



The No-Nonsense Guide to Learning Chitumbuka: Volume 1

A introduction for those of us who want the basics but don't need to translate soliloquies.

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1.0 Introduction

This document is in response to a lack of Chitumbuka resources available to APS and JFs trying to learn the language. Although spoken throughout the Northern Region, Chitumbuka is not a national language of Malawi and, unlike its sister language of Chichewa, resources available to foreigners are limited.

Last year, Mike Kang pioneered the first of the “*No-Nonsense Guides*” with an excellent introduction to the Chichewa language. The guide sought to condense the multitude of Chichewa resources into a clear, accessible document that would allow volunteers to hit the ground running, even if they weren’t Chichewa scholars. With Chitumbuka, it’s a little different, since there isn’t much to help you even if you did want to become a spoken word poet in Mzimba, but the need for a crash course to help you hit the ground running remains. With that in mind, this introduction to the basics has been developed as something to get you started in the time it takes to get from London to Jo-burg. I hope it helps!

This guide is called volume one, since I might put together additional resources if there is interest. Either way, let me know if you find this useful.

A Note on Dialects

This guide has been built off Mike Kang’s guide for Chichewa, even blatantly plagiarizing it in many places where the languages are identical. Many of the grammatical structures are similar, and some words are the same in both Chitumbuka and Chichewa, but there are also important differences.

	Chichewa	Chitumbuka
Kukoma	to taste good	to kill
Kusamala	to take care of	to run

There are also different dialects in Chitumbuka, which seems to vary more significantly between districts than Chichewa does. This guide is written mostly from the perspective of Karonga Chitumbuka, but Rumphi Chitumbuka has also been included where noted. Don’t be discouraged; most of these differences are minor, and people can generally understand what you’re trying to say regardless of the dialect.

A Note on Pronunciation

The language is written phonetically, with each letter pronounced individually. Exceptions are:

- *b* – pronounced between “w” and “v”, but without an exact English equivalent
- *ch* – pronounced as it is in English
- *ng’* – no English equivalent, but easy to pick up once you hear it

Further Reading

Some other resources exist through the Peace Corps, the best of which I’ve seen being “Let’s Learn Chitumbuka” by Mackwell Gondwe. The format is a little confusing however, and some important notes on grammar are either ambiguous or missing altogether. There is also an accompanying dictionary, both of which are for the Rumphi dialect of Chitumbuka.

2.0 What's the Deal with Subjects in Chitumbuka?

*Subject: This is the word in a sentence that tells you **who** is doing something. For example, in “I go”, the subject is **I**. In “he is talking”, the subject is **he**. In “the dog sees the cat”, the subject is **the dog**.*

In Chitumbuka, it's pretty straightforward. There is an exception, but we'll get to that. This list of subjects is all you need to get started.

English	Chitumbuka
I	ni ¹ -
You (informal)	u -
He/She (informal)	a -
We	ti -
You (plural or formal)	mu -
They (or He/She formal)	ba -

That's it! All you have to do is replace the English subject in a sentence with the Chichewa equivalent. So when you say “we sell” in English, the **we** becomes **ti** in Chitumbuka, and **sell** becomes **gulisha**, so “we sell” becomes “tikugulisha” in Chitumbuka.

You see that I inserted “ku” in between the subject (ti) and the verb (gulisha). You'll also notice that it's all one word, not 2 or 3. Don't worry about these things for now; you will soon see why I did that.

But it is here that the exception rears its head, and only for the case of “I”. If you want to say “I sell,” **ni** and **ku** are combined to make **nkh**. So instead of saying “nikugulisha” it becomes “nkhugulisha”. This may seem a bit complicated, but don't worry about it too much. “I” is the only subject that starts with the letter “n” and people will understand you either way.

