AFRICA AND ITS LINGUISTIC PROBLEMATIC

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The study and the classifications of the languages of Africa have traditionally been monopolized by European linguists who invariably approached the topic from an Eurocentric standpoint. This research standpoint was determined to a large extent by considerations of "race" as configured by orthodox European anthropology. I seek to critically examine and revise the current modes of classifying the language of Africa. I also discuss the issue of the current usages and possible futures of the European colonial languages in Africa.

One of the direct products of the European colonization of Africa is that while the African continent is home to approximately 750 languages, the languages of official communication and modernism are those of the erstwhile colonial powers. For example, there are few African countries where university and technical education are conducted in indigenous languages. The reason for this is the same one that led to the colonization of the African continent in the first instance. The colonization of Africa by Europe (specifically the six nations of France, Britain, Portugal, Spain, Belgium, and Germany) was due to the qualitative differences in technological development at the midpoint of the last century (i.e., the nineteenth century).

The technological advantage of the maxim gun made it possible that vast areas of Africa would be colonized by single European powers. These powers were then free to forcefully bring these vast areas under the official control of single European languages. Another technological advantage enjoyed by the European colonizers was that their languages were written, hence imbued with the power of permanence. This was indeed a situation fraught with irony since the earliest written languages in the world were of African origin: ancient Egyptian and ancient Nubian. The classical Ethiopic language of Ge'ez, Hausa, and Swahili are also languages with a long written tradition, and longer than most indigenous European languages. When I say, "indigenous European languages," I refer to extinct and never written European languages such as Pict, Vandal, Gallic, Saxon, and so on. In fact the vast majority of indigenous European languages are now extinct and have left no identifiable trace.

The European languages that were imposed on Africa during the colonial era are in reality hybrid languages, heavily influenced by the equally hybrid languages of Latin and Greek. It is now more than thirty years since the end of formal colonialism in Africa, but the colonial languages sill hold sway and the old post-independence questions still have not been settled. Examples of such questions are: what is the future role of the colonial languages in African society? Should one adopt a pragmatic attitude and preserve the colonial languages for the access they provide to modern science, technology, and knowledge? Are there

cultural and psychic costs for an unchallenged and continuing reliance on the colonial languages of Europe? These are the questions I propose to discuss in this essay on what I refer to as Africa's linguistic problematic. These questions have been already variously discussed by theorists of African literature, and some answers are well known. But I add to the discussion by exploring in metatheoretical fashion the very idea of "African languages" and their relationship to European discourse about language classification in general.

What is immediately evident concerning any study of the languages of Africa is that the classification of these languages have been for the most part conducted by European language scholars. What is also evident is that the historical analysis and dialogue concerning the languages of Africa have been structured according to assumptions heavily influenced by principles of Eurocentrism.

Thus, in this essay I shall proceed as follows: I shall first examine the value-laden historical and sociological bases on which the study of African languages were undertaken. I shall then examine the phenomenological content of such languages to determine how they influence the psychology of European and African speakers. Finally, I shall offer possible solutions to the question of colonial languages in Africa.

Africa and the Phenomenological Content of European Languages

The question concerning the role of European languages in African society is a controversial one given both the circumstances under which these languages were introduced to Africa and the linguistic terms and discourses that developed out of these specific circumstances. On the one hand, in a general way, there is what might be called the pragmatist approach and on the other, the phenomenological approach. The pragmatists would argue that there is nothing untoward to having European languages as the official languages in contemporary African society because such languages are already in place and they offer a gateway to forms of knowledge and expression that are international in scope.[1]

The well-known novelist Chinua Achebe is an example of the pragmatist position. Achebe believes that English could be used quite effectively by Africans in ways reflective of the specificity of African interpretive and cultural experiences.[2] On the other side there are well-known African writers who believe that a post-colonial Africa should seek to restore its agency by reverting to its indigenous languages for both written and speech purposes. The well-known arguments of Ngugi wa Thinog'o offer good examples of the phenomenological approach. According to this author it is the languages of Europe introduced to Africa by way of the colonial and neocolonial educational systems that ultimately represented the power of Europe that "fascinated and held the soul prisoner. The bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation" (286).

