Jos Journal of Religion and Philosophy (JJRP). Vol. 3. No. 1. 2021. ISSN ONLINE: 2795-2592 PRINT: 2795-2584
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AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY AND THE PROBLEM OF LANGUAGE

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Abstract

One of the enquiries that have engaged the minds of African philosophers is the problem of language in African philosophy. This piece argues that the problem of language as observed by some thinkers is not the plurality of languages in Africa, neither is it the presence of oral tradition in the history of the documentation of African Ideas. It rather asserts that the problem of language in African philosophy lies in the impact of colonialism on African languages and the need for a cultural renaissance so as to better express African philosophy in a language that profoundly mirrors African realities. While employing the expository and critical method of enquiry, it argues that African philosophy would mirror African realities more if they are conveyed in African languages.

Keywords: African, Philosophy, Problem, Language, Colonialism, Oral, Tradition.

Introduction

Language has always been an attractive area and a fascinating topic for philosophers. The history of philosophical thinking about language is almost impossible to separate from the history of logic and indeed the entire history of philosophy. Thus Anaulogho (1997) contends that all major philosophers and schools of philosophy have had some doctrine about the relationship between mind and language, and language and the world.

The earliest interaction between philosophy and language dates back to the ancient Greek philosophical era. Plato's life-long battle against the Sophists is a typical example of this phenomenon. Plato attacked the Sophists because of their competent ability to twist language to their own advantage for the sake of making money (Omoregbe, 2003). He was infuriated by what he saw as the danger and threat that sophistry posed to genuine communication and life in the society (Pierer, 1992). Before Plato, the Sophists had dealt with linguistic and grammatical

problems in a systematic way. Unlike Plato, they were not interested in the problem of language for theoretical purposes. They had a more urgent task to accomplish: to teach how to speak for the sake of political success and to win law suits (Anoughlogho, 1997). Language was the greatest instrument for political struggle in the Athens of the 5th century. Language became an instrument for definite, concrete and practical purposes. The Sophists believed that one had to manipulate language to his or her own advantage if such a person were to attain their objective. To enhance this purpose, the Sophists began a new branch of knowledge called rhetoric (Cassirer, 1976). As a result of their proficiency in rhetoric, they were able to make the weaker argument the stronger and to sweat-talk something bad into something good and turn black into white (Honderich, 1976).

Furthermore, in the Plato's dialogue: Cratylus, he considered another dimension of language: the question of whether the names of things were determined by convention or by nature. In this case, his analysis of language addressed the problem of nomenclature. He criticized conventionalism because it led to the bizarre consequence that anything can be conventionally denominated by any name. Hence, it cannot account for the correct or incorrect application of a name. He claimed that there was a natural correctness to names. To do this, he pointed out that compound words and phrases have a range of correctness. He also argued that primitive names had a natural correctness, because each phoneme represented basic ideas or sentiments. While Plato concerned himself with meaning, Aristotle, in his philosophy of language, stepped up his concern to issues of logic and categories. He separated all things into categories of species and genius. He believed that the meaning of a predicate was established through an abstraction of the similarities between various individual things (Kanu, 2012).

The Stoics, in their philosophy of language, made important contributions to the analysis of grammar, distinguishing five parts of speech: nouns, verbs, appellatives (names or epithets), conjunctions and articles. They also developed a sophisticated doctrine of the *lektón* associated with each sign of a language, but distinct from both the sign itself and the thing to which it refers. This *lektón* was the meaning (or sense) of every term. The *lektón* of a sentence is what we would now call its Propositions. Only propositions were considered "truth bearers" or "truth-vehicles" (i.e., they could be called true or false) while sentences were simply their vehicles of expression (Wikipedia, 2012).

Medieval philosophers were greatly interested in the subtleties of language and its usage. This interest was provoked by the necessity of translating Greek texts into Latin. Furthermore, the scholastics of the high Medieval Period, such as Occam and John Duns Scotus, considered logic as the science of language (*scientia sermocinalis*).

