

Draft paper for the Africa Knows! Conference; panel D27a

Anthony Okeregbe

AFROPHONY AND THE LANGUAGE OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY: REFLECTION ON PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

Abstract

Some recent reflections on African Studies have tended to present African Philosophy as the foundation upon which a proper understanding of contemporary African experiences could be laid. Proponents of this position have gone further to argue that a reconfiguration of African Studies could be attained in this sense. However, against the background of colonial linguistic determinism in Africa, one cannot speak of genuine African Philosophy—by which is meant the examination of the fundamental assumptions about the nature of reality in Africa and the ideas by which Africans live—without considering language as the vehicle of these assumptions and ideas as well as their investigation. In this regard, this paper explores selected works of Sophie Oluwole and Alena Rettova as cases in point to examine the problems and prospects of doing African Philosophy in African languages and what they portend for African Studies. This study adopts a qualitative research approach, relying on hermeneutical analysis in the examination of these selected works. Drawing insights from theorists like Lee-Whorf, Vygotsky and others who posit an intrinsic connection between experience, thought and language, this paper argues that multiplicity of language use in African Philosophy reflects the multiple expressions of the African experience. It argues further that whilst doing African philosophy in African language may be viable, it also raises some critical questions by way of reflection.

Keywords: Afrophone Philosophy, Linguistic determinism, hermeneutics, African Philosophy,

Brief Profile

Anthony Okeregbe, Ph.D, is a Senior Lecturer in Philosophy, Department of Philosophy and affiliate researcher, Institute of African and Diaspora Studies, University of Lagos. He earned his doctorate in 2004. His teaching and research interests are on Philosophy of Religion, Phenomenology/Existential Philosophy and Contemporary African Philosophy. Dr. Okeregbe is also Member, University of Bayreuth, African Multiple Cluster of Excellence and member of the African Studies Association of Italy (ASAI). His new interest in African Studies has drawn him into research projects on knowledge production, religious life in Africa, amongst others.

Introduction

Given the trending quest for reconfiguration of African Studies in order to reflect the multiplicity and multiform nature of the African experience, it is inevitable not to bring in African Philosophy. The deep consideration for African Philosophy rests on the truism that any inquiry about African ontological schemes, its various categories of knowledge, and its diverse moralities as well as their effect on African societies down the ages, would be fruitless without a proper understanding of African philosophy. By proper understanding of African philosophy is meant a sort of recognition of the indigenous intellectual superintendence, or foundation upon which, studies out about Africa could be carried out or built (Falaiye, 2017). This itself would be tricky, for how does one understand African philosophy without first investigating the ontological schemes, epistemological structures and the systems of morality of the different African peoples? Genuine African philosophy, it seems, would be the examination of the fundamental assumptions about the nature of reality in Africa and the ideas by which Africans live. However, when one considers Africa's colonial linguistic heritage, and its instrumentality in scholarship, politics, diplomacy, business, and in short, in identifying and situating Africa in the global community (Mazrui and Mazrui, 1998: 79; Wa Thiong'o, 1986:16), one cannot speak of genuine African Philosophy without considering language as the vehicle of these assumptions and ideas as well as their investigation. In other words, language has a major role to play in the contemplation of African philosophy. Although quite a number of philosophers and scholars have discussed the over-arching relationship between language and African thought system, two scholars stand out in their postulations on the role of African language to African philosophy: Sophie Oluwole and Alena Rettova.

To, this end, this paper explores selected works of Sophie Oluwole and Alena Rettova as cases in point to examine the problems and prospects of doing African Philosophy in African languages and what they portend for African Studies. This study adopts a qualitative research approach, relying on hermeneutical analysis in the examination of these selected works. Drawing insights from theorists like Lee-Whorf, Vygotsky and others who posit an intrinsic connection between experience, thought and language, this paper argues that multiplicity of language use in African Philosophy reflects the multiple

expressions of the African experience. It argues further that whilst doing African philosophy in African language may be viable, it also raises some critical questions. These critical questions are examined in the light of criticisms from a few contemporary African philosophers.

