1   Introduction: approach, questions and themes

1.1   What this book is about

Economic 'development' and sociocultural 'modernisation' in Africa have
been on the academic and political agenda for more than half a century, that
is, since the end of European colonialism and the independence of most
African countries – with success still heavily lagging behind aspirations.
Ambitious Millennium Development Goals were established by the United
Nations to be reached by the year 2015 – the year has come and gone, but the
goals remain widely unachieved. This book attempts to provide explanations
for continuing underdevelopment in Africa from a non-mainstream perspec-
tive. It identifies deficits in current academic and political discourse on Africa
as far as they pertain to an alarming disregard of the *language factor*. The book
explains why and how this disregard can be attributed to the persistence of a
particular *Eurocentric* mind-set in Western perceptions that moulds pervasive
language ideologies that are also shared by many members of the intellectual
and political elites in post-colonial Africa. The book develops a novel interdis-
ciplinary *Applied African Sociolinguistics* perspective and argues for a long
overdue *linguistic turn* in development discourse as it was and still is monopol-
ised by social sciences and economics; these sciences are the ones that are
traditionally the least concerned with any serious consideration of the language
factor. The book winds up with identifying and addressing the challenges
ahead for *comprehensive language planning* in order to achieve the societal
transformations and contribute to the academic and economic development
necessary for Africa to overcome underdevelopment, mainly by exploiting her
own linguistic, cultural and intellectual resources.

My focus is on the resourcefulness of languages, both indigenous African
and imported, particularly in the framework of official language policies and
language use in the educational systems of the African post-colonies. The
book's vantage point is a very broad interdisciplinary perspective on compre-
hensive language planning (to take up and elaborate on proposals by Ayo
Bamgbose), considering input from African prehistory and history, cultural
and social anthropology, sociology and political science, economics, education

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science and not least African linguistics and sociolinguistics, plus occasional reference to language acquisition studies. The book discusses the prevailing ignorance and indifference towards burning issues related to the language question in Africa and links these to persisting ideological positions and prejudice known as *Eurocentrism* and *Orientalism* which are deeply entrenched in Western thought. The Eurocentric mind-set favours monistic nation-state ideologies along the lines of *one state – one nation – one language*, it abhors linguistic and cultural plurality and diversity, and it discriminates against non-standard 'vernacular' languages and 'sub-standard' language varieties. Distortions of perception and cultural arrogance stemming from Orientalism (in the sense of Edward Said's controversial book of 1978) entertain Social Darwinist and thus basically racist attitudes towards non-Western societies and cultures, that is, those that do not match 'modern Western civilisations' that attribute their foundations to a particular value system associated with Occidental Christianity and based on the 'classic' heritage of ancient Greece and ancient Rome.

Despite running counter to almost all national sociolinguistic and cultural profiles on the ground, the elitist minorities presently in power in Africa, supported by their expatriate advisers from the West, largely embrace imported models of European provenance, not least under the growing impact of twenty-first-century globalisation. The book looks into the reasons why such 'copy-and-paste' strategies will not and cannot work in Africa. Rather, and on robust scientific evidence, it argues in favour of multilingual solutions involving both endo- and exoglossic languages as elements of a genuine African pluralistic approach to nation building and the necessary transformation of societies. An 'authentic' approach such as this might spare Africa the fate of becoming a malfunctioning twenty-first-century copy of models which her former colonial masters had originally propagated against the backdrop of the political situation in eighteen- and nineteenth-century Europe, when and where they may have served their purpose. The book argues that enlightened twenty-first-century nation building in Africa must be based on the recognition of ethno-linguistic and cultural plurality and diversity as *resources* for modernisation and development rather than as stumbling blocks to be removed on the way.

People in Europe, the USA and societies of Western civilisations in general tend to nurture strong ideological and emotional positions which link the idea of nation to the monistic notion of oneness and homogeneity; the motto is *one nation – one culture – one language*. The evocation of one single *national language* and a homogenous *national culture* lie at the roots of Western concepts of modern statehood. They are considered to be inseparable features of national identity and a nation-state, a position which is deeply rooted in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European history. According to this mind-set, linguistic plurality, in particular with regard to local ('tribal') vernaculars,

