



## Language Planning and Linguistic Exclusion in the Legislative Process in Malawi\*

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### Introduction

When Malawi declared both Chichewa (Chinyanja) and English as official languages in the 1968 Malawi Congress Party (MCP) Convention, the idea was that both languages would have roles in all official domains of national life such as in government and administration, the judicial system, and the legislature. Subsequent political articulation and implementation of the policy, however, have heavily favored English over Chichewa and the other indigenous languages. This state of affairs has given rise to an asymmetrical coexistence between the two official languages in which English has established a clear hegemony over Chichewa. Within this sociopolitical context, the continued covert government promotion of English in domains that Malawians perceive as socially and economically important means that Chichewa and the other indigenous languages will continue to be viewed in terms of this standard. As Malawi treads along the path of democratization, the consequences of this language policy are serious and far-reaching.

This paper examines the dynamic functioning of linguistic diversity in Malawi from a language planning perspective. It explores how the asymmetrical and competitive coexistence of English and indigenous languages in the secondary domains of national life has adjusted to current sociopolitical and sociocultural realities. More specifically it examines the efficacy of introducing indigenous languages, particularly the national lingua franca Chinyanja, into the legislative assembly.

### The State of Language Planning in Post-colonial Malawi

The current state of Malawi consists of a variety of ethnic groups most of which have their own languages. The last population census, which had questions on the linguistic patterns of the country, took place in 1966. Although these language questions were primarily asked to solicit information on ethnic groups rather than language patterns, the census revealed that Malawi had more than fourteen Bantu languages (National Statistics Office (NSO) 1966). The majority languages were identified as Chichewa (also known as Chinyanja), with 50.2% of the population claiming to be native speakers; Chilomwe, with 14.5%; Chiyao with 13.8%, and Chitumbuka with 9.1%. The other languages enumerated in the census had less than 4% of speakers and included Chisena, Chikhokhola, Chitonga, Chingoni, Chinkhonde, Chilambya, Chisukwa, Chinyakyusa, Chiswahili, Chimambwe, Chibandia, Chinyiha, and Chindali. The census also noted that Chichewa was the most understood language (76.6%). Given the almost one-to-one

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correspondence between language and ethnic group, the number of languages enumerated in the census roughly represents the number of indigenous ethnic groups in Malawi.

The census also showed that 0.006% of the population used English as a home language while 4.9% understood it. Only 22.5% of the population understood only an indigenous language other than Chichewa, and 0.9% understood English and another language but not Chichewa. As Stubbs (1972:72) notes, when Malawi won its independence from Britain in 1964 and attained its republican status in 1966, "slightly over one in five of the population aged 5 and over were unable to understand either of the languages in which information was diffused and administration and business conducted." In spite of this realization, the new government adopted the colonial language policy with the only exception that Chichewa was given a new status and a prominent position in the policy.

With these figures and a new government that was led by a Chewa, it is easy to understand why the MCP, and the only political party at the time, declared Chichewa as the national and official language<sup>1</sup> in 1968 at its annual party convention without any systematic sociolinguistic study of the language situation in the country. Chichewa shared the official status with English. The official text of the party convention framed the language resolution as follows (MCP 1983):

- a. Malawi adopt Chinyanja as a national language.
- b. The name Chinyanja henceforth be known as Chichewa.
- c. Chichewa and English be the official languages of the state of Malawi and all other languages should continue to be used in everyday private life in their respective areas.

Although no real official justification for adopting such a policy was articulated, Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda (1898-1997), the President at the time, made numerous statements that seemed to indicate that Chichewa was chosen as a national language because it was the most widely spoken language and, more importantly, that it had the power to unite all the people in Malawi. The association between national language(s) and national unity was not a new one at the time. According to Deutsch (1966), the formation of nations and nationalities entails the integration of different groups into the same communicational networks. Two important concepts here are 'cultural assimilation' and 'social mobilization'. The promotion of Chichewa was an attempt at cultural assimilation aimed at absorbing all ethnic groups in Malawi into one large group. English, on the other hand, was meant to stimulate social mobilization; uprooting people from their traditional and agrarian life into a more industrialized one. Education, carried out through the medium of English, was a major component of this process of social engineering.

Recently, Anderson (1991) has argued that a national identity arises with the process of modernity in which the availability of printed materials is decisive. Anderson argues that a nation can be imagined even if it does not have a homogenous linguistic community or even if all its members do not use the print language. The important point is that the members of a nation should imagine their national community through the same language. For Anderson, the importance of a national language resides in its capacity for generating imagined communities, that is, for building particular solidarities. It is within this desire to build nation-states by linguistic means that the language policy was instituted in Malawi and other countries as well. Almost all countries have some form of language planning either directly sanctioned by the government or by default (Fasold 1984, Wardhaugh 1992, Schiffman 1996).