Language, Thought and Reality

One of the most profound reflections bordering on language and thought has come from the psychologist Lev Vygotsky, who contends that language plays a central role in the cognitive development of the individual. While plotting a trajectory of language, thought and culture in the cognitive development of children, he posits that whereas cognitive development is dependent on language, the interaction of both is culturally and environmentally based (Vygotsky 1962). This position, which is set against the reductionist psychology in the S-R approach that undermines “the study of context and culture in which the individual develops,” argues that “Until the child is able to learn or relate his/her actions to the social-environmental contingencies language cannot be acquired” (Burkholder and Pelaez, 2000: 7). Thus, human development is a socially mediated process through which children acquire ideas (be they values, beliefs and problem solving techniques) or learn from interaction with others in society. The connection this has with philosophy is that the social expression of thought, that is, the communication with the outside world, has to do with how an individual – namely the child, is able to internalise the logical structure of language made available by interaction with the culture or environment of that individual. Accordingly therefore, “higher mental functions are products of psychological tools such as verbal language, sign language, and logic” (Ibid., 8). In the same vein, Benjamin Lee-Whorf observes that the relationship between language and thought is one of utmost relativity grounded on the diversity of experiences. According to Whorf, studies in human languages reveal that the forms of a people’s thought are rule-governed by unconscious laws of pattern, which differ from language or rather language is a system of thought expressing the bundle of knowledge acquired from experience with nature. Whorf explains: “There is no one metaphysical pool of universal thought. Speakers of different languages see the cosmos differently, evaluate it differently, sometimes not by much, sometimes widely. Thinking is relative to language learned” (Lee-Whorf, 1956: v).

Thus in this identified relationship between language, thought and reality, language becomes the basis of any philosophy. In the quest for meaning there is the interplay between the experienced reality which forms the thought-content of the philosopher's task and the language through which this thought is expressed. In relation to philosophic activity, therefore, where thought and language are absent, philosophy cannot exist. Thought is the vehicle with which the self is lifted to transcendence and consciousness. It is also the instrument of objectivity; that which makes it possible for man to reflect on his self as distinct from the non-self. Yet, this thought is able to express itself only in a language. It follows from this analysis that the structure of one's language shapes one's thought. And because there are many languages, the shaping of the thought of the individual would be many; hence the principle of linguistic relativism.

The language problematic in African Philosophy

The articulation of the language problematic in African philosophy has been made possible through the agency of the Hermeneutic school of African philosophy. Although Oruka identifies this trend in his later classification and addition of two other philosophical currents in the trends in African philosophy (Oruka, 1990), Serequeberhan, in his book, *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy: Horizon and Discourse*, posits that the progress of African philosophy lies with the cultural development of the hermeneutical perspective (Serequeberhan 1994, 2016). For want of a brief analysis, the hermeneutical perspective in African philosophy seems not to be as rigid as the professional school, for its standing in African philosophy is also somewhat controversial. Whilst Chimakolam, in his essay on the History of African Philosophy, describes this school as a school which seeks to study African philosophy "through interpretations of oral traditions and emerging philosophical texts" (Chimakolam, 2018:), Bekele Gutema asserts that this school was inspired by the 20th century philosophers Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer (Gutema, 2014). Concerning Gutema's position, some major proponents of the Hermeneutical school of African philosophy would want to dissociate themselves from the continental European heritage of hermeneutics attributed to Heidegger and Gadamer. Notwithstanding, Fayemi, in his brief analysis of the derivation of hermeneutics as a tool of investigation in African philosophy, writes: "In African philosophy, the concept of hermeneutics refers to the

methodology of achieving a deeper understanding of materials such as symbols, culture, language and history through detailed interpretation. It is the method of understanding some most probably, lost ideas through careful interpretation of the socio-historical background that produced them” (Fayemi, 2016:7). Owolabi grants privilege to hermeneutics as a tool for revealing “the hidden meanings embedded in the materials provided by the sages” (Owolabi, 2001: 153).

Regarding this approach of revealing hidden meanings or wisdom in African philosophy two scholars stand out in the language problematic. One is Sophie Oluwole and the other is Alena Rettova. Whereas Oluwole fits into the hermeneutical school described by Chimakolam above, Rettova is representative of the tradition described by Gutema – namely, the tradition which seeks to interpret and understand African past and present through a critical analysis of lived experiences. Where both candidates of the hermeneutical school seem to be in accord is on the possibility of doing African philosophy by analysing African ideas expressed in and by African languages. The Rettovan notion of Afrophony seems to capture this way of doing African philosophy.

Oluwole on the philosophicality of oral literature

Although trained in the Analytic tradition of her universalist colleagues, Oluwole does not fit herself into the strait jacket of philosophical currents identified by Odera Oruka. Straddling between a professional philosopher and a scholar in the degraded hermeneutical school, Oluwole sets out to debunk the claims of scholars who derided African culture as one bereft of sound, philosophical tradition. She argues that to posit that African Philosophy does not exist, one must examine the language and culture of the African people and the ideas expressed, and then on the basis of inferences drawn, conclude that African Philosophy does not exist. And since the critics of African Philosophy had not done that, she decided to test the efficacy of the analytic tradition she was schooled in, by critically examining her native Yoruba culture as an example of genuine African Philosophy.

