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Phonological Analysis of Chinyanja Dialects: A Case of Lusaka and Chadiza Districts, Zambia

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ABSTRACT **Original Research Article**

Dialectal nuances have persisted in Chinyanja dialects over the years. Efforts to elucidate the latter have been put forth, yet the vice still exists. This study conducts a phonological analysis of Chinyanja dialects spoken in Lusaka and Chadiza districts. The study aims to analyse phonological differences and similarities of Chinyanja dialects spoken in Lusaka and Chadiza districts. Utilising a qualitative approach, the study examines phonetic variations in vowel quality and syllable structure. Data were collected through recordings and interviews with native speakers, ensuring a comprehensive representation of the dialects. The study was guided by Contrastive Linguistics Theory in its analysis. The findings reveal notable distinctions in vowel quality and syllable structure, reflecting the influence of socio-cultural factors and geographical proximity. This analysis contributes to the understanding of Chinyanja dialectology and emphasises the importance of preserving linguistic diversity within Zambia. The study highlights the implications for language education and policy, thereby advocating for a recognition of dialectal variations in linguistic resources and teaching methodologies.

Keywords: Chinyanja, Dialects, Linguistic Diversity, Phonetic Variation, Phonological Analysis.

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Introduction

Language is a fundamental aspect of human identity, culture, and communication (Siame et al., 2025). In Zambia, a multilingual nation with over seventy indigenous languages, Chinyanja holds a particularly significant position as one of the seven official regional languages (Ministry of Education, 1996; Lubbungu, 2026). Chinyanja, also known as Nyanja or Chichewa, is a Bantu language belonging to the Niger-Congo language family, spoken predominantly in Malawi, Zambia, Mozambique and Zimbabwe (Guthrie, 1967–1971; Maho, 2003). In Zambia, the language is widely spoken in the Eastern Province, including Chadiza District, as well as in the capital city, Lusaka, where it has evolved into a distinct urban variety often referred to as 'Town Nyanja' (Bickmore, 2024; Gray, Lubasi, & Bwalya, 2013).

The classification of Chinyanja within the Bantu language family has been well established. Guthrie (1967–1971) classified both Nyanja and Chichewa as N.31, while Maho (2003) further refined this classification, listing Chichewa as N.31a and Nyanja as N.31b (Bickmore, 2024). Despite this shared classification, significant dialectal variation exists between different varieties of Chinyanja spoken across geographical regions (Miti, 1988). These variations manifest at multiple linguistic levels, including phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon (Mwanza, 2012; Siame, 2022).

Phonology, the study of the sound systems of languages, is a particularly revealing domain for understanding dialectal variation. Phonological differences between dialects can include variations in vowel systems, consonant inventories,

tonal patterns, and phonological processes such as assimilation, dissimilation, and vowel harmony (Odden, 2015; Siame et al., 2023). In the case of Chinyanja, previous research has identified notable phonological differences between the rural varieties spoken in Eastern Province and the urban variety spoken in Lusaka (Bickmore, 2024; Miti, 1988). However, comprehensive phonological analyses comparing specific varieties within Zambia remain limited.

Chinyanja in Zambia exhibits considerable dialectal variation, yet systematic phonological analyses comparing different varieties are scarce. The Chinyanja spoken in Lusaka, often referred to as Town Nyanja, has been described as 'extremely different from rural Chinyanja, incorporating large numbers of English-derived words, as well as showing influence from other Zambian languages such as Bemba' (Chewa language, 2012: 2). In contrast, the Chinyanja spoken in Chadiza District, located in Eastern Province near the Malawi border, is likely to retain more features of traditional rural Chinyanja.

Despite anecdotal observations and preliminary descriptions of these differences, there has been limited empirical research systematically comparing the phonological systems of these two varieties. Miti (1988) conducted a seminal study on tonal variation in Zambian Chinyanja varieties, including Zambian Chicewa, Chinsenga and Chingoni, and concluded that on the basis of tonal data, there are five distinct varieties of Zambian Chinyanja. However, this study did not specifically compare the Lusaka urban variety with the rural Eastern Province variety represented by Chadiza District.

Furthermore, Bickmore (2024) provided a detailed analysis of Town Nyanja verbal tonology, demonstrating that Town Nyanja has lost the underlying tone contrast found in verb roots in Malawian Chichewa and that it does not have high-toned verbal extensions, unlike Chichewa. However, this study focused primarily on Lusaka Chinyanja without a comparative analysis with rural varieties. This gap in the literature necessitates a systematic phonological analysis comparing the Chinyanja spoken in Lusaka and Chadiza districts.

The purpose of this study was to analyse the phonological differences and similarities of Chinyanja spoken in Lusaka and Chadiza Districts in Zambia, guided by the main objective: to analyse the phonological differences and similarities of Chinyanja spoken in Lusaka and Chadiza districts.

The findings of this study were of significance to various stakeholders. To linguists and language scholars, the study contributes to the documentation and description of Chinyanja dialectal variation in Zambia, addressing a gap in the existing literature. To language educators and curriculum developers, the findings inform decisions regarding which variety of Chinyanja is appropriate for use as a medium of instruction in different regions (Mwanza, 2012). To policymakers, the study provides empirical evidence to support language policy decisions, particularly regarding the standardisation and orthography of Chinyanja in Zambia (Chewa language, 2012; Siame & Lubbungu). To language learners and speakers, the study enhances awareness of the rich dialectal diversity within Chinyanja. Finally, to future researchers, this study provides a foundation for further comparative and historical linguistic research on Chinyanja and other Bantu languages in Zambia.

Literature Review

At the global level, the study of phonological variation within and across languages has been a central concern of linguistics for over a century. The comparative method, developed primarily by nineteenth-century linguists such as the Neogrammarians, established the systematic principles for comparing languages and reconstructing their common ancestors (Campbell, 2013). This method, applied extensively to the Indo-European language family, has since been adapted and applied to other language families, including Bantu (Bostoen, 2019; Guthrie, 1967–1971).

