

# AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY AND THE PROBLEM OF LANGUAGE

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## **Abstract**

*The Question of Language in Africa is a very fundamental area under discussion in African Philosophy. This is as a result of the fact that the fundamental nature of language in philosophy cannot just be over looked. Language on this ground, as it were to be, is traditions or enlightening bound. Hence, to disagree with a particular people on the place of their language is to disagree with them on their cultural heritage or existence. While employing analytic and descriptive methods in the course of this research, it will be argued that language plays not just a reflective role in the structuring or foundation of philosophizing but also, it occupies an incontrovertible ground in the quest of philosophy as a subject matter. Since philosophy in its nature is all about clarifications and resolutions of “intangible issues”, many African indigenous languages should be given a self-importance in the place of doing reflections just the way reality appears to them against their foreign counterparts because of the obvious epistemological compensation surrounded therein (especially in mother-tongues). This paper argues that a huge amount of groundwork is needed to be done in terms of encouragement and improvement on the status of indigenous languages, so as to meet up with the international standard. However, the need for the use of a foreign language that may engender the understanding of indigenous African language across ethnic barriers alongside the language of the environment is being advocated. This is not without sounding a forewarning that such is often weighed down by the use of the implement of translation. Though this is workable, it is far from being the ideal. The researcher uses the various Indigenous African languages as the foundations of this research. It is finally on this ground that there is the possibility of having what we might be called a genuine African Philosophy arising from the analysis of African long-established worldviews.*

## **Introduction**

Since the developmental stages of African philosophical writings, African philosophy has been written exclusively in many foreign European languages. Such languages include English, French, Portuguese, German, Latin, etc. If we may include the host of non-African

authors who have made substantial contributions to African philosophy and the languages in which most important research works of African way of life or worldview were written and translated, we would end up arriving at a large number of European and possibly even Asian and American languages, but very few or none African thought were written originally in the language of the African people.

According to (Okolo 18), philosophy by its nature focuses on conceptual clarifications and analysis of ideas and concepts in a proper language for easy understanding. African philosophers are confronted with certain philosophical linguistic problems of reading meaning into concepts in African indigenous thoughts or ideas, as resolutely within the methodical truth-seeking tradition of the African people. Thus, the basic worry of African philosophers in line of language is the clarifications of meanings in their original indigenous African ideas in the following areas: i. their grammatical forms and functions, ii. Their functions and denotations, iii. Authenticity of postulated idea and so on. According to Egbunu: “The question this research focuses on here, is to what extent the trans-cultural transfer of meaning of term in foreign language could take place without killing or destroying the original meaning of ideas expressed in a particular African language?” (11)

Thus, like from the Igala worldview, the idea of *Omi-oro e degwun*; in its original literary meaning and structure, means too much to be denotatively translated into another language and still holds its original meaning. Thus, if this idea is to be translated into any other language, it will not only end up destroying the meaning but it will end up making a total mess of the denotative meaning of the word. This dilemma is embedded within a case whereby the philosopher is expected to live within the African context and thought system while he/she writes with the western mindset. In other words, the contention lies in the difficulty of whether it is plausible to undertake authentic African philosophy in a language other than African language? For instance, Igala Philosopher (Egbunu) never put down his idea in the Igala language, neither Tanganyika philosopher (Julius Nyerere) did his own in Tanganyikan language. Igbo Philosopher (Augustine Chika Obi's) philosophical works were never done in the Igbo language. Bantu Philosophy (Tempels') idea about the Bantu people was never documented in the Bantu language; and so on. Such philosophies were often written in various foreign languages

The fundamental question is this: Can any research or research work done in any unfamiliar language actually be qualified in any form to be called an African Philosophy. Furthermore, the question of whether philosophical research work done in such language could genuinely communicate African thoughts which they stand to represent in any way in the original native African idea? According to Patrice Lumumba in *The African Congress*:

In an attempt to finding a possible solution to linguistic problem in African thought system, African scholars in all means have to first and foremost explore the need to decolonize their African mind set and try to understand the root at which their philosophical idea originated and spring from (Utube source).

