

Towards a Wittgensteinian Foundation of Language in African Egun Context

Bodija Journal
Vol. 15 (2025): 143-163

Olugbenga Seminapa OKESOLA
Saints Peter and Paul Major Seminary,
Bodija, Ibadan.
os.okesola@gmail.com

Abstract

The study of language, a fundamental endeavour in philosophy, has been largely situated within Western philosophical traditions, often overlooking the rich and diverse metaphysical underpinnings of language found in African philosophical thought. This oversight obscures potentially valuable insights into the nature of language and its relationship to reality. Additionally, while Ludwig Wittgenstein's later philosophy accentuates the contextual and social dimensions of language, it tends to be framed within Eurocentric perspectives, potentially limiting its applicability to non-Western contexts. Thus, a critical examination of the intersections between Wittgenstein's philosophy of language and African metaphysical conceptions is imperative, as it promises to unveil hitherto unexplored dimensions of linguistic practices and their embeddedness within broader ontological frameworks. This study addresses this gap by undertaking a comprehensive inquiry into the compatibility, tensions, and synergies between Wittgenstein's linguistic philosophy and African metaphysical views, aiming to forge new avenues for understanding language, reality, and cultural diversity.

Keywords: Philosophy of language, Wittgenstein, African Metaphysics, African philosophy, Egun.

1. Introduction

Language, as a fundamental human capacity, plays a pivotal role in shaping our understanding of reality. Language allows individuals to engage with others, establish connections, and participate in various social contexts. It enables the transfer of knowledge, beliefs, values, and traditions from one generation to another. Through language, cultural practices, stories, and rituals can be shared, preserved, and passed down. Language allows individuals to participate in their cultural communities, express their cultural identities, and contribute to the collective knowledge of their society.¹ Language not only reflects cultural and social dynamics but also contributes to their construction and negotiation. Language use can reinforce social norms, challenge power relations, and create or reinforce social identities.² Language, culture, and society are interconnected domains that influence and shape each other. Meaning in language is not solely determined by fixed definitions. It is also shaped by contextual factors and the use of language in specific situations. Pragmatics, a subfield of linguistics, explores how meaning is constructed and interpreted in context. Pragmatic meaning is influenced by factors such as speaker intentions, context, and shared knowledge.³

While Wittgenstein's later philosophy, particularly as expounded in "Philosophical Investigations," emphasizes the social and contextual nature of language, African philosophies often ground linguistic practices in broader metaphysical frameworks. Wittgenstein's philosophy tends to remain agnostic about broader metaphysical claims, focusing primarily on language use. In contrast, many African metaphysical views such as Egun's explicitly embed language within broader ontological frameworks, often

¹ Alessandro Duranti, *Linguistic Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 5.

² Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 47.

³ Stephen Levinson, *Pragmatics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1.

involving spiritual or cosmological elements. While Wittgenstein's philosophy of language is largely agnostic about ultimate reality, African metaphysical views often posit specific conceptions of reality, such as the existence of spiritual entities, ancestral realms, or fundamental cosmic forces, which deeply inform their understanding of language. While paying keen attention to an African *meta ta phusika* understanding of language, the paper aims to delve into the metaphysical aspect of language and its relationship with reality. It assumes like Wittgenstein, a social and contextual nature of language, acknowledges the idea that language shapes our perception of reality, and emphasizes that meaning is constructed through social practices and conventions. The study explores the nature of language, its ontological status, and how it influences our perception of the world.

In the philosophy of language, various theories and perspectives are discussed, such as analytic philosophy, pragmatics, semiotics, and hermeneutics. Analytic philosophy emphasizes the analysis of language and logic to understand its structure and meaning, pragmatics focuses on the context, intentions, and effects of language use in communication, semiotics investigates the signs and symbols used in language and their relation to meaning, and hermeneutics is concerned with interpretation and understanding of texts and language in general. In this paper, we shall explore Wittgenstein's argument on the "use" meaning of language and the implication it suggests for linguistic philosophers.

