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Language and Development in Africa

Development is based on communication through language. With more than 2,000 languages being used in Africa, language becomes a highly relevant factor in all sectors of political, social, cultural and economic life. This important sociolinguistic dimension hitherto remains under-rated and under-researched in Western mainstream development studies.

The book discusses the resourcefulness of languages, both local and global, in view of the ongoing transformation of African societies as much as for economic development. From a novel Applied African Sociolinguistics perspective, it analyses the continuing effects of linguistic imperialism on post-colonial African societies, in particular regarding the educational sector, through imposed hegemonic languages such as Arabic and the ex-colonial languages of European provenance. It offers a broad interdisciplinary scientific approach to the linguistic dimensions of sociocultural modernisation and economic development in Africa, written for both the non-linguistically trained reader and the linguistically trained researcher and language practitioner.

H. EKKEHARD WOLFF is Emeritus Professor at Leipzig University and held the chair of African linguistics until 2009. He also taught extensively in Nigeria, Niger, Ethiopia and South Africa. He has published widely on both major African languages and endangered languages. Among his publications are *Referenzgrammatik des Hausa* (1993) and *The Lamang Language and Dictionary* (2 vols. 2015). He has written extensively on language policies in Africa, in particular with regard to the politics of language in education, including *Africa: Challenges of Multilingualism* (2013, ed. with Claus Altmayer).

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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107088559

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First published 2016

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data
Names: Wolff, Ekkehard, author.
Title: Language and development in Africa : perceptions, ideologies and challenges / H. Ekkehard Wolff.
Description: New York : Cambridge University Press, 2016. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2016007892 | ISBN 9781107088559 (Hardback : alk. paper)
Subjects: LCSH: African languages–Social aspects. | Language policy–Africa. | Economic development–Africa. | Africa–Languages–Social aspects. | Sociolinguistics.
Classification: LCC P119.32.A35 W65 2016 | DDC 306.4496–dc23 LC record available at http://lccn.loc.gov/2016007892

ISBN 978-1-107-08855-9 Hardback

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For
Viktor Raphael
Sofia Helena
Oskar Erik Alexander
Justus Matteo

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. . . it is not necessary for black people to invent a great fictitious past in order to justify their human existence and dignity today. What they must do is recover what belongs to them – their story – and tell it themselves.

If you are going to enslave or to colonize somebody, you are not going to write a glowing report about him either before or after. Rather you will uncover or invent terrible stories about him so that your act of brigandage will become easy for you to live with.

(Chinua Achebe 2009)

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H. Ekkehard Wolff
Frontmatter
More information

Contents

List of figures *page* ix
List of maps x
List of tables xi
Preface xiii

1 Introduction: approach, questions and themes 1
1.1 What this book is about 1
1.2 Language and mainstream development discourse: 'It's the languages, stupid!' 6
1.3 Language attitudes, ideological blinkers and scientific approaches 18
1.4 Language – education – development 32
1.5 Twenty themes to guide the reader 41
1.6 Perspectives 43

2 Background: Africa and the West – a difficult relationship 46
2.1 Africa polarises: Westerners caught between attraction and repulsion 48
2.2 Do we really know more about Africa than our (great-) grandparents did? 59
2.3 Time and reason to rethink matters 63
2.4 Listening to Africans – but how? 71

3 Perception: between ignorance, half-knowledge and distortion 77
3.1 Perception and reality 80
3.2 Superficial information, half-knowledge and ignorance 95
3.3 *Eurocentrism* and *Orientalism* 100
3.4 Paternalism: why the West constantly interferes in African affairs 103

4 De-marginalisation: the 'cradle of humanity' and home of human language 106
4.1 Africa in global history 108
4.2 What is marginal: Africa or our knowledge about it? 119
4.3 We are all 'Africans' 121
4.4 Explaining language history and diversity 126
4.5 Conclusion 154

5 Re-conceptualisation: the overdue *linguistic turn* in development discourse 155
5.1 The language question in academic and political discourse 157
5.2 African Renaissance without African languages? 163

