

An Analysis of the Language Problem in African Philosophy

ETIM Boniface
Department of Philosophy
Akwa Ibom State University
Obio Akpa Campus

UDOH, Moses Augustus, PhD
Department of Philosophy
Akwa Ibom State University
Obio Akpa Campus

Abstract

This paper attempts to provide a solution to the contentious issues of language in African philosophy. The issue of language in African philosophy co-exists with the question of whether there exists African philosophy. This is because when the question of what language in African philosophy is to be done arises, it will certainly call for the foundation of African philosophy. Therefore, it is not surprising that language remains an important issue in African philosophy. Particularly the issue of language in African philosophy has raised a fundamental question as to whether the expression of African experience of reality in foreign language can present an authentic African thought to the extent which words and concepts are used without losing content and meaning since language mirrors a culture of the people. Though, the issue centers on whether or not foreign languages should be used to express African philosophical thought, this paper while employing the analytic method of philosophical investigation, identifies two major groups in their reactionary views on the issue of language in African philosophy, that is the "Progressive" and the "Conservatives". In taking side with the progressives, this paper argues that African philosophy can be expressed in foreign languages taking into cognizance that philosophy is a universal enterprise but with a proviso that technical terms could be used and meaning or interpretation given.

Keywords: Analysis, Language Problem, African Language, Foreign Language, African Philosophy

Introduction

The issue of language in African philosophy is a fundamental issue that centers on whether African philosophy can be expressed authentically in foreign languages. This issue is important because language is tied to culture and every culture has its own conceptual framework. Two major groups namely the Progressive and the Conservatives attempt to proffer a solution to the conflicting

question of whether African language can be used in expressing authentic philosophical thought. The conservatives in their view argue that, for African philosophy to be authentic it should be expressed in African language. In their view doing research and teaching in African philosophy using predominantly foreign languages can lead to conceptual distortion and false representation of African knowledge system. On the other hand, the Progressives, though mindful of the importance of the use of vernacular in producing authentic African philosophy argue against the possibility and feasibility of such enterprise. According to Azenabor (44),

The problem of language is further complicated because most African languages are local, whereas philosophy is an international study. So, talking of international realism, most African languages cannot pass the mark. If we use the language that has no meaning to international scholars, that work or philosophy shall perish for its lack of being understood, and understanding is a factor of development. Therefore, writing African philosophy in African languages poses a linguistic trap.

If for example we decide to write this book in my own language, that is in Esan language, ninety nine percent of my audience, readers and examiners would not understand; hence no communication. In the final analysis, it could be concluded that the problem of language in African philosophy lies mainly on how to convey African thoughts in foreign language without losing the value and ideas. Several concepts such as death, marriage, sex, water, colour, birth, tree, man etc are universal all over the world. These are embedded in various languages; therefore as we understand their meanings, African philosophy can also be understood in any foreign languages as far as Africans are familiar with these things.

Definition of Terms

African:

Panteleon Iroegbu (116), describes African as the "geo-political and the socio- cultural entity engulfed by the continent of Africa-North, Middle and South. It includes the old Afro-Islamic Egypt, Sub-Saharan Black Central as well as White South Africa are all included in this geo-graphical definition". The term "African" according to Azenabor (10) is racial geo-political entities...who are a people of a particular race, who could be Black, White, Arab, Negro etc., but

definitely with similar culture, custom, common history of colonial experience and tutelage". Though Africans are not but many races and people with diversity of languages, cultures, traditions and belief systems, there are similarities in spite of diversity of forms in African culture.

As part of humanity, Africans have had, and have continued to have their quests for answers to fundamental questions of existence. Their responses are expressed either in social structures, myths, symbols, proverbs and cultural linguistics, institutions or in direct verbal dispositions and writings (Iroegbu 117). Therefore, Africans are people who are natives of Africa, or individuals who trace their ancestry to indigenous inhabitants of Africa.

