

Is African Philosophy Possible in Noneafrican Languages? An Igwebuike Complementary Response

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Abstract

A cursory glance at the historical evolution of thoughts on the interface between African languages and the African philosophical enterprise reveals that two schools have emerged: the conservative perspective that insists on the indispensability of African languages in doing African philosophy, and the progressive perspective that understands the importance of African languages in African philosophy, however, while being open to a pragmatic progressive way forward given the limitations of African languages. The Igwebuike approach attempts at building a bridge between the two schools of thought. It presents African and colonial languages as not being fundamentally opposed to each other; and that both can be at the service of each other for the achievement of the fundamental purposes of African philosophy. In fact, rather than being the enemy of the African language, the colonial language is understood as a complement of the local languages in Africa. In this new relationship between the African and colonial languages, language is understood as not being a completed project but as one that is dynamic and still growing. Where the African language finds itself limited, the colonial language becomes a complement, especially on typical human realities that are universal or sometimes peculiar to other worlds outside of Africa, and when the colonial language fails, especially in relation to typical African realities, the African language would complement the colonial language. For the purpose of this research, the Igwebuike method of investigation which is complementary was employed.

Keywords: Igwebuike Approach, African, Language, Philosophy, Colonial, Complementary.

Introduction

Language occupies a central place in the human cognitive landscape or science and also a uniquely human ability that is instrumental for distinguishing between human and non-human minds (Caruther 2002; Bermudez 2007; Penn et al 2008; Bikerton 2014). Lupyan (2015) refers to language as a “productive and combinational system of communication” (1), which allows for the transmission of ideas (Szathmary & Smith 1995) through a secondary inheritance system. Thus, what has been acquired by one as knowledge can now be shared with others who also come to know and may expand on the knowledge of their forebears (Boyd, Richerson & Henrich 2011).

Murphy (2002), Posner & Keele (1968) and Prinz (2004) agree that language is not only essential for the creation of new knowledge but for the promotion of abstraction and for categorization and inferences. It is in this regard that language is understood as essential for the structuring of long-term memory (Luria 1976; Clark & Karmiloff-Smith 1993; Denneth 1992; Clark 1998). The relationship between language and philosophy or thought, or language and the rest of cognition has been an area of concern for scholars of various backgrounds: philosophers, psychologists, linguistic anthropologists, etc., (Vygotsky 1962; Luria 1976; Clark 1996; Gumperz and Levinson 1996; Elman et al 1997; Eckert 2000; Deak 2003; Boroditsky 2010; Leavitt 2011; Sera, Johnson and Kuo 2013). This central or fundamental place that language occupies in human cognition or in the rapid and flexible transmission of knowledge about the world makes it an even more important topic for discussion in African philosophy. This is very important as African philosophy touches on the *Uwa* (world) that is particular to the African people.

An aspect of the essential nature of language that easily connects it with philosophy is the fact that it plays a key role in the presentation of the structures of the world around us (Leavitt 2011). This is important as philosophy concerns herself with a systematic rationally critical thinking about the general nature of the world, the justification of belief and the conduct of life (Kanu 2015). This leads to the question: is African philosophy possible in none-African languages like English, French,

Spanish, etc? If an African thought is presented in a language other than an African language particular to the African people in context, can it be referred to as philosophy? Or does the absence of such a local language take away from its philosophiness? These questions and more are the concerns of this paper.

Perspectives on the place of African Language in African Philosophy

In the area of African philosophy, the perspectives of scholars have always differed considerably regarding the relationship between African philosophy and language. While some can be categorized as conservative, others are considered progressive. This categorization would guide the discussion on the perspectives of African philosophers on the relationship between African language and African philosophy.

a. Conservative Perspectives

The conservative perspective refers to the perspectives of African thinkers who have argued that African local languages or mother tongue should be employed for the doing of African philosophy. They believe, as Lupan (2015) did, that “much of what we take to be 'just' attention, 'just' learning, 'just' memory, 'just' categorization, 'just' perception may be importantly transformed by language such that the human form of these processes may rely on experience with and use of language” (2).

A cursory glance at the history of African philosophy reveals that while Kagame (1956) understands the concept of being within the context of the Bantu language grammatical categories, thus, emphasizing the importance of language in philosophizing in Africa, Mbiti (1970) extends this importance not only to the study of philosophy but also religion, especially within the context of his study of African time. He writes:

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 (14).

