

Towards a Study of the Lexicon of Sex and HIV/AIDS

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ABSTRACT

The first HIV/AIDS case in Malawi was diagnosed in 1985. Some medical practitioners, however, date the arrival of HIV/AIDS in Malawi from 1977. The advent of this fatal health condition was then made public to the nation of Malawi through a newspaper article and radio broadcasts on the then only broadcasting outlet, namely, the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC). The news of the outbreak of HIV/AIDS was received in different ways by different sections of the community. Three types of reactions may be noted for the purpose of this paper. The first reaction was one of shock and fear of this hitherto largely unknown ailment. Other people reacted by simply observing that the disease had always been there as evidenced by such names as **magawagawa** (they that you share) and **kaliwondewonde** (it that causes thinness). The third type of reaction was the ‘so what’ kind of response which pointed towards the fact that Malawians should not be unduly worried because it was a known fact that humans are destined to die sooner or later anyway. This paper aims to interrogate the relationship that obtains between cultural pursuits and dictates and the language that is employed in discussing matters of sex and HIV/AIDS. The paper examines the type of language and linguistic expressions, which are used in discussions about sex and sexual behaviour against the backdrop of a generally conservative and male dominated society. The conservative nature of the Malawian society is reflected in a kind of self-censored nature of linguistic use through the employment of euphemistic expressions. In addition, the paper also studies the language that is employed to discuss the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The conclusion reached is that most of the images invoked in such linguistic repertoire are those of being trapped by fatalistic determinism. If we accept that language is a reflection of a people’s culture and the manner in which the people perceive themselves as well as others, the implication of the language use is that certain sections of the community are not part of the national efforts and movements whose aim is to combat and arrest the spread of the fatal virus and all its concomitant socio-economic and cultural consequences. The language use also points out towards the fact that there is partial failure in attempts to effectively communicate about the obvious dangers of the disease whose spread in some cases is oiled by rampant and unacceptable poverty levels as well as lack of genuine empowerment of females to discuss and negotiate for safe sexual practices.

INTRODUCTION

In the end notes of an article titled: ‘Chichewa dictionary trials: a report’, the authors note that, “Explicit reference to human genitalia and/or sexual behaviour is culturally inappropriate in the Malawian context. However, with the current HIV/AIDS epidemic, it has become necessary to engage in what is known as ‘straight talk’ about sex organs and/or sexual behaviour. The use of euphemisms

does sometimes fail to convey the message clearly e.g. when the male sexual organ is referred to as **chida** (weapon)” (Kamwendo, Bwanali, Nyirenda and Kachiwanda 2001: 103). In the same article the reader is informed that a “major objective of the survey was to establish from prospective users the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the dictionary” (Kamwendo et al. 2001: 102). To this end therefore, the reader is further informed that “respondents were asked to evaluate excerpts of the dictionary. The following were perceived as the dictionary’s weaknesses: ... (ii) the inclusion of taboo words” (ibid). The present article, as will have become obvious by now, has been largely motivated by the article under reference and the fact that to date there has been no study devoted to words and expressions that are used in discussing sex especially in connection with the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The paper aims to bring the claim made in the end notes under an academic microscope with the express aim of revealing that the statement is as general as it is inaccurate in as far as it does not state in what contexts the use of the lexicon being referred to is inappropriate “in the Malawian context”. The paper goes on to show that there are contexts in Malawi in which the lexicon is considered appropriate and if the researchers had done comprehensive literature survey, they would have come across a lot of information, which would have compelled them to state what they do differently. In the context of today’s health pandemic of HIV/AIDS, the paper aims to study the general and specific lexicon which refers to sex, sexual behaviour, HIV/AIDS and expressions which make direct and indirect reference to sexual practices and attitudes towards this debilitating and life threatening health condition especially in developing countries where anti-retroviral drugs (ARVs) are inaccessible to the majority of citizens. The conclusion reached is that through the language studied, one gets the impression that despite the obvious awareness of the prevalence and the devastating socio-economic consequences of the pandemic, there is a sense of denial as well as acceptance of fate and determinism in some sections of the community. Such a scenario has the unwelcome implications of an express refusal to adopt behavioural change, which would assist in the arrest of one of the most deadly health pandemics the world has been challenged with. From a linguistics point of view, the lexicon and expressions offer overwhelming evidence to the fact that languages and societies are dynamic entities which are always undergoing change with cultural practices impacting on language while language reflects the culture. In addition, the paper reaches the conclusion that rather than condemn lexicographers for ‘telling it as it is’, readers or listeners should be asking for culturally appropriate communicative competence.