must be eradicated. All communication must be conducted in one overarching official language which is believed – as a matter of fact: wrongly – to be 'neutral' with regard to centrifugal forces and connotations related to the distribution of power. Rather, it is assumed – falsely again – that such neutral language would prevent secessionist tendencies and be more likely to support national political and sociocultural cohesion. Such neutral language, ideally, should be an established '*standard*' language with a long history of writing and extensive literature. In post-colonial Africa, quite obviously, the only candidates of this kind would be the languages of the former colonial powers. Most Westerners are convinced that, in the absence of such European-type monistic policy and politics based on a neutral exoglossic language, nation building will be abortive and finally result in failed states, which appears to become the fate of many previously so-called underdeveloped countries, including many African post-colonies. Viewed from this Eurocentric perspective, the evil effects of ethnolinguistic ('tribal') plurality and diversity must be made responsible for all such political and economic failures. As far as Africa is concerned, this Western approach to the idea of nation-state can and must be challenged, insofar as it is based on (a) indifference, if not ignorance, towards sociolinguistic facts in the contexts of prevailing territorial and institutional multilingualism, and (b) a somewhat blind worship of the Eurocentric ideological fetish of linguistic and cultural homogeneity and uniformity.

Africa is different. Saying this does not mean invoking Eurocentric pre- and early colonial misconceptions about 'savage natives' adhering to 'exotic rites' and communicating in 'primitive dialects'. Saying this means that Africans – *horribile dictu* in Western thought – enjoy their vital inherited ethnolinguistic and cultural plurality as enriching experience and make use of multilingualism as a resourceful tool for social and economic interaction. Westerners abhor such scenarios, and so do many representatives of modern African elites and stakeholders in education in Africa. They do so because they themselves have been subjected to Western education and, almost automatically, have undergone at least some kind of Eurocentric brainwashing, particularly with regard to language attitudes.

In reviewing mainstream Western political and academic discourse on Africa, and by looking at its reflection in the media, it is, therefore, not surprising to notice the absence of any detailed attempts to seriously address *ethnolinguistic plurality,* which is a characteristic feature of most African countries and societies. This is particularly apparent with regard to matters linking *language* with *development*: what we find reiterated, time and time again, are unfounded assumptions and sweeping statements on the detrimental effect of multilingualism for modern statehood and economy. Apart from stereotype and cliché, there is little if any robust knowledge regarding Africa's roughly 2,000 *mother tongues* or *first languages*, not to speak of their potential

resourcefulness for modern nation building and development. Little more is known about the additional reservoir of African or other lingua francas or second languages that are often labelled *national languages* and which, occasionally, may even function as *co-official* or *working languages* of government, administration, education, jurisdiction and the media. On top of all these, there are the imported *foreign languages* of mostly European provenance, but also Arabic, which legally function as *official languages* across so-called Anglophone, Francophone, Lusophone Africa – not to forget the Arabophone African countries. Finally, there is the vast variety of exoglossic *minority languages* resulting from work migration into Africa, mostly from Asia, during colonial times – with a more recent renewed momentum generated by Asian powers like China, India, Japan and South Korea in their quest for resources and markets in Africa. The hunt is already on for the best African students who are lured by generous scholarships to study Mandarin, Japanese or Korean, rather than exclusively European foreign languages, as formerly used to be the case. The inventory and complexities which make up the African linguistic landscape evade most observers and stakeholders when they engage in development discourse on Africa. To most outsiders, Africa has remained *terra incognita* since the Age of Discovery and early European colonial and missionary conquest. It is a common belief among under- or ill-informed Westerners that anything worth knowing about Africa can be read in English or French and that there is no need whatsoever to consider African vernaculars in any serious way for any important issue regarding African affairs and for development discourse. This basically racist attitude can be found even among Western scholars of African Studies. It implies the assumption that anything Africans say or write in their own languages is of essential irrelevance, unless they say or write it in the language of the former colonial master. This lies behind the tongue-in-cheek definition current in Africa that *'African Studies* is anything that you can read about Africa in English'! Since most African languages are exclusively used by their speakers for oral communication, whether or not they have already undergone 'reduction to writing' by missionaries, individual scholars or local language committees, the exclusive reliance on the written word discriminates against the vast majority of Africans – following the *dictum* of the ancient Romans: *Quod non est in litteris, non est in mundo* (What is not written does not exist).

Facing the challenges of twentieth- and twenty-first-century knowledge-based society and globalisation, national governments in Africa and most representatives of the so-called donor community appear to be largely unaware of the impact of the language question for sociocultural modernisation and economic development. Development discourse relating to the challenges of and strategies against, for example, hunger and mass poverty, massive educational failure and unemployment, juvenile delinquency and crime,

demographic explosion and female genital mutilation, deficient health care
and HIV/AIDS, all in the light of accelerating urbanisation, globalisation and
digitalisation, even under the slogans of *African Renaissance* and particularly
NEPAD (New Partnership for African Development) – whichever social
science, economic and political discourse we look at: language never figures
as a decisive factor in any of the relevant documents and speeches. In fact,
language is not mentioned at all.

