

African Indigenous Languages and the Advancement of African Philosophy

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Abstract

The contention raised in this research is to showcase that indigenous African languages are imperative tools in advancing African philosophy and thought. Therefore it is argued that by extension the beginnings and originality of African philosophical thought is best advanced when it is vocalized and transliterated in the mother tongue of the philosopher, second, that when African philosophical thought is done and articulated in language foreign to the philosopher, philosophical thought is weakened within the conceptual expression and foundation, and third, that indigenous languages would address perennial problems of inadequacies of languages especially where there are no direct replacements of concepts and terms to explain reality and other states of affairs.

Keywords: African, African indigenous languages, African philosophy, linguistic analysis.

Introduction

There are contentions among philosophers of language and philosophers of mind on the distinction between philosophy of language and language of philosophy. This contention is perennial in most researches and scholarly advancement in African philosophy, which implies that language is important to philosophical discourse. This is because in the study and development of philosophy, language plays a major role as a vehicle of philosophical reasoning pattern. Loveday presents Aristotle's postulation on language as that which expresses our thought and reality.

Language is important because knowledge does not consist of a mute mystical insight, but in the ability to discourse intelligently about the world. Language must have the same structure as thought, for how else could we put our thought into word (Loveday, 72).

The importance of language as a vehicle of thought and as expression of reality has also been emphasized by Martin Heidegger. In fact, Heidegger (2000) views language as that which makes thought and that which reveals reality (or being) in its most authentic form.

... and we seek to win back intact the naming force of language and words; for words and language are not just shells into which things are packed for spoken and written intercourse. In the word, in language, things first come to be and are (Heidegger 2000, p.15).

Correct use of language is critical, Heidegger says, if one must describe reality in its most authentic form. And to do this, one must go back to the indigenous usage of the concepts through which reality is described. It was for this reason that Heidegger began his analysis of being by examining the concept in the indigenous language of the ancient Greek philosophers.

In African philosophical tradition, recourse is not conceded to the need to use African indigenous languages as a fundamental instrument in the development and advancement of African philosophy. The major argument against the necessity to produce African philosophy in African indigenous languages is aptly presented in the assertion below.

Language is human non-instinctual act which is learnt. It is a means of communicating ideas and thought: for language to be meaningful it must follow laid down rule of structure. It must be composed of words which in turn are put into sentences expressing some thought (Ozumba 2004, p.18).

This excerpt of Ozumba opens up the problem of non-usage of African indigenous language in the advancement of African philosophy. The argument is that African philosophy can be done in any language, since language is learnt. This is the starting point of my argument in this paper. Is it possible for the philosopher to present the picture of reality as he sees it, in the language other than that which is immediate to him? Addressing this problem is critical to the development and advancement of African philosophy in the 21st century.

Language and Meaning

Language and meaning are critical to the development of philosophy. Language is a system of words that communicate certain meaning. Language and meaning are intrinsically interrelated; there cannot be language without associative meaning. Godfrey Ozumba (2018) defines language as “strings of words arranged syntactically and semantically for the sole purpose of communicating ideas, thoughts, moods, and for explaining action or inaction” (p.2). This means that language is a system that contains notion or symbols which allows a person to describe a phenomenon, perform an action, inform an audience and explain a thing. But language can also lead to misinformation and misdirection of another deliberately or otherwise (Essien 2010). That is why Emmanuel Eyo (2008) avers that language should be used in its correct logical context in order to communicate the intended meanings. Using language in its correct logical context goes beyond mere logical placement of phrases and logical connectives as was advocated by the logical atomists; it has to do with the ideas or thoughts that are embedded in it. John Austin (1962) observes that “words do not have fixed independent meanings but get their meanings from the sentence in which they feature” (p.28). This means that the meaning of language could be gleaned from the sentences displayed in either written or oral forms. But equally language gathers meanings from the moods of the users. If one does away with this dimension, language loses its flavour and renders meaning obscure even to the native speakers (Asouzu 2007). Despite this, the audience may attach differential meanings to the words in a way that is different from the usage of the speaker. Hence, the speaker must be sensitive to the audience (Eyo 2008) and the etymological underpinning of words in a language (Ozumba 2018). And these etymological underpinnings are best understood and used by the native speakers than any outsider could do.