In the field of phonology, theoretical developments have profoundly influenced how scholars approach dialectal variation. Early generative phonology, as articulated by Chomsky and Halle (1968), treated phonology as a system of rules operating on abstract underlying representations to produce surface phonetic forms. While this framework provided powerful tools for analysing sound patterns, it was criticised for being too abstract and unconstrained when applied to dialectal variation (Miti, 1988). Traditional models of generative phonology, according to Miti (1988), were found to be 'too abstract and unconstrained', and in generative dialectology, 'underlying forms which were constructed tended to be so abstract that they were really historical forms having no direct justification from the contemporary systems of the individual dialects' (p. 7).

Studies have identified distinct phonological features that characterise American dialects. For example, the vowel shifts observed in various regions, such as the Northern Cities Vowel Shift, have been extensively documented. Labov, Ash and Boberg (2006), in *The Atlas of North American English: Phonetics, Phonology and Sound Change*, examined patterns of phonological variation and sound change in North American English, with particular attention to regional vowel shifts. They discussed how this shift affects vowel pronunciation in Midwestern urban areas, illustrating the phonological landscape of American English. The scholars highlight the Northern Cities Vowel Shift and its implications for understanding urban phonological variation in American English. This study was relevant to the current study, as it provided insights into what would be unearthed. The findings reviewed were similar to those of the current study, which intended to identify phonological features of Chinyanja in Lusaka and Chadiza districts. However, the current study identified other phonological features, such as the syllable

structure beyond the vowel system discussed by the scholars in the reviewed study.

Chambers and Trudgill (1998), in their influential textbook *Dialectology*, provide a comprehensive treatment of dialectology as the systematic study of linguistic variation across geographical, social and temporal dimensions. The second edition, published by Cambridge University Press, develops an integrated approach to regional and social dialectology and incorporates developments in dialect geography, dialectometry and the mapping of linguistic variation. The authors also discuss dialect geography, urban dialectology, social variation and spatial variation. Their treatment demonstrates that linguistic variation may occur according to geographical location, social group and historical period. They further emphasise the relationship between dialectology and other areas of linguistics, including phonetics, phonology, historical linguistics and sociolinguistics. In particular, detailed descriptions of dialects can contribute to a broader understanding of phonological and grammatical variation. The work was relevant to the present study because the proposed analysis of Chinyanja in Lusaka and Chadiza required a systematic comparison of linguistic varieties across geographical and social contexts. The framework provided by Chambers and Trudgill (1998) supports the investigation of phonological variation while recognising the influence of social and geographical factors. Their work therefore provided a broad methodological foundation for comparing Chinyanja varieties and identifying areas of similarity and difference between the two speech communities.

The development of autosegmental phonology by Goldsmith (1976) represented a significant advance in phonological theory, particularly for the analysis of tone languages (Clements & Goldsmith, 1984). Unlike linear models, autosegmental phonology treats tone separately from the segmental elements that bear it, allowing for more adequate handling of tonal variation (Miti, 1988). This framework has been particularly influential in the analysis of Bantu languages, many of which are tonal (Odden, 2015).

More recently, contrastive linguistics has emerged as a practice-oriented approach that seeks to describe the differences and similarities between languages or language varieties (Contrastive linguistics, 2011). Contrastive descriptions can be made at every level of linguistic structure, including phonology, morphology, syntax and lexicon (Contrastive linguistics, 2011). In the context of dialectology, contrastive analysis provides a systematic framework for comparing varieties and identifying the features that distinguish them.

The study of phonological variation in Bantu languages has received considerable attention globally. Research has examined various phonological phenomena, including vowel systems, consonant inventories, tonal patterns and phonological processes such as vowel harmony, nasal assimilation and penultimate lengthening (Hyman, 1994; Odden, 2015). Studies have also investigated the interaction between phonology and other linguistic domains, such as morphology and syntax (Bickmore, 2024). However, despite this extensive body of research, many Bantu language varieties remain under-documented, and comparative studies within specific languages are often limited.

Within the African context, the study of phonological variation in Bantu languages has been particularly active. The Bantu language family, comprising between 400 and 500 languages spoken across much of sub-Saharan Africa, has been the subject of extensive comparative and historical linguistic research (Guthrie, 1967–1971; Nurse & Philippson, 2003). Scholars have applied the comparative method to reconstruct Proto-Bantu phonology, vocabulary and grammar, providing a foundation for understanding the relationships between modern Bantu languages (Bostoen, 2019; Guthrie, 1967–1971).

In southern Africa, comparative studies of Bantu languages have examined phonological variation at multiple levels. For example, studies have compared the phonology of closely related varieties such as Cisukwa, Cindali and Cilambya in Malawi (Brenzinger, n.d.), as well as Lungu, Mambwe and Namwanga in Zambia (A comparative analysis of the phonology and morphosyntax of Cisukwa, Cindali and Cilambya, n.d.). These studies have revealed both shared features and distinctive characteristics that distinguish the varieties.

In the specific context of Chinyanja/Chichewa, research has been conducted in Malawi, Zambia and Mozambique. The phonology of Malawian Chichewa has been extensively documented, including its tonal system, which is described as having high tones (H) and low tones (L), though some scholars argue it is more accurate to think of it as having high-toned syllables versus toneless ones (Chichewa tones, 2015). In contrast, the tonal phonology of Chinyanja spoken in Zambia has received less attention. Miti (1988) conducted a detailed autosegmental analysis of tonal variation in Zambian Chinyanja. The study employed autosegmental phonology to analyse tonal relationships, a topic 'usually neglected in dialect studies' (Miti, 1988: 5). Miti (1988) concluded that, based on tonal data, there are five distinct varieties of Zambian Chinyanja (Ce1, Ce2, Ns1, Ng and Ns2), compared to only three varieties based on lexicostatistical analysis alone. This finding underscores the importance of including tonal analysis in dialect studies, as 'based on vocabulary correspondences and other segmental information alone, the classification of language varieties or dialects may be overly simplistic' (Miti, 1988: 16).