2. On the Meaning and Nature of Language

The term "language" originates from the Old French *langage*, derived from the Latin *lingua*, meaning "tongue" or "speech," which itself traces back to Proto-Indo-European roots associated with speech and language.⁴ Language is a distinct human ability, allowing

⁴ Douglas Harper, "Online Etymology Dictionary: Language," 2001–2023, accessed July 22, 2023, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/language>.

complex communication through signs, symbols, and sounds.⁵ This cognitive and cultural tool enables us to convey thoughts, emotions, and knowledge, connecting generations and shaping human society. Language is integral to identity, cultural heritage, and worldview, as Sapir and Whorf suggest, influencing cognition and perception.⁶ Sapir calls language a system for conveying ideas and emotions through vocal symbols, while Chomsky sees it as an innate capacity to form grammatical structures. These definitions highlight key characteristics such as human, symbolic, vocal, arbitrary, and communicative. These characteristics reveal the complexity of defining language in a single, comprehensive way. Language remains central to human distinction and interaction, facilitating both individual expression and societal cohesion.

Perspectives on language vary across disciplines; philosophers see it as a tool for thought, sociologists as behaviour, psychologists as a glimpse into the mind, and linguists as a system of arbitrary signs. O'Grady and Katamba view language broadly as communication, thought medium, social institution, and even a nation-building catalyst. They emphasize its dual role in unifying societies and as a functional, interdependent system. De Saussure differentiates language into "langue" (the abstract, shared linguistic system) and "parole" (its specific, situational realization). Similarly, Chomsky distinguishes "competence" (knowledge of grammatical rules) from "performance" (its practical application). While "langue" and "competence" both refer to underlying language knowledge, De Saussure sees "langue" as socially derived, whereas Chomsky treats "competence" as an individual mental attribute. In teaching, instructors may focus on either foundational language rules or practical expressions students can actively use.⁷

⁵ Charlton Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879), 1074, accessed via Perseus Digital Library.

⁶ Benjamin Fortson, *Indo-European Language and Culture: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

⁷ Job Mwakapina, "What Is the Nature of Language? How Does It Behave? What Is Language Learning Then? A Review Paper in Applied Linguistics," *Randwick International of Education and Linguistics Science (RIELS) Journal* 2, no. 4 (2021): 604–605, <https://doi.org/10.47175/rielsj.v2i4.357>.

Richards and Rodgers categorize the nature of language into three primary perspectives: the structural, communicative, and interactional views. The structural view describes language as a system of interrelated components, such as phonemes, grammatical units, and lexical items that learners should master. Approaches like the audio-lingual method align with this perspective. The communicative view, however, regards language as a medium for conveying functional meaning, emphasizing semantic and communicative elements over strict grammar. This view supports approaches such as the communicative and natural approaches. Finally, the interactional view understands language as a tool for establishing social relationships and engaging in social exchanges. This perspective underlies interactional and conversational analysis and is supported by Fairclough's discourse analysis and Vygotsky's social cognition theory, which highlights learning through social interaction. Different scholars debate the nature of language due to its multifaceted role: it may be viewed as a system, form, a means of communication, or an interactive tool, making its definition inherently complex and varied.⁸

3. Language, Meaning, and Society

Language and meaning are intimately connected. Language serves as a vehicle for conveying meaning, and meaning is constructed through the use of language. Meaning in language can be understood from different perspectives. One approach is the semantic view, which considers meaning as an inherent property of words or linguistic units. According to this view, words have specific meanings that are determined by their definitions or the concepts they represent.⁹ For example, the word "dog" refers to a specific animal with certain characteristics. However, meaning in language is not solely determined by fixed definitions. It is also shaped by contextual factors and the use of language in specific situations. Pragmatics, a subfield of linguistics, explores how

⁸ Mwakapina, "What is the Nature of Language?" 610-611.

⁹ John Saeed, *Semantics*, 4th ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 1.

meaning is constructed and interpreted in context. Pragmatic meaning is influenced by factors such as speaker intentions, context, and shared knowledge.¹⁰ For instance, the meaning of the sentence “Could you pass me the salt?” may vary depending on the tone of voice, the relationship between the speakers, and the situational context.

