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## MEANING, TRANSLATION AND CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION: AN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHICAL DEBATE

### Znaczenie, tłumaczenie i komunikacja międzykulturowa. Afrykańska debata filozoficzna

Key words: Africa, culture, philosophy, development, universals, meaning, translation

Słowa kluczowe: Afryka, kultura, filozofia, rozwój, uniwersalia, znaczenie, tłumaczenie

#### Abstract

The subject to be interrogated is the problem of the extent to which differences in meaning across cultural experiences often affect translation and the chances of human communication. This is particularly significant in a world currently plagued by oppression, domination, colonialism, conflicts, prejudices, intolerance, discrimination, inequity and misconceptions. We are examining the issue of the perception that difference is a threat to cooperation, harmony and dialogue among peoples and institutions of the world. The aim of this study is to philosophically examine this idea and to show that cultural difference could be a tool for building up a world where the much required values of harmony, respect for others, reciprocity and cooperation can be established using philosophical arguments by prominent or eminent African philosophers such as Wiredu and Diop among others. Methodologically, this study is necessary because there is a need to examine the philosophical dimensions of this issue from an African philosophical viewpoint. Wiredu pushes the

#### Streszczenie

Przedmiotem artykułu jest ocena, w jakim stopniu różnice znaczeniowe w obrębie doświadczeń kulturowych wpływają na przykład i szanse na komunikację międzyludzką. Jest to szczególnie istotne w dzisiejszym świecie, w którym dominują: ucisk, kolonializm, konflikty, uprzedzenia, nietolerancja, dyskryminacja, nierówności i błędne przekonania. W artykule badamy kwestię postrzegania różnicy jako zagrożenia dla współdziałania, harmonii i dialogu między narodami i różnymi instytucjami. Celem tego studium jest zbadanie powyższego problemu z punktu widzenia filozofii i pokazanie, że różnica kulturowa może wspierać budowę świata, w którym wartości harmonii, szacunku dla innych, wzajemności i współpracy mogą być ustanowione z wykorzystaniem filozoficznych argumentów wysuwanych przez wybitnych afrykańskich filozofów, takich jak Wiredu i Diop. Pod kątem metodologii niniejsze studium jest konieczne, ponieważ istnieje potrzeba zbadania filozoficznych wymiarów tego zagadnienia z punktu widzenia filozofii afrykańskiej. Wiredu forsuje argument kultu-

argument from cultural universals while Diop makes a case for a cultural and historical basis of difference. Our key finding has been to show that there are some key philosophical theories that go beyond the views of Wiredu and Diop among others. The idea is to anchor difference on a set of moral values needed for establishing enduring intercultural dialogue on an ethical foundation. The work identifies for instance, tolerance, mutual recognition, compromise and human dignity as pillars of enduring mutually respectful intercultural communication.

rowych uniwersaliów, podczas gdy Diop stawia tezę o kulturowej i historycznej podstawie różnic. Nasze kluczowe odkrycie dotyczy tego, że istnieją pewne podstawowe teorie filozoficzne, które wykraczają poza poglądy, między innymi, Wiredu i Diopa. Chodzi o zakotwiczenie różnicy w zbiorze wartości moralnych potrzebnych do ustanowienia trwałego dialogu międzykulturowego na fundamencie etycznym. Praca opisuje tolerancję, uznanie, kompromis i godność ludzką jako filary trwałej, pełnej wzajemnego poszanowania komunikacji międzykulturowej.

## Introduction and problem

This essay focuses on the issue of cultural relativism, human communication and the condition for intercultural dialogue. The problem which this essay tackles has been succinctly stated by Hartley (1999: 79). It is to discover whether society determines human actions or whether society is the background against which human actions occur. The former view implies the belief that all human action is significantly relative to the society it occurs, while the latter means that there are certain features of human experience that are universal to all cultures. Put simply, we are examining the debate between the supporters of cultural universals and cultural particulars as a basis for clarifying a more serious issue of what conception of humanism can apply to human cross cultural interaction. What is the intention when some human beings try to interact with others? Is intention during such interaction to pursue a sort of global humanism among cultures or to continue to advocate the ancestral selective humanism across the ages that bred racism, colonialism, slavery, apartheid, ethnic cleansing, religiously motivated terrorism and wars, among others? This essay argues for the position that cultural relativism cannot be brushed aside and therefore that any attempt to achieve or talk about intercultural relations should take this fact into full consideration.

