

BLACK SKIN AND WHITE TONGUE: A CALL FOR LANGUAGE DECOLONIZATION

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IJASR 2021
VOLUME 4
ISSUE 3 MAY – JUNE

ISSN: 2581-7876

Abstract: Africa has always been a naturally land-unlocked continent; unlocked by the very word, ‘diversity’ that has a breath of assortment situated in culture, history, religion and languages. Apart from the aforementioned, Africa is also a home to tourists, missionaries and settlers. With a welcoming and hospitable attitude, those people are, but heartily hosted including their culture, religion, education, and language to mention but a few. Hosting such is increasingly refurbishing the African community. It is swiftly overturning what ought to be Africa, in particularly indigenous language systems. Ngugi wa Thiong’o opens his philosophical work *Decolonizing the Mind* with a decree that the subject of language in Africa cannot be discussed meaningfully outside the context of those social forces which have made it both an issue demanding our attention and a problem calling for solution¹. This article articulates a breakthrough of language colonization that has taken roots in the continent of Africa, thus arguing for *Language Decolonization*. By decolonizing native languages which have been assimilated by the languages of colonial masters, we come to a full understanding and appreciating the diversity of languages harbored in the continent. The paper also addresses one of the existential paradoxes in Africa, black skin but white tongue; an ontological issue that points to an incoherence that lies between the race and the language embraced. Hence clearing the perpetual dilemma of Africans on the choice of official languages especially to nations which adopted exoglossic language policies.

Keywords: Africanized, Englishized, *Dasein*, Language, *lingua franca*, Extinction, Copycats, Exoglossic, Endoglossic.

Introduction

Philosophical traditions have been engrossed with the articulation of reality in its entirety. From diverse schools of thought, defining different philosophical trends and systems have had different approaches towards the understanding of reality². It is but apt to say that philosophical problems have primarily attuned to the articulation and affirmation of the human individual with its attempt to conceive the World, Man, and God³. Narrowing it down to man, many a time we are faced with several unique problems in traditional anthropology. These problems have a compelling impetus that leads one to feel burdened and eventually become a lifetime millstone around the neck. Language is one of the most vital issues which by default deserve unswerving insights to unearth its hidden mysteries in the sphere of existence. Ngugi wa Thiong’o asserts that: “The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people’s definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe”⁴. In addressing Africa’s paradox of languages, which presents an ontological issue that points to an incoherence that lies between the race and the language embraced, the articulation for language decolonization will be instrumental to Africans. Precisely those who highly esteem their African cultural values by offering theoretical and practical insights on how to approach this dilemma of experiencing indigenous languages which have seen their way to extinction. This shall be illustrated through a brief narrative of language dynamics, narrating colonial Africa vis-à-vis language, the irony between race and language, about a mother tongue, culture as the custody of language and suggesting ways to realize this project at hand.

¹Ngugi wa Thiong’o. *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, (Kenya: Heinemann, 1986), 4. Henceforth it will be referred to as Wa Thiong’o. *Decolonizing the Mind*.

²Peter Emmanuel A. Mara. *The Capable Human Being and the Role of Language in Paul Ricoeur’s Hermeneutical Philosophical Anthropology*, (Philippines: University of Santo Tomas, 2011), 51.

³Christopher Shields. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Version 1.0*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 4534. Henceforth it will be referred to as Shields, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

⁴Wa Thiong’o, *Decolonizing the Mind*, 4.

Language Dynamics

Many definitions of *language* have been submitted and distributed in different quantities because of its diverse meaning and interpretation. American linguists Bernard Bloch and George L. Trager define language as a system of arbitrary vocal and none vocal symbols with which a social group cooperates. To their definition, I would add that it is a method of communication, both for rational and irrational animals which consist of spoken words, signs, symbols, sounds and structured behaviors exhibited in a conventional way. Based on these and other definitions, we can safely conclude that language is the epicentrum of being.

By using language, animals are able to convey information and express what they feel, see, hear and touch. This underpins the reason why in the early stages of childhood, humans learn language in their immediate environment, specifically their mother tongue since it is what connects them to the external reality. Apart from language, there is no other means through which our thoughts can be communicated, our feelings expressed and above all, our interior be deposited into the exterior compass. This deposition is culminated when information is conveyed and words are relayed.