Mwanza (2012) investigated the appropriateness of Chinyanja as a language of initial literacy in Lusaka District. The study found that 'there were a lot of differences between the Cinyanja spoken at play in Lusaka District and the one which was officially recognised in schools' (Mwanza, 2012:

29). Both teachers and pupils were found to lack proficiency in Standard Nyanja, leading to a 'mismatch between the Cinyanja spoken by children during play and the one recognised in schools' (Mwanza, 2012: 30). This finding highlights the practical implications of dialectal variation for language education in Zambia.

Despite these contributions, there remains a gap in the literature specifically comparing the phonology of Chinyanja spoken in Lusaka and Chadiza districts. While studies have examined individual varieties, a systematic comparative phonological analysis of these two geographically and socially distinct varieties is lacking. This study aims to address this gap.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Contrastive Linguistics Theory, a framework that seeks to describe the differences and similarities between languages or language varieties (Contrastive Linguistics, 2011). Contrastive linguistics is 'a practice-oriented linguistic approach that seeks to describe the differences and similarities between a pair of languages' and can be applied 'at every level of linguistic structure: speech sounds (phonology), written symbols (graphology), word-formation (morphology), word meaning (lexicology)' (Contrastive Linguistics, 2011: 1–2).

The contrastive approach is built on several key principles. First, it is inherently comparative, examining two or more linguistic systems to identify their points of convergence and divergence (James, 1980). Second, it is systematic, analysing linguistic phenomena at multiple levels of structure (Contrastive linguistics, 2011). Third, it is descriptive, providing detailed accounts of the features that characterise each variety (Lado, 1957). Fourth, it is explanatory, seeking to understand the factors that account for observed similarities and differences (James, 1980).

In the context of dialectology, contrastive analysis provides a systematic framework for comparing varieties and identifying the features that distinguish them. Contrastive descriptions can be made at every level of linguistic structure, including phonology, morphology, syntax and lexicon (Contrastive linguistics, 2011). In this study, the focus is on phonology, examining the sound systems of the two Chinyanja varieties.

Contrastive linguistics theory provides a relevant framework for analysing the phonological differences and similarities between Chinyanja spoken in Lusaka and Chadiza districts. The theory guided the researcher to systematically compare the sound systems of the two varieties, identifying points of convergence and divergence.

In this study, the contrastive framework was applied to compare the two varieties at two phonological levels. First, segmental phonology was examined, comparing the vowel system inventories of the two varieties. Second, suprasegmental phonology, particularly the examination of the syllabic system, was analysed.

The contrastive framework also guided the interpretation of findings. Where differences were identified, the theory encouraged exploration of the factors that may account for these differences, such as language contact, historical change or sociolinguistic factors (James, 1980). In the case of Lusaka Chinyanja, contact with English, Bemba and other languages has been identified as a factor contributing to its distinctiveness (Chewa language, 2012). In the case of Chadiza Chinyanja, its proximity to Malawi may result in greater similarity to Malawian Chichewa.

Contrastive linguistics theory was particularly relevant to this study for several reasons. First, it provides a systematic and rigorous framework for comparing the phonological systems of the two varieties, ensuring that the analysis is comprehensive and methodologically sound (Contrastive linguistics, 2011). Second, it guides the researcher to examine multiple levels of phonological structure, from individual segments to larger prosodic units, capturing the full range of phonological variation (Lado, 1957). Third, it encourages the identification of both differences and similarities, providing a balanced account of the relationship between the two varieties (James, 1980). Fourth, it facilitates the interpretation of findings by relating observed patterns to broader linguistic and sociolinguistic factors (Contrastive Linguistics, 2011).

By applying the contrastive framework, this study seeks to provide a systematic phonological analysis of Chinyanja spoken in Lusaka and Chadiza districts, contributing to the documentation and understanding of dialectal variation within this important Bantu language.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research design. The qualitative approach was appropriate for this research as it allowed for an in-depth exploration of the phonological features of the two Chinyanja varieties, capturing the rich, detailed characteristics of each variety's sound system (Creswell, 2014; Okolie, 2025). The qualitative design is particularly suited to linguistic research, where the focus is on understanding the structure and patterns of language rather than on quantifying frequencies (Merriam, 2009). This design enabled the researcher to conduct a systematic contrastive analysis of the phonological systems of Chinyanja spoken in Lusaka and Chadiza districts.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 purposively selected participants comprising 16 native Chinyanja speakers from diverse age groups (18–53 years) and four professions (teachers of Chinyanja with an age range of 25–48). Semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility in probing responses while maintaining focus on the research objective (Merriam, 2009). The interviews explored participants' perceptions of the phonological features of Chinyanja in their district, their awareness of differences

between varieties and their observations of phonological variation (Patton, 2015). Teachers were also asked about their experiences in teaching Chinyanja and any challenges related to dialectal variation.

Data presentation involved five themes: retention of inherited sound patterns, divergence in segmental realisation, repair strategies for borrowed forms, dialect awareness and accommodation, and evaluation of the standard and the local. Thematic analysis followed the six-phase approach of Braun and Clarke (2006). Interview transcripts were repeatedly reviewed, systematically coded and collated into themes, which were reviewed, refined, defined, named and illustrated with representative extracts. Analysis was conducted manually to maintain engagement with linguistic and sociocultural nuances.

Results and Discussion

Retention of Inherited Sound Patterns

The first and most extensive theme to emerge from the phonological data was the degree of similarity between the two varieties. Across the elicitation tasks, the majority of forms produced were identical in both districts, both in their segmental composition and in their syllabic organisation.

All twenty participants produced the same five contrastive vowel qualities, and no participant in either district produced a vowel outside that set in a Chinyanja-origin word. Table 5.4 presents the forms that were produced identically by all sixteen speakers.

