

Essays

W.V.O. Quine's "Indeterminacy Thesis of Radical Translation" and the Logic Problem in the Expression of African Thoughts

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Abstract

Western missionaries, ethnographic and anthropological scholars arrived in Africa, quizzed the pre-colonial African, and adjudged her, pre-critical and pre-logical, since the latter could not disclose or express thoughts according to the dictates or criteria initiated by the former. The criteria are the former's language and logic. The West's fundamental but implicit aim is to unearth African equivalents of Western concepts and the failure to discern these have placed the contemporary African in a status quo where she is on the intellectual defensive. Through the method of conversational philosophy, this research interrogates the linguistic and logical assumptions with which the West quizzed pre-colonial Africans. Whereas it invokes and concedes to William Van Orman Quine over the indeterminacy in meaning while translating word for word, from one language to the other, this research goes on to reinforce how the inadequate classical bivalent logic, which undergirds their assessment of African thoughts, is the culprit. After exploring the character of this intellectual misappropriation, this study invokes Gottlob Frege's discourse on the tandem between logic and language, to foreground that the failure of comprehension whilst translating is not traceable to pre-colonial Africans but to the Western ethnographic and anthropological scholars via the excessive reliance on the background classical logic that underpins thought in that tradition. From this leaning, it becomes clear that the pre-colonial African is neither pre-critical

nor pre-logical but intellectually unique in ways beyond the comprehension of the West.

Keywords: African Languages, Gottlob Frege, Logic Problem, Translation, W.V.O. Quine.

Introduction

Despite possessing the confidence to revise his earlier thoughts, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1963, 109) continues to maintain the outlook that “philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by musingguage.” The idea that language is important for the expression of thought and the comprehension of it is central to Wittgenstein. In addition, he perceives this as the overall task of philosophy. If this was not the case, he would not have relayed that: “philosophy, as we use the word is a fight against the fascination which forms of expression exert on us” (Wittgenstein 1958, 27). Even when he notes correctly, the role of language in the expression of thoughts, Wittgenstein, takes for granted, that the classical bivalent logic, which undergirds linguistics in the Euro-American sphere is sufficient for other climes, non-Western. Incidentally, this assumption is replete in the works and reflections of Western missionaries, and ethnographic and anthropological scholars that first graced Africa. One of their fundamental aims was to discern the Western equivalent of African concepts. Documented in the words of the Samuel Imbo (2004, 369), concerning the issue of God thus:

If God has a name, then the task of the missionary is that of finding out what the equivalent name is in the African languages...the missionaries did not carry out the lengthy and systematic studies in the African languages concerned to find out what true beliefs of the Africans were. They were simply looking for a local confirmation of their cherished preconceptions.

The underlying assumption for them is that concepts and ideas in the linguistic frameworks of traditional Africans can have semblances or similarities with the paradigmatic Western language and the classical logic that propels it. In instances where there are failures, they adduce that the primitive Africans cannot conceive such ideas. The late Ugandan scholar Okot p’Bitek (1971, 62) makes this luminous when he wrote:

In 1911, Italian Catholic priests put before a group of Acoli elders the question “Who created you?” and because the Luo language does not have an independent concept of creating or creation, the question was rendered to

mean, "who molded you?" But this was still meaningless... The elders told the visitors that they did not know... One of the elders remembered that, although a person may be born normally when he is afflicted with tuberculosis of the spine, then he loses his normal figure, he gets "molded." Therefore, he said, "Rubanga is the one who molds people." This is the name of the hostile spirit, which the Acoli believe causes the hunch or hump on the back. And, instead of exorcising these hostile spirits and sending them among pigs, the representatives of Jesus Christ began to preach that Rubanga was the Holy Father who created the Acoli.

The Luo language is not the only one to have suffered from this imposition of Western logic and language. Olódùmarè between the Yorùbá and Chukwu, among the Igbo for instance, have encountered their unfair share of poor renditions as God in the Western *way*. It is however important to understand that "because of the European penchant for metaphysics for its own sake, there are many European concepts that cannot find expression in an African language" (Imbo 2004, 371). That these concepts have no equivalents in African languages does not make African languages inferior, the problem however is that the logic that girds thought in these languages has yet to be given the proper attention.

