

# *Rethinking African Analytic Philosophy: A Perspectival Approach*

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*In this paper I put together insights from the ordinary-language approach (use-theoretical approach) and perspectival realism, and use them in developing and clarifying themes in African philosophy. I therefore appeal to language and how African individuals are using it in a particular context. In order to achieve this, I will firstly introduce the analytic philosophical framework in the context of Anglophone African philosophy. This exposition also aims at identifying gaps in the general studies that build on this approach. Secondly, I will clarify the perspectival approach, indicating further how it is reflected in African thought. Thirdly, I will demonstrate the abstraction of philosophical themes using the perspectival approach through the analysis of how Africans are using language. It is argued that this approach leads to the development of African philosophy from the grassroots and helps in opening up a multiplicity of philosophical themes on the African continent.*

**Key words:** African philosophy; perspectivism; communitarianism; individualism; African analytic philosophy

## 1 Introduction

Discourse on methods of doing African philosophy has mainly focused on language analysis, belief systems, and logic contained in ordinary people's language. These main ways of philosophizing have led to a multiplicity of approaches that are regarded as part of African philosophy such as the ordinary-language approach, hermeneutics, and ethnographic approach. These various methods tend to be framed in the general philosophical orientations, namely the analytic framework and the continental framework. The former is characterized by a modern form of empiricism that underlines the centrality of natural science, logic, and language, while the latter is characterized by rationalism (such as idealism).

I want to develop an approach within the analytic framework that further integrates the ordinary language approach with perspectivism. With the analysis on ordinary language, I acknowledge that genuine African philosophy may be developed by considering how people are using language. Perspectivism is introduced to accommodate various interpretations that are a consequence of language and use-semantics. This builds up on the understanding that human language and interpretation are all dependent on perspectives; hence various themes may be developed in a particular "language-use-interpretation context."

Before I elaborate on the development of the suggested African analytic approach, I would like to underscore the idea that doing philosophy, such as African philosophy, is similar to building an interpretation from a particular perspective. This explains why I value the idea of perspectivism as being central in building any philosophy. I would like to note that the idea of perspectivism that I hold is influenced by scientific realism and may be summarized as follows: firstly, I believe in the

existence of an objective world (natural world) independent of human experience or interpretation. I consider this to be a fundamental basis for a genuine perspectivism, which allows for a certain level of realism. As is the case, realism, such as scientific realism, is a philosophical position that acknowledges the existence of an independent natural world. When human beings such as scientists attempt to get access into this world, perception, with its various factors, enters into play. It is through this process that they provide an interpretation of the natural world. For example, Newton provided an interpretation of why things fall to the ground by creating the theory of a force that pulls them down (gravitational theory). In a different perspective, Einstein interpreted the fall of things as caused by the curvature of space and time by objects (general theory of relativity).<sup>1</sup>

## 2 Analytic Framework in African Philosophy

The use of the analytic framework in modern Anglophone African philosophy may be traced to the 1960s in work that built on the method of language analysis. One of the earliest works that used some aspects of the analytic framework was Willie Abraham's *The Mind of Africa*. Abraham was a Ghanaian philosopher who was influenced by Gilbert Ryle's ordinary language approach. According to Abraham, "The resort of linguistic philosophers to what we say or do is not, therefore, short-sighted. This is where relativism might affect philosophy" (Abraham 1962: 105).<sup>2</sup> He apparently supports the ordinary-language approach in the analytic framework as fundamental for developing African thought. The indication that "This is where relativism might affect philosophy" is indicative of a multiplicity of possible philosophical themes that are a consequence of language analysis. He joined together the analytic method with the ethnographic method. While the analytic method focused on the analysis of language ("what we say"), the ethnographic method attempted to build philosophy through a reflection on African culture ("what we do").<sup>3</sup> The combination of language analysis and culture qualifies Abraham as building up a philosophy based on mixed methods. In fact, Hallen noted that,

Despite his analytically orthodox philosophical training, overall Abraham might be said to advocate a methodologically pluralistic approach to the study of the philosophical in Africa's indigenous cultures. There is a place for language analysis, but there is also a place for the study and interpolation of oral literature and the beliefs and values enshrined in African social institutions (religious, political, legal, etc.) (Hallen 2000: 15).<sup>4</sup>

