

DIVERSITY READING LIST PRESENTS:

AFRICAN LANGUAGES AND AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

A DRL READING GROUP BLUEPRINT BY SARA PEPPE AND BJÖRN FRETER

LEVEL: INTERMEDIATE-HARD

INTRODUCTION

This blueprint will help you explore the key texts discussing the role of African languages in the philosophy of Africa. Can western languages express the key concepts of African philosophy? As you read, you will learn a lot about the conceptual frameworks of African philosophy and explore a selection of issues discussed by African writers.

More broadly, this Blueprint offers a great opportunity to inquire about the role of language in the philosophical practice in general. It will be great to anyone interested in the broad questions about how we do philosophy.

HOW TO USE THIS BLUEPRINT?

There is no particular order in which the texts on this list have to be read. Feel free to explore them in any order you prefer. You might also decide not to read all 14 texts, in which case you can use the abstracts and comments you will find on each entry to choose those that interest you the most.

CATEGORIES

- African/Africana Philosophy
- Metaphilosophy
- Language of Philosophy
- Philosophy of Language
- Language and Society

AVAILABLE ONLINE AT:

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ABSTRACT:

The necessity of writing African philosophy in African languages has been proposed more than once. But, expressing African philosophy in indigenous languages of Africa does not make it more authentic. Authentic African philosophy is the philosophy that takes into account African culture and life. Moreover, the problem of using indigenous languages deals with the fact that the above-mentioned languages are scarcely taught in schools and have almost no place in education. Regarding this, the Nigeria case is paradigmatic.

COMMENT:

Godwin Azenabor considers the problem of African philosophy in the African language by examining both the concepts of African philosophy and language. The author underlines that the fact that African philosophy should be written in the African language derives from the idea that other philosophies are written in their respective languages. This led the author to think that translating African philosophy into other languages may not depict the true picture of African philosophy, with African philosophy lacking in authenticity. The author focuses on the fact that African indigenous languages are not taught in schools, and scholars do not master the indigenous languages as much as to write in indigenous languages for education purposes. This occurs in Nigeria, where official institutions and education bodies use colonial languages. Plus, the problem of language is rooted in the idea that most African languages are local while philosophy aims to be international. The author also explains why Africans use colonial languages, i.e., to remove communication and understanding barriers. And Azenabor concludes that the language used does not determine the authenticity of African philosophy. Plus, what makes a philosophy African is that it is applied to the conceptual problems of African life and encompasses its tradition.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Define African philosophy.
2. Define the African language.
3. Why is there a large use of colonial languages for African philosophy?
4. Outline the situation of Nigeria.
5. What makes African philosophy authentic?
6. What are the problems of writing African philosophy in African language?

ABSTRACT:

Philosophy in Africa has for more than a decade now been dominated by the discussion of one compound question, namely, is there an African philosophy, and if there is, what is it? The first part of the question has generally been unhesitatingly answered in the affirmative. Dispute has been primarily over the second part of the question as various specimens of African philosophy presented do not seem to pass muster. Those of us who refuse to accept certain specimens as philosophy have generally been rather illogically said also to deny an affirmative answer to the first part of the question. In a paper presented at the International Symposium in Memory of Dr William Amo, the Ghanaian philosopher who taught in German universities in the early part of the eighteenth century, Professor Odera Oruka identified four trends, perhaps more appropriately approaches, in current African philosophy

COMMENT:

The article is focused on the theme of African philosophy giving a clear picture of the difficulties in defining what is African philosophy. This paper does not treat the theme of African philosophy and African language, but it provides a base for the above-mentioned debate giving an account picture of African philosophy. The paper indicates that the philosopher Oruka found four trends in African philosophy: Ethno-philosophy, Philosophy sagacity, Nationalist-ideological philosophy and Professional philosophy. The author highlights that the nature of African philosophy is understood differently by the various contemporary African thinkers. And, the article deeply considers the effects of contact with Western populations. Thus, the article links the philosophical problem of defining philosophy in Africa with colonialism. Moreover, Bodunrin examines the four categories of African philosophy proposed by Oruka in the light of the four challenges Africa faces after entering in contact with Western countries.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What are the main questions regarding African philosophy?
2. What are the four trends of African philosophy?
3. Are all the African philosophers in agreement when it comes to defining African philosophy?
4. What are the effects of colonialism on African philosophy?
5. What are the challenges the African philosophy faces after having come in contact with Western countries?