This is where the present book comes in. Firstly, it attempts to throw light on
some of the issues behind this situation. It relates the prevailing blindness to
the language factor in mainstream development discourse to particular nega-
tive attitudes resulting from a Western mind-set towards multilingualism and
non-standard vernaculars in general. This mind-set is based on Eurocentrism.
It entails condescending attitudes towards non-European languages, cultures
and religions, as already denounced under the title *Orientalism* by Edward
Said in his still controversial book of 1978. The present book, secondly,
reflects forty-five years of research, publishing and university-level teaching
in the fields of African linguistics and sociolinguistics, increasingly so under
the more recent paradigm of 'language as resource' (Ruiz 1984). This new
paradigm lies at the core of the emerging sub-discipline of Applied African
Sociolinguistics. Unfortunately, its approaches and results have not yet found
their way into mainstream development discourse, as it is widely monopolised
by certain social sciences and economics. In addition to opening up basic
insights and crucial questions of Applied African Sociolinguistics to the
reader, there is a biographic underpinning from the fact that the author has
not only spent about eight years living and working in Africa as a researcher
and university teacher, but also accumulated a fairly wide perspective which
rests on working visits as a professional linguist and sociolinguist to more than
twenty African countries since 1968.

The central idea of this book is to make available scientifically based robust
information on a little-known subject, and to create awareness for a wider
readership of the relevance of the language question in Africa and thereby help
to change the prevailing Western mind-set which is based on Eurocentric
distortions of perception and condescending Orientalist attitudes towards
extra-European languages and cultures. This will be done in a double perspec-
tive. The first perspective is that of pinning down and highlighting the Western
distorted perception of Africa and her peoples, their cultures and histories,
which has repercussions across practically all academic and political theories
on and dealings with Africa. The second perspective is that of opening the
view on available strategies for overcoming underdevelopment in Africa under
due consideration of the language factor. The call is out for a long-overdue
linguistic turn in all development discourse in and on Africa, political and
academic. This call implies a wide interdisciplinary approach which will

receive its underpinning from the consideration of insights from African
prehistory and history, cultural and social anthropology, sociology and polit-
ical science, economics, education science and most notably African linguis-
tics and sociolinguistics.

The book attempts to sketch out how all this could combine to allow a
broader and more understanding perspective on Africa. Such a broad transdis-
ciplinary approach reflects the genuine perspective of German-speaking
Afrikanistik to which the present author is linked by academic socialisation
and primary professional affiliation, and which has guided much of his aca-
demic activity in and outside Africa over the last forty-five years. The book
was originally designed and written in German to address a German-speaking
readership in particular; it reflects much of the author's experience with
working in German-speaking academia and in the ideological context of
media and political discourse on Africa in Germany. Therefore, reflecting on
development discourse in the German context may not fully mirror the situ-
ation in other societies of so-called Western civilisations; however, it may be
taken as a case study which helps to bring to light comparable distortions of
perception and cliché-ridden prejudice towards Africa, and poor if any under-
standing of the linguistic dimension of all development processes in post-
colonial societies in other Western societies.

1.2   Language and mainstream development discourse: 'It's the languages, stupid!'

When, in the US presidential elections of 1992, Bill Clinton defeated a tired
and worn-out administration led by President George H. W. Bush (Senior), this
was in no small measure attributed to a highly successful campaign slogan:
'It's the economy, stupid!' This was a rhetorical *coup de main* which could be
used to wipe any other argument off the table. Borrowing this slogan, one
could take issue with mainstream development discourse on Africa, which
appears to be equally tired and worn out, by modifying it slightly: 'It's the
languages, stupid!'