Now, it may be riposted that there were systematic studies of African languages by these missionaries, ethnographic and anthropological scholars. Hence, it is wrong to say that their deductions are invalid. On first showing, this rejoinder may be apt. For instance, Placide Tempels (1959, 28) in his *Philosophie Bantou* is said to have emerged from the comprehensive assessment of "the languages, modes of behavior, institutions and customs" of the Baluba of Zaire, now Congo. The result however is the injection of the logic that undergirds language in the West into the assessment of African world-views. If this were not so, Tempels (1959, 44) would not have relayed:

Certainly, we cannot pretend that the Bantu are capable of presenting us with a philosophical treatise *with an adequate vocabulary*. It is *we who must develop it systematically*. It is *we who can tell them* in a precise manner, what their innermost conception of being is (italicised emphasis mine).

More so, it is clear that Tempels seems to hold the outlook that the Bantu are naturally inferior to the Europeans: "The White man seemed to be the master of great natural forces. It had, therefore, to be admitted that the White man was an elder, a superior human force, surpassing vital force of all Africans" (Tempels 1959, 44). Hitherto, the German scholar Friedrich Hegel (1975, 177) had said that the African "is an example of an animal in all his savagery and

lawlessness.” This elevation of the rationality of the Euro-American over the African gains further recognition from the unreliable findings of Lucien Levy-Bruhl (1995, 43) that the African is “primitive, barbaric, irrational, uncivilized, and most importantly people without the capacity for critical and rational thinking – qualities that are natural to doing philosophy.”

Levy-Bruhl (1967) is also of the view that primitive Africans are pre-logical. Robin Horton (1977, 65) takes the position of Levy-Bruhl further when he writes, “Logic (with epistemology) lies at the core of philosophy and their demonstrable absence of philosophy in traditional Africa reinforces the obvious absence of philosophy in African traditional thought system.” Within the same page, he elaborates that traditional Africans “do not stop to ask what the irreducibly basic processes of inference are, or how they can be justified. Situations which would provide such questions simply do not arise” (Horton 1977, 65). The implication is that since it is not possible to establish logic (and by logic, classical bivalent logic initiated by Aristotle) in the African mentality, Horton (1967) believes that what can be discerned is “the theory of mystical participation,” where physical and routine events are provided mystical and supernatural explanations and/or justifications. It is this “theory of mystical participation” which now accounts for the various misrepresentations of the African reality since they are examined from the Western language and logic gauges. This culminated into the status quo wherein “Africans in our age are now forced to prove their humanity by demonstrating the presence of logic in their languages, cultures and by showing that the contents of their minds and behaviors are consistent with those of racists who regard themselves as proper humans” (Chimakonam 2020, xiv).

Based on the foregoing exposition, it is not inappropriate to ask, what makes it so difficult to find Western equivalents of African ideas during translations? What roles do logic play in a language that compromises the process of translation? How does William Van Orman Quine attempt to solve the puzzle generated from translating from Euro-American languages into African languages? How adequate is his proposal? These and other questions will be considered in the course of this disquisition.

There are four sections in this essay, including this introduction. In the section that follows, this study focuses on how Quine attempts to resolve the challenges generated from translation between languages. There, it is disclosed that Quine is silent over the place of logic in the two languages undergoing translation. The third section then goes on to establish the tandem between logic and language to illustrate why this is pertinent for the proper codification of thought and accuracies of translations. It also looks at the principal character of classical bivalent logic and its laws of thought to disclose how it is difficult for it to be able to grasp some aspects of the African reality,

given its Greek fermentation. In order to make obvious these grouses, the section relies on the efforts of Gottlob Frege to uncover the problems that the predominant two-valued logic portends. When it is comprehended, how different logics function in the languages of Africans from the one that functions for Euro-Americans, this research would have shown that all hitherto proclamations that Africans are pre-logical and have not been able to express reality are nothing but lies and propaganda. The fourth section concludes this inquiry.

