

The possibility of African philosophy in African language(s): Reflections on W.V.O Quine's Indeterminacy of Translation

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Abstract

The language question in African philosophy arose out of frustration given that if African philosophy existed then in which language(s) should it be documented, researched and expressed? Since the end of the debate on the existence or non existence of African philosophy, which many have seen as unnecessary, some questions have been asked, such as does the use of European languages to express African philosophy not foster colonialism which some of these writings in African philosophy reject? Can European languages capture the philosophical import of language in African philosophy and/or is it possible to express African philosophy in African languages or any other languages? The answer to these questions can be delineated into two camps: the Afrocentric and the Eurocentric. In taking side with the Afrocentric, this work explores Quine's indeterminacy of translations showing how it projects African philosophy in African languages. Finally, this work will adopt the method of hermeneutics to argue that language plays a vital role in philosophical discourse and as such African philosophy should be done in African languages.

Keywords: Language, African Philosophy, Afrocentric, Eurocentric, Indeterminacy of Translations

1.0 Introduction

Language is arguably crucial to understanding the worldviews of the people who speak it. Perhaps, each language is a function of the thought and belief systems as conceived in the culture concerned. While the German student studying German philosophy for example has no problem of bilingual analysis, the African student of traditional African thought needs the help of a cross-cultural analyst. This is so because the study of African philosophy is pre-empted by historical accident. Historical facts (such as Colonialism) made African philosophy, or at least most of it, to be practiced in one foreign language or another. Although most scholars accept that language is very essential to philosophical discourse, they are however divided over the question of which language should be employed in expressing African philosophy? While some thinks that African language(s) should be employed in African philosophy (Afrocentric) others hold that European languages should be employed (Eurocentric). This works uses W.V. Quine's thesis of indeterminacy of translation to argue a case for Afrocentricism or indigenization.

The role of language in philosophical discourse cannot be overemphasized. On the meaning of language, Godwin Ozumba noted that "language is both an art and a science. An art because it requires some creative skills and ability to weave ideas together in a well strewn network of thought and as science because it is fortuitous but systematic, coherent, follows a discoverable pattern with roles and expectations."ⁱ In his "Europhone or African Memory: The Challenge of the Pan-Africanist Intellectual in the era of Globalization" Ngugi wa Thiong'O, writes that "language is a means of organizing and conceptualizing reality but it is also a bank for the memory generated by human interaction with the natural and social environments."ⁱⁱ In the narrow or specific sense of the word, language may be explained as a system of communication that enables humans to cooperate. This meaning stresses the social functions of language and the fact that humans use it to express themselves and to

influence objects or phenomena in their environment. Language as an abstract thought could be interpreted as “the distinctive exercise of the mind, and the distinctive way in which we give shape to metaphysical beliefs.”ⁱⁱⁱ Language is an essential characteristic feature of all human beings. It is a mode of communication which is employed to describe one’s feelings, emotions, desires, opinions, and advance arguments. It is also a way of expressing a deep seated view as well as settling conflicts. Language is unique to everyone, every culture and every people. Though it is a universal phenomenon but the linguistic contents differ.

Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf who have worked in the area of language, pointed out that language limits one’s thought and worldview. In their reading of Sapir and Whorf, Siobhan Chapman and Christopher Routledge noted that Sapir and Whorf held the “position that language limits, or at least influences, the way a speech community conceives of its world view and reality.”^{iv} However, despite these roles and importance attached to language, African philosophy has been denied its language. The educated (formal) African today can speak and write in western languages and not with his indigenous African languages. More embarrassing is the concept and complex nature of meaning which has become a determining factor of the African cultural symbols and sayings.