FUNCTIONAL USES OF LANGUAGE

It is imperative that in a discussion on how communities and speakers use and react to language use one should shed light on what functions language is put to. For the present paper, we will note the following language functions:

informative. This kind of function, as the term implies, provides information of different types to the intended reader or listener. Examples of such a type of function are given below.

- (i) My name is John.
- (ii) Bara wajara. (They have closed the bar.)
- (iii) Kumangwetu ni ku Mangochi. (My home is Mangochi.)

The second type of language function is known as directive or imperative. And again, as the nearly two synonymous terms may imply, this kind of language function issues commands and orders. Reagan (1992) states that this function “is sometimes called the imperative function of language because it often involves the use of the imperative form of the verb” (Reagan 1992: 37). Examples of such type of language are:

- (i) Stop the car.
- (ii) Luta kukaya. (Go home.)
- (iii) Go to the village.
- (iv) Remove all your clothes.

The other function of language is known as emotive. In this regard, language is used to express feelings as well as emotions such as anger. One’s likes and dislikes also find expression through this type of functional use. See the examples below.

- (i) Ndimakonda kudya mbewa. (I like to eat mice.)
- (ii) Ndapsa nawe mtima. (I am cross with you.)
- (iii) Ndimakukonda. (I love you.)

In writing on the function of language, Reagan (1992) states that “one needs to be careful to distinguish between reporting on an emotion (e.g., ‘I like warm weather’) which would involve the informative use of language, and actually expressing an emotion (e.g., ‘I love warm weather’ Reagan 1992: 37).

It is this function of language, which will inform the section on the use of taboo, and euphemisms of the present paper. Meanwhile, the reader should note another three functions of language namely, the interrogative whose use requests “information and action”, the evaluative which is usually judgemental and the ceremonial function (Reagan 1992: 38). Examples of these language functions are given below in the order cited above.

Interrogative

- (i) Where are you going?
- (ii) Umakhala kuti? (Where do you live?)
- (iii) When were you born?

Evaluative

- (i) He is the brightest boy.
- (ii) Mnyamatayo alibe nzeru. (The boy is not clever.)
- (iii) She is the prettiest girl I have ever seen.

Ceremonial

- (i) Mwadzuka bwanji? (How are you this morning?)
- (ii) Yendani bwino. (Go well.)
- (iii) Ndasangalala kukuona. (I am happy to see you.)

There is need to point out that the context in which the language is used may significantly alter the function of language. Below let us briefly note how socialisation impacts on gender roles in the Malawian context.

SOCIALIZATION AND GENDER ROLES

The Malawian community reinforces gender roles from an early age. In towns and cities girl children are bought dolls and encouraged to know how to carry them on their backs, among other things. Boys, on the other hand are given toys such as cars and trains, which indicate power and wealth. Any feminine tendencies by the male child are admonished with comments such as “osamalankhula ngati mkazi” (do not speak like a woman/female) or “osamangolira zili zonse ngati munthu wamayi” (do not cry so easily as if you are a woman). Such stereotypical socialisation processes are an integral part of a societal package to mould children to fit into categories, which a hierarchical male dominant society wishes to lord over and perpetuate. When the children widen their experiential horizons, they discover that even certain jobs are believed to be there mostly for females only. These jobs are nursing, secretarial work and teaching among others.

Quick random interviews and focus group discussion on several radio programmes reveal that a majority of school going girl pupils mention nursing, teaching and secretarial work as possible careers when they complete school. Such aspirations to a large extent indicate the societal expectations of the girl child as she perceives them.

INDIRECT COMMUNICATION

The literature on oral communication in Malawi testifies to the fact that many Malawian societies encourage communication which is indirect. The reasons for this may be many. Many informants, however, reveal that they avoid direct communication to avoid the delivery of shock or embarrassment. There is need to save the faces even of those who deserve societal rebuke. In a Malawian

society therefore, there is nothing more embarrassing than being told off directly.

This indirect means of communication has been reported in research work on matters of sexual and sexual behaviour. Kornfield and Chilongozi (1997) report that:

Several married male clients in Nkhata Bay explained indirect ways they could tell their wives about the infection and need to obtain treatment, such that their wife would not realize that the symptoms were associated with sexual transmission and therefore would not suspect them of infidelity (Kornfield and Chilongozi 1997: 36).

Kornfield and Chilongozi (ibid) go on to state that husbands would tell their wives that they have “bilharzias which is transmitted both sexually and otherwise, describing the symptoms without revealing to the wife their relation to sexually transmitted diseases” (ibid).

Another indirect means for communication again reported by Kornfield and Chilongozi (ibid) is by way of testing the knowledge of sexually transmitted diseases before telling the sexual partner directly (Kornfield and Chilongozi 1997: 37).