Unarguably, language is said to be culture bound and as such African Language and Philosophy ought to really portray the unique identity, feelings and empathy of the original African ideology.

## Definition of Terms

### i. African Philosophy

On this structure, African Philosophy simply refers to the systematic inquiry into the thought system or worldview of African persons. This includes those within the substantial confines of the inhabitants of the Africa continent or those Africans staying in Diasporas. In other point of departure, those who share common historical experiences with and those who belong to same racial groupings with those within this continent but who have properly inclined themselves to making systematic inquiries into African predicaments and finding a possible solution to them are known as Africans.

### ii. Language.

Language on the ground of vocal, signs or documentation as a means of communication, Language in this point of view, is simply refers to the particular form of words and speech that is used by the people of a particular tribe, country, area, or social group. It also connotes on the other hand that Language is also the method of human communication using spoken words “*sounds*”, signs or written words. Such could also be depicting in signs, symbols, sounds, and other methods of communicating information, feelings, or ideas. Sign is drafted into this research work because some persons or individual within the African race are born naturally neither deaf nor dumb. This definition indicates that, the higher form of communication among human is thus, overt in this context, what we mean as communication here is specifically communication or interactions that exist between the human persons. This interaction could be neither body gestures, oral or written. In discussing this in suggestion to the African person, their African environmental position and concern are paramount, and must be put into consideration. Their feelings, their emotions alongside their unique ideas, signs and symbols should also be taken into cognizance in dealing with the context of language in African Philosophy.

Judging from the exceeding definitions above, it is quite considerable, therefore, to note that language, according to Egbunu is unceremonious and systematized vehicle for relating ideas, emotions, reality and feelings, in which signs, body gestures or sounds that have been agreed upon by a particular society or understood by them owing to their unique experiences are employed or utilized for the sake of conveying some truth or foundational messages. To a certain degree, language is to Africans and even the Western what water is to the fish or to what fuel is to a vehicle. A physically powerful correlation is made between language and ideas, words and in relationship with things in the universe.

### Language as a Tool for Understanding Human Person and Society

One of the peculiar and essential features that distinguish human beings from other species of beings that exist in the universe is language. As (Pinker 15) puts it, *language is the product of a well-engineered biological instinct*. Moreover, it is through it that human beings can shape events in each other's brain with exquisite precision. Simply by making 'noises' with our mouths, we can reliably cause precise new combinations of ideas to arise in each other's mind. Different kinds of people, with different languages, cause their speakers to construe reality in different ways. Hence, as many as there are different kinds of human beings, there are different

kinds of languages through which reality is being construed and communicated among them. It is in this respect that language, as a tool in the formation of metaphysical and epistemological ideas in Africa is said to be an important mechanism in developing social and moral consciousness of a people.

However, according to Pinker:

Given the nature of language as a complex, specialized skill which develops in the child spontaneously without conscious effort or formal instruction and is deployed without awareness of its underlying logic, is qualitatively the same in every individual, and is distinct from more general abilities to process information or behave intelligently (35).

It follows that for language to serve as a pathway to understanding a people, its underlying logic must be made explicit. This is possible only when the language and background of the people is well understood, analyzed and interpreted using the rules/logic and principles that are peculiar to the language itself. Through this analysis, some hidden facts about the people would be revealed. Moreover, analysis takes the language to a higher-level which stretches the reach of the language beyond its commonsensical boundary, thereby making it a technical, formalized and specialized enterprise. In this wise, one would need to learn the rule of the language for effective usage. The effect of this enterprise is that the conception of reality, knowledge, social and moral principles that guide a people would be different. In most cases, the agents of this technical, formal and special enterprise are alien to a language.