3.0 What's the Deal with Parts of Speech in Chitumbuka?

3.1 Verbs and Verb Construction

Verbs in Chitumbuka do pretty much the same thing as in any other language. A couple of key things to note about Chitumbuka verbs are:

- Chitumbuka verbs always end in “a”
- Chitumbuka verbs are often lower precision than English verbs for some things. This means that you will sometimes see that there is just one verb that means several different things in English
 - For example, *kusuzgika* = *to complain, to worry*
 - Another example, *kupulika* = *to hear, to understand, to feel*

In Chitumbuka, when you have a subject-verb construction, you don't separate the words. It's all one word, unlike English, French, or German. For example, in English, we say “you go”; “you” and “go” are separated by a space. But in Chichewa, the words for “you” (mu) and

¹ *ndi* - in Rumphi Dialect

“go” (kuluta) are not separated by a space, they are just shoved together: mukuluta

3.2 Nouns

There are many different classes of nouns in Chitumbuka. There are 6 basic classes plus a bunch of “extra” ones. In Chichewa, there are up to 18 depending on your definition, and Chitumbuka is similar, although I haven’t found any guides for Chitumbuka that explore noun classes to that extent.

What’s a noun class? It’s a type of noun that gives it certain properties. In English, there’s just one class, your regular noun, any noun. In French, there are two: masculine and feminine. In German, there are 3: masculine, feminine, and neutral. In Chitumbuka, there lots; the exact number depends on your definition.

Yikes! This sounds like a pain in the ass. That’s true, it is, but the good news is that you can pretty much ignore most of the rules associated with this noun class stuff and still manage to say most of what you want to say. This is not a great practice of course, but, if you just want to get on your feet in Chitumbuka, taking this approach is a good way to begin.

When making nouns plural in Chitumbuka, you change the front of the word, not the end of it as in English. How do you pluralize stuff? The table below shows the basic way of doing it, but remember, even if you just use the singular you will be understood. Imagine if someone came to you and asked: “How many child do you have?”, or “Do you want one loaf of bread or 2 loaf of bread?” You’d understand! You might not even care about the mistakes, particularly if the alternative is that the person just doesn’t make any effort at all.

The table below gives a quick overview of the classes and how they behave in the singular and plural. Getting a feel for the singular/ plural pairs is probably helpful, but memorizing this table isn’t essential at the beginning.

Noun Class	Singular Prefix	Plural Prefix	Chitumbuka Example	English Translation
People, Animals, or Professions	M- or Mw -	Ba –	Munthu/Banthu	Person/People
Other nouns starting with “M”	M- or Mu-	Mi-	Mpando/Mipando	Chair/Chairs
Nouns starting with “Chi”	Chi- or Cha-	Vi- or Vy-	Chipewa/Vipewa	Hat/Hats
Nouns with uncommon first letters	None	Ma – (but there are exceptions)	Hamba/Mahamba	Leaf/Leaves
Nouns beginning in “N” or “S”	N- or S-	No change	Njinga/Njinga	Bicycle/bicycles
Nouns beginning with “U”	U-	none	Ufa/Ufa	Flour/Flour

Also important to remember: there are NO ARTICLES in Chitumbuka. An article is a word that assigns precision to a noun: *the car, a dog, etc, (or die, der, des in German; le, la, les in French)*. This is pretty nice because you don’t have to worry about the article when using the noun.

Examples:

The car = galimoto

A car = galimoto

The dog = nchewe

A dog = nchewe

However, in Chitumbuka, there are words that mean *this, these, those, that one, this one, etc.* In fact, there are many more of these in Chitumbuka than there are in English. In Chitumbuka, they use a high degree of spatial precision for this stuff: “right here”, “over here”, “over there”, and “way over there” are all different words. This gets tricky in a hurry, especially since these words change depending on the noun class, and sometimes appear as suffixes attached to the nouns themselves! My advice is not to worry about this too much for now and just listen to what others say. You can also take a look at the table below to get you started.

