



Pronouncing English loanwords in Chichewa

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Vowel epenthesis is a well-documented strategy for adapting loanwords into languages that have less complex syllable structure than the donor language(s). Uffmann (2006, 2007) shows that three vowel epenthesis strategies are widely attested: the epenthetic vowel can agree in features with a preceding consonant, the epenthetic vowel can copy a vowel in an adjacent syllable, skipping an intervening consonant, or the epenthetic vowel can be a default vowel.

Chichewa, a Bantu language spoken in Malawi, exhibits all three strategies. Labial and coronal consonants (except the liquid 'l') trigger agreement on a following epenthetic vowel: *buleki* 'brake', *kaputeni* 'captain'; *hafu* 'half'; *sitovu* 'stove'. Epenthetic vowels following dorsals are either default 'i' or show vowel copy: *buku* 'book'; *kalasi* 'class'; *bokosi* 'box'; *Aginesi* 'Agnes'; *wigi* 'wig'. Vowel copy is also almost always found with the liquid 'l': *ci-bangili* 'bangles, bracelet'; *dalayivala* 'driver'; *sitolo* 'store'; *kologeti* 'Colgate'; *sukulu* 'school'; *delesi* 'dress'. What I will argue is that velar stops and the liquid 'l' do not trigger place agreement on an epenthetic vowel and allow vowel copy because these are the least marked consonants of Chichewa. Only marked consonants spread place features, and only unmarked consonants are skipped for vowel copy. Thus, loanword adaptation provides a window into the least marked consonants, as well as to the least marked vowels, of a language.