In reaction to all the charges made against African tradition of thought by the diverse philosophical currents, Oluwole insists that the only way by which the philosophical nature

of ancient African tradition of thought can be inferred is “through the direct study of African oral texts” (Oluwole, 1999: 100). She pushes her proposal further by arguing thus: “The thesis that ‘strict’ philosophy never existed in ancient African societies must be based on proofs from extensive studies of several actual oral texts in *different African languages*” (emphasis mine). Repositories of these texts are found in the custody of praise singers, the groits, the babalawos, and in proverbs, amongst others. The use of proverbs is very instructive in this regard because in its brevity it captures the essence of a philosophical narrative.

Although proverbs do not possess the argumentative detail and explanatory power of a philosophical treatise, they have been recognised in many traditional societies as vehicles of folk wisdom. The Yoruba, for instance, in bringing out the powerful conciseness that characterizes a proverb, describe a proverb with this vivid imagery: *‘Owe l’essin oro, oro l’essin owe. Ti oro ba sonu owe l’afin wa.* (Proverbs are the vehicles of words, words are the vehicle of proverbs. When words are lost we use proverbs to search for them). The Igbo, expressing the same philosophical adroitness in a proverb, say: Proverb is the oil with which words are eaten. G. L. Huxley, in his explanation of the philosophical function of proverbs, states: “Proverbs express wisdom pithily... In traditional societies proverbs have an educational function, preserving thought inherited from the past and guiding conduct in the present” (Huxley, 1981: 313).

To demonstrate that genuine philosophy existed, and still exists in African societies, Oluwole sets out to examine proverbs to extract issues of philosophical concern. In her article titled article, “Culture, Nationalism and Philosophy,” Oluwole presented the following set of proverbs as candidates for philosophical exploration.

1. Ajaajo o je okunrin o lomun,
Okunrin lomun, omi ni ko si ni'be;
Omi si wa ni'be, ko to omo mun ni.
(The roving life of a man deters the growth of his breasts;
Is not that he has no breasts at all,
But that his breast milk,
Is insufficient to feed his offspring.)
2. Ogbon odun ni, were eemii
(Wisdom of this year is foolishness in the course of time.)

3. Bayi ni a nse n'ibi, eewo ibo mii
(The custom of this land is abomination in another place.)
4. Omode gbon, agba gbon, ni a fi d'ale Ife
(Children are wise, elders too are wise, this is the basis on which primordial existence was structured.)
5. Bi a ba non gongo ogbon si nkan ti ko ba to o,
ki a fi were die ti ese.
(If reason is stretched to its limit,
Then folly becomes inevitable.)
6. Eni mon yi ko mon t'ohun,
Adia fun Orunmila,
Ti yio ko ifa lowo Amosun omo re.
(He who knows one thing is ignorant of another,
This is why Orunmila had to learn from Amosun his offspring.)

In her analysis of these proverbs, Oluwole asserts that “The first is an analysis of language to remove ambiguities that generate half truths. The second through the sixth stress the relativity of knowledge and wisdom in terms of time, place, age, reason and situation” (Oluwole, 1997). By her reckoning, the implication is that “In each of these pieces there is evidence of a critical attitude, elements of argument and caution against unjustifiable claims of absolute certitude (Ibid.).

Oluwole stretches this further when she examines the sayings of Orunmila in *Socrates and Orunmila: Two Patron Saints of Classical Philosophy* (2014). In this classic work in which she carves out a detailed and comprehensible comparison between Socrates and Orunmila, she posits that the language of philosophy need not be in the articulate and discursive prose of professional philosophers a la , Plato and Aristotle. Citing Durant (1926) who pointed out that the language of Socrates was reported to have contained poems, metaphors, parables, myths (Oluwole, 2014:1), she suggests that the Ifa literal corpus, wise sayings of which have been attributed to Orunmila, are extant literature of Yoruba philosophy (Ibid. 3).

Oluwole’s point of argument here is this: if Socrates’ submissions are acclaimed as genuine philosophy, Orunmila’s missives in the Ifa corpus are no less philosophical in whatever sense. Just as Socrates, who did not produce any written work, Orunmila also passed on his

ideas to his disciples without writing them down. If each of them expressed their profound thoughts in the oral form, and delved into deep reflections about being, knowledge, value, religion, then Orunmila deserves to be recognised as a philosopher like Socrates who is said to be the father of western philosophy.

Further on, she presents verses from both the Dialogues and Ifa corpus to illustrate the profundity of thought contained in the postulations of both ancient thinkers. On the nature of truth, whereas Socrates stated in the dialogue *Philebus*: "But the highest truth is that which is eternal and unchangeable. And reason and wisdom are concerned with the eternal," Orunmila, in Osa-Otura states: "Truth is the word that can never fail...Truth is the word that can never be corrupted (Ibid. p. 56).