	Person	People	Thing	Things
This (near)	Uyu	Aba	Ichi	Ivi
That (far)	Uyo	Abo	Icho	Ivyo

3.3 Adjectives

Adjectives in Chitumbuka are probably the parts of speech that are the most different from English. Very often in Chitumbuka, you will use a verb to represent an idea for which you would use an adjective in English.

English Adjective	Chitumbuka Verb	Meaning of Chitumbuka Verb	example
Beautiful	-towa	To be beautiful	The woman is beautiful = <i>mwanakazi ngwakutowa</i>
Hot	-otcha	To be hot	The water is hot = <i>maji ngakuotcha</i>

These verbal adjectives can also be turned into “normal”, English style adjectives, too. You do this by adding what’s called an “agreement prefix” to the front of the adjective, and that prefix is determined by your noun class. This is where things get really tricky in Chitumbuka, so I’m not going to get into it right now. If you really want to try this, just throw any letter on the front of the verb adjective and use it as you use a normal adjective. I usually put “wo” or “ku” on the front of the verb when talking about things, and “wa” when talking about a person. This is completely inaccurate, but people still get what I’m saying.

3.4 Prepositions

Prepositions in Chitumbuka don’t seem to be as hard to learn as those in French or German. It’s pretty simple:

ku = to, at, from

kwa = to, at (when talking about a person or a village, but not a town or city!)
pa = on
mu = in
pasi = under, down, on the floor/ ground
na = with

Of course there are more, but these are some of the main ones you will need. Just use them the same way as you do in English.

4.0 What's the Deal with Conjugation in Chitumbuka?

*Conjugation: This is the way you change a verb depending on the subject and the tense. For example, "I go", "He goes", "We went", and "They will go", are all different **conjugations** of the verb "to go".*

4.1 The Basics of Tenses

Good news! Chitumbuka doesn't conjugate its verbs for different subjects. Whereas in English, French, German, and Spanish (actually any language derived from Sanskrit, which includes all languages in the Indo-European language group, as far as I know), we must change the verb depending on the subject. In Chitumbuka, the verb stays the same!

Chitumbuka does have to make some changes if the tense changes, however, but these changes are really easy to make. Verb tenses basically tell you the timing or the conditionality of a verb, so if you are talking about future (*I will go*), past (*I went* or *I did go*), present (*I am going*), conditional (*I would go*), past perfect (*I have gone*), habitual (*I go* or *I usually go*), or even past conditional (*I would have gone*), we are talking about different tenses.

Changing these tenses in Chitumbuka is actually easier than it is in English, and a hell of a lot easier than French or German! All you have to do to choose the tense in Chitumbuka is to choose the infix or suffix. This is a little more difficult than Chichewa, and there are a few more tenses, but the basics are very straightforward, and apply to every verb (except the irregular ones, which we won't worry about for now).

Just follow this formula:

Subject + infix + verb + suffix

You almost always do it this way! There are some exceptions, which I'll explain a bit later. The good news is that, if you do always use this approach, you will always be understood even if you sound sort of stupid. Here are your options, exemplified using the Chitumbuka word for "go", which is "luta":

English Tense	English e.g.	Chitumbuka infix	Chitumbuka suffix	Chitumbuka e.g.
Present (right now)	We are going	-ku ² -	None	Ti-ku-luta = <i>tikuluta</i>
Habitual (all the time)	We go (every day)	-ku-	Madazi ghose (every day)	tikuluta madazi <i>ghose</i>

² Remember, *ku* combines with the first person singular subject *ni-* to make *nkhu-*

