The problem of language in contemporary African philosophy: some comments

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A critical discussion of the contentious problem of language in contemporary African philosophy is attempted in this paper. The problem centres on whether or not African languages can be used in 'doing' contemporary African philosophy, where 'doing' means teaching, writing and researching. It 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 content meaning. Two camps are delineated in this paper as reactionary views to the language question: the conservatives and the progressives. In taking sides with the conservative position, a critical discussion of the relationship existing between thought, language and reality is given. On the basis of the nexus established, as well as the conviction, that the challenges occasioning the irresistibility of doing African philosophy in non-African indigenous languages are surmountable, the paper defends the prospects of doing contemporary African philosophy in African language(s).

Key words: Language, African philosophy, thought, reality

Introduction

The question of the most appropriate language for inseminating ideas and communicating scholarship in the field of African philosophy is brought to light by Wiredu (1980). In his book *Philosophy and an African Culture,* Wiredu advances the idea that African philosophers might bring an added dimension to their theoretical consideration by taking philosophical cognizance of their indigenous language. While Wiredu in many of his later works[2] further defends his call and argument for doing African philosophy in African languages, ever since the publication of *Philosophy and an African Culture,* in 1980, there have been heated controversies and debates among African philosophers on its plausibility or impossibility.

In this debate, two groups are noticeable, namely the conservatives and progressives. Given that research and teaching in African philosophy today is predominantly, conducted in foreign languages, some scholars think that in avoiding conceptual distortions arising from the use of alien languages, and the false representations of African knowledge systems in African (and non-African) philosophical meditations, texts and conceptual frameworks, African indigenous languages must be adopted. I call those in this group the conservatives. Previously, Keita has tagged this as the *phenomenological* approach. The advocates of this approach as Keita (1999:28) puts it "believe that a post-colonial Africa should seek to restore its identity by reverting to its indigenous languages for both written and speech purposes."

The crux of the conservatives' argument is that all aspects of a colonial legacy which are inimical to the development of the African people should be removed. These include European languages as media of the philosophical thought of the African people. Articulate members of this orientation are: Wiredu (1980), Hallen and Sodipo (1986), wa Thiongo (1993), Ogunmodede (1993), Gyekye (1995), Bewaji (2002), Uroh (1994), and Afolayan (2007).

On the other side of the debate are scholars who, though mindful of the significance of the vernacular to the production of authentic African philosophy, assert strong scepticism against the veracity and feasibility of such an endeavour. For the sake of convenience, I identify scholars in this camp as the progressives, though Keita has tagged this as the *pragmatic* approach. The pragmatists, according to Keita (1999:28), "would argue that there is nothing untoward to having European languages as the official languages in contemporary African society because such languages are already in place and they offer a gateway to forms of knowledge and expression that are international in scope."

These broad categorizations should not suggest that proponents of either camp maintain the same line of reasoning and arguments on the issue of language; rather, it is just for the convenience of collective categorization.

The progressives advocate the maintenance of the status quo and the continuous use of English, French, Portuguese and other foreign languages in Africa as the official medium of communication whether in personal and economic realms

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or in educational researches and teachings. In the progressive camp are African philosophers such as Bello (1987), Makinde (1988), Tangwa (1992) and Azenabor (2004).

Given the above exposition of the divides in the language debate in African philosophy, some fundamental questions necessarily need to be raised: which side of the arguments in the debate is more convincing? What are the likely problems and limitations besetting each perspective and the lines of the debate? How can they be overcome? Should African philosophy not be done in African languages? Of what philosophical relevance is this language problem to the development of African philosophy? This paper attempts to provide some comments on these and related fundamental questions concerning the problem of language in African philosophy. A proper starting point of this discourse, however, is an elucidation of the nexus between language, thought and reality.

Language, thought and reality
Philosophy as an academic and human enterprise is not possible without thought and language. Philosophy, through metaphysics, is the study of reality, its nature and constituents. Reality, though a very vague concept, can be defined as the "totality of all things, structures (actual and conceptual), events (past and present) and phenomena that actually exist, whether observable or not, comprehensible or not" (Wikipedia n.d:par.1). Thought is the human capacity for self-consciousness, awareness and intellectual knowledge. It is also the capacity to reflect critically on our being and the other entities in the external world or universe (Ogunmodede 1993:13). Language is a social and cultural phenomenon used in communication. Rand (1977:3) defines language as "a code of visual-auditory symbols that denote concepts". These symbols are the written or spoken words of any language. Language is a subjective agreement by a group of people to conceptualize and verbalize their perceptions of reality in a certain way. It is the principal means by which individual thought incorporates social elements.