Concerning epistemic fallibility or the limits of human knowledge, Socrates stated in *Gorgias*: "For my position has always been, that I myself am ignorant of how things are." And in *Apology* recounts: "And I am called wise for my hearers always imagine that I myself possess the wisdom which I find wanting in others." Comparatively, Orunmila has this to say: "No wise person can tie water unto the edge of a cloth wrapper. No knowledgeable person knows the number of sands. No traveller can get to the end of the world. A sharp knife cannot carve its own handle" (Ibid. p. 57). On the clarification of ideas, Socrates states in *Apology*: "If I say the unexamined life is not worth living, you are still not likely to believe me," whereas Orunmila in Owonrin Meji counsels: "To establish sound wisdom, we must first engage in serious reflections to remove the seeds of confusion. Cogent decisions are results of deep thought about the concept and beliefs we live by" (Ibid., p. 57). Whereas Socrates is alleged to have stated concerning human destiny: "Your destiny will not be allotted to you; but you will choose your genius; and let him that draws the first lot have the first choice, and the life which he chooses shall be his destiny," Orunmila, in Otura Meji, says: "Every human being sent by the Omnipotent to the earth must go before Orisa to choose the blessing he desires with this condition that he cannot choose more than one blessing" (Ibid., p. 61). On virtue, Socrates says in the *Republic*: "Then virtue is the health and beauty and well-being of the soul, and vice, the disease and weakness and deformity of the same. They themselves care only for making money, and are as indifferent as the pauper to the cultivation of virtue" (Ibid. p. 83), on the same issue Orunmila, in Oyeku Meji, says: "Raise it up, pull it down, twist it as you may, the essence does not change. What

matters most is iwa (good character/virtue). You may be wealthy, have many children and build several houses; all come to naught if you lack good character” (Ibid.).

Beyond this Oluwole dedicates a generous section to the explication of African philosophy in its most profound grandeur. With a long verse from Chapter three, quote 12 of Owonrin meji, Oluwole explains the philosopher-king theory according to Ifa. She provides what she calls a literal structure of the said verse, subjects it to hermeneutical analysis in order to demonstrate that the Ifa position of the philosopher-king theory is as rational as the one rendered in Plato’s *Republic* (p. 105-107).

Having analysed the inherent philosophical wisdom in the oral text cited, Oluwole submits that the message in such texts goes to “western-trained scholars who wrongly believe that the adoption of western ideas, beliefs and principles of understanding are the only panacea to the multifarious problems of contemporary development in Africa (p. 114). She therefore urged “Africans to reclaim their philosophical heritage, contending that the body of knowledge she found in the Yoruba tradition was as rich and complex as any found in the West” (Salami, 2020).

Alena Rettova on African philosophy in African languages

Although Oluwole has impressed this way of doing African philosophy on her readers and enthusiasts, it is Alena Rettova who gives it conceptual elevation with her concept of Afrophony and Afrophone Philosophy. In a detailed review of the language of African philosophy, Alena Rettova analyses the way language usage has been explicated in the various trends of African philosophy. As a preamble she takes a historical excursion into the language used by African philosophers, and uncovers the dominance of foreign European languages on the intellectual exercises and postulations of early attempts by African-German modern philosopher Anton-Wilhelm Amo and others like Edward Blyden and W.E.B. Du Bois (Rettova, 2002: 132).

In her consideration of the development of some African languages and the adventure of many African intellectuals to fashion out linguistic registers for scholarly research, Rettova sets as the task before her an inquiry into the possibility of writing philosophy in African languages. She asks: “Is it, then, possible to write philosophy in African languages? What is

the role of African languages in the formation or reflection of African thought?" (Rettova, 2002: 132).

Concerning the role African languages play in the works of African philosophers, Rettova broadly reflects amongst others on the non-usage of African languages in the reflections of hardcore members of the 'Professional School' of African philosophy, the consideration, explication, and the derivation of a philosophical system from an African language, as well as consistent usage of African languages (Ibid., 137). With examples drawn from several individual authors such as Leopold Senghor (Ibid., 137-140), John Mbiti, Alexis Kagame, Barry Hallen and John Sodipo, Kwasi Wiredu, Julius Nyerere, Rettova examines the conceptual complexities and logical disruption encountered in any attempt to use African languages to write philosophy, and even African philosophy. While the reason for the complex linguistic situation may be attributable to the scientific development of foreign language due to the literary tradition or cultural dissonance effected by the diverse experiences and ontological schemes, Rettova observes that there is prospect in the role African languages have played in African philosophy. From the non-usage of African languages in certain authors of the 'professional school', to the consideration, explication and quasi usage of concepts by sympathisers of ethno-philosophy as well as derivation of philosophical themes by philosophers in the Nationalist/Ideological school, there seems to be some progress on the role African languages play in philosophy.