Past (yesterday or longer)	We went (last week)	-ka ³ -	None	Ti-ka-luta = <i>tikaluta</i>
Immediate Past (earlier today)	We just went	EXCEPTION There is a separate set of subjects for this	None	<i>See below</i>
Near Past (much earlier today)	We went (this morning)	EXCEPTION There is a separate set of subjects for this	None	<i>See below</i>
Past continuous	We were going	-ka-	-nga	Ti-ka-luta-nga = <i>tikalutanga</i>
Immediate Future (today)	We are about to go	None (monosyllabic verbs are preceded by the infix -ti-)	-enge (this replaces the a at the end of the verb)	Ti-lut-enge = <i>tilutenge</i>
Future (tomorrow or later)	We will go (next week)	-zamu-	None	Ti-zamu-luta = <i>tizamuluta</i>

4.2 What's the Deal with the Exception for the Immediate and Near Past?

Not much. **There is just one little thing you need to know about expressing recent past: you use a different set of subjects.** They aren't even that hard to remember because they look a lot like the originals. In the case of the near past, there is also an infix, but I usually just avoid using this tense altogether and people still understand me. All you have to do is follow this formula for the recent past:

Recent past subject +(infix) + verb

English Subject	NORMAL Chitumbuka Subject	Recent Past Chitumbuka Subject	English e.g.	Chitumbuka e.g.
I	ni ⁴ -	na ⁵ -	I just went	Na-luta = <i>naluta</i>
You (informal)	u -	wa -	You just went	Wa-luta = <i>waluta</i>
He/She (informal)	a -	wa -	She just went	Wa-luta = <i>waluta</i>
We	ti -	ta -	We just went	Ta-luta = <i>taluta</i>
You (plural or formal)	mu -	mwa -	You just went	Mwa-luta = <i>mwaluta</i>

³ The first person singular also combines with this tense subject: *ni + ka = nkha-*

⁴ *Ndi* - in Rumphi Dialect

⁵ *Nda* - in Rumphi Dialect

They (or He/She formal)	wa -	ba -	They just went	Ba-luta = <i>baluta</i>
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The near past is exactly the same, except there's an infix thrown in: -ngu-

English Subject	Recent Past Chitumbuka Subject	Infix	English e.g.	Chitumbuka e.g.
We	ta -	-ngu-	We went (much earlier today)	Ta-ngu-luta = <i>tanguluta</i>

I hardly ever use this, since the immediate past is easier and gets the point across. That being said, the tense is still commonly used, and being aware of it is helpful for understanding others.

4.3 What's the Deal with Other Infixes?

There are other infixes and suffixes in Chitumbuka that do not refer to the tense, but serve to make up other parts of a sentence (i.e. to add emphasis). I won't get into all of them here, but the infix for "can" is probably the most important.

In English, if we want to express ability to do something, we use the word "can". For example, "I can go", "You can see", etc. In Chitumbuka, this idea can be expressed using an infix, -nga-. There is also a notable difference in grammar between Chitumbuka and Chichewa here: in Chitumbuka, the last letter of the verb **does not** change when using this infix. Here's an example:

English Equivalent	English e.g.	Chitumbuka infix	Chitumbuka e.g.
Ability (to be able to)	We can go	-nga-	Ti-nga-luta = <i>ningaluta</i>

4.4 Irregular Verbs

Unlike Chichewa, there is no infix for "to have to" or "must". The verb *kwenela* is used instead and appears in the same way it would in an English sentence:

I must go → *Nkwenela kuluta*

There are a couple of things to note here. The first is that the second verb has "ku" in front of the verb stem (auxiliary verbs are coming later), and the second is that the conjugation of the verb *kwenela* is a little funky. The reason is we've hit upon an irregular verb! There aren't many of them in Chitumbuka, but important words like "to come," "to have to," and "to sing" are all irregular. This is a bit of a pain, especially since I haven't found any resource that actually spells out the rules for conjugating irregular verbs, but I'll share what I know in a moment. For now, here's a guide to conjugating the verb *kwenela* in the present tense. Most of it is very similar to the types of conjugation we've already seen.