Other works by such contemporary scholars as Looby (1996) and Dinwoodie (1998) have also

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<sup>1</sup> For purposes of this paper, a national language is an indigenous language that has been accorded that status by government and is seen as a unifying symbol of nation-statehood while an official language is one which has been selected to be used in official domains such as government, commerce, industry, and education.

emphasized the role of language in the construction of social and political solidarity. Looby (1996:1), who focuses on the role of language in the formation of the United States, notes, for instance, that some nations are not born but made ineluctably in language. While many nations find their coherence in racial and ethnic similarity, religious orthodoxy, and population concentrations among other factors, it is in speech that America finds its social solidarity. The discursive foundation of national legitimacy, English customs, values, and traditions have all been thematized in speech.

In spite of this theoretical grounding behind the language policy, the new policy came to be seen by many non-Chewa Malawians as an attempt by the ruling elites to dominate other ethnic groups rather than to integrate the various ethnic groups (see Chirwa 1994/95, Matiki 1998, Mchombo 1998). Apart from using various institutions such as the Chichewa National Board, schools, the University of Malawi, and the mass media in entrenching a Chewa hegemony, Banda often gave people the impression that being Malawian was synonymous with being a Chewa and maintained that many Malawians who claimed to belong to other ethnic groups were actually Chewa but that they did not realize that fact (Vail and White 1989, Africa Watch 1990). With all these social and political institutions, the promotion of Chichewa acquired "an explicitly-recognized hegemony over the definition of the community's norm" (Silverstein 1987). This was Malawi's brand of the "melting pot" which assumed that all ethnolinguistic differences would melt into a sublime homogeneity, yielding a nation for which not only Chichewa but also the Chewa culture was the ideal and the standard.

Since 1994, when Malawi became a multiparty democracy, it became evident that not everyone and everything must be held to this rigid standard set by the former political system. Consequently the language policy has been modified somewhat to allow for the inclusion of other indigenous languages, particularly on the national radio. The 'new' languages, which include Chilomwe, Chiyao, Chitumbuka, Chisena, and Chitonga, are, however, limited to advertisements and news bulletins that are basically translations of the English newscasts. The government has also decided to introduce other indigenous languages into the primary school curriculum, although this policy is yet to be implemented. Given that the role of these languages in the new political dispensation has yet to be spelled out, the changes basically reflect political expediency rather than the government's recognition of ethnolinguistic diversity and the need to reach out to as people as possible. This is particularly evident in the legislative assembly which espouses an English-only monolingual policy in its deliberations in spite of serious communication problems among the legislators.

### **Review of Selected Literature on Language in Parliament**

Literature on the issue of language in a parliamentary setting, particularly the issues that are the focus of this research, is rather scanty. In this section, we will review two works, Moosmüller (1989), and Mazrui and Mazrui (1998), which discuss issues related to the legislative process. Moosmüller's (1989) study in Vienna notes that variable language behavior in parliament is associated with concrete social implications for the speaker. For instance, the use of standard language variants is, for the most part, associated with intelligence, competence, and status related traits, whereas non-standard variants are generally associated with sociability, social attractiveness, and trustworthiness (also see Giles and Powesland 1975). She also notes that the use of non-standard dialect was only common on the private, emotional level since "the use of dialect, being associated with low social status and low intelligence, in such a formal situation as the parliamentary one, suggests the inference that the opponent's objections are in reality irrelevant, not even worth being considered and being answered in a deliberate and controlled speech behavior" (Moosmüller 1989:174). As a result of these associations, a "flexible" language use that includes both standard and dialect is a major attribute of any politician's



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speech repertoire in order to be evaluated positively and at the same time reach out to a wider section of the electorate. The politicians have to try to accommodate as many members of the electorate as possible in their speech behavior.

Another important aspect of parliamentary discourse that Moosmüller (1989) notes is that parliamentary discussions have a double function. On the one hand, certain topics that are discussed in parliament are for the interest of the parliamentary parties, while on the other, this information has to be rendered accessible to the general public through the mass media and other channels. The contact between the politician in parliament and the general public is, therefore, indirect since the speech situation with regard to the public is asymmetrical. Given this asymmetry, politicians do not seem to take into account the possible effect of their speech behavior on the public audience.

Mazrui and Mazrui (1998) discuss a number of issues pertaining to language policy in relation to democracy and the rule of law in Africa. These discussions include the use of language in both the legislative and judicial processes. With regard to the African experience, they note that the legal traditions of all Anglophone African countries are shaped by the British colonial experience, including the adoption of English as its linguistic medium. In spite of the multilingual nature of most African countries, English is often used as the major official language even though it is spoken and understood by a minority. With this state of affairs, "every right, every civil liberty, every law in the constitution has to be interpreted in terms of its meaning in the ex-colonial language" (p. 109). Zeleza (1997:52) makes a similar point, albeit in a slightly different context, that the continued dominance of English over indigenous languages means that Africans, their societies, and histories are interpreted in a language and discourse that is framed by concepts rooted in a Western epistemological order (also see Magang 1992:236). The major problem with this set up is that the language choice for the judiciary and the legislature, among other official domains, has created a distance between the law and the people it is meant to serve.

