

Speech by Dr. Steven Paas at the Launch of the Oxford Chichewa Dictionary, Cross Roads Hotel Lilongwe 29-9-16

Greetings

The former Vice President of the Republic of Malawi the right honourable Dr. Justin Malwezi, the Director of Inspectorate and Advisory Services of the Malawi Ministry of Education Dr. Raphael Agabu, who is represented by his Deputy Dr. Jennings Kayira [and others in a separate list], members of the press, ladies and gentlemen.

We are here because Oxford University Press – ORBIS invited us after having published the fifth edition of my Chichewa Dictionary. The organisation is headed by Mr. Rob Laing. He is represented here today by Mrs Lindiwe Kabai and Mr Oliver Oluoch [was not present because of an accident] , and also by OUP's agent for Malawi Mrs Gaulphine Nyirenda, Director of Maneno Books. I am greeting you and welcoming you to this event, which is of historical significance, in at least two ways:

1.For the very first time in history a Chichewa (or Chinyanja) dictionary is being published and distributed

globally, particularly in all countries where the more than 20 million users of the language live and play important roles.

2.For the first time in the history of Chichewa lexicography the publication and distribution of the dictionary does not depend on financial support by donors.

Gratitude

-In this very brief sketch of the historical background of the dictionary, gratitude takes the most important place. Of course I appreciate all who have honoured this event by your presence, not in the least [separate list]

-However, I am emphatically grateful to those who have assisted me throughout the years, so that the dictionary could progress to the present state. Among those who have given faithful moral support is Prof. Pascal Kishindo Director of the Centre for Language Studies of the University of Malawi. He encouraged me to go on, especially when I tended to give up because of several restraints [and constraints]. Perhaps he himself is not aware of how much his loyalty helped me.

-In 1997 I started my adventure with Chichewa. The first steps in grammar were taught to me by a scholar of African studies of Leyden University Mrs Tirza Schipper.

When developing active abilities in speaking and writing as well as passive abilities in reading and listening I soon discovered that no dictionary of Chichewa was available. That was the reason for compiling lists of vocabulary. Those lists were enlarged and improved in contacts with my students at Zomba Theological College and with members of the congregations where I went to as a minister of the CCAP. A great number of people assisted by serving as resource persons or as partners in communication. Some names are listed under the heading *Acknowledgements* on pages 5 and 6 of the dictionary. They greatly varied in gifts, social and scholarly positions and in availability. But all of them were indispensable! Without them I would not have been able to develop the original collections of vocabulary for personal use to the publication of a series of editions of a Chichewa Dictionary, of which the present one is number 11 if you include the previous separate books for English-Chichewa and for Chichewa English since 2000, and it is number 5 if you only look at the combined versions that have appeared in book form since 2009. I honour the team of language helpers, who contributed to the professional lexicon that it has become, as a tool for many users and learners of Chichewa.

-Special mention deserve my former students of ZTC who served as guides and resource persons. One of them is here, Rev. Sailes Kaleso. Further I am citing Mr. Andrew

Goodson, Classics Teacher of Kamuzu Academy and his language informants. [Plus some in a separate list]

-Let us also remember and hold in grateful memory those who have died in the meantime, among them are Mr. Richard Mitawa, a watchman at Zomba, Mr. Cliff Kalonga, a teacher at Kasungu, and Rev. D. Ponchisi Phiri a church minister in Zimbabwe.

-Above all we express our gratitude to the Lord our God who in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit called us to this work and has given us strength and the opportunities we needed.

History Chichewa Lexicography

-During the process of working on the dictionary I came to realise that we stand on the shoulders of others. There is a long tradition of Chichewa lexicography.

-Who was first to reduce Chichewa to writing? In a sense it was Major Antonio Candido Pedroso Gamitto, a Portuguese army officer. In the years 1831/1832 he led an expedition through Southern Malawi and Mozambique into the direction of Tete. On his way in the jungle he jotted down words that he heard from the African people they met. He collected words in several languages, some of the words in his list are Nyanja or Chewa.