English Subject	Chitumbuka Conjugation for <i>kwenela</i>
I	Ni + kwenela = <i>nkwenela</i>
You (informal)	U – kwenela = <i>ukwenela</i>

He/She (informal)	Wa – kwenela = <i>wakwenela</i>
We	Ti – kwenela = <i>tikwenela</i>
You (formal or plural)	Mu – kwenela = <i>mukwenela</i>
They (or He/She formal)	Ba – kwenela = <i>bakwenela</i>

4.5 Tense Agreements with Irregular Verbs

This section isn't essential and, although grammatically atrocious, irregular verbs can be conjugated just like regular verbs and people will mostly understand, although they might correct you. Originally, I thought I would leave this section out because irregular verb conjugation doesn't seem to belong in Volume 1 of a *No-Nonsense Guide*. Then I realized I couldn't find a summary of how to do this anywhere. Here is my understanding of it shown with the verb *kwiza* (to come), made with help from Malawian friends, although not guaranteed to be 100% accurate. Again, not essential at the beginning.

English Tense	English e.g.	Chitumbuka Infix	Chitumbuka Suffix	Chitumbuka e.g.
Present	We are coming	None ⁶	None	Ti – kwiza = <i>Tikwiza</i>
Past	We came (yesterday)	None ⁷	None. The “w” in the verb is dropped	Ti – k wiza = <i>Tikiza</i>
Future	We will come	-zamu-	None	Ti – zamu – kwiza = <i>Tizamukwiza</i>
Immediate Future	We are about to come	None	-enge. The “kwi” in the verb is dropped	Ti – k wiza ⁸ – enge = <i>Tizenge</i> ⁹
Immediate Past	We just came	-ng-. Use the subjects for the immediate past.	None. The “k” in the verb is dropped	Ta – ng – k wiza = <i>Tangwiza</i>

5.0 What's the Deal with Negation in Chitumbuka?

Negation: This is how you make a verb construction negative. For example, the negation of “I go” is “I don't go.”

The negation in Chitumbuka is really easy. All you have to do is add the word *chala* or *yayi* to the end of the sentence.

For example, if we are dealing with the present tense, “I go”, we have:

I go = ni + ku-luta = nkhluta

⁶ First person singular drops the “i”: Ni + kwiza = *Nkwiza*

⁷ First person singular drops the “i”: Ni + kiza = *Nkiza*

⁸ The “a” is replaced by the suffix *-enge* just like for regular verbs

⁹ These are pretty extreme changes to the verb stem! It makes me wonder if these are hard rules, or if irregular verbs are each conjugated differently. I honestly have no idea.

If we want to negate it, just add *chala*, at the end:

I don't go = ni + ku-luta + chala = nkhluta chala

Or

ni + ku-luta + iyai = nkhluta yayi

This is kind of like saying in English: “I go, not.” This negation always comes at the end of a sentence, and nothing else changes. That’s all!

6.0 What’s the Deal with Question Words in Chitumbuka?

6.1 Question Words

These are easy. All you really have to do is remember the words. The table below spells out the details:

English	Chitumbuka	Location in Sentence	English e.g.	Chitumbuka e.g.
Who?	Njani?	Beginning	Who has gone?	Njani waluta?
What?	Vichii?	End	What do you see?	Mukuwona vichii ?
Why?	Chifukwa cha vichi? (because of what?)	End	Why are you going?	Mukuluta chifukwa cha vichii ?
Where?	Kochi/nkhuni ¹⁰ ?	End	Where are you going?	Mukuluta kochi ?/ Mukuluta nkhu ni?
When (date)?	Pa uli?	End	When did you arrive?	Mukafika pa uli?
When (time)?	Nyengo uli?	End	What time is he coming?	Akwiza nyengo uli?
How?	Uli?	End	How are you?	Muli uli ?
Word to indicate a question sentence	Kasi ¹¹	Beginning	Can I eat? Has he arrived?	Kasi ningarya? Kasi wafika?

6.2 “How Much” and “How Many”?