Language:

Language is a complex form of human expression that is an instrument for communicating knowledge, information, emotions and understanding. The essential nature of language is symbolic, in that words as symbols are assigned to concepts. According to Umotong (109), the Oxford English Dictionary defines language as "the expression of thought in a specific way; a body of sounds, signs and or signals by which communication occurs". Ucheaga (18) posits that language is an indispensable tool in any human activity since we need to communicate our thoughts and beliefs, analyse and evaluate our arguments through words. Language used portrays a remarkable fact about human beings. As a vehicle of thought it makes human thinking to be varied and complex. One can describe the past, talk about the future and plan about the future based on one's assumption or belief about how things are. Therefore, language is a rational and conventional spoken or written symbol by means of which human beings as members of social group can participate in its cultures to express themselves. Language is an age long inevitable ingredients in any given society for intelligible interaction especially the exchange of information. Language is informative when it is used to convey facts concerning the state of the affairs, for instance in describing a person, like "Okon is an intelligent boy", or informing someone about an event, such as "25th of every December is celebrated as a Christmas Day". Language can also be used to misinformed or mislead someone, for example a stranger can be misinformed or misdirected about the right direction to a location he might be looking for. Language can also be used in

giving command or to appraise a state of affairs such as "killing is bad". Language too can be used to express one's emotions and also evokes emotions of others. Umotong (10) further posits that language is one of the social properties of a living society; it is at times abused as a result of lack of knowledge of its importance. Though Philosophy is generally believed to be an enterprise geared towards proper understanding of the universe and its perplexities; these are communicated to others through the use of language (Umotong 111-112). The concern of Philosophy of language is therefore to philosophical study languages and their meanings, the use of language and the theoretical concepts and the relationship that defines meaning in language and its relationship to reality.

Philosophy:

Philosophy means different things to different people, and in different contexts, it is differently applied. These differences in meaning occasioned by contextual application contribute a lot to its misconception, misapplication and misrepresentation as an abstract discipline (Umotong 6). According to Udoh (54) philosophy is a "rational discipline that attempts to study being. To a new comer, this would seem so confusing that the subject matter is so abstruse and abstract in nature, and so many wonder how such discipline could be studied". Philosophy entails an endless, logical and rational search for answers to fundamental issues of human existence. Philosophy is extremely wide because it entails several branches and sub branches which make it difficult to have one generally acceptable definition as various scholars define philosophy based on their field of specialization. Therefore, Dennis (62) in making further clarification about the nature of philosophy asserts thus;

When the question 'what is philosophy ' is asked, one meaningful way to respond to it is to expose the inquirer to the various aspects, profiles, branches ,or schools of thought that characterize the discipline. This is because apart from possibilities of describing the discipline from individual and specialized perspectives of various scholars, describing it from such profiles, aspects or branches also provides meanings that are sufficient to the tasks.

Etymologically, philosophy is a derivation of two Greek words "philos" and "sophia" meaning "love" and "wisdom" respectively. Thus the root meaning of

philosophy is "love of wisdom", and wisdom pertains to an understanding of life generally (Idang 15). Philosophy as the love of wisdom is the irresistible desire or search for fundamental or universal principle of things.... thus by normative approach, philosophy prescribes a way of viewing, understanding and interpreting our experiences or the objects of our consciousness (Udoidem 5). Generally, many philosophers at various times had tried to define philosophy in their own views. For instance, Socrates defined philosophy as a reflective self-examination of the principle of the just and happy life. Plato see philosophy as acquisition of knowledge while to Aristotle philosophy is a systematic search for truth (Idang 17). The linguist defines philosophy in terms of logical analysis of language and the clarification of the meaning of words and concepts. As a systematic search for truth and the search for reality, Africans as part of humanity are rationally and systematically searching for answers to the questions that arise in their minds when they reflect on their human experience about the ultimate meaning of reality. Hospers (3) in his own way defines philosophy as a systematic interpretation of all experiences.

Cultural Setting in Africa

Philosophy as a global enterprise has been segmented into Western, Eastern as well as African philosophies. Africa is not mono-ethnic but rather poly-ethnic, and each ethnic group with its own traditions and culture similar to its ethnic background. Africa is divided into North, South, East, West and Central, and each of these blocs are major ethnic groups. In the West for example we have Dogon, Bambara, Senufo, Mandinka, Mande, Banle, Akan, Mossi, Fulani, Fon, Yoruba, Hausa, Nok, Igbo (Encarta 12-13.). These are just few of major ethnic groups in Africa, and within these ethnic groups there are other cultural settings. That is those within the same environment with similar features and geo-political structures, though there may be different ethnic groups and languages, but common issue faces them all. Their philosophy is influenced by how they make sense and relate to these challenges and that is where language comes in as a means of expressing their thoughts. Asuquo (31) made a good classification of African languages, though not exhaustive enough when he grouped them into four, namely; Niger-Congo, Afro-Asiatic, Nilo-Saharan and Khoisan... It is observed that "languages belonging to the same group share

certain vocabulary known as cognates and grammatical features that is traced back to a common origin.

