

# **How One Scholarship in One Language Cannot Cross-Continents: 'shape theory' of language applied to intercultural communication between Europe and Africa.**

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## **Abstract**

Economic and socio-political dependence and not scholarly effectiveness, are here identified as the root of so-called 'inter-cultural communication' between Africa and Europe. The intercultural communication process is explored using the 'shape theory of language' which emphasises the importance in communication of that which is expressed being already known by the hearer in order to achieve mutual comprehension. Vast amounts of information assumed to be carried in words or phrases can be totally lost to the listener. The drawbacks of the inter-cultural use of English are emphasised by showing how it's fringes have been eroded. Because indigenously driven development and change requires language users to operate in familiar categories, the use of African languages is found to be essential for African development. This article emphasises the need for Western (as well as local) scholars dealing with African issues to do so from a position of vulnerability to local context.

## **Introduction**

Africans are being welcomed into the arena of Western scholarship. English is the dominant language of study on the African continent. More and more universities are being opened in Africa using English as media of instruction and communication. Other languages are sidelined. Yet welcoming Africans into Western scholarship using English is ignoring profound historical and cultural differences between African and Western peoples.

The outcome of the monopolization of African scholarship by Western languages and thought forms is, I suggest, at root of many of the Continent's troubles. I want to explore what has happened below, and ways in which a serious contextually relevant scholarship is prevented from developing in Africa, then how such ties the hands of Western scholarship in debilitating ways. I go on to propose some approaches by scholars that can bring a way out of 'Africa's development enigma'.<sup>1</sup>

## **The Colour of grass**

A theoretical consideration of the colour of grass will illustrate how, if the same language is used in different contexts, instead of words being effective in carrying meaning, they can be altered to fit to the pertinent reality. Instead of different language describing different contexts, and instead of words meaning things and those meanings being carried with words as they travel, the meanings and impacts of words may simply change as they move inter-culturally.

Let us imagine that grass in Africa is pink, but in Europe is yellow. Europeans being told 'the grass is yellow' will be the basis on which they know what 'yellow' is (i.e. yellow is the colour of grass).

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<sup>1</sup> Adeyemo refers to Africa's 'enigma' (Adeyemo 2001).

Africans would learn by experience on their continent that because they are told that grass is yellow, and they see their grass is pink, they will know that the label yellow is used to describe the colour pink. Should a European go to Africa and observe the grass, it will appear to him/her to be pink. Should Europeans say ‘the grass in Africa is not yellow but pink’ the Africans will deny this and say ‘no it is yellow’. So, who is right? Obviously the African will be right for Africans, but the European ‘right’ for Europeans.

Today such situations are handled by ignoring differences in context to preserve the unity of language. A European who insists that the grass in Africa is pink and not yellow, in the face of African scholarship which says it is yellow, will be accused of being racist and will relinquish his / her case. An African coming to Europe will find that European grass is not the yellow that he knows, but if the exam question asks (and a very common reason for an African person to be in Europe is to study) ‘what colour is grass in Europe’ and s/he fails to answer ‘yellow’, that will result in failing the exam. Because money and power is in Europe, the African must learn to use the same word to describe very different things (pink and yellow) – or risk losing financial income and academic credibility. In its efforts to be international and intercultural Western scholarship, it seems to me, is forcing serious European scholars to close their eyes.

The way to resolve this situation would be to use different languages in different contexts. But the predominance of English is not allowing this to happen in Anglophone Africa.

### **Impactible Area and Inter-cultural Knowledge**

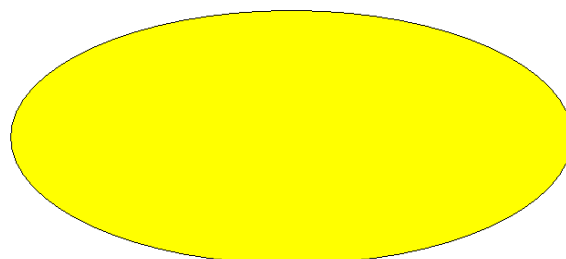
Spoken words are sounds, and written words symbols (‘squiggles’) that represent those sounds. Neither sounds nor squiggles on paper have any ‘carrying capacity’. That is, saying ‘sugar in the tea’ is a different to ‘putting sugar into tea’. The words alone do not move the sugar. One's hand

must do that with a teaspoon. If I say ‘that is a sheep’ when actually it is a goat, the truth of the reality on the ground will not be revealed by what I say. Nor will my words change the goat into a sheep. It will take a knowledgeable person standing besides me to point out my error.