The practice of linguistic exclusion, the policy that keeps out some languages from certain domains of society, is one of the obvious manifestations of the problem of the rule of law in Africa. In the majority of Anglophone African countries, African languages are excluded as media of national legislatures in preference for the English language. In Malawi, and other countries for that matter, parliamentary candidates are required to sit for English proficiency tests to meet this English-only requirement. Mazrui and Mazrui (1998) note two major effects of this lingo-legal configuration. First, by insisting on the use of English only, African languages are disadvantaged by being denied an opportunity to evolve a legislative register that is in keeping with the prevailing parliamentary tradition inherited from the colonial experience. In line with this lingo-legal policy, virtually all constitutions in Anglophone Africa are in English, a language spoken by very few of the citizens governed by those constitutions. This linguistic exclusion may be contributing to the slow development of a constitutional culture in Africa.

Second, the exclusion of African languages and the insistence on the exclusive use of English in the legislative process has essentially denied the majority that lack a facility in this language their democratic right of participation in the formulation of the laws. The exclusive use of English creates a communication barrier between the political elite and the masses on whose behalf these politicians are expected to work, it reduces the pool from which parliamentarians are selected to a minority, and "limits the political right to parliamentary participation of those who lack proficiency in English" (Mazrui and Mazrui 1998. 115).

The works reviewed above show that there is a strong interplay between language and legal traditions and that this association plays a very important role in entrenching the rule of law and democratic principles in a nation. Democracy as 'rule by the people' is obviously incomplete when the majority lack the opportunity to participate in making the very laws used to govern



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them, or cannot even understand what goes on in their own parliaments. Denying African languages an opportunity to serve in the legislature has essentially meant closing out the majority of Africans from the legislative process. This is essentially the case with the national assembly in Malawi because of its requirement that MPs must be proficient in English since all the debating in the house is done in that language. Even though Chichewa is now also an official language, it is frowned upon whenever any MP uses it in the National Assembly. For instance, in one of the sittings, Hon. S.K. Banda, MP for Nkhata-Bay South, used the Chichewa words *ndalama* (money) and *ng'ombe* (cattle) in his speech and was effectively reminded of the language policy in the house by the Deputy Speaker of Parliament: "The Honourable Member is reminded to use the official language, English. We do not know *ndalama* and *ng'ombe* in this house" (Hansard, No. 036:1724). It is also worth noting that although Chichewa is frowned upon, it is the language commonly used in interjections. These interjections are hardly informative to those who use them but they plainly have an important role in fostering a sense of identity among those who share the same political views, usually those from the same party as the interjector. The interjections are routinely used to ridicule members of the opposing party. In Moosmüller's (1989) characterization, the interjections represent the private, emotional level of parliamentary discourse. Since Chichewa is associated with low social status relative to the status of English, its use in interjections suggests that the opponents' contribution or objections during debates are irrelevant.

### Methodology

This section describes the methodology in the data collection and analysis. The methodology utilizes both sociolinguistic and ethnographic techniques in order to capture the multiple realities that this study deals with. As Fetterman (1989:15) notes, "people act on their individual perceptions, and those actions have real consequences – thus the subjective reality each individual sees is no less real than an objectively defined and measured reality."

The fieldwork for this research project spanned a period of one year and took place in Malawi. The research project drew its data through both sociolinguistic and ethnographic methods. These methods included questionnaires, participant observation, and both structured and non-structured interviews with key consultants, and document analysis. All these methods were used to complement each other in a process called "triangulation" (McMillan and Schumacher 1984:319, Fetterman 1989:89) to ensure the integrity of the data in terms of both quality and accuracy. This is a process that allowed me to cross-check the accuracy of information between records, observations, and consultants and consequently objectify and standardize my perceptions. I was, therefore, able to observe the same linguistic behaviors that the questionnaire attempted to solicit so that what was observed could be correlated with the questionnaire data and provide a more accurate linguistic profile.

The study, as noted above, utilized key research consultants using a combination of the "big net approach...mixing and mingling with everyone [I could] at first...[to] ensure a wide-angle view of events" and "judgmental sampling...relying on [one's] judgment to select the most appropriate members of the subculture or unit, based on the research question" (Fetterman 1989:42-3). Given the small number of MPs (192) a rigorous randomized design would not have worked very well. Such a design would have yielded high reliability data but extremely low on validity and consequently undermine the research project. The consultants included Members of Parliament, parliamentary personnel, local politicians, and other ordinary citizens whose input to the language question is important. The informal interviews and participant observation methods also opened up the study to a wide range of consultants.