To understand the language question in African philosophy, it is pertinent to settle the question ‘what is African philosophy?’ Most definitions of African philosophy borders on the question of methodology, its contents or what it constitute and the possibility of such an enterprise called African philosophy. For instance, Paulin Hountondji defines it as “a set of texts, specifically the set of texts written by Africans and described as philosophical by their authors themselves”^v. For H.S. Staniland philosophy as “criticisms of the ideas we live by”^{vi}, our conception of philosophy is decisive in determining what we take African philosophy to be. In “African Philosophy: Yesterday and Today,” which Joseph Omoregbe published in Bodunrin, P. ed. *African Philosophy: An*

Anthology, he argued that a philosopher is, “one who devotes a good deal of his time reflecting on fundamental questions about human life or the physical universe and who frequently and habitually does this.”^{vii} And although no clearly articulated and documented philosophy exists, there is still a philosophical tradition. Worthy of note here is the recently passed debate whether there can be African philosophy or not. Today the views of the various participants are in various literary works.

2.0 Afrocentricism

The question of language in African philosophy is as old as the existence of African philosophy itself. Fasiku Gbenga in his “African philosophy and the method of ordinary language philosophy” posited that the debate over the existence or non existence of African philosophy is unnecessary and that what is necessary is, “if African philosophy exists, we should show it, do it and write it rather than talking about it, or engaging in endless talk about it.”^{viii} His work focuses on what Barry Hallen refers to as ordinary language philosophy and explains how it authenticates African philosophy as unique ‘species’ of philosophy. His aim was to put an end to the controversy on the ontology of African philosophy. As we will see in the works of Wiredu (1991), Horton (1967), Ruch (1974), Oruka (1975), Makinde (2007) Sodipo and Hallen (2002), Gbenga also affirms that:

traditional African languages are not subjected to formal analysis, interpretation and clarification. This explains why African thoughts, beliefs, world-views and their conceptions of reality are considered pre-rational, pre-logical, anti-scientific and primitive.^{ix}

For Fidelis Eleojo Egbunu the language question is a very central subject of discourse in African Philosophy. This, for him, is “consequent on the fact that the essence of language in philosophy cannot be gainsaid”^x Egbunu in his paper affirms that language plays not only a catalyzing role

in the art of philosophizing but that it occupies “an inalienable place in philosophy.” Given that philosophy is more or less about resolving “conceptual cramps” or “bottle-necks”, he noted that “indigenous languages should be given a pride of place over and against their foreign counterparts because of the obvious epistemological advantages embedded therein (especially in mother-tongues).”^{xi} In a nutshell, Egbunu’s work must be commended for its submission that “... a lot of homework need to be done in terms of advocacy and development on the low status of such languages so as to meet up with the international standard and nature of the discipline”^{xii} and his contribution to Afrocentric discourse in African philosophy. Egbunu’s work explores, though in a very small way, Quine’s indeterminacy of translation and advanced the plausibility of his conclusion by using the Igala language as a case study.

Fayemi Ademola Kazeem also agrees with Menang (2001) and Egbunu (2014) that African languages should be use in documenting African philosophy. His laudable work “The Problem of language in contemporary African philosophy: Some comments” critically discussed the contentious problem of language in contemporary African philosophy. The problem of language, according to him, centres on whether or not African languages can be used in ‘doing’ contemporary African philosophy, where ‘doing’ means teaching, writing, and researching. Kazeem’s work also revolves around the question of the extent to which words and concepts in use in traditions of philosophy outside Africa can be translated into indigenous African languages without loss of meaning. He delineated the debate into two camps; conservatives and progressives and took side with the conservatives by critically discussing the relationship between thought, language and reality. On the basis of the nexus established, as well as his conviction that the challenges occasioning the irresistibility of doing African philosophy in non-African indigenous languages are surmountable, Kazeem defends “the prospects of doing contemporary African philosophy in African language(s),”^{xiii} Today, we can also without any fear of contradiction classify his work as Afrocentric.