Meaning is not solely derived from individual words or sentences but also emerges from the relationships and connections between linguistic elements. Structuralist and functionalist approaches emphasize the importance of considering the broader linguistic system and the role of language in communication and social interaction.¹¹ Meaning is not confined to isolated words but emerges through the organization of linguistic elements and their use in discourse. Furthermore, meaning in language is also shaped by cultural and social factors. Sociolinguistics investigates how meaning is influenced by social variables such as identity, social norms, and power dynamics.¹² Different communities or speech communities may attach distinct meanings or connotations to specific words or expressions based on their cultural and social contexts. Meaning in language is multi-faceted, encompassing semantic, pragmatic, structural, and sociocultural dimensions. It emerges from the interaction of linguistic elements, contextual factors, and shared knowledge within specific communicative contexts.

Language, culture, and society are deeply intertwined. Language expresses and transmits cultural beliefs, values, and practices, reflecting a society’s worldview, norms, and history. Culture shapes language through unique vocabulary and speech patterns, while social structures and interactions impact language variation and

¹⁰ Levinson, *Pragmatics*, 1.

¹¹ Michael Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978), 33.

¹² Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall, “Language and Identity,” in *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*, ed. Alessandro Duranti (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), 372.

choice. Sociolinguistics explores how social factors like class, gender, ethnicity, and age influence language use. Language, in turn, reinforces or challenges social norms and power dynamics, contributing to the construction of social identities.¹³ Together, language, culture, and society continually influence and shape each other.

4. On Wittgenstein's Language Game and Meaning of Language as Use

Wittgenstein's later work introduced the "use" theory of meaning, challenging traditional notions of language as private or grounded in mental representations. In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein argued that meaning emerges from public use, not from an object of reference, and dismissed the idea of private language.¹⁴ He likened words to tools, each with a unique function within various "language games," emphasizing that we learn words not by fixed definitions but by understanding their use in life's activities.¹⁵ Contrary to Cartesian and Russellian views, where names and meanings were tied to private ideas or logical structures, Wittgenstein argued that meaning is inherently social and embedded in life's practices. Russell had proposed that genuine names were limited to words like "this" or "that," which directly point to a known object.¹⁶ He saw most names, such as "Socrates," as descriptions rather than proper names. However, Frege's critique, suggesting that meaning and reference cannot be identical,

¹³ Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 47.

¹⁴ Harry Callaway, "Meaning and Linguistic Usage," in *Ten Comments on Later Wittgenstein*, 5, accessed December 12, 2023, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/369088454_Chapter_Five_Meaning_and_Linguistic_Usage_Ten_Comments_on_Later_Wittgenstein#full_Text_File_Content.

¹⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1958), 43.

¹⁶ Bertrand Russell, *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1918), 201.

contrasts with Russell's logic, as identical reference doesn't imply identical meaning (e.g., "Scott is Scott" vs. "Scott is the author of *Waverly*").¹⁷ Wittgenstein instead viewed language as a normative practice governed by usage, evolving with culture and social interaction. He described this with concepts like "family resemblance" and "language games," where meanings vary by context. Thus, understanding a word's meaning means grasping its use, as meaning is shaped by shared human activities, not merely by formal definitions or intentions. A sign does not become a meaningful word because it is associated with a reference, but because it has a function in the stream of life.¹⁸ One can clarify the meaning of a word by describing its use in a variety of situations, showing the similarities and differences of the uses.

Wittgenstein's concept of "language games" illustrates how language functions as a diverse activity, likened to games with distinct rules. He observed that, like games, language does not fit a single model; instead, it includes a range of activities such as describing, commanding, joking, and praying while they all function differently. Just as "games" do not share one common trait but a web of similarities, so do forms of language use.¹⁹ He also used the analogy to show that language is woven into life's activities; saying "pen" only makes sense in a specific context, such as requesting a pen, teaching vocabulary, or identifying an object. The meaning depends on the purpose within its language game, where words and actions are intertwined.²⁰ Furthermore, Wittgenstein criticized approaches like logical positivism for treating scientific discourse as the only valid form of language, overlooking the unique rules of other "games" such as ethics or aesthetics. He argued that ignoring these differences creates confusion and that philosophy's role is not to introduce new theories but to clarify misunderstandings about language use across different contexts.²¹

¹⁷ Callaway. "Meaning and Linguistic Usage," 3.

¹⁸ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 78.

¹⁹ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 65.

²⁰ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 7.

²¹ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 90.