The linguists in their views align this origin to their ancestral language which confirms these ancestral languages then influence their thoughts or worldview and as such the diversity of languages within that cultural background change their thought system common to all of them. Asuquo further argues that according to the linguistic studies, when a group of people who speak the same language move apart, their languages change in different ways... By this we can infer that the change in language does not affect the philosophy of the given people within the same cultural setting. (32)

What is African Philosophy?

According to Asukwo (30), to understand what African philosophy is, is to understand that African people are human beings with life challenges, these challenges come in different ways, through socio-political and economic factors, insecurity, death, war, health hazards, etc., and in the same view Omoregbe (30) observed that, generally, philosophy reflects socio-political situations of its time and place. Socio-political situations generally raise many questions in the minds of the people and this gives rise to reflection and philosophizing. For Udoidem (105) philosophy is essentially a reflective and critical activity. It is a philosophia, a quest for wisdom. It is a reflective and systematic investigation into the fundamental questions that confront human beings. These questions touch on reality as a whole, empirical and Meta empirical. It includes those questions concerning the universe, humanity, the neighbors, the self, life and supernatural beings, God, the spirit and the afterlife (Iroegbu 116).

The tendency to reflect on the fundamental questions of human experience is a part of human nature. Therefore, when Africans reflect on the fundamental issues of their experience, they are said to be philosophizing. To this end Udo (91) argues that when one applies philosophical tools and principles to African culture/worldview (problems and other fundamental questions of life), he is doing African philosophy. African philosophy in this context can be defined as a reflection by Africans on the fundamental issues of their experiences (Udoidem 105). While Iroegbu (117) in his view argues that what makes African philosophy Africans is not in the mood of expressing rational thought or in the

personality involved but in the content of the thought itself and its method of inquiry. This perhaps led Udo (91) to further assert that;

In defining the "africanness" and "philosophiness" of African philosophy the culture of the African people and the person are very important and indispensable elements. When we speak of the culture of the African people, it means that African philosophy must speak to African problems and situations. Secondly, the person doing African philosophy must either come from Africa or an African living in diaspora or someone not coming from Africa but is living in Africa and involved in the life of the African people, such a person can meaningfully and authentically contribute to the development of African thought.

Aligning with the view of Udo above, Azenabor (2) submits that "by African philosophy we mean the reflection and the asking of fundamental questions, the seeking of meaning and understanding within the bias context of African cultural setting and experience. In other words African philosophy is the reflection by an African or non-African on how Africans make sense of their existence and the world in which they live based on the African experience and reality.

(K.C. Anyanwu 2007). Specifically, the nature and the scope of African philosophy are yet not well understood. To some scholars, African philosophy is expressed through proverbs, mythologies, myths, folklores and religions, worldviews and cultures. This has led to various approaches and theories to the study of African philosophy as presented by Oruka and captured by Udoidem (105) thus:

- 1. Ethno Philosophy:** This approach emphasizes the study of African myth, folklores and folk-wisdom
- 2. Philosophical Sagacity:** Which attempts to identify men in the society reputed for wisdom who are critical independent thinkers who guides their thoughts and judgments, by the power of reason, inborn insights rather than by the authority of communal consensus.
- 3. Nationalistic Ideological Philosophy.** In the wake up of colonialism and the search for rational independence, African intellectuals have sought for active intellectual independence by seeking to evolve a new and unique social and political theory that is based on African traditions.

4. Universal Approach: The African logical neo-positivists all agree on idea or concept of universal philosophy though they differ in their applications, discussions and details. These philosophers believe that philosophy is transcultural. They hold the view that philosophy (African philosophy) is the philosophy done by the Africans, whether it is in the area of metaphysics, epistemology, and logic, history of philosophy or ethics.

The Language Issue in African Philosophy

Generally it is believed that there are almost 10,000 languages spoken around the world by human beings (Wang 36). And each of these languages is culturally domiciled with the aim of translating ideas, thought and worldviews from one culture to the other. According to Samovar and Porter (165, 167), the translation of these ideas and thoughts can be very challenging and difficult. Even though languages are in thousands yet, they all possess the same characteristics because they are collections of symbols governed by rules that will enable them to convey messages between individuals or group of individuals (Adler and Rodman 67). Multiple African languages which aim to convey these ideas are equally governed by these rules. These rules consist of semantic which defines the meaning of specific words and pragmatic rule which helps in the understanding of the intention of the speaker. The point here is that for a language to have a rule signifies there is an issue embedded in that language. Accordingly Asuquo (32) opines;

Generally speaking every language has a multiple definitions of some given words. This is also the nature of African languages. For instance, in Efik language the word "akpa" means different things with different accents. The word means (I) First, (ii) Stomach, (iii) Sea, (iv) death. Whenever a word like this is misused, the understanding of what it meant to convey will be lost. This is what seems to affect African philosophy if terms are properly defined.