William Van Orman Quine and the "Indeterminacy Thesis of Radical Translation"

When the English translation of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* first appeared in 1952, thanks to the efforts of H.M Parshley, it was riddled with conceptual confusions. The first chapter in French is entitled: "Les Données de la Biologie" but is generally accepted to have been translated correctly into English by Parshley as "The Data of Biology." However, Margaret Simons (1999, 194) believes that the chapter should have read: "The Givens of Biology." When asked about the translation as far back as 1985, Simone de Beauvoir, herself was not too pleased:

When I put philosophy in my books it's because that's a way for me to view the world; and I can't allow [translators] to eliminate that way of viewing the world, that dimension of my approach to women, as Mr. Parshley has done. I am altogether against the principle of gaps, omissions, and condensations, which have the effect, among other things, of suppressing the whole philosophical aspect of the book. I accepted [the translation] ...but when I found out that Mr. Parshley was omitting things, I asked him to indicate the omissions to me, and I wrote to tell him that I was absolutely against them. I asked him to say in a preface that I was against the omissions, the condensation. And I don't believe that he did that, which I begrudge him a great deal (see Simons 1999, 93–3).

These are some of the drawbacks when attempts are made to translate from one language into another, and Quine has a few suggestions on the subject.

In his renowned publication *Word and Object*, Barry Hallen (2002, 37) notes that Quine "introduced his Indeterminacy Thesis of Radical Translation via an imaginary encounter between a trained Western linguist-anthropology and a native speaker of a non-Western language that has never before translated into Western terminology." Quine (1960) explains how one comes to familiarise with the first language one speaks. Over time, one becomes competent in the language since "we finally gain mastery of the use of our language

so that others in our speech-community can treat us as reliable users of it” (Khani 2021). Quine is of the view that rather than focusing on the complex process of becoming familiar with a first language, accentuation should be placed “less abstractly and more realistically on translation” (Quine 1960, 27).

Quine imagines that if a Westerner finds herself in a foreign land where she does not have any aorta of the native language, the first step is the translation of utterances. Therefore, for each expression in the language of the native, she may find a corroborative or approximate meaning in her indigenous language. This is the birth of a radical translator (Quine 1960). Following Quine, let us imagine an English anthropologist in precolonial Yorùbá society, attempting to ferment an interaction with a Yorùbá indigene and a bird perches on a nearby tree, prompting the Yorùbá to say: “*ẹyẹ*,” as the word, which depicts a bird. For the translator, evolves into an approximate translation. Quine however takes the matter further that such a translation is inadequate as one observation of *ẹyẹ* is not sufficient to make “There’s a bird!” a valid translation. This translation is therefore hypothetical requiring further evidence and corroborations.

There is a behavioral approach to evidence-based translation since the translator cannot have any other way of coming to understand the language of the native aside from the sort of scenario discussed in the foregoing paragraph. Now, after several observations, it becomes clear that “there’s a bird” is the correct translation “*ẹyẹ*.” Quine maintains that these two terms become what he calls “stimulus synonymous” (Quine 1990). By this, Quine means to say that what prompts the native to say “*ẹyẹ*” has the capacity in other instances to command the English anthropologist to say, “There’s a bird” in similar circumstances. As a result, Quine argues that it is preferable to take seriously, stimulations rather than objects in the process of translation. This is in line with his doctrine of naturalism which he states that “it is a finding of natural science itself, however fallible, that our information about the world comes only through impacts on our sensory receptors” (Quine 1990, 19). In other words, the native and the English, during the process of translation readily and independently possess what he calls “some patterns of chromatic irradiation of the eye” (Quine 1960, 31). The aftermath of all these for African linguistic scholarship is well summed by Barry Hallen (2002, 37) when he writes:

Quine’s consequences included that, since we do not have direct access to the consciousness of others, the most the linguist can have access to, are alien sounds coming out of an alien mouth. This means that the assignment of meanings to those sounds by the linguist is always open to a degree of indeterminacy, inaccuracy, and interpretation; the degree of indeterminacy, of guesswork, increases with the degree of abstraction of the

terms involved (compare "tree" with "freedom"). Consequently, translation on the abstract level is much more difficult to verify and thereby make determinate.

