

THE PROBLEM OF LANGUAGE IN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY: AN ENIGMA

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Abstract

African philosophers who argue for a unique African identity are also greeted with the practice of communicating African philosophy largely in foreign languages. Some of these African scholars opine that there is need to redefine African philosophy in terms of the language with which it is communicated. In Nigeria, as well as other parts of Africa, the problem of language in African philosophy is raising a real concern. African philosophy is overly prided as unique by some of its proponents. Language which mirrors the culture of a people has a special role to play for African philosophy to maintain its uniqueness. Nigeria has more than two hundred distinct indigenous languages plus the use of English as a lingua franca. This paper investigates what determines the language in which African philosophy in Nigeria should be articulated. It concludes that the African scholar faces an enigmatic dilemma since the replacement of English as lingua franca by indigenous languages suffers several developmental setbacks. The paper recommends that further research and funding for research on indigenous languages and lingua franca can improve the situation.

Keywords: Language, linguistic rights, African Philosophy, Nigeria.

Introduction

The provisions of the *Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights* (1996) emphasise the equality of all languages. The linguistic

equality here portends that no language is superior to another. All languages of communication have equal rights. This equality precludes the audience or the population that uses a particular language while highlighting the right of each language to be recognised as a member of the human language community. Further to this, the *Declaration* holds that cultures and language groups have the right to an equitable presence of their languages and cultures in the global community via communications media. Emenanjo (2010b) pointing at the Article 5 of the *Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights*, 1996, emphasizes the principle that the right of all language communities are equal and independent of the legal and political status of their languages as official, regional or minority languages. The Article 15 subsection 1 of the Declaration says that "All language communities are entitled to the official use of their language within their territory."

English language, which tends to demean the *Declaration*, has been seen as one of the strongest and domineering languages of the world, suppressing other languages it comes in contact with, and threatening to push them into extinction (cf. Metcalfe & Astle, 1995). African languages, on the other hand, are seen to be underdeveloped and lacking the strength to command a large international audience. It becomes imperative to ask against this backdrop, whether or not one can justifiably say that individual African languages are to be compared to the English in terms of equality. African philosophers, though not all of them, still clamour for the use of African languages in African philosophy. The crucial concern this paper wants to address is to know what determines the language in which African philosophy should be articulated. In the face of the on-going, should the adoption of English language as a vehicle to communicating African philosophy in Nigeria still be maintained? Should indigenous

languages, or any selected one, or one newly created from the available indigenous ones, replace English in the role of communicating the most intrinsic feelings, beliefs and philosophy of a multicultural and multilingual people of Nigeria-Africa? The challenge this paper wants to address encounters an interesting problem even from the very start of this essay. Using English to address the problem of rising agitation to hasten effort in writing and communicating in indigenous languages already tilts the balance towards the weight of the foreign language. If the foreign language dominates and swallows up the indigenous language would that be an indication that the latter is inferior to the former?

Africa's chequered history of enslavement, conspiracy, betrayal, injustice, exploitation, the quest for identity and more seems to have left Africa at the mercy of other races of the world. Africa's peculiar experience is that most African languages are endangered due to the adverse impact of foreign lingua franca on their survival. Subduing African languages is sometimes perceived as a way of substantiating the claim that Africans lack rationality since language is one of the marks of rationality as it places humans above other animals. The argument goes: if humans' intellectual superiority is due to the use of language, then suppressing the language of a people equally suppresses their dignity. Foreign lingua franca was imposed for convenience and availability, and should not pose as tools for oppression and suppression, thanks to the *Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights*. The languages of Africa do not seem to be as respected as posited in the *Declaration* among the world language community.

