Language and Perception in African Philosophy

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Abstract

Language is a mirror of reality, storing the memory bank of the people. This paper wants to point out that African philosophy is not only done in a foreign language, but, worse still, African reality or perceptual experience is expressed through linguistic signs generated in foreign environments. It has become a worrying state of affairs that must be addressed by African scholars. Since language is dependent on the environment, African reality is arguably better expressed by linguistic signs generated within African environment. It is almost an anomaly to see, hear, touch, feel and reason in and within an existential African-situatedness and talk about one's experience with a language made in London, Paris, Spain or Portugal.

Introduction

The book, *Harvesting & Sharing Indigenous Knowledge in Africa*, edited by T. Okere and Levi Nkwocha, contains the proceedings of the 2nd International Symposium of Whealan Research Academy, Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria, held between 2nd and 4th October 2003. The Symposium was dedicated to harnessing, storing and sharing African indigenous knowledge system. It covered indigenous knowledge system in general (part 1), specific areas as medicine (part 2), food and agriculture (part 3), and science and ethics (part 4). On the whole, the Symposium spanned over 16 presentations distributed then in four parts. The scholars in their various presentations laboured mightily to unnerve and debunk the idea held among some Western scholars that African indigenous knowledge system should be disregarded or discredited as a knowledge system that is not genuine. It was interesting and breathtaking to see the huge contributions of scholars in their various assigned areas of competencies, lauding the African indigenous knowledge system. Understandably, sad though, all the papers were written and presented in English language. No one realised that African indigenous knowledge is stored in foreign linguistic boxes. In documenting the riches of the Conference, the closest attempt to remind presenters of the linguistic channel of harnessing, storing and expressing the outcomes of their researches was raised by Archbishop A. J. V. Obinna in his address of welcome who, since it would seem to be no presentations in any indigenous African language, decided to write the last page of his address in an African indigenous language – Igbo.

One is becoming increasingly concerned about the rendering of African reality in foreign linguistic signs adopted from a different environment. It is this concern and the attendant double distance of the African subject in the face of reality that I want to share in this article.

The Many Languages of Africa: Merit and Demerit

Functionally, language can be defined as an utterance by a speaker that induces an effect in an interpreter about a subject-matter, (Runes 1960: 163). In the philosophical parlance, language is understood as "a system of signs (whether words or ideograms) used in regular modes of combination, in accordance with conventionally established rules, for the purpose of communication," (Ibid., 164). By the possession of language, humans are said to rank above other animals; the greatest instrument created by the human intellect is the *word,* (Njoku 2002: 105-124); hence, language is a generative power typical of a spiritual substance. There is no doubt that animals have communicative organs appropriate to them; however, language is an index of human creative intelligence not held captive, as in the animal behaviour, by mere external stimuli:

> That is, if animal behaviour is controlled by external stimuli or internal states, then as the stimuli vary over an indefinite range, so also may the behaviour of the animal. But normal use of language is not only innovative and potentially infinite in scope, but also free from the control of detectable stimuli, either external or internal. It is because of this freedom from stimulus control that language can serve as an instrument of thought and self-expression as it does, not only for the exceptionally gifted and talented, but also, in fact, for every normal human, (Okoye 1982: 257-258).

Language witnesses to the power of intellect or reason, a power that effects and actualises the process of human donation, interaction and the navigation of human's inter-subjective highways for the sharing of meaning. Language is a mirror of culture, communicating the richness of the culture in which it is used; and as a mirror of culture in which it is used, its written or oral aspect may come to be emphasised by the culture in question, (Imbo 1998:99).

African cultures can count on the richness of language, from one end of the continent to the other. There are many language groups, namely the Congo-Kordfanian, the Afro-Asiatic, the Nilo-Saharan, and the Khosian groups as presented by Joseph H. Greenberg. The **Congo-Kordofanian** group houses the Niger-Congo, Kordofan and Sudanic languages spoken in West Africa, extending eastward to the Bantu of Central East, and parts of Southern Africa, and embracing the Baluba, the Akan, and the Dogon families. The **Afro-Asiatic** group is spoken in North Africa and around the Horn, consisting of the Berber languages of North Africa, the ancient Egyptian, Semitic, Cushitic, and the Chadic languages; the Arabic, Egyptian, and Ethiopian languages also belong to Afro-Asiatic group. The family of languages in the Sudanic belt such as Songhai and Kanuri, and also the Chari-Nile group together with Nilotic north-eastern languages belong to the **Nilo-Saharan** group. The **Khoisan** group of languages is spoken in Southern Africa, a linguistic family or group that combines the Khoikhoi and San languages, which are characterised by click sounds, (See Greenberg 1966; Imbo 1998: 97-98).

