

IGWEBUIKE AND LANGUAGE: IN SEARCH OF AN ONTOLOGICAL TOOLBOX FOR IGBO-AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

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Executive Summary

Human beings are by nature enshrined in an inescapable world-hood web called language. As a symbolic construction and human agenda setting in semantic space, language ensures the application of social meaning, control, culture and social knowledge. As a result of the place that language occupies in the integration, interpretation and internalization of convention for the state of affairs of sociality, it is not surprising that it has always been an attractive area and a fascinating topic for philosophers. The history of philosophical thinking about language is almost impossible to separate from the history of logic and indeed the entire history of philosophy. This piece argued that human beings do not live in the world without the agency of language which becomes the medium of expression within particular societies. It is based on this understanding (that the real world of a people is based on their language habits) that this paper employed Igwebuike as an ontological toolbox that forms the trajectory system of the Igbo-African world. Within the context of Igbo-African philosophy of language, this piece argued for the necessity of the use of the word “Igwebuike” as it captures and communicates the Igbo-African world. Igwebuike is the form (and symbolic) of the Igbo-African mental being, and thus, the gateway to Igbo-African philosophy. Beyond the literal understanding of

Igwebuiké (Igwe- number; bu-is; ike-strength) as 'there is strength in number', it captures the Igbo philosophy of relationality, complementarity and interconnectedness of reality. The objective of this work is to discover the centrality of language within philosophy and thus give correct bearing to philosophy. For the purpose of this piece, the Igwebuiké holistic approach will be employed.

Keywords: Igwebuiké, Language, Philosophy, Igbo-African, Ontological, Toolbox

Introduction

The concept of *Igwebuiké* as a toolbox of Igbo-African philosophy is better understood from the background of Wittgenstein's concept of language as a toolbox which contains hammer, plier, saw, screwdriver, ruler, glue pot, nails, screws, etc. From this metaphor, language, therefore, offers functions through words that are as diverse as the objects in the toolbox (1961, p. 18). These functions would include that of communication, identification and instrument of thought. As practical as these objects are, so practical must a language be in its structuring of reality within its original home. It is through language that people are able to practically explore their world and reality. Thus, according to Sefler (1974):

Language and the world are two sides of one and the same reality. The world I know is known inseparable from the language I use. One cannot split the two and discuss them in isolation without some literal misrepresentation. Such segregation necessitates some metaphysical device, such as local space, to be intelligible, yet its metaphorical character must be preserved and recognized to avoid even in this context misleading conclusions. An investigation of the aspects of language is at the same time an investigation of the formal aspects of the world. To give the essence of propositions is to give the essence of all description, therefore, the essence of the world (p 188).

Arguing along this line, Okonkwo (2002) avers that the language of a people is a reflection of the world of the people:

The worldhood of man is therefore his language. The language as a ‘given’ in a worldhood can be called legitimately ‘onto-linguistic’. Onto-linguistic defines language as the state of affairs that demarcates and structures the world of man (Dasien) and his being-in-the-world. The world around me is the world made possible through my language. It is my language that concretely arranges, organizes, shapes and delineates my experience and knowledge of my environment, situation and history (p. 180).

Thus, one can argue that human beings do not live in the world without the agency of language, which becomes the medium of expression within the society in question. This implies that one cannot adjust to the realities within a particular people or place without the use of language as an instrument of communication, understanding and reflection. It is from this perspective that *Igwebuike* is employed as a toolbox that forms the trajectory system of the Igbo-African world. Within the context of Igbo-African philosophy of language, this piece argues for the necessity of the use of the word *Igwebuike* as it captures and communicates the Igbo-African world. *Igwebuike* is the form (and it is symbolic) of the Igbo-African mental being and the gateway to Igbo-African philosophy.