For Bongasu Kishani the relation between philosophy and language in Africa seems to favour the languages of written expression to the detriment of the languages of “oral” expression. Kishani’s articulation challenges the assumption that philosophy is only possible in, with, and through written languages (foreign). His work adds to the voices clamoring for change to African languages in African philosophy. In his words

... African languages should play significant roles in both the exploration of the past and in contemporary and future philosophical inquiries in Africa. In other words, the real problem is not so much to determine how far philosophy is compatible or incompatible with specific languages and with language as a whole, or vice versa, as to discern what role African languages should play within the framework of the past, contemporary and future philosophies in Africa. for if colonial experiences obliged Africans to confront this predicament without success, the contention here is that Africans cannot continue to philosophize sine die in European languages and according to European models of philosophy as if African languages cannot provide and play the same roles.^{xiv}

In line with the above premise, Kishani concludes that today more than before, both the lettered and “oral” traditions of Africa invite Africans to practice self-reliance in such matters.

In Sophie Oluwole’s submission, the oral tradition in African philosophy stresses the importance of language to African philosophy. This is so because, before documenting these folklores and sayings in foreign language (and in order not to distort the meaning of the belief) it is

better that we do the research and analysis in African language after which translations can be made to foreign languages. She avers that

Many writers have stressed the fact that language is not a philosophically neutral medium of expression. They have reminded us that apart from fundamental psychological differences, each language has imbedded in its structures a particular way of looking at reality.^{xv}

For Oyekan Owomoyela “if we wish to assert and preserve distinctly African ways of being and distinct living, we must cultivate distinctly African ways of speaking.”^{xvi} Commenting on this position, Adeseke argues that this same thought is embodied in Ayo Bamgbose’s paper title “Deprived, Endangered and Dying Languages” (1993) where he expresses the fear that our indigenous languages will go into extinction if urgent steps are not taken to address this downward trend in their usage, especially for creative writing.^{xvii}

In his own opinion, Lere Adeyemi avers that novels written in indigenous languages are more qualified to be regarded as Nigerian or National literature than novels written in English language. On this premise, he suggests that “multilingualism is not a divisive factor rather, it is a potential strength”^{xviii}. He goes further to state that: If the indigenous novels are translated into English and vice versa, they will all contribute to the shaping of the national culture and identity which will equally solve some of the linguistic problems in Nigeria.^{xix}

Eben Adeseke agrees with Femi Osofisan (1988) that African languages should be employed in writing African literatures after which translations can be made to foreign languages. A major problem, according to Adeseke, in facing this proposition of translating prose, drama and poems written in indigenous languages into English language and vice versa is the alarming mass illiteracy in our indigenous languages. Hence, he avers that:

there should be concerted efforts at making these languages taught at the earliest stages of African-child education. Policies should be put in place that will enhance the study of these languages from early stages of studentship. The orthography of such languages should be developed and expanded to accommodate new trends and words.^{xx}

Adeseke also agrees with Gabriel Okara and Chinua Achebe that the Nigerian Pidgin English should be codified, expanded and developed so as to be adopted as a language of writing African literature. Achebe (in Adeseke) posited that:

I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit new African surroundings.^{xxi}

Alena Rettova's "The Role of African Languages in African Philosophy," is a major work in understanding the place of language in African philosophy. His analysis and articulations are very commendable and instructive in querying the use of foreign languages to express African philosophy. He started his analysis of the role of language in African philosophy by recalling a paper delivered by Henry Odera Oruka entitled "Trends in African Philosophy" which he praised as an outstanding paper in understanding the different aspects of African philosophy. He examined six aspects of African philosophy, noting their use of African languages and finally opined that African language(s) is vital to an authentic African philosophy. Indeed, Rettova contends that no philosophy is actually written in African languages but sometimes sentences or even entire dialogues are transcribed or translated from African languages into foreign languages.

Ngugi wa Thiong’O is an advocate and a practitioner of the Afrocentric school of thought. On his part, he argues, in his *Moving the Centres* and *Decolonizing the Minds* that every language has its genius, it does not matter how many speakers it has. Ngugi noted that the genius of language is not dependent on the quantity of its speakers. Language, thus, is the people who speak it. In his discussion of the role of the writer in a neocolonial state, Ngugi posited that the language a writer employs in his writing determines the audience which he targets. If a writer who is writing against colonialism and neocolonialism writes in French, English, Portuguese, German etc he would be contradicting himself because he would be perpetuating and exhibiting the phenomenon which he is fighting against. Ngugi’s works will be remembered for his emphasis on the necessity of decolonizing African culture, of writing in African languages, and of returning the generative center of cultural production to the grass roots among Africa’s common folk. Finally, Ngugi sees every part of the English language, its grammatical and semantic structures as emphasizing the imperialistic ethos. Thus, to achieve decolonization, we must move the centre away from the West.

