

Understanding Chichewa Noun Classes and Morphological Structure

Liston Mpheza

Lecturer in Linguistics and Communication Studies,
The Catholic University of Malawi

Abstract: This paper explores the complex noun classification system of Chichewa, a Bantu language primarily spoken in Malawi and surrounding regions, with approximately 15 million speakers. This system, which categorizes nouns based on both semantic and morphological criteria, profoundly impacts subject-verb agreement and concord usage, thereby shaping Chichewa sentence structure. Nouns are divided into various classes, each marked by specific prefixes that change with singular and plural forms. For example, class 5 and 6 nouns typically begin with consonants such as b-, d-, and dz-, with singular forms prefixed by "li-" and plural forms by "ma-". A distinctive feature of some class 6 nouns is their retention of the "ma-" prefix in both singular and plural contexts. The paper also discusses classes 7 and 8, which differentiate nouns starting with "ch-" in singular and "z-" in plural, and classes 9 and 10, where nouns generally maintain the same form between singular and plural, using "i-" for singular and "zi-" for plural. Diminutive prefixes "ka-" and "ti-" classify nouns into classes 12 and 13, while nouns beginning with "u-" or forming plurals with "ma-" are assigned to classes 14 and 6, respectively. The study further explores locative prefixes, with class 15 involving gerund forms with "ku-", class 16 using "pa-" for "on", class 17 using "ku-" for "at", and class 18 using "mu-" for "in". These classifications not only highlight the morphological complexity and systematic nature of Chichewa grammar and syntax but also provide a comprehensive framework for understanding and effectively using the language, offering valuable insights for linguists, language learners, and educators.

Keywords:- Chichewa Language, Noun Classification, Prefixes, Concord, Singular, Plural.

I. INTRODUCTION

Chichewa, also known as Chinyanja, spelled as Cinyanja, is a Bantu language spoken predominantly in Malawi, where it serves as the national and official language. It is also spoken in parts of Zambia, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe, particularly in border regions (Paas, 2016; Wills, 1985). Chichewa holds significant cultural, social, and economic importance in Malawi and the surrounding regions. As the national language of Malawi, it plays a crucial role in facilitating communication and fostering national unity among diverse ethnic groups within the country. Moreover, Chichewa is one of the subjects in Malawian schools, making

it essential for education and literacy (Malawi Institute of Education, 2013).

In addition to its local significance, Chichewa is also increasingly recognised internationally. With the growing interest in African languages and cultures, Chichewa has gained attention as a language of study and research, contributing to the global understanding of Bantu languages and linguistics.

One of the distinctive features of Chichewa is its complex system of subject-verb agreement. According to Mchombo (2004), Chichewa exhibits a rich array of verb inflections that indicate agreement with the subject in terms of person, number, and gender. This agreement system is closely linked to the noun classification system in Chichewa, which divides nouns into various classes based on semantic and morphological criteria.

Chichewa employs a noun class system, a common feature among Bantu languages, whereby nouns are categorised into different classes or categories (Steytler, 1989). Each noun class is associated with specific concords, which are prefixes or particles that agree with the noun in terms of class and are used in various grammatical contexts, including subject-verb agreement, possession, and agreement with demonstratives and adjectives (Mjaya, 2002). The writer acknowledges that it is important to master each class and the concords—both subject markers and object markers—that accompany each class. However, this paper is only interested in identifying the Chichewa noun classes.

Noun classes contribute to the richness and complexity of Chichewa grammar, making it an intriguing subject of study for linguists and language enthusiasts alike. Furthermore, they present both challenges and opportunities for language learners, media presenters and educators seeking to understand and effectively communicate in Chichewa.

II. NOUN CLASSIFICATION IN CHICHEWA

Chichewa, like many other Bantu languages, employs a noun classification system whereby nouns are grouped into various classes based on shared semantic or grammatical features. These noun classes serve as a framework for organising the lexicon and determining agreement patterns in the language. Noun classes in Chichewa are typically marked by prefixes attached to the noun stems, although there are also suffixal and internal modifications (Mjaya, 2002).