Beyond the literal understanding of *Igwebuike* (*Igwe*- number; *bu*-is; *ike*-strength) as “there is strength in number”, it captures the Igbo philosophy of relationality, complementarity and interconnectedness of reality (Kanu 2014; 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018; 2019). It concatenates Igbo forms, symbolism, signs, media, meaning, anthropologies, universal cosmic truths, functions, semantic powers, physics, phenomena, faculties, and Igbo environmentalities, and symbolizes the propositional powers of Igbo knowledge, perception, identity, phenomenalism, physics, metaphysics, logic, history of analytic character, speculative mindset and positive provisions for definitions of facts.

Philosophical Perspectives of Language

The human person, not minding place and time, is enshrined in an inescapable world-hood web called language. As a symbolic construction and human agenda setting in semantic space, it ensures the application of social meaning, control, culture and social knowledge. As a result of the place that language occupies in the integration, interpretation and internalization of convention for the state of affairs of sociality, it is not surprising that it has always been an attractive area and a fascinating topic for philosophers. The history of philosophical thinking about language is almost impossible to separate from the history of logic and indeed the entire history of philosophy. Thus, all major philosophers and schools of philosophy have had some doctrine about the relationship between mind and language, and language and the world.

The earliest interaction between philosophy and language dates back to the ancient Greek philosophical era. Heraclitus, understanding *logos* within its semantic and symbolic function, had thought that the word was not merely an anthropological phenomenon but captures what he regarded as a universal cosmic truth. In him, ancient Early Greek thought moved from the study of nature to philosophy of language.

Plato's life-long battle against the Sophists is a typical example of the concerns of the ancients with the phenomenon of language. Plato attacked the Sophists because of their competent but dubious ability to twist language to their own advantage for the sake of making money. He was infuriated by what he saw as the danger and threat that sophistry posed to genuine communication and life in the society (Pierer, 1992).

The Sophists, before Plato, had dealt with linguistic and grammatical problems in a systematic way. Unlike Plato, they were not interested in the problem of language for theoretical purposes. They had a more urgent task to accomplish: to teach how to speak for the sake of

political success and to win law suits. Language was the greatest instrument for political struggle in the Athens of the 5th century. Language became an instrument for definite, concrete and practical purposes. The Sophists believed that one had to manipulate language to his or her own advantage, if such a person were to attain their objective. To enhance this purpose, the Sophists began a new branch of knowledge called rhetoric (Cassirer, 1976). As a result of their proficiency in rhetoric, they were able to make the weaker argument the stronger and to sweet-talk something bad into something good and turn black into white (Honderich, 1976).

In the Plato's dialogue, *Cratylus*, he considered another dimension of language: the question of whether the names of things were determined by convention or by nature. In this case, his analysis of language addressed the problem of nomenclature. He criticized conventionalism because it led to the bizarre consequence that anything could be conventionally denominated by any name. Hence, it cannot account for the correct or incorrect application of a name. He claimed that there was a natural correctness to names. To do this, he pointed out that compound words and phrases have a range of correctness. He also argued that primitive names had a natural correctness, because each phoneme represented basic ideas or sentiments. While Plato concerned himself with meaning, Aristotle, in his philosophy of language, steps up his concern to issues of logic and categories. He separated all things into categories of species and genus, and believes that the meaning of a predicate was established through an abstraction of the similarities between various individual things (Kanu, 2010 & 2012).

The Stoics, in their philosophy of language, made important contributions to the analysis of grammar, distinguishing five parts of speech: nouns, verbs, appellatives (names or epithets), conjunctions and articles. They also developed a sophisticated doctrine of the *lektón* associated with each sign of a language, but distinct from both the sign itself and the thing to which it refers. This *lektón* was the meaning (or sense) of every term. The *lektón* of a sentence is what we

would now call its propositions. Only propositions were considered "truth bearers" or "truth-vehicles" (i.e. they could be called true or false), while sentences were simply their vehicles of expression (Kanu 2014).