Table 1: Forms produced identically in both districts

English gloss	Chinyanja form	Transcription	Syllable profile
to put on (clothes)	kuvala	/kuvala/	CV.CV.CV
plate	mbale	/mbale/	NCV.CV
tree	mtengo	/mtengo/	N.CV.CV
relish	ndiyo	/ndijo/	NCV.CV
goat	mbuzi	/mbuzi/	NCV.CV
house	nyumba	/pumba/	CV.NCV

Two features of this set are worth noting. First, every form terminates in a vowel, and no participant in either district produced a closed syllable in a Chinyanja-origin word. Second, the sequences of nasal plus consonant in *mbale*, *ndiyo* and *mbuzi* were produced without an intervening vowel by all sixteen speakers, and were not broken up or simplified by any participant.

The narrative and observational data supported the same pattern. In the connected speech recorded during the narrative task, the syllabic profile of Chinyanja-origin words was consistent across both districts. Example (1) illustrates a clause produced in Chadiza in which every syllable is open and every nasal-consonant sequence is preserved.

(1) kama yatyoka [kama-ya-tyok-a] 'The bed has broken.'

bed 9SM-break-FV (*Narrative task data, Chadiza. Item A3.1.*)

Speakers in both districts described this similarity when asked whether they noticed differences in how words were pronounced. A Lusaka speaker and a Chadiza speaker gave complementary accounts as shown below:

> *Mme me intachulira mawu ambiri a Chinyanja ndi kofanana ndi mme ne anthu a kumadera ena amalankhulira. Koma pali mawu ena omwe mungazindikire kuti pronunciation yake ndi yosiyana. Mukamamva pafupipafupi, mumazolowera.* 'The way we pronounce most Chinyanja words is the same as the way people in other areas speak. But there are certain words where you can notice that the pronunciation is different. When you hear it often, you get used to it.' (*Speaker C, Lusaka, male, age 41. Item A3.2.*)

> *Pali kufanana kwakukulu pa mme me intachulira mawu a Chinyanja, koma pali mawu ena omwe anthu a ku Lusaka amawatchula mosiyana. Ukamva muntuhu akunena mawu ena; you can sometimes tell that the person is from Lusaka. Koma ngakhale pronunciation itasiyana pang'ono, timamvetsetsana bwino chifukwa ndi Chinyanja chomwecho* 'There is a great deal of similarity in how we pronounce Chinyanja words, but there are certain words that people from Lusaka pronounce differently. When you hear a person saying certain words, you can sometimes tell that the person is from Lusaka. But even though the pronunciation differs a little, we understand each other well because it is the same Chinyanja.' (*Speaker J, Chadiza, female, age 29. Item A3.3.*)

Both accounts locate the difference in a limited set of particular words rather than in the sound system as a whole, and both affirm mutual intelligibility.

The professionals described the same pattern from the perspective of the classroom:

> *Kuchokera pa zime ne ndimawona, mawu omwe ana athu amagwiritsa ntchito ndi ofanana kwambiri ndi omwe ndimva kwa anthu a ku Lusaka. Kusiyana kumene kumawoneka kwambiri kumakhala pa mawu ena komanso pronunciation. Ana ambiri amasunga mme ne amamvera Chinyanja kunyumba* 'From what I observe, the words our children use are very similar to those I hear from people in Lusaka. The difference that shows most is in certain words and in pronunciation. Most children keep the way they hear Chinyanja at home'(*Professional S, Chadiza, female. Item B2.1.*)

The finding for this theme is therefore that the phonological similarity between the two varieties is extensive and covers the greater part of the elicited and naturalistic data. Participants and professionals alike located differences in specific lexical items rather than in the underlying sound system. The differences reported under the following two themes occur against this background of shared structure.

The most extensive finding under this theme was one of similarity rather than difference. All twenty participants produced the same five contrastive vowel qualities; no participant in either district produced a closed syllable in a Chinyanja-origin word; and the nasal-consonant sequences in *mbale*, *ndiyo* and *mbuzi* were produced without an intervening vowel by every speaker.

This is what the comparative Bantu literature would lead one to expect. The five-vowel system recorded here is the system Hyman (2003) describes as the commonest outcome of the Proto-Bantu seven-vowel inventory across the family, and it is the system Downing and Mtenje (2017) document for Chichewa, of which Chinyanja is the Zambian variety. The open-syllable requirement and the treatment of prenasalised sequences as single onsets rather than as clusters are likewise general Bantu properties rather than local ones (Nurse & Philippson, 2003; Van de Velde et al., 2019). What the data show, in other words, is that both varieties retain the inherited phonological system substantially intact.

The significance of this for the study is structural. Chambers and Trudgill (1998) argue that the working criterion distinguishing dialects of one language from separate languages is the presence of a shared underlying system across which surface differences are mapped, together with mutual intelligibility. Both conditions are satisfied here. The differences reported under Themes Two and Three are differences in which items are selected and how foreign material is handled; they are not differences in the phonological system that selects and handles them.

Participants' own accounts converge on the same conclusion. Speakers C and J, from opposite districts, each located the difference in a limited set of particular words while affirming that comprehension is unaffected, and Professional S described her learners' forms as very similar to those she hears from Lusaka. That participants and analysis agree on this point is itself worth noting: as Niedzielski and Preston (2000) observe, folk accounts of language difference are frequently more accurate about the location of variation than about its extent or its causes. Here the location is correctly identified.

This finding also bears on how the study should be read against the regional literature. Where earlier work on Zambian urban language has emphasised the emergence of distinct urban varieties (Spitulnik, 1998), the present data suggest that in the phonological domain at least, urban Chinyanja has not diverged from the rural variety at the level of the system. Divergence, where it occurs, is lexical.

Divergence in Segmental Realisation

Against that shared background, the data revealed a small and specific set of items on which the two districts diverged. These fell into two sub-patterns: items where the districts drew on different lexical material altogether, and items where the same lexical material was realised with a different segment.

Divergent lexical material

Four items were produced with entirely different forms in the two districts. Table 5.5 sets out these forms together with their distribution among the sixteen speakers.