In the three publications briefly explored, Rettova presents African literature as an indispensable complementary discourse to contemporary African philosophy. In "Time as Myth, Time as History in Afrophone Novels on Ujamaa (Tanzanian Socialism) and the Second Chimurenga/Umvukela (Zimbabwean Liberation War)", she explains how texts in African languages retain deep philosophies of time and history. In her comparative analysis of what may be termed liberation novels, namely Ujamaa novels and the Second Chimurenga/Umvukela novels, she examines how the contrastive depiction of time and history in fictional writing shapes the people's understanding of their societal and personal development, history, and political organization.

According to her, while "Chimurenga/Umvukela novels display a definite sense of historical progress towards a future accomplishment involving political independence and an independent state...Ujamaa novels, on the other hand, erase history in their effort to

resurrect traditional society” (p. 395). From the contrastive depiction of time, we are presented with the supervening effect of predominant metaphysical concepts on the state of social progress. Metaphysical concepts are, therefore, not just sterile invariants that exist only in the mind, rather they form the living force for social mobilisation. When fictional narratives are tied around any essentialised philosophical concept, they have the potency of stimulating social action in unexpected or unpredictable manners. Although her sphere of intellectual influence is confined to a narrow and relatively unfamiliar segment of African reality, the issues she examines, namely the effect of temporality on literary depiction of African socio-political life, provides impetus for replication in other parts of the continent.

Following the same expression of philosophical vitality from African novel, Rettova, in the paper, “The singer of pain: Suffering and subversion in the poetry of Sando Marteau”, pushes for the integration of other tropes of reflection as candidates for authentic African philosophy. Of special interest in this regard is the activity of Sando Marteau, a singer, who by the author’s reckoning, subverts the forces of essentialism by deploying his avant-garde poetry to critically interrogate existential problems of his people. She engages in her existentialist analysis of Marteau’s subversive poetry by over-riding Wiredu’s dismissive stance on African philosophy through a deconstructive exercise of the philosophical essentialism paraded by the purist school of African philosophy.

She justifies the subversive nature of Marteau’s musical and poetic reflection by elaborating on the following state of Sando Marteau’s music: First, that Marteau’s use of Congolese Swahili is itself a subversive activity which works against the Swahili of the coastal region. Secondly, the fact that Sando Marteau engages in philosophical debates through music is a reaction to the established canons of philosophical debates. Furthermore, while Marteau’s critical poems are targeted at the existing political structures, the paper shows that they fundamentally subvert essentialism in philosophy, especially as they concern cultural identities and the human predicament (2017: 168).

In her book, *Afrophone Philosophies: Reality and Challenge*, which may be considered her ‘magnus opus’ of sort, Rettova further examines how literary works in African languages have contributed to African Philosophy and to philosophy in general. Perhaps inspired by the settled position that philosophy in African languages was realizable, the work, which

contains eleven chapters of random investigation of texts, examines literatures in six African languages, from Eastern and Southern Africa region, otherwise called Bantu Africa (Swahili, Lingala, Shona Ndebele), while from West Africa the author selected Bambara and Yoruba. In order to dig up the philosophy inherent in the literary works of these languages, she deploys the reflexive instrument of philosophy itself. In other words, philosophy becomes the tool for extracting philosophy from literary works of Africans in African languages. It is expected that given this kind of research endeavour, the end product would be an ambitious project, namely the 'philosophy of African languages.

However, in the light of the multiplicity of languages in Africa, and less likely, literary works in African languages, any claim to forging a 'philosophy of African languages would have been an ambition taken too far. Hence, the author was right when she placed this caveat: "The book does not strive at any systematic and complete representation of "philosophy in African languages" or even of philosophies in the individual African languages. Rather it seeks to open a plurality of existing avenues of thought expressed in African languages" (2007: 23).

This book, which derived from the author's doctoral thesis, pioneers a philosophical study of texts in six African languages. A strong point in this book is the liberty which the author took to define philosophy without recourse to domineering traditions in the discipline, and the privilege she accords philosophy as a 'free and critical thinking' over its influential academic definitions (p. 37). It is from this standpoint that Afrophone Philosophies would be greatly appreciated as a major contribution to African scholarship. Thus, African Philosophy would no longer be seen in biased, pejorative, ethnocentric classifications as 'traditional', 'folk', 'indigenous', 'ethno/ethnic'.

