CiTonga: An overview

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Classification

- Guthrie (1948) classifies Malawian languages as Bantu languages belonging to zones M, N and P.

- CiTonga belongs to 'Zone N Group 10' together with neighbouring Chichewa and Tumbuka. Bryan (1959) puts CiTtonga and Tumbuka (Northern Malawi's lingua franca) in one group where Chichewa (or Nyanja, Malawi's lingua franca) is excluded. In colonial literature, the language is considered a dialect of Tumbuka.

- The language is mostly spoken in Nkhata-Bay, a district in Northern Malawi that covers 4089km^2, with a population of 213,779 people (according to 2008 population census).

- It is estimated that 1.7% of Malawi's 19 million people speak the language in their homes. The language is also spoken in neighbouring parts of Mzimba, Rumphi, Likoma Island and Nkhota-kota Districts.

- Very little has been published on CiTonga linguistics, let alone phonology.

- Perhaps the earliest work that can be termed a linguistic pursuit is that which was done by Turner (1952: Tumbuka-Tonga-English Dictionary).

- Serious linguistic studies published as journal articles include Mtenje (1994/95, 2006), Mkochi (2005, 2007/8, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2018, 2019a, 2019b, 2021), Bickmore and Mkochi (2018, 2019), Mkochi and Bickmore (2021), and Mkochi, Rodrigues & Bickmore (2022) especially in the field of phonology.

- There are also copies of undergraduate and graduate dissertations found mostly in the departments of English and African Languages and Linguistics at the University of Malawi.

- Some of the old works which are written in CiTonga are Chirwa (1932), *Mcapu wa Chitonga* (n.a) (1932), *Mazgu ghaku Chiuta, The Bible in Chitonga* (1986), and Mphande (2000). None of these works is linguistically important.

- Materials written in English about CiTonga and its people include MacAlpine (1905), Mary Tew (1950), Monica Wilson (1958), Jaap van Velsen (1959a,b, 1964), Banda (1985), Soko (1985), Mphande (1998), Msosa (1999) and Mphande (2000).

- Mphande (2000) and Vail (1972) show that the earliest books written in this language which were read in primary schools included *Mkwele, Chiswamsangu, Marko, Mcapu, Nthanu*, and others. But these are not available now.

- CiTonga has five phonemic vowels namely, low, central and unrounded vowel [a], mid, front and unrounded vowel [e], mid, back and rounded vowel [o], high, front and unrounded vowel [i], and high, back and rounded vowel [u].

- Long vowels are encountered in limited and predictable positions. Length is not contrastive.

- Long vowels of Bantu languages are mostly represented by double letters, the method of indicating length advocated by the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures (e.g. **bii.k-a** 'cook').

- The IPA uses (ː) after the letter representing the long sound segment. In my works, long vowels are represented by double letters.

		BILABIAL	LABIO-DENTAL	ALVEOLAR	PALATAL	VELAR	GLOTAL	LAB. VELAR
STOP	Non-pre.nas	b p pʰ		d t tʰ		g k kʰ		
	Pre-nas	mb mpʰ		nd ntʰ		ŋg ŋkʰ		
AFFRIC	Non-pre-nas				ɟ c cʰ			
	Pre-nas				ɲɟ ɲcʰ			
NASAL		m		n	ɲ	ŋ		
FRIC		β	v f	z s			h	
APProx			ʋ		j	ɰ		w
LAT				l				

- In writing system:
- p^h= ph, t^h=th, k^h=kh, mp^h=mph, nt^h=mph, $ŋk^h$=nkh, ŋg = ng
- = ɟ or ǰ = j, c^h=ch, ɲɟ or ɲǰ=nj, ɲc^h =nch
- ɲ= nɣ, ŋ = ng', ʋ or β = ŵ, j = y, ɰ= gh

- Like many Bantu languages, the structure of the syllable in CiTonga is essentially CV.

- Many of them are light.

- Heavy syllables are attested in the penultimate syllable position of many words. This length is generally believed to be a cue for stress in many Bantu languages. The forms in (2) below exemplify this fact. A period symbol '.' has been used to show syllable boundary.

- *Heavy syllables are realized in word-penultimate position*
- *Chitonga*   *English*
- **je.ˈndee.s-a**   drive
- **ˈlee.mb-a**   write
- **βe.le.ˈβee.t-a**   speak
- **to.ˈndeé.k-a**   fail
- **mwe.tu.ˈlii.j-a**   smile
- **go.go.ˈtee.z-a**   exagerate

Noun word

• Like in many Bantu languages, all nouns in CiTonga belong to a noun class. The noun word may consist of a noun stem (noun word minus prefixes) and a noun prefix.

• The prefix expresses grammatically relevant information of noun class gender and number (plural or singular).