Table 2: Items produced with divergent forms

English gloss	Chadiza (n=7)	Lusaka (n=9)	Distribution
fire	moto /mɔtɔ/	mulilo /mullɔ/	moto by six of seven in Chadiza; mulilo by eight of nine in Lusaka
bird	mbalame /mbalamɛ/	kanyoni /kɑpɔni/	mbalame throughout Chadiza; kanyoni throughout Lusaka
to speak	kulankhula /kulankhula/	kukamba /kukamba/	kulankhula throughout Chadiza; kukamba throughout Lusaka
dog	galu /galu/	imbwa /imbwa/	galu throughout Chadiza; imbwa throughout Lusaka

The distribution of the forms for 'fire' was not categorical in either district. One Chadiza speaker produced *mulilo*, and one Lusaka speaker, a woman of forty-eight who reported Chadiza origins, produced *moto*. Both forms were therefore known in both districts, but each was clearly preferred in one.

The vowel qualities in these divergent pairs are drawn from the same five-vowel set. In *moto* and *mulilo* the difference lies in which vowels occur, not in the inventory available; no vowel appears in one variety that does not appear in the other.

Divergent realisation of the same item

A second and narrower pattern was found in the word for 'water', where the two districts produced what is recognisably the same item with a different medial consonant.

Table 3: Divergent segmental realisation

English gloss	Chadiza (n=7)	Lusaka (n=9)	Distribution
water	madzi /madzi/	manzi /manzi/	madzi by all seven in Chadiza; manzi by all nine in Lusaka

This was the most consistent single difference recorded in the phonological data. Every speaker in Chadiza produced *madzi* and every speaker in Lusaka produced *manzi*, with no exceptions in either direction. The vowels are identical in both forms; the difference is confined to the medial consonant.

Several participants commented on this difference in the three counts illustrated below:

> *Se pano timanena kuti madzi. Manzi ndimawamva kwambiri kwa anthu ochokera ku Lusaka. Mukamva muntnu akunena manzi, mumatha kuzindikira kuti mwina wachokera ku Lusaka. Koma timamvetsetsana bwino chifukwa tanthauzo lake ndi lomwelo* 'Here we say madzi. I hear manzi mostly from people who come from Lusaka. When you hear someone saying manzi, you can tell they are probably from Lusaka. But we understand each other well because the meaning is the same.' *Speaker J, Chadiza, female, age 29. Item A3.3.*)

> *Kuno timakonda kunena madzi, osati manzi. Koma anthu amene amakhala ku Lusaka kapena amene akhala kumeneko amatha kugwiritsa ntchito manzi. Sizikhala zovuta kumvetsetsana chifukwa tonse tikulankhula Chinyanja* 'Here we prefer to say madzi, not manzi. But people who live in Lusaka, or who have lived there, tend to use manzi. It is not difficult to understand each other because we are all speaking Chinyanja' (*Speaker M, Chadiza, male, age 38. Item A3.1.*)

> *Ife ku Lusaka timakonda kunena manzi, koma ndamvapo anthu a ku Chadiza akunena madzi. Poyamba ndimaganiza kuti ndi kusiyana kwakukulu, koma tsopano ndazolowera. Tikamalankhula, timamvetsetsana bwino ngakhale mawuwo atasiyana* 'Here in Lusaka, we prefer to say manzi, but I have heard people from Chadiza saying madzi. At first, I thought it was a big difference, but now I have grown used to it. When we speak, we understand each other well even though the words differ' (*Speaker C, Lusaka, male, age 41. Item A3.2.*)

The three accounts are mutually confirming and are given from both sides of the alternation. Each participant names their own district's form as the ordinary one and the other district as the form they associate with speakers from elsewhere, and all three volunteer that the difference does not impede understanding. Speaker C's remark that he initially perceived the difference as substantial and has since grown accustomed to it indicates that the alternation is salient on first encounter rather than after prolonged exposure.

Against that background, two kinds of difference were recorded. The first involved different lexical material altogether, as with *moto* and *mulilo* for 'fire', *mbalame* and *kanyoni* for 'bird', *kulankhula* and *kukamba* for 'to speak', and *galu* and *imbwa* for 'dog'. The second involved the same item realised differently, as with *madzi* in Chadiza and *manzi* in Lusaka.

Competing inherited forms

The four items in the first group are not innovations on either side. Each form belongs to inherited Bantu lexical stock, and the pattern is one of competing retention rather than of one district innovating and the other conserving. Bantu languages commonly maintain more than one inherited root for items of basic vocabulary, with regional preference determining which is dominant (Nurse & Philippson, 2003; Guthrie, 1967–1971). The finding that *moto* was produced by six of seven Chadiza speakers and *mulilo* by eight of nine in Lusaka, with each form nonetheless known and occasionally produced in the other district, is precisely the distribution such competing retention would generate.

This matters for the interpretation of the study as a whole. It would be easy to read the Chadiza forms as older and the Lusaka forms as newer, and thereby to construct a narrative of rural conservatism against urban innovation. The lexical data do not support that reading. Both sets of forms are inherited, and the difference is one of regional preference, not of chronological depth.

The *madzi* and *manzi* alternation

The alternation between *madzi* and *manzi* is different in kind, and was the most consistent single difference in the dataset: every Chadiza speaker produced the first and every Lusaka speaker the second, without exception in either direction. The vowels are identical. The difference is confined to the medial consonant, where an affricate in one variety corresponds to a nasal-plus-fricative sequence in the other.

It should be stated plainly what this study can and cannot claim about that correspondence. It can report that the correspondence is exceptionless within the sample. It cannot, on the strength of a single lexical item in two varieties, establish the direction of the change, identify a conditioning environment, or determine whether the alternation is a regular sound correspondence or an isolated lexical difference. Campbell (2013) is explicit that a sound correspondence is established by recurrence across multiple lexical items in comparable environments, and that a single pair, however consistent, is a starting point for investigation rather than a result. The present study elicited one such pair.

What can be said is that the alternation functions as what Labov (1972) terms a marker: a variable of which speakers

are consciously aware, which they can reproduce in the other variety, and which they use to locate speakers socially and geographically. Speakers J, M, C and L all volunteered it without prompting, and Speaker C reported that he had initially perceived it as a substantial difference and had subsequently grown accustomed to it. A feature that is noticed on first encounter and habituated with exposure is a marker in exactly Labov's sense.

