

Mmuo: Soul or Spirit, a Problem of Imposition of Language

John Justice Nwankwo

Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities, Rivers State University, Port-Harcourt, Nigeria

Email address:

johnjusticenwankwo@yahoo.com

To cite this article:

John Justice Nwankwo. Mmuo: Soul or Spirit, a Problem of Imposition of Language. *International Journal of Philosophy*.

Vol. 10, No. 1, 2022, pp. 13-16. doi: 10.11648/j.ijp.20221001.13

Received: January 6, 2022; **Accepted:** January 28, 2022; **Published:** February 16, 2022

Abstract: A people's philosophy emanates from their worldview. Sometimes, some worldviews are similar or even related, but there are no two worldviews that are the same or that share exactly the same ideas. Worldviews are expressed through languages and the differences in worldviews are visible in the differences in the various world languages but often more visible during translation of literatures from one language to another. This difficulty cuts across different areas of various worldviews such as the days of the week, where many African worldviews have just four (4) days, but the Gregorian calendar, which could be called western calendar has seven (7) days. Therefore, the imposition of the Gregorian calendar on the African calendar will definitely leave gaps for comprehension. The same thing holds sway about used words; sometimes, words used in Africa do not get perfect literally translations into English language and this should not be strange, realizing that there are experiences of people that are dependent on their environments. But this work will be restricted to showcasing these difficulties through the ambiguity in translating the word 'mmuo' into English; should it be translated as soul or spirit? This research work seeks to bring to bare the ambiguity of translation and the problem of lack of equivalent or exact matching words; ending up in the imposing of meaning to words that are not the same. It will adopt the analytical philosophical method and will use the Igbo background in its study. It intends to help one another in appreciating people and their cultures, without the conscious or unconscious efforts to extinguish some cultures from the world.

Keywords: Mmuo, Soul, Spirit, Problem, Imposition, Language

1. Introduction

Today, the world is a global village and it is still moving into more unity on daily basis. It is a thing of joy that through the ingenuity of human minds and science, we can communicate with people, irrespective of the distance. Through electronic media, we can send and receive messages from different parts of the world in a matter of seconds. As good as this globalization may seem, it is the duty of critical minds to pick certain aspects of this existing unity that many other people may not even perceive and sometimes, even when they are forced to perceive it, they hardly understand its necessity. Most times, the philosopher who picks these undermined pieces of reality is often mocked and laughed at, yet the end often shows that wisdom is always profitable to direct everything in life.

The world is winding into a global village through factors such as; translation, travelling, learning new languages, use of electronics, education, et cetera. Most times, these factors

help us to understand one another but the mistake that accompanies it is that it also brings about imposition of worldviews that may not be similar. The most common channel of exposing this overlooked weakness of globalization and imposition of variant worldviews on people is through translation. It is often said that "translation is a traitor". But the problem is not with translation but with forceful imposition of meanings on words that enjoyed their meanings from their own worldviews. As we try to force meanings on some of our native words, recall that Wittgenstein's language game theory says that "Meaning is Use". This research work seeks to delineate the uniqueness of languages and the proper placement of meanings to proper words. It also seeks to expose the challenges of translations, especially when words that are not exact in meanings are forcefully imposed through translations as the exact meaning. There is no doubt, a close relationship between the meaning of words and the use of such words, even in our local languages. But proper applications of the meanings of words are necessary for adequate comprehension and acceptance. It

is for such reason that philosophers like Kwasi Wiredu refused that there is any form of relationship between Western thought and African traditional thought. Those are all extreme positions but not without some attributes of the truth.

This research work therefore, intends to use the word 'mmuo' to expose the disparities and discrepancies that exist between worldviews through the use of languages, especially through the means of translations. There are other words that suffer this same fate with 'mmuo' and most times blur the understanding of the human mind. This work shall adopt a critical analytic method and shall be divided into abstract, introduction which is ongoing, the 'mmuo' concept, the reality of variant thoughts, the principle of 'meaning is use', conclusion and references.