### **Possibility of Creating or Selecting a Particular African Language in doing African Philosophy**

The debate on the existence of African philosophy has been an age long debate due to the nature of African inquiries, and this has been a central concern to most philosophers and thinkers of the 20th and 21st centuries respectively, Africans and non-Africans alike. Such debate, according to Makinde, is unnecessary. What is necessary here according to him here is: “If African philosophy thus exists we the Africans should show it, do it and write it according to the inspiration, form and language it appears, rather than talking about it just for the talking sake or engaging in endless talks or word battles about it” (27). As evident in the debate, what is expected to be shown, done and written is philosophy being tailored along the African worldview and paradigmatic sense peculiar to their existence. However, (Hallen 98) argues that: African thinking/thought pattern and language, is a language deep with the African experience *per se*, and should be recognized as such. The focus of this study is to analyze what should be referred to as the place of ordinary language philosophy, and to explain how this authenticates African languages as unique 'species' of doing philosophy. In what follows, this work explores the use of language as a tool to understand the epistemological, metaphysical, ethical, social and political beliefs and world-views of human society.

*The question and idea of Language in this context is a central issue in African Philosophy right from its onset up till date. In trying to resolve the problem of which particular African language to be chosen for doing African philosophy, brings about the question whether Africans in their numbers can select a particular Africa language pattern in writing or doing African philosophy? This is consequent upon the fact that the fundamental nature of language*

in philosophy cannot just be neglected on a Platter of gold. Language, as it were by its nature, is culture-bound. And as such, to deny a people of rationality in their thought of how reality presents itself to them or the use of their language is to deny them their identity. According to (Nyerere 67), the predicaments of Language in Africa is not the song that is been sung, but the language in which it is being sung in. This simply means that African language is Metaphoric in nature not like their western counterpart which is Alphabetic in nature. According to Nyerere: "This implies that many terminologies used in writing research works in the western language does not in any means depict the statement represented originally from the African point of view" (67). Taking into account the idea of Divinities in Africa, divinities as represented in the West imply the same meaning in the African language. This implies that language plays not only a catalyzing role in the painting of philosophy, but it also occupies an inalienable place in doing philosophy. Temporarily, the need for using a language that engenders a common understanding across ethnic barriers alongside language of the environment is being castrated due to the multicultural nature of the African person. This is not without sounding a caveat that such a transfer of knowledge which is often fraught with some quantity of purification via the mechanism of translation, though practicable, is far from being the superlative. It is on this token that the opinions of experts and a host of others on Methods of Ordinary Language Philosophy and Indeterminacy are being advanced as plausible means of confronting the Issues of the challenges of an appropriate language in doing African Philosophy.

### **The Conceptualization of Language and African Philosophy**

There is a popular belief that language is a veritable *instrumentum laborat* (working tool) for the communication of thoughts and the conception of reality. There is equally a lingering belief that language pictures or mirrors reality, either reality as an empirical fact out there or reality as connected to the way of life of a people. In this sense, language is seen as a tool in the formation of metaphysical and epistemological ideas, developing social and moral consciousness of a people. According to Battista Mondin: language is the instrument with which man effectuates communication; through language, man actuates himself as a social being, as the *Mitsein*, as the I-Thou ((Battista 45). This implies the communicative and social function of language, which is reflective of the notion that man is the only being referred to (and rightly so), as a *homo loquens* (a being that is capable of speaking or a self-speaking thing); a language-inventor and a *bona fide* language user. In the history of philosophy, language has always been an attractive area and a fascinating topic for philosophers. It is in the light of this assumption that Ki-Zerbo, argues that language is the treasury house of a people's philosophy. He further writes:

Language is like a bank or museum in which, over the centuries, each ethnic group has deposited all it has built and accumulated in the way of mental and material tools, memories and resources of the imagination; by means of an in-depth and wideranging study of the language both infra and supra linguistic (67).

That language is a quintessential tool in philosophy, is indisputable. It is, for many, the ultimate piece that brings to the glare of publicity a people's identity and thought formations. As Benjamin Whorf observes:

Particular languages embody distinctive ways of experiencing the world, of

defining what we are. That is, we not only speak in particular languages, but more fundamentally become the person we become because of the particular community in which we grew up. Language, above all else, shapes our distinctive ways of being in the world. Language, then, is the carrier of a peoples identity, the vehicle of a certain way of seeing things, experiencing and feeling, determinant of a particular outlook on life (13).