ABSTRACT:

The Language Question is a very central subject of discourse in African Philosophy. This is consequent upon the fact that the essence of language in philosophy cannot be gainsaid. Language, as it were, is culture bound. As such, to deny a people of their language is to deny them their cultural heritage. While applying the descriptive and analytic method in this work, it is contended that language plays not only a catalyzing role in the art of philosophizing but that it occupies an inalienable place in philosophy. Again, that since philosophy is more or less about resolving “conceptual cramps” or “bottle-necks”, indigenous languages should be given a pride of place over and against their foreign counterparts because of the obvious epistemological advantages embedded therein (especially in mother-tongues). It is submitted here that a lot of homework need to be done in terms of advocacy and development on the low status of such languages so as to meet up with the international standard and nature of the discipline. Meanwhile, the need for using a language that engenders understanding across ethnic barriers alongside the language of the environment is being advocated as a short-term measure. This is not without sounding a caveat that such a transfer of knowledge which is often fraught with some degree of adulteration via the instrument of translation, though practicable, is far from being the ideal. It is on this token the opinions of experts such as Barry Hallen, Quine and a host of others on Methods of Ordinary Language Philosophy and Indeterminacy, respectively are being advanced as plausible means of meeting the challenges before us. In this manner, while using the Igala language of Central Nigeria as a case study, it is finally submitted that it is possible to have what we might term authentic African Philosophy emerging from a systematic analysis of our traditional worldviews.

COMMENT:

This paper examines the issue of language in African Philosophy and highlights that language and culture are closely linked. Indeed, in paragraph 2, Egbonu studies the term “language”, underlining that language has to do with people’s identity and culture. Also, the author explains that language has a crucial role in philosophising, with African indigenous languages that should have a major role in African philosophy since it expresses the cultural heritage of African people. Egbonu focuses on the case of Igala people, where the meaning of the words they use is not the same when we translate them. But, Egbonu also underlines that language is not the only way to determine what should be considered authentic African philosophy. Indeed, it is argued that language does not determine whether African philosophy is authentic or not. Instead, authentic African philosophy is the philosophy applied to the conceptual issues of the African experience.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What is the definition of language?
2. What are the three principal elements of language? (pp. 364-365)
3. What is African Philosophy?
4. What happens if we do not use African languages in African philosophy?
5. Talk about the Igala case (pp.369-370)
6. What the author concludes from his speculations on African language and African philosophy?

GYEKYE, KWAME. *AN ESSAY ON AFRICAN PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT. THE AKAN CONCEPTUAL SCHEME*

1987, Temple University Press.

Difficulty: Intermediate

PUBLISHER'S NOTE:

In this sustained and nuanced attempt to define a genuinely African philosophy, Kwame Gyekye rejects the idea that an African philosophy consists simply of the work of Africans writing on philosophy. It must, Gyekye argues, arise from African thought itself, relate to the culture out of which it grows, and provide the possibility of a continuation of a philosophy linked to culture. Offering a philosophical clarification and interpretation of the concepts in the ontology, philosophical psychology, theology, and ethics of the Akan of Ghana, Gyekye argues that critical analyses of specific traditional African modes of thought are necessary to develop a distinctively African philosophy as well as cultural values in the modern world.

COMMENT:

A classical work of modern African philosophy and, because of its analysis of the conceptual scheme, highly relevant for the context of African philosophy and language.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What is the conceptual scheme of the Akan?
2. What is Gyekye's understanding of oral African traditions?
3. Why are proverbs so important for African philosophy?
4. What is your opinion on Gyekye's usage of Western philosophical terminology in his project?
5. How does Gyekye challenge to opinion, predominant in Western philosophy, that philosophy has to be written?