Mainstream development discourse on Africa appears to be stuck. Old
school thinking, which recognises hegemonic patterns of global interaction
and communication, prevails. Selective and partially distorted perceptions of
Africa have become commonplace; they guide Western thought on Africa and
the behaviour of Westerners towards Africans. The serious media, both print
and electronic, specifically tabloids and easy-reading popular literature, tend to
support misconceptions regarding Africa. Such misconceptions rest on preju-
dice and clichés that are already familiar to a mass readership because they are
deeply rooted in traditional thinking. Such stereotypes are enjoyed by readers
and media consumers, just as they enjoy meeting old friends when they come

their way. More irritatingly, even established social sciences and advisory think-tanks for governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) tend to be subject to resting their judgements and theories on incomplete information, deficient knowledge and received cliché, which, by their proliferation via the media, continue to contaminate majority opinion among the general public. Different schools of thought and critical voices from whichever quarters, including quite a few from Africa, tend to be marginalised if not simply disregarded and thus silenced; deviating views do not usually make the headlines. Highly paid consultants and advisers to governments and to important NGOs are not known for deviating from well-trodden paths and, thereby, taking professional or political risks. The global aid and consultancy industry tends to be rather conservative and prefers to stick to business as usual – all the while making money and securing employment and self-promotion as consultants and in the 'aid industry'.

Under such circumstances, a fresh and more comprehensive approach is called for. Some new thinking must infiltrate the media as much as political and academic discourse on Africa. The new approach that this book advocates targets a necessary linguistic turn in development discourse. It further reflects on prevailing Eurocentric perceptions of the African situation and adduces novel scientific evidence, in particular regarding the all-encompassing role and salience of the language factor for development under the regimes of multilingual, multiethnic and multicultural realities in Africa. Such a linguistic turn is long overdue in development discourse, particularly in Western academic and political quarters. Interestingly and as a matter of fact, in Africa this linguistic turn has long been propagated, implicitly at least, among a fair number of enlightened linguists, sociolinguists and some educationists. They have come to accept the inherited plurality of languages as resourceful and instrumental in the process of nation building and democratisation, for the benefit of social cohesion and mobility, for sociocultural modernisation and economic progress, even under the regime of modern globalisation. This approach, however, is novel to most participants and stakeholders in mainstream development studies outside Africa.

An analysis of the many laudable international conventions, conferences and resolutions over recent years ... shows that they make scant reference to the language issues that need to be addressed if their noble aims, such as the eradication of poverty, the recognition of ethnic, gender, and other minority issues are to be realised; though to be fair the World Conference on Education for All in 1990 did recognise that, where possible, language policy and planning should begin with looking at the role played by local languages in the lives of people.

While language is fundamental to the individual for expressing his/her most intimate feelings and ideas it is also crucial for imparting – and internalising – new ideas. In plurilingual societies, added complications arise because different languages have

different roles, depending upon their power structures either nationally or locally (Street 1984). For example '. . . in much of Africa some 90% of the people have no knowledge of the official language of their country, even though it is presumed to be the vehicle of communication between the government and its citizens' (Mackey 1989: 5). One could argue, therefore, as Blake (1993: 1) has done, that 'what has mainly gone wrong in development communication is its absolute rooting in Eurocentric approaches to both development and communication'. (Watson 1999: 6–7)

One of the bugging questions lurking in the back of our minds is the following: why does Africa, in particular in the countries of so-called 'black Africa' south of the Sahara, appear to be persistently stricken by underdevelopment and frustratingly slow progress towards development in many sectors of public life and economy? Other post-colonies elsewhere in the world have largely overcome their colonial traumata and take part, some as so-called emerging economies and markets, in global competition, with ever-increasing political weight in world affairs, like the so-called BRICS countries, namely Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. It cannot be a lack of highly valuable natural resources like oil, gas, uranium, gold, diamonds, rare earth metals, Coltan – there is plenty of it, Africa is a rich continent in this regard! The reason must lie elsewhere, presumably in certain political, cultural and social conditions after independence which may, however, be rooted in the preceding colonial past. In the African post-colonies, we observe a dramatic lack of justice and equity when it comes to sharing the national resources, access to quality education and power; the opportunities lie with those who master a foreign language and who, via this language, have privileged access to quality education. Since independence, this has given rise to a post-colonial class divide, with a small privileged elite taking over the post-colonial state ('black faces in white places') to the exclusion of the masses of the national population. Language, and in particular the language on which the system of formal education is based, plays the all-decisive role in this class divide. The language used by a small elitist minority is willingly turned into a bottleneck that allows this minority to control the replenishment of its ranks and limit upward social mobility and access to power, resources and quality education for the masses. The resulting linguistic deprivation is twofold: the masses are kept away from colonial language-based quality education and knowledge, and the indigenous languages spoken by the masses are simultaneously kept away from modern science and technology in quality institutions of (higher) learning. Inevitably, economic and technological progress is slowed down by intellectual attrition and waste of human resources, effectively manipulated by the alienated elites and their likewise misguided expatriate advisers through the ideological bedevilling and factual crippling of the indigenous languages combined with the fetish-like worshipping of the ex-colonial language.