In this citation, aspects of language analysis and the study of oral literature provide a good background for doing analytic philosophy. Apart from the use of a mixed approach in Abraham, a notable adoption of the analytic framework may be seen in the works that developed African philosophy from the 1970s and 1980s. These developments were mainly a response to those academics who denied the existence of rational/logical/scientific discourse in African cultures.<sup>5</sup> Some of them were anthropologists who were influenced by positivism.<sup>6</sup> Their main argument was that Africans have not yet reached the level of rationality as in western Europe. Africans attempted to refute this allegation through the development of African philosophy, using various methods such as the analytic, hermeneutic, and ethnographic methods. In fact, in his philosophy Wiredu reflected upon both the language and beliefs among the Akan people of Ghana and elaborated different conceptions claimed to be representative of the Akan people.<sup>7</sup>

One of the theories reflecting the analytic framework is Wiredu's theory of truth as dependent on opinion in a particular context (a form of perspectivism). He builds on the centrality of language analysis as is expressed in the following passage:

There are a couple of words in Akan which have the same significance as *nokware*. There are *ampa* and *ewom*. *Ampa* implies truth but it has the same excess of meaning over 'truth' that 'truthfulness' has. The word is a unification of phrase *eye asem pa*, literally 'it is a good piece of discourse.' *Ewom* literally means 'it is in it' (Wiredu: 1985: 282).<sup>8</sup>

In the 1990s, the use of the analytic framework reached its climax in different parts of Africa in Anglophone philosophy. One prominent example was Kwame Gyekye, especially his "Person and Community in African Thought,"<sup>9</sup> and *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*.<sup>10</sup> Gyekye focused on the Ghanaian language Twi as a source of his philosophy. He identified philosophical concepts, and found sages to provide their meanings. The importance of sages was to show that rationality is present among the Africans, contrary to claims that were made by some colonialists. Gyekye is also commonly noted for underlining the importance of proverbs as carriers of African traditional philosophy through the oral tradition. The sages were expected to provide meanings regarding these proverbs. This may be seen as the application of the ordinary-language approach to meaning as promoted by philosophers such as Gilbert Ryle<sup>11</sup> and John Austin.<sup>12</sup>

The philosophy of Gyekye shows that he is very conscious of the universal nature of philosophy. This implies that philosophical activity takes place for all human beings regardless of their physical differences or geographical position. He therefore does not limit the presence of values or philosophical ideas only to African thought. Even within African philosophy, he is aware of the possibility of various historical perspectives, and he connects philosophy with history as well as confirms that it is a cultural affair. Similar interest in language analysis is also found in the works of Segun Gbadegesin,<sup>13</sup> who worked with the Yoruba people of Nigeria. Gbadegesin focused on various issues that arise among the Yoruba by investigating their conceptualization of concepts such as individuality, causality, person, and communitarian morality.

In the late 1990s, some African philosophers, such as Henry Oruka<sup>14</sup> and Paulin Hountondji,<sup>15</sup> were often categorized as using an analytic framework because they build on aspects of logical positivism in their philosophy.<sup>16</sup> In Oruka's sage philosophy, analytic philosophy is echoed in the emphasis on identifying logic in African sages. In his method, which is also known as the conversation method, language plays an important role given that an interview, discussion, and dialogue take place with African sages. Philosophy or logical thinking that is reflected in the words of a sage during this dialogue is seen as a consequence of a joint venture between a sage and the community in a particular context. A sage is therefore rational, as he/she reflects and interprets cultural philosophy, bringing his/her own perspective in due course.

