

## Language and Morality: An Analysis of Gabriel Okara's *The Voice*

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### Abstract

Man's perceptions or worldviews about reality are conditioned and shaped by the language in which they are expressed. Thus, our knowledge of morality is expressed in the language we use. This paper examines the interrelatedness of language and morality using the matrix of Gabriel Okara's *The Voice*. It explores the relationship between language and morality, and how they feature in the actual state of affairs. It utilizes the method of textual analysis and hermeneutic phenomenology in carrying out the research. It concludes that language and morality are inseparably bound together. It recommends a reappraisal of Okara's conception of language and morality within the framework of African ethics.

**Keywords:** Language, Morality, Analysis, Gabriel, Okara, Voice

### INTRODUCTION

Language is an essential component of culture. As has been pointed out earlier, morality itself is largely a product of culture (Nwobu 2019). In other words, the ethical value system is culture-bound. Also worthy of note is the fact that morality does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, it finds expression in our use of language. As an aspect of culture, language is the springboard of morality in traditional African society. In this regard, the language of morality gives insight into moral thoughts or ideas. In the African ethical system, the centrality of the notions of character and moral personhood, which are inspired by the African moral language, is given a prominent place. In attempting a philosophical excursus of the points of convergence between language and morality, the following questions become pertinent:

- i) What do we mean when we use moral language?  
What do ethical words such as *good*, *bad*, *right*, *wrong*, and *ought* mean?
- ii) What is the justification for our moral judgements?  
Is there some universal objective moral standard or is it a matter of our own culture? And if there is a universal objective moral standard-what, is it and how is it justified?
- iii) What causes us to adopt our moral positions? What causes us to condemn or accept abortion, homosexuality, slavery, etc? Is it preferences arising from our

culture, genes, or simply that some of us are better at working out moral truths than others through innate ability or better education? (Hare qtd in Nwosu 2006). Moral language is not just an injunction or a categorical imperative to perform or refrain from performing certain activities or acts (Eyang 2018; Mishina & Iskandar 2019). In fine, it involves a particular set of reasons for doing or not doing certain things. It is not just a matter of semantics. Language enables, extends, and maintains human value systems. Ozumba (2001), while reflecting on the role of language in ethics, emphatically notes that:

Our problems in the realm of morality have been that of a confused understanding of terms. Our clear-sighted apprehensions of the terms we use bring about a diminution of the disagreements that abound in our ethical arguments. We are exposed to the meaning of terms like, right and wrong, good and bad, etc (p. 21).

This remark is based on the understanding that morality, as an abstract concept, is couched and embedded in human language. It follows, therefore, that moral values are expressed in language. However, Ozumba's contention is that ambiguity in our use of language invariably distorts our moral value system. That is to say that when language is not properly articulated, it affects our ethical constructs. This is obviously a truism, as language is the vehicle to formulate and express morality. For Nwigwe *et al.*, (2003):

Language is central in our thinking... The objects of experience do not exist separately from the concepts we have of them. For this obvious reason, words enter into the very structure of our experience. The way we perceive the world ... is a function of our linguistic apparatus. What this means is that... the mind is made up of conceptual schemes with which we think. These conceptual schemes constitute... the categories of the mind. Through language alone, we achieve forms... which are phenomenally derived from material realities (p. 1).

The above excerpt underscores the pivotal role of language in our thinking process. Moral values are conceived in the mind and ultimately expressed or defined in language form. Here, the ideational function of language comes to play. The speech act theory also has an ethical dimension. Language evokes a response in man as a moral agent. Hence, the interplay between language and morality cannot be overemphasized. Language features prominently in our thought process. Thus, to ask whether reality is intelligible is to ask about the relation between thought and reality. In considering the nature of thought, one is also led to consider the nature of language. Inseparably bound up with a question of whether reality is intelligible, therefore is the question of how language is connected with reality, of what it is to say something (Eyang & Edung 2018). In point of fact, the philosopher's interest in language lies not so in the solution of particular linguistic confusions for their own sake as in the solution of confusions about the nature of language in general.