West African philosopher Marcien Towa also expresses the urgency of the situation with his observation that "the linguistic problem is one of the fundamental problems of the African. The linguistic problem conditions the construction of an African ensemble at the continental level" (178). This comes after the recognition that certain interpretive and phenomenological blockages arise when the African author seeks to express in the colonial language certain thoughts and ideas that are properly germane to a local African language. This problem is so evident that even European authors express similar sentiments. There is the general belief that Tolstoy or Kant are best understood in their original languages of Russian or German, even when professional translations into other cognate European languages are made.

Yet Towa recognizes that the problem may even reduce to that of language mastery for whatever purposes; he emphasizes the importance of an inter-regional language such as Swahili for communication in Africa while retaining the colonial languages for communication with the non-African world (178). Matters are complicated by the fact that the idea of post-colonial literature in the colonial languages is now being positively embraced in some quarters on account of the infusions of new usages and phenomenologies on the part of the contemporary African. This approach partially resembles that of Achebe's but with an important difference. Whereas Achebe seems to recognize an equality of importance between the colonial languages and the local ones, some authors, supportive of the new creative ways in which the colonial languages have been used, ascribe an increasing importance to the colonial languages on account of an assumed quality of modernism.

This model derives possibly from a recognition of the development of modern languages in Europe. The myriad languages that Europeans spoke for thousands of years before the imposition of Latin on most of Europe have disappeared for the most part. French, English, German, and Spanish are relatively modern hybrid languages that have developed out of local European vernaculars embellished mostly by the colonial languages of Latin and Greek. It should be noted that the local languages of Europe were constrained to borrow heavily from Latin and Greek in order to express abstract and theoretical ideas. In this regard it is ironic how Eurocentric linguists of colonial times sought to contrast Europe's languages with those of Africa on the basis of capacity for abstract thought of the former, a quality which the latter supposedly lacked. But the colonization of Europe's linguistic patrimony by Latin and Greek need not be repeated in Africa with the European colonial languages playing a role similar to Latin and Greek. The reason is that there are major languages of Africa that were well established in written form before the advent of the European colonists. These are the languages of Swahili, Hausa, Ge'ez, Arabic, and others.

Authors such as Gérard have recognized this fact but with some qualification. Gérard and others would argue that Swahili, though possessing a written past, is a hybrid language (48). This is an error. Swahili is no more hybrid than French,

Yoruba, or any number of languages spoken in Europe or Africa. In the case of Swahili there are some Arabic loan words due to the fact that the language was developed in a geographical area where individuals of different ethnic backgrounds engaged extensively in trade. In this regard the origins of Swahili are no different from those of several other extant languages. I suspect that if the loan words in Swahili were from some language regarded as Bantu there would be little discussion from Eurocentric linguistic sources. But we should note that even if Arabic is regarded as belonging to some distinct Afro-Asiatic language family, this language group has its origins in East Africa.

The linguistic classification "Afro-Asiatic" was coined mainly on the basis that Arabic was developed in Arabia, a region of West Asia. Yet there are more logically compelling reasons to regard Arabia as Africa minor (Eurocentric discourse speaks of Asia minor with regard to places like Turkey) than as part of Asia. What this discussion demonstrates is the important implications (linguistic, sociological, etc.) that flow from the arbitrary assumptions of Eurocentric discourse.

Yet we cannot escape the debate concerning the role of Europe's languages in post-colonial Africa. As suggested above the fundamental issue is the phenomenological content of Africa's languages of Europe and their compatibility with the languages of Europe. I would want to qualify this question though with the observation that on account of the universality of the principles of empirical science and its emphasis on objectivist analysis, the phenomenological question concerning Europe's languages in Africa would be of lesser importance in this area. Proof of this claim could be had from the fact that Asian scientists of Chinese and Japanese extraction often publish articles in English, which does not appear to hinder their analytical skills. But in the more creative and subjectivist areas of discourse such as poetry, literature, and music the phenomenological question assumes importance. One interesting point though - which again tends to support my contention - African writers, poets, and musicians are able to express their ideas, from a phenomenological viewpoint better in the Mediterranean languages of French, Portuguese, and Spanish than in the other colonial languages of English and German. The point is that even for the untrained ear Mediterranean modes of expression seem less incongruous in an African context than those from other areas of Europe. Perhaps there is a linguistic basis for this given the proximity of the Mediterranean culture area to Africa and the seemingly sharp divide that one discerns between the languages and cultures of northern Europe and Mediterranean Europe.