Africans, in other words, can express themselves in multi-linguistic forms, given the many languages they have. One recalls that about 3 languages are spoken in Somalia, Zimbabwe has 9, Kenya 39, and Uganda and Ghana have 22 each. 46 languages are spoken in Tanzania, Ethiopia and Eritrea all together has 76. The number of languages in Zaire is put at 326. Nigeria, Cameroon and Sudan have each about 200 languages, (See Knappert 1995:12). African continent can boast of the possession of many languages with which to express herself, as one can see. However, the possession of many languages is part of the undoing of the continent; there is no linguistic unity. In the midst of confusion of languages, it was easy for the colonialists to think that it was their God-given duty to control the use of indigenous languages.

Africans have many languages, but they talk pass each other in the midst of confusion of languages. Meaning resides in the interiority of the communicator; since people speak differently, appealing to different linguistic signs, the result is that most Africans talk without succeeding in effectively communicating with one another. Even the area where they same language is spoken, the variations in the same languages leave one in such doubt as to know when a particular dialect needs to branch out as a different language. No wonder the colonists imposed their language for sense in the midst of confusion; thus, the African till date continues to learn the stranger's language.

Furthermore, to express himself, even to complain against his oppression, the African is compelled to stoop down, then learn his colonizer's language; even at that he is not judged intelligent enough to appreciate the metaphysics of language, since, according to the colonialist, his little head, it was claimed, is not meant for complicated learning. He not only lacks the audience to read meaning in what he is saying, he has still to resolve within himself as to whether his authentic African reality can be communicated in a foreign language.

One continues to ask: if language is a mirror of culture that holds the memory bank of the people, can an authentic African reality be communicated in a foreign language? Language is a system of signs, articulated, given the experience of one's environment; and signs are conventional (context-bond): how does one communicate an authentic African reality or experience in a foreign language totally based on a different experience with different and particular system of signs? Our perception of reality is represented in symbols, and symbols are context-bound. It then appears that any authentic African reality, being dependent on African linguistic symbols, cannot fully be expressed in a foreign language. Perhaps it is against this background that T. Okere relativizes the truth of African philosophy, (See Okere 1983: 124). Before one continues let us look at the concept of perception in general.

Perception
A rough preliminary view of 'perception' understands it as a "species of a wider genus, namely sensitivity, (Russell 1979:47)." To be sensitive to one's surrounding does not

immediately presuppose knowledge; we assume the environment is there, as we have not as yet started to reflect; otherwise perception obtained by an external observer is "something displayed in the form of reacting to the environment," (Ibid., 50). Both humans and animals have this capacity to react to their environment. When one perceives something, one is somehow 'locked into it,' to use the language of Smith and Jones, (See Smith Jones 1986:104-105). In genuine cases, say, of perceiving a cat, it is required that it is the cat that causes visual sense-perception, that is, there is a relationship between the object and the experience; "it is a necessary condition of perceiving an object that the experience be causally dependent on the object," (McGinn 1982:40). John sees a car. The experience of seeing the car causes one to see the car – "as of the car." This experience is, however, not a guarantee that you saw what you claim to have seen; genuine perception may not be fully analysed in causal terms, but "it is enough to note that perception necessarily involves a causal relationship with the object, though of a kind not isolable without using the notion of perception itself," (Ibid., 41)

In perception, we are talking about how the mind is aware of things. Perception is an evidence of that characteristic capacity of the mind to take note of things around it; hence, as McGinn writes, "this other-directedness seems to be an essential characteristic of the mind to be conscious of this or that item," (Ibid., 37). When someone says he sees something, say a car, we need to distinguish two situations by asking the following questions: (1) what is the object that is seen? (2) In what way is it seen? – 'What is it seen as?' The first question deals with specification of the object; in short, whereas question one wants to get at identifying a "particular object in the external world and say that it stands in a certain relation to the perceiver," the second question or specification "addresses itself to the character of the perceiver's experience; it says how things look to him," (Ibid., 37), that is, how he perceives reality, and this is quite independent of how reality is in itself.