In contrast to his early work in the *Tractatus*, which viewed language as a detached system of symbols, Wittgenstein's later philosophy presents language as dynamic, and deeply embedded in human life. His notion of "form of life" suggests that language use is inseparable from human activity, evolving within the "stream of life" and deriving meaning through shared practices, not strict logical structures. Words only carry meaning within this living context, shaped by collective behaviours, history, and culture. Wittgenstein argues that the need for philosophical justification has limits; certain fundamental concepts can't be rationally justified, rather, they are simply woven into our way of life. Agreement in language, then, is not only in definitions but in shared forms of life, which provide continuity and context to our understanding and interpretations.²²

Critics argue that Wittgenstein's idea of "meaning as use" is too vague. Ernst Specht contends that Wittgenstein fails to distinguish clearly between "use" (the conditions under which a word operates) and "usage," which involves established norms within a linguistic community. According to Specht, without this distinction, Wittgenstein's theory risks conflating a word's meaning with an indefinite range of possible contexts, making the concept impractical. Additionally, Specht and Gilbert Ryle suggest that Wittgenstein's term "language game" also lacks precision. They argue that while games are non-essential, recreational activities, language is a critical social instrument, challenging Wittgenstein's analogy and casting doubt on the universality of "language games" as a model for all linguistic behaviour.²³

²² Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 241.

²³ Ernst Specht, *The Foundations of Wittgenstein's Late Philosophy*, trans. D. E. Walford (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1969), 129.

5. African Epistemology and Egun Metaphysical Conception of Language

African epistemology reflects a communal approach to knowledge, where understanding reality is shaped by a cosmology that balances the material with the metaphysical.²⁴ For Africans, knowledge extends beyond empirical verification and embraces spiritual dimensions, grounded in collective customs and traditions. This worldview posits the universe as a unique blend of tangible and transcendent aspects, with the spiritual realm seen as integral to knowing the self and cosmos. Spirituality in African thought, as Dei observes, encompasses relationships with ancestors, empowerment, healing, and a unity of body, mind, and soul. This spiritual focus aligns with African metaphysics, which seeks coherence between human life and the non-material world of ancestors and deities. Knowledge, therefore, is validated not solely by empirical or rational standards but through a fusion of both, as seen in Egun traditions. African epistemology thus harmonizes empirical inquiry with spiritual insight, emphasizing indigenous wisdom in forms like folklore, proverbs, and myth.²⁵ Although going by a specific African culture namely Egun in our African conception of language, let us quickly consider an analysis of a “word” and its functions. This approach gives us a better, deeper, and clearer understanding as regards the people’s manner of viewing language and the sort of linguistic knowledge they hold.

A word may be described as “a speech sound or series of speech sounds that symbolizes and communicates a meaning usually without being divisible into smaller units capable of independent

²⁴ Gregory Ogbenika and Philip Isanbor, “On the Interdependency of Human Minds in African Epistemology,” *Ewanlen: A Journal of Philosophical Inquiry* 1, no. 1 (2017): 71.

²⁵ Kudakwashe Danmore, Keithy Tapfumaneyi, and Gift Rupande, “Social Dimensions of Knowledge and Education,” *International Journal of Advanced Research* 1, no. 5 (2013): 589–590.

use.”²⁶ Also, we may describe it as “a unit of language, consisting of one or more spoken sounds or their written representation that functions as a principal carrier of meaning.”²⁷ Words are composed of one or more morphemes and are either the smallest units susceptible of independent use or consist of two or three such units combined under certain linking conditions, as with the loss of primary accent that distinguishes the one-word *blackbird* (primary stress on “black”, and secondary stress on “bird”) from *black bird* (primary stress on both words).²⁸ A word seems to have some psychological reality as a unit and admitted as such by linguists, although it is not easy to define what a word is and what it is not by unequivocal and universal criteria. Being an experimental unit, a word has the advantage of being composed of smaller units (phonemes) and of combining into larger units (phrases and sentences).²⁹

African Metaphysics has a huge impact on the Egun people’s language known as *gungbe* and how reality is construed. As they believe in the interconnectedness that exists between man and reality, this also affects their linguistic utterances. First, the Egun believe that the human tongue is powerful and second, spirits are constantly passing by and granting wishes to whatever is being uttered. This awareness commits the Eguns to a very careful use of words and even thoughts. For a better understanding of how language is used in the Egun setting, it is necessary to take a look at some examples. Let us, in the following paragraphs, consider two common words, such as salt (NaCl) or *flakoh* and sickness or *ahutou*, and how they are understood in an Egun setting.