Language, thus, is to a people what memory is to an individual, a people without language would suffer from collective amnesia groping from a pitiable state of lack. And so, in African philosophy, language is taken seriously.

### **African Philosophy and the use of Foreign Languages**

African philosophy soars in the ocean of identifiable issues and problems. According to (Pantaleon Iroegbu 93), some major problems that have beset genuine African philosophizing today include: “Education, Colonization, Civilization, Christianization, Islamization and Language.” These problems are in themselves germane, and as such, stand as necessary evils, through which the Europeans sowed their seeds of cultural and identity consumer in the hostile invasion. But the apogee of this conquest is the enforcement of the colonial languages on the colonized culture; a process which many scholars claim outrightly distorted the metaphysical, ontological, social, political, economic, spiritual, and even religious cogitations of the African people. Thus, according to (Pantaleon 96) this tilt or linguistic turn, led to the underground assumption that, although there is philosophy in Africa, there is no African philosophy. Some of Pantaleon's accounts in (98) even have it that: based on the languages employed, what Africans call their philosophy, is simply a rehearsal or transcript of Western philosophy. And so, an increasing number of scholars are beginning to realize today how the use of foreign languages in African Philosophy is itself an obstacle to a truly unfettered research into African thought. To choose a language is to choose a particular thought pattern. And the choice of the language already predetermines the most important questions. This idea is predicated on the fact that language is the key to any serious research into, and understanding of traditional religion, culture and philosophy. It is however sad to note that most of those involved in the study of African philosophy are using the peculiar categories of English, French or German languages to analyze Igala, Akan, Yoruba, Hausa, Zulu, Ibibio, Efik, Igbo or Epira thoughts, as the case maybe. This is, perhaps, the fundamental root cause of the language problem in African philosophy. Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, on this note conceives language as the: “Particular system of verbal signposts, which over time, comes to reflect a peoples historical consciousness, It also becomes the memory bank of their collective struggle over nature and over the social product” (55).

Ngugi (56) further argues that the imposition of the European languages on Africans, furthers the oppression of the people, because their chances for mental liberation become remote. Molefi Asante adds that language is essentially the control of thought, and that “all languages are epistemic.” And (F.O. Njoku 78) believes that “language is a mirror of culture in which it is used.” While, (Akin Makinde 87) agrees with Wittgenstein that “the limit of our language is the limit of our world,” he also observes that English and French have so gained the upper hand in the minds of many African scholars, that they have become foreigners to their own cultures (88). Makinde reveals that: “The kind of powers derived from a belief in one's culture and

systems of thought, such as have helped Japan, China and India to develop on their own, is almost non-existent among African thinkers” (88).

### **The Implications of the Non-Usage or Usage of African Languages in doing African Philosophy**

Proponents of African Language for African Philosophy have advocated that African Philosophy would be made more dependable by writing or teaching it in African languages. i.e, the igala philosophy should be written or expressed in the Igala Language. The language of a people for them is the principal or quality feature that marks them off from other people. It is their essence more of a foundation or their skeleton (Uroh 138). In the light of linguistic forms in African philosophical position of view have been said to have commanding control over the mindset and idea of the African people. On this note, for (Azenabor 41) language is said to be a good stronghold of people's thought system and reflection about their existence, their origin, historical and background. Thus, according to Masolo: “If one is able to arrive at the structure of reality of a particular people beginning from their language, it would be quite rewarding that one have gotten the foundation of the people” (245).

From Uroh's point of view, the problem gets more complicated at the illustration that “foreign languages with strikingly different background are forced on a populace in place of their own original language” (Urah 139). This is actually the bottom of the matter. The connotation is that the people in question are thus “forced to perceive themselves through a foreign cultural display” (Uroh 139). It is argued on this ground that the resultant effect is inescapably the distortion of their own reflection. As (Uroh 142) rightly inferred, “such a people will suffer an identity crisis, for they will neither really be like 'themselves' nor exactly like the culture they are imitating”.