The later specification is interested in specifying the content of the perceiver's experience. In other words, perceptual situation has two aspects: one refers to the object of the experience, and the other to the content of an experience. It is to be noted that "the content of experience comprises the mode of perceptual presentation of the object to the perceiver; it contains how the world is represented in experience, and so the manner in which the mind apprehends the objects of perceptual acquaintance," (Ibid., 40). Thus, "roughly speaking, the content of the experience is a matter of how things *seem* to you, while the perceptual object of the experience concentrates on the actual external thing that seems that way." There are various theories that account for what is involved in perceptual experience, namely: the naïve realist; the image theory; the cognitive; and the belief acquisition theory of perception. I am here largely interested in the belief acquisition theory of perception.

The belief-acquisition theory of perception tries to give account of the nature of our perceptual experience in terms of acquisition of beliefs about the physical world, (See Ibid., 208). It is held that through perception we discern the whereabouts of objects in the

world around us; we discover the properties of these objects such as their colours and shapes and learn about movements and the way they change. Thus, perception avails us with information about our environment. Our beliefs alter as we acquire new information; they can also be erroneous. There are cases of dreams and hallucination that produce false beliefs. These possibilities are not denied. However, we can always sort out genuine beliefs from erroneous ones. Smith and Jones insist that "perception consists in the acquisition of beliefs via receptors which provide a sufficiently reliable information-transmitting interface between the believer and the world. And we should add, in order to deal with the case where your perceptual mechanisms blow a fuse and go completely haywire, that the mechanisms involved should be functioning normally. So, in ordinary English parlance, perception involves acquiring beliefs in the normal kind of way via one's sense organs," (Smith and Jones 1986:105) Whether or not we are mistaken about our perceptual experience, the point is that we acquire a belief, which is in some way about the object situated in our environment. Our beliefs issue in rules of action, as actions are doings brought about by people, (See Njoku 2010:181-183). Those doings are registered in people's language as symbols. Symbols acquire their significance in the context of linguistic environment.

Language and Reality
As S. E. Okoye rightly argues, language differs greatly in vocabulary; it is a difference that is "generally correlated with differences in environment," (Okoye 1982:259). The point is that our vocabularies reflect our physical and social environment; hence, language is the memory bank of the people. In the language of the people, one has a whole inventory of ideas, their concerns and interests; thus, language serves as a mirror of reality for the people for "vocabulary reflects the environment of the people," (Ibid., 260). Given the role the environment plays in building up the language of the people, their perception is not a passive activity where the mind simply acts like an unconcerned or ideal chronicler. What is perceived is influenced by the mind. What the environment furnishes us makes us see in particular ways, and communication develops different linguistic or communicative signs with which to structure and understand reality, to educate the young and organise the community: "Thus we tend to dissect nature along lines laid down by our native language. Not only that, we cut nature up, organise it into concepts, and ascribe significant features largely because we are parties to an agreement to organise it this way, an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the pattern of our language," (Ibid., 262). It is against this backdrop that Benjamin Lee Whorf wrote: "All observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or in some way can be calibrated," (Ibid., 262).

Does it occur to the scholar of African philosophy that African Philosophy, as a course of study, is taught in a foreign language, propagating the colonizer's language while many African languages are fast going into extinction? Even in appealing to European languages to communicate, the African philosopher is still struggling with the inherent politics of defining African philosophy which is rooted in debate that earlier denied

reason to Africans, (See Njoku 2002:7-11). Since rationality was said to be tied to logo-centrism and written tradition, orality to which African traditions are tied, is belittled as a text.