To express the idea of “How Much/ How Many” in Chichewa, we use the word *–linga*. The prefix used for this word depends on the class of the noun about which you are asking. Examples:

¹⁰ *Nkhuni* is less common in the Karonga Dialect. The word also means “tree” or “firewood” depending on the context.

¹¹ *Kasi* can be omitted from a question sentence without changing the meaning as long as the intonation is raised at the end of the sentence

English Question	Chitumbuka	Prefix Used
How much money?	<i>Ndalama zilinga?</i>	Zi -
How many children?	<i>Bana balinga?</i>	Ba -
How much time?	<i>Nyengo zilinga?</i>	Zi -
How many cows?	<i>Ng'ombe zilinga?</i>	Zi -
How much work?	<i>Ntchito yilinga?</i>	Yi -
How many years?	<i>Vyaka vilinga?</i>	Vi -

Don't worry about the different prefixes for different noun classes. As you practice you'll start to just know which to use when. In the meantime, just pick one and go with it (I usually use "zi" when I don't know), and people will correct you if you say it wrong. They will understand you, so don't stress about it!

6.3 "What Kind"?

Just like asking "how much" or "how many", "what kind" is also a suffix that needs to agree with the class of the noun it refers to. Again, don't worry about this too much ("ya" is a good guess if you don't know), all you really need to know is the suffix *-mtundu uli*.

Mtundu literally means colour, so the question can be "what kind", "what type", or "what colour" depending on the context.

English	Chitumbuka
What colour are the clothes?	<i>Malaya gha mtundu uli?</i>
What kind of food are you eating?	<i>Kasi mukurya chakurya cha mtundu uli?</i>

7.0 What's the Deal with If/When/Maybe/Or in Chitumbuka?

This is pretty straightforward. Use of these words is pretty much the same as in English.

English	Chitumbuka	English e.g.	Chitumbuka e.g.
If	Panji/Panyakhe	If he is drinking beer, I am drinking too.	Panji akumwa phele, nkhumwaso ¹² .
When/Whilst	Pa- (+ infinitive verb)	When I went to school I saw a snake.	Pakuluta ku sukulu nawona njoka.
When	Pala	When I arrive in Mzuzu, I will eat.	Pala nafika ku Mzuzu, namurya.
Maybe	Panyakhe	Maybe she doesn't eat meat.	Panyakhe akurya nyama chala.
Or	Panyakhe	Should we buy chicken or fish?	Kasi tigulenge nkhuu panyakhe somba.

¹² The suffix *-so* means also, or again, depending on the context, and can be attached to the end of any verb or adjective.

Note that, with the word “when”, it’s not a question word but an indicative word. We are not asking “when is he arriving”, because with that question you need to use “*pa uli*” or “*nyengo uli*”. Rather, it’s an indication of something that will happen (or has happened) contingent upon another event: “At the time when it happens that he arrives, it will then happen that I will cook.”

8.0 What’s the Deal with Auxiliary Verbs in Chitumbuka?

Auxiliary verbs are like helpers. They are usually used when your main verb does not completely capture the idea you want to express on its own. For example, “I want to see” has 2 verbs in it: “want” and “see”. “See” is the main verb because that sends the main message of the statement, but you also need to auxiliary, “want”, because it indicates how “see” relates to your message. You don’t see right now, but you want to.

An auxiliary verb is not a special verb. It’s just the way it’s used: if you use a verb to describe an action on another verb, it’s an auxiliary.

Other examples of auxiliaries:

I can cook.

We must go.

You should learn.

She wants to walk.

They are learning to speak.

Auxiliaries in Chitumbuka are simple: the auxiliary is attached to the subject and tense, followed by the main verb as an infinitive. The infinitive means adding the prefix *ku-* to the verb stem (for regular verbs). This changes a verb such as *-luta* (go) into *kuluta* (to go). When you ask someone about the Chitumbuka word for an English verb, they will usually respond with the infinitive.