If philosophy, by this token, entails a reflexive activity whose object of inquiry is anything, the discourse of which could be written or oral, then Afrophone Philosophies are "those discourses conducted in African languages that fulfil the function of philosophy in given African societies, that is, that are the site where philosophical reflexion takes place" (p.38). If one is to go by this redefinition of the philosophical enterprise, then a cardinal feature in the understanding of philosophy in general would demand that one adheres to geographical and socio-cultural considerations rather than to have recourse to Greece as the spiritual birthplace of philosophy.

A major setback to this progressive move is the written tradition that has been bequeathed on Africa by the western intellectual culture. Rettova expresses this sentiment this way: “The lack of writing in African languages is the main obstacle to writing African philosophy in African languages and to a more effective elaboration of the philosophical thoughts contained in folk wisdom.” Hence she counsels: “Creating a written tradition in African languages is, I believe, one possible solution to fortifying the position of African languages in philosophy, and by mean of this, to an enhancement of the knowledge of African philosophical concepts in philosophy” (Rettova, 2002: 150).

Some Reflection and Evaluation

Despite the salutary proposals of Rettova and Oluwole, who find some potential in the use of African languages to do African philosophy, there are certain challenges that need to be surmounted for the proposal to yield fruits. These challenges I have identified as problems of doing African Philosophy in African Languages. They are as follows:

Problem of Documentation

One of these problems is the problem of documentation. Concerning this problem the argument has been that the African does not record or preserve his thought in the systematic fashion of western tradition. By this is meant written literary tradition. This is a fundamental problem highlighted by Paulin Hountondji (1990: 111 – 131), when he construes written literature as a sine qua non for authentic African philosophy. While it remains contestable that the genuineness of African intellectual reflections as philosophy demands that they necessarily be preserved as (written literature), the methodology and tradition of documentation of African philosophy in African languages poses a major problem. In the documentation of African philosophy in African languages what laws of explanation are we to make use of? Should African languages be explained and documented in such a way that their logical structure of explanation would necessarily involve their being subsumed into what obtains in general laws? Without undermining the linguistic and epistemological models of Western philosophy, what linguistic consideration should the African give to his thought expression? How do the complexities involved in African languages get authentic documentation?

Problem of Abstraction and Methodology

To answer these questions, we are further pushed to another problem in African philosophy. This is the problem of abstraction and methodology. The existence of a certain process of documentation implies a methodology (Garraghan, 1946: 13) and so it logically follows that to say that there is a problem of documentation implies a problem of methodology and abstraction. The phenomenologist's interpretation of abstraction has often taken recourse in Western objectivity in which self-consciousness, universality and intentionality form characteristic properties. To abstract means to grasp the fundamental and the essential, with its domain at the highest level of intellectual knowledge. According to the Western interpretation the height of abstraction has its candid clarification in the selectivity of intelligence, the ability of self-consciousness exemplified in the tradition of distinction between the self and the object, the ability of the intellect to separate, detach and divorce itself from objects and recognise them as such (Mondin, 1985: 87–100). This form of objectivity according to Anna-Louize Conradie (1980:4) is alien to the African. But not to confuse this notion of abstraction with the logic of classification and categorisation Conradie argues, with examples, that Africans have the ability for effective classification, and it does not exist as a philosophical problem to the African worldviews. Thus the difference in the notion of objectivity does not devalue the African as a being devoid of intellectual knowledge. What it means is that abstraction for the African does not mean subject/object detachment but in the functioning of symbolism which provides the relevant image of the concrete such that "symbols, complemented by habits that have become automatic, dictate what has to be done.

Akin Makinde (1993:11) on his part, views this problem from the perspective of African science. According to him the inability of the African's body of knowledge to contribute meaningfully to science and scientific subjects is as a result of the poverty of African languages. African languages, he argues, have not made any contribution to science. He asserts "this may be due to the fact that African languages have not been developed into scientific languages. The reason for this underdevelopment in language is hinged on the fact that unlike the continental languages of Europe which show similarity in logical grammar, African languages possess no such similarity in logical grammar. Not only does this poverty effect the development of an African science, it has become a stumbling block

to philosophic activity. Citing Yoruba languages as an example Makinde observes: "it has not been possible to do African (Yoruba) philosophy in the native languages. This is so because our language is not yet developed to the extent that its vocabularies and logical syntax can handle abstract philosophical discourse"(Makinde, 1993: 12-15). To solve the problem of this poverty of language, he suggests that there should be another way of doing African philosophy in African language: the adoption of a continental lingua franca.