Questionnaires are one of the most efficient ways of collecting data, especially when there is a high level of returns. The questionnaire, with questions presented in English, was designed to



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solicit information from Members of Parliament (MPs). Specifically, the questionnaire attempted to establish whether or not the Members of Parliament would prefer that Chichewa or any other indigenous language be introduced in Parliament as an alternative language for parliamentary proceedings. Apart from these language attitudes, the questionnaire also elicited data on the consultants' sociolinguistic background and their views on the language situation in Malawi in general. The sociolinguistic data included information on educational background, ethnic affiliation, first language learned, other languages that the consultant speaks, patterns of language use in various domains, and language fluency rates. These variables were correlated against each other to establish a basis for the language choices that the consultants made. The questionnaire also included a blank page on which the respondents were encouraged to write anything that they considered important and needed further explanation.

The data generated through the questionnaire was analyzed using SPSS. Given the small size of the sample and the nature of the data generated by the questionnaires, non-parametric statistics (descriptive statistics), which consisted mainly of frequency distributions, were used. These frequencies were necessary to determine, among other things, patterns of language use and linguistic attitudes. A series of crosstabulations were also computed to examine the relationships among response patterns and demographic characteristics such as educational attainment, ethnic affiliation, and first language learned (mother tongue). With regard to the interview and observation data, a constant comparative method was used to group the data into common emergent themes. These descriptive findings from the interviews, documents, the mass media, and observations were useful in explaining the questionnaire results, which in turn provided some insight into how widespread certain linguistic attitudes are.

### **Results and Discussion**

This section of the paper will discuss selected aspects of the study, particularly those issues that deal with the choice of language in parliament. The major focus will be to examine the MPs' proficiency in English and relate this to their ability (or lack of it) to participate actively in parliamentary debates and also to find out if introducing indigenous languages in general, and Chichewa in particular, in the National Assembly would be an acceptable option for those whose facility in the language of parliament, English, is limited.

### **Demographic Information on the MPs**

A total of 80 respondents completed the questionnaire with the majority of them being male (86.3%), and ranging between 23 and 67 years in age. The majority were above 36 years of age. The sample was dominated by members of the four demographically major ethnic groups, the Chewa (38.8%), the Lomwe (8.8%), the Yao (16.3%), and the Tumbuka (13.8%). Except for the relatively low figure for the Lomwe, the ethnic representation here reflected, to a larger extent, the national pattern. In terms of education, the majority of the MPs (66.3%) attained an MSCE (equivalent to 'O' Levels) or some post-secondary qualification such as a certificate from a technical college but below university level. While one's level of education is a reliable indication of one's exposure to English, actual proficiency depends very much on the quality of education received.

### **Knowledge of Indigenous Languages**

For the majority of the MPs, Chichewa was cited as their mother tongue (46.2%), followed by Chiyao and Chitumbuka (12.8% each), Chitonga (7.7%), and Chilomwe and Chikhokhola at



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5.1% each. It is also worthy of mention that no one claimed English as a mother tongue. This pattern correlated quite closely with information on the ethnic affiliation of the MPs. There was almost a one-to-one correspondence between an MP's ethnic group and his or her claimed mother tongue. Thus, one's mother tongue remains a very strong indicator of one's ethnic affiliation. The pervasiveness of Chichewa was also noted as well - wherever there was a mismatch between one's ethnic group and one's claimed mother tongue, the mother tongue actually claimed was most commonly Chichewa. The study also showed that the Chewa are notoriously loyal to their ethnic language for the most part. Of all the 31 Chewa MPs in the study, none of them had a language other than Chichewa as a mother tongue. Given that Chichewa is the national language and the national lingua franca as well, the Chewa have had very little social demand to adopt any other indigenous language as their home language.

In order to assess the level of bilingualism among the MPs, they were asked to state other indigenous languages that they speak. Chichewa emerged as the most dominant second language (47.1% of second language mentions). Other languages cited as second languages included Chitumbuka (20.6%), Chiyao (11.8%), Chitonga (5.9%), Chisena (1.5%), and Chilambya (1.5%). With the exception of Chichewa, the MPs tended to know second languages that are geographically close to their own native languages. It is also interesting to note that 10.3% of the respondents cited English as their second language, although the question had specifically asked for Malawian languages. This is probably an indication of the respondents' perception of English as a Malawian language rather than as a foreign language. The general pattern that emerged showed that bilingualism and multilingualism are a matter of life for the majority of the MPs.