Such a manner of communication would involve showing “the partner the symptoms to find out if he or she knew what caused them” (ibid). Even communication pertaining to matters of sex between lovers and married couples is mainly done in an indirect way. Hence, one hears that **Amuna anga salowa mnyumba** (My husband does not get into the house, i.e. my husband is not able to have sex with me) or ‘**Akazi anga akundikaniza mwendo**’ (My wife is refusing me a leg, i.e. my wife is denying to have sex with me).

Indirect communication goes to great lengths where outsiders and the less suspecting listener may have no clue of what an exchange between two speakers may be leading to. Consider the situation and exchange described below. A man is seen struggling to open a bottle of beer and a female says:

Kani simudziwa kutsakula.
(I see you do not know how to open.)

To the above observation the man says:

Ee sindidziwa.
(Yes, I do not know.)

The female then says:

Ndidzakuphunzitsani kutsakula.
(I will teach you how to open.)

To an outsider, the above exchange may sound straightforward talk about a simple incident of opening a beer bottle or a bottle of a cold drink. What is actually being talked about are matters of sex and sexual activities.

Some traditional Chichewa songs further illustrate the use of indirect communication on matters pertaining to sexual intercourse. Consider the song below.

Mwana wangayu ngwamthengo ngosantenga
Ngati udadya mkwapukwapu suyo mtenge
Mavuto ku mseu.

(I have a bush child, which was never taken
If you ate mkwapukwapu here take him/her
Trouble at the road.)

The above song is very cryptic. The woman singing it has a child outside wedlock. Normally after the birth of a child in a family the couple are supposed to have sex following particular laid down and standard procedures. That ceremonial sexual intercourse is called '**kutenga mwana**' literally 'to take the child', i.e. the first sexual act after the birth of a child symbolises the acceptance of the child into the society and the freeing of parents, relatives and the chief to resume community sanctioned sexual activities.

The singer of the above song, therefore, has not had the chance to 'take the child', because she has no husband. She therefore, through song, invites any man who may care to listen to 'take the child'. She warns that the man who may 'assist' her in taking the child 'If you ate **mkwapukwapu**'. **Mkwapukwapu** is a wild plant believed to provide sexual potency.

The use of the phrase 'kutenga mwana' (to take the child) is not merely for information's sake or making a declarative statement. It conveys the interrelationship between language and Chewa culture. The same can be said about the phrase 'kulowa mnyumba' (to enter into a house). The linguistic term **nyumba** (house) is more than just a dwelling unit. In the culture of some Malawian communities, 'nyumba' invokes other semantic readings. A statement such as 'Amunanga salowa mnyumba' carries with it semantic readings of sexual impotence or inability to sexually satisfy one's spouse or girlfriend.

Whereas some communication through song may be indirect, there are cases where such is clearly not the case. The Maseko Ngoni of Ntcheu district in central Malawi provides an illustration of direct communication regarding matters sexual and their attendant consequences of sexually transmitted infections. The illustrative song runs as follows:

Anakwata wachindoko
Anakwata wachindoko
Suyo wanka nayo!
Aye hoyo!
Aya hoyo!
Suyo wanka nayo.

He fucked one with syphilis
He fucked one with syphilis
There he is gone (dead)
Aye hoya
Aya hoya
There he is gone (dead). (Kamlongera 1999: 4)

The above song is clear testimony, if any were needed, that direct and explicit communication about sexual matters and infidelity are part of some Malawian communities. Such evidence puts the observation made by the survey team on the Chichewa dictionary into doubt.

GENDER AND THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE

That the Malawian society is hierarchical has been said before. In writing on language, culture and gender one is compelled to make reference to Lacan (1977a, b) who is reinterpreting Freud focuses on “a structuralist theory that places central importance on the role of language on the development of the individual” (Harris 1989: 70). Lacan’s (1977a, b) reinterpretation of the Oedipus complex is that it

is the moment at which the individual enters what he calls the ‘symbolic order’, that is a system of signification which positions the individual within a given structure of meaning (Harris 1989: 70).

The relevance of the above statements is that gender roles and gender issues are usually embedded in arguments that critique differences and what accrues to an individual due to those differences. Harris (1989), again, continues to observe that ‘meaning is organised around the recognition of difference, and is based on the presence or absence of the phallus, here understood as strictly symbolic rather than physiological entity’ (ibid).

What Lacan subscribes to can also be said of the Malawian society in which the phallus is a key signifier which inscribes certain power relations within discourse such that males, who command discourse, occupy a privileged position in the structure of society (Harris 1989: 71).