Problem of authenticity in the use of African languages

What is the best way to do African philosophy in African languages? In relation to philosophic activity, how authentic is the use of African languages to these questions? The suggestion by Makinde is that the best way to do African philosophy in African languages is to adopt as lingua franca a continental language. He pursues this line of argument for the purpose of developing an African scientific language. According to him, the continental language in view requires an enrichment in vocabularies at both national and regional levels such that the regional and national languages become a reservoir of linguistic materials from which the continental language can borrow. Thus, the continental language becomes more developed and somewhat richer than the regional languages from which the linguistic materials are to be taken. The consequence would be that the logical grammar of the African continental languages would be subsumed in, assimilated by and unified with other linguistic communities outside of Africa, while there would be a conscious and continuous improvement of technical vocabularies and terminologies, leading eventually to the full development of the scientific language. As a condition for the realisation of this objective, Makinde outlines five linguistic proposals which can be summarised as follows:

- a. Conscious development of vocabulary and syntax to widen the horizon of applicability.
- b. Its logical grammar has to be extensively unified with the rest of the scientific communities.
- c. The language must be translatable into scientific language, without loss of meaning, and vice versa.
- d. It must be a modern language.
- e. It must be subjectable to linguistic and critical analysis to meet present day intellectual demands.

For Makinde, this development will create a favourable impact in African's theoretical thinking. Despite the fact that the seemingly laudable proposal for the adoption of a lingua franca forms the highest point of Makinde's essay, it also opens its weaknesses. The implication of Makinde's proposal when critically examined portends an unrealisable project for African science. The impediment to African continental language lies in a phrase in the third of his linguistic proposals without loss of meaning. Can it be that in translation from one language to another, there is the impossibility of loss of meaning? It is not likely as the Quinean principle of indeterminacy of translation shows. While translation could be possible without loss of meaning for both the user of English and the user of Yoruba over the translation of a goat owing to the immediate sensory experience with both share, the same is not possible for concepts, or ideas especially if they are organically knitted into the customs, traditions and culture of a people. Furthermore, Makinde insistence on modernity as an attribute of the African language becoming a continental language and de facto a scientific language since no indigenous African language is modern. What can be deduced from this proposal is that gives a tall tale to be achieved it is only the infiltration of languages of the developed Western scientific communities into African languages that raises African languages to a scientific language and eventually into a scientific language. By implication, since African languages cannot be titled to a scientific language, it requires the unification with other scientific languages to make it tenable.

On the other hand, from remote observation, even the position of lingua franca is inconsistent with the principle of linguistic relativity earlier highlighted. If it is assumed that different language structures have different expressions of thoughts and experience which invariably endows on one differences in meaning, then it is inconsistent with the lingua franca proposal. This is so because practically, the adoption of a lingua franca even if it is an indigenous language is a form of cultural imposition at a micro level, in the same way English or French is a factor of alienation. Just as our ideas are affected by our use of indigenous language, likewise is the worldview of the Zulu man as presented by Chichewa different from that of the Ekiti man as presented by the Yoruba language. The point that is being driven at here is this: that different linguistic backgrounds structure perception of the universe differently owing to the different thought process evolving from the different languages. In essence, the inconsistency in Ogunmodede's (1993: 9) adoption of a lingua

franca can be observed when we juxtapose two basic conclusions of his arguments. He argues:

a person or group who uses the mother tongue or indigenous language as the medium of communicating his thoughts and experience will feel at home and do much better than if he were to do so with a foreign language which is not structured to his thought-pattern and experience... If an alien language becomes imposed on a person as the official language of communication and learning, his thinking process will be affected and his achievement will definitely be lower than what it should normally be, since he is using a rather different and artificial means of self-expression.

Ogunmodede thus concludes that: "in spite of the genetic-linguistic affinity between Egyptian and modern Negro-African languages today, all of African does need just one language to express the varied schools and traditions of African philosophy. The reason for Ogunmodede's assertion may be suggestive of pan-Africanist and ideological consideration, for it is implicit in his argument that there is something which the Africans culturally have in common, and it is expedient that language brings out that commonness. But it is unlikely whether there is any ontological basis for this. Rather the unification of Africa per lingua franca is purely politically motivated, and for that reason it is advantageous for arresting socio-political problems. This notwithstanding, the position gives a negative impression of African unity contrary to arguments that have earlier been put forward by some African thinkers. Thus, rather than any natural relation resulting from a "common stock of metaphysical notions, Africa's unity is a paradoxical product of imperialism and traditional social relations" (Appiah, 1985: 262). This in fact belies the artificiality in lingua franca. Languages have an intrinsic relationship with emotions of people and to impose any language on them usually proves futile in the long run. Even if the adoption of a single language over the whole of black Africa seems feasible ideologically, it is likely to fail because such proposal "requires for its success such massive political, administrative and educational efforts that can be neither initially supplied nor progressively sustained now or in the foreseeable future" (Afolayan, 1982:183).