The major preoccupation of this paper is the points of convergence between language, as a linguistic phenomenon, on the one hand, and morality, as an ethical concept, on the other hand as presented by Okara in his text entitled *The Voice*. We shall begin our discourse by looking at the nexus between both concepts, namely language and morality

## OKARA ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ETHICS AND LANGUAGE

Okara's wit in exploring the nexus between ethics and language is quite analytical. His articulate disposition, brilliance, and eloquence in this respect pass for a scorecard for intellectual excellence. Okara's persona-the embattled Okolo has a strong conviction that if the culture of expressing the right attitude is propagated and upheld, there would be sanity and moral rectitude in human relations. In Okara's perspective, our language is a sum total of our attitudes, beliefs, norms, values, etc. He is by extension a budding linguistic, analytic philosopher and, of course, a meta-ethicist. Okolo, the protagonist, has a deep interest in language, in the precision of thought and feeling that a technical use of language produces. His valuation of people's moral standing centres on their behavioural framework as manifestly evident in spoken language of the characters. Here is Okara (1979) understanding of how language profoundly affects human behaviour:

*Nobody withstands the power of the spoken word. Okolo has spoken.  
I will speak when the time is correct and others will follow and our  
spoken words will gather power like the power of a hurricane and  
Izongo will sway and fall like sugar cane (pp. 94-95).*

The above statement is credited to a certain messenger in Okara's novel, *The Voice* who shares the same moral consciousness with Okolo notwithstanding the fact that he is at the service of Chief Izongo – his principal. There is no iota of doubt that language embodies distinctive ways of experiencing the world and defining what we are. It shapes our distinctive ways of being in the world or the moral community as moral agents. The same messenger further opines that "Our words will have power when we speak them out" (Okara 1979). From the above background, it is crystal clear that language is the carrier of a people's identity, the vehicle of a certain way of seeing things, experiencing and feeling, determinant of particular outlooks on life (Afolayan 2006). In Okara's perspective, Okolo is presented as his people's preserver of the authority and purity of language. This presupposes that what men are and do is always revealed in the language they use. Hence, language is a product of conventional morality.

In Okara's *The Voice*, Okolo's unflinching commitment to the indispensability of freedom of speech as a moral absolute is indicative or suggestive of the strong ties between language and morality. Okolo insists, and strongly so, that, "... always the straight thing do and the straight thing talk and your spoken words will have power and you will live in this world even when you are dead" (Okara 1979, p. 106). The import of the foregoing is that there is a symbiotic relationship between what we *say* and what we *do*, morally speaking. Okara (1979) further writes that "Izongo fears Okolo, whose voice is 'like the voice of a mosquito which had driven even sleep out of their eyes'" (pp. 10-11). So far, the point is that language has a moral connotation or implication. This fact is exemplified in Okara's thought pattern.

## THE SEARCH FOR AN ABSOLUTE VALUE

Philosophy, by its very nature, is the search for ultimate reality. It is a reflective or systematic inquiry into the nature and character of truth as an absolute value. Little wonder that Socrates sees philosophy as a reflective self-examination of the principles of a just and happy life (Asuo 2018; Asuo 2019). It is a criticism of the fundamental beliefs in any man's cultural enterprises, science, art, religion, the moral life, social and practical activity when some new idea or altered experience has impinged upon them and generated intellectual tensions and maladjustment (Asuo & Kingsley 2017).

One of the major philosophical themes in Okara's *The Voice* is the quest for absolute value. The principal character, Okolo, is poised to uncover or unravel the basic and ultimate values that underlie or underpin our moral fabric in the society. It is against this background that Albert Camus rightly remarks that the central of man is the problem of the meaning of human life (Omogegbe 2010). This search for the ultimate meaning of human existence is, according to Unamuo, very fundamental in man's existential condition or reality. He further notes that:

*For man investigates the world because he finds himself in it and wants to improve the quality of his life in it... It is this (quest) ... that prompts disturbing questions about the meaning, purposive, origin and ultimate destiny of human life* (Omogegbe 2010, p. 27).

In Okara's narrative, Okolo's attempt to search for an absolute value climaxed in his asking of the apparently vague question, 'Have you got *it*?' In so doing, he is both challenging them to consider what kind of lives they are leading and at the same time giving them a clue about how to find the answer. It is, however, important to note that the undefined *it* which Okolo seeks to unravel or demystify is nothing more than the meaning of life vis-à-vis morality. In Edet's parlance, "When one considers that the core of the story is Okolo's search for something which is never more explicitly defined than as *it*; it evokes metaphysical, ethical, and epistemological issues" (2015, p. 36). Okara (1979), as an African philosopher of a sort, demonstrates his enormous grasp of philosophy as a critical reflection on the justification of the basic human beliefs and analysis of basic concepts in terms of which such beliefs are expressed using the experience of his persona-Okolo. Okolo's search for an absolute value is obviously an inquiry into the most fundamental questions of reality and human existence.