## Alfred Ayer's view on communication

A conception of communication that provides a good starting point for this essay is Ayer's. He holds that communication is a very broad

concept embracing several things such as knowledge, experiences, feelings, disease, etc. He notes that what is common to these examples of communicable entities is the fact that there is a transfer of something. For him, communication refers not only to the thing being transferred but also to the medium of such a transfer and indeed to the entire process of transfer. He believes that communication is linked to the ideas of sharing and participation (Ayer 1973: 19). Furthermore, Ayer emphasizes the use of language as the most important of all means of communication. Communication implies some sort of conversation and certain things are necessary for communication to take place (Ayer 1973: 23). However, Ayer (1973: 30) also maintains that some people believe or perceive that they could possess thoughts that they cannot put in words. Thus he contends that “the thoughts which we are unable to put into words is vague and inchoate, the symbols in which it is embodied are fragmentary. They do not fit together, or not in any way that satisfies us” (Ayer 1973: 30). We may understand the above position better as a cultural viewpoint by evaluating its core assumptions using an African context or experience.

### **Cultural, metaphysical and conceptual barriers to communication and translation: an African perspective**

When we bring in an African perspective into the discussion then it gives us an opportunity to criticize Ayer on some issues. Our question is: Why are such thoughts or knowledge that Ayer talks about underdeveloped or half-formed or incomplete? In short, what, if at all, can be the epistemological, cultural or even metaphysical status of such thoughts? These questions are important because it is definitely possible for a person to have certain complete, coherent or actual thoughts, experiences or knowledge that cannot easily be put into words. There could be many reasons for this situation. Firstly, a person who had had a very traumatic experience may not be able to convey it easily. Secondly, children, in their early ages of development, do have experiences, which they are not fully capable of comprehensibly articulating or conveying to us. However, this temporary developmental incapability does not in any way imply that the child does not have or has not

had this experience. Thirdly, it need not necessarily be the case that every experience should have the capacity of being expressed in words. Such experiences may include certain mystical experiences, whereby some human beings may not have the linguistic terms to capture their meanings, character and significance.

Fourthly, apart from the issue of a lack of capacity to communicate one's thoughts or experiences owing to defects in the physical senses or human faculties, one may also not be easily able to explain some specific procedures of an event or experience. For instance, by what categories can one explain a popular scene on an African street in which a man bedecked with charms and amulets uses a visibly razor-sharp sword to slice his stomach, continuously and yet there is no incision or wound on his body, as he smiles enigmatically? This experience narrated above used to be a common sight on the streets of some Nigerian cities in the 1970's and 1980's. Other similar legendary magical or mystical feats have been ascribed to the *Agbekoya*, a Traditional Farmer's Union, which operated in the Yoruba speaking southwestern region of Nigeria in the 1960's and perhaps, may still be in existence up till date. More recently, there have been public and widespread claims that the Oodua Peoples' Congress (OPC) have members who possess magical powers that can make them immune to gunshot wounds, acid baths, knife cuts, etc. (An editorial of "This Day" Newspaper volume 5 no 1729 Sunday 16 (January) 2000). "Inner working of the OPC, Chronicle of blood and tears. Only Yoruba Officer can kill OPC, Money cause the rift in OPC-Faseun" 16–40). The question therefore is; How can such extraordinary experiences be explained and communicated to others, especially those who have serious doubts about existence of such phenomena?