Following the contributions of the linguists of the Renaissance and Baroque periods, such as Johannes Goropius Becanus, Athanasius Kircher and John Wilkins, Locke in the 17th century, like Plato, dealt with the fact that only an adequate or correctly formed language could be a vehicle for communication. He believes that the desire to know reality is the foundation of communication. Even though there is the possibility of lying, Locke argues that lies do not constitute communication, since to lie is to deny reality. To lie is the perpetration of inequality in society since it denies the other his or her share and portion of reality. To deceive a person is an implicit assumption that he or she is not worthy to know the truth (Wikipedia, 2012). This explains why Locke, like Plato condemned sophistry.

> Nor has this mischief stopped in logical Niceties, or curious empty speculations; it hath invaded the great concernment of human life and society; obscured and perplexed the material truths of law and divinity; brought confusion, disorder and uncertainty into the affairs of mankind; and if not destroyed, yet in great measure rendered useless, those two great rules, religion and justice. (p. 486).

In the early 19th century, the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard insisted that language ought to play a larger role in Western philosophy. He argues that philosophy has not sufficiently focused on the role language plays in cognition and that future philosophy ought to proceed with a conscious focus on language: Hence, language began to play a central role in Western philosophy in the late 19th century. The philosophy of language then became so pervasive that for a time, in analytic philosophy circles, philosophy as a whole was understood to be a matter of philosophy of language. In the 20th century, "language" became an even more central theme within the most diverse traditions of philosophy. The phrase "the linguistic turn" was used to describe the noteworthy emphasis that modern-day philosophers put upon language (Wikipedia, 2012).

The Problem of language in African Philosophy

Language is one of the prerogatives of the human person by which he enters into communication with animate and spiritual beings. The African is a cultural being, a *homo culturalis,* and from the moment of birth he enjoys the capacity to form himself so as to realize his being through culture, thus language (Mondin, 1999). But the problem under focus is not whether the African has a language or not. The evidences that he has a language abound. In Somalia, three languages are spoken, in Nigeria, Cameroun and Sudan, more than two hundred languages are spoken, in Zaire about three hundred and twenty six languages are spoken, in Kenya thirty nine languages, in Zimbabwe nine languages, in Uganda twenty two languages, in Tanzania forty two languages, in Ghana twenty two languages, in Ethiopia and Eritrea, about seventy six languages are spoken. Thus, the problem under focus is not whether the African has a language.

Njoku (2002), has tried to point out that the presence of many languages in Africa among a people who share the same political roof is a problem, and that even some dialects are similar, thus making it difficult to know where to draw boundaries between a language and a dialect. He stresses that the lack of this linguistic unity militates against the desire or talk about African unity. The fundamental question arising from his analysis is: in what language is African philosophy to be written? Especially in a situation like that of Africa where there are many languages. Here I would like to differ, the problem of language in African philosophy, is not about the language in which it is to be written; western philosophy was written in different languages, some in English, some in French, some in German. That African philosophy is written in different languages does not alter the philosophicality of African philosophy, just as that western philosophy is written in different languages has not changed it from being philosophical. Instead of taking away, I rather see this diversity as adding something to the beauty of African philosophy.

The Universalist school of African philosophy has also tried to make African philosophy unphilosophical as a result of the absence of the documentation of the ideas in African languages. They argue that since African ideas, expressed in their myths, folklores, proverbs etc., in African languages are not written down, they can't be regarded as philosophy. The fundamental question to ask here is if philosophy is inextricably bound to writing. I do not even consider this as a problem to be dealt with in analysing the problem of language in African philosophy. Because whether the African language is written down or not, it does not weaken its ability to carry the philosophy of the African people. I am surprised

that fellow Africans would categorize their philosophy as unphilosophical as a result of it not being in a written language. Yet they read the works of philosophers like Socrates who never put his work into writing and qualify them as philosophy. Philosophy is not only preserved through writing, it could be preserved as well through oral tradition. It is not the method of preservation that makes philosophy but the content.

What I think philosophers should be more concerned about as regards the problem of language in African philosophy is on the impact of colonialism on African languages and the need for a cultural renaissance so as to better express African philosophy in a language that profoundly mirrors African realities. This problem arises from the need to ensure that African meanings are not distorted in the process of analysing them within the conceptual frameworks of alien languages (Adeshina, 2006). This work argues that African philosophy would mirror African realities more if they are conveyed in African languages.