Historically, Okolo's search for an absolute value is akin to St. Augustine's conception of the search for truth: "Do not go outside thyself, but return to within thyself; for truth resides in the inmost part of man" (Augustine 2014, p. 19). Okolo, therefore, makes a clarion call for deep introspection and self-examination. Thus, everyone must return to his innermost self while searching for the truth as a moral value. This, he believes, lies in man's inner mind. The absolute value which is technically referred to as "*It*" does not designate a particular concept. In Okolo's consideration, the "*It*", which is an abstract concept and the object of his controversial search or a voyage of discovery, is not given a straight jacket or clearly defined label as he fears this would engender ideological tension or intellectual wrangling. For him, "Names bring divisions and divisions, strife. So let it be without a name; let it be nameless" (Okara 1979, p. 112). The "*It*" connotes the metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical foundations of the moral conduct of the chiefs, elders, and natives of Amatu and Sologa communities, respectively.

## **JUSTIFICATION FOR ETHICAL RELATIVISM**

In considering the notions of rightness or wrongness of human actions or conduct, we have to bear in mind that the concepts of right and wrong are multifaceted or multidimensional. Thus, rightness can hardly be given a clear-cut interpretation because there are as many viewpoints regarding the concept as there is avalanche of moral philosophers and theologians. In fact, people tend to define and associate meaning to these ethical concepts – rightness and wrongness in ways that appeal to them or suit their intellectual orientations or idiosyncrasies. The conception of these terms is coloured or conditioned by the people's belief system, mores, and norms. All these factors combined to inform the prevailing ethical standard of a particular cultural group. It should be noted



that relativism is a theory of ethics that is opposed to the universality of morality and the universal application of moral principles.

In any case, we have to admit that there are certain relative elements in morality. Put differently, certain aspects of morality are relative depending on the circumstances or peculiarities of the society in question. This explains why there exists nuances of moral rules in different societies. This reality is manifestly evident in Okara's *The Voice*. In his remark, Longe comments thus, "Gabriel Okara is well aware that each one has a meaning of life to himself and that is apparently the reason d'tre for the conflict" (p. 33). It is also important to stress here that moral relativism should not always be seen in a negative light. It has its relative merits as its strong points. A good number of ingenious arguments can be advanced or raised in favour of ethical relativism.

For one, Herodotus, the Greek historian of the 5th century B.C., advanced a defensive thesis when he observed that different societies have different customs and that each person thinks his own society's customs are the best. But no set of social customs, Herodotus said, is really better or worse than any other.

In view of this, some philosophers have argued that morality develops differently within different cultures because it is a social product. Thus, each society develops standards that people use within it to distinguish acceptable from unacceptable behaviour, and every judgement of right and wrong presupposes one or another of these standards. It, therefore, follows that if practices such as polygamy or infanticide are considered right within a society, then they are right for that society, and if the same practices are adjudged wrong within a different society, then those practices are wrong for that society. In this regard, there is no such thing as what is *really* i.e. absolutely or objectively or universally right, apart from these social codes, for there is no culture-neutral standard to which we can appeal to determine which society's view is correct. The different social codes are all that exist. Secondly, another argument for ethical relativism is due to the Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711-1776), who claimed that moral beliefs are based on *sentiments* or emotions rather than on reason. This idea was developed by the 20th-century school of logical positivism and by later philosophers such as Charles L. Stevenson (1908 – 1979) and R.M. Hare (1919 – 2002), who held that the primary function of moral language is not to state facts but to express feelings of approval or disapproval of some action or to influence the attitudes and actions of others. The foregoing point of view is referred to as *emotivism*. Right and wrong are relative to individual preferences rather than to social standards.

Ethical relativism is attractive to many philosophers and social scientists because it seems to offer the best explanation of the variability of moral belief. It also offers a plausible way of explaining how ethics fits into the world as it is described by modern science. Even if the natural world ultimately consists of nothing but value-neutral facts, according to the relativist persuasion, ethics still has a foundation in human feeling and social arrangements of societies and institutions. In point of fact, ethical relativism seems especially well suited to explain the virtue of tolerance. If, from an objective point of view, one's own values and the values of one's society have no special standing, then an attitude of "live and let's live" towards other people's values seems quite appropriate. To this end, conception of right and wrong is perspectival. Hence, the indispensability of ethical relativism.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have critically examined the intricate web of relationship between language and morality and how they feature in traditional African society using Okara's perspective of African indigenous value system.

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