Another significant figure in the late 1990s was Didier Kaphagawani, who in his various works used language analysis in his presentation of African thought. For instance, he attempted to collect and analyze the Chichewa proverbs in the areas of Malawi, Zambia, and Mozambique. He helped clarify components of individualism and communitarianism in these areas of African thought. His analysis of proverbs may be exemplified by the following passage:

For Africans, certainly the Chewa, are aware of this important difference as exemplified by the following expressions: *Chaona mnzako chapita mawa chili paine* (What your neighbor has

experienced is gone, tomorrow it will be your turn); *mvula ikakuona litsiro siikata* (When the rain has seen that you are dirty, it does not stop pouring); and *Wanthu ndi mchenga saundika* (Human beings are like sand out of which one cannot make a mountain). All these proverbs and expressions reflect the Chewa's cognizance of the individuality of human beings.<sup>17</sup>

In the citation, the expression *Wanthu ndi mchenga saundika* (Human beings are like sand out of which one cannot make a mountain) provides a strong foundation for singularity/subjectivity. The expression implicitly denies conceptualizing communal relations as the essence of being. In fact, it underlines singularity by pointing out that you cannot make a mountain of human subjects. In his analysis, a proverb such as *Chaona mṁṁṁako chapita mawa chili paine* (What your neighbor has experienced is gone, tomorrow it will be your turn) acknowledges individual experience. Similarly, the proverb *mvula ikakuona litsiro siikata* (When the rain has seen that you are dirty, it does not stop pouring) indicates a particular experience of an individual. It is through an analysis of the proverbs in the above quotation that he suggested the concept of individuality in the African context. Similarly, Kaphagawani analyzed the meaning of concepts such as truth (*chowonadi*) by focusing on how they are used among Chewa language speakers.

In 1998, the analytic framework was used by Mogobe Ramose in his development of African philosophy.<sup>18</sup> Using rheomodic language<sup>19</sup> that attempts to capture the dynamism of being, (rheomode comes from the Greek word *rheo*, which means “to flow”), he discussed the concept of *Ubuntu*. Ramose studied the syntactic structure of this word. In fact, through linguistic analysis and abstract reflection on the meaning of *ubuntu*, he showed the aspect of dynamism by arguing that this term is conceived as a combination of a prefix *ubu-* and a suffix *-ntu*. *Ubu-* is interpreted as being in general, while *-ntu* represents the manifestation of being/a mode of existence. He argued that the generality suggested in *ubu-* (enfolded being) indicates that this is a context of ontology (study of being in general). *-Ntu* (unfolded being) is in the realm of epistemology, since it deals with the conscious expression of being in a particular mode of existence. *Ubu* in the epistemic context of *-ntu* may be instantiated in different forms (ways of being) such as social organization, religion, or law. He concluded with an argument that the community is an important context for realization and manifestation of *ubuntu* in the African context. Briefly, this thinking reflects the use of both phenomenism (continental philosophy) and language analysis (similar to Bohm). I am aware of the fact that some thinkers in continental philosophy such as Derrida also engage in language analysis; however, the unique component with analytic philosophy is its association with empiricism and its methods.

The trend of Anglophone African philosophy from 2000 has tended towards a common use of the analytic framework. For example, Barry Hallen and Olubi Sodipo<sup>20</sup> as well as Grivas Kayange<sup>21</sup> have openly declared that they are developing their perspectives of African philosophy building on the framework of analytic philosophy, specifically the ordinary-language approach/pragmatic approach. This promises to be a very effective method to the extent that it takes a philosopher to be in touch with ordinary people's beliefs, thoughts, and actions. In some of Hallen's works,<sup>22</sup> such as *African Philosophy: The Analytic Approach*, it is claimed that there is original indigenous philosophical content in African thought, which may be traced in language. This framework is well spelled out in *The Good, the Bad and the Beautiful*.

One of the convictions underlying much of this book is that the systematic analysis of ordinary, everyday language usage in non-Western, particularly African, cultures can prove to

be of fundamental philosophical value. The methodological inspiration for this kind of analysis derives, most obviously, from ordinary language philosophy as enunciated by Anglophone philosophers during the mid-twentieth century. In my own case, how this inspiration came to be transferred to sub-Saharan West Africa is a story that perhaps deserves telling in some detail (Hallen 2000: 1).