Man as *homo loquens*: the role and importance of language

A renowned contemporary philosophical anthropologist Mondin (1985), refers to man as *homo loquens* which literally translates as the *being that speaks*, or the *talking being*. When the German critical philosopher, Kant (2006) writes about a distinguishing feature of man as a “reasonable being endowed with freedom”, the extrinsic factor that highlights this freedom and reasonability is language. Njoku (2002:105) accentuates the fact that the possession of language is one of the distinguishing factors that raise human’s superior to other animals. Andrea Nye, from a feminist perspective, underscores the same point when she enlisted language as one of the peculiar and essential features that distinguish human beings from other species of beings that exist in the universe. Language, therefore, is one of the distinctive characters of the human species. Its importance in our day to day activities cannot be over emphasized, since language, is a *conditio sine qua non* for human existence. It seems obviously contradictory to think of any group of human species that cannot communicate using a highly developed system of language. Our language *ipso facto*, becomes the most important aspect of our being and existence. It is essential to every aspect of the human life. Humans use language to inform the people around them of how s/he feels, what s/he desires, requires and what s/he aspires for. Our decisions are communicated in language, to such an extent that we cannot communicate them without language.

No doubt language is a veritable tool for national development, used in business transactions, scientific postulations and philosophical speculations. With it, we share deep insights, relate, educate and communicate with one another in the human community. Humans communicate their most intrinsic feelings

and ideas and impart knowledge through the power of language. So, language is human's medium of communication and learning. Thus, man, *homo loquens*, obviously has been identified as the being that possesses language. Human language according to Emenanjo&Ojukwu (2012) is natural language and is uniquely distinguished from that found in other animals because the human alone is both a reasoning animal and an animal capable of reasoning. Other animals, they say, may squeak and blabber, but only the human can speak.

Njoku (2002) maintains that language mirrors the culture of the society that speaks it. Consequently language is not only a tool for understanding human society at large, it is also a tool for understanding specific aspects of the human society. Thus it is not contradictory to think of meaning in cultural terms: of course meaning can be cultural thanks to the syntactic and semantic implications of language. It is the only mode of communication available to various disciplines of human endeavour and most especially to philosophy. Without language there is no possibility of any meaningful philosophical endeavour. We can go on and on to appreciate the importance and role of language. Wait a minute. Do we know what language is? Do we actually mean the same thing when we use the term language? What do we mean by language?

The nature of language

Successful attempts by some prominent scholars have been made at the definition of language. Sanguinetti (1988) and Polanyi (1974) hold that language is a system of sensible oral or written signs used to establish, evoke and systematize the concepts and thoughts of human beings. Thus, language is a collection of symbols, governed by some rules, which are to convey messages between individuals or groups of individuals;

Andrea Nye describes language as a tool in the formation of metaphysical and epistemological ideas developing social and moral consciousness of a people. In *The Language Instinct*, Pinker (1995), sees language as “the product of a well-engineered biological instinct” through which human beings can shape events in each other’s brain with exquisite precision. Pinker says that language is a human instinct, wired into our brains by evolution like web spinning in spiders or sonar in bats. He gives the nature of language as “a complex, specialized skill, which develops in the child spontaneously, without conscious effort or formal instruction, and is deployed without awareness of its underlying logic”. (Pinker, 1995).Emenanjo&Ojukwu (2012) assert that “language is any system employed in giving, transmitting, receiving, sharing, exchanging or hiding information. It is made up of sounds, signals, symbols, postures, gestures, and even silence. It may be verbal and nonverbal. Language is essentially a communication system.”

Language, Society and Reality

Language, society and reality are related in some philosophically important manner. Does it matter what language a society speaks? Should conceptual meaning not have some universal overtone, in the sense that a particular language does not become a barrier to meaning? Every unit of the human society uses a specific language as a vehicle for communication. However, a different language can lead to a different conception of reality as Pinker (1995) observes that various people, with different languages, cause their speakers to construe reality in different ways. Pinker submits that “as many as there are different kinds of human beings, there are different kinds of languages through which reality is being construed.” He insists that language is a tool in the formation of metaphysical and epistemological ideas, develops the social and moral

consciousness of a people. Pinker is unequivocal in placing language as a pathway to understanding a people. The underlying logic of a language has to be made explicit especially when the language is well understood, analysed, and interpreted using the rules, logic and principles peculiar to the language itself. Through analysis of this kind, some hidden facts about a people are often revealed. Moreover, analysis takes a language to higher level; which stretches the reach of the language beyond its commonsensical boundary, thereby making it a technical, formalized and specialized enterprise. Pinker explicitly states that the effect of this enterprise is that the conception of reality, knowledge, social and moral principles that guide a people would become different. This uniqueness is expected of every language, and indeed, African languages should wave their magic bands over the issue of African philosophy for it to assume the uniqueness it has so longed for. African ethno-philosophers, hermeneutical currents and indeed several other proponents of African philosophy seem to apply the principles of linguistic uniqueness to promote the cause of African philosophy.