ABSTRACT:

The contention raised in this research is to showcase that indigenous African languages are imperative tools in advancing African philosophy and thought. By extension the genuineness and originality of African philosophical thought is best advanced when it is vocalized and transliterated in the mother tongue of the philosopher. When African philosophical thought is done and articulated in language foreign to the philosopher, then that philosophical thought is weakened within the conceptual expression and foundation. It is also contended that, indigenous languages would address perennial problem of inadequacies of languages especially where there are no direct replacement of concept and terms to explain reality and other state of affairs.

COMMENT:

Diana-Abasi Ibanga and Emmanuel Bassey Eyo's paper "African Indigenous Languages and the Advancement of African Philosophy" is a fundamental text to understand the role of indigenous languages in the advancement of African philosophy. Bassey Eyo and Ibanga underline that the concepts expressed in foreign languages convey African philosophy thoughts more weakly. Moreover, this paper highlights the need to philosophize in the African language, which would enable African philosophers to convey concepts precisely, and avoid inadequately translating their thoughts.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What is the role of language in philosophical reasoning?
2. Why does the language need to be used correctly in philosophical reasoning?
3. What are the major critiques to philosophizing in African languages?
4. What are the advantages of philosophizing in African indigenous languages?
5. What happens when a thought developed in an indigenous language is translated?

PUBLISHER'S NOTE:

The relation between philosophy and language in Africa seems to favor the languages of written expression to the detriment of the languages of "oraural" expression. Concretely, this has meant not only the exclusive use of Arabic and European languages in the philosophies in Africa, but also the assumption that philosophy is only possible in, with, and through written languages. This article argues that change is long overdue, and that African languages should play significant roles in both the exploration of the past and in contemporary and future philosophical inquiries in Africa. In other words, the real problem is not so much to determine how far philosophy is compatible or incompatible with specific languages and with language as a whole, or vice versa, as to discern what role African languages should play within the framework of the past, contemporary, and future philosophies in Africa. For if colonial experiences obliged Africans to confront this predicament without success, the contention here is that Africans cannot continue to philosophize sine die in European languages and according to European models of philosophy as if African languages cannot provide and play the same roles. Today more than before, both the lettered and "oraural" traditions of Africa invite Africans to practice self-reliance in such matters.

COMMENT:

Kishani's paper "On the Interface of Philosophy and Language in Africa: Some Practical and Theoretical Considerations" argues that African languages should play a vital role in the African philosophical inquiries. The crucial point of the article is to examine and establish the role African languages should play in past, present and future African philosophies. The article argues that Africans cannot keep doing philosophy relying on European languages and models as if African languages would be unable to play the same role. Indeed, the article explains that Africans should be self-sufficient in philosophising in their languages and with their models relying on their lettered and "oraural" traditions.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What is written and "oraural" expressions?
2. Why does the author examine the issue considered through the lenses of past, present and future?
3. What should be done to avoid that philosophical creativity belongs to the lettered African elite alone?
4. Why should Africans embrace their linguistic heritage?
5. Why does writing in European languages represent the exclusive means of expression for Africans?

ABSTRACT:

The African continent and the nearby islands constitute one-fourth of the land surface of the earth. Approximately 460 million people live in Africa which is about 11% of the world's population. Of the estimated 6,200 languages and dialects in the world, 2,582 languages and 1,382 dialects are found in Africa. Some languages in Africa are spoken by more than 20 or 30 million people, e.g. Hausa-Fulani, Oromo/Galla and Swahili. Arabic is the most widely spread language on the continent and it is the mothertongue of more than 110 million Africans, whereas in Asia there are only half as many native speakers of Arabic. More than 50 languages are spoken by more than one million speakers each; and a couple of hundred languages are spoken by small groups of a few thousand, or a few hundred people. These small languages are disappearing at a fast rate. Altogether only 146 vernaculars are used as "operative languages" in different situations, and 82 of them are classified by linguists as "highest priority languages", i.e. they are used as "local languages" in different contexts by various authorities, aid organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in their projects and campaigns. Of the latter, 41 languages are widely used as "lingua franca" for inter-ethnic, regional and/or international communication. All African languages compete with metropolitan/colonial languages, as well as with pidgin and creoles. However, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) has recommended 50 languages to be supported along with Arabic and Swahili as the only native African working languages. The lingua francas in Africa are of two types: Type A is spread by Africans, e.g. Amharic, Hausa, Swahili and Wolof; while Type B is spread through foreign influence, e.g. Lingala and Swahili during the colonial period. Most lingua francas have both Type A and B features, and the common denominator for them all is that they have been, and many of them are today, languages which were used by soldiers and warrior groups and African conquerors, languages which were later employed by European colonialists in their African armies.

COMMENT:

This article provides an outlook on the languages of Africa, highlighting that the African continent is multi-lingual since there is a huge number of languages and dialects. Plus, the paper clarifies that together with the autochthonous languages, colonialism introduced European languages, increasing the number of languages used. The importance of this article is that it elucidates the impact of the acquis of languages in Africa on politics, education and development. This is linked with the issue of African languages in African philosophy too.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How many languages and dialects are there in Africa?
2. What problems arise from multi-linguism in Africa?
3. Who benefits from education in Africa and what languages are used for education?
4. What are the drawbacks of using metro-languages?
5. What is the difference between "endoglossic" and "exoglossic" African countries?
6. To have a clear picture of African languages, their distribution and usage look at the typology of language situation and policy (pp. 83-84) and remember its main information.

ABSTRACT:

In view of the increasing demands for the rehabilitation and promotion of indigenous African languages, a philosophical answer to the question of what can and should be done to effectively counteract the continuing marginalization of languages is often required. Despite the relatively successful coexistence of African and European languages, which has produced mixed languages, all measures must be taken to ensure that the native languages of Africa are used in the future as a means of expressing Africa's identities and worldviews. This chapter tries to show how the philosophy of convergence can contribute to overcome the language dilemma in Africa.

COMMENT:

This article treats the theme of the marginalization of African indigenous languages in African philosophy and proposes a way of solving this issue through transcription and semantic transmission applied in philosophical translation. Plus, the paper highlights that to solve marginalization, Africa urgently needs a policy on languages that encourages the use of native languages. This would be helpful for African philosophy since, in this way, African thinkers can express African patterns of thinking, values, cultural heritage and identity.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Describe the theme of marginalization of African indigenous languages.
2. Why native African languages should be preserved?
3. What policy is needed for African languages and what is the advantage of it?
4. What methods could be applied to philosophical translation, according to this article?
5. What are the advantages of using African indigenous languages for African philosophy?

NGŪGĨ WA THIONG'O. *DECOLONISING THE MIND. THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE IN AFRICAN LANGUAGE*

1986, London: James Curry, Nairobi: Heineman Kenya,
Portsmouth: Heinemann, Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House

Difficulty: Intermediate

PUBLISHER'S NOTE:

Decolonising the Mind is a collection of essays about language and its constructive role in national culture, history, and identity. The book, which advocates for linguistic decolonization, is one of Ngũgĩ's best-known and most-cited non-fiction publications, helping to cement him as a pre-eminent voice theorizing the "language debate" in post-colonial studies.

Ngũgĩ describes the book as "a summary of some of the issues in which I have been passionately involved for the last twenty years of my practice in fiction, theatre, criticism, and in teaching of literature..." *Decolonising the Mind* is split into four essays: "The Language of African Literature," "The Language of African Theatre," "The Language of African Fiction," and "The Quest for Relevance."