How does this matter to philosophy? Ozumba (2004) informs us that it is language that makes philosophy possible. This means that philosophy is impossible without language. This is because philosophy is concerned with truth, ideas, concepts, knowledge and reality, which are best apprehended with language.

Language therefore matters to philosophy because everything concerning the activity of man originates in thought (thinking about ideas). But ideas must be verbalised to make meaning. Language and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, feelings and desires, by means of a system of sound symbols, needs to be externalised for its semantic import to be realized (Ozumba 2004, p.119).

This brings us into the heart of this discourse. In what language must a philosopher communicate his ideas – is it in indigenous or in foreign language? This question is critical to the development of philosophy, albeit, African philosophy.

African Philosophy and Indigenous Languages

It is incorrect to say that philosophy started with the Greeks. It is not also true to claim that philosophy is wholly Western or European. In the realm of knowledge acquisition rudimentary ideas are attached to geographical demarcations. In world histories, there are English, Greek, German, Chinese, African and other historical creations that distinctly reveal that philosophy and its language should be culture based. This is the reason most Western scholars and philosophers concentrated on viewing realities from their cultural perspectives. The languages of writing and recording were cultural and societal based. However, at the epochal study of philosophy, most of the opinions and contentions were not handed down in other languages except the authors' native languages. The issue is how did other people and nations understand their opinions and worldviews? It was through translations. This implies that people who became interested had to study the language of these authors and cultures to enable them to inform and communicate with others. These are the traditions, histories and evolutions of philosophies.

In African philosophy, not much emphasis has been placed on the importance of language in transmitting African philosophy. Many African scholars believe that language is not really an essential component of the art of doing African philosophy. In fact, Ozumba (2015) avers that:

African philosophies do not have to decolonize the basic concepts of philosophy or employ African languages in order to establish the originality of African philosophy... The use of concepts coined in a Western language does not mean that African interpretation cannot be unrobed using foreign concepts (p.172, 182).

That is to say, there is no need to do African philosophy in indigenous languages because foreign languages have developed enough to accommodate African philosophical thought. In fact, those who desire to do African philosophy in indigenous languages have to recognize that serious work needs to be done on African indigenous languages to enable firmly established philosophical conceptualisation (Ozumba 2015). A more radical position was taken by John Tucker (1981) who declared that language was not an “expression of inner life”. He argues that:

The sole function of language could not be that of making public some private event which is the meaning of what is uttered or written down... In speaking and writing we are not ‘expressing our inner life’, rather, we are engaging in a social setting, with an aim which is understood by the participants (Tucker 1981, p.19).

In other words, the role of language is to enable wider participation in a philosophical discourse and not necessarily to communicate meanings. If language does not serve to publicize the thought of the philosopher, then it would be useless insisting that African philosophers should do philosophy in indigenous languages. What they should do is express their ideas in globally enfranchised languages of the colonialists “for ease of cross-cultural understanding” (Ozumba 2015, p.182).

The Nigerian philosopher Innocent Asouzu also takes a similar view. His argument is that the advocacy to do African philosophy in African indigenous languages would rather undermine the growth and advancement of African philosophy. According to him, “all who are involved in a communication process always leave out something un-communicated and always have something to learn from each [other]” (Asouzu 2007, p.183). For him, “in all situations involving human beings, no meaning is complete or perfect and the same can be said of meaning thereby intended” (Asouzu 2007, 182). Asouzu (2007) further argues that meaning does not become clearer because it has been transliterated in either foreign or native language and that philosophical reasoning “transcends language itself” (Asouzu 2007, p.185).