Words have an impact on someone’s mind. The impact of words will depend on the mind of the hearer. The hearer will attempt to understand the word(s) according to contexts known to them. A hearer may unknowingly misconstrue.

Because words can only impact what is already in the mind, (or the person hearing wouldn’t know what is being talked about) it is important to consider the impactible area of someone’s mind. We can do this using set-theory, and considering words to be two-dimensional shapes. (This is clearly a simplification – but a very useful one for illustrative purposes.<sup>2</sup>) The impactible area is clearly related to ‘knowledge’. The total possible impactible area of the human mind is equivalent to all the knowledge that humans could possibly have. See Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Diagrammatic Representation of Total Possible Impactible Area of a Person’s Mind – in two-dimensional form



This ‘area’ is vast. Just to choose a few diverse examples; it includes the experience of giving birth to a baby with two heads, the experience of visiting mars on a space craft, a detailed study of the

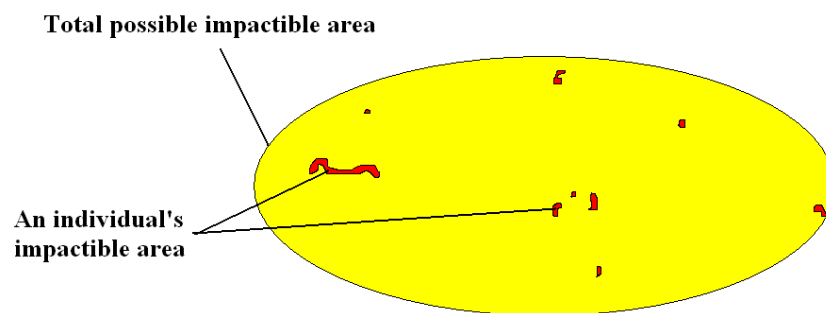
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<sup>2</sup> See also Harries 2008a.

make up of mitochondria, what it is like to live in a desert, the secondary school London university 1982 ‘O’ level geography syllabus, eating goat meat, the Luo language, Alexander the Great’s breakfast preference – and so on *ad infinitum* (and *ad absurdum*).

The actual knowledge held by any individual is clearly only a miniscule proportion of the total possible knowledge or impactible area that someone could have, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2. An Individual Person’s Impactible Area as a Part of the Total Possible Impactible Area of the Mind (to illustrate how small a part of the total possible knowledge any person actually has)



This illustrates how most knowledge for most people can effectively have no impact. That is; it will pass through the gaps between the small parts of knowledge or ‘impactible areas’ that someone has. To draw again on the examples given in the paragraph above; to those who do not happen to have shared the experiences in column 1 of Table 1, the comments given in column 2 will not impact (in colloquial English we say they are meaningless). Most things in fact, that could be and have been said by most people most of the time, if overheard by a person chosen at random would be ‘meaningless’ in this sense.<sup>3</sup>

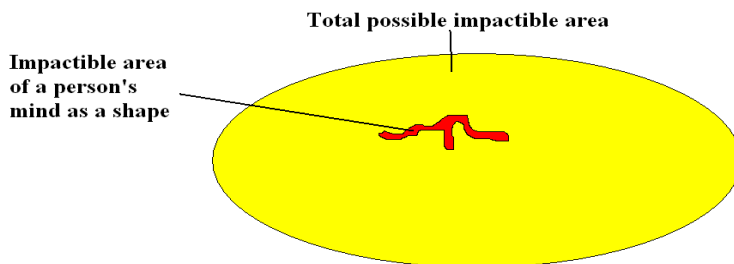
Table 1. How Words are only Correctly Understood only if they Meet an ‘Impactible Area’.