2. The 'Mmuo' Concept

The key word of this inquiry is the word 'mmuo'. What then is 'mmuo'? Does 'mmuo' mean the same thing as spirit? Does 'mmuo' mean soul? The concept mmuo is a commonly used term among the Igbos in the Eastern part of Nigeria, among the Eches, Ikwerres and Ogba people in River State, to refer to spirit. While describing words that are associatives, Ozo-mercury Ndimele grouped 'mmuo' as one of them. According to him "The Associative is a type of affiliative nominal compound which is used to indicate a kind of association between the constituent in a construction." [1]. This simply means that Ndimele describes mmuo as a name that is affiliated with something else. Ndimele went ahead to translate Mmuo as spirit [1]. He associated mmuo with nso, which means 'holy', therefore coming out with mmuonso which means 'Holy spirit'. Ndimele explains how the concept mmuo is often used especially among the Etche people, which is also similar to other people especially the Igbos, who translate mmuo as spirit. Mmuo is always associated with either the other realities; Mmuomaanu which means 'the spirit of a human being'. Mmuochineke means 'the spirit of God', mmuondiche means 'the spirit of the ancestors'. In Etche, for example; mmuo is seen as a benevolent spirit as against agbara which is the Etche translation evil spirit.

The human person is seen as a composite of two realities in African ontology; body (ahu in Etche) and mmuo (spirit). Whereas the 'ahu' being the body ends in death, mmuo is believed to survive even after death. Here comes the belief that there is life even after death and a spiritual world where these spirits exist. This belief is widespread in Africa. Writing in 1969, Mbiti says "There are many, and often complicated ceremonies connected with death, burials, funerals, inheritance, and the living dead among others" [2]. Then crispinous Iteyo added that these ceremonies exists "...because belief in the spirits of the dead is common and widespread [3]. This points to the belief in the post-death survival of the spirits in Kenya. The Akan people also, according to Gyekye (1987) believes in their religious language, behaviours and practices. Gyekye acknowledges

that during the rite of libation, "spirits of our ancestors receive this wine and drink" [4] forms essential part of the prayers. It simply means that many African cultures believe in the existence of spirits. Of course, the spirit has to exist first before existing in any form; whether of the human person, of God, of ancestors or of the dead.

However, none of these cultures made a mention of 'soul'. Even in the traditional Etche thought system, there is no belief in the soul as a different thing from the spirit. But a closer look at the belief in the existence of the spirit is almost agreeing with the characteristics of the soul. The question then remains; is mmuo one and the same thing with both soul and spirit in our worldview or is there another traditional concept for soul. With the advent of Christianity, the concept 'mkpuruobi' came to refer to the soul. If a concept has been developed for the soul as mkpuruobi, what then happens to the belief in the spirit and its functionality? Here therefore, emerges another philosophical problem which has to deal with the dangers of imposition of meanings through translation. Following the spirit of language philosophy, which is emphatic on clearly defining words, we still ask: which is the spirit and which is the soul, even when the Christian theology carved out a name, the problem of the functions still remains.

3. The Reality of Variant Thoughts

The most unfortunate effort humanity can witness is anything that exacts energy in futility. There is a popular saying that "You cannot place a square peg in a round role." (Popular Nigerian Adage, undated). In the effort to build a global community, there have been attempts to find out what is common in various cultures and worldviews and blend them together. Writing on Spinoza, Sahakian has this to say: "Spinoza approached this issue with his theory of coherence, that is the belief that all true ideas are ultimately interrelated in an integrated systematic whole that comprises absolute or metaphysical reality" [5]. "This interrelationship is infinite in its various combinations" [6]. Therefore, Spinoza concludes that "... the ultimate universe is one infinitely enormous integrated logical structure, and the world of nature functions like a machine governed by unavoidable, irreversible laws." [6]. As true as this might seem, it is not completely true that the whole world is logically integrated and governed like a machine. This will definitely mean that humanity is completely helpless in the world of nature. The truth is that the world we live in is full of various views built on and around their culture. While defining culture, Mondin says; "... culture signifies that totality of customs, techniques, and values that distinguish a social group, a tribe, a people, a nation". [7]. Taylor speaking on culture says: "... it is the mode of living proper to a society" [8]. This simply means that the people's culture makes them unique and distinguishes their worldviews. As such, inasmuch as the whole world is united in certain aspects especially of nature such as life and death, each place is different based on cultural varieties.

From the ongoing arguments, in the identification and blending of worldviews, it will be necessary to note the matching ability of the varied worldviews. This will help to avoid an exercise in futility. Kwasi Wiredu noted these variations when he wrote: “How not to compare African traditional thought with Western thought” in his book title “philosophy and an African culture”. First of all, Wiredu postulated three senses of the word “philosophy”:

In the last chapter a distinction was made between two senses of the term ‘philosophy’. For African philosophy the distinction may be formulated as being between the varieties of folk world-view and philosophy as a result of the work of individual Africans using the intellectual resources of the modern world to grapple with philosophical problems. There is a third possible sense in which one might refer to the thought of a class of individuals in the traditional African societies who, though unaffected by modern intellectual influences, are capable of critical and original philosophy reflection as distinct from repetition of folk ideas of their people. [9].