• It plays a crucial role in agreement between the nouns and other grammatical classes (such as adjectives, possessives, demonstratives and verbs) in a construction. According to my observation, there are about 18 noun classes in this language.
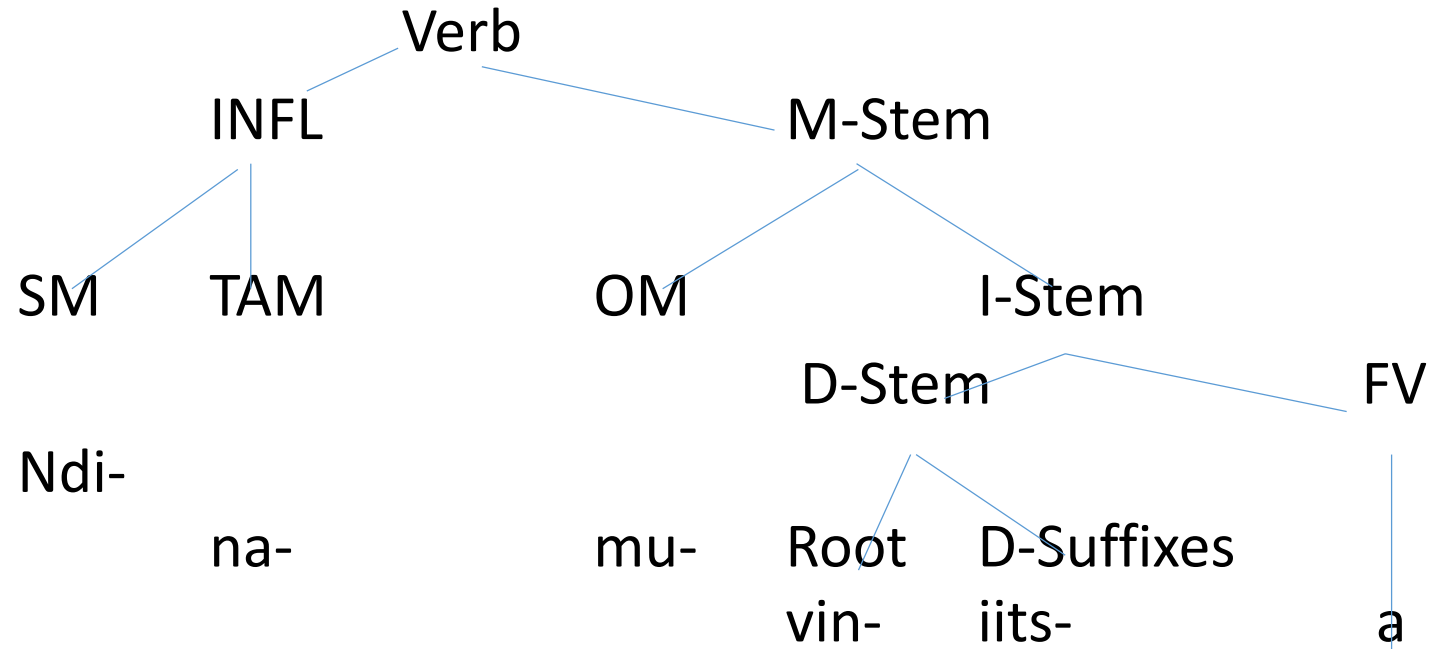
CLASS	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	12	13	14	6	15	16	17	18
PREF	mu	βa	mu	mi	li	ma	ci	Vi	*N	*N	ka	tu	u	ma	ku	pa	ku	mu
SM	wa	βa	u	i	li	ŋga	ci	vi	i	zi	ka	tu	u	ŋga	ku	pa	ku	mu
OM	mu	βa	u	i	li	ŋga	ci	Vi	i	zi	ka	tu	u	ŋga	ku	pa	ku	mu

- [ka-mu-ntʰu]   [ka-fípa]   [ka-ŋgu-li-léemb-a]   [bukú]
   [li-tuúβa]

   [12-1-person]   [12SM-black]   [12SM-past-5OM-write-fv]
   [5book] [5-white]

   'A small African wrote (it) a holy book.'

Verb structure

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                           Verb
              INFL                      M-Stem
    SM      TAM            OM                  I-Stem
                                        D-Stem           FV
    Ndi-
          na-           mu-      Root     D-Suffixes
                                 vin-     iits-              a
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Ndi-na-mu-vin-its-a
I-PAST-1OM-dance-CAUS-FV
'I made him dance'.

Tone

Tone is contrastive for both verbal and nominal roots, as seen in the isolation forms below.

(4) a. dììk-à   'spill'   g. cì-lèèzò   'chin'

 b. dìík-à   'cover oneself'   h. cì-mìítè   'tree'

 c. tʰèèl-à   'arrive'   i. mà-líìŋì   'rings'

 d. tʰèél-à   'give up'

 e. vììmb-à   'cover'

 f. vììmb-à   'be constipated'

The language has both grammatical (melodic) and lexical tone.

Important works

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