Some thinkers have stressed the need for the use of African languages as a language of instruction in schools (Afrikaans was adopted in South Africa) so much so that it became a policy of the Nigeria government, but it only remained as a policy in Nigeria and it was never implemented not even in primary schools. Commenting on the use of African language in schools, Russell Kaschula insisted that “...language informs how we teach and what we teach across disciplines.”^{xxii} The question Russell seeks to answer is “how does the indigenous knowledge that underpins African language...get reflected within curricula across disciplines, from the sciences to the humanities?”^{xxiii} When he answers in the negative, he too noted that for Africanization to be total, South African universities “should be thinking of intellectualizing selected African languages to be used as media of instruction...”^{xxiv} What led to this policy of using African language in schools may be that African leaders saw the

significance of language in carving a national identity. Obi Oguejiofor and Ngozi Ezenwa-Ohaeto posited that “language is not only the vehicle of culture; it is also very significant in constructing self-identity.”^{xxv} Thus they argued that “the excessive concentration on the use of these languages (foreign) is a hindrance to grass root communication in many African countries.”^{xxvi} They further contend that “given the pivotal importance of language in ensuring cultural identity...there is an antithesis between the quest for identity and the neglect of African language.”^{xxvii}

On the interface between language and identity, Thaddeus Menang posited in his “Which Language(s) for African Literature” that

Language and literature have both been considered as important attribute of national identity. Besides, *the nationality of any literature is, at least partly, determined by the language in which it is produced.*^{xxviii} [italics mine]

Menang’s work reexamines the question of language and identity which Ngugi, Wiredu, Wali and Oguejiofor also focused on. Menang, however, took the issue from a sociolinguistic perspective, showing that the debate is gradually becoming old fashioned and after a brief review of the various viewpoints expressed for and against African or foreign languages, he concludes that “...all Africa’s languages are viable vehicles of African literature in particular and of the African identity as a whole.”^{xxix}

Chinua Achebe posits

No man can understand another whose language he does not speak (and language here does not mean simply words but a man’s entire world-view). How many Europeans (and Americans) have our language? I do not know of any, certainly not among our writers and critics...this naturally applies also in reverse, although our position is somewhat stronger because we have a good deal of

European history, philosophy, culture etc., in books.^{xxx}

Belaboring this point, Obi Wali suggested that literary critics should learn African languages before “generalising and formulating all kinds of philosophical and literary theories,” and that “an African writer who thinks and feels in his own language must write in that language”.^{xxxi}

Thus, Wali’s thesis is that:

the whole uncritical acceptance of English and French as the inevitable medium of educated African writing is misdirected and has no chance of advancing African literature and culture. In other words, until these writers and their western midwives accept the fact that any *true African literature must be written in African languages*, they would merely be pursuing a dead end, which can only lead to sterility, uncreativity, and frustration...^{xxxii}[italics mine]

C.R. Hopgood insists that the use of Bantu languages in education and literature suggested that Africans would not learn English sufficiently to understand their subjects completely at all levels, and that a ‘linguistic rebirth’ would be needed – at least among adults – so that they could attach total meaning to English words, instead of translating them into equivalents which would often not be valid translations.^{xxxiii} L.F. Brosnahan stresses the fact that cultural context determines the language which in turn reflects those concepts that are determined by the needs, activities, and thoughts of the particular society; and that the particular society is predisposed to certain world-views because of the concepts expressed in its language. Thus, he argues, the members of the society are orientated to their linguistically biased world-view.^{xxxiv} In the same view, Austin Shelton remarks that language is the means of expressing one’s world-view, and in a certain degree limited or biased by the world-view.