The Text of African Philosophy

If the vocabulary of a given language reflects the environment of its users, the paradox is that African Philosophy is done in a foreign language fashioned in a different environment; and the linguistic signs that are product of a different environment are employed to express reality in an African environment. The paradox does not end there; the European languages to which African philosophers appeal are rooted in written tradition, while African languages mostly stress oral tradition. Do those who insist that philosophy must be written deny oral tradition as text? Paul Hountondji breathed the Western bias, and insisted on written texts as constituting philosophy, (Hountondji 1983:63; 1991:120). Henry Odera Oruka makes spirited effort with his sage philosophy to insist that there is an aspect of African oral narrative that could serve as philosophy or text of critical thinking, (See Oruka 1991:52).

We must not, however, pretend, even on the Western front, that there is unanimity among scholars on the centrality of written discourse as text. Thus, the blanket assumption that Africa is for orality and West for the written word is not correct. Paul Ricoeur casts an illuminating light on a broader understanding of text, when he states:

> From the outset the notion of text incorporated features, which freed it partially from the relation to writing as opposed to oral discourse. Text implies texture, that is, complexity of composition. Text also implies work, that is, labour in forming language. Finally, text implies inscription, in a durable monument of language, of an experience to which it bears testimony. By all of these features, the notion of the text prepares itself for an analogical extension to phenomena not specifically limited to writing, nor even to discourse, (Ricoeur 1981:37).

The word 'text,' therefore, is an inclusive term and cannot be confined to issues of literacy. One insists on African narrative texts which include *oral traditions, literature and arts*. These are the African central narratives. The narratives offer the *African a definite sense to the world philosophic landscape*. Richard Bell writes: "As a primary source of conscious self-expression, such 'narratives' have significance for enabling us to *see* and *hear* the realities that *are* African; narratives are an aesthetic entryway into the African experience 'as it is.' These narrative forms enable non-Africans to encounter 'an aspect of' that experience," (Bell 2002:14). The oral, literary and artistic or iconic traditions offer one ticket to understanding the truth of African experience in its situatedness. African central narratives give us a definite sense or a point of view with

which to express ourselves and meet others; they are important aesthetic points of view that communicate the African concreteness or experience. To remove oral narrative is to prejudice an essential part of us – a huge world of meaning.

Chinua Achebe resolves that is not an act of cowardice to use the oppressor's language to express himself. Since he has no alternative, given the situation he has found himself in, but he insists that he will use the language in such a creative way to suit his need; it has become necessary, he would think, to play the ball in the enemy's court: "Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else's? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. But for me there is no other choice. I have been given the language and I intend to use it," (Achebe 1975:44). Achebe rightly does not see the use of the White man's language as a sign of weakness, but given his circumstances the adoption seems a necessary point to begin with in order to put up a bargain, (See Ibid., 44). However, the bold defence and acceptance of the African predicament does not remove the fact that Achebe and the present author are struggling to communicate African experience in a foreign language; hence, the worrying stigma is still there that the African philosopher appeals to the enemy's language to express himself. One recalls the case of Nigeria that took Cameroon to a French court, and had to wait for the opponent lawyers to translate for her in order for her to make her case. What a double jeopardy! I am not however calling for a reactionary rejection of European languages like some have done, although they enjoy Western life and goodies. It might be easy as some African countries have done to adopt one or two European languages to avoid the confusion of multiplicity of African languages. After all, "language makes it possible for human beings to think together, to feel together, and to act together. For those who know a language, words may establish similar preferences, and words may be the cue to similar behaviour. To know a language is to have a common ground upon which to meet others," (Sondel 9158:21). But why cannot an African country adopt some of the native languages within her borders as national languages? However, if technology is a product of people's reflective activity in their environment, there is no serious reason why attempts cannot be made in African language; if there is no proper handle on the employment of indigenous languages in what we do and think about, African languages, like Igbo, are already heading towards extinction in a very near future, (See Asiegbu 2006:107-127), because they are not patronised by their native speakers. We do not solve the problem of linguistic unity in African by adopting more European languages in the continent; this will quicken the death of African languages. Why not adopt or impose some African languages over others in African states? Yes, it might sound as if one ethnic group is imposing her language over other ethnic groups; however, the merit is that the imposed language remains an African language with linguistic signs generated within African environment. But what is wrong with imposing one ethnic language or dialect on others! Many European countries did the same: the English, the Italians and the Spaniards did. Moreover, studies have revealed that at the age of seven, children can process as many as six languages. The earlier African languages are taught African children, the earlier we are equipped with a great ticket out of the woods of Western intellectual and linguistic/technological colonialism.