Medieval philosophers were greatly interested in the subtleties of language and its usage. This interest was provoked by the necessity of translating Greek texts into Latin. Furthermore, the scholastics of the high Medieval Period, such as Occam and John Duns Scotus, considered logic as the science of language (*scientia sermocinalis*). More so, the employment of Greek words in the explanation of the Christian faith remains a major contribution of the Patristic and Medieval philosophers and theologians.

In line with the thoughts of the linguists of the [Renaissance](#) and [Baroque](#) periods, such as [Johannes Goropius Becanus](#), [Athanasius Kircher](#) and [John Wilkins](#), Locke (cited in Kanu 2012), in the 17th century, argued that only an adequate or correctly formed language could be a vehicle for communication. He believed that the desire to know reality was the foundation of communication. Even though there is the possibility of lying, Locke argued that lies do not constitute communication, since to lie is to deny reality. To lie is the perpetration of inequality in society, since it denies the other his/her share and portion of reality. To deceive a person is an implicit assumption that he/she she is not worthy to know the truth. This explains why Locke, like Plato, condemned sophistry:

Nor has this mischief stopped in logical Niceties, or curious empty speculations; it hath invaded the great concernment of human life and society; obscured and perplexed the material truths of law and divinity; brought confusion, disorder and uncertainty into the affairs of mankind; and if not destroyed, yet in great measure rendered useless, those two great rules, religion and justice. (p. 486).

In the early 19th century, the Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, insisted that language ought to play a larger role in Western

philosophy. He argued that philosophy had not sufficiently focused on the role language plays in cognition, and that future philosophy ought to proceed with a conscious focus on language. Hence, language began to play a central role in Western philosophy in the late 19th century. The philosophy of language then became so pervasive that for a time, in analytic philosophy circles, philosophy as a whole was understood to be a matter of philosophy of language (Kanu 2014).

During the 20th century, Ayer (1942) averred that our being as human beings was about the inversion of language for the all-encompassing agenda-setting of humanity. As such, humanity has no other choice than the total experimental engagement for the understanding of the workings of language. Wittgenstein (1961), thus, argues that the function of philosophy is not to construct theories but to clarify thought. Therefore, philosophy is an activity of elucidating propositions in order to make them clear, and this can only be done within the boundaries of human knowledge and the use of language.

Keller (1979) and Rorty (1992) speak of modern trends within philosophical inquiry as a method that denotes philosophy as the passage from the philosophy of nature to the philosophy of language. They argue in favour of this linguistic turn on the basis that there is no singular possibility of human sciences outside the data base of human language. Bell (1978) avers that “It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and language is an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection” (p. 130). Humbolt (1985) further underscores language as the totality of the human spirit which in itself is the central human activity that gives character and structure to human culture and individuality.

Language as the Trajectory System of African Philosophy

This piece does not argue that African philosophy cannot be done in other languages; rather, it maintains that to engage in African philosophy more profoundly, the African language is indispensable.

Mbiti (1970) speaks of language as a very important element in understanding African philosophy:

There is great potential in African scholars studying African Traditional Religion and philosophy, with the aid of scientific tools and methodology and with the advantages of being part of the peoples of Africa, having almost unlimited access to information and speaking the languages which are the key to serious research and understanding of traditional religions and philosophy (p. 14).

Edeh (1985) further writes that: “Our brief consideration of the Igbo language leads us into the culture of the people since it is obvious that a language cannot be divorced from the culture which it expresses” (p. 56). While talking about destiny, Gyekye (1987) brings out the link between language and philosophy as expressed by thinkers:

The first relates to the link that a number of thinkers find between language and thought, or more precisely in the present context, between language and metaphysics. They claim that there is some kind of reality antecedent to language that language is developed to express or depict. Language or linguistic structure, they hold, reflects a deep lying structure of reality or being. (p. 105).

It is within this context that Adeshina (2006) observes that every language system embodies a particular ontology and a system of knowledge about reality. Language, from this perspective, becomes loaded with worldviews and metaphysics, and, more importantly, a person’s language determines, at least in part, the way to perceive and conceive the world. Thus, when you lose the language of a people, you also lose a great chunk of their philosophy. It is not surprising that Tempels (1959), Edeh (1985), Gyekye (1987) and Iroegbu (1995) thought it significant to begin from the analysis of language in their philosophical searches.