If the cultures were identical except for the language, one would need only to learn the different terms for the concepts, and there would be relatively little breakdown in communication. Such is not the case however, in communication between Africans and non-Africans, where the cultures often differ greatly and where African writers attempt to express the ideas and attitudes of their own culture in the European terms. He argues further that:

...the problem facing the African writer is that the very need to use the European language is a constant reminder of matters which he may not care to be reminded of: colonialism, the Europeanisation of society, and so forth. Furthermore, he faces the problem in language itself of finding the true equivalents of many African terms. For example, Achebe in *Arrow of God* refers to the *alusi* named Ulu as a 'god'. It is not a 'god' but no proper equivalent terms exist in English. Some missionaries have called *alusi* 'devils' in order to convert the Ibo people; some young Ibo refer to *alusi* as 'angels' reflecting their desire to praise *alusi*; anthropologists tend to call *alusi* 'spirits' which is an inexact as the other translations. An *alusi* is an *alusi*...^{xxxv}

3.0 Eurocentrism

On the question of language in African philosophy, Godwin Azenabor has this to say

The question of language, as it relates to the idea of African philosophy is that, there can be no African philosophy, (so it is argued), until there is a philosophy in African language(s), not just a translation or interpretation. This is because Western philosophy (English philosophy, for example, is

written in English, Chinese philosophy is in Chinese language, French philosophy is in French language, German philosophy is in German language, the list is endless) but African philosophy (e.g. Edo, Yoruba, Igbo, Akan, etc) is still being written and communicated in foreign languages. These foreign languages, it is argued, may not depict the true picture of African philosophy. It is the indigenous languages that really take care of issues of identity, feelings, empathy and meaning...It is precisely this question of language, that has led to skepticism about African philosophy by some contemporary African philosophers. And it is precisely because of the need to reverse this trend that made some scholars to request that we write African philosophy in African languages in order to make it authentic.^{xxxvi}

Thus for Azenabor African philosophy is not alone in the use of foreign languages to communicate in African studies. "There are other disciplines such as African history, African literature, etc which are still being written and communicated in English and French"^{xxxvii} He concludes that "We need not write in African languages, in order to write authentic African philosophy."^{xxxviii} Hence "what we need is to express our thoughts in a language that is universally understandable and intelligible and to avoid foreign categories and models"^{xxxix} Azenabor reiterated this point in his "Odera Oruka's Philosophic Sagacity: Problems and Challenges of Conversation Method in African Philosophy" when he states that

This idea of African philosophy in African languages seems to reduce philosophy to semantics and philology. But philosophy is essentially the articulation of concepts rather than words. Language

is simply a medium of expression and communication, so that any language used in philosophy depends on the target audience and the reality of the situation. Furthermore, philosophy deals with ideas, which themselves precede language.^{xl}

From the above quotation, we can say that Azenabor's position is Eurocentric given that he believes that African philosophy can be done in European languages.

Kai Kresse's article "The problem of how to use African language for African thought: On a Multilingual perspective in African philosophy" does not share such convictions that African philosophy should be expressed in its indigenous languages. Though he pointed out that philosophy is wholly dependent on language, he however noted that the use of African language for African thought poses a problem because African philosophy has been shaped and influenced to a large extent by their colonial past, and it is still the European languages which govern African education and philosophy. Kresse's work focuses on how African philosophy can liberate itself from this 'colonization of thought' and how its central functions can be fulfilled by African languages. His work is critical of Oruka and Wiredu and draws an analogy from the field of literature where similar problems concerning the use of language occur. Thus, he discusses Mazisi Kunene's position in "Problems in African literature" (1992) that European languages are totally inadequate to express African philosophy and Ngugi wa Thiong'O's position in *Moving the centres*. Kresse's conclusion is that given the diversity of African culture, African philosophy is intercultural and multilingual from the outset. For him, a discourse beyond the borders of culture and language is inherently part of African philosophy.^{xli} He also conducted interviews with scholars like Wiredu on the language problem in African philosophy.