It is currently common knowledge amongst linguists that no language is inherently incapable of incorporating modern science and technology. One thing which the contemporary Asian experience demonstrates is precisely this. None of the 'Asian economic dragons' of today are developing on the basis of colonial languages, and yet we know too well that only four to five decades ago some of them were colonies like their African counterparts. What the Asian experience means of course is that sustained development must be structured on indigenous culture with selection inputs and adaptation from outside. (Prah 1998: 6)

There are, in principle, two possible explanations which come to mind in order to account for the differences between, for instance, Asian and African post-colonial societies and economies. Either, and this would be a blatantly racist pseudo-explanation which, unfortunately, is adhered to in certain quarters of a 'white' public both in Africa and outside, there is something essentially 'wrong' with Africans, and their miserable situation is their own fault. Or, and this is the systemic explanation, we have been witnesses to decades of 'wrong' policies and politics, including 'wrong' decisions on language and education. The pseudo-explanation draws on unacceptable racist ideology associated with Social Darwinism that would declare Africans to be essentially unfit to handle their own fate and future. In Europe and its overseas colonies, this line of thinking had in the past given rise to the acceptance, if not advocacy, of slavery and to early missionary and colonial exploitation under an assumed hegemonic patriarchal responsibility of the 'white' man for the 'black' man. The 'White Man's Burden' was shouldered, so to speak, on purportedly Christian and humanitarian grounds. In a more critical and non-racist perspective, we are likely instead to accept the second explanation. This one has hardly ever been thoroughly explored, if only for the reason that the predominant approach to African affairs both in social and economic sciences and in political discourse has never considered an alternative to mainstream thinking. We might therefore ask the following questions: what if the neglect of the language factor, both as sociocultural and economic factor as much as first-hand tool for the elicitation of primary socioeconomic data, leads to fatally deficient and, subsequently, irrelevant theory building that in consequence fosters 'wrong' language ideologies? What if social science theory and methodology was, for this reason, faulty because based on a selective and partially distorted perception that again is deeply rooted in received Eurocentric prejudice, stereotype and cliché? What, then, if all our Western analysis and resultant consultancies rest on falsifiable assumptions and deficient theories, as they are based on empirical data that are incomplete and inadequate from the outset because of linguistic deficits? This is our starting point in order to disentangle several interlocking questions:

1. Is there a blind spot in development discourse on Africa because of the tendency to disregard at least one of possibly many equally decisive factors, and if so, which factor would that be?

The answer provided here is: Indeed, this is the case. The decisive factor which is practically completely overlooked is *language*.

This entails another question:

2. What does language have to do with development?

The answer is that development is, first of all, about communication. More precisely, we are talking about the transfer of knowledge and creative adaptation of technological, economic and sociopolitical innovations, all of it transported via language, either written or oral or both.

In Africa's highly complex linguistic landscape, there are both endoglossic (indigenous African) and exoglossic (imported foreign) languages involved that have to play their respective roles. It is quite trivial to say that language may function as either *barrier* or *facilitator* for communication, and accordingly its role is tremendously important: a shared and competently mastered language is a facilitator, a language foreign to or incompetently mastered by one of the participants in dialogue functions as a barrier. This double-edged function of language does not easily relate to the experience of expatriate social scientists and even members of the new African elites who remain convinced that all necessary communication must and can be achieved through the (ex-colonial) official language, albeit foreign and, as a rule, insufficiently mastered by most stakeholders. Glorification of the ex-colonial master's 'world language' is the order of the day among post-colonial African elites, automatically relegating African mother tongues and African lingua francas to inferior status and considering them to be devoid of any instrumental value for modernisation and development. To them, institutionalised multilingualism is no option, because it is not part of the European model of a nation-state to which they adhere. Also, they have all undergone the same Western education, be it through mission schools, military academies and post-colonial copy-and-paste educational systems built on the former colonial master's model, including universities in and outside Africa. In very few of these institutions does serious academic study of African sociolinguistic reality have a home.

In other words, looking at what we might call development communication among agents and recipients of development aid, the important thing is which language is used by whom, and how competent or incompetent are stakeholders with regard to full mastery of the language, or languages, in question. Experience and scenarios known from African contexts suggest that full comprehension among donors and recipients, despite or even because of using interpreters, translators, field assistants, etc. of uncertain professional qualifications, is the exception rather than the rule.