Is there some conceptual connection between language, thought and reality? Answers to this question can be viewed from diverse angles – philosophy, psychology, linguistics, etc. Philosophically, in Kant, there is a link between thought and reality. Though reality for Kant is the realm of 'noumena' which is quite unknowable, he believes that one's consciousness creates the external world: "The world men perceive and deal with, the 'phenomenal world', is a human creation, a product of fundamental mechanisms inherent in the structure of human consciousness" (Peikoff 1982:59). In his application of Kant's view to language, Von Humboldt (as quoted by Chomsky (1968:67) claims that "language is not really learned – certainly not taught – but rather develops 'from within', of its own accord, by processes more like maturation than learning." This view relies on the idea in Kant's philosophy that the innate structure of the human mind creates an image of the external world independent of what the external world is. The simple implication of this view is that since words are created by the innate structure, language then precedes the objects it describes. It then means that reality is independent of consciousness or thought. Thought is then the means of perceiving reality, not of creating it.

The above position is likely to be objected to by someone who shares the convictions of (early) Ludwig Wittgenstein that the limit of one's language determines the extent of one's concepts. In Wittgensteins reasoning, while language then precedes the objects it describes, it is the structure of one's language that affects the way one thinks and perceives the world. Concepts are abstractions of units perceived in reality. Given that reality provides the data from which we abstract and form concepts, reality is the source of all words – and of all languages (Fram-Cohen 1985).

At the level of psychology, the view of Vygotsky (1962) is worthy of note on the relationship between language and thought. He explains the function of word meaning in a given language in the development of thought. Vygotsky (1962) claims that there is a form of pre-linguistic thought that comes into contact with speech and is gradually transformed by it during the process of a child's cognitive development into adulthood. He writes:

> A prelinguistic period in thought and a preintellectual period in speech undoubtedly exist also in the development of the child. Thought and word are not connected by a primary bond. A connection originates, changes, and grows in the course of the evolution of thinking and speech (Vygotsky 1962:119).

Vygotsky in the above passage is saying that language and thought have independent roots from the outset in childhood; however, some partial connections evolve later in maturity. In explaining the partial connection between language and thought, Vygotsky said the connection is formed in childhood as the child first learns to speak for others. By this, it is meant that the child acquires word meanings without being aware of their conceptual potential. But later, the child begins to use language as an aid to thought. It is at this point that thought is identical with and can be transformed into language in the cognitive act and processes of thinking and perception. He writes:

> Thought development is determined by language, i.e., by the linguistic tools of thought and by the sociocultural experience of the child ...The child's intellectual growth is contingent on his mastering the social means of

thought, that is, language … The nature of the development itself changes, from biological to sociohistorical (Vygotsky 1962:51).

Vygotsky is of the view that the above interrelation of language and thought reveals on the one hand that the development of thought is contingent on language; on the other hand, the relationship enables the emergence of the higher mental functions such as abstract, systematic, and conscious control. It is in this sense that Vygotsky thinks that language provides the essential ground for the development of human consciousness and the ultimate cognition of reality.

From the linguistic angle, Whorf (1956) notes that the relativity of all thinking is brought about by the fact that the structure of one's language shapes one's thoughts and world-views. Whorf (1956) believes in the deterministic connection of thought and language. He notes that thinking is "the [psychological] function which is to a large extent linguistic" (Whorf 1956:66). The differences between languages are differences between conceptual interpretations of reality. Whorf (1956:v) notes that "all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some ways be calibrated." He notes further that:

> The background of the linguistic system is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but is itself the shaper of ideas, the programme and guide for the individual's mental stock in trade. (Whorf 1956:212).

Whorf is of the view that language provides the concepts for representing, determining and making sense of our experiences in reality. He thinks there is an implication of grammatical meaning in a variety of languages for the characteristic thought patterns in a culture. For him, the most important consequence of the language and thought interaction is that it leads to the cultural contextualization of thought. In Whorf's view, language guides thought, although not to a higher level of development but to a culturally specific interpretation of experience. In a sense, language constrains thought by either its implications for the limit of human awareness or guiding it in culturally specific patterns. Lending credence to Whorf's position, Liamson (1986:67) says "language is indeed, the cause of thought and a presenter of reality." In the same vein, Bieshauvel (1952:45-57) asserts that:

> The "characteristics of language spoken by a people determine considerably" the nature of their thought process, especially, the degree these function at the conceptual level. As thought is one of the principal means by which man adjusts himself to his environment, it follows that the nature of this adjustment will differ according to the language structure.

This above position, that language unavoidably shapes the way we think, no doubt is not entirely correct; it is a logical possibility that people possess many concepts which their language does not directly encode. The existence of some forms of thought independent of language presupposes that language may only influence or transform thought in important ways, and not strictly determine it. In conceptualizing the nature of the relationship thus existing among language, thought and reality, caution needs be exercised in using language to make a final objective analysis of reality. Each language is supposed to describe the particular subjective reality of its speakers (Fram-Cohen 1985: par. 7). But the problem likely to be posed by this is the translation between two languages, which may be impossible in this view.