Establishing the correspondence properly would require comparison across a wider lexical set and against neighbouring varieties: Chewa in Malawi, Ngoni Nyanja and the Nsenga of the Eastern Province. That comparison is beyond the present design and is recommended in Section 8.

Repair Strategies for Borrowed Forms

The third phonological theme concerns what happens when a word of English origin enters Chinyanja speech. Three distinct strategies were observed in the data, and their distribution differed markedly between the districts.

The three strategies were: full substitution, in which an existing Chinyanja form is used, and the English word does not appear; adaptation, in which the English form is taken but altered to fit Chinyanja syllable structure; and direct transfer, in which the English form is used without alteration. Table 5.7 sets out the distribution of these strategies for the two items on which they were most clearly visible.

Table 4: Strategies for accommodating English-origin forms

Referent	Strategy	Form produced	Chadiza (n=7)	Lusaka (n=9)
bed	Full substitution	kama	7	—
bed	Adaptation	bedi	—	4
bed	Direct transfer	bed	—	5
door	Full substitution	chitseko	7	—
door	Direct transfer	door	—	5

No Chadiza speaker used an unadapted English form for either item. All seven produced *kama* for 'bed' and *chitseko* for 'door'. In Lusaka, by contrast, no speaker produced *kama*, and the group divided between the adapted form *bedi* and the unadapted *bed*. For 'door', five of the nine Lusaka speakers produced the unadapted English form; the responses of the remaining four were not recorded.

Where adaptation occurred, it took a consistent shape. The English form ends in a consonant; the adapted form carries a final vowel, so that *bed* /bed/ becomes *bedi* /bedi/. The result conforms to the open-syllable pattern reported under Theme One. Example (2), recorded in Lusaka, shows the adapted form functioning in a clause with full Chinyanja agreement morphology, and may be compared directly with example (1) above.

(2) *bedi yatyoka* [bedi ya-tyok-a] 'The bed has broken.'

bed 9SM-break-FV (*Narrative task data, Lusaka. Item A3.1.*)

The two examples are structurally identical. The clause frame, the agreement marker and the verbal morphology are the same in both districts; only the noun differs. Where the borrowed stem is used in Lusaka, it is fitted into an unchanged Chinyanja grammatical frame rather than bringing English structure with it.

A Lusaka speaker described both strategies and the condition under which the adapted form arises below:

> *English words zikabwera mu Chinyanja, anthu ambiri amangogwiritsa ntchito mawuwo monga momwe anawamvera. Koma nthawi zina mawuwo amasinthidwa kuti agwirizane ndi Chinyanja. Mwachitsanzo, munthu akhoza kutenga English word n'kuwonjezera vowel kuti ikhale yosavuta kuitchula. Izi zimachitika kwambiri pakati pa young people* 'When English words come into Chinyanja, many people simply use them as they heard them. But sometimes the words are changed so that they fit with Chinyanja. For example, a person can take an English word and add a vowel so that it is easier to pronounce. This happens a great deal among young people.' (*Speaker E, Lusaka, male, age 33. Item A3.5.)*

The account corresponds closely to the distribution in Table 5.7. Speaker E describes both of the strategies recorded in the Lusaka data, direct transfer of the form as heard, and adaptation by the addition of a vowel, and identifies the adaptation as vowel-final, which is the shape the elicited data takes in *bedi*. He also associates the practice with younger speakers, a distinction the elicitation task did not test but which corresponds to the age patterning in Lusaka.

The third phonological finding was that the two districts differed systematically in how they accommodated English-origin words. Chadiza speakers used existing Chinyanja forms without exception, producing *kama* for 'bed' and *chitseko* for 'door' in all seven cases. Lusaka speakers divided between the adapted *bedi* and the unadapted *bed*, and five of the nine produced the unadapted *door*.

These three outcomes map directly onto the typology Haugen (1950) established for the analysis of borrowing. Haugen distinguishes importation, in which the foreign form is reproduced, from substitution, in which native material replaces it, and identifies an intermediate category in which the foreign form is imported but its phonological shape is substituted to fit the recipient system. The Chadiza strategy is substitution; the Lusaka unadapted forms are importation; and *bedi* is the intermediate case. Table 5.8 sets out the correspondence. The figures for 'door' in Lusaka are incomplete, as noted above, and are omitted from the table.

Table 5: The observed strategies in relation to Haugen's (1950) typology

Strategy	Haugen's category	Example	Distribution
Full substitution	Loan shift: native material, foreign meaning	kama, chitseko	All seven Chadiza speakers
Adaptation	Loanword with phonemic substitution	bedi	Four of nine Lusaka speakers
Direct transfer	Importation without substitution	bed, door	Five of nine Lusaka speakers

Source: Field data, 2026, classified after Haugen (1950)

The shape the adaptation takes is significant. The English forms end in a consonant; the adapted form carries a final vowel. This is the repair strategy Simango (2000) documents in detail for English loans in Chichewa, where vowel epenthesis brings borrowed stems into conformity with the language's open-syllable requirement. The present finding therefore replicates for Zambian Chinyanja a process already established for Malawian Chichewa, which strengthens the case that the two are varieties of one system rather than independently developing languages.

The theoretical interest lies in what the adaptation preserves. Paradis and LaCharité (1997) argue that loanword adaptation is minimal: the borrowing language makes the smallest change compatible with its own constraints, and preserves as much of the source form as those constraints allow. That is what *bedi* does. The consonantal skeleton and the vowel of the English form are retained; a single segment is added, and only because the recipient system does not permit the coda. The adaptation is not an approximation of English by a speaker who cannot produce it, but a systematic repair by a speaker whose grammar requires it.

Speaker E's account corresponds closely to this analysis. He described both outcomes, use of the form as heard, and modification by the addition of a vowel, and identified the addition as making the word easier to pronounce. The functional explanation he gives is the one the phonological literature gives.