<sup>3</sup> In reality they may not be ‘meaningless’ as such – see below.

Necessary Knowledge or Impactible Area	For These Words to Impact
giving birth to a baby with two heads, the experience of visiting mars on a space craft,	“such a painful birth ...”, ... “... the glow we saw when still 1000 miles from the surface”,
a detailed study of the make up of mitochondria, what it is like to live in a desert,	“the green lining is full of holes”, “... the relief that comes at 6.00 pm”
the secondary school London university ‘O’ level geography syllabus,	“this appearance reveals the rock to be igneous”
eating goat meat,	“not quite as tasty as beef”
the Luo language,	“abiro biro limi kiny e dala”
Alexander the Great’s breakfast preference	“have the same for breakfast as did Alexander”

I want to make another simplifying but I believe helpful assumption, again diagrammatically. That is, I want to assume for simplicity’s sake that the diverse small spots that represent the impactible area of a person’s mind can be combined to form a unique single shape that represents the impactible area of a person’s mind, which is a subset of the total possible impactible area, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Impactible Area of a Person’s Mind Represented as One Shape as a Part of the Total Possible Impactible Area.



Note that this shape will constantly change in response to the acquisition of new knowledge. A piece of new knowledge is shown to be introduced in Figure 4, which results in the change of the shape to that illustrated in Figure 5.

Figure 4. Illustration Representing the Introduction of a New Piece of Knowledge

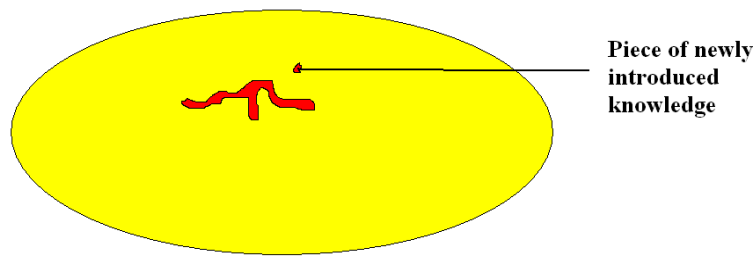
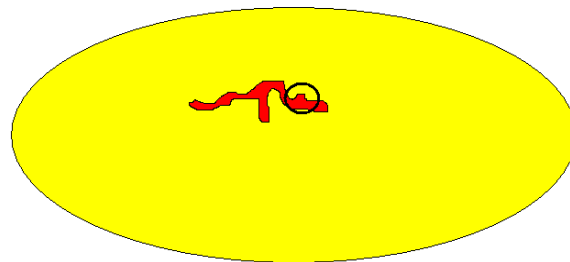


Figure 5. Illustration Representing the Change in Shape of the Impactible Area Following the Introduction of the new Piece of Knowledge (encircled)



Any addition of new knowledge will affect the pre-existing knowledge, as all knowledge is interrelated. Any new experience, in other words, will affect someone's comprehension of all other experiences. Such impact may be slight, or major. This inter-relationship perhaps needs some explanation. Someone hearing a baby cry after walking through a field of bleating sheep will link the baby's cry and the sheep's bleating in their mind. This pen will feel thin to me, if I have recently used a fatter one for writing. The impact of the term 'Africa' on people's minds will have changed following the chaos that occurred in Kenya in early 2008, and so on.

It should be clear that while the shapes of people's impactible area will vary, shapes of people who have interacted closely and whose lives are spent in similar contexts, will be the most similar. The more different people's life-context and experience, the more their shapes will vary. Sharing a native language clearly results in having a comparable shape or part of a shape. Someone's having a different native language, that uses a different set of categories and boundaries, will give them a

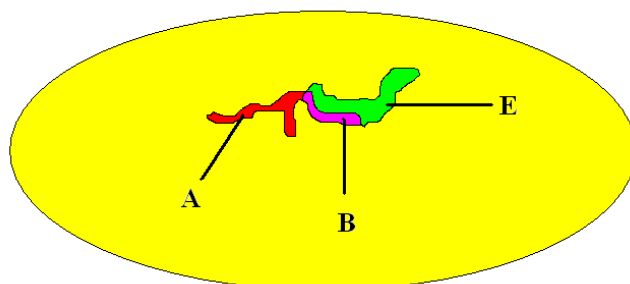
different shape that is located at a different place within the total possible impactible area of their mind.