### Language Skills in Chichewa

The respondents were also asked to rate their own ability to speak, understand, read, and write Chichewa. Studies by Fishman, Cooper, Ma, et.al. (1971) have shown that this kind of self-reporting is generally accurate. When asked how well they could understand spoken Chichewa, 78.5% of the MPs across all the ethnolinguistic groups reported that they understand everything. In terms of speaking, the majority of the MPs (68.8%) claimed they speak Chichewa fluently while another 21.3% claimed to speak well enough to communicate most ideas. The remaining MPs reported that they speak Chichewa well enough to communicate simple ideas and requests. Knowledge of Chichewa in terms of reading was, however, higher than that of speaking. The majority of the respondents (85.0%) claimed to understand everything they read in Chichewa, while only 12.5% understand only most of what they read. This pattern is hardly surprising because of the teaching of Chichewa in the schools which typically emphasizes the structure of the language rather than speaking. For those with languages other than Chichewa as their mother tongue, the classroom does not, therefore, provide sufficient opportunities for improving their proficiency in Chichewa.

The generalization we can make from these self-reports regarding the MPs' skills in Chichewa is that all the respondents have an adequate facility in Chichewa. What is particularly significant with respect to this study is that the majority of them can understand spoken Chichewa. A language policy, which allows the optional use of Chichewa for debating in the National Assembly, would not disadvantage that many people both in parliament and society in general compared to the current English-only policy.

### Knowledge of English



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With regard to knowledge of English, the majority of the MPs (92%) indicated that they learned it in school. The remaining 8% claim to have learned it at home. The majority pattern here is related to the fact that English in Malawi is largely a taught language and its spread and degree of institutionalization are closely tied to education. As long as English proficiency is the required qualification for elective office, the system will continue to draw its candidates from a relatively small pool of those who have had the luxury of a secondary and university education. In terms of understanding spoken English, the majority of the MPs (78%) indicated that they understand everything that is said by Malawians as well as native speakers. A slightly lower percentage (64.6%) claimed to speak English fluently. Fluency in English rises with increased levels of education. In terms of reading and writing, the respondents report higher proficiency in the former than in the latter.

The overall pattern is that the self-reported proficiency is really quite high in all the four language skills. The majority of the MPs' proficiencies in all the skills range from being enough with few difficulties to near-native control. It is worth noting, however, that there are relatively more MPs who report near-native control in the receptive skills, listening and reading, than in their productive skills, speaking and writing. In general, my own assessment, based on field observations, interviews, and personal interactions with the MPs, is much lower than the MPs' self-reports. During the days that I observed parliamentary debates, the MPs who contributed to the various motions were predictably the more educated ones, particularly those with some university education.

These observed deficiencies reflect both lower levels of education among the majority of the MPs and the fact that these skills are not adequately taught in the schools. As a matter of fact, in a separate question, 44.2% of the MPs indicated that they are making attempts to improve their English formally. It is possible, therefore, that the high self-ratings presented above merely represent the shortfalls of questionnaires. It is likely that some of the respondents may have reported social facts that did not relate to actual socio-cultural practices because they wanted to present a certain image. The MPs qualify for parliamentary elections on the strength of their proficiency in English and this is essentially the image they want to present to the public.

### **Functional Choice of English and Indigenous Languages**

The MPs' were asked if English and Malawian languages are good linguistic choices in various domains and for various functions. In most cases a high acceptance rate for English has a corollary high non-acceptance rate for indigenous languages. The overall pattern that emerges is that English is the most desired language in such domains and functions as official documents (95.9%), appointments with top government officials (87.8%), official speeches (80.6%), secondary schools (91.9%), University (92.0%), parliamentary bills (82.4%), parliamentary proceedings (82.7%), and budgets (86.5%) while Malawian languages are preferred to English in such domains as political speeches (82.9%), court sessions (84.5%), on the radio (84.7%), and in newspapers (71.8%). It should be noted, however, that unlike in the domains in which English is desired, the domains for Malawian languages have also relatively high acceptance rates for English. The general acceptance of the role of English as an institutional language was so broad as to be taken for granted. The respondents were aware of the limitations of insisting on the exclusive use of English in all official domains since not all Malawians know this language.

Some of the MPs' responses to the questionnaire were very surprising. Interviews with the MPs, officers of the house, the general public, and my own field observations consistently showed that the majority of the MPs are unable to follow parliamentary proceedings because of



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low levels of proficiency in English. Some of the obvious areas in which the MPs have problems include reading and understanding bills and budgets that are tabled for discussion in parliament. While these documents are generally written in very technical language, which is a problem for most of the MPs, these legislators have the added disadvantage of having these documents in English, a language that most of them have problems understanding. As a result, some of the MPs are effectively disadvantaged in making any meaningful input except through voting. Hon. Louis Chimango's reference to some of his party colleagues in parliament as the "silent voices" (Morning session, March 14<sup>th</sup>, 2000) is an apt characterization of the majority of the MPs. Some of the comments the MPs made in the post-questionnaire narratives related directly to their deficiencies in English.