He maintains that in order to effectively communicate philosophical meanings, philosophical ideas have to be seen as missing links and held as being complementary to ideas in other linguistic traditions (Asouzu 2007, p.182). In other words, what one communicates in his native language is only half truth until such is complemented in foreign languages. It is here evident that Asouzu appears to pin the authenticity of African philosophy to the linguistic configurations of Western and Eastern philosophies.

But the point advocated in this paper is that, for African philosophy to advance, African philosophers must start writing in indigenous African languages. The point we raise here is that doing African philosophy in African indigenous languages would not disenfranchise African philosophical thoughts. And in doing African philosophy in indigenous languages the African philosopher would be articulating African ideas in authentic manner. The role of the African philosopher is to examine basic assumptions, prevalent opinions and doctrines in African society in order to awaken the consciousness in the society towards authentic living. But in doing this, “the philosopher must employ the language which the people understand and use” (Ogunmodede 1998, p.5) in order to make them interested, informed and willing participants in the discourse and to effectively communicate his or her ideas to the society. This means that language of philosophizing matters. This importance is expressed thus:

“Language of African philosophy” is intended not just for the African matters and issues that an African philosopher analyzes but also the chosen instrument of his critical analysis or interpretation, as well as the meaningful transmission, understanding and relevance of his findings to his society (Ogunmodede 1998, p.8).

The language in how one does philosophy matters because it serves as the instrument for analysis and interpretation as well as for effective transmission to the intended society. Language of doing philosophy is quite essential because philosophy is culture-bound. It is for this reason philosophies in Europe and Asia are expressed in the indigenous languages of those societies. In China, Germany, France, Britain, and Russia their philosophers express their philosophical thoughts in Chinese, German, French, English and Russian, respectively. There has not been an occasion where a Chinese philosopher or German philosopher transmitted his philosophical knowledge in Efik, Annang or Akan language. They always express their thoughts in their native tongue. The reason for this is not far-fetched. The ideas of these philosophers are rooted in the conceptual frameworks in their cultural settings and, thus, can only be authentically expressed in the language of those cultures. In addition, the philosophers are aware that they are analyzing cultural issues, to that extent that they are also addressing the people in their societies. To do this, therefore, in a language foreign to their societies would undermine the capacity of their philosophical ideas to achieve the intended purposes.

The African philosopher cannot afford to deviate from this course or pattern. African episteme is embedded in African indigenous languages. Several aphorisms, concepts, ideas, notions, idioms, and principles that the African philosopher uses to do African philosophy are embedded in the wider corpus of African languages, and their meanings are best expressed in those indigenous languages. Moreover, the African philosopher does his or her thinking in his native language but only translates it into foreign language when he or she transliterates into written form. A number of scientific studies have demonstrated that thinking is done essentially in the indigenous language of the thinker. Even when one is quite fluent in foreign language, he or she does his or her thinking in the native language that he or she was born. Therefore, one can say that an African philosopher of Efik origin basically does his or her philosophical thinking in Efik language. When he or she transliterates his or her thought into written form with foreign language, he or she barely translates the thought from his or her native language to the foreign he or she is transmitting the thought. In doing this, the philosopher crosses language paradigms and incurs problems in the process. William Quine refers to this problem in his theory of indeterminacy of translation. In the second assumption, he held that “there exists the possibility that sentences exist in one language without its equivalent in another language” (Ozumba 2002, p.77). The logic and conceptual framework that defines one language may differ from that of other languages. For example, between Annang and Ibibio languages there exist some semantic differences. Basically, there is no ‘L’ expression in Ibibio language whereas there is the ‘L’ alphabet in Annang language. Hence, the Annang thinker would experience serious difficulty transliterating his or her L-endowed thought into Ibibio language; much of the transliterated thought would lose meaning. Ozumba also makes similar observations about Igbo and English languages.