Ki-Zerbo (1981) argues that language is the treasury house of a people's philosophy, and, therefore, an indispensable toolbox for the philosophical enterprise:

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) (94).

Corroborating Ki-Zerbo, Whorf (1993) within the context of the role of language in the establishment of a people's identity adds that:

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 becomes 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 people's identity, the vehicle of a certain way of seeing things, experiencing and feeling, determinant of a particular outlook on life (158-159).

It is in this regard that Heidegger (2000) maintains that words and language are not just shells in which things are packed for spoken and written purposes. They go deeper to reveal a people's identity. He believes that it is in language that things first come to be and are. Still on this, Iroegbu (1994) asserts:

The linguistic expression of a people is definitional of their essential being an acting. Language is the soul of culture, the heart of the environment and the spirit that motivates and directs a people's life. The dynamism of the German language and the emotivism of the Italian, portray the being and the character of the two peoples. African thought in a foreign language is not fully African thought. African philosophy, done in a foreign language is not yet authentically African philosophy (134).

While talking about destiny, Gyekye (1987) brings out the link between language and philosophy as expressed by thinkers. Focusing on the Akan language and linguistic repertoire, he insists that language “does not only merely suggest, but may also embody philosophical perspectives” (31) and that philosophical thesis are strongly influenced by the characteristics of the language in which they

are formulated: “whether a particular philosophical theses or problem is language oriented or language neutral, it must be determined within the structure of a given natural language” (169). He writes further: The first relates to the link that a number of thinkers find between language and thought, 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 (105).

A good number of the philosophers or thinkers who hold on to the conservative position understand it within the context of decolonization. And a principal thinker on this line is Kwasi Wiredu, who discussed it within the context of linguistic decolonization for cultural decolonization in the face of cultural alienation. The idea of cultural alienation is the product of the situation the African has found himself in, given the policies of colonization, his cultural heritage and the foreign cultural legacy bequeathed to him by his colonizers. Wiredu (1998) observes that:

The starting point of the problem is that the African who has learned philosophy in English, for example, has most likely become conceptually westernized to a large extent not by choice but by the force of historical circumstances. To that same extent he may have become de-Africanized. It does not matter if the philosophy learned is African philosophy. If that philosophy was academically formulated in English and articulated therein, the message was already substantially westernized, unless there was a conscious effort toward cross-cultural filtration (3).

Wiredu (1995) avers that the consequence of this is the superimposition of the Western categories of thought on the African thought system. Focusing on the Yoruba, Sodipo and Hallen (1986) insist that there is a very strong and remarkable distinction between the Western and African conceptual schemes. Any attempt to understand one in relation to the other would lead not only to underdevelopment but many instabilities in the contemporary African society. Wiredu (1984), therefore, calls for the employment of African languages in every area of human endeavour, precisely in the area of philosophy. His emphasis on the need to use African languages in the doing of African philosophy is because of his linking of language with thought, and since philosophy has got to do with reasoning/thinking, Wiredu (2000) believes that African philosophy is not possible without African language. Wiredu (1998) asserts that: “...a language is not conceptually neutral; syntax and vocabulary are apt to suggest definite modes of conceptualization” (3).

Ogunmodede (1993) maintains that as Africans, we have a personal responsibility towards expressing ourselves in our own language for the evolvement of a unique African philosophy. He observes that the present crop of African philosophers have continued to think in a vicious circle because they use borrowed Western linguistic categories to analyze African realities. He writes:

A person or group who uses who uses the mother tongue or indigenous language as medium of communicating his thoughts and experience will feel at home and do much better than if he were to do so with a foreign language which is not structured to his thought-pattern and experience... If an alien language becomes imposed on a person as the official language of communication and learning, his thinking process would be affected and his achievement will definitely be lower than what it should normally be, since he is using a rather different and artificial means of self-expression (9). WaThiong'o (1993) corroborates the position of Ogunmodede within the context of his decolonization of Africa. He holds that the colonization of the language of the African people is an attempt by the West to control the way the African people think and manage their daily lives, or even their perception of themselves and their universe. The implication is that the Western language that we use does not adequately represent our world and it places a limit on our thinking. Focusing on how it matters to philosophy, Ozumba (2004) posits that: “Language, therefore, matters to philosophy because everything concerning the activity of man originates in thought (thinking about ideas)” (119). Thus, Uroh (1994), Keita (1999), Bewaji (2002) and Afolayan (2006) aver that the most suitable language for critical, scientific, technological, mathematical, educational discourses in Africa is the African language which he thinks is dynamic enough to encompass new phenomena.