Some African scholars have argued that foreign languages may not convey the true reality of African philosophy, but rather the indigenous languages would do such as feelings, empathy, meaning and identity etc. Therefore, authentic African philosophy should be written or done in African languages because it mirrors the culture of the people. In the words of Azenabor (41) "the problem of

language has become important because language is the tool and primary medium of philosophical expression; it is the vehicle of philosophical thought which plays an important role in the way people know and understand ". The following language issues can be highlighted:

Communication Barrier:

According to Njoku (106, 107), lack of unity in linguistic in African language among language groups is a major factor in language issue in African philosophy. Based on this reason, he argues that the people of the continent find it very difficult in understanding one another. For instance, in the West Africa cultural setting alone, where we have the following ethnic indigenous speaking languages, , Dogon, Bambara, Senufo, Mandinka, Mande, Banle, Akan, Mossi, Fulani, Fon, Yoruba, Hausa, Nok Igbo, Ibibio, Ijaw, and other cultural setting in West Africa, writing or doing philosophy in indigenous language will constitutes a difficult task to convey the philosophical thought of one group to the understanding that will make meaning to the other ethnic groups within the same cultural setting. This was noted by Mazrui (12) when he notes that "African linguistic diversity (over 2000 languages) creates obstacles for philosophers to communicate and share ideas across language boundaries. Similarly, Niredu (25) asserts that linguistic differences can lead to variations in conceptual understanding, making it difficult to establish a shared philosophy vocabulary. In the same vein, Ngugi (15) points out cultural and conceptual nuances as a barrier when he argues that "language embodies cultural and conceptual nuances which may be lost in translation, leading to misinterpretation".

Accessibility:

According to Nkrumah (70), philosophical texts and ideas may not be accessible to scholars who do not speak original language. This may lead to fragmented intellectual discourse which according to Nyerere can lead to isolated intellectual community, hindering Pan-African philosophical discussions.

Dependence on Colonial Languages:

African philosophy often relies on colonial languages (English, French and Portuguese) which may not adequately capture indigenous concepts (Oluwole 56).

Underrepresentation:

This happens when doing philosophy which is a global enterprise in indigenous African languages. Oruka (123) contends that African philosophers from linguistically diverse backgrounds may be misrepresented in global philosophical discourse.

Difficulty in Establishing Common Philosophical Framework/ Challenges in Translating Traditional Thought:

Hountondji (45) observes that linguistic differences hinder the development of African philosophical framework. Similarly, Tempels (78) in his own submission posits that "translating traditional African thought from indigenous into dominant colonial languages can distort original meanings"; while Ngugi (25) submits that language influences identity and self-expression whereas linguistic fragmentation can lead to fragmentation identity. Language issue as it affects Africa makes it impossible to have a common African philosophy. If nature has allowed Africa to have a common language it would have served as a tool that could form the metaphysical and epistemological ideas to develop social and moral consciousness which would have made it possible to have common African philosophy. Now the question is: if we are to use African languages in doing philosophy, which of the African language will be acceptable such that will meet the demand of every culture? According to Samovar and Porter (165) given that it is language that communicates ideas to others, and as such anyone who tries to convey ideas, worldviews from one culture to another has a challenge to face.

The Progressive Argument as a way Forward:

Following the lack of linguistic unity among groups in Africa where people find it difficult to communicate with, and understand one another as well, the Progressive Philosophers argue that African philosophy should be done in a foreign language? They put forward the following arguments to support their claim.

Global Accessibility:

Since Philosophy is a universal enterprise, writing in a foreign language allows African philosophers to reach a global audience and engage with international debates (Hountondji 12). The use of European languages

according to Mazrui (20) "facilitates the dissemination of African philosophical ideas beyond national border, while in Wiredu's view, globalisation requires African philosophers to communicate in languages that transcend local boundaries (15).

Academic Credibility:

Publishing works on African philosophy in foreign languages as opined by Oruka enhances the credibility and recognition of African philosophers within the global academic community (123). According to Oluwole (56), international academic journals and publishing houses always require publications in foreign languages. In Nkrumah's assertion "foreign languages provide access to global resources and funding opportunities (70).