Wiredu is of the view that: “An idea closer to that of Uroh was also expressed by Wiredu when alluding to such foreign structures, characteristics and expressions when he affirms how this might affect the nature of a given philosophical position of a people” (34).

Notwithstanding, Wiredu was not unacquainted of the fact that languages by their nature possess both the qualities of flexibility and adaptability which could easily be used in creating grounds for their communicability. Azenabor on this note, distinguished this issue in his management of Language Questions in Philosophy when he opined about how “language is not only the means of transportation for the expression of thought or idea, but also the frame research work within which thought or idea is being formed or build upon” (Azenabor 42). Indeed, opinion or thought system are developed or shaped in relative to the form of a particular languages spoken or written upon. To put our African experience in a foreign mould in our expressions therefore, would be tantamount to forcing unfamiliar expressions on our African feelings, ideas or experiences, which could end up undermining the African languages. The resulting thought blueprint would be a misrepresentation of the original structure of idea transferred from the African point of view.

### **Language and African Identity**

In this light of Language and African Identity, language creates and also names an entity, language brings life into being and bring every existing being it names into being-ness.

Without the essence of language, nothing could be said of existence. Language has a lot to do with a people's identity, personality, feeling, ideas, etc, as said earlier. This second function of language shall remain our basic point of focus in this research. And it is perhaps, on this ground, which is the communicative function that the existential function subsists. Besides the fact that language describes objects and communicates our sentiments and ideas, languages also serves as a tool to bearing testimony to people and ourselves as an existing entity. That partly explains why language is often spoken of as “*a mirror of reality of culture*” (Imbo in Njoku 106).

On the other ground, language also expresses the people's individuality; and language is “the principal means whereby culture is accumulated, shared and transmitted from one generation to another” Kirkness in (Omachonu 169). Omachonu concluded on this note that; without language, knowledge as an existing reality will or could hardly exists (Omachonu 165).

In this direction, according to Bewaji:

Anything which “endangers the existence, worth or value of language is regarded as a threat to the growth and development of language” to the people's mutual existence, in other words, it identifies and distinguishes. It confers socio-cultural characters that existed between people, creating mannerisms or imposing gestural constraints” (272).

### **Language as Revitalization of Traditional African Thought Systems**

On this ground, African writers in their numbers stress the consequence of a revitalization of the long-established deliberation in the African language systems; some on this ground go as far as to claim that the usage of African languages may have across-the-board penalty on the philosophical conclusions at which language and meaning could arrive. In spite of this, the same African writers often recognize certain underflows of African languages to express philosophical ideas or thoughts. In this mind set, Africans in their numbers continue writing in many western languages.

The reasons for this state of affairs are obvious are traced down to the historical historiography of Africa. On this ground, many Historical conditions such as colonialism, globalization and political dependency, contribute a huge junk to the fact of the international weakness of African languages, this being the case not only of African languages. On this ground, Egbunu is of the notion that:

The Westerners, have a large international public, books in their various language sold, and were read, etc all over the world. African languages were ignored or even suppressed during the colonial era, at the point where Africans are been panelized in schools and organizations for speaking their indigenous languages (14).

So that the speaking of any of the European languages will become a matter of high prestige among the Africans, whereas, the original indigenous African languages were looked down upon the light of the day. This becomes the major strategies used in the economic underdevelopment that lead to cultural underdevelopment. Propagating African languages is

only possible if and only if there are the resources within the African context to do so. Despite this, there is the large number of African languages which are we to choose? On the grounds of multiplicity of language of these reasons, we are made to understand by the western ideology that African languages are underdeveloped. Africans have mutiplicity of languages, and Africans lack an organized vocabulary to express realities of modern life. There are some languages with a large number of speakers or simply lucky to have patriotic intellectual elite. In these languages, the efforts to develop a modern terminology, including a philosophical terminology, have already a certain tradition.