The way we key our sentences to non-verbal stimulations in Igbo language and that in English language are similar but at the same time the inward appreciation at times differs. When in Igbo language we see a Rabbit, the non-verbal stimulation may both in English and Igbo necessitate the words “there goes the Rabbit” and ‘ne-Oke-Oyibo’ respectively. But in Igbo, because the presence of rabbit signifies one thing or the other, while the Igbo language user may really be focusing his attention on the superstitious implication of rabbit’s appearance, the English language speaker may be concerned with the mere literal presence of rabbit. And in either language the stimulation and the utterance take the same dimension but not the same signification (Ozumba 2002, p.77-78).

Martin Heidegger (2000) also made the following observation:

In the age of the first and definitive unfolding of Western philosophy among the Greeks, when questioning about being as such and as a whole received its true inception, beings were called *phusis*. This fundamental Greek word for beings is usually translated as “nature”. We use the Latin translation *natura*, which really means “to be born”, “birth”. But with this Latin translation, the originary content of the Greek word *phusis* is already thrust aside, the authentic philosophical naming force of the Greek word is destroyed. This is true not only of the Latin translation of *this* word but all other translation of Greek philosophical language into Roman. This translation of Greek into Roman was not an arbitrary and innocuous process but was the first stage in the isolation and alienation of the originary essence of Greek philosophy (p.14).

What this means is that the picture of reality viewed from the lenses of different languages may present different meanings that are valid within the axiomatic system of the languages. To translate this into another language would cause substantial loss of meaning, the very ingredient of the philosophical thought. This is what Quine was talking about with his theory of indeterminacy of translation. The African philosopher who ignores these axiomatic boundaries may essentially be committing what Mesembe Edet (2015) refers to as “descriptive chauvinism” – that is, the tendency of assuming that concepts from other philosophical traditions ask similar questions and construct responses as one’s own. In fact, there is often the problem of incommensurability incurred when an African philosopher adopts the axioms in the foreign linguistic tradition to express the thought he obviously conceived in his native language. Edet (2015) notes that this was the difficulty Kwasi Wiredu faced in attempt to decolonize the concept of truth.

... [W]hat Wiredu discovered in his effort at decolonizing the concept of “Truth” ... [was] that his native Akan, correlate the word “truth”, *nokware*, with a primarily moral connotation rather than a cognitive conception of truth [as it is obtained in European tradition] (Edet 2015, p.211).

This can also be said about *akpaniko*, Efik correlates of truth, whose connotation differs with European conception. Therefore, when one transliterates this concept, *akpaniko*, into English, such may be laden with inconsistencies in connotations and ultimately a definitive misunderstanding of the concept. In so doing, the African philosopher may have misled his audience.

Conclusion

The point emphasized in this paper is that, for African philosophy to advance, African philosophers must start writing in indigenous African languages. The African philosophers should not worry about the capacity of the indigenous languages to transmit their ideas to a wider audience. They should know that those who are interested in their ideas would seek out ways to translate them into their own languages. It is not writing their philosophical thoughts in English or French that will stimulate people's interests in their work. Great ideas can never be hidden away for long in "obscure" languages. There will always be people who will seek them out. Already much of ujamaa philosophy was written in Swahili language by Julius Nyerere. Yet it is widely studied. Thiong'o's works that were published in indigenous languages are being translated and studied. The scriptures that are foreign to us were written in Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek and Latin. African theologians and believers were compelled to learn those languages before translating same to us. And the scriptures are being translated into different African indigenous languages. It is instructive that African philosophers have adequately raised issues about the cosmos, God, humanity, morals, ideas and other phenomena. But these views and ideas can only be sustained and advanced by using African indigenous languages. In this direction, Efik philosophy, Igbo philosophy, Yoruba philosophy, and Hausa philosophy should first be written in those languages before their translations to foreign languages. This is the only sure way of communicating African philosophy.

We suggest that African philosophers should initiate means of developing their indigenous languages to enable foreigners interested in learning such indigenous languages. African philosophies should be written, documented and imparted in indigenous African languages. Philosophy students should be encouraged to learn, write and philosophize in African indigenous languages.

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