Conceptual Precision:

According to Hountondji (25), foreign languages offer a rich philosophical vocabulary and terminology. Equally Tempels (78) posits that "European languages provide conceptual frameworks and categories necessary for philosophical analysis" and Wiredu (20) avers that foreign languages facilitate the application of Western philosophical concepts to African contexts.

Universalism:

The Progressives also argue that philosophy is universal and transcends linguistic and cultural boundaries (Mazrui 15). Oruka (130) also supports this view when he asserts that foreign languages promote universal philosophical discussion and debates. While Nkrumah (75) recommends that African philosophy should engage with global philosophical issues which require foreign languages.

Accessibility and Dissemination:

Hountondji (12) believes that foreign languages increase the accessibility of African philosophical ideas to global audiences, for instance as observed by Wiredu (15) the internet and digital platforms facilitate the dissemination of African philosophical ideas in foreign languages, while Mazrui (20) avers that foreign languages enables African philosophers to reach broader audiences beyond national border.

An Analysis:

It is an acceptable fact that multiple languages in Africa present enough challenges to African philosophy that cannot be denied. The question is, can we argue that because of the issue of multiple languages we reject that there is African philosophy or stop philosophizing? Assuming that there is no unity in African languages, and it is true that every language conveys thought or idea that is similar to all the language groups' in-spite of the differences in their languages. It is also true that philosophy is not about languages but rather it is about ideas or thought that is communicated in a language. Russell in his work *The Problem of Philosophy* (114) argues that "these thoughts deal with universal concepts which from Plato's time to the present philosophers have not stopped from debating on it" .And as such philosophers interest is to challenge the statement of claims about the thought or idea expressed and not the language that has no logical content.

The ancient Greek thinkers in their time philosophies, a given language of their time and today their philosophies are translated to us and we can understand their world-views. Therefore, African philosophical thoughts or ideas can equally be translated into foreign languages since the concept used in expressing these thoughts and ideas are universal concepts. The use of foreign language has afforded us the opportunity to understand philosophies of other cultures which we would have not been able to know. Foreign language plays a major role of educating us through which we can have access to other people ideas. The central concern is the worldview of the people mirrored by the language of the time. (Asukwo 34).

Language is evolving and growing, it is not static but dynamic in nature. In the ancient era, there was nothing like computer language, with the passage of time most languages accommodate computer language and currently the world is evolving into Artificial (AI) language. From the works of Aristotle according to Udoidem in his book "Understanding Philosophy" (13) "Thales who is acclaimed founding father of Greek philosophy is said to have studied in Egypt, what language did he studied with?. It is supposed that the Greek philosophers studied with Egyptian language. But when they got back home, they translated the Egyptian thoughts and ideas into their own language and that is what we have today as Greek philosophy. In response to the issue raised by Njoku, that

foreign language can express conflicting worldview which can lead to loss of philosophical thought or idea as a necessary philosophical problem, we submit that it should not be regarded as a conflict that cannot be solved, since a given philosopher can even understand his work differently in a different culture based on the worldview of the society he is at the time.

Advancing his argument further, Asukwo (35) avers the argument that language can only be understood in the culture of its origin as questionable, he therefore questioned, "is it in the expressed ordinary language or the claims that the language makes '? Such a claim must be within the cultural setting through which interpretation is done". Also the argument that lack of African language hinders the development of a common philosophy in Africa is debatable. Supposing that there is a common language spoken, will that solve the problem in Africa, will a common language remove individual psychological conflict? how about communal, religious and environmental conflicts that shape and challenge people's worldview which leads to philosophical reflections of the time?

Conclusion:

It is obvious that language constitutes a serious issue in African philosophy like other philosophies outside Africa. It is also true that thoughts or ideas are expressed through language. Therefore, if a man's language cannot express all that he has in his mind, can a foreign language do? This is what every language faces. If there is anything that language cannot express today, it can express it in future because language is not static but rather it is evolving. Therefore, African philosophy is not about construction of good sentences, but rather it is a transmission of ideas and thoughts vis a vis the explanation of realities in their environment.

Philosophy is a universal enterprise and African thought like any other thought is influenced by universal concepts like life and death, evil, etc. So as other philosophies try to unravel the mysteries of their daily experiences, likewise African philosophical thought. What is central is the universal concept which is common to most cultural settings. It is therefore necessary for the Africans to make our language clear and known by interpreting technical terms for people to understand what we have in mind, failure of which will lead to misinterpretation.

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