### The Question of Overlap in Impactible Area

Some areas of knowledge or ‘impactible areas’ can be seen as being the province of European and not African people, and others of African and not European people. A people who understand the stars at night to be campfires of the gods (Mboya 2001) will clearly struggle to comprehend the details of a space-mission designed to observe the surface of mars. Many Europeans will struggle to understand how the death of their aunt can have been caused by the jealousy of their neighbour. (I understand that some scholars and laymen may deny that there cannot be such a clear difference between cultures. Their arguments lead us to the situation described above under grass-colours, whereby apparent agreement over the similarity of cultures is achieved through an implicit redefinition of words.)

In reality, despite some graying of boundaries brought about by cross-cultural exchange, I believe there is a clear case to be made for Figure 6 below which illustrates quite simply that while there may be areas of overlap between different cultures, there are also impactible areas (knowledge) that is / are unique to certain cultures. In Figure 6 ‘A’ is unique to Africa, ‘E’ is unique to Europe, whereas B is shared by both.<sup>4</sup>

Figure 6. The Impactible Areas or Knowledge of Different Languages / Cultures



E = unique to European culture.

<sup>4</sup> Figure 6 is languages of

es. In actual fact no two words of any two of the language / culture on all words.

A = unique to African culture.

B = common to European and  
African culture.

One effect of the relationship shown in Figure 6 is an implication of ignorance or primitiveness by a person of one group of the 'other'. Members of the European and African communities soon discern the limitations of the understanding of the 'other'. Hence inter-cultural dialogue tends to be confined to area B. (The boundaries of B are learned by observing the responses and responsiveness of the 'other' listener should one stray.) This having to confine oneself to B (never of course actually achieved in totality (Harries 2008b)) gives the impression of the 'other' people being 'simple' or uneducated compared with a person's implicit valuation of his/her own people (with whom s/he talks in the context of E and B or A and B). Europeans often do not, in my experience, realise that this assumption of the primitivity of the 'other' is mutual. (A difference of course is that European's primitivity is combined with relative wealth, whereas Africa's primitivity is associated with poverty.)

Suggesting that people assume the simplicity of 'the other' is itself a bit simplistic. Reality is more complex. An African hearing a European talking in area E has two choices. Either they can take this person as being mad, confused or primitive and / or they can make an implicit link between E and A, so try to work out what is being said in E by making links with A and B. One impact of doing this has already been discussed under grass-colours above. Other examples in brief; what to

the African can be miraculous healing can to the European be placebo, what to the African is their homely ‘tribe’ to the European sounds crude or barbaric, genealogical records that are the basis of an African person’s identity will seem an inconsequential detail to many Europeans, and so on. I do not give reverse examples (African views of European language uses) for various reasons.<sup>5</sup>

What may by some be termed ‘misunderstandings’ can become a part of the system. That is much of E becomes assumed to be a part of A (or A a part of E in the case of a European), and is subtly (or sometimes less subtly) redefined to fit the new context.

It is the redefining of E that aligns it with A (and vice versa) that puts us into a fix. It is an almost natural consequence of the language policies of numerous Anglophone African countries (such as Zambia, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Uganda) that have for various reasons taken English to be their official language. Perhaps for purposes of prestige and also to facilitate communication with Europe and especially the UK and America, efforts are made to deter the Africanisation of English, and instead to use the same English in Africa as is used in Europe. So the aim and claim of these African states is *not* to have adapted English to their purposes, but to be using it as the British use it.<sup>6</sup> Once that claim has been made, it must be defended. To challenge the knowledge of English usage by leading Africans is to threaten them at a deep existential level, as this claim may be the basis of their finding a place amongst the nations and in ruling and administering their territory. Such challenge is strongly resisted. Because it seems to threaten the essence of African humanity<sup>7</sup> presenting this challenge today brings accusations of racism hot on its heels.