There are so many contexts in which the importance of language is portrayed; for instance, every nation has its own language(s), religion has its own language code as well, though diverse in its utility. For example, Christians have a language they use when approaching God, just as Muslims have theirs too. Teenagers also have a unique code of conversation which is in accordance with their consciousness and the demands of their age. To level it down; my home country Zimbabwe, although she is an exoglossic nation, she also has a multiple native language including Shona, Ndebele and Tonga which are widely spoken.

In the depth of our consciousness which I call interior of consciousness, contemplating the complexity of the subject at hand will leave one with no choice but to bolt with a series of questions such as: who is the creator of language? Who sets the rules of language? Where does language lead us? Etc. Even the possibility of taming and domesticating language is quite taxing because it continuously evolves with every generation. Language seems static yet very dynamic, and this dynamism can go unseen (passive) and be active simultaneously which is utterly nerve-racking. This implies that it can be universal, relative, pragmatic, subjective and objective depending on the perspective one takes, such that wherever we find ourselves there is a certain code of communication used that fits our linguistic operations.

Narrative of Colonial Africa Vis-À-Vis Language

Every living organism is linguistic by nature. Language has always been at the heart of Africa's definition despite the controversy which sprouted hundred years ago when the western imperial powers delineated an entire continent with her multiplicity of peoples, cultures and languages into different colonies. Ngugi wa Thiong'o in his *Decolonizing the Mind* contends that; "it seems it is the fate of Africa to have her destiny always decided around conference tables in the metropolises of the western world"⁵. From a historical perspective it is imperative to conclude that the Berlin conference divided African countries not as mere colonies but into different territorial states guided by European languages. Colonialism and post-colonialism remapped Africa's language-geographical structure through the reference of English-speaking, French-speaking or Portuguese-speaking African countries.

One of the achievements of colonialism was to ensure that the imposition of a foreign language conquered the mental universe of the colonized through penetrating and undervaluing their culture and intellectual prowess; for language carries culture, and culture carries language, especially through orature and literature⁶. Thus, in the Anglophone countries of Africa, English is more than a language; it is like a sacred tower where all native languages prostrate themselves. In the same vein, it has not only colonized our indigenous languages but also our education system to the extent that the criterion of intelligence is measured through one's mastery of English. The incapable English speakers are mocked, scolded or even dehumanized as dull and illiterate. For this reason, Frantz Fanon, one of the champions of Negritude movement, remarked that; "the black person is not only burdened by geography,

⁵Wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind*, 4.

⁶ Wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind*, 16.

history, time, and difference exacted by the idea of race, but the inferiority complex inflicted by colonialism has injected self-hate⁷.

Fanon's masterpiece *Black Skin, White Masks* offers a lot of inspiration in this article for its systematic detailed account of the language inferiority complex as the highest contributing factor that turned many Africans to amplify the use of English language at the expense of local languages. As a result, sparking a conflict between the complexion and the tongue (black skin and white tongue). "Its cause can be found in the interiorization of a historically and economically determined inferiority complex"⁸. Indeed, the problems of the colonized are deep and intricately connected with the racist gaze and the oppressive colonial state which is fully equipped with language, books, teachers, experts, and even the Bible, which it uses to oppress the colonized subjects. Therefore, colonialism did not leave any stone unturned in its tactic of extinguishing the natives' cultural and linguistic heritage⁹.

Moreover, where English has been used, it has lasted. It all flickered in the colonial period where the language of settlers colonized the languages of the people whose land they seized. Many indigenous languages were marginalized and gradually driven into extinction and simultaneously absorbed from them whatever local terms seemed useful.

The Irony between Race and Language

Martin Heidegger, in his *Being and Time*, postulates language as the house of being¹⁰. The direct translation of this being is a human being. While an explanatory essay by Paul Livingston of Villanova University offers it a unique interpretation which says 'language is more than a tool, ready-at-hand for our use; implying that we live in our language as we live the lives determined by it and we think insofar as we bring reality to language'. Additionally, language has an important place in our daily lives; it is more of a shell that shelters the operations of a culture. Therefore, Africa with its linguistic and tribal fertility is a house of languages.