²⁶ Merriam-Webster, “Word,” accessed February 7, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/word>.

²⁷ Merriam-Webster, “Word,” accessed February 7, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/word>.

²⁸ Dictionary.com, “Word,” accessed February 7, 2024, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/word>.

²⁹ Ioanna Panpandropoulou and Hermine Sinclair, “What Is a Word?” *Human Development* 17 (1974): 242.

5.1. Salt (NaCl) or *flakoh*

In African Egun culture, salt translates as *flakoh* (general term) and also as *unnudida-nu* (condiment or a sweetening substance). Generally, when we apply salt to food as a seasoning, it is mostly called “table salt”. It is regarded as a sweetening substance. Beyond the understanding of salt as a sweetening substance, however, there is a metaphysical belief about the substance. Although this may not be the case for a Westerner, the case is quite different for an African such as a *gunvi* (an Egun person). Egun believes in both the physicality and non-physicality of things. The Eguns believe that such substance as “salt” has more feature that goes beyond its understanding and mere use as a sweetening substance. The *gunvi* believes that *flakoh* carries a metaphysical significance. It is believed to be both a sweetening substance and as a representation of joy in the home. For instance, in an Egun home, it is inappropriate to make a statement like “*flakoh ma tin*” (there is no salt) or “*flakoh o voh*” (salt has finished). In fact, it is not only inappropriate, it is forbidden and regarded as a taboo. The reason behind such belief is that saying that salt which is believed to be a representation of joy in a home has finished, is to mean that there is no joy in that particular. There are two ways it is interpreted. One way is that it is seen as a curse because of the traditional belief in the power of a person’s tongue.

Egun traditional belief maintains that an individual’s tongue has been designed with a spiritual gift of command such that the tongue is so powerful that it can effect whatever utterance it wishes to effect in any situation, whether one chooses to experience such manifestation or not. Another interpretation by the Egun people is that the tongue relates directly to some constantly roaming spirits. The elders warn against uttering negative statements about oneself or others because those roaming spirits may sign one’s utterance into a sort of answered prayer. So, it is always advisable to utter only positive things. Since saying “*flakoh o voh*” in a home would mean that “joy has finished” in that home, it is therefore forbidden to make an expression as such. Alternatively, one should rather say

that “*unnudida-nu o voh*” which translates as “the sweetening substance has finished”. This way of construing salt is also common among the Yorubas. For instance, in a Yoruba home, it is forbidden to say that “*iyo (salt/joy) ti tan*” (salt has finished), rather, one is expected to say that “*isebe (sweetening substance) ti tan* (has finished).

5.2. Sickness or *Ahutou*

The *gunvi* (an Egun person) understanding of self affects how carefully they use other people’s linguistic expressions. For instance, they barely say “I am not healthy” whenever they are unhealthy, they rather say “I am strong” and one immediately understands that such expression translates into not being healthy and may attract a need for a medical care for the person. The myth behind such understanding is the belief in the power of tongue; the belief that whatever we utter has a spiritual implication and can manifest itself. So, one dares to be strictly careful about what one utters either against or about oneself, and to or about others. One is also careful of the future and uttering of negative words about one’s future and goals in life. To an African, it is not until you are in the realm of prayer that your tongue can prophesy. The tongue is necessarily spiritual and spiritually active to grant whatever one utters that might be expressed in form of curse or prayer, deliberately or non-deliberately. The tongue is essentially both material and spiritual; material being that it can be said to crack jokes, read statements, engage in debates while spiritual in the sense that it has the power of manifestation.