But is the phenomenological question really about the incompatibility of different discourses or is it one of conditions of agency? Western theoreticians of the epistemologies of language such as Whorf (1952) and Quine (1960) have argued that different languages are like different epistemological nets cast on the world to capture different aspects of it. What this means is that what we know about the world are not facts existing independently of us but different meanings

ascribed to our separate sensate experiences. And Quine spoke of the incompatibility of different discourses apparent through translations. This idea constitutes the heart of his interesting text *Word and Object*. The thesis concerning the contingency of linguistic meaning has also gained much currency in recent times within the research area known as the "strong programme in the sociology of knowledge" (Barnes, 1977).

Thus it seems evident that some meanings are necessarily lost whenever translations are made between any languages. One might consider the hypothetical solution of Englishmen having to discuss their daily affairs in Hausa, say. The very thought of this strikes us as incongruous. One obvious reason for linguistic incompatibilities is that every natural language is not just a set of words joined together by syntactical rules but a body of particularistic meanings developed over time. This is indeed one of the problems with interlinguistic adoptions.

But is the question only one of interlinguistic incompatibilities or does it also entail the human psychological cost of alienation? In fact, the "alienation" argument is one of those frequently heard concerning African usage of European languages especially in those areas regarding the phenomenological aspects of human experience. But is this always the case? In the case of the European context consider the case of individuals of Jewish ethnic extraction who have lived in many European countries and have participated in the intellectual life of these countries, all using different languages. Was Jewish intellectual life in Europe thereby alienated for several centuries? This does not appear to have been the case. Maimonides, Spinoza, Marx, Trotsky, and Einstein were individuals of Jewish extraction who did not write in Hebrew but made significant contributions to the intellectual life of Europe over many centuries. These intellectuals of Jewish extraction were certainly Europeans though they were not fully recognized as such for most of the history of Europe.

Consider too the case of the peopling of the United States of America by individuals of linguistic heritage other than English. Yet I doubt whether American scholars of Polish, German or Hungarian extraction experience any phenomenological misgivings about expressing their thoughts in English - a language alien to their cultural heritages. Yet it would be viewed somewhat differently for a Native American Navajo to write an authentic novel in English depicting Navajo cultural life. Perhaps the question here is one of agency. American writers of European but non-English ancestry are not really affected by having to write in English. Since the migration of Europeans to the Americas was mainly voluntary, human agency was expressed. Furthermore, the languages of Europe do not contain terms and meanings which view European cultural others as dehumanized beings lacking in agency.

But this is not the case with European Languages vis á vis Africa. European language usage brackets the African in ways that create specific ontologies alien to those of African languages. Terms such as negro, black, primitive, uncivilized tribe, tribal, sub-Saharan Africa, black Africa, true negro, negroid, Hamite,

Hamitic, Bantu, savage, first world, third world, evolué, and so on, do not exist in any African language. These are merely value-laden terms with dehumanizing and pejorative intent, added to the languages of Europe reflective of the unequal encounter between European and African in the last five hundred years. The truth is that the African occupies a special place in the ontologies of the languages of Europe. This special place is one reflective of a racial caste system in which terms have been created to define the African as a being of less human worth than that of the European. In the Americas, the location of the brutal captivity of West African by Spaniard, Portuguese, English, Dutch, French, and Dane, the languages of its inhabitants reflect the racial and caste obsessions of the European settler. The punctilious taxonomy of so-called racial types created for the lexicons of the Portuguese, French, Spanish, and English (to a lesser extent) demonstrates that the African is always viewed as a biological being occupying particular rungs on a racial hierarchy. According to these linguistic usages, civilization, culture, aesthetic values, and so on are defined by the European for the purpose of European agency and hegemony.

The task then for persons of African heritage who use the languages of Europe is to purge them of their anti-African concepts in order to create neutral ontological spaces for African discourse. But given that the languages of Europe are still spoken by Europeans who express a vested interest in maintaining cultural and economic hegemony over the African world the task of reconfiguring these languages for African usage may prove somewhat daunting. Yet the task of reconfiguration is still worthwhile so long as Africans see themselves constrained to use the languages of Europe in whatever dimension. In fact, the linguistic task at hand is a dual one: the promotion of two or three African languages for intercontinental currency and the sanitizing of the languages of Europe so that African agency be restored. In the case of the Americas there are four international languages of United Nations usage: French, English, Spanish, and Portuguese. In Asia the languages of Chinese and Japanese are recognized for international usage while in Africa only Arabic enjoys United Nations recognition. Hausa and Swahili could quite easily be added to Africa's international language roster.