-But the real fathers of Chichewa Lexicography are the Malawian Salimini and the German Johannes Rebmann. They met and worked thousands of kilometres from the Malawi borders. Salimini was an ex-slave from Lake Malawi, Rebmann was a missionary and founder of the Church in Eastern Africa. About 1850 in Mombasa, eastern Kenya, not far from the Kilimanjaro mountain, they cooperated in giving birth to the very first dictionary in the language that we now call Chichewa or Chinyanja. Rebmann called his collection 'Dictionary of the Kinyassa Language'. It has almost 200 small pages and was published in Switzerland and in London simultaneously in 1877, one year after Rebmann's death. In 2011 I published a biography of this remarkable missionary and linguist, not forgetting the significance of his Malawian friend. See the advert on the very last page of the dictionary. [Also see www.chichewadictionary.org and click 'Johannes Rebmann']

-A decisive milestone is the lexicographical work of a Scottish missionary in Southern Malawi, David Clement Rufelle Scott. In a way he was the founder of the Blantyre Synod of the CCAP. In 1892 he published his *A Cyclopaedic Dictionary of the Mang'anja Language ...*. His successor Alexander Hetherwick edited Scott's work, which led to the publication in 1929 of a book entitled *Dictionary of the Nyanja Language*. It was reprinted in

1951, 1957 and 1963. And then largely forgotten. It took years after my start in Chichewa before someone drew my attention to this historical monument and presented me with a copy.

-Let us not forget the work of another famous missionary, who was at the cradle of the Livingstonia Synod of the CCAP: Dr. Robert Laws. In his earlier years at Cape McLearn and Bandawe Laws compiled *An English-Nyanja Dictionary*, eventually published in 1894.

-There are many more data that could be mentioned. For an article and a bibliography of the history of Chichewa dictionary-making, see the site of the Chichewa Dictionary Project (www.chichewadictionary.org) under the button 'Chichewa Lexicography'. Almost all these lexicographical initiatives eventually failed in the sense that they ended when their author died. A rare exception is an anonymous *Student's English-Chichewa Dictionary*. It originates from a document of the Zambezi Mission in the beginning of the 20th century, under the name *English-Nyanja Dictionary*. CLAIM and Malamulo reprinted it in 1986, respectively in a blue and in a brown cover. Many of you may remember this small and handy book of 173 small pages.

Motivation

When working for the Chichewa dictionary I have been deeply motivated by a number of convictions:

1. I am convinced of the immense importance of a person's mother tongue for his or her life and work.

2. Apart from our mother tongue we often have to learn other languages. I am also convinced that you cannot learn another language well without knowing your own language well.

3. I realised that if as a foreigner one wants to find the way to a person's head and heart one will have to learn the mother tongue of that person. This is a basic rule in intercultural relationships.

4. I have been feeling a desire to serve all users and learners of Chichewa.

5. Finally, as a Christian I am convinced that language concerns God and our relationship with Him. Let me briefly quote Scripture to underline this. It is the well-known story of the building of the tower of Babylon.

-Gen.11:1-8: 'Now the whole world had one language ... They said, Come let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens ... The Lord said ... Come, let

us go down and confuse their language, so they will not understand each other.'

This history of Babylon in the book of God's revelation shows that God Himself broke the unity of language and made a variation of different languages. This teaches us various lessons. In concluding this speech I am mentioning two lessons:

*The existence of languages cannot be taken for granted. Man's ability to speak a language or languages is God's gift. He created the languages, so that we should rejoice in their beauty and use them for our communication, to the honour of His Name.

**We are not allowed to use our language as a proud fortress to subdue or overwhelm other peoples and languages. That is true for English, the language of the former colonizer. English is a beautiful vehicle of communication to give access to the international world of knowledge. But English should not try to eradicate people's mother tongue. Because one's mother tongue is and remains the first and most important and most precious and most effective means of learning the intricate essentials of life.

This rule also applies to Chichewa itself. Chichewa in Malawi serves as a *lingua franca* between the various language groups, a useful connecting language for all. But

its speakers should never dishonour or try to surpress the use of the other vernacular languages in the country. In practice of course not all languages can have the same function, but they are all Malawi's national languages and gifts from God.

These two divine rules or conditions delineate the boundaries within which Chichewa, hence this dictionary, can serve as a tool for peace and progress in Malawi.

Zikomo!