Just follow this formula:

Subject + infix + auxiliary verb + suffix¹³ infinitive of main verb

English Sentence	English Auxiliary	Chitumbuka Auxiliary	English Main	Chitumbuka Main (always infinitive)	Chitumbuka Sentence
I know how to cook	I know	<i>Nkhu-manya</i> (ni +ku =nkhu)	to cook	<i>Ku-phika</i>	<i>Nkhumanya kuphika</i>
She will learn to speak	She will learn	<i>A-zamu-sambira</i>	to speak	<i>Ku-yowoya</i>	<i>Azamusambira kuyowoya</i>
They went to eat	They went	<i>Ba-ka-luta</i>	to eat	<i>Ku-rya</i>	<i>Bakaluta kurya</i>

¹³ Depending on the tense, infixes and suffixes may or may not be required.

9.0 What's the Deal with Commands and Requests in Chitumbuka?

9.1 Polite Requests

This concept is both simple and very useful, especially when combined with the *-nga-* infix to ask permission. To make a polite request, follow this formula:

Subject + verb stem + change the last letter of the verb stem to "e"

To ask permission, insert the infix *-nga-* between the subject and the verb stem. When this happens, there is no need to change the last letter of the verb stem to "e". Here's what it looks like:

English e.g.	Chitumbuka e.g.
You should speak	Mu – yowoy <u>e</u>
We should be careful	Ti – chenjer <u>e</u>
Can you help?	(Kasi) mu – nga – vwila?
Can I cook?	(Kasi) ni – nga – phika?

9.2 Commands

Commands directed at a group or towards someone formally are made by attaching the suffix *-ni* to the verb stem.

Commands or requests to not do something have the same form: the infinitive is followed by the word *chala*, regardless of the subject. See the examples below:

English Request	Chitumbuka Request	English Command	Formal Command	English Request to Not do Something	Chitumbuka Request to Not do Something
You cook	Muphike	Cook!	Phikani	Do not cook	Kuphika chala
You run	Musamale	Run!	Samalani	Do not run	Kusamala chala

10.0 Vocabulary: the essentials

Some Key Nouns	
<i>English</i>	<i>Chitumbuka</i>
Airplane	Ndege
Car	Galimoto
Dog	Nchewe
Food	Chakurya
God	Chiuta
Hunger	Njala
Husband	Mfumu/msweni
Market	Msika
Luggage/stuff	Katundu
Man	Mwanalume
Music	Sumu
Name	Zina
Office	Ofesi
Path	Nthowa
Person	Munthu
Place/location/space	Malo
Relish eaten with nsima	Dende
Road	Msewu
Town	Tauni
Room	Chipinda
Village	Muzi
Water	Maji
Westerner	Mzungu
Wife	M'boli
Woman	Mwanakazi
Work	Ntchito

Some Timing Key Words	
<i>English</i>	<i>Chitumbuka</i>
Afternoon	Namuhanya
Day	Dazi
Evening	Namise
Morning	Namulenje
Night	Usiku
Now	Sono
Soon	Sono sono
Time	Nyengo
Today	Muhanye uno
Tomorrow	Namachero
Yesterday	Mayilo

Market			
<i>English</i>	<i>Chitumbuka</i>	<i>English e.g.</i>	<i>Chitumbuka e.g.</i>
To buy	-gula	I am buying relish	Nkhugula dende
To sell	-gulisha	She is selling bananas	Akugulisha makombwe ¹⁴
Money	Ndalama		
How much?	Ndalama zilinga?		
I have	-li na	Do you have money?	Kasi muli na ndalama?