In his article published in 2018 at world facts website, Benjamin Elisha Sawe observed that Africa is one of the world's most linguistically diverse continents; the second largest continent in the world by population and land area. According to 2016 estimates from the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Africa was home to about 1,225,080,510 people. Linguists estimate that nearly 2,000 native languages are spoken in Africa. Nigeria is one among countries with many indigenous languages estimated to around 500 languages spoken within its borders. The principal native tongues of Africa are divided into four major categories, which include Afroasiatic, Nilo-Saharan, Niger-Congo, and Khoe.

However, in as far as language multiplicity is concerned; it is symmetrical to the pride of the continent. Although the irony is that each linguistic constellation is on a verge of annihilation, especially the Khoe language group, one of the dominant language groups in the southern region of Africa. The most prominent dialect within this group is the Nama which is spoken in Namibia. Emphatically, Nama and some languages within this group are facing the risk of extinction as native speakers feel at home when speaking English rather than their own.

Moreover, it is quite alarming to think about whether or not there's a language widely spoken and studied as much as English is, since the desire to learn it is becoming unquenchable and the spread unquestionable. In this 21st century, the world is becoming more urban and more middle class, and the adoption of English is inevitable. Currently, the world language index testifies that about 20% of the world population speaks English. A report in 2017 by the World Linguistic Society found that among the 1.2 billion Africans, 700 million speak English¹¹. As a consequence, the given data is a proof testifying that Africa is accounted for being an English-speaking continent.

However, appealing to prediction it is probable that this trending language despite competing with other influential languages like French and Chinese, has colonized the world specifically Africa. Prompted by the future linguistic

⁷Kwasi Wiredu, (Ed). *A Companion to African Philosophy (USA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004)*, 218. Henceforth it will be referred to as Wiredu. *A Companion to African Philosophy*.

⁸Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Trans. Charles Lam Markman, (France: Pluto Press, 1952), 184.

⁹Wiredu, *A Companion to African Philosophy*, 218

¹⁰Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh, (New York: State University, 1953), 39.

¹¹By Dylan Lyons. *How Many People Speak English, And Where Is It Spoken*: Babel Magazine, Published March 10, 2021. <https://www.babel.com/en/magazine/contributors/dylan-lyons>. Accessed 21 May 2021.

status of Africa, it is reasonable to admit that the strength of many native languages in our region are losing their vitality. This is evident in the urban set up of Africa where children are introduced to English or French as their *lingua franca* while subordinating their mother tongues. Interestingly, in present day sub-Saharan Africa, the intelligence of a child is judged not according to his/her intellectual aptitudes, rather according to the mastery of foreign grammar, in this case we mean the fluency of speaking English.

It is common to hear a naïve African say, “oh your English accent is very poor.” Such patronizing remarks demote us into copycats because no matter how much we may pretend or apply all cosmetics to our tongue, it is impossible to surpass our native accent. It may sound pessimistic but that’s the plain truth. This reminds me of my elementary school life, I used to be punished if not flogged for speaking my mother tongue because English was seen as the ideal language of education competency. It is not surprising that vast amounts are spent on spreading the language in question through written books and research works than indigenous languages. The reality is that it is taking on more and more local colour in the different places where it is used. Accordingly, while the numbers of languages in the world are diminishing, the number of English speakers is increasing¹².

The intensification of English is evidential to exoglossic language policy nations in Africa. Exoglossic countries are those which adopted English, French or Portuguese as their official national languages. These include countries like Zimbabwe, Zambia, Uganda, Angola, D.R Congo among others. It is a clear indication which explains a deeply rooted language colonization in Africa and still rings a bell for language decolonization. Whereas, the Republic of Tanzania is one sovereign country that deserves an applaud for pursuing an active endoglossic language policy as justified by the use of Kiswahili in all institutions of the country and as the language of instruction in schools. Although this exercise of an indigenous language has been a headline of criticism, because the named country has been enticed to adopt English as language of instruction as a way of catching up with the rest of western civilization.

However, it is in this vein that Kagame, Mkhize and Hlongwa amongst others, have called upon the African elite, the men and women of the village (organic intellectuals), together with like-minded intellectuals of all persuasions, to free themselves from the vestiges of colonialism¹³. This will enable Africa to perform the revolutionary task that intellectuals of the western world have executed with their native languages, and this will elevate many native languages to qualify academic and scientific use¹⁴. Lest we fall into a trap of producing a class of natives with African blood and colour, yet European in taste, thinking and conduct.