Reinventing the Languages of Europe

In terms of the reconfiguration of Europe's languages for African usage one might consider the following examples. The term "negro," for example is strictly of European provenance and has no real sociological significance in any analysis of Africa's peoples. Historically, Africans have always referred to themselves in terms of linguistic, regional, and ethnic affiliations, not according to the simple-minded notion of pigmentation, In the modern era only the addition of nationality to the above list is acceptable. But despite its questionable content the terms "negro" has been massively abused since its conception. It was the central concept

in the Eurocentric historiography of Africa and its peoples. The usual strategy of the part of the Eurocentric historian (who usually fancied himself also as an anthropologist) was to determine *a priori* whether such and such an African people were "negroes" or not, then to proceed to write a speculative history *cum* anthropology based on that simplistic assumption. In the Western Hemisphere the standard Eurocentric procedure was to analyze the period of captivity and forced labor of Africans there as "negro history"

But the usage of the Eurocentric term "negro" persists even if changed into "black" for English language usage. Hence instead of "negro Africa" we now have "black Africa" or its euphemistic equivalent "sub-Sahara Africa." Eurocentric discourse speaks of "sub-Saharan Africa" as a simple mechanism for divorcing most of its inhabitants from any cultural or historical connection with the rest of Africa and its environs. The invented or real pathologies that afflict so-called sub-Saharan Africa are mysteriously supposed not to affect "supra-Saharan African." It is in the spirit of this discussion that the Eurocentric term "negro" and its euphemistic permutations (black, negroid, sub-Saharan, and so on) should be evaluated for African usage.

Another example is that of the term "tribe." The term derives from the Latin word *tribus* that signified the three original peoples of Rome but is now used exclusively in the languages of Europe to refer to the sub-national groups in Africa, provided that those groups are not of European provenance. European discourse reserves the term "ethnic group" or "people" for equivalent groups of European origin (the Afrikaners of South Africa are never referred to officially as a tribe). On the contrary, usage of the term "tribe" of "tribal" in Eurocentric discourse refers in strictly emotive fashion to societies that are primordial or primitive (another favorite Eurocentric term vis á vis Africa) in all dimensions. Political action on the part of European communities is usually described as "ethnic conflict" while similar actions in Africa are viewed emotively as "tribal strife." The behaviors in both instances are similar, but the images are different.

Another interesting example of how Eurocentric discourse constructs specific ontologies for Africans in that concerning the post-colonial African world. The terms "francophone," "anglophone," and "lusitaphone" are reserved only for so-called "sub-Saharan Africa." The ex-French colonial territories of North African and South-east Asia (Vietnam, Thailand, Laos, etc.) are almost never referred to as francophone areas. And unfortunately the colonized mentality of post-colonial Africa would seem to endorse these
divisive constructions.

Concluding Remarks

The problem concerning linguistic discourse and communication in contemporary Africa are but an aspect of the continent's general problems. In the above discussion I pointed out how the questions of Africa's languages have been

answered from the standpoint of Eurocentric discourse. This Eurocentric hegemony constitutes one aspect of Africa's linguistic problematic. Thus a critical examination of the prevailing Eurocentric linguistics of Africa is to be encouraged. I also pointed out the usage of Europe's colonial languages by African writers should be an enterprise of much circumspection - given the peculiar European-engendered phenomenology of Africa's peoples and cultures since the fifteenth century. Briefly, the languages of Europe should be purged of all usage that denies agency and confers a lesser humanity on Africans. Despite the myriad problems of the contemporary era Africans now have greater freedoms to develop creative solutions to the linguistic problem. One such suggestion was to establish one or two *lingua francas* for the African World, which includes not only the African continent but areas where relatively large numbers of persons of African origin reside. After all, the world has no problem with the fact that most speakers of Spanish or Portuguese do not live in Spain or Portugal respectively.

Notes

[1] Key elements of the pragmatist thesis are expressed in Edwin Okafor, "Hégémonie de L'anglais au Nigeria," *Presence Africaine* 133-134 (1985): 3-18.

[2] See Chinua Achebe, "The African Writes and the English Language," in *Morning yet on Creation Day*, (New York: Anchor Press, 1975) 91-103. But note the following: "...but I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings" (103).

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