For Gabriel Okara, the idea of writing in African languages would “create pockets or localized literature in Africa and someday bring about the divisive nature of language”^{xlii}. He goes further to posit that for now English and French should be seen as Nigerian or African languages and suggests that what should be done is to “emulsify either English or French with our own native African systems or African ethics or African aesthetics”^{xliii}. If that is accepted, he feels it may culminate in a “certain form of English... that they refer to as a derivation of English” Although he accepts that writing in African languages is the best way to reach the masses, he criticizes the idea of writing in African languages as utopia since it is unattainable. His views are Eurocentric in nature.

Prah (in Rafiu) nails it on the head when he says that “Africans learn best in their own languages, the languages they know from their parents, from home... it is in these languages that they can best create and innovate”^{xliv}. Buttressing this point, Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike, thinks that when “the deep diseases” inherent in our culture is cured, most African writers will tend towards writing in indigenous languages and that before that is achieved, “what we write in borrowed Western languages will still be African if it is addressed to Africans and if it captures the qualities of African life”^{xlv}. To them, what matters most is not the languages in which the writer writes, but that the writer should be faithful to his cause by writing “beautiful and effective things” that are not obscure but are very relevant to the yearnings and aspirations of African society and that will ultimately raise their nationalist consciousness. Their view is Eurocentric in nature given their submission that

We would like to call an end to the debate over the use of Western languages by African writers. The use of these languages is a part of the problem of contemporary African culture. Ideally, African literature should be written in African languages. But the same historical circumstance that presently

compel African nations to use Western languages as their official languages also compel African writers to write in them until these historical circumstances are changed – and we hope they change soon – it is pointless debating whether or not to use these Western languages in our literature.^{xlvi}

According to Afolayan, the problem of language in African philosophy today is as a result of the colonization of Africa by the Westerners. The language issue in African philosophy, Afolayan argued, has a curious historical antecedent. A specific dimension to the general colonial and cultural incidence which brought foreign accretions in contact with African belief systems as manifested in the intellectual sphere say in African philosophy, which therefore becomes complicit in the uncritical infusion of foreign categories of thought into African thought systems.^{xlvii} For him, we need not write in African languages rather before translating a native's language to his own language, the linguist must first interrogate the ontological suggestiveness of his own language so as not to unwittingly impose the ontological suggestiveness of its own language on the people he is translating.

Kwasi Wiredu contends that the question of the appropriate mode of doing African philosophy is as a result of the western intrusion into the African society. Wiredu notes that colonialism "has caused a wide-spread involuntary intermixing of Western and African intellectual categories in the thinking of contemporary Africans. Common sense alone dictates that we Africans of the immediate post-independence era should try to unravel the conceptual entanglement."^{xlviii} Thus, the way forward is for Africans to view their own philosophic inheritance in its true lineament. Although Wiredu sees the harm of colonialism, he however believes that there are still some positive elements which we should embrace. He writes that "it seems to me likely that any African synthesis for modern living will include indigenous and Western elements, as well, perhaps, as some from the East."^{xlix} According to Wiredu, the real question is "how are

Africans in the contemporary world to set about the project of exploiting the resources of philosophy available to them from their own and other cultures?"ⁱ In other words the real issue concerns the right way of conceiving and advancing African philosophy in our time. The urgency and importance of this question is seen in the light of our historical situation and the fact that African intellectuals are trained in Western style education. Thus, Wiredu proposes the methodology of conceptual decolonization as a precondition for doing African philosophy.