The Strength of a Mother Tongue

Dealing with language problems particularly the influence of mother tongue to an individual, poses a threat to the future generations if the problem of language assimilation by the colonial languages won't be counteracted. This takes us to an interview recorded in 2019 published on YouTube, Ngugi wa Thiong'o strikes a challenge to this problem in his bold remark that: “If you know most languages of the world excluding your mother tongue, it is self-enslavement, whilst, if you know your mother tongue first, then putting an effort to learn other world languages, then that is called empowerment”¹⁵. It is a dialectal conflict that directly speaks and appeals to Africans to re-evaluate their attitude towards their native languages while striving to catch up with foreign languages. The choice lies whether we take the direction of self-empowerment or self-alienation. The latter is by default leads Africa to doom because it puts an individual into the web of identity crises and cultural dilemma.

This follows that interplay between culture, thought and language is perennial, hence the triad cannot be alienated in the quest for a holistic appreciation of reality. Culture captures our way of life and it is from where a philosophy of life of a people can be garnered. More still, man's history always has its point of departure and mainly associated with events of time, place and identity. It is on this basis that scholars argued that philosophy also has a cultural

¹²Henry Hitchings. *What's the language of the future*; Salon. Published November, 6, 2011.

https://www.salon.com/2011/11/06/whats_the_language_of_the_future/. Accessed 21 May 2021.

¹³Nhlanhla Mkhize et al. *African Languages, Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), and the Transformation of the Humanities and Social Sciences in Higher Education*, (South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2014), 14. Henceforth it will be referred to as Mkhize. *African Languages, Indigenous Knowledge Systems*.

¹⁴ Mkhize. *African Languages, Indigenous Knowledge Systems*, 17.

¹⁵ Ngugi Wa Thiong'o - *Why Africans hate their own languages* | Diaspora Connect: Ep. 23.

<https://youtu.be/tnF6XdOh5HY>, accessed 7 May 2021.

root, for every experience has an environment in context¹⁶. Man speaks from within the environment that originates his umbilical; it is essentially responsible for his linguistic expressions.

Narrowing down this question in relation to the language with which our umbilical cord is cut would entail the language which orients an infant to the physical world, is itself sufficient to qualify the fact that every language is pregnant with a worldview of its users, inclusive of their ethos, values and cultural practices. The manner one perceives the world is birthed from the language system because in order to understand the name of different objects in foreign language, it is natural then that one has to translate those words and fit them into his categories of thought. With this in mind, Bantu speakers as they strive to strike equilibrium between the known and the unknown language, between their mother tongue and foreign language, they are urged not to be spectators of their diminishing language, but protagonists of indigenous language preservation.

Culture as the Custody of Language

It follows that “language, any language has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture”¹⁷. For instance, the adoption of English in Africa functions more more merely communicative than the use of mother tongue which is both for communication and transmission of culture. For this purpose, culture is almost indistinguishable from the language that makes possible its genesis, articulation and indeed its transmission from one generation to the next. Therefore, the values contained within a language are the basis of a people’s identity and their sense of particularity in the human race¹⁸.

However, a Harvard Business School professor, Tsedal Neeley, argues that language and culture are a completely separate entity which needs to be treated distinctly¹⁹. From an African outlook that supposition is very controversial and prone to refutation because in African anthropology it is impossible to approach the reality of language and culture on completely differing edges. It is important to understand that the primacy of language is to excel in communication and communication is not only about to learn language forms, rather it is also to know how those forms interact in every culture. Therefore, it isn't prolific to distance language from society in whatsoever dimension because language has the legitimacy of a communicative function and the realization of that function lies in the mainstay of culture.

For instance, names, of people have a linguistic meaning in them; rocks and mountains are not just empty objects, but bears linguistic features, changes of weather and types of rainfall are not simply silent wonders of nature, but speaks to the community a language of readiness for farming, drought or warnings of an imminent calamity. More examples could be alluded, but the bottom-line is that in African communities, typically the Batonga people of Zimbabwe, the whole of existence presents a phenomenology of language. The secret to unfold the language hidden underneath the Batonga outlook of the universe is purely hermeneutical.