The difference between male and female is emphasised in the Malawian society. This author, for instance, has never seen a female assigned to beat drums for a **gule wamkulu**¹ performance. This is explained by the fact that all those involved in beating the drums must be ‘pure’. Anthropology informs us that

¹ Gule Wamkulu literally means the ‘big dance’. This is a largely male secret society which plays a vital role in the socio-cultural, political, economic and educational life of the Chewa.

we often find emphasis on the polluting, dirty, dangerous and thus anti-social character of women's sexuality. The combination of menstruation and child birth is given as justification for treating women as less than fully cultural (Harris 1989: 77).

A recent report on HIV/AIDS in Malawi cements the above position through stating that "cultural norms and values define masculinity in terms of sexual prowess and sexual activity. This encourages male promiscuity" (UNDP Report 2002: 12). The behaviour of Malawian males is compared to that of fearless wild animals who must risk it all to achieve and maintain supremacy in the society as expressed in 'Ana amuna ndzilombo adakatenga nyama mndondo' (Males are wild animals (power and daring) capable of taming game and bring it to the village).

Chirwa (1997) agrees when he writes that "The social construction of male sexuality is thus part of the construction of manhood and masculinity. Sexual relations are expressed in terms of social maturity" (Chirwa 1997: 7).

The all powerful image of the **chilombo** (beast) which, as stated earlier, represents power, authority, dominance and a certain amount of violence and calculated aggression, for all intents and purposes, is the construct of male and expected behaviour of males towards females in Malawian society in general, Chewa society in particular. To hear the word **chilombo**, therefore, is to hear a linguistic signal, which is associated with the attributes outlined above. To understand the meaning of the word **chilombo** is therefore to agree that

meaning is rarely if ever, an innocent process of denotation, but depends on a whole series of other meanings, connotations and structures of a given social order (Harris 1989: 89).

The expected activities and male oriented behaviour is revealed in the language in the song below.

Aye aye chilombo nsala (4 x)
Bwera bwera
Bwera (2 x)
Nanga umabwererANJI
Wangobwera yee
Aye aye chilombo nsala

(Aye aye sexy beast (4 x)
Come yonder come yonder
Come yonder (2 x)
So why did you come after all
Since you have returned
You have just returned
Aye aye sexy beast)

It is characteristic of **gule wamkulu** to engage in boldly gestures, which are unmistakably sexual in nature. Because they largely represent males in the society the song and language used above is a mockery on a cowardly male who (represented by the chilombo in the song) approaches a group of females but fails to satisfy their sexual desire. It is almost in the realm of the Shakespearean metaphor of alcohol provoking the desire but taking away the performance.

The language used in the song though seemingly simple is highly coded but also easily decoded by initiates and those with an expanded knowledge of the linguistic latitude that can be attained by expressions like **wangobwerera** (you have just returned) meaning ‘you have returned without doing anything’. There are many more examples that illustrate the intricate relationship that binds together language and cultural beliefs, practices and perceptions. The girls and women singing the above song it can be said are far from being passive, muted and totally inarticulate. In mocking the **chilombo**, the way they do, they are a voice which articulates the pretences of the male folk.

For the male to be sexually incapacitated mercilessly attracts comments which are not complementary from both males and females. Expressions meant to mock and demean males who for one reason or another cannot sexually deliver are common. Among them are:

Adagwa mu mpapaya
(he fell from a pawpaw tree)
Adakhomera ku Dowa
(he paid his tax at Dowa)

Meaning ‘he is sexually incapacitated’.

LANGUAGE AND CONTEXT

Evidence that language use is largely determined by context as well as other factors is provided by Kamwana (1996). Kamwana (1996) reports that she heard two men exchange the following utterances outside a bar in the Municipality of Zomba, Malawi.

Speaker A: “Iwe! Ukamuchinde kwambiri ameneyo”.
Speaker B: “Kuchinda ndi kuchinda sibola kukhala ndi ndalama”
(Kamwana 1996: 19).

On the scale of sexual words that may be a high load of tabooism, the above highlighted words would rank very high if not the highest.

The context in which it is used is one where men and women pass time drinking beer with both sexes looking for partners to have sex. Such environments in which alcohol is being consumed provide speakers opportunities to use language which would not be normally used in other

contexts such as the home. The talk of sex and money near drinking places is independently supported by Forster (2000) who writes that:

“customers for bar girls are more plentiful at the end of the month when most wage and salary earners are paid. Surplus income is then available for male pleasure in the form of sex and drink, which are sought at the bar (Forster 2000: 3). Earlier, Chirwa (1997) also rightly observed that “there is a link between alcohol consumption and commercial sex” (Chirwa 1997: 10).