Equally, Hallen and Sodipo used the ordinary-language approach in discussing concepts of truth, belief, knowledge, and evidence among the Yoruba people of Nigeria (Hallen and Sodipo 1997). Kayange,<sup>23</sup> who followed the tradition of philosophers such Wittgenstein (1953),<sup>24</sup> Paul Grice (1957),<sup>25</sup> Ryle (1951, 1953), and Austin (1962), developed a similar direction in his recent work (Kayange 2014, 2018b). In a recent publication, Kayange (2018a) shows how philosophy can be done in African thought using ordinary language, where concepts such as beauty, meaning, truth, and rationality are discussed. The study builds on meanings relative to various figurative expressions such as proverbs, taboos, riddles, and metaphors, which are claimed as carriers of traditional philosophy.

Equally, E.C. Eze, in the article “African Philosophy and the Analytic Tradition,” confirms the importance and use of this framework in the following passage: “Could the ‘analytic’ approach take greater roots in the traditions of African Philosophy? In this contribution, I give an affirmative answer to the question” (Eze 2001: 205)<sup>26</sup> In fact Eze, rightly noted a variety of themes of this tradition that are also present in African philosophy. For example, pointing at topics in analytic thought, he writes, “In the 1960s R. J. Butler of the University of Toronto edited a two-volume work entitled *Analytic Philosophy*. The chapters, written by as many as forty philosophers, bore headings such as ‘Modality,’ ‘Quantification,’ ‘Causality,’ ‘Method of Analysis,’ ‘Intentionality of Sensation,’ ‘Propositions,’ ‘Nonentities,’ and so forth” (Eze 2001: 205). In this regard, the importance of analytic philosophy is that it is characterized by a commitment to the universality of thought, such that the various themes have a universal scope. Doing African philosophy through the analytic method apparently contributes to this universal nature of thought and reality.

In the article “The Analytic Appeal to African Philosophy,” Jason Van Niekerk defended the importance of analytic philosophy in the African context, and argued for “an account of analytic philosophy as a style of philosophy” (Van Niekerk 2015: 517). This style builds on an analysis of propositional claims made in various statements, which is commonly known as the syntactic approach. Commenting on this approach, Niekerk wrote, “My intention, then, is to use the term ‘Analytic’ to pick out a style of philosophy, understood as a procedural focus, a preference for prioritising certain types of questions or objects of analysis. Specifically, I use the term to pick out a preference for: testing propositional claims; doing so in ordinary language; and pursuing parsimonious explanations” (Van Nierkerk 2015: 517). The list of works and ideas that subscribe to analytic philosophy in African thought and some that use mixed methods in this tradition may go on and on; however, this suffices as a background for this discussion.

### 3 Justification of the Perspectival Approach

This shift towards a perspectival approach is an attempt to eliminate a dogmatist view about African philosophy. I am aware that this dogmatism may apply to other philosophies such as Indian and Chinese philosophy; however, my interest is on African philosophy. Certain ways of thinking are

generalized as a true representation of the African thought, for example, the principle that African philosophy is communitarian or cultural philosophy. This dogmatism mainly hinders further inquiry beyond the current beliefs about the African philosophy. A good summary of this trend is presented by Kripke's dogmatism paradox, which is summarized in the following words, "If I know that *b* is true, I know that any evidence against *b* is evidence against something that is true; I know that such evidence is misleading. But I should disregard evidence that I know is misleading. So, once I know that *b* is true, I am in a position to disregard any future evidence that seems to tell against *b*" (Harman 1973: 148).<sup>27</sup> Any evidence about other ways of thinking in the African context, such as individualism, is not in line with commonly accepted theories—such as communitarianism—and is dismissed as being misleading. Perspectivism will avoid this dogmatism by allowing for various interpretations and reinterpretations in African philosophy, and hence encourage further inquiry.

Apart from eliminating dogmatism, this paper is justified by the need to address the nature of philosophical activity in a particular perspective. It draws attention to the role of a perspective in the creation or analysis of African philosophy. This is a door towards the development of various philosophies (a form of pluralism) as individuals reflect on a perspective. For instance, Kaphagawani presents a Chewa version of philosophy in his reflection on people's language use, which may be considered as partially true in that perspective. Similarly, Kayange presents a Chewa interpretation of philosophy, which is partially true in this perspective. This presents a shift from emphasizing cultural philosophies shared by everyone to specific perspectives that are interpretations influenced by both subjective and objective factors (pluralism). I am of the view that the existing language-analysis approaches do not adequately accommodate pluralism that is characteristic of the African thinkers in a traditional setting. Of course, there are some thinkers such as Oruka, Gyekye, and Hallen who have tried to capture this aspect by partly focusing on the sages in their language-based methodologies. Unfortunately, there is no systematic elaboration of perspectivism that informs their approaches.