The district difference is best understood as a difference in contact intensity rather than in phonological competence. Winford (2003) and Matras (2009) both emphasise that the extent of lexical borrowing correlates with the degree and duration of bilingual contact rather than with any property of the recipient system. Lusaka speakers are exposed to English in daily institutional and commercial use in a way that Chadiza speakers, in a rural district of Eastern Province, are not. The Chadiza pattern is therefore not evidence of resistance to borrowing but of reduced opportunity for it.

Discussion

This section synthesises qualitative results collected from 20 participants drawn from two districts, Lusaka and Chadiza. Findings reveal various similarities and differences in the vowel system, consonant system and syllable structure of Chinyanja spoken in Lusaka and Chadiza districts.

The phonological data yielded three findings. First, the two varieties share the same vowel inventory and the same syllabic organisation, and the majority of elicited forms were produced identically in both districts; participants and professionals in both districts described the difference as confined to particular words rather than to the sound system. Second, a small and specific set of items diverged, either through the use of different lexical material or, in the case of *madzi* and *manzi*, through a difference in a single medial consonant. Third, the districts differed systematically in how they accommodated English-origin words: Chadiza speakers used existing Chinyanja forms without exception, while Lusaka speakers used either adapted or unadapted English forms, and where adaptation occurred, it operated to preserve the open-syllable pattern found throughout the native vocabulary.

Taken together, the three themes support a single conclusion about the phonological relationship between the two varieties. The system is shared; the inventory is shared; the syllabic organisation is shared. Where the varieties differ, they differ in which inherited item is preferred, in one exceptionless consonantal correspondence whose status requires further investigation, and in the extent to which English material is admitted and how it is treated when admitted. None of these is a difference of system. On the criteria Chambers and Trudgill (1998) set out, the two are dialects of a single language, and the finding that all sixteen speakers reported mutual comprehension supports that classification independently.

Dialectal Awareness and Accommodation

Participants in both districts identified the other variety and named the features by which they recognised it. The *madzi* and *manzi* alternation was cited most frequently and from both sides, with each participant naming their own district's form as ordinary and the other's as marked.

This bidirectionality is methodologically important. Perceptual dialectology, as developed by Preston (1999), is concerned with the mental maps speakers hold of linguistic variation, and a recurring finding of that literature is that such maps are asymmetric: speakers of a dominant or urban variety frequently perceive rural varieties as marked while regarding their own as unmarked. The present data do not show that asymmetry. Speaker C in Lusaka and Speaker L in Chadiza describe the alternation in mirror-image terms, each treating the other as the deviation. Neither claims a neutral position.

The divergence recorded in Speaker N's account is instructive rather than problematic. He named *moto* as a feature by which he identifies a Lusaka speaker, whereas the elicitation data record *moto* as the form produced by six of the seven Chadiza speakers and *mulilo* as the Lusaka form. His second cue — the presence of English material — corresponds accurately to the distribution reported under Theme Three; his first does not.

Niedzielski and Preston (2000) argue at length that folk linguistic accounts should be analysed as data about perception rather than assessed as approximations to a linguistic description. On that view, the mismatch is not an error to be corrected but evidence that what speakers report noticing and what they demonstrably produce are separable, and that the former is shaped by social salience rather than by frequency. Labov (1972) makes the related point in distinguishing the levels at which speakers can accurately report their own usage. The finding therefore supports a methodological conclusion the study can legitimately draw: elicited production and metalinguistic report are complementary sources of evidence, and neither can substitute for the other.

Speaker O's account of accommodation supports the same conclusion. He described adjusting his speech toward Lusaka usage as something that simply happens rather than as a deliberate strategy, and as partial rather than wholesale. Trudgill (1986) describes exactly this in his account of dialect contact, where short-term accommodation between speakers of related varieties is largely automatic and operates on salient individual features rather than on the variety as a whole. Giles, Coupland and Coupland (1991) frame the same behaviour in terms of convergence toward an interlocutor. That Speaker O accommodates while denying that he thinks about it is consistent with both accounts.

The Standard and the Local Varieties

Participants reported that hierarchical judgements about the two varieties circulate in their communities, but none of those quoted endorsed such judgements. Speaker K acknowledged that people describe the local variety as deeper or more proper while declining to describe the Lusaka variety as wrong; Speaker P reported hearing that some places speak better Chinyanja and stated that he did not fully agree.

This is a more nuanced position than the standard language ideology literature often finds. Milroy and Milroy (1999) describe standard language ideology as the widely internalised belief that one variety is inherently correct and others are departures from it, and they emphasise how thoroughly such beliefs are naturalised among speakers of non-standard varieties. Lippi-Green (2012) documents the consequences of that internalisation in institutional settings. The present participants report awareness of the ideology without adopting it, which suggests that in this community the evaluative hierarchy is known but not strongly held.

The professional accounts are the most substantial data in this theme, and they converge on a consistent pedagogical position. All three professionals described the home variety as a resource to be acknowledged rather than an error to be corrected, and the standard form as the register required in formal writing. Professional R described first establishing whether a form is in wide local use before explaining the formal alternative; Professional S described a similar sequence; Professional T stated explicitly that the teacher should show the difference between the home variety and the standard rather than declaring the local form wrong.

This is, in substance, the additive position that Cummins (2000) advocates, in which the learner's existing linguistic resources are built upon rather than displaced. That three teachers arrived at it independently, without the interview schedule proposing it, is a finding of some practical significance for the language-in-education debate in Zambia, which Marten and Kula (2008) describe as historically dominated by questions of medium of instruction rather than of dialectal variation within a medium.

Professional R's second account is the only place in the dataset where a participant addresses the implications of contact for the language as a whole. He distinguished language change from language loss, attributing the visible English influence among younger speakers to contact rather than to decline. That distinction is the one the contact literature itself draws (Thomason & Kaufman, 1988; Aitchison, 2013), and the present study's findings support his formulation: the evidence of the three themes is of a system accommodating new material through its own machinery, not of a system breaking down.