b. Progressive Perspectives

The progressive position on the relationship between African philosophy and African language

refers to those thinkers who may have agreed that there is need to do African philosophy in African languages but might not be firm in holding on to this position, since their positions are suggestive of alternative approach(es). Notable among these scholars is Bello (1987). He strongly believes that while language can be a pointer to a people's philosophy, language is not all that is required. The implication is that an emphasis on language is not enough and not a necessity: "The language of a people can be a good index or pointer to a people's philosophy, linguistic considerations alone cannot in themselves be decisive in philosophical disputes" (5). He writes further that: "The African philosopher should be wary of over-emphasizing the importance of his vernacular if only for the sake of being able to communicate with fellow African philosophers" (5). He, therefore, thinks that the use of only linguistic arguments as a knock-down argument for philosophical beliefs and doctrines might not yield the desired result. Thus, while African language would be of help for the elucidation of African concepts, Bello (1987) strongly believes that the use of vernaculars for all philosophical activities would mar communication.

While Makinde (1988) agrees with the conservative school of thought on African philosophy and language, specifically that the limit of a people's language is the limit of their world, he also thinks that African languages are not developed enough for doing African philosophy. He posits that: "None of the African languages is satisfactory enough to be adopted as a continental language, rich enough for analytic philosophy and science" (16). This explains why African thinkers are in a continuous struggle of trying to locate words in their mother tongue that capture others in foreign colonial languages. This, he thinks depreciates reasoning rather than helps it. With this understanding, he does not show any enthusiasm regarding doing African philosophy in African languages. Although Bewaji (2002) had rejected the position of Makinde (1988) who traced Africa's problem of under-development to poor language, tracing the development issues in Africa to the realm of the political, Tangwa (1992) calls for the domestication of English and French languages in Africa on the basis that they express great ideas, philosophies and paradigms.

Egbunu (2014), in his discussion on the problem of language in African philosophy, focusses on the Igala people of Nigeria. He holds that African language remains a very important factor in doing African philosophy, because understanding the African language is the principal feature that marks the African people and makes them different from others. However, he concludes that the absence of African local languages in the expression of African thoughts does not in any way make it unphilosophical. What he thinks that matters is that African philosophy is presented in a language that makes it intelligible. It is in this regard that Ezenabor (2004) writes that "... we need not write in African languages in order to write authentic African philosophy. What we need is to express our thoughts in a language that is universally understandable and intelligible and avoid foreign categories and models" (46).

Bassey, Enang and Nwaeke (2018) focuses on the related issues and the implications of doing African philosophy through linguistic imports that are sufficiently alien to the African people. They argue that only the use of African languages can guarantee authentic African philosophy, and thus call for the development of the African languages in such a manner that they compete with foreign languages. According to them: "... the herculean task remains for us to upgrade seriously on our indigenous languages; to make it more accessible and systematically structure, for others who have interest in Africa to fetch from the wellspring" (1061). This notwithstanding, they do not believe that for African philosophy to be philosophy that it must be written, taught or researched in the African language:

Through this practical approach, we submit that foreign languages, need not be fundamentally opposed to African realities, and need not fundamentally impede the substance of African philosophy. From this realistic canvas, foreign languages need not be at the disservice of African philosophical reflections. (1061)

At the heart of the perspective of the progressive school is that African philosophy does not cease to be African philosophy because it is written in a colonial language. This is not in any way to undermine the importance of African language in the African philosophical enterprise.

An Igwebuike Complementary Approach

Igwebuike in African philosophy provides an approach that interprets the puzzle of our complex relationships. It is transcendent, complementary, comprehensive and systematic in its provisions of answers to questions for the purpose of selfless enlightenment (Kanu 2021). The concept *Igwe bu ike*

is an Igbo proverb and also a typical Igbo name. Igbo proverbs and names are among the major traditional vessels where African philosophy, religion and culture have continued to be preserved. They contain the wisdom and experience of the African people, usually of several ages gathered and summed up in one expression (Kanu 2018). The expression, *Igwebuike* is a combination of three Igbo words. It can be understood as a word or a sentence: as a word, it is written as *Igwebuike*, and as a sentence, it is written as, *Igwe bu ike*, with the component words enjoying some independence in terms of space. Literally, *Igwe* is a noun which means number or multitude, usually a large number or population. The number or population in perspective are entities with ontological identities and significances, which are, however, part of an existential order in which every entity is in relation to the other. *Bu* is a verb, which means *is*. *Ike* is a noun, which means *strength* or *power* (Kanu 2019). *Igwe, bu* and *Ike* put together, means 'number is strength' or 'number is power' (Kanu 2017).