Although language analysis is substantially attended to in African thought, what is often not clarified is the idea of interpretation. It is further justified by the interest to provide a unique way of understanding African philosophy inspired by perspectivism. Indeed, Hallen's and Sodipo's work may potentially lead to a perspectival conceptualization of African philosophy; unfortunately, however, they are not explicit about perspectivism. For instance, although they use insights from thinkers such as Austin and Ryle, the ideas of interpretations and partial truth are often dismissed. But the ignored idea of interpretation is crucial in the creation and development of African philosophy. This can help in appreciating individual thinkers and the various factors that contribute towards a particular philosophical position. In fact, this work wants to respect the nature of a human subject and reality. It provides various angles for judging reality.

A simple demonstration of the importance of interpretations in a perspective may be clarified by considering Hallen and Sodipo's ordinary language philosophy (which in this case is a series of interpretations). In fact, interpretation is firstly seen in the methodology where Hallen commenced with interviewing certain elders on the meaning of concepts such as "person." Their interpretation is considered in this context as an interpretation of the use of words in a particular cultural context. In his early application of the ordinary language approach, Hallen utilized students from different cultures such as Yoruba, Igbo, Edo, and Tiv, who interpreted their findings through a presentation of an essay on the subject matter. Hallen was then involved in clarifying the findings or commenting on the essays of his students or the data that was collected. This implies that there is also Hallen's frame of interpretation, which is influenced by various factors including subjective

aspects (his education, experience, beliefs, feelings, etc.). This aspect is captured in the following passage:

While I was putting together the ensuing text about Yoruba ethical and aesthetic discourse I found myself thinking of the expository format it was taking on as a presentation that deliberately frames and interprets this material so as to highlight dimensions to it that are pronouncedly, emphatically, empirical and rational in more or less conventionally 'Western' terms (Hallen 2000: 9).

This is further reflected in his observation that the main proponents of the ordinary-language approach, mainly Austin, interpreted some of their findings relative to this approach. For Hallen, Austin's performative acts are a further interpretation about the latter's findings.

But I would prefer to avoid that kind of deconstructive refuge. What is important in a study such as this is to be careful—to try not to misrepresent African meanings and attitudes. The issue with which I was therefore compelled to come to terms is whether the undeniable emphases this narrative places upon reasoning and empirical evidence represent ways in which the *oníségún* thought and spoke, or whether these elements have become disproportionately exaggerated due to selective quotation, leading remarks (during discussions with them), and my own cultural (Western) and professional (philosophical) persuasions. Perhaps I have unwittingly transformed a qualitatively different form of intellect into something I find familiar and therefore with which I can feel more comfortable (Hallen 2000: 11).

This citation confirms the need to rethink African philosophy through a deeper reflection of the concept of interpretations.

Lastly a unique element about the perspectival approach is that it intends to account for the validity of African philosophical theories. I am aware of the debates on what makes a particular philosophy valid and African; however, there is no explicit work that incorporates the notion of partial truth as an explanatory tool about the status of theories in this context. Perspectivism automatically invites a discussion about the validity or truthfulness of a particular philosophical claim. This will encourage a debate that will lead to the improvement of the status of theories in African philosophy.