What then is conceptual decolonization? Wiredu sees conceptual decolonization as "the elimination from our thought of modes of conceptualization that came to us through colonization and remains in our thinking owing to inertia rather than to our own reflective choices."ⁱⁱ It is the interrogation, through sustained critical reflection, of the foreign categories of conceptualization which Africans inherited through colonization. This is a difficult task because what we call African philosophy is mostly done in western languages. Wiredu noted that:

Languages (in their natural groupings) carry their own kinds of philosophical suggestiveness, which foreign as well as native speakers are apt to take for granted. If, by virtue of a colonial history, you are trained right from the beginning in a foreign language and initiated thereby into the professing of philosophy, then certain basic ways of thought that seem natural to native speakers might become natural to you too. Consequently, you might not even realize that those ways of thinking may not be all that natural or, if your own language is radically different, even coherent from the stand-point of your own language.ⁱⁱⁱ

Thus, Wiredu holds that the antidote to this impediment is to do African philosophy in African vernacular even if African philosophers still have to expound their results in some Western language.^{liii} He tried to specify the

influence that the language which we use to do philosophy has on the philosophical conclusions at which we arrive. Indeed, the issues themselves are sometimes language-dependent.

It is a historical accident that the first writers on Africa and Africans (missionaries, anthropologist, ethnographers and others) were Western scholars and they wrote in their own languages. Still, it must be recognized that:

the influence of language on philosophical thinking is not irreversibly deterministic, and it is possible for philosophers, if need be, to resist the suggestiveness of even their own languages or at least to become reflectively aware of it. If they can do this with respect to their own vernaculars, they can do it with respect to any second language in which they may have occasion to philosophize, even if by dint of historical colonization.^{liv}

Wiredu does not share the view that humans are prisoners to language, and as such there will be a ground for cross-cultural understanding. In fairness to Wiredu, he does not accept a strong indeterminacy in translation as implied by Quine but only in weak or partial noncognitive cases. Now the resort to African languages is not to emphasize the African difference. Why then do we call for this decolonization? Wiredu's response is that:

the situation in African philosophy that calls for a decolonizing reversal is due to the superimposition of Western intellectual categories on African thought elements. To remove the colonial encrustation is to bring oneself to a vantage point for viewing the African thought materials in their true light...^{lv}

To construct a “good African philosophy” Wiredu provides a catalogue of the concepts which the African philosopher must decolonize and domesticate. These concepts include:

Reality, Being, Existence, Object, Entity, Substance, Property, Quality, Truth, Fact, Opinion, Belief, Knowledge, Faith, Doubt, Certainty, Statement, Proposition, Sentence, Idea, Mind, Soul, Spirit, Thought, Sensation, Matter, Ego, Self, Person, Individuality, Community, Subjectivity, Objectivity, Cause, Chance, Reason, Explanation, Meaning, Freedom, Responsibility, Punishment, Democracy, Justice, God, World, Universe, Nature, Supernature, Space, Time, Nothingness, Creation, Life, Death, Afterlife, Morality, Religion.^{lvi}

4.0 W.V.O. Quine’s Indeterminacy of Translations

Given the persistence of the debate on the language question in African philosophy, this column presents a subtle defence of Afrocentricism using Quine’s indeterminacy of translation thesis. My aim is to show how it projects African philosophy in African language(s).

Willard Orman van Quine (1905-2000) writes in his *Word and Object* (hereafter referred to as *WO*) that

manuals for translating one language into another can be set up in divergent ways, all compatible with the totality of speech dispositions, yet incompatible with one another. In countless places they will diverge in giving, as their respective translations of a sentence of the one language, sentences of the other language which stand to each other in no plausible sort of equivalence however loose.^{lvii}

Elsewhere in his *Pursuit of Truth* (hereafter referred to as *PT*) Quine writes that

A manual of Jungle-to-English translation constitutes a recursive, or inductive, definition of a translation relation together with a claim that it correlates sentences compatibly with the behavior of all concerned. The thesis of indeterminacy of translation is that these claims on the part of two manuals might both be true and yet the two translation relations might not be usable in alternation, from sentence to sentence, without issuing in incoherent sequences.^{lviii}