HISTORICAL AND ETHNIC CONTEXT

In Malawi, it is a well-known historical fact that some ethnic groups do not necessarily consider mentioning certain activities and some body parts as unacceptable.

There are other terms which were thought to be the manifestation of the new disease. These are **tsempho** and **kanyera**. **Tsempho** has its root from the verb *kusempha* which mtanthauzira mawu (2000) defines as:

Kanyera is derived from the verb **nyera** ‘defecate’. It is easy to understand why these two conditions were equated with an individual who has been infected by HIV. A person suffering from **tsempho** exhibited the following symptoms: “marasmic appearance, generalized edema, weight loss and diarrhoea” (Kornfield and Namate 1997: 19). One suffering from **kanyera** on the other hand exhibited the following symptoms: “body chills” which prompted the patient to do some “sun busking”. Like the **tsempho** patient the individual also went through “weight loss” and had “marasmic appearance” report Kornfield and Namate (ibid).

It is easy to understand why in the earlier day of the HIV/AIDS Malawians had the view that the new disease was simply a manifestation of older ailments come to revisit the people. Kornfield and Namate (1997) report that “Two symptoms common to all three diseases are marasmic appearance and weight loss. Diarrhoea is common to **tsempho** and AIDS.

The use of these terms to define HIV/AIDS conditions would have devastating effects on the community because as Kornfield and Namate (1997) state: There is The possibility that a person who suffers from opportunistic illness related to HIV are considered to be suffering from **tsempho** or **kanyera** and therefore are not taken to hospital to be treated for the opportunistic illness (Kornfield and Namate 1997: 28-29).

The above view is supported by Forster (2002) when he writes that “There were also ... claims, to the effect that AIDS could be cured because it was really **kanyera** or **kanyera wamkulu**” (Forster 2002: 6).

AIDS IN MALAWI

Lwanda (2002) writes that the probable origins of HIV/AIDS still remain mysterious. Lwanda (*ibid*) however does point out that HIV/AIDS may have entered Malawi “through the international road trade routes from the eastern and western (Zaire to Kenya) and the eastern and southern (Kenya to South Africa) networks (Lwanda 2002: 151). It is not, again, exactly when HIV arrived in Malawi. Its presence in the country can only be traced to the discovery of “the two per cent prevalence rate among antenatal patients at Queen Elizabeth Hospital in 1985” (Lwanda 2002: 151). Lwanda however, citing L’Herminez et al. (1992) goes on to suggest “that HIV may have arrived in Malawi around 1977” (Lwanda 2002: 152). What one can say with certainty Lwanda states, though is the fact that “Oral Yao, Tumbuka and Chewa discourses agree that HIV/AIDS is ‘new’ to Malawi – kubwera kwa Edzi (the arrival of AIDS) (Lwanda *ibid*).

There is a counter view though. During the early days of the disease’s existence in Malawi, certain sections of the community notably older men and women and traditional healers were suggesting that the disease was not new to Malawi since the way it was being transmitted and its symptoms had been witnessed before. This point of view is hinted upon by Lwanda (2002) when he writes that when he carried out field work in the year 2000 “opinions varied as to whether this was a sexually transmitted disease of antiquity like **tsempho**, **mdulo**, **kanyela** or a new one” (*ibid*).

Whether or not the disease is new or old is not a burning issue for us here in this work. The fact still remains however, that starting from the late 1970s Lwanda’s (2002) observation as a medical practitioner is that “between 1979 and 1984, there was an increase in the number of Malawian students sent for training abroad who died from a number of ailments, including hepatitis B, a blood borne disease” (Lwanda 2002: 152). Apart from the uncertainty of the origins of HIV/AIDS, naming the epidemic was itself problematic.

WHAT SHALL WE CALL THE DISEASE?

As stated in the introduction, the arrival of HIV/AIDS brought with it many unanswered questions. One of them was what the new epidemic should be called. Recall also that one of the statements made in the Malawian community was that this was not an entirely new medical problem largely because of the manner in which it was transmitted from one person to another. Hence, the initial candidate is a word with the inherent semantic content of sharing, hence **magawagawa**. **Magawagawa** is a nominal that is formed from the verb **gawa** – share. The nominal is derived from two morphological processes. The first is that of reduplication, the second is affixation and in this particular case, the type of affixation is prefixation.

This name never gained serious currency to refer to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The reason for this may be the following. Calling HIV/AIDS **magawagawa** may have been right in as far as the disease was transmitted sexually. This name, however, may have hidden the fact that the new disease was here to stay in comparison to **magawagawa**, which in the past was curable.