Sickness in an Egun setting is usually considered for both material and spiritual treatment. This is undeniably due to the all-encompassing cosmological belief of the Egun tribe. Whenever a person is sick, the relatives take the unhealthy person to the priest of the land who will perform some divination or spiritual rites in order to determine the cause of the sickness. Such divination or spiritual rite informs the priest on the necessary traditional medicine, which is commonly referred to as “*amasin*”, to give the unhealthy person. They also pray to the gods of the land like *thron*, *vodun*, or *atinga* for quick recovery. It could be any other gods

depending on the god the particular sick person prays to, although performing divination or spiritual rites is not considered the first aid. The first aid treatment is to apply common treatment which has worked in the past to manage a likely ailment. It is after such treatment is noticed to have not cured the ailment that the sick person is taken to the priest who is believed to have supernatural powers. Supernatural power could be a gift from above and passed onto a person by an ancestor or a priest. In fact, appointment of priests involves divination. It is believed that the gods of the land choose who they want to become the next priest. If a person were chosen by the gods, such person cannot decline. If they declined, such person would face the wrath of the gods.

The belief in witchcraft is also a necessary aspect in Egun traditional treatment. For instance, if there were a person who has been terminally ill, different rites are performed in order to determine the nature of such illness and possible cure. In some cases, a part of the divination may require a rite to seek the help or intervention of an *aze* (a witch). There are two angles to this; first, the terminally ill patient might have offended a witch and the illness might be a punishment meted upon the terminally ill person by the witch. A told story among the Egun people holds that a young girl disrespected an old woman who unbeknownst to the girl, was an *aze*. A few days later, the girl got ill and the first aid treatment, which included some herbs, did not cure her illness. When taken to the priest, the priest found out through a divination that it was the old woman who had punished her for the disrespectful act. The priest recommended that the family of the girl should find and apologize to the woman. After the family had done as the priest had instructed, the girl regained her health before the family got home. The lesson from the story is usually used to educate the children about supernatural power of an *aze*, as well as to teach morality, especially respect for elderly ones.

From the instances shown above, we cannot deny the role of metaphysics in the daily usage of linguistic expressions, especially as found with the Egun people as evidenced above. It seems as Wittgenstein puts it that *what we do is to bring words back from*

*their metaphysical to their everyday use.*³⁰ However, while some groups of persons may not pay attention to the metaphysical nature of language, the Eguns are aware of such beyond-the-physical nature of language and they take it seriously in practice. This seems to be a call for other tribes to revisit their orientation about language, as it may have possible spiritual implications. On January 3, 2024, in a physical dialogue with Prof. Isaac Ukpokolo on meaning and use of language, in his office at the Department of Philosophy, University of Ibadan, he gave an instance of a young child whose parents were always calling dumb due to his academic performance in school. Prof. Ukpokolo in his words stated that such is one of the linguistic mistakes being made by most parents because for him, he believed that at a point in the boy's life, the child may become totally dumb for he believes that words or linguistic utterances carry metaphysical implications. This could be a spiritual implication (going by the Egun belief in the power of the tongue) or psychological implication (where the child's psyche or mental state adjusts to or agrees to the "dumb" qualification given to him by his parents).

6. A Wittgensteinian Foundation of Language in an African Context

African philosophy of language, like Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, delves into the contextual and social meanings of language. However, it transcends mere social and contextual interpretations due to its inherent metaphysical dimensions. This essay explores the intersection of Wittgensteinian language philosophy and African linguistic thought, emphasizing the unique contributions of African perspectives. Through an examination of language as a tool for understanding reality, communal communication, and metaphysical implications, we uncover the rich tapestry of language in an African context. Language is a fundamental aspect of human existence, shaping our perceptions, interactions, and understanding of reality. Ludwig Wittgenstein, a

³⁰ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 116.

prominent philosopher of language, explored the intricate relationship between language and thought. In an African context, language carries additional layers of significance, intertwining with cultural practices, communal identity, and metaphysical beliefs.

Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, emphasized language as a practical tool rather than a fixed system of representation. He rejected the idea of a universal language structure and advocated for an understanding of language grounded in its use within specific contexts. African languages similarly thrive in their practical applications; oral traditions, storytelling, rituals, and everyday communication. The communal nature of African languages aligns with Wittgenstein's view that meaning emerges from shared practices.³¹ Wittgenstein introduced the concept of "language games," highlighting the diverse ways language functions within different social contexts. African communities engage in intricate language games, where words carry cultural nuances, historical memories, and communal bonds. For instance, proverbs, folktales, and naming ceremonies convey collective wisdom and identity. The Bantu concept of *ubuntu*, emphasizing interconnectedness and shared humanity, exemplifies how language shapes communal relations.³²

Beyond its pragmatic use, African languages harbour metaphysical elements. The Yoruba language, for instance, contains a rich cosmology embedded in its grammar and vocabulary. Words evoke spiritual forces, ancestral connections, and cosmic balance. The *nommo* in Dogon cosmology signifies the creative power of speech.³³ African languages bridge the mundane and the transcendent, echoing Wittgenstein's exploration of language's

³¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 23.

³² Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 112.

³³ John Mbiti, "The Power of Words: Nommo and Language in African Thought," in *African Religions and Philosophy* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1990), 5.

limits. The Wittgensteinian foundation of language finds resonance in African linguistic thought. Both emphasize context, communal practices, and the dynamic nature of meaning. African languages, with their metaphysical underpinnings, offer unique insights into the human experience. As we navigate the complexities of language, we recognize its transformative power; a bridge connecting the tangible and the ineffable.

7. Conclusion

The kind of understanding of language in the Egun traditional setting shows the validity of the claims of Wittgenstein in his description of language game, at least to some acceptable degree. However, the African Egun understanding of language as we have seen goes beyond the ordinary meaning or understanding of a linguistic expression. For them, language could be both ordinary and beyond ordinary (i.e metaphysical) at the same time due to their cosmological belief about how the physical and spiritual world are necessarily connected. Language serves various functions which includes its influence on thought. Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy and Egun philosophy represent distinct cultural and intellectual contexts. Wittgenstein's work catalyzed the so-called linguistic turn in philosophy. While Wittgenstein's linguistic philosophy emphasizes language games, meaning, and context, African philosophy of language is deeply embedded in cultural practices, metaphysics, and communal life. Wittgenstein's work emerged from the Western analytic tradition, while African philosophy draws from diverse cultural and metaphysical perspectives. The divergence between Wittgenstein and African philosophy of language lies in their contrasting approaches to context, meaning, and metaphysics. African Egun metaphysics recognizes that language is not a neutral system but a living force. It shapes how individuals perceive and interpret reality. Language is not merely a tool for communication; it is a lens through which reality is perceived. African languages reflect the interconnectedness of human beings with their environment, ancestors, and spiritual forces. The understanding of *gungbe* (Egun language) is seen as beliefs and realities which

are the outcome of lived experience.³⁴ Drawing some linguistic instances, we have seen how a specific African language (namely *Egun*) or linguistic phenomena impacts the understanding of reality for the specific language users. The study broadens our understanding of linguistic practices and their embeddedness in diverse cultural and metaphysical contexts, thereby contributing to the field of philosophy of language, metaphysics, and African philosophy. It assumes like Wittgenstein, a social and contextual nature of language, acknowledges the idea that language shapes our perception of reality, and emphasizes that meaning is constructed through social practices and conventions.

It is important to note that the African metaphysical belief system about reality is not a mere practice with no grounding. Ozumba opines that Africans have far-reaching thoughts about the phenomena, be it physical or transcendental, with which they are acquainted. That an idea works does not prevent the African mind from digging into why it works. The African tries to understand, at times through mystical means the basis for the things around. The African is aware of the danger of superficiality. As much as theoretical and experiential apparatus could take them, they seek to understand the “why” and “how” of the reality around them.³⁵ Ogbenika and Isanbor contest that in various African epistemological frameworks, humans are perceived as whole beings who are somehow connected and not distinctly segregated into two separate entities (body and mind). This perspective, however, does not provide for the Cartesian issue of doubting the existence of other minds; the mutual relationship of individuals assures that the reality of other minds is considered as a fact rather than a philosophical issue to be questioned.³⁶ Such claim potentially poses

³⁴ Godfrey Ozumba, *African Traditional Metaphysics* (Calabar: University of Calabar Press, n.d.), 4.

³⁵ Anselm Jimoh, *Metaphysics in African Philosophy* (2020), 2, https://www.academia.edu/76588944/Metaphysics_in_African_Philosophy.