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Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-08855-9 - Language and Development in Africa: Perceptions, Ideologies and Challenges
H. Ekkehard Wolff
Frontmatter
More information

5.3 European linguistic and cultural imperialism 165
5.4 To whom do African languages belong? 169

6 Challenges: linguistic plurality and diversity – problem or resource? 172
6.1 Linguistic diversity and the *latitudinal gradient* 174
6.2 What does linguistic plurality mean in the African context? 176
6.3 African and other languages in Africa 180
6.4 African languages in official functions 182
6.5 The political and economic dimensions of linguistic plurality 185
6.6 African 'mother tongues' and Africa's future 189
6.7 Languages and globalisation 204
6.8 Language as 'barrier' and language as 'facilitator' 206
6.9 Multi-tiered communication landscapes in Africa 209
6.10 The fundamental multidimensionality of language 217
6.11 A word on language change, death, birth and revitalisation 222
6.12 Multilingualism versus multiple semilingualism 226
6.13 Language and power in Africa 228
6.14 Chinese Whispers: breakdown of communication in North–South dialogue 236

7 Future: synopsis and options for language planning 238
7.1 The role of language in development communication 242
7.2 The final act of decolonisation: liberating the African languages 244
7.3 The options for sustainable language planning are on the table 249
7.4 Managing multilingualism: language planning is social planning 257
7.5 'Informed choices' versus 'uninformed choices' 260
7.6 Overcoming underdevelopment and mass poverty in Africa via adequate language policies for education 264

8 Agenda: arguments and steps 270
8.1 Eight arguments in favour of substantial changes concerning language policies in education in Africa 270
8.2 Ten steps towards integrating indigenous languages into national education systems in Africa 275

9 Basic sociolinguistic facts: languages, dialects, numbers of speakers 284
9.1 Political and historical dimensions of language in Africa 284
9.2 Languages, dialects and dialect continua 288
9.3 Languages and their numbers of speakers 293
9.4 Africa's big languages 296
9.5 African language phyla and families 300

Bibliography 305
Cited works 305
Introductory and further reading 308
Glossary 316
Index 345

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CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-08855-9 - Language and Development in Africa: Perceptions, Ideologies and Challenges
H. Ekkehard Wolff
Frontmatter
More information

Figures

1.1 Ideological components of Eurocentrism *page* 20
1.2 Interdisciplinary development research on Africa (model) 30
1.3 Parameters of development discourse 33
4.1 The biological and the linguistic 'family tree' of Modern Man 130
4.2 Proto-language scenario 1 141
4.3 Proto-language scenario 2 142
6.1 The African polyglossia pyramid (schematic maximal model) 210
9.1 Family tree diagram of genealogical relationship between West-Germanic languages originating from shared proto-languages 292
9.2 Schematic representation of a dialect continuum or chain 293

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CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-08855-9 - Language and Development in Africa: Perceptions, Ideologies and Challenges
H. Ekkehard Wolff
Frontmatter
More information

Maps

4.1 African language macro-families (after Greenberg 1963) *page* 137
4.2 Hypothetical language families of very early hunter-gatherers 138
4.3 Possible expansion of African languages over the last 8,000 years 139
6.1 Number of indigenous languages in Africa per country, with significant accumulation near the Equator (*latitudinal gradient*) 176
6.2 Stratum 1: African language phyla 212
6.3 Stratum 2: African lingua francas and national languages 213
6.4 Stratum 3: contact languages: pidgins and creoles 215
6.5 Stratum 4: official exoglossic languages before 1990 217
6.6 North and north-eastern Africa: Islam and Arabic 218
6.7 West African empires and the Hausa city-states in the sixteenth century 231
6.8 Anglophone Commonwealth of Nations 234
6.9 L'Organisation de la Francophonie 234
6.10 Further international political agencies based on common language 235

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Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-08855-9 - Language and Development in Africa: Perceptions, Ideologies and Challenges
H. Ekkehard Wolff
Frontmatter
More information