The reference to HIV being **kachilombo koyambitsa matenda a edzi** (literally: a small beast that gives rise to AIDS). In more recent times the sentence has been reduced to the single word **kachilombo** (a small beast). The majority of Malawians now understand the term **kachirombo** as HIV unless otherwise stated. Hence, one hears of: Kachirombo kalowa (a small beast has entered), meaning someone is showing symptoms of having been infected by the deadly virus. Lwanda (2002) however warns that the use of the term kachilombo carries with it the meaning that this small beast can and should be fought and killed. This has therefore led to the belief that if it is acquired it is possible to get rid of it in the same manner a wild beast may be killed. It is perhaps for this reason that some people believe that the virus can be 'killed' if one sleeps with an under aged girl or even a girl or a woman who is physically or mentally challenged.

The use of the term has generally been accepted and is used extensively in both the electronic and print media as well as public political and religious rallies. The word has even found its way into modern Malawian dictionaries. For instance, the English-Chichewa/Chinyanja dictionary by Paas (2003) defines edzi as:

edzi imakononga chitetezo cha thupi kumatenda
(AIDS destroys the protection of the body against diseases) (Paas 2003:
16)

OTHER EXPRESSIONS AND TERMS FOR HIV/AIDS

The epidemic is also known in Malawi as **matenda a boma** (government's disease). The origin of this expression may be due to the fact that government has shown unprecedented interest in the pandemic (Lwanda 2002). The concern by government and government officials has received new accentuation in revamped contemporary songs. Chitenje Tambala, a very creative blind local musician has sung about the pandemic thus:

There is AIDS
President Bakili Muluzi says
You are going to be wiped out
Where have you seen illness that
Has no cure? (WASI, 1999: 16).

The mention of the name of the first president of the second republic is in itself a stark manifestation of how government has become concerned with the

HIV/AIDS pandemic. This position was given further strength when at the launch of the national AIDS policy the president decided to reveal that he was HIV negative.

GENDER, POVERTY AND HIV/AIDS

It has been noted that “adolescent girls are both biologically and psychologically more vulnerable than boys to sexual abuse, violence, prostitution and the consequences of unprotected and premature and unsafe sexual relationships (Kaya 1999: 40). Due to cultural socialisation, research as well as practice has shown that adolescent girls and young women “do not have the power to insist on safe and responsible sexual practices” (Hope Sr. 1999: 40).

In the case of Malawi, Kamowa and Kamwendo (1999) wrote that:

Women have no power to negotiate for safe sexual practices with their partners because sex is a taboo subject even between husband and wife, and a woman who discusses sex openly is viewed as ill mannered and promiscuous (Kamowa and Kamwendo 1999: 172).

DICTIONARY DEFINITIONS OF HIV/AIDS

Not surprisingly perhaps, the student’s English Chichewa Dictionary published in 1986 does not have the term AIDS in its entries. One can only conjecture that the reason for this may be that the manuscript had already been finalised by the time the dictionary went to press. Dictionaries published years after the HIV/AIDS pandemic was first acknowledged have attempted definitions of the term. A recent Chinyanja dictionary defines AIDS as:

Matenda opha chitetezo chathupi la munthu omwe ndi opatsirana m’njira monga yachiwerewere, kupatsana magazi kapena kuchokera ku kholo mwana akabadwa ndipo pakadali pano matendawa alibe mankhwala (Mtanthauzira mawu wa Chinyanja, 2000: 94)

The translation of the above definition would run as follows in English.

A disease that destroys the human body’s immunity and is passed on through promiscuity, the donation of blood or through mother to child infection and at present the disease has no cure.

A number of things can be said about the above definition. Medically we have been informed that AIDS is not a disease *per se*. Rather that it is the manifestation of a variety of opportunistic infections (diseases) arising from the loss of immunity by an individual or individuals. To define **edzi** as a disease that destroys the body’s immunity is therefore misleading to say the least. If anything, **edzi** is a consequence of the body’s loss of its naturally acquired immunity.

Secondly, to say that it is spread through promiscuity is to largely limit the many others ways through which it is spread. One has in mind here the spread of HIV infection through cultural practices such as the **fisi** and wife or husband inheritance customs, rape and defilement. The reader should be reminded that there is also “risk through blood and body fluid contamination in assisting in childbirth, preparation of corpses [and FM], local injections” (Kornfield and Namate 1997: 21).

The third observation is that the fact that AIDS related illnesses have no cure has become part of the definition of the health condition.

Next we need to examine the indirect language use of subject and matters, which are considered too embarrassing and unacceptable within many Malawian communities.

EVIDENCE OF THE AVOIDANCE OF TABOO WORDS AND THE USE OF EUPHEMISM

Malawians use euphemism to refer to sexual organs and parts of the human anatomy that are used to extricate human waste. Below I give examples of words that refer to body actions such as urination, defecation and sexual intercourse. Initially, I give a word that makes direct reference to a particular action followed by words and phrases which are euphemisms.