COMMENT:

The papers in this volume were foundational for the post-colonial debate on African language.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What are the reasons for the refusal of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o to write (fiction) in the English language?
2. Describe the theory of language, esp. with regards to the intertwining of language and culture.
3. What Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o mean by the Imperialism at its effect as a "cultural bomb"?
4. Why is language so important? What is a language to its speaker? What does it mean to speak one's "own" or an "alien" language?
5. What is, according to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Decolonisation? And why does he focus especially on the Decolonisation of the Mind?

ABSTRACT:

This article focuses on two translation techniques, namely explicitation and amplification. Substantial research has been conducted using these translation techniques in languages other than indigenous languages of South Africa. These two techniques were explored in a translation from English into isiZulu, using Brenda Munitich's *The Fisherman*, which is translated into isiZulu as 'Umdobi'. Besides giving a clear understanding of the two translation techniques (explicitation and amplification), the article shows how these techniques can facilitate the translation of texts from English into isiZulu. Further, it shows how translators can use these techniques to improve the quality of their translations, especially expressive texts.

COMMENT:

This text offers a practical approach to translation from English to isiZulu. It proposes two translation techniques, i.e., explicitation and amplification that are able to help translators to improve the quality of their translations. It has been included because it enables students to have a clear idea of the state of the art in the field of translation practices from English to an indigenous language, i.e., isiZulu.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. At the beginning of the article the authors talk about translation strategies, could you describe these strategies?
2. List and describe the translation techniques proposed in the article.
3. What is explicitation? Also, describe its use.
4. What is amplification? How it is used?
5. What are the translation problems explicitation and amplification are able to address to?

INTRODUCTION:

Since the beginning of the development of the corpus of African philosophical writing, African philosophy has been written exclusively in European languages. African philosophers write in English, in French, in Portuguese, in German, in Latin, and if we may include the non-African authors who made substantial contributions to African philosophy and the languages into which the major works of African philosophy were translated, we would arrive at a large number of European (and possibly even Asian) languages, but very few, if any, African ones. There are authors among African philosophers who stress the importance of a renaissance of the traditional thought systems, some go as far as to claim that the usage of African languages may have far-reaching consequences on the philosophical conclusions at which we arrive. In spite of this, the same authors often acknowledge certain shortcomings of African languages to express philosophical ideas. In any way, they all continue writing in European languages. The reasons for this state of affairs are obvious. Historical conditions such as colonialism, economic and political dependency, contribute to the fact of the international weakness of regional languages, this being the case not only of African languages. English and French, but especially English, have a large international public, books in English get sold, get read, etc. African languages were ignored or even suppressed during the colonial era, so that speaking a European language became a matter of high prestige, whereas African languages were looked down upon. Even if that changed, economic underdevelopment leads to cultural underdevelopment, propagating African languages is only possible if there are the means to do it. But even then, there is the large number of African languages : which are we to choose ? On the grounds of these reasons, African languages are underdeveloped, lack the vocabulary to express realities of modern life.

COMMENT:

This article explores the theme of African philosophy that is generally expressed in European languages. Some African philosophers want to propose a renaissance of the traditional body of thought, even if some acknowledge that African languages face issues in expressing some philosophical ideas. African philosophers are continuing to write in European languages due to some historical conditions (e.g., colonialism) that are responsible for the weakness of regional languages on the international scene. One of the main issues is that neither efforts have been made yet to develop a corpus of African philosophical terminology nor Western philosophical books have been translated into African languages. The major questions of the article focus on whether it is possible to write philosophy in African languages and analyse the role of African languages in the development of African thought. The author considers the usage of African languages in African philosophy, the use of African languages in the four major branches of African philosophy and finally, she considers African languages that serve as a tool for African philosophy.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What are the historical events that contributed to the massive use of European languages for African philosophy?
2. What are the four trends of African philosophy?
3. What is the usage of African languages in the philosophical works of African philosophers?
4. Are African languages able to express all the philosophical concepts usually expressed by European languages? What problems a philosopher who wants to use African languages could face?
5. How illiteracy relates to the issue of African languages in African philosophy?