While the above mentioned scholars agree that language and thought are not identical, their position may be seen as extreme. A moderate position on the above is that even though language does not necessarily and completely determine thought, it in one way or another affects people's habitual thought patterns by either promoting the significance of some conceptual contrasts or de-emphasizing others. The point here is that since thoughts are flexible, non-completely dependent and streamlined by linguistic terminology, differences in language do not necessarily mean differences in thought pattern. While it is true that both language and thought are significant in any philosophical cognition of reality, a philosopher's analysis of reality should not depend only on his linguistic resources, but also on the development and refinement of his thought. In view of the fact that language is generative and dynamic, it should not merely be a means of describing reality. It can and should expand to include newly discovered or innovated objects in reality. Reality is not described but created by language, and each language should create its own reality.

On the above showing, one may ask what the implications of the above varying views and contentions are for the problem of language in African philosophy. The foregoing analysis of the relationship between thought and language is relevant in this paper's attempt better to understand the issues, challenges and prospects on the possibility of conducting African philosophy in African languages. There is an implication for accepting or rejecting the above analysis on the relationship among language, thought and reality. If one accedes to the strong nexus thesis, that is, the deterministic relationship between language and the formation of thought, then one may see the position of the conservatives as having a stronger edge; but if one sticks to the moderate thesis, which sees the relationship between language and thought as

one of influence and degree, the progressives' position may seem to hold sway. I now turn to the arguments of the conservatives.

The conservative arguments on the language problem in African philosophy

Wiredu is in the front line of the advocacy for doing African philosophy in the vernacular; hence his view will be discussed first. Wiredu concedes that linguistic decolonization is a vital subset of the general need for cultural decolonization. While warning of the danger of cultural alienation implicit in an uncritical adoption of the European languages as the linguistic paradigm in African philosophical discourse, Wiredu proposes his agenda of conceptual decolonization. But what does the whole idea of philosophy of decolonization entail?

Philosophy of decolonization is a brain-child of the intellectual consequences of the colonization of Africans by Europeans. Colonialism is a political instrument and a governmental policy of acquiring and controlling a foreign territory or country by another country. In the case of Africa, colonialism was imposed politically; additionally, it was a cultural imposition of Western education and values on Africa. A consequence is the interpretation of African experience, thought and mind-set in foreign terms. Colonialism introduced Western education to Africa, and education in this sense is taught in the medium of one foreign language or the other.

The implication of this education on the value system and identity of the Africans is complex. The African today, as Wiredu (1995:33) writes, "lives in a cultural flux characterized by a confused interplay between an indigenous cultural heritage and a foreign cultural legacy of colonial origin." This cultural flux has the effect of "historical super imposition of foreign categories of thought on African thought system" (Wiredu 1995:33) This super imposition, as Wiredu (1995:33) argues, does not only generate distortions of African world-views, it also "could be responsible for many of the instabilities in contemporary African society." For Wiredu (1995), the best way to avoid these distortions and other implicit associated problems of conceptual and mental colonization is by thinking about philosophical problems in African languages. This is the idea of conceptual decolonization. In some of his articles, "Formulating Modern Thought in African Languages: Some Theoretical consideration" and "The Need for Conceptual Decolonization in African Philosophy", Wiredu advocates the use of African languages in every conceivable area of human endeavour. Wiredu (1984:1) is of the opinion that much progress cannot be made in the teaching and research of African philosophy without conceptual decolonization.

One may ask why his advocacy for African language in African philosophy? For Wiredu (2000:par. 30), "the way your language functions can predispose you to several ways of talking and, indeed, to several ways of reasoning." By implication, if one learns:

> Philosophy in a given language that is the language in which one naturally philosophizes, 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 (Wiredu 1998:3).

Wiredu is quite careful in his choice of words by noting that language only 'suggests' and does not 'compel'. Suppose it was to necessitate, the idea of conceptually decolonization that Wiredu is advocating would be counter-factual. Consequentially, Wiredu (1998:3) writes further:

> The starting point of the problem is that the African who has learned philosophy in English, for example, has most likely become conceptually westernized to a large extent not by choice but by the force of historical circumstances. To that same extent he may have become de-Africanized. It does not matter if the philosophy learned was African philosophy. If that philosophy was academically formulated in English and articulated therein, the message was already substantially westernized, unless there was a conscious effort toward cross-cultural filtration.

By efforts toward cross cultural filtration, Wiredu (1998) means conceptually decolonizing concepts and categories of thought. What then is conceptual decolonization? Conceptual decolonization means the attempt to disassociate African philosophical thinking from ideas and frameworks that have been unduly influenced by the historical fact of colonization. This meaning of conceptual decolonization has two complementary understandings in Wiredu's view. The first is negative, while the second is positive:

> On the negative side, conceptual decolonization means avoiding or reversing through a critical conceptual self-awareness the unexamined assimilation in our thought (that is, in the thought of contemporary African philosophers) of the conceptual-frameworks embedded in foreign philosophical traditions that have had an impact on Africa life and thought" (Wiredu 1995:22).