The above analysis pushes us into the domain of meaning and reality, which embraces the logical study of some issues within metaphysics and language. Specifically, there are important problems concerning those experiences or thoughts that we intend to translate from one language into another. Sogolo (1987: 68; 1993: 27) argues that the problem of meaning and translation is not mitigated by the fact that a person is bilingual. Meaning and translation problems need to be adequately tackled and resolved if we are to have cross-cultural analysis that can give us universal propositions. In order to tackle the problem of meanings or translation problems, Quine (1961: 44) makes a distinc-

tion between observation and theoretical sentences. He says that the former are based on the immediate sensory experiences of the speaker, and their truth-value can be readily observable and verifiable. The latter could be remotely connected to observation, but third truth-value is independent of immediate sensory experiences. The theoretical sentences embody abstract notions such statements codify the belief systems of a culture, theories of religion, art and politics. According to Sogolo (1987: 71), translating theoretical sentences from one language to another are necessarily beset with difficulties because language is a network of system involving beliefs, world views and other social values which are culture dependent.

Given the culture-dependent character of language, the meanings ascribed to specific concepts or statements in one language are defined by the totality of the culture in question. A translator would be prone to the imposition of the meanings of his own language system on those of a foreign language. This conceptual gap between languages is recognized by Quine (1982: 41) when he observes that there can be conceptual distance between languages. Another level of the problem of meaning and translation is shown by Martin (1987: 19) in his distinction between speaker's meaning and sentence meaning. He differentiates between what a speaker means by a sentence and what the sentence really means. Thus, we see that the whole question of linguistic meanings and translations between cultures can be fraught with the very threatening danger of misrepresentation and misconceptions, which create serious problems for cross-cultural dialogue and relations. To understand better the philosophical issues underlying the problem of meaning and translation let us look at the theory of cultural universals pushed by Wiredu as a way of denying that difference can be the basis for enduring intercultural relations. Wiredu thinks that establishing intercultural relations requires that human beings should argue for and feature those things that they share in common.

### **Critique of Kwasi Wiredu on culture and cultural universals**

In order to understand how the problems of meaning and translation militate against effective intercultural communication, there is

a need to examine the nature or view of culture. Culture has to do with the way of life of a people; their thought patterns, behavior, environment and experience ranging from dietary patterns to systems of science and philosophy. Wiredu (1992: 65–66) points out that any culture has procedures, customs and usages that have no essential bearing on questions of either human well-being or truth or falsehood. He argues that style of apparel is frequently (though not invariably) of this nature. Consequently, adopting one style rather than another often makes no objective difference to human well-being or to one's belief about the world. Language, dance, music, are more contingent in this sense in some of their aspects. Since it is not rational to give up such components in preference to foreign substitutes, to do so is a sure sign of the loss of cultural self-identity. On the other hand, Wiredu (1992: 66) argues that such components of culture as philosophy and religion depend on truth-value. "Philosophy, religion and science are areas of human experience in which the effects of cultural differences could conceivably be eliminated through the peaceful give-and-take of dialogue among cultures". How can culture be linked to communication, especially at the level of meaning?

Wiredu (1996: 14) argues that if communication is to be possible, then there should be objective meanings. For him, if meaning were to be subjective or arbitrarily dependent on the peculiar features of individuals, then it would not be possible to talk about conventions, socially established rules and the correlation of symbols to meanings. Thus, meanings could be objective if we shall be able to admit the possibility of conversation among people. Wiredu (1996: 20) observes that certain cultural factors influence the development of the individual's capacity to communicate. Mainly, there are elements of universality and particularity in every culture. For him, human beings communicate both value and facts. Just as certain values vary from one culture to other, the conception of certain factual matters may differ from one culture to another. Thus, for Wiredu (1996: 20) it is important to note that "the fundamental biological similarity of all human beings assures the possibility of resolving all such disparities. For, the foundation of all communication is biological". He insists that the universals of culture are the defining features of the human species. Therefore, if an explanation of the concept of communication is to be fundamental it must

disperse that cultural relativism which is an obstacle to intercultural dialogue. Wiredu's position raises some concerns that we shall address shortly.