Home	
<i>English</i>	<i>Chitumbuka</i>
Clothes	Malaya
Dishes	Mbale
Sibling (opposite sex)	Mlongosi
Sibling (older, same sex)	Mkulu
Sibling (young, same sex)	Mchoko
Mother	Mama ¹⁵
Father	Dada
Child	Mwana
Grandmother	Buya
Grandfather	Sekulu
To wake up	-wuka
To sleep	-gona
To eat	-rya
To bathe	-geza
To wash dishes	-suka
To wash clothes	-chapa
To visit/chat	-chezga

The Basic Verbs			
<i>English</i>	<i>Chitumbuka</i>	<i>English e.g.</i>	<i>Chitumbuka e.g.</i>
To arrive	-fika	We have arrived	Tafika
To be	-li	She is a Westerner	Ali mzungu
To be happy	-sekelera/kondwa	They are happy	Bakusekelera
To come	Kwiza*	He is coming	Akwiza
To come from (country or place)	-fuma or -fumila ¹⁶	I come from Canada	Nkhufuma ku Canada
To cook	-phika	You are cooking nsima	Mukuphika nsima
To do/make	-panga ¹⁷	How do you make this?	(Kasi) Mukupanga uli?

¹⁴ Bannas = *ntochi* in other dialects. Also in Chichewa

¹⁵ The prefix *ba-* is usually added to show respect for elders

¹⁶ *Kufumila* also means “to have diarrhea”. The meaning is usually obvious from the context, but still something to be aware of!

¹⁷ This is incredibly versatile, especially as a command. Favourite examples I’ve overheard: “*Mupange slow down!*” and “*Mupange transpose!*” (while teaching someone a new guitar chord)

To go	-luta	We are about to go	Tilutenge
To go on foot/walk	Kwenda*	She walked	Wakwenda
To have	-li na (lit. to be with)	I have strength	Nili na nkhangono
To hear	-pulika	I heard about them	Napulika vya awo
To hold/grip	-kola	I hold it like this	Nkhukola nthena
To know	-manya	He knows Chitumbuka	Akumanya Chitumbuka
To learn	-sambira	You learned Chitumbuka	Mukasambira Chitumbuka
To live/sit/stay	-khala	He stays in Mzuzu	Akukhala ku Mzuzu
To love/like	-temwa	I love your food	Nkhutemwa chakurya chanu
To say	-yowoya	How do you say...	Mukuyowoya uli?
To see	-wona	We see the lake	Tikuwona Nyanja
To sing/play an instrument	Kwimba*	Sing!	Kwimani!
To speak	-yowoya	They speak Chichewa	Akuyowoya Chichewa
To stay/stop	-leka	You (child), stop that!	Iwe, leka!
To teach	-sambizga	He used to teach English	Akasambizga Chinglezi ¹⁸
To tidy/repair	-nozga	We fixed the borehole	Tanosia dilawo
To try	-yeza	I try to speak	Nkhuyeza kuyowoya
To understand	-pulikisha	He can understand	Angapulikisha
To use	-gwiritsa ntchito (lit. to cause to grip work)	We used a hoe	Tikagwiritsa ntchito jenbe
To wait	-lindizga	I will wait	Nilindisienge
To want	-khumba	I want a beer	Nkhukhumba mowa
To work	-gwira ntchito (lit. to grip work)	We work with EWB	Tikugwira ntchito na EWB

And, three words I wish I'd known at the beginning:

Ujeni – a word used instead of any noun, place, or person. English equivalents are “thingy”, “whose-a-whats-it”, “that place”, “you know who”, and “that girl, you know, the one with the shirt, and the hair, and the guy”. It is fabulously non-descriptive and Malawians use it *all* the time. I wish I’d learned it sooner.

Nthenanthena – means “the same as”. A very useful word for making comparisons and asking questions about multiple words that mean the same thing. *Nthena* on its own means “like this”, useful when asking for instructions on how something is done, say, learning to cook nsima.

Mbwenu – means either “that’s all”, “that’s enough”, or “and then” depending on the context.

¹⁸ *Chizungu* is also a word commonly used for English. Literally, it means “the language of the white people”.