Conclusion

Authenticity in the use of African languages lies not in the adoption of any African language as a lingua franca nor in the pan-Africanism of any domesticated foreign language, but in

the independent use of each people's language in whatever form. Each culture should view the world as its language works on its thought process; for it is only in the language of each culture that an authentic expression of meaning can be made manifest. If authenticity in African philosophy is manifested by philosophising in the indigenous language, each African ethno-linguistic entity should philosophise in their own indigenous African language. It is for this reason that Oluwole's hermeneutic analysis of oral African texts and Rettova's Afrophone philosophy becomes salutary when it comes to knowledge production by African philosophy. Their richly textured literary and philosophical investigations of the African lifeworlds suggests that their approach to studying Africa is consistent with the emerging trend in multiform interpretations of Africana scholarship. The task before the African knowledge production community is for linguists, translators and phraseologists to get to work of translating into indigenous African languages and documenting original philosophical postulations. Though the task seems daunting, we could take a cue for the translation of the Bible. If it is possible for the Bible to be translated into nearly 500 languages, intellectual commitment and necessary motivation can enable the generation of philosophical knowledge in African indigenous languages.

Bibliography

- Afolayan, Adebisi. 1982. "African Language and Literature in Today's World" pp. 174-192 in *African History and Culture*. Richard Olaniyan, ed. Ikeja: Longman Nigeria Ltd.
- Appiah, Antony. 1985. "Soyinka and the Philosophy of Culture" pp. 250-63 in P. O. Bodunrin (ed.), *Philosophy in Africa: Trends and Perspectives*. Ife: University of Ife Press.
- Chimakonam, Jonathan O. "History of African Philosophy" in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at: <https://iep.utm.edu/afric-hi/>.
- Conradie, Anna-Louize. 1980. "Africa" pp. 289 – 407 in *Handbook of World Philosophy Contemporary Development since 1945*. John R. Burr ed. (London: Aldwych Press.
- Falaiye, Muyiwa. 2017. "Is African Studies Afraid of African Philosophy." *The Palgrave Handbook of African Philosophy*, pp. 141-153. Eds. Adeshina Afolayan and Toyin Falola (eds. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Garraghan, G. I. 1946. *A Guide to Historical Method*, reprint. New York: Fordam University Press.
- Gutema, Bekele. 2014. "Hermeneutics and African Philosophy". A podcast of Professor Bekele Gutema, at the presentation of the opening lecture of the Winter 2014 speaker series.
- Huxley, G. L. 1981. "Storied Explaining Origins of Greek Proverbs." *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C. Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature,* Vol. 81C, 1981: pp. 313-343.
- Lee-Whorf, Benjamin. 1956. *Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*, J. B. Carroll ed. (Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- Makinde, Akin. 1993., "African Philosophy and African Science" a paper presented at the First International Conference on African Philosophy and Feministic Studies at the University of Lagos, December 1993.
- Mazrui Ali A. and Mazrui, Alamin M. 1998. *The Power of Babel: Language and Governance in the African Experience*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mondin, Battista. 1985. *Philosophical Anthropology*. Rome: Urbaniana University, Press.
- Ogunmodede, Francis. 1993. "African Philosophy in African Language" a paper presented at the First International Conference on African Philosophy and Feministic Studies, in the University of Lagos in December 1993.
- Oluwole, Sophie. 2014. *Socrates and Orunmila: Two Patron Saints of Classical Philosophy*
- Oluwole, Sophie B. 1999. *Philosophy and Oral Tradition*. Lagos: Ark Publications.

- Oluwole, Sophie. 1997. "Culture, Nationalism and Philosophy" in *Philosophy and Democracy in intercultural Perspective*, Studies in Intercultural Philosophy, Volume: 3, Heinz Kimmerle and Franz M. Wimmer (eds.) Amsterdam/New York: Brill/Rodopi.
- Owolabi, A. Kolawole. 2001. "The Quest for Method in African Philosophy: A Defense of the Hermeneutic-narrative Approach." In *The Philosophical Forum* Vol. XXXII, No. 2, Pp. 147-163.
- Rettova, Alena Rettova. 2015. "The Singer of Pain: Suffering and subversion in the poetry of Sando Marteau." *International Journal of Francophone Studies* Vol. 18 Nos. 2&3: 359-384.
- Rettova, Alena. 2007. *Afrophone Philosophies: Reality and Challenge*. Středokluky: Zdeněk Susa.
- Rettová, Alena. 2002. "The Role of African languages in African philosophy", *Rue Descartes* 2002/2 (n° 36).
- Salami, Minna. 2020. "On the Yoruba Tradition's Complex Philosophical Heritage" Available at: <https://lithub.com/on-the-yoruba-traditions-complex-philosophical-heritage>. Accessed on January 25, 2021.
- Serequeberhan, Tsenay. 2016. *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy: Horizon and Discourse*. New York: Routledge.