

# THE IMPLICATIONS OF WITTGENSTEIN'S LANGUAGE GAME THEORY ON POST-COLONIAL AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

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## **Introduction**

Is there still any need to present African philosophy as a reaction to the rather ignorant assertions of western philosophers? Should African philosophers still be interested in some maligning publications like those of Hegel's "Absolute Spirit" and Lucian Levi Bruhl's "Primitive Mentality" or should it rather be concerned with the existential problems of Africans like other philosophers of the world? If African philosophy is still considered inferior and irrational then we are making a case that there must be a condemnable mixing link in the score sheet of contributions that has obviously become blind to the outlandish Africa perspectives to universal concepts and philosophical problems. This claim becomes more palpable particularly after the masterpiece published by Wittgenstein and other legendary contributions of western philosophers against such obnoxious ideology.

This paper is charged with the task of drawing out lucidly the implications of the language-game theory asseverated by Wittgenstein on the entire post-colonial African philosophy. It is

pertinent to assert that in pursuance of this task, we shall not attempt to x-ray the nitty-gritty of African post-colonial philosophy. We shall endeavour to conceptualize it. To achieve this task, the following topics will be considered;

- What is African philosophy?
- The idea postcolonial in African philosophy?
- What is postcolonial African philosophy?
- The language game theory: Historical background, Meaning and Basic assumptions
- Critical evaluation of the language game theory
- The implications of the language-game theory on post-colonial African philosophy

### **What is African Philosophy?**

There are avalanche of debates that encircle the attempt to define African philosophy. What we could make out of some of the arguments is that African philosophy is a philosophy produced by the African people. It is the philosophy that presents African worldviews and uses distinct African philosophical methods in remonstrating the African experience.<sup>1</sup> Some other debates on the definition of African philosophy are centred on arguments ranging from what exactly the term 'African' qualifies, the content of the philosophy and the distinctive methods employed, or the identities of the philosophers.<sup>2</sup> On the former view, philosophy counts as African if it involves African themes such as perceptions of time, personhood, space and other subjects, or uses methods that are defined as distinctively African. In the latter view, African philosophy is any philosophy produced by Africans or by people of African descent, and others engaged in synthesis or analysis of their works.<sup>3</sup>

There have been a pristine debate also on the nature of African philosophy as a critical response to the claim that there is no African philosophy. One divide of the respondents are the ethno-philosophers and their thesis is that a specific culture can have a philosophy that is not applicable and accessible to all peoples and cultures in the world.<sup>4</sup> However, this concept is disputed by

traditional philosophers.<sup>5</sup> More so, in *A Discourse on African Philosophy: A New Perspective on Ubuntu and Transitional Justice in South Africa*, Christian B. N. Gade argues that the ethno-philosophical approach to African philosophy as a static group property is highly problematic.<sup>6</sup> His research on *Ubuntu* presents an alternative collective discourse on African philosophy that takes differences, historical developments, and social contexts into serious consideration.

No matter the contention on the existence of African philosophy, it is pertinent to note that philosophers have defined African philosophy from different perspectives. For instance, K. C. Anyanwu defined African philosophy as "that which concerns itself with the way in which African people of the past and present make sense of their destiny and of the world in which they live."<sup>7</sup> It implies that African philosophy is a critical reflection on the unique experiences of the African people. It is the concern about how Africans have confronted their challenges at every given point in time and proffered solutions for progressive development.

The above definition, amongst other positions of scholars, allows us to enter the colonial as well as evaluate the post-colonial experiences in Africa milieu. Since, we are focused on the post-colonial experience, it become imperative to conceptualize the term post-colonial from the African perspective.

### **The Postcolonial Notion in African philosophy**

There are two senses in which African philosophy have used the word 'post' in post colonial philosophy. The first sense is that African philosophy is against the colonial tradition engrained in the endeavours of Africa. And secondly, it depicts African philosophy as going beyond the havocs of coloniality and redefining the identity of the African people. Post colonialism to begin with is a perspective that analyses, explains, and responds to the cultural legacy of colonialism and structural extraction of imperialism.<sup>8</sup> Post colonialism speaks about the human consequences of external control and economic exploitation of

native people and their lands.<sup>9</sup> It also engages the politics of knowledge by examining the relations of social and political power that sustain colonialism and neo-colonialism.<sup>10</sup>

In *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* (1996), Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins clarified the denotational functions, among which:

The term *post-colonialism* - according to a too-rigid etymology is frequently misunderstood as a temporal concept, meaning the time after colonialism has ceased, or the time following the politically determined Independence Day on which a country breaks away from its governance by another state. Not a naïve teleological sequence, which supersedes colonialism, *post-colonialism* is, rather, an engagement with, and contestation of, colonialism's discourses, power structures, and social hierarchies. . . . A theory of post-colonialism must, then, respond to more than the merely chronological construction of post-independence, and to more than just the discursive experience of imperialism.<sup>11</sup>

As a genre of contemporary history, post colonialism questions and reinvents the manner in which a culture is being viewed, challenging the narratives expounded during the colonial era.<sup>12</sup> Anthropologically, it records human relations between the colonists and the peoples under colonial rule, seeking to build an understanding of the nature and practice of colonial rule.