Language and the construction of (African) reality

The adult world is mediated by meaning. And meaning is each person's intelligent grasp of the world. In this way, meaning becomes the natural attitude which the ordinary person takes up to experience everyday life and work: "That attitude is one in which by use of pragmatic common sense, that aspect of the world is grasped which must be understood in order that the practical business of daily life may go on," (Kelly 1981:70). Meaning exists in the interiority of persons, and made manifest to the other through carriers of meaning. Carriers of meaning are materials, events or communicative signs in the outer world produced by the communicator, (See Ibid., 58-59). There are also agreements as to how words and symbols established should be used; hence "language is a store of such symbols and agreements," (Webb 1995:48). Meanings are stored and decoded in the interiority of each person; hence, verbal language is a system of conventional signs:

> When we say conventional, we imply the historical invention, construction and acceptance by men and women – in groups, tribes and bigger societies – of definite voiced sounds which are recognised by all in the group as stable signs appresenting the meanings of the everyday world and, as well, the meanings of those other finite provinces of reality relevant to the group…. The existence of a verbal language, whether spoken or written, assumes and implies reciprocities, between everyone in the language-group. Verbal language facilitates the task of coping with action and interaction in daily life and other finite provinces of reality, (Ibid., 88).

Language holds or houses and embodies our understanding or meaning of reality; hence, it is a mirror of reality and culture, and that mirror is constructed for a purpose as pragmatist would tell us. The mind, according to pragmatists, is not an ideal chronicler or recorder. There is a personal element, pragmatists argue, in our reasoning processes. So, there is no abstract reasoning process conducted by a hypothetical faculty or intellect that functions in isolation of the rest of our faculties. In other words, personal and emotional or volitional factors cannot be divorced from our reasoning endeavours, (See Joad 1957:448).

In explaining external phenomena, Immanuel Kant thinks we must appeal to the law of nature. Now where the subject is involved, then we must go beyond the laws of senses; hence, Kant worked for a comprehensive adjustment and balance of the interests - claims of knowledge and moral ideals. He makes a startling or revolutionary discovery: that the mind does not passively reflect experience. Rather, it actively creates the order of scientific and ethical experience. According to Kant, the mind does not derive its laws from nature: it prescribes then to nature; it does not receive but postulates the conditions of moral experience: God, freedom and immortality. External phenomena follow the natural law; the natural law explains to us the empirical character of external phenomena.

The empirical character of external objects is the law of causality. The law of causality "is to be cognized in and by means of experience," (Kant 1990:304).

The transcendental cause of phenomenon, Kant believes, lies in the transcendental object: "the intelligible ground of phenomenon in this subject does not concern empirical question. It has to do only with pure thought; and, although the effects of this thought and action of the pure understanding are discoverable in phenomena, these phenomena must nevertheless be capable of a full and complete explanation, upon purely physical grounds, and in accordance with natural laws," (Ibid., 306-307). Humans belong to a sensuous world; hence the empirical character of their actions; but they have more to themselves than this. Although nature reveals itself to man through the senses, but he also cognizes himself: "Through pure apperception; and this in actions and internal determinations which he cannot regard as sensuous impressions. He is thus to himself, on the one hand, a phenomenon, but on the other hand in respect of certain faculties, a purely intelligible object -- intelligible, because its action cannot be ascribed to sensuous respectivity. These faculties are understanding and reason," (Ibid., 307).