➤ *NOUN CLASS 1 AND 2 (MU-, A-)*

In the Chichewa language, nouns that utilise the prefix "A_" to indicate plurality are categorised into two distinct noun classes based on their singular and plural forms. When these nouns are used in their singular form, they are classified into noun class 1. In contrast, when the same nouns are pluralised, they belong to noun class 2. This distinction is fundamental to Chichewa grammar and reflects the language's intricate system of noun classification and subject-

verb agreement. However, in the Malawian school curriculum, these nouns are often grouped under the broader category of Mu-, A-, class (Mangoche, and Loga, 1971). It is noteworthy that while these nouns may begin with any initial letter in their singular form, their plural marker consistently starts with the prefix "a_" or "wa", highlighting the regularity and predictability of Chichewa noun morphology. The table box below shows some of the Chichewa nouns that are in classes 1 and 2.

Text Box 1 (Mu-, A-,)**Class 1****Singular**

mwana (child)

mbusa (pastor)

mtsikana (girl)

bakha (duck)

kalulu (hare)

Class 2**Plural**

ana (children)

abusa (pastors)

atsikana (girls)

abakha (ducks)

akalulu (hares)

In Chichewa, concords play a crucial role in subject-verb agreement, possession, and agreement with demonstratives and adjectives. Concords are inflectional morphemes (aphatikitiri) that agree with nouns in terms of their class and are used to mark agreement between different elements within a sentence. Each noun class in Chichewa is associated with specific concords, which are used to modify verbs, pronouns, and other elements of the sentence to reflect agreement with the noun.

When the concord refers to a subject marker in class 1, it utilises the prefix 'wa-' or 'a-.' When it refers to class 2, it utilises the prefix 'a-' for agreement, aligning with the plurality marking of the noun classes. This consistency ensures grammatical accuracy and coherence in sentence structure. When the object marker belongs to class 1 or class 2 the prefix 'wa-' and 'a-' are employed respectively.

Agalu akupha kululu wakuda
Agalu a-ku-ph-a kululu wa-kuda

➤ *NOUN CLASS 3 AND 4 (MU-, MI-)*

In Chichewa, nouns utilising the prefix "mi-" to signify plurality undergo a reclassification depending on their singular or plural form. When singular, they fall into noun class 3, but upon transitioning to plural, they shift to noun class 4. This distinction is pivotal in Chichewa grammar, showcasing its complex system of noun classification and concord usage. Despite this grammatical complexity, the Malawian school curriculum often simplifies these nouns, grouping them under the broader category of "Mu-, mi-, class." This simplification aids learning by providing a standardised framework, regardless of the specific morphological changes the nouns undergo. It's noteworthy that while these nouns may vary in the prefix used in singular form, their consistent use of the "mi_" prefix for plural markers underscores the regularity and predictability of Chichewa noun morphology. Table box below exemplify this:

Text Box 2a : (Mu-, mi-,)

Class 3

Singular

Mutu (head)

Mudzi (village)

Mwambi (proverb)

Mwezi (month)

mzere (line)

Class 4

Plural

mitu (heads)

midzi (villages)

miyambi (proverbs)

miyezi (months)

mizere (lines)

In Chichewa, while certain nouns are classified as class 3, they do not change form when transitioning from singular to plural. Despite this grammatical feature, some speakers erroneously utilise the prefix "mi-" when referring to these nouns in their plural form. This misuse is exemplified in text box 2b below, where nouns retain their singular form even in plural contexts. Such misconceptions likely stem from the general association of the "mi-" prefix with pluralisation in Chichewa, leading speakers to apply it indiscriminately.