(i)	kukodza	to urinate
	kukayimirira	to go and stand
	kutaya madzi	to throw away water
(ii)	kunyera	to defecate
	kudzithandiza	to help oneself
	kuyimirira	to stand
	kupita kuthengo	to go to the bush

For the examples in (ii) there are additional expressions such as ‘ndagona panja’ which literally means ‘I have slept outside’ meaning ‘I have opened bowels or I have diarrhoea.

(iii)	kukwatana/kuchindana	to have sexual intercourse
	kugonana	to sleep with each other
	kunyengana	to cheat each other (literally)

The words, which appear first, are words which have a high taboo rating. In other words, there are situations and environments in which the use of such words is totally out of the question. Such an environment is a mixture of children and adults.

Some of the words considered and treated as taboo have such a load that even lexicographers who should focus on defining any word of a particular language shun from doing so. Some of the dictionary definitions of penis by Paas (2003) are empirical evidence of language use that hinges on avoidance to call a spade a spade. Although penis is directly defined by its vernacular counterpart – **mbolo**, there are expressions which are euphemistic such as **mavalo achimuna** (male's private parts), **chikodzero chokodzera** (it that you use to urinate) and **maliseche a amuna** (males' nakedness).

Paas (2003) has even more problems with the entry vagina. The equivalent of vagina in Chichewa is **nyini**. Paas (ibid) however offers this is **njira yamkazi** (woman's path or path into a woman), **maliseche amkazi** (female's nakedness) and **chiwalo chamkazi chomwe chimatulukira mwana pobadwitsa** (that part of the body through which a child is born).

THE LANGUAGE OF SEX

That sex and its related activities are central to people's lives can be deduced by the number of expressions used to describe. Paas (2003) has the following for describing sexual intercourse: **chigololo**, **chiwerewere**, **kukwerana**, **kuchindana**, **kukwatana**, **kugonana**, **mkwato**, **mchindo**, **mbukufu**, **mathanyula**, **manyuchi**, **mankhwala owongolera msana/mchiwuno**, **mtobwito**, **mphadzanzi** (Paas 2003: 331). In addition to the above, to have sex has two additional expressions: **yesana misinkhu**, **tola nkhungudzu** and **sansa nyerere** (Paas: ibid).

Chirwa (1997) in passing partially discusses lexicon which pertains to sex and sexual behaviour. Courtship which may end up in marriage usually follows certain laid down procedures. Chirwa (ibid) observes that "In Malawian culture, a man courting a woman for marriage affirms his commitment to her by giving her or her parents or guardians a material gift called **chikole**, from the word **kukola** 'to get hold' or 'capture' or 'take control' (Chirwa 1997: 8). This paper is interested in the word **chikole** because in the words of Chirwa (ibid) it "symbolises the man's access and claim to the woman's sexual territory" (Chirwa: ibid).

Another lexicon item that Chirwa discusses is **chibwenzi**. Ordinarily, **chibwenzi** means friendship. An abstract counterpart **ubwenzi** is also used which also means friendship. In addition Chirwa (1997) adds that "The popular phrase ... **chibwenzi** ... means 'love affair' in the Chichewa language" (Chirwa 1997: 9). **Chibwenzi**, therefore, signals that persons are sexually involved with each other so do the Tumbuka and Tonga terms **mubulu** which Chirwa again, writes "means 'love affair'".

SEX COMPARED TO FOOD

The physiological and psychological need to have sex has at times been compared to the body's requirements to be replenished with food from time to time. Batibo and Kopi (personal communication) indicate that the comparison of the desire for sex and food has also been noted in Botswana where the sexual experience "is mystified as a super pleasant experience likened to nice food..." (Batibo and Kopi to appear).

Musician's awareness of the HIV/AIDS pandemic is recorded in song. A veteran Malawian musician, Saleta Phiri has a song titled: Ili mu ufa (It is in maize flour). Ufa (maize flour) is the mainstay ingredient of Malawian diet. Ufa is what **nsima** (food) is made from. By implication, and in a fatalistic ironic twist, if one does not eat nsima, one is not expected to survive. What this means is that HIV/AIDS is in what is used to prepare nsima (the main staple portion of many Malawians diet). The implication, rightly or wrongly, is that sex is like nsima (food), which human beings cannot do without.

Other expressions, which liken sex to food, are:

Tidya momwemo
We are going to eat in there
i.e. We are going to have sex with...

Timadya momwemo
We eat in there
i.e. We have sex with...