In other words, what the foregoing demonstrates is that word-for-word translation from one language to the other may not yield the intended translated meaning of the native concept. This problem has been demonstrated by Parshley's translation of Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, from the French into the English. As a way of buttressing the necessary error in the radical word for word translation from one language to another as indicated by Quine, consider an attempt to translate word for word, the following sentence from English to Yorùbá, say by a Western-trained anthropologist, who has had no prior knowledge of the African language. In this instance, "*I want to photograph the insane today,*" maybe translated word/phrase for word/phrase into: "*Mo fẹ ya wèrè lónìí.*"

I want to	<i>Mo fẹ</i>
Photograph	<i>ya</i>
The insane	<i>wèrè</i>
Today	<i>lónìí</i>

On first showing, considering the translation valid, since each word/phrase is moved from one language into the direct unit-equivalent in the other language. On deeper scrutiny, however, the utterance "*Mo fẹ yá wèrè lónìí,*" may also be "I want to become mad today." The operating verb "*yá,*" has the capacity to be translated as "become/turn." On this note, logical attention is given to the referential context made through the utterance. Much as Quine has done a wonderful job showing how it is impossible to make translations accurately, he is certainly bothered as Wittgenstein (1963, 109) "the bewitchment of our intelligence using language." However, like Wittgenstein, he assumes that the classical logic (which undergirds language in the West) is sufficient for non-Western languages too. As a way of making it lucid, the contention made here is pertinent to engaging the tandem between logic and language.

Gottlob Frege on the Relationship between Language and Logic

Language, as used in this research "is a system of communication that relates what is to be communicated with something that communicates (Fayemi 2020, 126). A mediating agent that humans and some non-human animals (in rare instances) employ for expressing their thoughts or ideas. When it is not

to be denied that language is composed of some basic or formal rules, which are socially determined, the right or wrong application of these rules necessarily invites logic. This is what prompts Oghenekaro Ogbinaka (2002) to have taken the position that logic cannot exist without language. For him, language makes it possible to have logic. Kazeem Fayemi (2020, 126) expatiates this connection: “Thus, the existence of culture presupposes the existence of logic, and presumably, the existence of language presupposes the existence of culture. Thought, which is prior to language, ibeforested through language and it is an instrument of logical study.” What then is logic?

Logic is construed as a study of techniques for detecting and making distinctions between valid and invalid arguments (see Copi 1972; Cohen & Nagel 1978). According to Kazeem Fayemi (2020, 127), “Logic is an instrument that improves ordinary language through detection, and avoids errors in thinking and language use across all varieties.” The first intellectual comprehension of the paramount place of logic for linguistic expression, formulation, and the articulation of ontology was adduced to the ancient Greek scholar, Aristotle. His *Metaphysics* discloses the tandem between logic and ontology. Several centuries later, Michael Dummett (1965, 431), would write:

When logic is taken in the broad sense in which it comprises the theory of meaning understood as a branch of philosophy, the idea of logic has no metaphysical, that is, no ontological component is a delusion. There cannot be an aseptic logic that merely informs us how language functions and what is the structure of thought is expressed without committing itself to anything concerning reality, since reality is what we speak about... and an account of language demands an account of how what we say is about reality and is rendered true or false by how things are in reality.

Dummett’s finding had already been deciphered and even invoked hitherto, by Aristotle. This finds justification via Susan Stebbing’s (1961, xii) position that whoever seeks to study the history of Western ontology ought to first be grounded in Aristotle’s logic. Aristotle’s bivalent or two-valued logic, which takes only two possibilities: ‘T’ and ‘F’ and no other value, has become the most dominant, absolute, and universal logic system exported to other climes such as Africa for the comprehension of the thoughts of the peoples. The traditional laws of thought have also been used to regulate albeit unfairly, the ideas and expressions of these peoples.