Buttressing this point in these books and other works such as his *Ontological Relativity*, Quine presents a thought experiment of a jungle linguist who unaided by previous works starts his translations from the scratch. Quine calls him a Radical Translator. This translator relies only on the overt behavior of the native. Quine argues in line with his naturalistic view of language and the translator's reliance on stimulus meaning and stimulation showing that it is impossible to determine the actual meaning of 'Gavagai' given the translator's ineptitude to go beyond the native's stimulus behavior. Quine, it will be recalled, has previously attacked the notion of synonymy and the distinction between analytic and synthetic statements. He now argued that there is no fact of the matter to be discovered in translation. That there is no fact of the matter led Quine to ontology.^{lix}

Quine who has earlier said that no statement is immune to revision, has continued to revised the doctrine of indeterminacy of translation in several of his writings and replies to critics. It is imperative to state at this juncture that there have been several commentaries on Quine's indeterminacy of translation and Quine has also taken his time to attend conferences on him replying and listening to his critics. For instance, in *Words and Objections: Essays on the Work of W.V. Quine* edited by Donald Davidson and Jaakko Hintikka we have fifteen critical papers on Quine published alongside Quine's replies. In this work and other works, Quine

continue to formulate and insist on his indeterminacy of translations as formulated in his *WO, PT, OR* etc

Now given the plausibility and tenability of Quine's doctrine, it follows that the earliest writers on African philosophy which some have classified as ethno philosophers where radical translators who impose the categories of thought as given in the languages with which they write on the people of Africa. Perhaps, the problem of meaning which is encountered in African philosophy is arguably as a result of the usage and imposition of foreign languages in African philosophy. Given that we cannot successfully translate from one language to another without indeterminacy, it becomes crystal clear that the muddles in African philosophy are as a result of indeterminacy in the translations. Again, following Quine, it is arguable that the first group of writers on African philosophy such as Placid Tempels, John Mbiti, Alexis Kagame, and Marcel Griaule etc. imposed the logic of the language with which they write on the native by discussing, translating and documenting what they paraded as "African philosophy" in their own languages. For instance, Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy* to a large extent has been found to be non-African. Perhaps, African philosophy ought to be directed to Africa's problem, Tempels tells us that his *Bantu Philosophy* is for the White evangelizers who might be interested in the evangelization of Africa. Hence, critics might asked whether there is anything left to be called African in his writing since his aim, language and audience where non-Africans. Thus, ethno-philosophers where radical translators relying on the observable behavior of the native's assent and dissent and given their insistence on writing in non African languages.

Other aspects of African philosophy in Henry Odera Oruka's "Trends in African Philosophy" where not also written in African languages. The scholars in these aspects of African Philosophy may at times pick a concept from African language and analyze it in western language (such as Sodipo and Hallen's use of *Mo* and *Gbagbo*, Mbiti's use of *Sasa* and *Zamani* etc) in which case their conclusion is arguably facile.

Consider for example the unnecessary debate between Bedo Addu and Kwasi Wiredu on the Akan concept of Truth. Imagine they writing in Akan language, like Ngugi in Gikuyu language, this problem of translation and meaningfulness of Akan notion of truth will not have arise in the first place.

5.0 Conclusion

There is no gain emphasizing that language plays a role in philosophizing and influences the conclusion of an argument. Both parties, the Afrocentric school of thought and the Eurocentric school of thought seems to agree that African languages will play a role in building African philosophy, their diverge however, seems to be that the Eurocentric scholars do not see the possibility of African philosophy in African languages. It is possible to do African in African languages although it may not be easy in the beginning given the current situation in Africa, where those who parade themselves as African philosophers do not even know how to speak nor write in their languages. This is indeed laughable and it calls to mind the derogatory and realistic description of Africa by the World number one man, Donald Trump that Africa is a “shithole” continent. Sad but true, if we do not break away from the use of these European languages in expressing African philosophy we may continue to be a ‘shithole’ continent in the eye of Trump and continue to impose western paradigm of rationality as given in the ontological suggestiveness of their language on Africa.

From Quine, we have learnt that translation of African traditional thought to non African languages is indeterminate given that we cannot have linguistic or semantic commensurability. Hence, EITHER African philosophy is done in African languages or there is ‘NO’ African philosophy since what we will have will be philosophy as philosophy.

ENDNOTES

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