Moreover, it is from studying the culture of a specific community that we arrive at a better understanding and interpretation the language in use. It doesn't end there, but it also goes to the extent of categorizing a community's philosophy of life. Above all, in this world of a cocktailed linguistic structure, “we are living at a time where differences can tear us apart where we feel small, isolated, insignificant and divided. Language can be our bridge to understanding, our bridge to interpretation and our bridge to connection”²⁰, so that as Africans we could join together to rebuild the broken bridges of ubuntu.

Way Forward towards Realization of Language Decolonization

Advocating for the possibility of language decolonization is a commendable academic innovation. The big task is on the methods of ensuring that the promotion and distribution of resources that could harness this approach to philosophy is conventionally furnished. The first is to fashion an atmosphere that stimulates African scholars to

¹⁶ Christine Jourdan. *Language, culture, and society*. Key topics in linguistic anthropology, (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2006), 5.

¹⁷ Wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind*, 13.

¹⁸ Wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind*, 17.

¹⁹ Tsedal Neeley. *Why Global Success Depends On Separating Language & Culture* | Tsedal Neeley | TEDxCambridge, <https://www.ted.com/tedx>, 24 October 2017. Retrieved 13 January 2021.

²⁰ Neeley. *Why Global Success Depends on Separating Language & Culture*.

embrace the culture of writing and reading. The secondly is to create opportunities that promote literature written in native languages. The third is to review our local education systems so that they prioritize the in-depth study of indigenous languages to learners and publish more books translated from foreign to local languages as well as fostering language interactions. If such measures are taken into account, then Sub-Sahara Africa will be a fertile ground to host many philosophical concepts that are generated within the confines of our continent, indeed in relation to the entire universe²¹.

This therefore, calls for an urgent need to emphasize and recognize the inclusion of African languages in curriculum development. It is also the task left to African scholars in different academic fields to carry out this responsibility of harnessing a philosophical campaign of the vitality of African languages as stated by Dr Wanjohi in the following words:

If African languages are accorded the importance, they deserve, I foresee scholars starting language associations for the promotion of the former, and others especially philosophers coming up with journals in which the exchange of ideas of their discipline is in a native tongue. Given such a scenario it will be possible to value each other's work²².

Carrying such an academic exercise will boost the consideration of our linguistic heritage in our localities and abroad. It will also be a good gesture to develop the system left by the early missionaries who pushed native languages to be written in roman transcription. Again, African philosophers old and young should be the protagonists to harness this project. Certainly, this is one of the ways to make philosophy more practical, contextual and enculturated.

Conclusion

I believe that the world is in constant communication with us, our main task is to respond, to inform and tell the tale of life from the perspective of an original language. "The conversation that we ourselves is, is not led by us but we are a conversation itself"²³. This is precisely justified by the fact that every conversation belongs to a linguistic context, hence it is in a conversation where one experiences what language is²⁴. Hence, as Africans we can have an intimate encounter or experience with our own indigenous languages by salvaging the remnants of our mother tongues and activating their grammatical influence. We obviously have to rethink the fact that Africa suffers from the pandemic of language disparities. It is a task laid upon us to vaccinate this pandemic by going back to our roots. Lest we continuously succumb to this undeniable fate that there is a radical drift from Africanised Africans to Englishized Africans. It is a black skin and white tongue reality; yes that is what we have been made to stomach this ontological crisis in Africa. It is no easy task to dismantle English in Africa because it will be like accepting a song while rejecting its lyrics. While on the same note, distancing ourselves from native languages is like cutting a tree while leaving out the roots. The choice lies between you and me to decide the ambient of languages we want to hoist in the sub-Saharan territory.

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²¹ Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, (Kenya: Heinemann, 1986), 4.

²² Gerald Wanjohi – *IRUGA: A Translation of Plato's Symposium into Gikuyu. The Role of Philosophy in the African Context; Traditions, Challenges and Perspectives*. Edited by Stephen Okello, (Roma: Urbaniana University Press, 2019), 83.

²³ Robert J. Dostal ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, (United State of America: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 106.

²⁴ Hans George Gadamer. *Truth and Method*, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), 346.

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