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Englishes in Africa

Foreword

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There is a considerable body of work on the varieties, functions, and positions of English in African contexts, which has shown the complexity of the topic, but also that many questions remain under-examined and in need of further investigation. The contributions to the present volume address this challenge and add new perspectives and insights from a range of locations and contexts from across the continent.

English – or Englishes – have found a home in many linguistic ecologies in Africa. Initially introduced through colonialism and British imperialism, over the last century English has become an important member of the linguistic repertoires of many people across the continent. Sometimes embraced, often received critically, increasingly taken on board and owned, and a topic of controversial discussion among linguists, writers, government officials and the community of users – English is important in Africa and looks set to continue to play a significant role in the future.

However, beyond the general observation that Englishes in Africa matter, the chapters in this volume show that there are differences in the way English is used and functions, and how it is embedded in the wider sociolinguistic contexts of different locations and speech communities.

Diachronically there have been shifts in how English is viewed from the early days of independence, starting for most African countries from the 1960s, through the beginning of the new millennium to today. English has become the key global language, and its attractiveness, association with modernity and opportunities, and cultural and social value continue to increase. This effect can be seen in Africa as well, including in countries which were not historically part of the British Empire. English has also become an African language in its own right – or indeed, as the title of the volume indicates, there are now many African Englishes, with their own specific lexical, phonological and grammatical features. In the arts, African writers have long become comfortable with expressing their experience in English, and have made English their own. Processes such as globalisation and ownership have shaped the nature and role of English in many African spaces.

On the other hand, in many African countries, African languages (or, African languages other than English) have received more prominence in a wider process of revalorisation, reflected, for example, in the recognition of multilingual heritages and practices in language policy and planning. In many African countries, national constitutions now recognise African languages, and there are policy initiatives to increase the use of African languages in education. Of course, the question of implementation of these policies is often another matter, but overall there is a trend to highlight African languages and to place Englishes in Africa in the context of the African languages which share the relevant linguistic ecologies.

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Given the long and dynamic history of English in Africa, and the complexity and diversity of many African multilingual ecologies, it is no surprise that different African Englishes have developed differently and have taken up different roles and functions. As the chapters in this volume show, the best way to come to a better understanding of these differences is through detailed studies of the lived experiences of speakers of African Englishes.

The chapters do so through focussing on different African countries (Cameroon, Ghana, Kenya, Morocco, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe) and on different themes and contexts relevant to African Englishes, including the use in the classroom, contact with other languages and code-switching and translanguaging, usage in informal contexts and as written language in formal discourse, and in terms of language attitudes.

Overall, the volume presents a vivid picture of lived language use in different African contexts and how different Englishes are embedded in it. It will make an important contribution to our understanding of African sociolinguistics, of different Englishes, and of language use more broadly.