Tables

9.1 Languages per phylum (based on *Ethnologue*) *page* 294
9.2 Additional languages without genealogical affiliation 294
9.3 Numbers of speakers per language phylum (based on *Ethnologue*) 295
9.4 Numbers of languages worldwide within ranges of numbers of speakers 295
9.5 Big African languages according to numbers of speakers (> 5 million) 298
9.6 Indigenous African cross-border languages (selection) 299
9.7 Sub-classification of the Niger-Congo languages 301
9.8 Sub-classification of the Afroasiatic languages 302
9.9 Sub-classification of the so-called Nilosaharan languages 303
9.10 Sub-classification of the so-called Khoisan languages 304

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H. Ekkehard Wolff
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Preface

What does *language* have to do with *development*? Can the sheer number of more than 2,000 indigenous languages in Africa be held responsible for the continent's persisting underdevelopment? Is the dominant Western scholarship and political discourse on Africa generally biased and prejudiced, and isn't it the more so when facing Africa's essential ethnolinguistic plurality and diversity in view of the continent's ongoing sociocultural modernisation and necessary economic development? If so, what would then be elements of an authentic and genuine African approach to societal transformation that would take due account of the continent's ubiquitous multilingualism, multiculturalism and multiethnicism? This book addresses a set of related questions, based on a novel *Applied African Sociolinguistics* approach and by taking a critical stand on current mainstream development discourse as monopolised by the social sciences and economics. Its starting point is the analysis of distortions of perception and deep-rooted ideological preconceptions known as *Eurocentrism* and *Orientalism*, which have moulded Western perspectives on non-European peoples, languages and cultures. It combines this analysis with an outline of relevant sociolinguistic facts and challenges for comprehensive language planning in the face of ongoing transformations of society and the need for technological and economic advancement in post-colonial Africa. Emphasis is on the role of *language in education*.

The body of the book is organised according to a set of twenty more or less striking themes, which introduce and guide the reader through salient issues treated in the respective chapter narratives. It ends with a kind of 'road map' of how to facilitate modernisation and development in Africa by changing language policies towards multilingual options involving both local and global languages.

Being conceived as an introductory text, the book takes the format of an extended essay-type narrative rather than that of an academic textbook. According to this format, it limits the amount of technical terminology used, and for what is unavoidable it provides a Glossary at the end. It avoids elaborate footnote materials and extensive reference to hard-to-come-by professional literature. The idea is to make reading easy while providing information based on robust scientific sources.

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The targeted readership embraces the enlightened media user and the informed professional both of whom may be dissatisfied with overly simplistic reports in Western media on Africa as 'continent of catastrophes' and Africans as 'being the way they are'. Such superficial and strikingly essentialist approaches would appear to follow an only too transparent – if subconscious – motivation, namely to underscore European exceptionalism, if not Western supremacy.

The book provides a summarising survey as much as a selective account of research issues in order to introduce a wider readership to the emerging field of Applied African Sociolinguistics with a focus on formal education. The present author thus stands on the shoulders of many researchers and authors before and beside him, many from Africa, who have developed the theoretical foundations and/or contributed empirical studies to this field over many years. Names that immediately come to mind, and purposefully restricting the list to eminent scholars from Africa, are Efurosibina Adegbija, Neville Alexander, Hassana Alidou, Gilbert Ansre, Ayo Bamgbose, Herman Batibo, Beban Sammy Chumbow, Zubeida Desai, Paulin Djité, Ben Elugbe, E. Nolue Emenanjo, Rosalie Finlayson, Marc-Laurent Hazoumê, Kathleen Heugh, Russell Kaschula, Kembo Sure, Pamela Maseko, Kahombo Mateene, Alamin and Ali Mazrui, Rajend Mesthrie, Abdulaziz Mohamed, Salikoko Mufwene, Pai Obanya, Okoth Okombo, Adama Ouane, Kwesi Prah, Etienne Sadembouo, Sarah Slabbert, Christopher Stroud, Maurice Tadadjeu and Vic Webb. I have profited tremendously from their work and also from a rewarding personal relationship with many of them over the years. This selective list in no way diminishes the value of the contributions by so many more authors, from Africa and beyond, who have also influenced my views on the topic but are too numerous to mention here. Only a few of these authors will be explicitly referred to and quoted verbatim in the body of this book, which will remain unique in the way it explicitly relates underdevelopment to the *language factor* and to the deep-rooted prejudice and ideology that inform Western language attitudes and are unfortunately widely shared by African elites in power.