Beyond the linguistic expression of *Igwebuike* lies a deeper meaning. It is an ontological horizon that presents being as that which possesses a relational character of mutual relations (Kanu 2016). *Igwebuike* at this level means *otu obi* (one heart and one soul) – *cor unum et anima una*. In a metaphoric sense, it is used within the Igbo linguistic setting to refer to relational engagement in the world, accomplished in solidarity and complementarity, and the powerful and insurmountable force therein (Kanu 2017). The closest words to it in English are complementarity, solidarity and harmony. *Igwebuike* provides an ontological horizon that presents being as that which possesses a relational character of mutual relations; one that can only survive through complementarity. The *Igwebuike* approach, therefore, is about synthesizing the language of the colonizer in such a manner that it serves the interest and the worldview of the African such that the English language becomes a local language and expresses local realities.

Within this context, the *Igwebuike* approach presents African languages and the colonial languages as not being fundamentally opposed to each other; and that both can be at the service of each other for the achievement of the fundamental purposes of African philosophy. In fact, rather than being the enemy of the African language, the colonial languages are understood as complements of the local languages in Africa. In this new relationship between African language and colonial languages, language is understood as not being a completed project but as one that is dynamic and still growing. Where the African language fails, the African language becomes a complement, especially on typical human realities that are universal or sometimes peculiar to other worlds outside of Africa, and when the colonial language fails, especially in relation to typical African realities, the African language would complement the colonial language.

The need for the use of the colonial language at the moment is also based on the fact that African philosophy cannot stop because Africans do not understand their language or because their language is limited. Between now and the time when the African language can be developed further to serve the interest of African philosophy in a profound manner in African languages, African philosophy done in colonial languages does not cease to be African philosophy, as long as the colonial language is employed in such a manner that it works according to the conceptual framework of the African world. When we are able, as a continent to close up the vacuum in our indigenous languages, then they can be employed fully in the doing of African philosophy. In this case, while it is agreed that there is a strong connection between thought and language, it is not only the language that shapes thought. A people's worldview can shape a person's thought too, even when expressed in a different language. More so, that a person is speaking, writing or researching in a colonial language does not mean that the person is still under the bondage of colonial ideals. Therefore, it is not just language that determines the authenticity of a philosophy, in this case, African philosophy (Ezenabor 2004; Bassey, Enang and Nwaeke 2018). Going by the *Igwebuike* approach, the colonial language and the African worldview would work together to fill up the missing link. And it is on this ground that the works of African philosophy written in colonial languages remain authentic African philosophies.

There is always a typical African reality and a typical human reality. In doing African philosophy, it might be necessary to understand or use African language for the understanding of a typical African reality which might not find expression in the colonial language. However, African philosophy does not concern itself with only typical African realities. There are also other typical human realities that African philosophy concerns herself with. These typical human realities can be well expressed in languages outside of the African language. Is this to say that the African language

development project be abandoned? No! If language reflects the structure of a people's world and reality (Imbo 1998 and Brown 2006), it becomes important that African philosophers must make an effort to develop a tradition of writing in African languages, if African philosophy must perdure in African languages; this culture has to begin from the early stages of the development of the child.

Conclusion

This study attended to fundamental questions that have bordered the minds of African thinkers over the years, regarding the extent to which language reflects the structure of the human reality, and its place in the African philosophical enterprise. It has shown to what extent language affects, structures, shapes and interprets all aspects of human life; how language conditions thoughts, perceptions and identity formation of a people. This understanding of the place of language in thought led to the reflects on the possibility of doing African philosophy in a language other than the language of the people to whom the philosophical world belongs, and thus respond to the numerous questions in African philosophy regarding this issue. This did not ignore bringing to the fore the challenges associated with the employment of linguistic imports that are alien to the African people. Given the present circumstances, in which the world is globalizing, and the African person finds himself in a world where he is faced with the reality of using the colonial language alongside his or her own local language, this research investigated the possibility of a pragmatic approach to the issue of language in African philosophy. Employing *Igwebuike* theory, it concludes that both African and colonial languages have important places to play in the African philosophical enterprise.

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