Wittgenstein (1961), in his *Tractatus*, argues that the structure of language is conditioned by the structure of reality, for language makes

us see reality in a structure corresponding to the structure of language. He writes, “What every picture of whatever form must have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it at all... is the logical form, that is, the form of reality” (p. 18). He strongly believes that the structure of the world is pictured by language, which can now be considered a model of reality. Wittgenstein (1974) further writes, “These facts (of which the world is made of) are pictured by language so that by means of language we make to ourselves pictures of facts” (p. 1). In this picture and the pictured, there must be something identical in order that one can be a picture of the other at all. Language is like a mirror of facts, and if it does not correspond to it, it is false. What Wittgenstein is saying is that just as you cannot use human language to talk about divine realities, you also cannot use European languages to talk about African realities, because there are so many things that the European language cannot picture in the African world, and even when it pictures it, it does that inadequately, for the simple reason that there are no such realities in the European world.

Ki-Zerbo (1981) has argued that language is the treasury house of a people’s philosophy:

Language is like a bank or museum in which, over the centuries, each ethnic group has deposited all it has built up and accumulated in the way of mental and material tools, memories and resources of the imagination. By means of an in-depth and wide-ranging study of the language (both infra and supra linguistic). (p. 94).

The emphasis on language as an indispensable element for doing profound African philosophy is very evident in the philosophical position of Ethno-philosophers who view African philosophy as the philosophical thought of Africans as could be gotten from their various world views, myths, proverbs, etc. In this sense, it is the philosophy indigenous to Africans, untainted by foreign ideas. It places little or no emphasis on scientificity, logic, criticism and argumentation, and makes more emphases on local relevance or

context. In studying ethno-philosophy, we discover the deep relationship between language and philosophy.

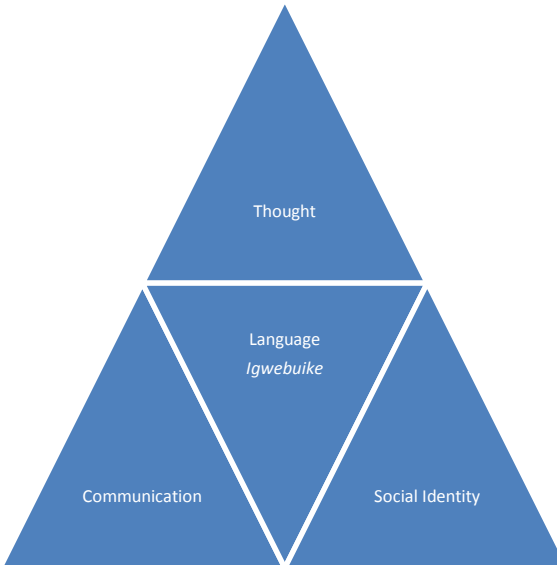
In his work, *African religions and philosophy*, Mbiti (1970) begins with an analysis of the African concept of time from the Kikamba and Gikuyu languages, in which he analyses three verbs that speak of the future, covering only a period of six months and not beyond two years at most. Alexis Kagame, in his work, *Philosophie Bantou-Rwandaise de L'Être*, reveals that from the language of the Rwandans who were called Kinyarwanda they developed their thought through a linguistic ethno-philosophy. Njoku (2010) discovered that *Ntu* is the category of being or the generic meaning of something. This he classified into four: *Umuntu* (human beings), *Ikintu* (non-human beings), *Ahantu* (place and time), and *Ukuntu* (Aristotelian category of quantity). *Ntu* is the unifying notion among all these, even though God does not belong to it. Iroegbu (1995) develops an African concept of being as *Belongingness* from the Igbo principle of *Egbe bere Ugo bere* (let the kite perch, let the eagle perch), which he believes re-enacts the contents and significance of belongingness.