Nye (2004), like Pinker, shares the same idea that meaning in language is governed socially and never autonomously. She subjects language and meaning of reality to cultural bounds corroborating what is found at the heart of the later “linguistic turn” initiated by Wittgenstein. She does this by connecting Hume’s idea, that meaning is governed by custom in the form of a public language that mediates experience and ideas, to Wittgenstein’s critique of a private language. Nye also notes that Wittgenstein’s arguments against the possibility of a “private language” whereby words refer to ideas were aimed at Locke and Descartes with their assumption of mental independence. Nye (2004) concludes that as long as meanings

are determined socially, there can be "no pretence of building up a public world from subjective pre-social certainties of the sort Descartes seemed to be searching for."

According to Audi (1997), an approach to understanding the truths of reason and our justification and knowledge regarding them, builds on the undeniable connections between how we use our language - specifically, our linguistic conventions - and our knowledge of truths expressible in that language. For him, "what terms mean is a matter of convention. It depends entirely on agreement, usually tacit agreement, among the users of the relevant language, concerning the proper application of the term." (Audi, 1997)

Noddings (2006) suggests that we are products of our own culture, and that our language reflects the culture that produces us. "It is surely true that our national homeland and its language are inscribed in us," she says, and buttresses "the difficulty of adjusting to life in a culture different from that into which one was born." Groups trying to understand strangers in their midst, Noddings says, also have a hard time, and the difficulty is aggravated when strangers insist on the religious or political superiority of their own views. The point is that communication is key especially with multiple dependencies and the complexity of language, currency and culture. To a little extent, this reveals what the African peoples had been, and are still passing, through in the era of slave trade, colonialism and currently the pangs of neo-colonialism.

English Language and African Philosophy: The Nigeria Experience

Among the many conceptions of African philosophy, the view that it can reflect on the culture, worldview and experience of

the African generally is not disputed. In Nigeria, African philosophy is both a set of reflective practices rooted in culture and reason, and an academic discipline in the tertiary institutions. This, at least, has doused the raging debate on the existence or non-existence of African philosophy which was set in motion by the scholarly reactions to the publication of Placide Temple's *Bantu Philosophy* and got to its peak in the last and first quarters of the 20th and 21st centuries respectively.

English Language has become one of the greatest exports of the United Kingdom since the colonial era. At present it is the most flourishing global language ever, commanding "a massively expanding speaker population of 1,500 million worldwide" (Asiegbu, 2006). Among other world organisations, English is the political language of the United Nations Organisation and the Commonwealth of Nations. It has assumed the status of academic language since the Scientific Revolution and more prominently during the era of proliferation of computer wares, both hard and soft. Carried by Christian missionaries and colonizers into Africa, English has since the colonial era become the *lingua franca* of some African countries, including Nigeria. Seen from this light, the late Nigerian celebrated author Achebe (2012) has described English as an important unifying language. It has a large international public such that books written in English get sold and read by a wider public. English has gradually emerged as the language of power, politics and domination as perceived by citizens of the formerly colonized states of Africa. It was perceived as a tool in the hand of the colonizer to effectively control their colonies and not for the good of those colonized. Despite the merits of the use of English language, the victims of Western domination, especially Africans, perceive English and other foreign languages, as a Western racist tool for African subjugation. Consequent upon

this, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986 & 1993), for instance, does not want African children to grow up "in that imperialist-imposed tradition of contempt." Yet, due to the multiplicity of languages and tribes in Africa, and the effect of imperial colonialism and neo-colonialism, English, like a necessary evil, has consequently become imposed as the official language and medium of instruction in Nigeria.

Is it true that whoever learns a new language acquires a new soul? If it is, then many Africans who have learned some foreign languages have acquired new souls: most probably non-African souls if the language is not of African origin. If language is a reflection of a people's culture, whose culture does English language reflect when used for African philosophy? It should not be taken for granted that the constant use of a foreign language in a society adversely affects the people's conceptualisation, either partially, where there is a resistance or totally where there exists no resistance. The language of instruction of a philosophy determines where the meaningfulness of that philosophy tends. Philosophers seem divided on this issue.