### **What is post-colonial African philosophy?**

Postcolonial African philosophy could be conceived as a constellation of philosophies about the colonial experience of the African people by African and non-African writers.<sup>13</sup> It was targeted at x-raying the evils of colonialism and possible ways of overcoming the multiple challenges colonialism hived on Africa. The work of Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* in 1954 was one of such interventions in Africa. It was interested in constructing a

postcolonial identity for the African people particularly for Nigerians.<sup>14</sup>

Postcolonial African philosophers contrary to the colonialist claim that Africa was underdeveloped demonstrated that there were kingdoms in Africa that were already established before the coming of the western imperialists. Allusion is made to the kingdoms and empires of Ashanti, Benin, Dahomey, Buganda and even Kongo. They also amplified how the colonial powers undermined the integrity of this established kingdoms.<sup>15</sup> In addition; they propagated the belief that they required European stewardship as asserted and justified in the essay *The African Character* (1830), by G. W. F. Hegel. This was in keeping with his philosophic opinion that cultures were stages in the course of the historical unfolding of *The Absolute*.<sup>16</sup>

Another intervention was that which was put up by a Kenya author, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. In his *Weep Not, Child* (1964) he demonstrated the pathetic experience of the East Africans of colonial imperialism. In the *River Between* (1965) he lamented the imposition of Christianity, a foreign religion to the Kenyan people and indeed to the generality of the African people. This attempt was amplified in the essay; *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986).

The thematic issues in postcolonial philosophy are no other than those that concerns the identity of Africans. A number of them are gender, ethnicity, religion, language to mention just a few. The imperative of such discourse became glaring as most countries began to gain independence from the colonial powers.<sup>17</sup> For some scholars while it seems evident that the colonial powers have vacated the African territory, they are still very much present in the thinking of Africans especially in its leaders.

Put succinctly, postcolonial philosophy is a deliberate quest to define the identity of the African people. Because of the encounter with colonial imperialist, the identity of the African people was seriously distorted not only in terms of politics,

economics but even mentally.<sup>18</sup> It was so much a terrible state that the entire continent risk been extinct from the planet earth. And so, postcolonial philosophy looks inward to highlight salient achievements of the African people before the coming of the colonialists and project them as counter argument to the colonialist claim that Africans were underdeveloped and bestial and so the reason for them to be colonized.<sup>19</sup>

### **Ludwig Wittgenstein Language Game Theory: Background, Meaning and Assumptions**

Having showcased the key areas of postcolonial African philosophy, it is pertinent to ask at this juncture at what point the aforementioned discourse connects with the language game theory of Ludwig Wittgenstein. How would Wittgenstein a western philosopher address any of the pristine challenges championed by the postcolonial African philosophy? It is pertinent to restate that at the core of the postcolonial struggle is the crucial agenda to rewrite and correct the obnoxious notion about Africa propagated by the western colonialists which were a yardstick for the impoverishment of Africa disguised as an attempt to develop it.

This notion beyond the colonial dispensation persists and constitutes a major bottleneck in the way Africans perceive themselves and are perceived in the global community. It is such that Africans seem to be disadvantaged amongst other continents of the world and needed to create a point of entry for itself so as to contribute in the global roundtable. This in a nutshell is what Wittgenstein had done in the language game theory. To further delineate it, let us first and foremost outline the background, meaning and basic assumptions of the language game theory.

It is almost expected that whenever one mentions language game theory all attention is focused on Ludwig Wittgenstein and his twin publications namely *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus* 1921, hereafter called, *Tractatus* and *Philosophical Investigation* 1953, hereafter, referred to as *Investigation*. These publications differ significantly in style as well as in their conceptions of

philosophy and language.<sup>20</sup> In this paper, we shall focus on the *Philosophical Investigation* because the language game theory was developed therein.