Admittedly, the book also carries subjective views on matters coined by the author's many years of experience as a researcher and university teacher in several countries of Africa. It combines personal experience with forty-five years of professional academic dealings with African linguistics and sociolinguistics based on available literature. It thus represents a balancing act between reporting objective facts culled from scientific research on the one hand, and subjective interpretation of both empirical facts and anecdotal personal observation on the other. It also allows for some language activism, which reflects the author's support for worldwide linguistic and cultural plurality and diversity, which is born of a deep personal concern to respect any person's right to use his/her language unrestricted by any legal and

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administrative interference – as long as there is an expressed will to do so. The book may be provocative where it takes issue with the sacred cow of implicit and widely unquestioned European or Western supremacy over Africa, and it may be irritating where it addresses race and latent racism, uninhibited by political correctness, as a still highly virulent – if subconscious – factor in academic and public discourse on Africa in Europe and Western societies in general.

Writing on matters inside Africa, namely on how Africans use or do not use, should or should not use, their own and other languages, and to do this as a Westerner, may invoke raised eyebrows with some readers. However, this book is as much about Western perspectives on and perceptions of Africa (mainly Chapters 2 and 3) as it is about reassessing Africa's role for humankind and in global history. For example, it takes issue with Western tendencies to marginalise Africa's contributions (Chapter 4) and sketches out objective criteria for making use of both Western and African linguistic resources for the benefit of sociocultural modernisation and economic development (Chapters 5 to 7), not least in order to meet twenty-first-century global challenges that remain impacted by Western thought. Moreover, in order to counterbalance any potential bias, the book purposefully makes room for visible intellectual input from Africa by allowing a considerable amount of verbatim quotation of mainly African voices. It is, after all, their languages that this book is about!

This book is completed under the auspices of the South African National Research Foundation (NRF) Chair in the Intellectualisation of African Languages, Multilingualism and Education in the School of Languages at Rhodes University as well as the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS) Catalytic Project in African Language Concept Formation. The opinions expressed and conclusions arrived at are those of the author and should not necessarily be attributed to the NRF or NIHSS. On a personal note, I wish to express my gratitude to my splendid hosts, Professor Russell H. Kaschula and Professor Pamela Maseko, and all other stimulating professional companions and warm-hearted friends at the NRF Chair and the African Language Studies section in the School of Languages.

The book was originally designed, and a preliminary version was prepared, for a German-speaking public soon after my retirement in 2009 from the Chair of African Linguistics at the University of Leipzig. The decision to instead prepare the present English version in order to reach a much wider and international readership was stimulated by Helen Barton from Cambridge University Press. I am very grateful for her constant encouragement and support, just as I gratefully also acknowledge the valuable assistance rendered by other members of the team in the editing and production process, Bethany Gaunt and Sarah Starkey, and also David Cox who prepared the maps. In particular, I want to thank my excellent copy-editor Jacqueline French.

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Her comments and queries constantly reminded me of the fact that, no matter how long one has used English as a second language for academic teaching and writing, the full command of the intricacies of the language of Shakespeare remains unattainable for us non-native speakers, and of how much we are restricted when not making use of our own mother tongues. This insight relates to the almost proverbial title of the 1999 lecture 'English Unassailable but Unattainable', by the late Neville Alexander, in which he outlined the dilemma of language policy and practice in (South) Africa as being trapped between global and local pulls. In his words, we are facing 'the ever expanding global hegemony of the English language and the apparently inexorable corollary marginalisation of local, national and regional languages' – a sustained dilemma which may serve as Ariadne's thread for the reader through the labyrinth of the 'language question' in Africa as it is sketched out in this book.

Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa
Weseby, Germany
H. EKKEHARD WOLFF

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