The positive side, as Wiredu (1995:22) grants, involves "exploring as much as judicious, the resources of our own indigenous conceptual schemes in our philosophical meditations on even the most technical problems of contemporary philosophy." Here, Wiredu (1995) is advocating that indigenous African languages and intellectual resources should be optimally put into use in the process of reflection and writing in African philosophy as well as in African contributions to philosophy at the global level.

From the above, it can be seen that the process of conceptual decolonization can be described as one of intellectual reconstruction through conceptual understanding and clarification. Conceptual decolonization can be said further to involve a comparative utilization of different African languages in philosophical thinking with a view to guarding against the uncritical assimilation of conceptual schemes embedded in foreign languages and culture. At the same time, it aims towards "promoting an adequate understanding of the intellectual foundations of African culture" (Wiredu 1991:98). In addition, "philosophy of decolonization will liberate us from colonial mentality and help us determine which philosophical problems are tongue-dependent or otherwise tongue neutral or universal" (Wiredu 1984:47). It will help clear ambiguities in linguistic usages which can obstruct the process of cross-cultural comparison of ideas. In all, philosophy of decolonization involves linguistic contrasts, comparative studies, conceptual clarification and understanding of issues concepts and philosophical problems, using African indigenous languages.

Wiredu is not alone in the intellectual camp that advocates doing African philosophy in indigenous languages. One can also find the likes of Gyekye (1995), who shares the view that "language, as a vehicle of concepts, not only embodies a philosophical point of view, but also influences philosophical thought". The thought of a given philosopher is to some extent determined by the structure and other characteristics of his or her language, such as the grammatical categories and the vocabularies in the language. The point of truth in Gyekye's position can be seen in the works of African philosophers like Kagame, Mbiti and even Sodipo.

Kagame (1956) examines the concept of being among the Rwanda-Burundis and has established that Bantu metaphysical categories are based on the grammatical categories of the Bantu language. Mbiti (1970:21) also treads the same path with his thesis that in the East African languages there are no concrete expressions to convey the idea of a distant future. As a consequence, he infers that the Africans have a two-dimensional conception of time with a long past and a present. Sodipo & Hallen (1986) maintain that there is a fundamental distinction between the Western epistemological system and the Yoruba African option. They defend the idea of Yoruba moral epistemology by making some remarkable distinctions amongst epistemic concepts such as belief, opinion, knowledge and truth (with a two-prong typology, cognitive and moral). They expose the dangers in assuming that epistemic terms such as 'know', 'truth' and 'believe' in the English language have precise meaning and equivalence in the Yoruba language.

While my interest is in the main not to explore the cogency or otherwise of the positions of these scholars, as each of their positions has been controversially contended in African philosophy, the point of their reference here should be clear. This is that linguistic structures and characteristics influence – and may in fact determine – the construction of moral, metaphysical and epistemological doctrines. In the words of Gyekye (1995:31), "language does not merely suggest, but may also embody philosophical perspectives." With this conviction that every language implies or suggests a vision of the world, Gyekye, using the Akan language and its linguistic repertoire, analyses some concepts in Akan thought, which include: God, causality, person, destiny, ethics, time, among others.

Some inferences can be made from the above view of Gyekye. One, if philosophers are thus influenced by the structures and characteristics of language, then such a situation is an invitation to relativism. To hold this view will suggest that philosophical theses are language-oriented and depend on language for their plausibility or validity. Two, if it is accepted that philosophical theses are strongly influenced by the characteristics of the languages in which they are formulated, a meaningful and profound assessment of the theses can best be achieved through an adequate understanding of the structures and characteristics of the language in question.

One fundamental presupposition of having an adequate understanding of the native language that has influenced or conditioned the philosophical theses is that one is either a native speaker or an indigene of the culture of the language. For Gyekye (1995:169), "whether a particular philosophical thesis or problem is language-oriented or language neutral, it must be determined within the structure of a given natural language." I may not entirely agree with Gyekye's position because philosophical problems, I think, may be language neutral but philosophical theses are usually language-oriented; it is worth considering the view of Bewaji, who is another conservative on the language debate in contemporary African philosophy.

In his defence of African languages in the doing of African philosophy, Bewaji (2002:271-295) argues their "suitability for critical, scientific, technological, mathematical, educational and most importantly, philosophical discourse." According to him (2002), African languages, like all other living languages, including European languages, are dynamic and sufficiently

able to express African philosophical thoughts. Thus, while supporting the use of African languages in African philosophy, Bewaji (2002) notes that African languages are dynamic enough to accommodate and express new phenomena and issues of philosophical relevance. Arguing the case for why African philosophy should be done in African language, Chris Uroh (1994:138) writes:

> The problem becomes more complex when foreign languages with markedly different worldviews are imposed on a people in place of their own language. In that case, they are forced to perceive themselves through an alien cultural screen, which is bound to distort their own image. Such a people will suffer an identity crisis, for they will neither really be like "themselves" nor exactly like the culture they are imitating.