### **A Short Background to the Language Game Theory**

The entire discourse in the *Tractatus* could be summarized into three points. Firstly, it was an attempt to repudiate traditional metaphysics. Secondly, it was a deliberate attempt to reduce language to small prepositions that would correspond to observable facts and thirdly, it was poised to establish a theory of language that would define the boundaries of meaning.<sup>21</sup>

In the *Tractatus*, the picture theory of language was developed. It was more or less a furtherance of Bertrand Russell's conception of the world. For him, the world was a collection of atomic facts. Using the term "states of affairs" for "atomic facts," Wittgenstein gives us a similar account. Wittgenstein, with his picture theory states that language represents a state of affair. He developed this in the *Tractatus* only but later criticised this notion with the introduction of the language theory in the *Investigation*.<sup>22</sup> These points form the background for the emergence of the *Investigation* which was published post-mortem.

### **Language Game Theory: Meaning and Basic Assumptions**

*The Philosophical Investigation* begins with a quote from Augustine's *Confessions* which "give us a particular picture of the essence of human language," based on the idea that "the words in language name objects," and that "sentences are combinations of such names."<sup>23</sup> This picture of language cannot be relied on as a basis for metaphysical, epistemic or linguistic speculation. Despite its plausibility, this reduction of language to representation cannot do justice to the whole of human language. In addition even if it is to be considered a picture of only the representative function of human language, it is, as such, a poor picture. Furthermore, this picture of language is at the base of the whole of traditional philosophy, but, for Wittgenstein, it is to be shunned in favour of a new way of looking at both language and philosophy.

The *Philosophical Investigations* proceeds to offer the new way of looking at language, which will yield the view of philosophy as therapy. The most analogy Wittgenstein drew in the *Investigation* is that between language and games. There are several usage of this expression in this publication.<sup>24</sup> Firstly, language-game is used by Wittgenstein to emphasize the plurality of our ways of speaking. We do not all speak in the same way however, there is something common in all our speaking he observed.<sup>25</sup> This is in contrast with the one dimensional theory of language in the *Tractatus*. More so, he used the analogy of family resemblance to portray the different uses of language.

The second use of language-game by Wittgenstein was to emphasize that the speaking of language is an activity. This is to underscore the fact that we do not only speak, but we do things by means of speaking. And thirdly, Wittgenstein used the language-game to illustrate the confusion that arises from the ignorance that words function varies from one language-game to another.<sup>26</sup> For instance, the games that uses ball have different laws governing the handling of balls. In volley ball, all parts of the body could touch the ball without penalty but in football, the hands of the players except the goalkeepers are not allowed to touch the ball.

He also pointed out that with regards to language, the logical positivists treated scientific discourse as the only language-game and judged all other ways of speaking (religious, ethical, and otherwise) to be meaningless and nonsensical.<sup>27</sup>

Put succinctly, the basic assumption of Wittgenstein which could be deduced from the meaning of language-game are mentioned as follows; That there are different ways of speaking and each way of speaking is neither superior nor inferior to the other. This point is similar to the notion of the *Principle of Charity* which Donald Davidson expressed in his *The Very Idea of Conceptual Scheme*.<sup>28</sup> That language is not restricted to abstract reality but includes the totality of both material and abstract expressions of a people. Language as an activity means it is not only mere words

but it is also an action. Finally, that there are peculiar use of language amongst various people even though all languages have something in common. And that such peculiar use of language makes such people unique but never less equal to other people.

### **Critical evaluation of the language game theory**

A critical introspection of the language game theory reveals that there is a sense of relativity engrained in this postulation. If the language game theory states that each language should be understood from its cultural perspective then how do we interrogate each language? Are all languages equally acceptable? Does the language of a people interact with other languages? If Wittgenstein is taken completely seriously, it would mean that the language of a people could be seen as an island. What does Wittgenstein has to say as a rejoinder?

Wittgenstein seem to have prefigured such a reaction from some scholars that would amplify the point that there is a tendency of relativism in his postulation when he mentioned about *Forms of Life* as well as *family resemblance*. By *Forms of Life*, he meant to express that “To imagine a language means to imagine a form of life.”<sup>29</sup> In other words, there are different forms of life and forms of life have something in common. However, we cannot find what is common to all these activities and what makes them into language. Furthermore, he rejected general explanations, and definitions based on sufficient and necessary conditions, is best pronounced. He rather points to 'family resemblance' as the more suitable analogy for the means of connecting particular uses of the same word. In other words, we should, instead, travel with the word's uses through “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing.”<sup>30</sup>

Family resemblance also serves to exhibit the lack of boundaries and the distance from exactness that characterize different uses of the same concept. Such boundaries and exactness are the definitive traits of form whether Platonic or the general form of a proposition adumbrated in the *Tractatus*.<sup>31</sup> It is from such forms that applications of concepts can be deduced, but this is precisely

what Wittgenstein now eschews in favour of appeal to similarity of a kind with family resemblance

### **The Implications of the Language-Game Theory on Post-colonial African Philosophy**

Having delineated the language-game theory of Wittgenstein as well as post-coloniality in African philosophy, it is imperative we spell out the implications of the former on the latter. As a recapitulation, post-colonial philosophy is a deliberate attempt by African philosophers to assert the identity of the African people amidst the debilitating experience of colonialism.<sup>32</sup> The points of entry of this attempt cuts across the entire endeavour of the African ontology. That is to say it includes the political, economics, educational, religious, social and more importantly psychological spheres of the African existence.