This is not a put-up-show. Educated Africans *have* appropriated English to the contours of their lifestyle, and one dares to say, they understand one another somewhat effectively through its use.

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<sup>5</sup> Examples of African views of Europeans tend to be concealed in and expressed in African languages, and are not easy to translate to the presumed European readership of this article.

<sup>6</sup> Many of the dictionaries recommended and used in schools in Kenya are those produced by Oxford. I was struck particularly by this orientation to ensuring the alignment with British English while in Zambia in 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Because it is Westerners who set the dominant definition for what it is to be ‘human’.

(This aided by the fact that the cultures of various African people's have strong similarities (Magesa 1997: 26).) The problem arises when a foreigner, especially a native English speaker, attempts to participate in the conversations going on. A native English speaker, unless very deeply exposed to African ways, will assume English words to be rooted in E, when they are actually rooted in A.<sup>8</sup>

A pragmatic ignoring of this situation is, I suggest, extremely damaging. While the 'stronger' party who try to keep a control of their language are definitely the native-English speakers, they have had to concede the fringes even in their own uses of their language. The 'fringes' that have been conceded are important and significant. 'Fringes' of English that are nowadays considered politically incorrect in usage consist of certain critical points at which A differs from E. The differences between A and E being thus concealed from view, no account of these critical points can be taken in academic study or policy formation. Sometimes physical differences in geography and climate can remain in view, but cultural differences between African and European people are hidden. Thus we get claims by the likes of Professor Sachs that: "the barriers to development in Africa are not in the mind, but in the soils, the mosquitoes, the vast distances over difficult terrain, the unsteady rainfall" (Sachs 2005). This has further contributed to a state already noted by Steiner that "[twentieth-century] linguistic philosophy ... particularly in England and the United States ... has ... edged ... [aesthetics, theology, much of political philosophy] away from professional respectability ..." (Steiner 1998:219).

The corollary of the above is of course that Africans are forced, throughout the formal English-based educational system, to confine themselves to a subject-content that has already excluded any cultural content of their lives that differs from native English speakers, from view! As a result African schoolchildren are forced to learn from early on that their formal education will always tend to irrelevancy. They soon realise that the purpose of 'education' is to give them access to the

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<sup>8</sup> And will assume context E+B whereas the African is assuming A+B.

powerful international economy, and not to be an aid to self-understanding or grass roots progress. The ‘weak’ are forced to use the sense of the ‘strong’, whether it makes sense to them or not.

### **The Economics that Back the Ignorance**

The failure to date to develop a resilient African society and economy from the grassroots up contributes significantly to the hegemony of foreign economic models on the African continent. Africa from the perspective of Western economies being something of a basket case, means that the dominant economic model applied is that of ‘aid’. The ‘good’ that Europe produces by intent being widely assumed in Africa to arise by default<sup>9</sup> indeed results in a very basic material-existence in the absence of foreign aid. This economic effect is however rarely addressed or even realised. Instead outside economic provision all too often confirms African people’s conviction that their wise men are most productively engaged in developing ways to counter spiritual evils (this argument is developed in Harries, 2006).

Another effect of this system resulting from enormous dependence on foreign charity is an orientation at all costs to the pleasing of donors. This has contributed to the apparent merging of A and E (see Figure 6) already described above. Such merging is very rational behaviour in pursuance of economic self-interest. Linguistic confusion already described above easily combines with an African orientation to utilise language to create and not reflect reality to produce physical outcomes (Harries 2007:21). The combination of the above two factors results in a habituation to what can in Western English be considered to be ‘telling lies’. Such lies are used to provide justification for the perpetuation of unhelpful (in the long term) economic, social and political policies.