According to Wiredu (1998: 31), if there were no cultural universals, then intercultural communication would be impossible because if any two persons are to communicate at all, they must share some common medium of communication. He feels that there is a need to discover whether there is anything about which all the peoples of the world can communicate. Wiredu (1998: 32) notes further that communication with our own kith and kin can be taken for granted. He asks the question: Can we guarantee the possibility of communication among human beings from different regions and cultures? In an attempt to justify his view on the approach to cross cultural communication, Wiredu holds that the human constitution is the same everywhere; there is only one world in which we all live, move and have our struggles, even though there are such factors as the variations in climate. Communication among widely separated people is often more difficult than communication among people living relatively closely together. There is no human language known to man which non-native speakers cannot learn as a second language. Therefore, all human languages are learnable and translatable. On the fact that any language can be learned we may agree with Wiredu easily. He (Wiredu 1998: 37) observes that the fact that language itself is possessed by all human societies is the epitome of the cultural universal. In other words, he maintains that it is necessary for any human community to have some language. However, the particular language any society has is contingent on their history, ancestry and geographical location in the world. From the above analysis, Oladipo (1996: 53) states that it should be clear that Wiredu is not a cultural relativist, given that the defining features of the human species are the universal aspects. While the idea of cultural universals seems appealing in its own right and is valuable as a philosophical foundation for measuring cultural communication among cultures, there are certain issues that require critical attention in Wiredu's theory.

Wiredu's view, as we may say, is a very optimistic account of human nature and the conditions of human interaction. Is this optimism supported by the dark oppressive history of cultural interactions among human beings? Wiredu (1995: 13) admits that Africans in particular

belong to nations oppressed. In our view, there is clear evidence that there are differences among cultures and that such differences are significant in the understanding of human nature. Firstly, if as Wiredu says, cultural universals exist as the important basis of human communication, then why do human beings need to make very conscious and deliberate efforts to interact and communicate effectively and productively with others? We cannot take communication for granted. If intercultural communication could actually be very easy to achieve, why then do we experience so much intolerance, oppression, marginalisation and racism in different parts of the world today? Let us have some examples from a local case study of Nigeria. There are traces of serious inter ethnic and intra ethnic conflicts which have clearly pointed to the fact that communicating between kinsmen or persons of the same ethnic origins as well as their neighbors cannot be taken for granted. In the southwestern Yoruba-speaking region of Nigeria the case of the Ife versus Modakeke communal conflicts which led to extensive violence, killing and destruction of 1997 to 1999 is instructive. In the south east there was the Aguleri versus Umuleri of 2000 and in the Niger Delta region the Eleme and Okrika communities who were neighbours within Rivers State were involved in violence and wars in 2000 over the rights to and ownership of the Port Harcourt oil refinery which ironically is a state owned strategic national installation.

Furthermore, it is correct to argue that cultural relativism acknowledges the differences among men (whatever be the reasons for such differences). This view permits us to seek more viable and enduring ways of establishing and sustaining dialogue between cultures on a platform of mutual recognition. This is to ensure that no group is unduly excluded, eclipsed or marginalized. Intercultural communication, therefore, need not compulsorily emerge from the quest for what, if at all, is common to all cultures? This is because, there are few things that are actually common to most cultures, which can be the basis of intercultural relations. The question of how to achieve the conscious harmonization of interests in the context of inter-cultural communication is significant if we realize that contrary to Wiredu's view, communication between kith and kin cannot be taken for granted. To achieve communication, we need to establish a social atmosphere of peace, justice, cooperation and mutual recognition between kith and kin. The



recent trend of crisis in most African countries in the decades since the 1960's has shown that people can come from the same region or geo-political zone and yet remain incapable of communicating with one another without difficulties.

From the above, it is clear that the existence of a common language or history does not in any way detract from the reality of conflicts and the breakdown of mutual understanding, respect, communication and even national consciousness. Moreover, even if we admit that the human constitution is the same everywhere, this situation or fact does not in any way suggest that every man in the world shares identical values or beliefs with another. Sogolo (1993: 119) holds that values embody "the cherished form or image of life which every society sets for itself and seek to attain and to which it constantly refers in the process of going through life". To this extent Titus (1970: 331) is correct to say that "a sense of values is experienced by all men and women". Moreover, since it has been established that men and women live their lives within cultural contexts, then Brunner et al (1937: 87–88) are correct when they insist that "value form the basis of all cultural life" or as Singer (1989) would say that a value is something we regard to be important (Singer 1989: 145). Various cultural and human experiences around us reveal that different cultures have interests that are often at variance with one another.