The bottom line of this conscious elucidation is to undermine the arguments of the colonialists for colonizing Africa namely that Africans were underdeveloped and needed to be colonized in order to savage their plight.<sup>33</sup> Put differently, what the colonizers encountered upon arrival in the African soils was to their consideration primitive, obsolete and inhumane. One would wonder what their yardsticks were that resulted to such conclusions. In any case, they claimed that colonizing Africa was a way of helping Africa to develop, whereas history has shown that all their attempts were geared towards sapping to the detriment of Africa all her resources both natural and human.<sup>34</sup> Whatever innovation (roads, railways, hospital, education, politics, economics, religion and so on) they brought was to facilitate their agenda eventually.<sup>35</sup> For instance, they condemned the Africa religion and promoted Christianity in replacement which typified God as omnipotent, omnipresence, benevolent and omniscience as against the African gods. They even taught Africans to spell their God with small letter and theirs with capital letter which is indicative of the superiority of their God over that of the Africans.

What, however, remains interesting here is that after these long years had passed since most African states have gained independence, Africans still lament the havoc of imperialism and colonialism. Some scholars have argued that Africans by now should not be justified in decrying colonialism since other continents like Asia who were also colonized but seemed to have joined the developed countries bang wagon and have become key players in the global space.<sup>36</sup> As a response to such claims, other scholars have palpable reasons to assert that colonialism in Africa had a more endemic approach that destroyed the identity of the African people. While colonialism in other continents like Asia could be mainly based on their natural resources, the African experience were added to natural resources was brainwashing.<sup>37</sup> This is why till date Africa is still notorious attached to the umbilical cord of the western colonialists.<sup>38</sup>

If the language-game theory of Ludwig Wittgenstein, one of the finest and celebrated minds in western philosophy is taken seriously which we believe it is, then, the following are the implications of his assertion as regards the condition of Africans in the global space.

Firstly, that there are different ways of speaking and each way of speaking is neither superior nor inferior to the other. This is to say that Africans have a way of speaking which does not have to be like that of the colonialists. More so, the African way of speaking is not in any way inferior or superior to any other way of speaking in the world. Furthermore, it will be obnoxious and unacceptable for anyone to price a way of speaking other the other ways of speaking and this is what the colonialists did and still are doing to the African continent with nascent neo-colonial tendencies.

Secondly, for Wittgenstein, language is not restricted to abstract reality but includes the totality of both material and abstract expressions of a people. Language as an activity means it is not only mere words but it is also an action. It means that both the words and actions of a people is integrally part of the way of speaking. In others words, every mode of communication, verbal

and non-verbal are inclusive. If this is correct, why would the unique way of speaking by the Africa people be termed bestial and primitive? Why should African arts and writings (Ajaami scripts) not be respected and promoted by the colonialist and the world order generally?

Finally, he concluded that there are peculiar use of language amongst various people even though all languages have something in common. And that such peculiar use of language makes such a people unique and never less equal to other people. If all languages have something in common then it means they are interconnected. In addition, what a particular language could produce by way of unique innovation other languages will do in their own right. What we call technology today could be understood as an expression of a language. Like China and America, Africans also have technology which may not be the same with others but adopted to the African existential milieu. Put simply, there is no language that has as its exclusive reserve world class innovation. Whatever any language seem to possess, there are other modes or version of it in other languages. And so, no language is indeed inferior or superior to the other.

## **Conclusion**

Having attempted a discourse on the language-game theory and postcoloniality in African philosophy which is the intention of demonstrating the implications of the former on the latter, it is expedient to assert at this juncture that there are avalanche of questions that this attempt precipitates to be considered. These questions stem from an astonishment that follows the continuity of colonialism as neo-colonialism despite the submissions of some western scholars including Wittgenstein and Donald Davidson as regards the nature of language adumbrated above herein. If those claims were to be taken seriously, then the entire postcolonial struggle in African philosophy would become a no issue. African philosophy would rather be focused on advancing the African experience not as a reaction to western claims but as a package of what Africa has to offer the world at the global round-table.

## ENDNOTES

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