The point in the above excerpts is that if we do not utilize African languages in education, especially in philosophical thought and discourse, our emancipation from colonial domination remains incomplete.

Other scholars whose perspectives on the language problem are worth mentioning are Wa Thiong'o (1993) and Ogunmodede (1993). In a critique of the progressives' position, Ogunmodede (1993:12) argues that "it is none of the business of the African to Africanize or de-racialize English or French or German as argued by the advocates of these languages in African philosophy." But it is our business to express ourselves in our own language that will promote our culture. He further claims that in order to evolve a unique and true Africanity of our philosophical thought, the use of African languages is indispensable. He noted that the present crop of African philosophers and scholars speculate on what African philosophy, or African history, African literature or whatever ought to be without succeeding in identifying and stating what it is. In his words, "we fail to do so because we use borrowed Western linguistic categories to analyse the matter and contents of our thought according to the values of these predetermined Western categories, only to end up in a vicious circle" (Ogunmodede 1993:12).

In the same vein, wa Thiong'o (1993) says that linguistic decolonization, which is a vital subset of the general process of cultural decolonization, has been neglected in African scholarship. He notes with dismay how African scholars and philosophers have unwittingly been carrying out the process of cultural reaffirmation, after much ethnocentric bastardization of African values, in foreign languages. His argument is that "any attempt at cultural decolonization carried out within the ambit of the European languages is already a capitulation to a European cultural standard crudely disguised as universalization" (wa Thiong'o 1993:xvii). wa Thiong'o's (1986:16) opposition to colonial language is ideologically inclined in order to "control how the Africans manage their daily lives, their mental universe, and their perception of themselves and their relationship to the world." Hence, like other conservatives, he too has called for the need to start doing African philosophy in indigenous African languages.

Afolayan (2006), who is another conservative on the debate on language in African philosophy, notes that the linguistic problem is one of the major problems facing contemporary African philosophers. This problem has to do with whether African philosophy should be done in African language(s) or not and the extent to which meanings can be translated across cultures without distortions. Unlike other conservatives, Afolayan (2006:55) argues that "it is better for an African writer and philosopher to think and feel in his own language and then look for an English transliteration approximating the original." This view of Afolayan derives from the major challenges of doing African philosophy in pure African languages. One is the translation problem, which often arises as a result of the failure in translating some categories, expressions and concepts in the native language into foreign languages and those in foreign languages into indigenous languages. Wiredu (1980:27) points to this problem when he notes that "unless different languages share basically the same logic, it would be impossible to translate one into another." The second major challenge of doing African philosophy in pure African language has to do with communicating African philosophical research findings to a non-African audience and other audiences outside the linguistic tradition.

Towa's (1997) position is unlike the views of the conservatives considered above. He emphasizes the importance of "an inter-regional language such as Swahili for communication in Africa while retaining the colonial languages for communication with the non-African world" (Towa 1997:178). Like Towa (1997), Keita (1999:34) also suggests "the establishment of one or two *lingua franca* languages for the African world, which includes not only the African continent but areas where relatively large numbers of persons of African origin reside." After all, the world has no problem with the fact that most speakers of Spanish or Portuguese do not live in Spain or Portugal respectively.

On the whole, conservatives such as Wiredu, Hallen, wa Thiongo, Ogunmodede, Bewaji, Oluwole, Uroh, and Afolayan agree that all forms of colonial legacy and undue imperialist influences in contemporary African life and thought should be avoided. The European languages, which are the media of communication in African philosophical discourse, are recommended for replacement with indigenous African languages. They believe foreign languages distort the cultural

identity and foster Eurocentric African philosophy; until philosophy is written and taught in an African language, African philosophy may turn out in future to be nothing but Western philosophy in an African guise.

The progressive arguments on the language problem in African philosophy

Now I initiate a discussion of the progressives in the language debate in African philosophy. I shall start with an exposition of the view of Bello (1987). In the article "Philosophy and an African language", Bello establishes a two-fold conclusion on the language question in African philosophy. One, he maintains that while "the language of a people can be a good index or pointer to a people's philosophy, linguistic considerations alone cannot in themselves be decisive in philosophical disputes" (Bello 1987:5). This is because they can only serve the function of providing additional data. Two, "the African philosopher should be wary of over-emphasizing the importance of his vernaculars if only for the sake of being able to communicate with fellow African philosophers" (Bello 1987:5).

In advancing arguments for the above conclusions, Bello employs some supportive arguments earlier advanced by Wiredu (1980) in his *Philosophy and an African Culture*. In this book, Wiredu enjoins that the African philosopher should pay close attention to his language because doing so has the advantage of yielding not only dividends in philosophical clarity but also adding some theoretical dimensions to African philosophizing. Wiredu cautions in this regard that "language can only incline but not necessitate"; granted this, Wiredu (Wiredu 1980:35) suggests that "it is premature to seek to carry out the teaching of philosophy in the vernacular." On these points, Bello agrees with Wiredu.