Language incidentally, may be seen from the syntactic and semantic angles. In the class of the former are words, the parts of speech, clauses, phrases, and sentences. In the latter, there are sense, thought, reference or meaning, and truth-value (Frege 1956). It is through the correct usage of language along

these two paths that humans are able to evaluate reality and the world intelligibly. The excessive trust in the capacity that language expresses thought contents is one of the overriding motivations and emergence of the analytic tradition of philosophy. Frege, the adduced founding father of analytic philosophy explains better while explaining the importance of logic: "All sciences have truth as their goal, but logic is also concerned with it in a quite different way from this. It has much the same relation to truth as physics has to weight or heat. To discover the truth is the task of all sciences; it falls to logic to discern the laws of truth" (Frege 1956, 289).

The history of Western thought has explored Aristotle's two-valued logic and the three laws of thought "for discerning the laws of truth" as Frege relays in the foregoing paragraph. However, if the task of discerning the laws of truth is the task of logic, and by logic, it is meant classical bivalent logic, then, logic has failed this task. Classical bivalent logic with the three laws of thought has been found wanting on several grounds. The shortcomings of the logic system will be unmasked summarily, relying on the discussion by Gottlob Frege on the following themes: (i) sign and sense; (ii) thought and context; and finally, (iii) truth-values and propositions. These themes, how they inform logic and language will be the focus of the remainder of this disquisition.

According to Gottlob Frege, every sign has a sense – this means that every word or concept (sign) signifies something external to it (sense). This is the underlying assumption in Russell's logical atomism and Wittgenstein's pictorial theory of meaning, both of which underscore the correspondence theory of truth. There are, however, instances wherein there are more senses to a sign. One of such is the utterance popular among youths in Yorùbá-speaking Nigeria: *Owó ni mo wá kà, mí ò nì ìwe kà*. What this means is "It is money that I have come to count, I have no desire to read." However, the sign 'kà' appears twice and carries two senses.

In the first sense, it connotes the verb 'count,' whereas in the second it signifies the verb 'read.' It is also important to state that in other contexts, it may also denote confess. For instance, in the utterance: *Àjàlá kà nílé Fàşínà*, which translates as "Àjàlá confessed in the house of Fàşínà," *kà* signifies confess. It is from instances such as these that Quine's (1951) critique of the first of the two dogmas of empiricism rests. It is difficult to make a clear-cut dichotomy between analytic and synthetic propositions. Granted the fallacy of four terms or equivocation is ascribable to the proposition, however, this does not make the individual propositions senseless to their speakers. Using 'p' to symbolize 'kà,' as it occurs twice in the utterance: *Owó ni mo wá kà, mí ò nì ìwe kà*, the following holds:

- (1) $p = p$, which is an *a priori* and analytic proposition;
- (2) $p = p$, the second proposition is also *a priori* and thus analytic.

They are *a priori* because they refer to the same object and therefore necessarily true. They would be synthetic if appeal is to be made to experience for affirmation. When these propositions are brought together to form compound propositions, the consequence is what analytic scholars, will adduce as cognitive meaninglessness. Via propositional logic, propositions (3)-(5) reveal how this meaninglessness occurs:

- (3) $(p = p) \leftrightarrow (p = p)$ *kà* (count) is not equivalent to *kà* (read)
- (4) $(p \supset p) \leftrightarrow (p \supset p)$ *kà* (count) is not equivalent to *kà* (read)
- (5) $(p \quad p) \supset (p \quad p)$ *kà* (count) does not imply *kà* (read)

The foregoing propositions are nonsensical using classical bivalent logic, considering the variables they indicate. A deeper assessment however discloses that classical bivalent logic with the laws of thought is not capable of showing why propositions such as *Owó ni mo wá kà, mí ò ni ìwe kà* may not be nonsensical. This proposition illustrates that bivalent logic is not capable of expressing, nay translating African mind-view. This failure also attests to one of the reasons why a clear distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions has been shown as inadequate (Quine 1951). It is now crucial to expound, using Frege's assessment of the tandem between language and logic in establishing why classical logic is not capable of expressing African ideas.