Text Box 2b: mu -, mi-,

Mwazi (blood)

Mkaka (milk)

Mtedza (groundnuts)

Mphweya (air)

Mchere (salt)

Mpunga (rice)

In Chichewa grammar, nouns classified into class 3 utilise the prefix 'u-' as their concords when serving as subject markers or object markers within a sentence. Conversely, nouns categorised into class 4 employ the prefix 'i-' for concords in similar grammatical roles. This distinction in concord usage based on noun classification is a fundamental feature of Chichewa grammar.

*Mwezi **uno** tikagulitsa mtedza **uwu** tigule mipando **itatu**.
Mwezi **u-no** ti-ka-gulits-a mtedza **u-wu** ti-gul-e mipando **i-tatu**.*

➤ Noun Class 5 and 6 (Li-, Ma-,)

Nouns in class 5 typically have a singular form starting with the prefix "li-" and a plural form in class 6 that starts with the prefix "ma-." However, there are only a few nouns in class 5 that start with a consonant "l-" in their singular form. Below are some examples to illustrate this pattern:

Singular/Chimodzi	Plural/ Zambiri
Lamulo (law)	malamulo (laws)
Lalanje (orange)	malalanje (oranges)
Lirime (tongue)	malirime (tongues)
lembo (letter)	malembo (letters)

The examples above, show how the prefix "li-" in the singular form changes to "ma-" in the plural form, indicating that the nouns belong to classes 5 and 6 respectively.

In Chichewa, most nouns in class 5 start with consonants such as b-, d-, dz-, f-, g-, gw-, h-, j-, kh-, p-, ph-, ts-, tch-, th-, and v-. The plural forms of these nouns belong to class 6 and typically start with the prefix "ma-." This morphological pattern is consistent and follows the guidelines outlined by Nankwenya (1992). Below are some examples to illustrate this:

Singula /Chimodzi	Plural Zambiri
Bere (breast)	maŵere (breasts)
fano (an idol)	mafano (idols)
dzira (an egg)	mazira (eggs)
gawo (section)	magawo (sections)
tsamba (leaf)	masamba (leaves)
khutu (ear)	makutu (ears)
tchimo (sin)	machismo (sins)

These examples above demonstrate the typical pattern of how singular nouns in class 5 with various consonant beginnings transform into their plural forms in class 6 with the prefix "ma-."

It should be noted that, in Chichewa, there are many nouns that start with the prefix "ma-" and belong to class 6, which do not change their form to indicate singularity or plurality. These nouns retain the same form whether they are used in singular or plural contexts. All Chichewa nouns that start with the prefix "ma-" and remain unchanged in both singular and plural forms belong to this class. The following examples illustrate this:

- **Singular:** ma-dzi (water)
- **Plural:** ma-dzi (waters)
- **Singular:** ma-peto (end)
- **Plural:** ma-peto (ends)
- **Singular:** manda (grave yard)
- **Plural:** manda (grave yards)
- **Singular:** mantha (fear)
- **Plural:** mantha (fears)

These examples show how the prefix "ma-" is used consistently without changing the form of the noun, regardless of whether it is singular or plural. This characteristic is a defining feature of nouns in class 6 that start with the prefix "ma-."

➤ *NOUN CLASS 7 AND 8 (CHI-, ZI-,)*

In Chichewa, nouns that start with the consonant "ch-" belong to noun class 7 and are used in singular form. Their

plural forms start with the consonant "z-" and belong to noun class 8. For example:

Singular/Chimodzi	Plural /Zambiri
chala (finger)	zala (fingers)
cheke (cheque)	zeke (cheques)
chibaluwa letter	zibaluwa (letters)
chibakera fist	zibakera fists

From the text box above, Chichewa nouns that start with "ch-" are singular and belong to class 7, while their plural forms start with "z-" and belong to class 8.