On the idea posited by Wiredu that communication is more easily attained between those living closely together than those living far apart from each other, the history of contemporary Africa since the mid-twentieth century has shown otherwise. Breakdown of communication among peoples or cultures living close together in one society lead to widespread conflicts, destruction and anarchy across entire geo-political regions. The dispersal and magnification of wars and refugee crisis within countries such as Rwanda, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia and Sudan led to a breakdown of communication and harmonious existence among groups across other proximal nation states.

Language is the ideal of a cultural universal because every society possesses language. It seems that the message or expression of intent conveyed by one language may be different from that conveyed by other languages. The point we are making here is in a deeper and more profound sense, more significant than the fact of whether English can

be differentiated from French. For instance, if we acknowledge that the renowned American civil rights crusader Martin Luther King Jr. spoke English language just as the American propagators of racism such as the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) who upheld the racist system prevailing in the America of his time then, we must admit that his disposition and message of non-violence which was expressed in English, was fundamentally different from and opposed to the language and culture of intolerance, exclusion, de-humanization and violence of his sworn detractors and oppressors. This shows the reality of difference in the world. Diop tries to build an argument for intercultural relations using the fact of the diversity of human experiences which compel a conscious need for tolerance of other identities. His theory leads us to review the conditions for a mutually respectful dialogue that can foster meaning and translation. This conceptualization of a way of attaining harmony among humans is particularly significant given the long history of theories and practices proposed as ways to ensure a problem free communication among peoples. In fact there have been constructs that tried to explain the problem and implications of differences among men. Some of these are mentioned below. Contrary to Wiredu's position, Diop attempts to build a theory of difference as a basis for dialogue and human communication.

### **Appraisal of Cheik anta Diop on an African idea of difference**

Scholars have examined the concept of difference using constructs like marginality, otherness, subaltern, hegemony and colonialism. On his part, Diop (1991: 221) in his discussion of difference and inter cultural relations suggests that every geographical and linguistic territory has its history, political and social arrangements, customs, traditions and morality. These are the very factors that constitute the basis of the difference between cultures. Usually such differences are more obvious and pronounced in the area of linguistic expression or language. Similarly, Hartley (1999: 79–88) holds that cultural difference is reflected in certain physical and social elements, both of which determine the peculiar nature of each social structure and the particular social rules and social roles that can exist in any society. Diop (1991: 222)

discusses three possibilities that could occur when an attempt is made to translate ideas among languages and cultures that are widely separated such as the African and Western languages. Firstly, “where the concepts and images that convey the message are of a specific or particular type restricted to a culture, then a literal translation may not be possible in a language that does not participate in the same culture. Secondly, where the images and expressions that convey a message are of a universal type being adequately detached from geographic climate and social factors, then one language can be translated into another without distortion. Thirdly, Diop (1991: 222) says that where specific images that convey a message can be given as adapted translation, then one language can be translated into another in such a way that the original meaning of the expression is retained.

One important point in Diop’s analysis is his recognition of the difference between cultures, even though he draws upon examples mainly from geographical features. However, he admits that there are areas of convergence among cultures. With special reference to the domain of African philosophy, Diop in some of his other important works (1974; 1987; 1991) tries to shed light on a particular form of cultural conflict or contact, namely the question of the status of the ancient Egyptian civilization. To this extent it is right to say that “every society has tendencies and aspirations linked to its particular culture and history”. It is such features that provide the basis of the society’s identity (M’ Bow 1992: 11). Sarbaugh (1979: 5) admonishes that the idea of ‘inter-cultural’ should not be given a restrictive interpretation. This is because intercultural communication can occur in different forms and at different levels. Inter-cultural communication can occur among more than one individual of different nationalities. It can also assume an official tone in which various government representatives on behalf of their national governments can exchange messages. Moreover, it is possible that two school teachers or tutors from different nations have studied the same courses under one teacher from a third nation and that both tutors are currently working together on the same project (Sarbaugh 1979: 6).