³⁶ Ogbenika, “On the Interdependency of Human Minds in African Epistemology,” 71.

a challenge to a philosopher of mind in terms of how different cultures perceive the nature of mind and the philosophical questions such challenge might birth. Language in African metaphysics is not merely a means of communication; it is a dynamic force that shapes perception, connects individuals to their surroundings, and provides a holistic understanding of existence. African metaphysics could be described as the way Africans perceive, interpret, and make meaning out of the interactions among beings and reality in general. “The logic in their metaphysics underpins their standard and expectations. This is not to go with the impression that all African communities share the same standards even though the standard is community-based.”³⁷ This study provokes further research tasks for linguistic philosophers in their constant thirst to further investigate the meaning of language and to see if the use and orientation or understanding of language in a cultural system may affect or be applicable in another cultural setting. Linguistic philosophers should attempt a rigorous examination to unravel both the physical and metaphysical nature of language.

References

- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991.
- Bucholtz, Mary, and Kira Hall. “Language and Identity.” In *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*, edited by Alessandro Duranti, 369–394. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004.
- Callaway, H. G. “Meaning and Linguistic Usage.” In *Ten Comments on Later Wittgenstein*, 5. Accessed December 12, 2023. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/369088454_Chapter_Five_Meaning_and_Linguistic_Usage_Ten_Comments_on_Later_Wittgenstein#fullTextFileContent.

³⁷ Elijah Okpanachi and Joseph Onuche, “Rethinking African Metaphysics from an Igala Perspective,” *Albertine Journal of Philosophy* 4 (2020): 138.

- Danmore, Kudakwashe, Keithy Tapfumaneyi, and Gift Rupande. "Social Dimensions of Knowledge and Education." *International Journal of Advanced Research* 1, no. 5 (2013): 587–595.
- Dictionary.com. "Word." Accessed February 7, 2024. <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/word>.
- Duranti, Alessandro. *Linguistic Anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Fortson, Benjamin W. *Indo-European Language and Culture: An Introduction*. 2nd ed. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.
- Gyekye, Kwame. *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- Halliday, Michael. *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning*. London: Edward Arnold, 1978.
- Harper, Douglas. "Online Etymology Dictionary: Language." 2001–2023. Accessed July 22, 2023. <https://www.etymonline.com/word/language>.
- Jimoh, Anselm K. *Metaphysics in African Philosophy*. 2020. https://www.academia.edu/76588944/Metaphysics_in_African_Philosophy.
- Kudakwashe Danmore, Keithy Tapfumaneyi, and Gift Rupande. 2013. *International Journal of Advanced Research*. Vol. 1. Issue 5. 587-595.
- Levinson, Stephen. *Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Lewis, Charlton, and Charles Short. *A Latin Dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879. Accessed via Perseus Digital Library.
- Mbiti, John. "The Power of Words: Nommo and Language in African Thought." In *African Religions and Philosophy*, 5. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1990.
- Merriam-Webster. "Word." Accessed February 7, 2024. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/word>.

- Mwakapina, Job. "What Is the Nature of Language? How Does It Behave? What Is Language Learning Then? A Review Paper in Applied Linguistics." *Randwick International of Education and Linguistics Science (RIELS) Journal* 2, no. 4 (2021): 604–611. <https://doi.org/10.47175/rielsj.v2i4.357>.
- Ogbenika, Gregory E., and Philip Osarobu Isanbor. "On the Interdependency of Human Minds in African Epistemology." *Ewanlen: A Journal of Philosophical Inquiry* 1, no. 1 (2017): 70–80.
- Okpanachi, Elijah, and Joseph Onuche. "Rethinking African Metaphysics from an Igala Perspective." *Albertine Journal of Philosophy* 4 (2020): 138.
- Ozumba, Godfrey O. *African Traditional Metaphysics*. Calabar: University of Calabar Press, n.d. 4. 2004.
- Panpandropoulou, Ioanna, and Hermine Sinclair. "What Is a Word?" *Human Development* 17 (1974): 241–258.
- Russell, Bertrand. *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1918.
- Saeed, John I. *Semantics*. 4th ed. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016.
- Specht, Ernst Konrad. *The Foundations of Wittgenstein's Late Philosophy*. Translated by D. E. Walford. New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1969.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1958.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009.