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<sup>9</sup> African cultural orientation has its people focus on the deterring of spiritual adversaries unlike European cultures that often concentrate on producing ‘good’, which in Africa is thought should arise by default (Harries 2006).

In short, scholars need to be very discerning in their research in Africa, in the light of its economic dependence. *Enormous* pressure on all concerned to ‘not bite the hand that feeds you’, combined with the linguistic confusion already described above, result in conditions akin to a minefield for researchers of the African scene. The way forward, it seems to me, must lie in a vulnerability that can result in free two-way interchange between Western and African people. These days a lot of African people to various degrees (at least overtly) cross and have crossed over to European ways of life. What is harder to find, but desperately needed in order to facilitate scholarship and aid programmes, are Europeans who are able to ‘cross’ in the other direction, and acquire a close familiarity with African languages and cultures.

### **Indigenous Education**

Even Tanzania, which has an incredibly strong orientation to the use of the African language Kiswahili in almost all official and unofficial public events, switches to English for all formal post-primary education. Some find this incredible and it has been much critiqued (Puja 2003). Amongst other things reflected by such a policy, I want to suggest, is a deeply ingrained self-doubt amongst African people regarding their own ability at developing scholarship at other than a very basic level. That is, whereas some Africans have become very adept at interacting with and contributing to Western scholarship, very few (if any?) consider themselves capable at building from the ground up in African languages.<sup>10</sup>

This often overseen detail has important consequences in at least two areas. Firstly, it raises the question of whether there is a bridge between African ways of life and more ‘modern’ cultures? If there is a bridge, then what is it and how can it be found? Secondly, if grassroots thinking does not

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<sup>10</sup> I believe this to be the case almost continent-wide. For example, in Cameroon most indigenous languages are considered “... not yet developed and thus cannot serve as written media for transmitting modern knowledge” (Chiatoh 2006:105) so that most Cameroonians consider their languages primarily as “instruments of preserving cultural heritage ...” (Chiatoh 2006:108).

connect with the academic superstructure then the question must arise – as to what it is that is guiding the day to day thinking of African populations?

The finding of that bridge will enable positive change in African communities. I suggest its finding is essential, and until it is found we must assume that at any depth African communities are not guided directly by Western academia or their formal education systems, but primarily by the largely intact and little changing (as it is ignored by the schooling system) indigenous thinking rooted in long ancestral tradition. This author is facing glaring evidence of this, being located in Western Kenya while writing in early 2008 amidst unrest that has surfaced deeply ingrained tribal animosities that seem to be threatening to obliterate 100 years of intense education using English in Kenya from view. The bridge from African culture to so-called ‘modern ways’ of life is obscure. The imposition of foreign models of education is a distraction that by offering financial and other benefits to African people to contribute to Western academia instead of devising their own,<sup>11</sup> seems constantly to delay the paying of attention to the important bridge-building process.

There is a desperate need to encourage African (and non-African) scholars to look at African problems as defined by Africans in African languages so as to set a foundation for a truly African academia. Failure to do this is likely to result in the collapse of more and more African states that are building on the foundations of others (such as Kenya in relation to the British colonial legacy) into governorship by neglected but all-too-present ‘traditional values’.<sup>12</sup>

### **Vulnerable Scholars using Indigenous Languages Desperately Needed**

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<sup>11</sup> It is financially more profitable and socially more prestigious to operate in English than in local languages, whether or not what is produced in English is meaningful.

<sup>12</sup> Zimbabwe is one of the African countries considered to be a classic example where this has recently occurred. This is a large topic only dealt with cursorily here.

While removing the hegemony of Western academia over African scholarship may be a step in the right direction, progress also depends on there being an African scholarship to take its place. One obvious route to follow at this stage, is to suggest what African people 'should do' to put right the problems that I am describing. My orientation is however to address Westerners, who in many ways are holding the countries of Africa in an arm-lock. African people, I suggest, should be less bound by financial coercion. I would like to ask about the influence that Westerners can have that will leave African people empowered to follow positive avenues in their own lives and societies. My direct concern is not to correct the methodologies used by those Westerners who force their agendas onto Africa by use of financial incentives or pressure, even if it should by now be clear that I do consider such to be misguided. It is rather to open an alternative avenue that could be followed by those who want to have an impact on Africa that is positive, but not compelled. Scholars are needed to do the legwork that will enable others to work effectively.