The disparity here between the MPs' self-reports of proficiency and the practical demands of using English in parliament relate directly to the social prestige of English. English is viewed as a symbol of social status irrespective of whether or not one has a facility in it. Its attitudinal implications seem to override practical demands for the use of a language or languages that may facilitate debates in parliament. Overall, the association between formal domains and the use of English is very strong. A few formal domains, however, have opened up to indigenous languages reflecting, for the most part, the need to reach out to a wide cross section of the population when political messages are disseminated.

#### **Attitudes Towards Indigenous Languages**

Another set of questions attempted to elicit the MPs' attitudes towards indigenous languages. One of the questions asked the MPs to rate their feelings about speaking indigenous languages. The pattern of responses was not clear-cut. In spite of this ambivalence, some MPs feel that the use of indigenous languages arouses feelings of pride (27.5%), while others feel more Malawian (28.8%) by speaking these languages. While there is slightly little pride in speaking indigenous languages, these languages are, however, associated with nationalistic sentiments as 28.8% of the MPs felt more Malawian while 11.3% felt like genuine Malawians when speaking indigenous languages. Cumulatively, therefore, 67.6% of the MPs expressed nationalistic sentiments towards indigenous languages. Thus, indigenous languages are not only a mark of ethnic identity of its speakers but are also indexical of national identity (also see Firmino 1995).

The indigenous languages are also said to give a better personal image (31.3%) and also facilitate contacts with relatives (30.0%). While the indigenous languages are used for a wide range of functions, they are not strong, however, in facilitating contacts with friends at work and in facilitating knowledge of national and world news, functions that are reserved for English. None of the respondents associated indigenous languages with getting employment, for instance. These responses are consistent with the functional load of indigenous languages vis-à-vis English. English predominates in such formal domains as education, and employment, while indigenous languages, with the exception of Chichewa, are used for intraethnic communication.

#### **Attitudes Towards English**

There were a number of questions that attempted to elicit the attitudes of the MPs towards English in order to find out their social dispositions and how they relate to this language. This information is important in understanding the social implantation of English in Malawi, especially



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whether the language is regarded as part of Malawi's cultural milieu and not as a foreign language. The majority of the MPs (45.6%) associate English with pride, presumably because of the social prestige that it enjoys in Malawi. English is not, from the MPs' responses, a nationalistic language in Malawi since only 5.1% of the respondents felt more Malawian by speaking English; it is not the language in which Malawians imagine their national community. The overall pattern here suggests that the importance of English among the MPs lies in its social prestige and in its status as a medium through which knowledge is gained. There was little evidence to show that English is perceived as a viable resource for interpersonal communication, probably since this function is fulfilled by the national lingua franca, Chichewa. The low educational levels of the majority of the MPs may also help to explain the low use of English to fulfill the interpersonal function.

### **MPs' Dispositions Towards Language in Parliament**

The study showed that there is genuine concern among some of the legislators that English is a major obstacle to their participation in parliamentary debates. One of the items on the questionnaire asked the MPs if English limits their involvement in debates. While a bare majority of 55.7% are not affected by limited proficiency, 15.2% report serious limitations and the other 29.1% are partially affected. It should also be noted that while some MPs do not fully acknowledge their linguistic handicaps, they generally accept that the use of Chichewa or their mother tongue in parliament would significantly facilitate their participation. Half or more of the MPs would fully benefit from the use of Chichewa or their mother tongues while another 16% would benefit partially. It appears that in both cases the use of an indigenous language would give them more confidence compared to the exclusive use of English. It is mostly those with higher academic qualifications who show no appreciable deficiencies in the exclusive use of English in Parliament. On the other hand, it is mostly those with less than some university education who would benefit most from the use of Chichewa. For instance, 6 of the 9 MPs with a Junior Certificate, 16 of those 26 MPs with an MSCE, and 14 of the 26 with some technical education show strong support for the use of Chichewa. On the other hand, only 3 of those MPs with some university education think that the use of Chichewa would facilitate their participation in parliament.

### **Language(s) that Parliament Should Adopt**

With regard to the choice of language in parliament, the MPs were given four choices: English only, Chichewa only, both English and Chichewa, and other specified Malawian language(s). The English-Chichewa bilingual choice had a slight edge over the English-only option (50.0%). A Chichewa-only policy was given a low rating as only 3.8% of the MPs endorsed that choice. The maintenance of the current English-only policy also appears to be very strong (46.3%). Those with MSCE and below were in the majority in support of a bilingual policy while those with post secondary education wanted to maintain the English-only policy. These results are predictable since those with lower education would benefit quite considerably from a bilingual policy.