The Impact of Colonialism on African Languages

The encounter between European and African cultures is better described as a forced acculturation. A word that describes a situation in which a highly developed society impose certain elements of its culture on the other, thereby forcing it to derail from its unique tract of cultural civilization; the observed result is an initial form of resistance and conflict that often leads to a situation of cultural disorder. In the contention of Ekwuru (1999), the first strategy employed by the colonial masters was that of disassemblage, concealed in the exploitative colonial ideology of benevolent paternalism. It was first an ideology of condemnation, which identified everything "good to be white" and everything "bad to be black" (Kwame, 1981). The basic purpose of condemnation was to create a moral ground for the destruction of the traditional society in its various forms and modes. This was followed concurrently by a process of reassemblage, and this involved the reconstruction of the African cultural world in accordance with colonial vision and design (Ekwuru, 1999).

Achebe (1958) in his celebrated classic and epoch-making piece, *Things Fall Apart,* brought out the consequences of the encounter between the European and African cultures. He particularly looks at the Igbo society, specifically at the period when the white man broke into it as a missionary, trader and administrator. This is located in Obierika's accusation of the white man:

> Does the white man understand our custom about land?, asked Okonkwo, "How can he when he does not even speak our tongue?" responded Obierika, and then he continued, "But he says our customs are bad; and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers and our clan can no longer act as one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart". (pp. 124-125).

Europeans in general and European missionaries in particular; with some few exceptions, admitted little if any culture of value in Africa, just as many had denied that Africa really has any religion other than fearful superstitions. They came with their language, religious customs, morals and ways of praying and acting, which defines their identity and imposed it on Africans. In this way, they killed our culture and denied us of our true identity and uniqueness. The extent of this distortion is however, determined by the extent of European contact and control. By this distortion, the European dealt *coup de grace* to the African personality, to his *is-ness* by destroying the African cultural values. Magesa (1976) avers that they made no appraisal of our peculiarities, our languages enriched with traditions of centuries, our parables, many of them the quintessence of family and national histories; our modes of thought, influenced more or less by local circumstances our poetry which reveals the profundity of African literary wizardry, this was done against the background that the negro in all his susceptibilities is an inferior race and that it is needful to give him a foreign model beacon to emulate and follow. Many missionaries were not well informed about the societies hey came to evangelize; an ignorance that is partly blame worthy and partly inevitable. They came with an almost impregnable confidence in the overwhelming superiority of the European west and in all the ways of society and culture which they had taken for granted in their homes, whether Evangelical or Catholic, little wonder then many of them rejected African names for baptism, as a replacement, they encouraged the adoption of not only Christian names, but also European family names like Dos Santos, Caetano, Johnson, Crowther (Kanu, 2010).

Kanu (2012), observes that when the colonial masters came to Africa, they gave us the impression that their languages were superior to ours. In French colonies, through the principle of 'assimilation', they tried to stop the indigenous languages

of colonies, which they considered inferior to the French Language. For the French colonial masters, they looked forward to a day when all their colonies would speak one language, namely French. In British colonies, English was taught at schools. As such, many Africans have grown with the impression that their language is inferior (Gimba, 2006). Today many Africans have forgotten their languages, especially the young, and they feel that there is nothing wrong with that. It is in this regard that Senghor (1976) said that 'African misfortunes have been that our secret enemies while defending their values made us despise our own' (p. 17). This has had a great consequence on the development of African philosophy. When the colonial powers devalued the language of the African people, and enthroned European languages, it played a formidable role in exiling Africans from their languages and thus their philosophy.

African Language for African Philosophy

This piece does not argue that African philosophy cannot be done in other languages, but rather, it maintains that to engage in African philosophy more profoundly, the African language is indispensable. Mbiti (1969) speaks of language as a key to understanding African philosophy when he wrote,

> There is great potential in African scholars studying African Traditional Religion and philosophy, with the aid of scientific tools and methodology and with the advantages of being part of the peoples of Africa, having almost unlimited access to information and speaking the languages which are the key to serious research and understanding of traditional religions and philosophy (p. 14).