Further fatalistic perception is conveyed in expressions such as 'edzi inabwerera ife' (AIDS came for us) and 'kufa ndi kufa basi' (dying is dying, that's all, i.e. whatever one may do, death is inevitable).

Despite the seemingly acceptance that death is inevitable some Malawian citizens have gone to a bizarre extent to avoid contracting the virus. In an article in May 2003, the Malawi nation and the world woke up to read a story titled 'Man dates cow'. Extracts of the article read:

he spotted Mwamondwe struggling
on top of the cow
Later found Mwamondwe
"red handed on the cow"
They found him naked with
his trousers on his knees
(The Nation, 2003: 19).

On being quizzed why he was doing what he had been apprehended for, the man responded that he was having sex with the cow because he had heard that human beings were responsible for sexually transmitting HIV/AIDS.

INNOVATIVENESS AND CREATIVITY IN SEX LANGUAGE USE

The use of indirect language to refer to matters of sex receives further accentuation among the youth especially those of school and college going ages. It is obvious that despite a generally liberal environment for language use may be provided at school and college campuses the youth still resort to the use of euphemistic terms and expressions when referring to matters considered secret and private by the Malawian society. This is not to say, however, that direct reference may never be heard.

Chisoni (2001) makes reference to language use on matters sexual which is indirect. What I mean by indirect here is that some other item or items unrelated to the words, which are normally associated with sexual activities, are used. Below I give a sample of such terms and expressions.

Chisoni (2001) indicates that insults, jokes and comments that contain sexual import are common among some Chancellor College (a constituent college situated in the Municipality of Zomba in Southern Malawi) under graduate students. She gives six examples as follows:

- (a) (i) Windows: said of a couple making love
- (ii) Windows 2000: said of a woman seen making love through a window
- (b) DSTV; expand your view: reference to female students wearing short skirts or dresses that expose thighs and undergarments
- (c) Virgin/virgo Chanco: female student with no known boyfriend but believed to have had sex
- (d) night queen: female student whose boyfriend only prefers to be with her at night.
- (e) soul winner: a female student found in the company of males.
- (f) thigh power: (i) academic grades obtained unfairly by female students
: (ii) improvements in grades frowned upon on suspicion that they are granted upon an offer of sexual favours.
(Chisoni 2001)

The innovativeness and creativity in the above examples in (a) and (b) are a result of modern technology. (a) makes reference to a computer software

programme called Windows which gets modified and upgraded hence the availability of Windows 98 and in (a) (ii) Windows 2000.

Earlier, Kamwana (1996) has also reported on how speakers create new terms to describe and refer to sexual activities. She reports that two women exchanged the following in a hairdressing saloon.

Speaker A: “Iwe, ukawauze amalume ako kuti awathamangitse akazi awowa chifukwa akukana kukugulira nsalu”.

Speaker B: “Nanga akandithamangitsa kwathu **adzikandimbwatchula** ndani?”

The highlighted lexical item **adzikandimbwatchula** is a new or a very unfamiliar word to the researcher. What it shows is that speakers have the ability to coin new words in an attempt to describe but also disguise their actions and thoughts. Another creation involves a total shift the use and reference of the word **ntchito**. Consider the college students exchange below.

Speaker A: “Kodi ukwati umene uja ulipo?”

Speaker B: Ungathe? Jessie amachita kundiuza kuti mwamuna wache uja amamukonda ngakhale kuti ndi wosaphunzira chifukwa amatha ntchito. (Kamwana 1996: 22)

Kamwana explains the usage of **ntchito** as follows.

The word **ntchito** has been used euphemistically in this conversation. Its literal meaning is “work”, but in this case it has been used to convey the message that Jessie loves her husband because he satisfies her sexually despite the fact that he is not educated. Thus, the work being referred to in this conversation is sex. (Kamwana 1996: *ibid*)

CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated that the Malawian society still finds it difficult to directly express itself lives on matters pertaining to sex and HIV/AIDS and often resort to using euphemisms and idiomatic expressions in their discourse on this dreaded pandemic. For instance one has yet to see a newspaper report which will directly state that a particular individual has died of HIV/AIDS related ailments. More importantly the study has also revealed that when there is a new social and medical phenomena in the society appropriate speech and communicative modes and mechanisms are created. The paper has also shown that new metaphors have continued and continues to be created and in the process gender matters are given a new emphasis and focus which reveal disparities and imbalances between male and female. The society’s perception of illness and death also surface through the many expressions that have become part of the Malawians’ linguistic repertoire. Some of the language, it has been shown, indicates a

fatalistic view to the pandemic. Newer expression, however, are beginning to emerge which seem to be countering the earlier expressions.

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