Practical Contribution of the Study

The study records that language professionals in both districts, working independently and without prompting from the interview schedule, described the home variety as a resource to be built upon rather than an error to be corrected. That convergence supplies evidence from practising teachers for a position that has been argued in principle in the language-in-education literature (Cummins, 2000; Lippi-Green, 2012).

Limitations

This study has several limitations (Creswell, 2014). First, the small sample size (20 participants) means that findings may not be generalisable to all Chinyanja speakers in Lusaka and Chadiza districts or to other varieties of Chinyanja (Merriam, 2009). Second, the study focuses on phonological analysis and may not capture other dimensions of dialectal variation, such as morphological, syntactic or lexical differences (Contrastive Linguistics, 2011). Third, the study relies on elicited speech data, which may not fully capture the range of phonological variation present in natural speech (Ladefoged, 2003). Fourth, the study is synchronic, examining

contemporary varieties, and does not address historical changes that may have contributed to the observed differences. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into the phonological differences and similarities between Chinyanja spoken in Lusaka and Chadiza districts (Bickmore, 2024; Miti, 1988).

Conclusion

The study concludes that the Chinyanja of Lusaka and the Chinyanja of Chadiza are dialects of a single language. The two varieties share their vowel inventory and their syllable structure, and every participant reported understanding speakers of the other variety without difficulty. The differences are real, and in places systematic, but they do not amount to a difference of linguistic system, which is the criterion by which dialect is distinguished from language in the comparative tradition (Chambers & Trudgill, 1998; Campbell, 2013).

In answering the research question, the phonological similarities are systemic, and the phonological differences are lexical and contact-related. The same five-vowel inventory, the same open-syllable requirement and the same treatment of nasal-consonant sequences operate in both districts, and divergence is confined to the selection of inherited items, to the medial consonant in the word for 'water', and to the strategy by which English-origin forms are accommodated (Haugen, 1950; Winford, 2003).

Where the varieties diverge, the divergence is patterned rather than random, and it is patterned along two dimensions: contact intensity, which distinguishes the districts, and age, which distinguishes cohorts within Lusaka, the younger group carrying the morphological variation in the apparent-time pattern associated with change in progress (Labov, 2001; Aitchison, 2013).

The study further concludes that contact effects are graded by domain. They are extensive in the lexicon, real but bounded in nominal morphology, and absent from the core syntax, a distribution consistent with established borrowing hierarchies (Thomason & Kaufman, 1988; Matras, 2009). Borrowed stems are not admitted as foreign bodies but are integrated into noun classes and made to agree, and the class 2 prefix that distinguishes younger Lusaka speech is an alignment with a neighbouring Bantu system rather than a departure from Bantu morphology. What the data describe is a grammar operating normally on an enlarged lexicon, not a language under strain, and the distinction drawn independently by the professionals between language change and language loss is the one the evidence supports (Aitchison, 2013; Spitulnik, 1998).

Finally, the study concludes that speaker report and elicited production are complementary rather than interchangeable kinds of evidence (Silverstein, 1981; Niedzielski & Preston, 2000), a methodological conclusion that bears on the design of further dialectological work in Zambia.

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are offered:

Recommendations for Materials and Documentation

i. Materials produced in Chinyanja for national distribution should recognise that lexical variation exists between regions and that neither set of forms is a corruption of the other. Where a choice must be made between competing forms such as *moto* and *mulilo*, the basis of the choice should be stated rather than left implicit, and the alternative form acknowledged. Participants themselves declined to rank the competing forms, framing their own preference as habit rather than as correctness, so materials that present one form as correct would impose a hierarchy that the speakers of the language do not themselves apply (Milroy & Milroy, 1999; Lippi-Green, 2012).
ii. Documentation of Zambian regional languages should record dialectal variation rather than a single standard form. This study found variation within one language across two districts at the phonological linguistic level examined using vowel system and syllable structure, and there is no reason to expect the position to differ for other Zambian languages (Spitulnik, 1998; Marten & Kula, 2008).

Recommendations for Education

i. Teachers of Chinyanja should be equipped to distinguish a regional form from an error. All three professionals who addressed the question in this study had arrived at that distinction independently through experience; it should not depend on individual insight. Guidance identifying the principal points of regional variation would allow the distinction to be made consistently.
ii. Where a learner produces a regional form in written work, the appropriate response indicated by this study's findings is to acknowledge the form as locally current and to explain the form required in formal writing, rather than to mark the local form as incorrect. This was the practice described independently by professionals in both districts, and it corresponds to the treatment of the home language as a resource for learning rather than an obstacle to it (Cummins, 2000).
iii. Teacher training in language subjects should include an introduction to dialectal variation within Zambian languages. The professionals interviewed were working with variation daily and had received no preparation for it (Chanda, 2022).
iv. Curriculum materials should avoid presenting one regional variety as the language and others as

departures from it. Participants in this study reported that such judgements circulate in their communities and reported not endorsing them, attributing difference to place and contact rather than to competence; materials should not supply the endorsement (Milroy & Milroy, 1999; Niedzielski & Preston, 2000).

Recommendations for Further Research

The following recommendations arise directly from the limitations recorded in Section 7 and from questions that the study raised but could not be answered:

i. The correspondence between *madzi* and *manzi* should be investigated across a substantially wider lexical set to establish whether it recurs in comparable environments, since only recurrence across multiple items can establish a sound correspondence (Campbell, 2013; Hock & Joseph, 2009).

ii. Acoustic and tonal analysis should be undertaken. Instrumental measurement of vowel quality and duration, and description of tone in both varieties, would address the largest gap in the present phonological account (Hyman, 2003; Downing & Mtenje, 2017).

iii. The comparison should be extended to neighbouring varieties, in particular Chewa as spoken in Malawi, Ngoni Nyanja and the Nsenga of Eastern Province. Placing the Lusaka and Chadiza data in that wider frame would allow the direction of the differences recorded here to be assessed (Maho, 2003; Simango, 2000).

iv. A real-time follow-up should be conducted. Returning to the same districts after an interval, and where possible to the same participants, would allow the apparent-time inferences drawn here about change in progress to be confirmed or revised (Labov, 1994).

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