But against Wiredu, Bello critically notes that in some of Wiredu's later works, especially those he published on "The concept of truth in the Akan language" and his paper on "The Akan concept of mind" together with his article on "Conceptual decolonization", Wiredu (in these aforementioned later works) seems to abandon the caution which he had earlier considered appropriate on the issue of language and philosophy. Without necessarily going into details of Wiredu's positions in these papers, Wiredu's central position in the articles in question is that some philosophical problems are not universal. There are some that can be posed in English language but not in the Akan language, which he philosophized in.

In critically evaluating Wiredu's positions, Bello makes some inferences worthy of examination. One is that no major natural language is intrinsically superior or inferior to another. But as he (Bello 1987:7) notes, "one language may be more or less developed in some specific respect, for example, literature, philosophy, science, etc. than another language." Bello is quick to add that at the level of possibility, any language can catch up with any other in some specific respects in which it is deficient if there are serious efforts and doggedness in place. The two ways by which this can be possible, as outlined by him, are through coining and borrowing.

The second inference of Bello is that while it is not wrong in principle to label philosophical problems as 'universal', 'fundamental' or pseudo as Wiredu had done, Bello is sceptical as to whether such a classification can be derived from the fact that the problems either cannot be stated in a vernacular at all or cannot be stated without uninformative repetition as we have in Wiredu.

Bello's third inference is that while philosophical insights can be drawn from linguistic facts (at least, as evident in ordinary language philosophy in Britain and US), we should be "wary of using purely linguistic facts (for example, translatability or non-translatability) as knock-down arguments for philosophical beliefs or doctrines" (Bello 1987:7).

I think this is the core of Bello's position on philosophy and language, as well as his critique of Wiredu's (1985) position on the problem of truth in Akan thought. Wiredu's (1985) position is that "if this theory does translate into my language with tautology or repetition, therefore, its rivals in my language are preferable." Bello's critique here is that this type of reasoning says nothing about the plausibility or otherwise of the theory in question, but only goes to show the deficiency or the unsuitability of the native language in discussing certain types of theories. Thus, Bello urges that we should not use the evidence of linguistic facts alone as knock-down arguments for either affirming or denying philosophical theories or beliefs in African philosophy. He insists that the African philosopher cannot use the insights derived from his language as decisive arguments for or against a philosophical position.

One other major issue in the discourse on language in African philosophy is that of the problem of translation. On the use of translatability as a tool of philosophical analysis, Bello agrees that translatability is crucial to intercultural under-standing. Much as it is, he (Bello 1987:9) suggests that "if a theory does not translate easily into a vernacular, more energy should be applied to the translation." If upon such efforts there is a failure of translating a theory into the vernacular successfully, Bello says such a situation should be regretted and not celebrated as Wiredu had thought and done.

Giving credence to Bello's critical stance on Wiredu, I think Wiredu was more motivated by the quest for asserting or affirming a unique and authentic Akan conception of truth and even mind; otherwise, Wiredu wouldn't have celebrated the untranslatability of the cognitive notion of truth and fact into one word in Akan language.

On a suggestive note, Bello highlights some of the tasks in which the resources of an African language can be advantageously employed. He advises that African languages can be employed in supporting or refuting the popular and

unpopular conceptions about African thought and culture. On his list are issues such as whether or not Africans are in all things religious, whether or not African morality is based on religion, as well as whether traditional beliefs are rational or non-rational. Bello (1987:9) also advocates that "African languages can be used in the process of elucidating some of the concepts that traditional Africans lived by such as divination, kinship, destiny, sacrifice, etc."

In an attempt to employ African languages with respect to elucidating some of the concepts that traditional Africans lived by, Bello (1987:10) critically notes problems that one will unavoidably encounter. For instance, "the use of vernaculars for all philosophical activity will mar philosophical communication not only between Africans and the rest of the world, but also among Africans themselves." This is because "Africa does not yet have a *lingua franca* and not all Africans understand or speak other indigenous African languages" (Bello 1987:10). To illustrate this point, "only an Akan speaking philosopher could meaningfully have contributed to, or arbitrated in the debate between Wiredu and Bedu-Addo on the concept of truth in Akan language" (Bello 1987:9).

Makinde (1988) is another progressive whose viewpoint is worth courting with on the language problem in African philosophy. While he agrees with the Wittgensteinian view that the limit of a people's language is the limit of their world, he also shares the position that language has an important influence on a people's understanding of culture, reality and ultimately, philosophy. The knowledge of a language induces reality in a way quite similar to the culture whose language it is. Indeed for Makinde, the best way to propagate a people's philosophy and culture is through their language. However, in the African context, Makinde thinks that there is a lack of a developed language capable of communicating scientific ideas and philosophical erudition. In his words:

> At present, none of the African language is satisfactory enough to be adopted as a continental language, rich enough for analytic philosophy and science. Most of the advances countries of the world have succeeded in spreading their ideas and cultures, especially by means of their philosophy science and religion to other parts of the world through their well-developed language ... The poverty of African languages has led to the poverty of scientific ideas and meaningful contributions to the development of philosophy, science and technology (Makinde 1988:16-17).