The first important, and in today's Africa extra-ordinarily difficult task for non-African natives, is to escape the identity of being a 'donor'. The association between white skin (and other coloured skins with Western accents) and financial bounteousness is extremely wide and deep. Means of playing up to donors are extremely deeply ingrained. Great care should be taken not to provide financial incentives for any bias in people's responses to a researcher. Secondly, there is a need for careful attention to research methodology. Interviews and questionnaires are far too flawed as methodologies for use in most research on African societies by Westerners. A researcher needs to confine research methodology to participant-observation.<sup>13</sup>

Second but equally important – is for a researcher or practitioner to operate in the language of the people being reached. This language can only be correctly understood if learned in the context in which it is used. Operating using English or with languages learned in a classroom is in Africa

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<sup>13</sup> To go into more depth in considering research methodology would be beyond the scope of this essay, but see Harries 2007.

leaving perhaps *the* key task in the acquisition of understanding to locals, who almost by definition will not comprehend what a foreigner is trying to communicate (contrast A and E of Figure 6). Using a people's language will be an encouragement or boost to their self-valuation and can be enabling them to function in their community. Use of a foreign language tends to irrelevancy if it is not backed up by large scale funds.<sup>14</sup>

The person who follows the above suggested procedures will in due course realise, I believe, that African people live in response to the actions of a 'supernatural force'.<sup>15</sup> The nature and composition of this force is complex. It is often associated with the content of E (see Figure 6) known as 'God'. Helpful alternative labels could be: 'the force', 'vital force', 'mystical powers' or 'the power'.<sup>16</sup> Comprehending the nature of this force or 'god' as understood by African people is vital for anyone wanting to understand Africa. The force can be compared to a bucket if people are taken as being water – he / it defines the shape and the boundaries of African people's ways of life. Trying to understand African people while ignoring 'the force' is like wondering why water in a bucket stays where it is! It is like trying to understand an individual person while taking no account of their community, family or friendship network. 'Theology', the study of 'God' (or god or 'vital force'), is the vital and desperately needed discipline these days most often missing from studies on Africa.

## **Conclusion**

Numerous misconceptions and over-simplifications in inter-cultural communication and scholarship are here unveiled. It is economic and socio-political dependence, and not good scholarship, that appears to unite the work of the Western and African academia.

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<sup>14</sup> If it is backed by funds, then the 'relevance' arises due to those funds.

<sup>15</sup> While I use the term 'supernatural', for African people this force is not 'supernatural' in the English sense as for Africans there is no concept of 'nature' (Harries 2007:132).

<sup>16</sup> Tempels in his classic work refers to *life, force, to live strongly* or *vital force* (1959:44).

Words being sounds do not ‘carry’ anything. Rather, they have an impact only on what is already in the mind of the hearer. Any one person knowing a tiny fraction of all that is to be known in the world means that much or most intercultural discourse falls in the ‘spaces’ between impactible areas in people’s minds.

Knowledge is discovered to be always subjective and therefore held in a unique way by every person. But that does not stop people from connecting the words of others with knowledge that they hold, so that an assumed transfer of vaults of meaning can occur to someone who may be totally unaware that this is happening.

Native English speakers have lost control over the fringes of their language especially that refer to the ‘other’. The ‘other’, being non-English people, have managed to prohibit those uses of English once used to describe ‘them’.

There is little or no evidence that any native Sub-Saharan community has yet managed to find a bridge to ‘modern ways of life’ without drawing on foreign languages and categories. This bodes badly for Africa (if as appears) the use of foreign languages cannot bring indigenously rooted sustainable development.

This article concludes that there is *great need* for Western scholars to relate to Africa other than as donors, using African languages, and seeking to understand African notions of ‘god’.

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