ABSTRACT:

My paper is divided into two parts. In the first part, I will define the basic concepts, such as "African philosophy" and "Afrophone philosophies", their relationship and the general context of the debate on "African philosophy". I anticipate my definition here and say that "Afrophone philosophies" are those discourses that are the medium of philosophical reflexion in a given culture. Thus in the second part of my paper, I will concentrate on one specific case of a philosophical reflexion, that of reflecting philosophical influences in the late works of Euphrase Kezilahabi, Nagona (1990) and Mzingile (1991).

COMMENT:

Rettová offers an overview of the concepts of "African philosophy" and "Afrophone philosophies", helping the reader grasp these concepts. Moreover, part of the paper aims to look at the Swahili-speaking societies and how they are influenced by Western philosophy. The discussion involves considering the late works of Euphrase Kezilahabi.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Describe the basic concepts of African philosophy.
2. What are Afrophone philosophies?
3. What are the differences between African philosophy and Afrophone philosophies?
4. What is the role of Western philosophy in Kezilahabi's late works?
5. What is the purpose of this article and what does it tell us about the Swahili-speaking societies?

ABSTRACT:

One of the multiple effects of colonialism in Africa was the suppression and marginalization of African indigenous languages and the imposition and valorization of colonial languages which thus became the exclusive vectors of modern education, religious proselytization, and international communication and dialogue. After independence, this language situation led to a series of debates centered on what should be the appropriate language of pedagogy, scholarship, and artistic expression in Africa. Having successfully struggled against colonialism, should Africans continue using the colonially imposed foreign languages for their teaching, knowledge production, artistic and literary expression, to the continued detriment of the colonially marginalized indigenous languages? In this chapter, Tangwa revisits the language problematic in Africa from the vantage position of one who had actively participated in the language debates in the early 1990s. Tangwa briefly considers the purpose, functions, and uses of language in general, the relationship between language and culture, and the polar positions in the language debate in Africa. The chapter ends with a brief examination of the contemporary situation in the evolution of the language problem and makes a recommendation on what appears to be the only way forward.

COMMENT:

An up-to-date, concise and solid overview of the language problem in African philosophy.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Describe the debate on language in African philosophy.
2. What is meant by the "domestication and indigenization of the colonial language heritage"?
3. Discuss the specific problems of language for the African diaspora.
4. Is it, in Tangwa's opinion, possible to authentically use a colonial language as an African person? What are his arguments?
5. Why is language such an important issue in African philosophy?

1995, *Kwasi Wiredu: Conceptual Decolonization in African Philosophy*.
Four Essays, selected and introduced by Olusegun Oladipo. Ibadan:
Hope Publications, 22-32

Difficulty: Intermediate

ABSTRACT:

Wiredu argues for a conceptual decolonization. This means, "[o]n the negative side, 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 the foreign philosophical traditions that have had an impact on African life and thought. And, on the positive side, I mean exploiting as much as is judicious the resources of our own indigenous conceptual schemes in our philosophical meditations on even the most technical problems of contemporary philosophy. But I cite it first because the necessity for decolonization was brought upon us in the first place by the historical superimposition of foreign categories of thought on African thought systems through colonialism.« (Wiredu 1992, 22) »This superimposition has come through three principal avenues. The first one is the avenue of language.« (Wiredu 1992, 22) The second one is religion and the third one politics."

COMMENT:

One of the many seminal papers by one of the most influential African philosophers of Decolonisation. It addresses, in Wiredu's words, the problem of "historical superimposition of foreign categories of thought on African thought systems through colonialism".

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What does Wiredu refer to with the expression "Decolonisation" and what does the qualifier "conceptual" mean?
2. Describe the negative effects it can have, according to Wiredu, to think in English (instead of thinking in your respective African native language)?
3. Describe Wiredu's understanding of objectivity.
4. Explain the problems of the understanding of Descartes' Cogito ergo sum in Akan language.
5. Why are African thinkers in danger of a "involuntary mental de-Africanization"?