In addition, some nouns that start with the consonant "ch-" do not inherently show singular or plural distinctions. Instead, they are classified into Chichewa noun class 7 when used as singular in a sentence and into noun class 8 when used as plural. Text box below illustrate this:

chiyero (holiness)
chinyamata (boyhood)
Chicheŵa (language of Chewa people)
chilungamo (righteousness)
chimanga (maize)

In Chichewa, some nouns that use the prefix "chi-" can be employed to either underrate something or to emphasize its hugeness. These nouns belong to noun class 7 when used in their singular form. The following text box illustrate this:

- chigalu (a large dog)
- chibwana (extreme foolishness)
- chinyama (a large animal or beast)
- chinyumba (a large house)

In both cases, whether to underrate or to emphasise size, the nouns start with the prefix "chi-" and belong to class 7 when used in the singular form.

➤ *NOUN CLASS 9 AND 10 (I-, ZI-,)*

In Chichewa, classes 9 and 10 belong to the i-/zi- group, which includes nouns that typically do not change their form when used in both singular and plural.

Nouns in class 9 are identified when they are used in their singular form in a sentence. They do not start with the prefixes u- or ma-. The same nouns, when used in their plural form within a sentence, belong to class 10. This is because the plural form in Chichewa typically involves the use of the zi- prefix for nouns in this class.

In Chichewa, noun classes 9 and 10 include many nouns that start with specific consonant clusters. These clusters are indicative of nouns that often do not change form between singular and plural, but their class membership changes based on their usage (singular for class 9 and plural for class 10). According to Nankwenya (1992), most nouns in these classes begin with the following consonants:

mb- (e.g., mbale - plate)**mph-** (e.g., mphaka - cat)**ns-** (e.g., nsolo - bushbuck)**nth-** (e.g., nthano - story)**ng-** (e.g., ng'ombe - cow)**nh-** (e.g., nkhalango - forest)**nz-** (e.g., nzika - citizen)**mf-** (e.g., mfiti - witch)**n-** (e.g., njoka - snake)**ny-** (e.g., nyani - baboon)**ntch-** (e.g., ntchentche - fly)**ng'-** (e.g., ng'ona - crocodile)**nd-** (e.g., ndalama - money)

In addition to nouns starting with specific consonant clusters, Chichewa noun classes 9 and 10 also include some nouns that begin with the vowel "i-." These nouns, like others in classes 9 and 10, do not change form between singular and plural. Instead, their classification depends on their usage in a sentence—singular forms belong to class 9, while plural forms belong to class 10 as shown below:

Example: imvi (grey hair)

- **Singular (Class 9)**
- **Plural (Class 10):**

Imvi yaikulu. (A large grey hair.)

Imvi zikulu. (Large grey hairs.)

The above examples illustrate that the word **imvi** does not change whether it is used in singular (class 9) or plural (class 10) form.

III. NOUN CLASS 12 AND 13 (KA-, TI-)

Nouns demonstrating diminutive forms in the singular with the prefix "ka-" are classified in Class 12, while those exhibiting diminutive forms in the plural with the prefix "ti-" belong to Class 13 of Chichewa noun classification. This classification is supported by Chadza (1980), who outlines the characteristics of these noun classes. For example, "kamwana" (little child) exemplifies a diminutive noun in the singular form, where "ka-" signifies smallness. Conversely, in the plural form, "tiwana" (little children) illustrates the diminutive, with "ti-" indicating smallness.

It should be noted that nouns that lack singular or plural forms but begin with the syllable "ma-" utilise only their plural form in diminutive contexts. When these nouns exhibit plural diminutive forms with the prefix "ti-," they are appropriately classified within noun class 13. For instance, consider "timadzi" (small water) and "timafuta" (small oil), where the prefix "ma-" denotes a collective plural form. These nouns do not have singular counterparts, and their diminutive forms are expressed through the plural form with the prefix "ti-." Thus, according to Mchombo (2004), Chichewa nouns lacking singular or plural distinctions but

utilising the prefix "ma-" in the plural and forming diminutive plurals with "ti-" are appropriately classified within noun class 13.