Wiredu (1998) was resolute on this point by arguing that the conceptual non-neutrality of language should be a crucial philosophical concern especially when reflecting on the educational system of Africa: "Now if you learn philosophy in a given language, that is the language in which you naturally philosophize, not just during the learning period but also, all things being equal, for life. But a language, most assuredly, is not conceptually neutral; syntax and vocabulary are apt to suggest definite modes of conceptualization." The use of foreign language, English for instance, as a medium of education, says Wiredu (1998), de-Africanizes the African. On the same plane,

Hallen (2002) argues that African philosophy can only be possible when we explain, understand and give meaning to concepts using the African language. Asukwo (2009), believing that concepts are universal, does not feel Africans should stop philosophizing simply because there is no adequate African language to do so.

Njoku (2002) has observed that there is multiplicity of African languages. There is lack of linguistic unity among these languages. There is lack of an indigenous *lingua franca*. He avers that the use of foreign language to teach and impart African philosophy raises the issue of difficulty to apprehend and establish meaning. Asukwo (2009) is not sceptical whether or not a foreign language can convey the expected ideas. He rather urges that what matters is the claim such ideas make: "philosophy is not all about language but thoughts or ideas communicated through language". With reference to English, Achebe (2012) does not see any evil in the use of the language available to us to communicate and reflect on our culture, be it foreign or local.

Philosophy seems irrelevant when it is not in any way meaningful to the people whose problems it was intended to address. In Nigeria, all subjects including those with special appeal to local culture and indigenous people's worldview still have to grapple with the use of English to communicate their object and essence. There are those who feel that it does not matter in what language African philosophy is done, whereas others hold that the language of African philosophy determines the essence of that philosophy. Thus, it is good to do African philosophy in African language; but, as Njoku (2002) puts it, "how do we do that?"

Experts in African studies (Imbo, 1998; Njoku, 2002; Asukwo, 2009; Maduako, 2010; Emenanjo&Ojukwu, 2012; Rettova, 2016) say the continent of Africa can boast of about two thousand cultural groups and most with their own distinct ethnicities, religions and languages. Emenanjo and Ojukwu (2012) speaking of the 2000 languages spoken in Africa, say that Nigeria in particular can boast of about 10% of this number of languages since Maduako (2010) says there are “as many as 250 Nigerian languages”. Njoku (2002) however, points out the fact that the various languages of Africa also have dialects and in each dialect there are also subtle variations that make comprehension difficult among the groups. This situation does not promote homogeneity in doing African philosophy. Should African philosophy then be conducted in African language? Which of the indigenous African languages should become African lingua franca? Should we retain the colonially imposed foreign language as *lingua franca*? The obvious is in sight: when we use foreign languages, there is scepticism about the identity and uniqueness of African philosophy. If we use the local languages we would achieve a better understanding of the culture that is mirrored in African language. Now there are many cultural mirrors in Africa. Through which of these mirrors can the African face be clearly viewed? This is the dilemma that is proving intractable in the face of African philosophical discourse.

Rettova (2002) has observed that “since the beginning of the development of the corpus of African philosophical writing, African philosophy has been written exclusively in European languages.” Some African philosophers stress the importance of a renaissance of the method of African philosophy by advocating the use of African languages as yielding more meaningful philosophical conclusions. As welcome as this idea

seems it is inundated with challenges. It often appears difficult for a colonized mind of the African to communicate fluently in his 'endangered' language. African historical circumstances impacted negatively on the development of African languages. In fact, "African languages were ignored or even suppressed during the colonial era, so that speaking a European language became a matter of high prestige, whereas African languages were looked down upon." (Rettova, 2002).

Njoku (2002) vividly presents the foregoing problem in the opinion of its proponents; that "foreign languages distort the cultural identity and African historical struggles; they perpetuate the imbalance of power...African languages need to be delivered from the domination of European languages. The speaking of European languages continues to maintain European education, culture and art in the neo-colonial period, hence some claim that African philosophy must be done in African language".