Thus, Wiredu postulates three senses of the word ‘philosophy’ the first being philosophers emanating from folk worldview, the second being modern philosophers whose intellectual resources of the modern help to grapple with philosophical problems and the third being traditional philosophers but different from folk ideas of their people. For me, African philosophers can be categorized into verbal ethnophilosophers, written ethnophilosophers and universal African philosophers. Joseph Omoregbe also partitioned what he described as ‘philosophy in Africa’ into three phases; the ancient phase in which he made references to St. Augustine and Origen, medieval era which he pointed in the direction of verbal and traditional thoughts around metaphysics, cosmology, ethics and so on and what he describes as contemporary African philosophy, where he associated people like kwame Nkrumah, Leopold Senghor, Julius Nyerere, Kwasi Wiredu, Nnamdi Azikiwe and Obafemi Awolowo. One thing running in common with the various categorization of philosophy is the number ‘3’ which cuts across all. Wiredu went on to state that African thoughts are totally different from Western thought. Wiredu disagrees with seeing everything in African thought as philosophical, he nonetheless disagrees also with any form of relationship between Western thought and African thought.

Building on the above ideas, it is pertinent to point out extreme positions both on Spinoza and on Wiredu. Just like Spinoza said, there are common factors of interrelationship in the world between people and cultures, but there are also wild varieties as Wiredu noted. We must acknowledge the two and accept what is, as real as it is. In fact, it is varieties that makes realities beautiful. According to Asouzu:

With regard to complementary reasoning, the human mind cannot operate without contraries and we know due to the ability of the mind to contrast and differentiate. It is for this reason that we know certain ideas better if we are able to contrast them with what they are not. [6].

First of all, this citation points to the existence of

contraries such as night and day, right and wrong, good and evil, tall and short, man and woman, material and immaterial, body and soul, past and future, present and future. [6]. The existence of contraries shows that reality is not monistic. In fact, a close look at the examples cited show that some contraries share a relationship of continuity. Therefore, in life there are different types of relationships; some are opposites, some are similar, some are continuous, et cetera. Forcefully trying to establish a similarity where there is strong opposition or trying to establish opposition where there is none could end up in futility. This truth is objective at all times, in all places and in different circumstances. On the other hand, trying to force a meaning or a relationship that does not exist will lead to the fallacy of inconsistency [10] or end up with the fallacy of ignoratio elenchi [11] or even guilty of hasty generalization [12] or may end up committing two or more fallacies.

4. The Principle of ‘Meaning Is Use’

The relationship that exists between words and their meanings is universal. However, it was in the twentieth century that Wittgenstein wrote his Philosophical Investigations, within which this relationship undertakes a philosophical examination. Wittgenstein wrote that “The meaning of a word is its use in the language” [13]. This is very true because sometimes in our use of words, we can only understand the meaning within the context of usage. For instance, BBC English Dictionary states that “The form read is used in the present tense, pronounced /ri:d/, and is also the past tense and past participle, pronounced /red/.” [14] (BBC English Dictionary 1992, p. 953). This simply means that the only way to decipher the difference when ‘read’ is used as a present tense or past tense or past participle is in the context of its use. This is very true about many other words. As such, Wittgenstein sought to improve words from being metaphysical realities to pragmatic realities. In the same book, Wittgenstein also declared: “What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.” [13]. It is quite impressive that Wittgenstein contemplated on this sensitive aspect of reality as words could hardly assume any meaning outside the rules of its language. Wittgenstein in his Philosophical Investigation now embraced a more realistic approach to language as against the metaphysical position on the status of language in Tractatus Logico-philosophicus. Writing on this Stefan Giesewetter states that;

What is the relationship between later Wittgenstein’s method of dissolving philosophical problems by reminding us of how we would actually use words, and this famous statement that “meaning is use” in Investigations? The idea is widespread among readers of Wittgenstein that a close relationship obtains between the two [14].

This simply explains the fact that many of Wittgenstein’s readers accept the fact there is a connection between philosophical problems and the principle of meaning is use. Recall that Wittgenstein believes that the philosopher’s central concern is the analysis of language. Therefore, in the

analysis of language, there is a close relationship between meaning and use. It is part of the rules of language game.