It is essential to note that while there are Chichewa nouns that begin with the syllable /ka/, not all of them demonstrate diminutive forms. For instance, nouns like "kalata" (letter) and "kapolo" (servant) commence with the syllable /ka/ but do not exhibit diminutive qualities. As such, these nouns should not be categorised in Class 12, which is reserved for nouns showing diminutives in their singular form with the prefix "ka-." Instead, they belong to other appropriate noun classes based on their semantic or grammatical characteristics. This highlights the importance of distinguishing between nouns that genuinely display diminutive forms and those that merely begin with the syllable /ka/ but do not indicate smallness or diminutiveness. Therefore, while "kalata" and "kapolo" start with /ka/, they should not be erroneously classified as diminutive nouns in Class 12, as they do not conform to the criteria for diminutive formation in Chichewa.

➤ Noun Class 14 (U-, Ma-)

In Chichewa, nouns that begin with the phoneme /u/ categorised in Class 14 of Chichewa noun classification. As outlined by Mchombo (2004), Class 14 consists of nouns that retain the same form in both singular and plural, typically starting with the phoneme /u/. For instance, "udzu" (grass/grasses), "udzudzu" (mosquito/mosquitoes), exemplify this pattern, where the noun form in Chichewa remains unchanged despite being singular or plural. Therefore, according to Mchombo (2004), Chichewa nouns beginning with the phoneme /u/ and maintaining the same form in both singular and plural align with the characteristics of Class 14 nouns, regardless of their usage in singular or plural contexts.

However, for all nouns that begin with the phoneme /u/ but form their plurals with the prefix "ma-", only the singular nouns are in class 14 while the plural nouns are categorised in Class 6 of Chichewa noun classification. According to Mchombo (2004), Class 6 also comprises nouns that start with the phoneme /u/ in the singular form but take the prefix "ma-" to form the plural. For instance, "uta" (arrow) is in class

14 while "mauta" (arrows) in the plural form is in class 6. Similarly, "ulendo" (journey) is in class 14 while "maulendo" (journeys) in the plural is in class 6.

A. NOUN CLASS 15 (KU + MNENI / VERB)

In Chichewa, gerund nouns formed by attaching the locative prefix "ku-" to the verb root are typically classified within Class 15 of Chichewa noun classification. According to Myers (2015), Class 15 comprises gerund nouns derived from verbs, often preceded by the prefix "ku-", which indicates the action or process denoted by the verb. For instance, "kupita" means "going," where "ku-" signifies the action of going, and "pita" represents the verb "to go." Similarly, "kukula" translates to "growing," where "ku-" indicates the process of growing, and "kula" denotes the verb "to grow." Thus, these examples demonstrate how Chichewa gerund nouns formed with the prefix "ku-" conform to the characteristics of Class 15 nouns, as described by Nkhoma (1999), indicating their classification within this specific category.

B. NOUN CLASS 16 (LOCATIVE PA-)

In the classification of Chichewa nouns, those indicating places and featuring the locative prefix "pa" (meaning "on") are typically categorized into class 16. According to Kishindo (2019), nouns denoting locations, such as "pampando" (on the chair) or "padenga" (on the roof), are examples of this classification. These nouns exhibit the prefix "pa-" as a marker of their locative function, indicating the position of an object or entity about a particular place. This categorization into class 16 reflects the systematic organization of Chichewa nouns based on semantic and morphological criteria.

C. NOUN CLASS 17 (LOCATIVE KU-)

In the categorization of Chichewa nouns, places marked with the locative prefix "ku" (meaning "at") are commonly placed in class 17. As noted by Phiri (2015), nouns that represent locations, like "kumsika" (at the market) or "kumunda" (at the garden), serve as prime examples of this grouping. These nouns employ the prefix "ku-" to signify their role in indicating the position or direction of an object or entity concerning a specific place. This assignment to class 17 highlights the systematic organization of Chichewa nouns, which is grounded in semantic and morphological considerations.