As Frege believes, propositions express some thought. However, a single proposition can express different thoughts. Usually, thoughts, as expressed in propositions ought to determine the truth values. This is complicated in instances like the foregoing where a sign has more than one sense. It seems it will be tedious to determine the truth value of propositions. This is another reason why the two-valued logic, the logic edifice upon which Western philosophy rests beset by limitations, and why an alternative trivalent logic is important. It is therefore a matter of awe that this logic system with its history of shortcomings has been applied to make sense of African ontology, birthing a history of misconceptions and misrepresentations. This puzzle of 'dual senses' wherein a sign carries two senses can be extinguished without classical bivalent logic, by looking at the nature of contexts and how truth values ought to be assigned to propositions.

The truth-values of propositions, for Frege, are not deduced from their referents but are deduced from the context in which the proposition appears. Frege (1960, xxii) therefore commands, "never to ask for the meaning of a

word in isolation, but only in the context of a proposition," as propositions appear in contexts. Serious considerations were given by Jonathan Chimakonam (2019) to the development of an Afro-inspired trivalent logic which can better mediate thought in Africa and beyond. He agrees with Frege only for him to state that "what we call truth may not always be dependent on the collection of facts which a proposition asserts but rather, on the context which that proposition is asserted" (Chimakonam 2019, 119). To make his point clear, he provides a useful analogy:

For example, consider the proposition: 'you need to drink water to stay alive.' When considered from the Boolean algebraic equation, this proposition will have the value 1. But this may be a little hasty if we take into consideration, as I think we should, such a serious concern as the context of that proposition. For one who is in the middle of the Sahara desert on a hot afternoon, the value of the proposition will be 1; but for one who is drowning in the River Niger, even if on a hot afternoon, that proposition cannot be true, its Boolean value will be 0. A drowning man may not need to drink water to stay alive. What he needs to stay alive is air, water will simply kill him. The preceding water analogy is one of several examples in which context upsets fact (Chimakonam 2019, 122).

What the foregoing attests to is that the truth or falsity of propositions command contexts. Contexts, being critical to truth values disclose another failing of the classical bivalent logic and the laws of thought. The foregoing analogy is used by Chimakonam to emphasize the importance of contexts that cannot be girded by any of the three traditional laws of thought. The emphasis on context further erodes the place of logical atomism and the pictorial theory of meaning by the Vienna Circle.

Having been able to relate the connection between thought and language, with the background that logic makes them function well, it is pivotal to relay that classical logic, itself, is plagued by some questionable assumptions as it has frustrated authentic efforts toward research even in the mainstream and dominant Western tradition.¹ It is ironic that despite the shortcomings, which were not secretive, the logic is seen as absolute and universal.

Conclusion

The principal character of this study, thus far has been to offer grounds, upon which, the intellectual and logical denigration and deficiencies cited

1 . For a comprehensive discourse on how classical logic is incompetent, see von Neumann (1932); Birkhoff & von Neumann (1936); Sophie Oluwole (2014); Chris Ijiomah (2014); Emmanuel Ofuasia (2019); Alfred Whitehead (1978).

against primitive Africans are misguided and invalid. The misguided character of the translation of African ideas into Western conceptual schemes takes for granted the locus that Aristotle's logic is not only universal but also absolute for all climes. Even when there are clear instances via translation and the tandem between language and logic, the deficiencies of this logic, it has yet to be stated how inadequate the logic is, for comprehending African episteme. It is this failure to own up that has contributed to the seemingly ignorant nature of African episteme, leading to the position that the African is void of logic and knowledge of the divine. This study has been able to explore the connection between logic and language from the perspective of a non-African scholar, Gottlob Frege toward establishing some of the grounds upon which classical logic has both misrepresented and disarticulated African ideas rendered into European languages. From this leaning, it is therefore lucid that African languages and ideas, because they do not conform to the standards of Western language and logic, are invalid reasons to have said that Africans are pre-logical and mentally inferior. The problem is simple – efforts have yet to be made to unearth the background logic that informs African languages and the present study seeks to rouse African scholars from their logic slumber. It is crucial to foray into their indigenous cultures, engage them and ferment relevant thought patterns that inform the logic of their language. Unless done, the Africans will continue to encounter embarrassing intellectual provocations that will demand them “to prove their humanity by demonstrating the presence of logic in their languages” (Chimakonam 2020, xiv).

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