Human understanding possesses certain imperative, which it prescribes to nature: "Understanding knows nothing in nature but that *which is* or has been, or will be. It would be absurd to say that anything in nature *ought* to be other than it is in the relations of time in which it stands; indeed, the *ought*, when we consider merely the course of nature, has neither application or meaning," (Ibid., 307-308). 'Ought' expresses a species of necessity, but this imperative relates to the effects of natural action brought about by the determination of the will. 'Ought' relates to the sphere of freedom. Thus, Kant declares:

> Be the object what it may, purely sensuous -- as pleasure, or presented by pure reason -- as good, reason will not yield to grounds which have an empirical origin. Reason will not follow the order of things presented by experience, but, with perfect spontaneity, rearranges them according to ideas, with which it compels empirical conditions to agree. It declares, in the name of these ideas, certain actions to be necessary which nevertheless *have not taken place* and which perhaps never will take place; and yet presupposes that it possesses the faculty of causality in relation to these actions. For, in the absence of this supposition, it could not expect its ideas to produce certain effects in the world of experience, (Ibid., 308).

If we combine the empiricist creed that there was nothing in the intellect that was not first there in the senses with the pragmatist insistence that our perceptions of the world are not neutral but are imposed and gotten against the backdrop of our needs and adaptive purposes, which together has close affinity with Kant's claim that what the mind perceives is what is already cooked by it plus the fact that, our language is dependent on our environment just in the same way reality is dependent on our construction of it;

therefore, the ideas, as in Berkeley, (See Berkeley 1988:53), become the real for us. The reality, thus, made by us is what our language receives and articulates from perception. This perception translates into our judgments of, or beliefs about, things – values, desires, and purposes. Our table of values becomes what conforms to the world and the way we want the world to confirm to our bidding. Values are the whole set of goods for human beings; goodness is not only one of the transcendental attributes of being, it is also perfection in humans identified as an end of a process.

It must be insisted upon that language mediates between us and reality through the carriers of meaning in the human environment. Although language and thought are not identical, what we say and conceptualise is influenced by our language which is, in turn, dependent on our environment. We dissect, analyze, and classify reality along linguistic lines. And this classification or perception of reality is shaped by our habits and customs, which are also dependent on our environment. And all these constitute the ideas or mirrors with which we meet reality. We behold reality through our sensory organs that convey information: whatever it is, this information is mediated through language or our linguistic rationality; thus, "the world may divide into facts, but the manner of the division is a human construct for human reasons," (Okoye 1092:259). What appears real to us is what we have constructed given our mediated contact with reality, a contact that is essentially drawn against the background of our adaptive purposes.

Interpretation or understanding has reference to environment or context since one claims that vocabularies themselves are largely products of the environment, (See Macdonald and Pettit 1981: 25). Whether one is an anthropologist or a philosopher, understanding/meaning is intended in communication or interpretation. There is rationality that is being sought; and while for the anthropologist this translation is "a means to the end of understanding the customs and behavior of people in different societies," the philosopher of language centers his reflection on translation which "illuminates issues which have their base in the theory of meaning and the philosophy of mind," (Ibid., 14), that have reference to the historical roots and environment against which the owners of language express themselves.

It could be objected that if vocabulary of a language is rooted in a particular environment, what of the use of Latin in philosophy by Europeans in the medieval era? Latin as a language belongs to a particular environment. In fact, Latin is "the Italic language of ancient Rome and its empire, originating in Laticum," and a Roman, historically, is "an inhabitant of ancient Latium in Central Italic," and "of the countries or peoples (e.g. France and Spain) using languages developed from Latin," (Tulloch 1993: 860). 'Italic' here means "of ancient Italy," (Ibid., 810). Thus, Latin or the Italic language of ancient Rome and its empire did not exist or originate in a vacuum. Its vocabulary and meaning bear reference to a people or group of people living within a particular environment. And a better understanding of meaning of words does not disregard the usage of the people; hence people look for etymologies: verifying historically the credible sources of formation of the word and the development of its meaning.

One of the consequences to be drawn from all this is that "we are unable to take moral positions on other forms of life, on what goes on in other cultures, (See Bento and Craib 2001:98). This is not necessarily a position for relativism; but if it is relativist, it must be taken in the sense of relativism of judgement, and not of standard. If what we see and hear is fashioned by our language which is dependent on our environment or the reality we perceive, then multi-culturalism should be emphasised more; its stand point will strongly detest imperialist attitudes. It has become clear that African realities have been held captive by the imposition of European languages and mode of thought. To retrieve African realities with the appropriate linguistic signs generated within African environment, we need to divest African perceptual environment of its present European linguistic clothing.

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