Recognizing that the problem of language concerns how to translate concepts (be it scientific or philosophical) across cultures, Makinde notes that African thinkers are today confronted with the linguistic problem of finding words in their native languages that would catch precisely the meaning and reference of foreign words and terms. The implication of this, in Makinde's view, is that "it has led to the situation where serious efforts are being made by African intellectuals to make their thoughts fit into the thoughts and pictures of reality of the owners of these foreign languages" (Makinde 1988:18). In Makinde's perception about the poverty of African languages, he thinks that they restrict and depreciate the role of reason and analytic thinking in contemporary efforts at understanding the African world. Not only this, he bemoans the multiplicity of languages in Africa and the absence of a continental language as an obstacle to the development of a distinctly homogenous African philosophical frame of mind. As a consequence, Makinde neither sees the plausibility nor possibility of doing African philosophy in African languages.

Makinde's position has been brilliantly countered by Bewaji (2002). Contrary to Makinde's (1988:19) claim that "the poverty of African language has led to the poverty of scientific ideas and meaningful contributions to the development of philosophy, science and technology."[1] Bewaji (2002) argues that Makinde's (1988) view is incorrect. According to Bewaji, the reason for the lack of a continental language in Africa is not a poverty of grammar, syntax or semantics. The point is that "each ethno-cultural linguistic group differs culturally from others and has an identity, which is borne by language" (Bewaji 2002:278). Thus, "it is more of a political issue which language is now an inter-continental language, not because of any special superiority of the language, but because of political, economic, military, and technological power" (Bewaji 2002:278).

Arguing along the same lines as Makinde, Tangwa (1992) posits that both French and English languages should be domesticated in African scholarship since these two languages possess inexhaustible ideas, paradigm and philosophies, etc. He maintains this position in contrast with indigenous African languages, which he considers as "destitute on the account of being grounded mainly on oral traditions" (Tangwa 1992:36-38). He supports his position with the fact that "the use of foreign languages is now an unchangeable and irreversible historical antecedent in Africa" (Tangwa 1992:42).

Azenabor (2004:46) in support of the progressive thesis argues that "we need not write in African languages in order to write authentic African philosophy. What we need is to express our thoughts in a language that is universally

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1. Makinde's (1988) position on this is spurious. An instance of a brilliant localization of scientific language in Yoruba thought is Professor O.L. Olopade's Inaugural lecture, entitled *Software System in Mother Tongue: The Yoruba Perspective*. Lagos: Lagos State University Press, 2009.

understandable and intelligible and avoid foreign categories and models." Furthermore, he notes that learning, understanding and writing in an African language is not what really matters; rather what matters is having the experience of African people. Language does not determine the authenticity of African philosophy but rather how philosophy is applied to the problems of African life and experience. Azenabor (2002:47) adds that it is not pertinent doing African philosophy in African languages because "African languages are really underdeveloped in syntax, localized and lack the needed vocabulary to meet up with modern challenges and sophistication."

Evaluation and conclusion

The controversial nature of the language debate in contemporary African philosophy has made the issue an open-ended one. The above exposition of the problem of language in African philosophy reveals on the one hand the contention between the conservatives and the progressives, which sums up on whether or not African languages can be used in doing African philosophy, where 'doing' means teaching, writing and researching. On the other hand, it 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 a loss of content meaning. While each side of these problems has been extensively explored by scholars, I think the assumption of divides in the debate cannot just be given as necessarily correct.

For instance, it may be argued against the conservatives' position that simply because one speaks or writes in English does not entail that one necessarily takes on board certain colonialist ideas, as Wiredu would have us believe. Similarly also, contra to the progressives' stance, it is arguable that it is naïve to think that we escape colonialist ideas simply by speaking and writing in an indigenous language. However, before taking sides, I think some pertinent questions, which are central to the resolution of the contentions, remain yet ever to be raised. Why do we continue to do African philosophy in European languages? Related to this question is to ask whether or not there are efforts currently being made in creating a philosophical glossary in an African language or to translate Western philosophical literatures into African language(s)? Owing to the large number of African languages, which one are we to choose from in doing African philosophy – ethnic dialects, national *lingua franca*, regional African language or continental African language?