Sarbaugh (1979: 7–15) observes further that a fundamental point implied in the discourse of inter cultural communication is the issue of the heterogeneity of the participants. He contends that one important problem in intercultural communication which positive values

can tackle is that of 'stereotypes' (Sarbaugh 1979: 17). This issue is important because in the previous decades, for instance, cultural stereotype existed in the form of what Biakolo (1998: 12) refers to as the cross-cultural categories which provided a theoretical basis of the far reaching distinction between the Africans and the Westerners. During that period, the western cultures were seen as civilized, logical and scientific, while the African cultures were seen as savage, pre-logical and magical. Such ideas about Africa served the purpose of colonization and exploitation. Therefore Sarbaugh holds that the important and basic principle of communication in intercultural perspectives is accommodation or the adjustment of structures and belief systems fit into other conceptions of reality. By so doing the peoples of the world can enhance moral and humane values as a way of breaking down intolerance, prejudice, anachronism and injustice.

Such a possibility relies upon what Amitai Etzioni has rightly construed as the quest for some basis for moral reconciliation and dialogue. Moral dialogue, according to Etzioni (1997: 183–185), are needed across societies or cultures. Moral dialogues occur when groups of people engage in process of sorting the values that will guide their lives. Moral dialogues assume that societies need shared formulations entail dialogues that concern values and not merely deliberations over empirical facts or logical ideas. Hence, Etzioni argues that when we call on all people to respect the same set of core values, this does not entail arguing that all have to follow the same path of socio-economic development or that they should enjoy the same modes of entertainment or even the same rules of public behaviour. Rather, at issue are core values such as respecting human dignity, being responsible to all members of the respective communities.

These values identified by Etzioni are some of the cardinal moral values needed by human beings in order to achieve genuine inter-cultural dialogue and reconciliation. However, there is a need to analyze the character and significance of these values. Moral values are undoubtedly a unique set of values. It is in this light that Agrawal (1998: 151) holds that a value is not a moral value unless, in principle, it can be upheld by all human beings. Moral values mediate between particular actions and what is considered to be an ultimate human value. Thus, according to Frankena (1973: 62–63) moral values are things that are

morally good. As Nwala (1985: 148–149) says, moral values can either be positive or negative in nature. Positive moral values endorse actions directed at the attainment of communal value and cohesion as well as the realization of proper human and social interaction. Negative moral values, on the other hand, prohibit actions such as murder and stealing when they manifest. Mbiti (1975: 175) also emphasizes that moral values can operate at the personal and social realms of human life. And the aims of such moral values are to ensure the protection and preservation of the entire human race, which in our opinion is urgently in need of harmony and reconciliation.

## Conclusion

We studied the problem of the extent to which differences in meaning across cultural experiences often affect translation and the chances of human communication. We noted the significance of this problem because the world was currently plagued by oppression, domination, colonialism, conflicts, prejudices, intolerance, discrimination, inequity and misconceptions. We examined the issue of the perception that difference was a threat to cooperation, harmony and dialogue among peoples and institutions of the world. We philosophically examined this idea and showed that cultural difference could be a tool for building up a world where the much required values of harmony, respect for others, reciprocity and cooperation needed to be established. We used philosophical arguments by prominent African philosophers such as Wiredu's cultural universals and Diop's cultural difference theory to show the philosophical depths of the debate. We noted that methodologically, this study was necessary because we needed a philosophical analysis of values needed for establishing enduring intercultural dialogue on an ethical foundation. The work identified tolerance, mutual recognition, compromise and human dignity as pillars of enduring mutually respectful intercultural communication. These values were required in order to find a balance between conceptual schemes which represent ways of organizing experience or the points of view from which persons, cultures, etc, can view things or reality (Davidson 1984: 183). This study of the reality of difference and its implications suggested an endorsement of the fact that any attempt to reach a com-

promise on the issue of cross-cultural discussion was required to accept the reality of cultural relativism given the position of Staden (1998: 15) that culture is both a political and historical concept. Finally our quest for intercultural relations should take into consideration the political and historical context of the reality of cultural difference.

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