D. NOUN CLASS 18 (LOCATIVE MU-)

In Chichewa, nouns denoting places that incorporate the locative prefix "mu" (meaning "in") are typically categorized within Class 18 of Chichewa noun classification. According to Mchombo (2004), Class 18 encompasses nouns referring to locations or places, often preceded by the locative prefix "mu-" denoting "in." For instance, in Chichewa, "m'mudzi" means "in the village," where "mu-" indicates "in," and "mudzi" represents "village." Similarly, "m'nyumba" translates to "in the house." These examples also align with the characteristics of Class 18 nouns as outlined by Salaun (1969), illustrating how Chichewa nouns incorporating the locative prefix "mu-" fit within this specific classification.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Chichewa is a Bantu language spoken predominantly in Malawi and neighboring regions, it features a complex system of noun classification that is integral to its grammar and syntax. This system categorizes nouns based on semantic and morphological criteria, influencing subject-verb agreement and concord usage, and thereby shaping the structure of Chichewa sentences. Nouns in Chichewa are divided into various classes, each marked by specific prefixes that change depending on whether the noun is singular or plural. For example, class 5 nouns often start with consonants like b-, d-, dz-, and others, with singular forms prefixed by "li-" and plural forms by "ma-". A unique feature of some class 6 nouns is that they start with "ma-" and do not change form to indicate number, retaining the same form in both singular and plural contexts.

Additionally, classes 7 and 8 include nouns that start with "ch-" in singular and "z-" in plural. Classes 9 and 10 often feature nouns that do not change form between singular and plural, using the prefix "i-" for singular and "zi-" for plural. Nouns with diminutive prefixes "ka-" and "ti-" belong to classes 12 and 13, respectively. Those beginning with "u-" or forming plurals with "ma-" fall into classes 14 and 6, respectively. Further more, Chichewa's noun classes also include locative prefixes: class 15 involves gerund forms with "ku-", class 16 uses "pa-" for locative meaning "on", class 17 uses "ku-" for "at", and class 18 uses "mu-" for "in". These classifications not only illustrate the linguistic richness of Chichewa but also provide a structured framework for understanding and using the language effectively.

The noun classification system in Chichewa highlights the language's morphological complexity and systematic approach to grammar, offering linguists and language learners a fascinating area of study and practical application.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Chadza, E.J. (1980). *Tiphunzire Chichewa*. Christian Literature Association in Malaŵi.
- [2]. Chichewa Board (1991). *Chichewa Grammatical Tems*. Chichewa Board.
- [3]. _____ (1990). *Chichewa Orthography Rules*. Chichewa Board.
- [4]. Malawi Institute of Education. (2013). *Silabasi ya Chichewa ya Fomu 1 ndi 2*. Malawi Institute of Education.
- [5]. Malawi Institute of Education. (2013). *Silabasi ya Chichewa ya Fomu 3 ndi 4*. Malawi Institute of Education.
- [6]. Mangoche, M.V.B. ndi Loga, J.P.B. (1971). *Muuni wa Chichewa*. Thomas Nelson and Sons.
- [7]. Mchombo, S. (2004). *The Syntax of Chichewa*. Cambridge University Press.
- [8]. Mjaya, A.N.U. (2002). *Descriptive Analysis of African Languages*. Domasi College of Education.
- [9]. Nankwenya, I.A.J. (1992). *Zofunika Mu Galamala ya Chichewa*. Dzuka.

- [10]. Nkhoma, W.A. (1999). *Kuphunzira Chinyanja*. Chanco Publications.
- [11]. Salaun, N. (1969). *Chichewa Intensive Course*. Likuni Press and Publishing House.
- [12]. Steytler, J.G. (1989). *Cinenedwe Ca Cinyanja*. Kenneth Kaunda Foundation.
- [13]. Paas, S. (2016). *Chichewa – English Dictionary*. Oxford University Press.
- [14]. Wills, A.J. (1985). *An Introduction to the History of Central Africa: Zambia, Malawi and Zimbabwe*. Oxford University Press.