With regard to mother tongue and the choice of a language in parliament, the majority of the Chewa MPs were in favor of the bilingual policy while native speakers of other major languages (Chilomwe, Chiyao, Chitumbuka) favored the exclusive use of English. The latter's choice is probably an expression of their sub-national sentiments against Chichewa, a language they view as having established a political hegemony at the expense of their own indigenous

languages. Over two-thirds of the English-only votes came from non-Chichewa MPs while almost two-thirds of the English/Chichewa option came from Chichewa mother tongue MPs. In spite of these feelings against Chichewa, 93.4% of the MPs saw Chichewa as a symbol of national identity. Thus, Chichewa is the language around which Malawi's national community is mobilized.

### Reasons for Language Choice in Parliament

As we have noted throughout this paper, those with higher education tended to favor the exclusive use of English in parliament. A number of reasons were given in support of such a language choice. One of the most cited reasons was that English is the only politically and ethnically neutral language that does not, on these parameters, disadvantage anyone in the house. One of the MPs noted that "the English language, despite being foreign, unites the nation, other than local languages which are numerous". Some MPs indicated that introducing Chichewa in the house would disadvantage, politically, speakers of other indigenous languages while the introduction of more than one indigenous language would not be economically viable. Given the low socio-economic status associated with indigenous languages, including Chichewa, some of the English-only supporters felt that the introduction of any indigenous language would significantly lower the status of parliament. English confers status on the house and it should be used "to maintain the high standards of the house and the caliber of members of parliament chosen to this house" (Questionnaire comment 4).

Another reason given for the maintenance of English in parliament, especially by the officers of the house, was that the Malawi Parliament is a member of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and therefore needs English to participate in this organization more effectively and maintain contacts with the outside world. It should be noted here, however, that this position does not preclude the possibility of using an indigenous language in parliament for debates, as long as English is maintained. As a matter of fact, the officers of the house that were interviewed were very supportive of the idea that Chichewa should be included in parliament as an alternative language for those MPs who are not very fluent in English.

Finally, some MPs and interviewees felt that indigenous languages lack the requisite legal and parliamentary register to be used in parliament. This reasoning, however, cannot stand in the face of the recent translation of the constitution into some indigenous languages. In these translations, various linguistic resources such as loaning and loan translation have been used effectively. As Saville-Troike (1973:4) notes, the nature and form of each language reflects the social requirements of the society that uses it, and there is no standard for judging the effectiveness of a language other than to estimate its success in achieving the social tasks that are demanded of it. Thus, Chichewa, and any other indigenous language for that matter, cannot be judged based on social functions that the society has not yet demanded of it. The only way that indigenous languages can be enriched in terms of legal and constitutional vocabulary is to be used in domains that require such vocabulary (see UNESCO *Working Document* 1997:13).

The MPs and interviewees who were in support of the addition of Chichewa, and where and when feasible, other indigenous languages in parliament, were mostly concerned with the problems that some MPs have in expressing themselves in English. It is contended here that the issues the National Assembly discusses are mostly local and would best be presented in a local language. It is important to note that those in support of indigenous languages also support the continued use of English by those who may be handicapped in Chichewa or their own mother tongue because of the long contact with English. A bilingual or multilingual policy

for the National Assembly is envisaged.

It is important to note that the idea of Chichewa is not meant to allow those who have a facility in Chichewa only to qualify for parliamentary elections but rather to enable those who qualify under the existing conditions to participate in the debates more effectively. Otherwise, putting proficiency in Chichewa as the only requirement would attract even those who have not been to school. My interviews and interactions with a lot of Malawians emphasized the need to maintain some minimum academic qualification for the MPs since the issues discussed in the National Assembly require some level of literacy. Some of the MPs and interviewees observed that the credibility of the National Assembly would seriously be undermined if people without any formal education became MPs. The commonly cited minimum qualification was MSCE.

Other reasons for the support of indigenous languages had to do with the preservation of culture and the promotion of Malawian languages. There were also nationalistic or ideological reasons given, namely that Malawi, as an independent country, should no longer rely on an ex-colonial language.

### On Renaming the National Language “Chinyanja”

Related to the issue of Chichewa as a national language and symbol of nation-statehood, was a question concerning the name of the language. It will be recalled that Chichewa was until 1968 called Chinyanja. This is the name that other dialects of the code are known by in the neighboring countries of Zambia, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe. Some of the language debates that ensued after the 1994 political changes centered on whether or not it was prudent to revert to the old name of the language. Such a change might also symbolize the demise of the Banda era and the resurgence of political pluralism. It was clear in the field interviews that the acceptance of Chichewa as a national language and a symbol of nation-statehood seemed to be predicated on its being disassociated from a particular ethnic group, the Chewa. Chinyanja provides such an avenue for change.