As Wittgenstein puts it:

We can think of the whole process using words... as one of those games by means of which children learn their native language. I will call these games 'language games'... think of the tools in a tool box: there is a hammer, plier, a saw, a screw-driver, a rule, a glue-pot, glue, nails and screws- The functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects.... It is of interest to compare the multiplicity of the tool in language and the ways they are used, the multiplicity of kinds of words and sentences, with what logicians have said about the structure of language [15].

The above quotation points out:

- (1) Use of language is like games and for proper usage the rules must apply.
- (2) Through the rules, learning takes place; even in children.
- (3) Words have diverse functions and could be applied to various circumstances.
- (4) To carefully understand the multiplicity of words and sentences and properly apply them in different occasions, the rules must apply.

5. Conclusion

The research undertaken on 'mmuo' and the relative peculiarities in people and their worldviews is quite timely in the field of African philosophy. In the past, Africans make effort to situate every concept in their worldview into the ambience of English language. In fact, to some extent, there is a feeling that if you cannot situate anything in the framework of English language, from our cultural milieu, that it means that you are not intelligent enough but when the reverse is the case; an English lad or even adult not been able to situate their concept into African language, then we accept that it is the antiquity of our tradition and concepts that is responsible for the English person's ignorance. The truth is that worldviews interact to the extent of their social dependence and no culture is better than any other one. Cultures are different and worldviews are built on the people's cultures.

So far, the research through its abstract and introduction, gave the lead way by exposing people and their differences. The introduction went a step ahead by exposing globalization as one strong factor that is responsible for the unification of the whole world through languages. We exposed the concept of mmuo as spirit in many native languages around the East and Southern Nigeria in African worldviews because African cosmology believes a human is made of body and spirit. However, with Christianity that brought the tripartite composite of the human person; the body, soul and spirit, the native concept of 'mkpuruobi' was introduced to create room for 'soul'. Unfortunately, the problem now lies in their functionality, because 'mkparuobi' is now giving the explanation of 'spirit'. Thus, the next problem is at what point can we distinguish the soul from the spirit in our native cosmology?

We also saw that it is not everything in various worldviews that must align especially through the philosophy of Kwasi Wiredu. This was done after exposing the philosophies of Spinoza that reduced our existence to mere mechanistic reality and we saw that we are more than machines. Later, we came to understand the peculiarities in various languages through the language game theory of Wittgenstein, emphasizing 'meaning is use'.

And finally, we conclude that people, their languages, their worldviews and ideas differ. Sometimes, there are similarities and should be appreciated, but where there are no similarities, meanings should not be forced on concepts.

References

- [1] Ndimele, O. (2005). *A Concise Grammar and Lexicon of Echie*. Aba: National Institute for Nigerian Languages, pp. 80, 81.
- [2] Mbiti, J. S. (1969). *African Religions and Philosophy*. Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya Ltd, p. 149.
- [3] Iteyo, C. (June 2009). "Belief in the Spirits of the Dead in Africa: A Philosophical Interpretation" in *Thought and Practice: A Journal of Philosophical Association of Kenya (PAK)*, 1 (1), 147-159.
- [4] Gyekye, K. (1987). *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought; The Akan Conceptual Scheme*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 85.
- [5] Sahakian, W. S. (1968). *Outline-History of Philosophy. From the Earliest Times to the Present*. New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc, pp. 140-145.
- [6] Asouzu, I. I. (2004). *The Method and Principles of Complementary Reflection in and beyond African Philosophy*. Calabar: University of Calabar Press. pp. 96, 98.
- [7] Mondin, B. (1991). *Philosophical Anthropology*. Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, p. 146.
- [8] Taylor, R. B (1972). *Elements of Cultural Anthropology*, Bologne: Mulino, p. 27.
- [9] Wiredu, K. (1980). *Philosophy and an African Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 37.
- [10] Eboh, M. P. (1996). *Introduction to Clear and Correct Reasoning*. Port Harcourt: Pearl Publisher, p. 22.
- [11] Efemini, A. O. (2011). *Fundamentals of Logic*. Port Harcourt: Blestgrafix, p. 25.
- [12] Elechi, M. (2018). *Intrologia: In Initial Acquaintance with Logic*. Port Harcourt: Fordyke Print and Publishing Ltd, p. 168.
- [13] Wittgenstein, L. (1953). *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell, p. 116.
- [14] *BBC English Dictionary: A Dictionary for the World*. (1992). Harper Collins Publishers, p. 953.
- [15] Gieseewetter, S. (2014). "Meaning is Use' and Wittgenstein's Treatment of Philosophical Problems" in *Nordic Wittgenstein Review*, 3 (1), p. 69.