominal class system.

Class 1/2 is generally organized on the basis of its semantic saliency; it is the ‘people’ class. It is evident from the data, however, that nouns that are non-people and not generally associated with this class have ended up in this class. Such ‘stray’ loan nouns include *kabichi* (cabbage), *kama* (bed), *kalitushi* (bullet cartridge), *naliti* (sewing needle).

The fact that the semantic content of the loanwords is not the basis for class assignment of loanwords is also evident from the fact that some synonyms are assigned to different classes. For instance, *naliti* is in class 1/2 while its native synonym, *singano* is in 14/6. The loan noun *wenzulo* (whistle) belongs to class 5/6 while its

synonymous loan, *pinto* is in class 9/10. Thus, semantics seems to play a limited role in the assignment of loanwords to Bantu classes. Matiki (2001a) shows that some nouns which should be in class 1/2 on the basis of the semantic criteria may actually be 'dehumanized' and assigned to a non-human class. For instance, a big person may be called *chi-munthu*, a noun which is assigned to class 7/8 instead of 1/2, the human class.

Some loan nouns were clearly assigned to classes on the basis of their perceived semantic content. For instance, most loan nouns that denote people or animals and objects that are closely associated with people were assigned to Class 1. Such loan nouns include *bulu* (donkey), *kama* (bed), and *kabichi* (cabbage), among others. Other potentially people nouns, however, end up in other, non-people classes. For instance, *pasinjala* (passenger) is assigned to class 14/6.

All loan nouns that begin with *chi-* are assigned to class 7/8. These nouns are clearly assigned to this class on the basis of the phonological similarity of the initial syllable with the class 7/8 prefix. All nouns in Class 7/8 in Chichewa begin with the class prefix *chi-* in the singular and *zi-* in the plural. Although the initial *chi-* in the loan nouns is clearly not a class prefix, nevertheless, loan nouns that begin with it are assigned to this class. It should be pointed out here that some of the loan nouns entered Chichewa with *chi-* already as part of their morphology from the source language while others came into Chichewa without the prefix and their first chi- syllable assimilated to the class prefix allowing it to be substituted with the class prefix zi- to form the plural. It is not clear why this latter group of words, which includes *chi-sikiro* and *chi-dole* (all from English *sickle* and *doll*, respectively), was assigned to this class and then given the class prefix. There is need, therefore, for further investigation of this class assignment.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined lexical borrowability in Chichewa. It has documented the nature of borrowing in terms of semantic field, word classes and source languages. The way loanwords are assigned to various semantic fields has obvious advantages in providing insights into the dynamics of borrowing in particular, and language change in general. The data for the study comprised loanwords collected from the Chinyanja monolingual dictionary (CLS 2000). The study has confirmed that nouns are the most borrowable lexical items; a pattern that is consistent with other loanword studies. English is by far the biggest donor language of loanwords to the Chichewa lexicon, accounting for more than half of all the loanwords listed in the dictionary. The colonial legacy of the English language in Malawi and its position in the education system has contributed immensely to its dominance as a donor language. In terms of semantic fields, most loanwords in Chichewa fall within the *modern world* category as well as in the *clothing and grooming* category. Finally, the study has established that a majority of the nominal loanwords are assigned to the 'garbage' nominal classes of Chichewa, classes 5 and 9.

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