With this background in mind, the MPs were asked whether renaming the national language as Chinyanja would be in the best interest of the nation. With only 54 MPs responding to this question, the results showed a fifty-fifty split. Although the Ministry of Education announced in February 1999 that the name of the language had reverted back to Chinyanja, the old name has not picked up any currency and attempts to popularize the change continue to meet some opposition.

The survey also showed that it is mostly the Chewa MPs who want to maintain the name. For instance, while 70% of the Chewa MPs support the status quo, 60% of the Lomwe MPs, 63.6% of the Yao MPs, and 66.7% of the Tumbuka MPs support the change of name. The Chewa MPs would like to maintain the name most probably because of the political and cultural clout it confers on their ethnic group. Kathewera (1999:108) also insists on the maintenance of the current name by basing his argument on the historical fact that the Chewa and the Nyanja belong to the same ethnic group and speak dialects of the same language. The differences in name have to do with the fact that the Maravi people who settled along Lake Malawi were named after the lake, Nyanja (lake), otherwise they are the same Chichewa-speaking group.

The non-Chewa MPs are, on the other hand, in support of the change of name (78% of the “yes” vote). Their basic argument is that a national language should not be identified with one specific ethnic group, or otherwise it will be politically divisive and inevitably erode the status of minority languages and pose a major threat to the identity of the speakers of those languages. Some MPs have in fact questioned the legitimacy of Chichewa as a national language, claiming

that it was imposed on the people.

### Summary and Conclusion

The overall pattern that emerges with respect to knowledge and use of English, Chichewa, and other indigenous languages is continuous with the positions of the languages in the linguistic market in Malawi. English is a formal institutional language; Chichewa is a national lingua franca; while the other indigenous languages are restricted, for the most part, to familial and intra-ethnic interactions. In spite of its reign as the dominant language for wider communication, Chichewa has always played second-class to English in Malawi in terms of its attitudinal implications. It has consequently made very little inroads into the official domains of national life. Probably the only real official function of Chichewa is in its role as a symbol of national identity.

Another significant pattern that is clear from these results is that English is increasingly making inroads and gaining ascendancy in informal domains. The social boundaries that define the use of specific languages are increasingly becoming nebulous. The functional predominance of Chichewa, especially in interpersonal communication, local trade, and so on, is also clear. My field observations showed that Chichewa is the primary choice in most interactions, unless the interlocutors are recognizably non-speakers of this language or when an indigenous language is used to establish social solidarity. The patterns discussed above clearly show that the social situation in which the MPs are immersed as well as the symbolic and indexical values associated with English, Chichewa, and indigenous languages move them towards English and Chichewa and inhibit the use of indigenous languages in such situations. One of the generalizations we can make is that English has been appropriated by a significant social segment of Malawians and integrated into their social life as a natural linguistic resource; exogenous forces no longer determine the use of English.

With regard to language choice for the National Assembly, the responses to the questionnaire, the interviews, and the field observations all point to some kind of special 'diglossia'. The MPs typically communicate orally in Chichewa or in other indigenous languages but prefer to read and write in English. The language ability self-ratings reported in this study are also continuous with this diglossic assessment. As we noted, the MPs view their reading and listening abilities in English as being far better than abilities in speaking and writing. In general, we have presented evidence that some MPs do not participate actively in the debates of the National Assembly because they lack the requisite proficiency in English.

The overall pattern that emerges from the MPs' responses is that they prefer documents that are presented and discussed in parliament such as budgets and bills to continue to be written in English. Parliamentary records will also continue to be written and kept in English. This reflects largely the fact that they view their proficiency in reading English as adequate. On the other hand, they also seem to indicate a desire to be allowed to discuss these documents either in English or Chichewa depending on which of these languages each MP feels comfortable, a fact which is continuous with their low levels of proficiency in speaking English. Chichewa has emerged as the most viable indigenous language to be used in the National Assembly because virtually all MPs interviewed understand it, although some of them may not be able to speak it fluently. It is possible, therefore, that some MPs may opt to use Chichewa without disadvantaging other MPs. It is also important to emphasize that the bilingual policy being proposed here has little to do with attempts to ameliorate nationalist-nationalist conflicts but rather to accommodate the needs of those who may have problems communicating in English only.



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This bilingual policy, which is similar to the Kenyan model (see Mazrui and Mazrui 1998), represents a real possibility in widening the society's democratic base in not only allowing all MPs to participate in parliamentary discussions, but also in allowing the general public to follow parliamentary proceedings without the need for interpreters. The authority of representative systems of government emanates from the people through popular elections. Democracy, as a system of government, implies both universal suffrage and the minimization of obstacles to the exercise of this suffrage. In the context of Malawi, as we have noted throughout this report, the exclusive use of English is one such obstacle which could be eased by the complementary use of Chichewa.



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