The Nigerian curriculum in education has included three major languages of Nigeria (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) as languages to be learned in schools together with English. Also, the *Nigerian Constitution* (Chapter 5 Part 1, Section 55) also provides for the use of these native languages in conducting the National Assembly. Yet, that ideal suffers so many setbacks due to what Prof. Chris Nwodo calls "minority resentments", stemming from the fact that the minority ethnic groups in the country always feel marginalized even when it was not so intended. This resentment created some inferiority complex in the sense that acquisition of English is preferred to any local lingua franca. So, there is total lack of interest to learn these local languages as formal school subjects showing that there is a negative attitude even among Africans toward their own language. A typical

African is led to believe the stereotypical view that the African language is incapable of adequately expressing contemporary philosophical, scientific and technological thoughts. Local languages are perceived largely as horizontal codes (languages of everyday interaction and solidarity) rather than as vertical codes (languages of educational and societal access), which the colonial languages (specifically English) represented. Despite these perceptions the colonial languages are gradually taking over the horizontal codifications. Some African authors even as many of whom still write in foreign languages strongly stress the importance of a revival of African traditional thought and language. Asiegbu (2006) cites *Odenigbo* lectures as an intellectual attempt at reforming and revamping an African language and culture while repositioning it (Igbo) as one of those languages that can conveniently discuss issues of contemporary concern. *Odenigbo*, according to Asiegbu (2006), covers a range of subjects, from physics to biology, religion to ethics, medicine to politics, neuroscience to language. This demonstrates that Igbo (African) language is suitable for expressing subtle shades of meaning and its vocabularies are rich enough for describing all aspects of the human world.

Evaluation and Conclusion

That language is actually the sole mode of communication for African philosophy is not contentious. Equally unarguable is the fact that the language of African philosophy affects the meaning derivable from such philosophy. What obviously appears more dubitable than the previous statements is the determination in which language African philosophy ought to be done. The determination depends on the pragmatic values derivable from such decisions. If one wants to communicate a philosophy that mirrors the culture of the people, and he wants to address indigenous audience, the use of a foreign language does not

provide thorough meaningfulness and so should not be encouraged. If one hopes to communicate a philosophy of a people to foreign audience, the use of a foreign language would be preferred to the local one. A central lingua franca is recommended for a multicultural environment of Nigeria. The question remains that English has assumed the role of a Nigeria-African lingua franca. If culture is perspective and the English language reflects the English culture how well can English language reflect the Nigerian culture? Can there be no possibility of an African lingua franca? Evidence has shown that English, even if it was imposed on Nigeria-Africans, has come to stay especially in the 21st Century. To learn to re-create and re-construct English to suit the socio-cultural milieu of Africa will be welcome. Any research towards incorporating English into Nigeria-African thought system seems both inevitable and attractive. Inevitable, because the use of English tends to be predominant in official circles and has received more grants in research and learning and, attractive because, while the indigenous peoples of Nigeria seem incapacitated without English in daily communication, the use of native language to replace the role of English especially in official matters still has a long way to go. And, if we could not adequately communicate without using English in Nigeria, then it is commonsensical to allow the language a place in the socio-cultural and academic moulding of the Nigerian character. Consequently, English would most likely continue its role of unification of a multidimensional entity called Nigeria. Would this prestigious status of English warrant any insinuations that the language could occupy a dominant position in the midst of other languages and eventually phase out the others completely? Asiegbudo does not answer in affirmation. He argues that the same role English is playing today was played by Greek and Latin during their glorious imperial years. If Greek and Latin, in all

their magnificence could phase out, Asiegbu (2006)extrapolates, English language will, definitely, be no different. But, until then, English, with special reference to Nigeria, still wields strong influence among other languages of the world.

Recommendations

- i. Constant re-orienting of smart and intelligent Africans toward the promotion and appreciation of the use of their positive cultural values should continue.
- ii. Research grants and scholarships should be made available to researchers or students who have shown interest in the promotion of indigenous languages.
- iii. Non-governmental organisations should be encouraged to reach out to scholars interested in the local languages.
- iv. Further research on how to bridge the gap between the present use of foreign languages and the development, learning and use of Nigerian languages as lingua franca should be pursued.

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