Much as it is desirable to have contemporary African philosophy in African languages, especially in view of the intricate connection among language, thought and reality, the difficulty in not having a wholly expressed African philosophy in African indigenous languages is not because of the deficiency of the language as Makinde (1988), Tangwa (1992) and Azenabor (2002) have maintained. Rather, in the words of A. Rettova (2002:148), the "lack of writing in African languages is the main obstacle to writing African philosophy in African languages" and to a robust elaboration of the philosophical components entailed in African cultural heritage. Without necessarily rejecting the sentiments of the conservatives on their insistence that African philosophy in contemporary time should cease to be done and communicated by African philosophers in alien language(s), I think what is more fundamental as a precursor to this goal is first understanding and overcoming the challenges of doing contemporary African philosophy in non-African indigenous languages.

One factor is the lack of a written tradition in African languages. Another point is that European languages, which are dominantly used in African philosophy, are the languages of power. "The more widely the European languages propagate themselves, the more widely their influence pervade in post-colonial Africa be it in education, culture, art, law or sciences" (wa Thiong'o 1993:37). In sharing in the linguistic power of influence, African scholars are therefore wont to use the European metropolitan languages (English, French, Portuguese or German). More fundamental is the economic reason for unavoidably using European languages in African philosophical communication. As a matter of fact, "anybody who works in African languages is most likely to be limited to the skimpiest of audience in terms of geography and numbers" (Imbo 1998:120). In reaching to a wider audience, which at the end will promote scholarly recognition and its economic consequence, African philosophers cannot but despise their indigenous African languages. These reasons are more primary than the desire to promote intercultural communication and discourse among other African philosophers in different linguistic groups. Perhaps appropriate solutions can be found in all these respects, and the doubting dust of doing African philosophy in African languages would be settled.

If language is essentially not neutral such that it usually mirrors reality in a given culture, or using the words of Masolo (2003:33), "the language of any community reflects the structure of their world in terms of how they understand, define, and taxonomize ideas about themselves," then it is high time we began taking African languages seriously by assiduously making efforts to create and develop a tradition of writing and general proficiency in the mother tongue in respective African cultures. In fortifying, therefore, the conservatives' position on the use of African languages in the communication of African philosophical thoughts and ideas, the promotion of proficiency of Africans (both in speech and writing) in their indigenous mother tongues from foundational educational levels should be paramount. The use of indigenous language in contemporary African philosophy can be seen as just good in itself. It may also be instrumental in rating the level of

learning admiration of African languages even by non-speakers of the language. One couldn't help noting the large number of English speaking scholars of Heidegger who have found it useful to learn to read German in order to appreciate the depths and subtleties of Heidegger's writing, and yet who have been able to make these apparent to an English speaking audience. Western Philosophy is written in many different languages (for instance, Greek, English, French and German) and it is extremely varied. Much of this intellectual cross-linguistic involvement can be achieved in African philosophy only if the conservatives' position is accepted.

It is more cogent to suggest that the progressives reconsider the need to explore the possibility and prospects of doing African philosophy in (an) African language(s). This will add to the extant meaning of contemporary African philosophy by saying it is the philosophy in an African language. In the words of Brown (2006:vi), "African philosophy is the philosophy that reflects the philosophical concerns that are manifested in African conceptual languages." It is instructive and pertinent therefore that we direct our philosophical thinking away from distortive foreign language(s) and express ourselves in autochthonous, indigenous and relevant language(s) in our philosophical discourse.

The challenges confronting the reality of such a programme are enormous; however, they are surmountable. To the challenge of evolving a unified continental *lingua franca* for African states, despite their cultural ethnic heterogenousity, I think it is possible. Much as it may seem impracticable for us to work exclusively and wholly in indigenous African languages while doing African philosophy, we may proceed in a piecemeal manner. By this, I mean proceeding through analysis of indigenous concepts by way of thinking in indigenous language and communicating that in foreign language(s). This is what the likes of Mbiti, Oruka, Sodipo, Hallen, Wiredu, and Balogun have been doing by picking and analysing some concepts in their respective cultural languages and communicating them in the English language without attenuation for promoting the vector of African tradition.

But we may ask: even in such analytic exercises on indigenous concepts, how do we resolve the problem of meaning and translation? I think language analysts in Africa have a crucial task in coming out with continuously improved translation. "Orthographic undertakings for the preservation and improvement of our different languages should be encouraged" (Brown 2006:35). While this is being done, residual meta-philosophical issues could still arise. However, with continuous philosophical reflections, refutations and counter refutations, the storm of doing contemporary African philosophy in African language(s) will be weathered in the near future. This is very possible. With the sincere support of relevant stake-holders in the planning and methodical execution of the idea of an indigenized language of African philosophy, it is hoped that many of the teething problems militating against this programme will be effectively challenged. Ensuring the reality and sustenance of doing contemporary African philosophy in African language(s) is a historical responsibility which contemporary African scholars must not neglect. The success in this regard constitutes the greatest assurance for not only genuine interactions among philosophical traditions in Anglophone and Francophone Africa, but also for indigenous scientific, technological, cultural and intellectual development in 21st century Africa.

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