Edeh (1985) further wrote, "Our brief consideration of the Igbo language leads us into the culture of the people since it is obvious that a language cannot be divorced from the culture which it expresses" (p. 56). While talking about destiny, Gyekye (1987) brought out the link between language and philosophy as expressed by thinkers,

> The first relates to the link that a number of thinkers find between language and thougth, or more precisely in the present context, between language and metaphysics. They claim that there is some kind of reality antecedent to language that language is developed to express or depict. Language or linguistic structure, they hold, reflects a deep lying structure of reality or being. (p. 105).

As Adeshina (2006) observes, every language system embodies a particular ontology and a system of knowledge about reality. It is thus not surprising that Tempels (1959), Edeh (1985), Gyekye (1987) and Iroegbu (1995) thought it significant to begin from the analysis of language in their philosophical searches. A field linguist who therefore attempts a radical translation without the knowledge of the entire linguistic system of the native's culture will fail. Language from this perspective, become loaded with worldviews and metaphysics and, more importantly, a person's language determines, at least in part, the way to perceive and conceive the world. Thus, when you lose the language of a people, you also lose a great chunk of their philosophy.

Wittgenstein (1961), in his *Tractatus,* argues that the structure of language is conditioned by the structure of reality, for language makes us see reality in a structure corresponding to the structure of language. He writes, "What every picture of whatever form must have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it at all… is the logical form, that is, the form of reality" (p. 18). Thus, he is saying that the structure of the world is pictured by language, which can now be considered a model of reality. Wittgenstein (1974) further writes, "These facts (of which the world is made of) are pictured by language so that by means of language we make to ourselves pictures of facts" (p. 1). In this picture and the pictured, there must be something identical in order that one can be a picture of the other at all. Language is like a mirror of facts, and if it does not correspond to it, it is false. What Wittgenstein is saying is that just as you cannot use human language to talk about divine realities, you also cannot use European languages to talk about African realities, because there are so many things that the European language cannot picture in the African world, and even when it pictures it, it does that inadequately, for the simple reason that there are no such realities in the European world.

Ki-Zerbo (1981), had argued that language is the treasury house of a people's philosophy:

> Language is like a bank or museum in which, over the centuries, each ethnic group has deposited all it has built up and accumulated in the way of mental and material tools, memories and resources of the imagination. By means of an in-depth and wide-ranging study of the language (both infra and supra linguistic). (p. 94).

The emphasis on language as an indispensable element for doing profound African philosophy is very evident in the philosophical position of Ethno-philosophers who view African Philosophy as the philosophical thought of Africans as could be gotten from their various world views, myths, proverbs, etc. In this sense, it is the philosophy indigenous to Africans, untainted by foreign ideas. It places little or no emphasis on scientificity, logic, criticism and argumentation, and makes more emphases on local relevance or context. In studying ethno-philosophy, we discover the deep relationship between language and philosophy. In his work *African religions and philosophy,* Mbiti (1969), begins with an analysis of the African concept of time from the Kikamba and Gikuyu languages, in which he analyses three verbs that speaks of the future, covering only a period of six months and not beyond two years at most. Alexis Kagame, in his work *Philosophie Bantou-Rwandaise de L'Etre*, from the language of the Rwandans who were called Kinyarwanda developed their thought through a linguistic ethno-philosophy. According to Njoku (2010), he discovered that *Ntu* is the category of being or the generic meaning of something. This he classified into four: *Umuntu* (human beings); *Ikintu* (non-human beings); *Ahantu* (place and time); *Ukuntu* (Aristotelian category of quantity). *Ntu* is the unifying notion among all these, even though God does not belong to it. Pantaleon (1995) developed an African concept of being *a*s *Belongingness* from the Igbo principle of *Egbe bere Ugo bere* (let the kite perch, let the eagle perch), which he believes re-enacts the contents and significance of belongingness. In criticizing the philosophies of Kagame and Mbiti, Njoku (2002) argues that their ideas are only one or two cultural groups among the many hundreds of African language groups, and thus not exhaustive. It is worthwhile to observe here that what makes African philosophy to be philosophy is not the unity of language. If an idea is presented in Hausa or Igbo or Kikamba or Gikuyu language, they are still African philosophy. African philosophy does not base its philosophicality on expressing its ideas in the same language. Generally, I argue that there is a need for conceptual decolonization for the deepening of African Philosophy. Those who do African philosophy, should be able to go into the world of the African language to obtain from there African world views about reality. If it is neglected, much about African thought would lie hidden.

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