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).
Language and Development in Africa

Perceptions, Ideologies and Challenges

H. Ekkehard Wolff
For
Viktor Raphael
Sofia Helena
Oskar Erik Alexander
Justus Matteo
... 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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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, multiculturality 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.
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 Adegbiya, 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 Hazoumè, 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, Kwares 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
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.
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