In Igala, there are research works done by J.S Boston in the early 60<sup>th</sup>, in Hausa, there are books at the early 90s, by Joseph McIntyre and Hilke Meyer-Bahlburg. In Yoruba, Prof. Ayo Bamgbose edited the book *Yoruba Metalanguage* (Ede-iperi Yoruba). A Glossary of English-Yoruba Technical Terms in Language, Literature, and Methodology published Lagos, 1984. This research could be instructive for all future African scholars who will try to create a terminology in African languages, for it stresses the usage of an Igala terminology, as opposed to introducing English loanwords, to express the realities of modern life. In doing this, it follows five strategies in the creation of modern terminology: composition, semantic extension, dialect borrowing, special coinage and loanwords. A lot of modern-day realities get expressed without actually retreating to loanwords. Some of these words are in fact very elegant one example for all, the composed word (*olitafi otalaka*) means literally constricting the mouth in order to pronounce, and it renders the linguistic term fricative.

### **African Languages in the Research Framework of African Philosophers**

It is surprising that all African Philosophers have written in foreign languages such as English, French, Portuguese, German, Latin etc. In writing their experience due to the fact that most of the African philosophers were schooled in various languages of their colonial masters, and in such doing African philosophers in their numbers are Euro-centrally educated due to the fact and existence of colonial activities. Some of these can also be traced to the historical conditions such as economic and political dependency, contribute to the fact of the international weakness of regional languages, the multilingual nature of the African states e.t.c. This being the case not only of African languages but African thought and belief system. The colonial masters brought western education to African which became the major reasons the early African writers never had no good background in writing or expressing a workable thought in African Philosophy.

Having thus introduced the backdrops and downfalls of the early African writers in doing African philosophy, (Odera 27) turns attention to the investigation of the role played by African languages in the developmental research works of African philosophers such as of Léopold Sédar Senghor, Alexis Kagame, Julius Nyerere, John Mbiti or Placide Tempels. Approaches or methodology to African languages in African philosophy are different; Whereas some writers mostly the professional African philosophers totally give up the struggles of the usage of African languages in doing African Philosophy due to their background in the western ideology, others make use of African languages, in a varying measure, in their research works.

It is to be said that these categories are sometimes overlapping in the research works of certain

authors or that some authors may assume different approaches in different research works.

According to Egbunu:

Some professional philosophers, for example, renounce every mention of African languages in their writing on general philosophical themes because of their background to western education, whereas they investigate into African conceptual systems in other research works, or at least offer an interesting perspective sometimes by mentioning an African concept even in the context of general philosophical writing (16).

### **Conclusion**

When concerned with doing African language, we are concerned primarily with the language spoken by Africans in their everyday living. Hence, philosophy should not be limited to the western language, culture, rigorous, critical and technical activities that characterize Western philosophy. In fact, a people's beliefs, world-views and positions, should be expressed through language they accessed and the philosophical technicalities that are common among the people. From the above-mentioned, we have seen that it is safer for an African writer or philosopher to think and feel in his own very language and then look for a more common language transliteration according to their various colonial masters for easy flow of ideas which will approximate the original meaning of the idea portrayed in their African thought system (Afoloyan 55). This may not be very ideal to be workable in the African context, because only Nigeria as a country in Africa has approximately over 200 languages where each and every one of the languages seeks dominance and always on headlock, but it is alright and practicable enough, at least, in the present dispensation. In light of this, Language should not be made the sole determinant of what we should consider as authenticity in African philosophy, but the idea painted in the mindset of the people.

For proper interrelation and balance in doing philosophy, it is perhaps proper to continue doing African philosophy in whichever languages that can best picture out the ideas without one running into any conflict of tenable universally ideas or thought, whether such languages (such as English, French, Portuguese, Arabic, Chinese or Indian) are unfamiliar is not what actually matters in this circumstance. The crucial issue we ought to be conceding with here is whether they provide any strong point in African thoughts comprehensible enough at the universal level. Thus, Azenabor on this ground rightly and graphically defended this position thus: “Language does not determine the authenticity of African Philosophy. Authentic African philosophy is that philosophy that is applied to the conceptual problems of African life and experience” (47).

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