These developments in African philosophy are a pointer to the relevance of African language in doing African philosophy. It is also within the umbrella of this understanding that the *Igwebuiké* is adopted as a very significant concept in the understanding and communication of Igbo-African philosophy.

The Tripartite Dimensional Reasons for *Igwebuiké* as a Language-Based Philosophy

Okosisi (2012) posits that each language of the world stands out as a configuration and mechanization of the people's book of history and of philosophy, containing and concatenating their implications of real 'worldhood' of facts and metaphysics. Thus, he avers, "The people who use that language are registered and known by the realities of that same language" (p. 9). It is in this regard that *Igwebuiké* stands out as a configuration and mechanization of the Igbo-African book of history, and captures the Igbo-African real world of facts and

metaphysics. It is within this context too that it is referred to as the gateway to Igbo-African philosophy or ‘worldhood.’ To understand better how *Igwebuike* serves as a gateway to the Igbo ‘worldhood’ of facts and metaphysics, it would be worthwhile to employ the tripartite dimensional functions of language in Okonkwo (1994), which include: the function of communication, the function of interpretation of the real world (thought function) and the function of ontology (Metaphysics or identity), and explain how *Igwebuike* functions in these capacities.



- a. *Igwebuike* as an Instrument of Igbo-African Thought:** *Igwebuike* is an instrument of thought which natures and showcases the Igbo-African human ideas that may be instances and stances of science in a fact of ‘worldhood’, and this is possible because of the central place of *Igwebuike* in the Igbo-African worldview. Within this context, *Igwebuike* becomes an expression of the Igbo-African world because it captures and expresses Igbo forms, symbolism, signs, media, meaning, anthropologies, universal cosmic truths, functions, semantic powers, physics, phenomena, faculties, and Igbo environ-

mentalities, perception, identity, phenomenism, metaphysics, logic, history of analytic character, speculative mindset and positive provisions for definitions of facts. It is a media for conveying basic facts about our relationship with one another, the environment and super-sensible world.

b. *Igwebuiké* as an Instrument of Igbo-African Social Communication: Communication speaks of the state of affairs within which human persons share commonly and mutually intelligible and knowledgeable competences. *Igwebuiké*, with all it embodies, is an instrument of social communication. This is possible because it is the moving spirit, and therefore captures the entirety, of the African means of communication which involves stories, proverbs, dancing, music, costumes, arts, religious ceremonies, rites and rituals, music, etc., which might be used for the transmission of cultural and religious heritages, skills and knowledge.

c. *Igwebuiké* as an Instrument of Igbo-African Social Identity: *Igwebuiké* captures the social identity of the Igbo-African. As a concept, it gives the Igbo-African the identity of being in an integral framework of relationality. *Igwebuiké* is, therefore, not just a word but symbolizes the identity of the Igbo-African. It is based on the worldview of the people which is a background to Igbo behaviour and metaphysics. It explains the Igbo attitude, blueprints, traits, skills, etc., that have registered on their identity, institution, organization, management, etc.

The analysis of *Igwebuiké* from the stand point of the functions of language, and the discovery of the fulfilment of these functions by *Igwebuiké*, becomes a basis for the insistence on the importance of language in African philosophy and the emphasis on *Igwebuiké* as the gateway to Igbo-African philosophy.

Conclusion

This study on *Igwebuike* as the ontological toolbox of Igbo-African philosophy, which is a reflection within the parameters of African philosophy of language, has been undertaken on the basis that the Igbo language and Igbo world are merged into the same reality. Any attempt to separate the two points to the impending danger of misrepresentation and misinterpretation. *Igwebuike* is understood within this context as the gateway to Igbo-African philosophy. Thus, an investigation of the structure of *Igwebuike*, which is an Igbo language, is at the same time an investigation of the formal structures and aspects of the Igbo world. It is within this context that Wittgenstein stated that “the limit of my language is the limit of my world”.

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