#### 4 Perspectival Approach and the African Shift

The perspectival approach, also known as perspectivism, is a philosophical position that considers any theory or judgment on reality as a consequence of an interpretation that takes shape in a particular perspective. A perspective may be defined as a way of constructing an interpretation or a theory (Giere 2001: 53-70).<sup>28</sup> The basic argument in this construction is that, human beings get access to the world through the process of perception. Perception is a process that involves various factors such as human subject (senses, judgment), external factors (such as light, air, space, and time), and the object of experience with its properties. For example, when I see a blue car, I undergo visual perception that involves factors such as my eyes, light, distance, object, and experience. A

report on how things appear in a perspective may be viewed as an interpretation, which is an outcome of the process of perception. In this regard, theories, whether in philosophy, science, or any subject, are regarded as interpretations. It is this conception of theories or knowledge that is commonly known as perspectivism. This philosophical position may be traced to some of the writings of classical philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Secondly, I believe in the correspondence theory of truth, where statements stand in a relation of correspondence with the facts in the natural world. For example, “John is running” represents facts in the natural world. In the realism that is endorsed in this paper, an interpretation of the natural world may be given either through statements or a model. In this view, a statement or a model is a partial representation of reality. The aspect of partial representation is justified by the fact that theories and models about reality are created in a perspective. The various factors, including the subject, are busy modifying reality. It is therefore impossible to have a perfect picture of reality. I am aware of attempts by Wittgenstein (1922)<sup>29</sup> to establish an isomorphism between a statement and reality. This attempt was inadequate because it failed to take into consideration perception and the subjective elements in a particular perspective that affect human judgment of reality. Karl Popper also noted that scientific theories are just instruments, which do not give objective truth about reality.

Thirdly, following from the above conception that statements (about the natural world) and models are partial representations of reality, they are partially true (partial truths) in the perspectivism followed in this paper. This concept of partial truth has been sufficiently discussed and developed further by various thinkers such as, Niiniluoto (1987), da Costa and French (2003), and Kayange (2019).<sup>30</sup> In addition, Popper attempted to articulate the notion of partial truth in terms of verisimilitude or approximation to the truth. Of course, a technical development of this theory was proved to be a failure, and further developments were made by various philosophers such as Niiniluoto, Kuipers, and Volpe.<sup>31</sup> Because of my subscription to the possibility of some truth in a particular perspective, I view this perspectivism as a form of perspectival realism.

In the context of African thought, I would like to apply perspectivism by indicating that African philosophical theories are interpretations done in a particular perspective. In this regard, a theory such as African communitarian virtue ethics is an interpretation involving various factors. It may involve factors such as the perceiving subject, observation, people’s behavior, subjective judgment, and approved ways of doing things. In my understanding these interpretations in African philosophy are not completely true, but they may be seen as having some truth (partially true). For example, the interpretation of the African conception of a person, represented by “a person is a person through others,” may be viewed as partially true in a particular perspective. This does not exhaust the meaning of a person in the African context. In fact, it is based on the selection of elements that define “a person.” Below I will demonstrate the perspectival approach in an African context using language. This realist perspectival analytic approach is unique because it provides a multifaceted but comprehensive African philosophy of being a human person. This philosophy attempts to accommodate the aspects of subjectivity (individual interpretation of reality) and objectivity (correspondence to facts in a perspective). It further provides a flexible framework for interpreting African philosophy, as it allows for various historical perspectives to take shape.



## 5 Building Philosophical Perspectives Through the Study of Language

The perspectival approach may be demonstrated in African analytic philosophy through the study and analysis of ordinary language, mainly focusing on how people are using language. By studying language, it is possible to come up with different philosophical themes that characterize African individuals in a particular setting. Firstly, I will demonstrate this through the use of concepts in the ordinary language. Secondly, I will focus on figurative expressions, more specifically proverbs. My basic argument is that when individuals are using a particular language, they create and express a philosophy. It is the further understanding of these themes that may lead towards the development of African philosophy that respects the dynamicity of language (as a source of philosophy) and thought (pertaining to various changing interpretations).

### *Ubuntu and Umunthu in Ordinary Language Use*

The building of a philosophical perspective/s may be exemplified focusing on the use of the concept “*ubuntu*” or “*umunthu*” in ordinary language use. This may be done by looking at its meaning from different levels, hence creating various philosophical themes in the African context. In ordinary language, the first area that may show the use-meaning is the dictionary. The word *umunthu* is primarily a combination of a prefix *u-* and the word *munthu*. The word *munthu* may refer to (a) personhood; (b) personality; (c) humanity; (d) human character; and (e) human behavior. The addition of *u-* at the beginning makes it to refer to the state of being human. Generally, it is a state of being a good person in society. It is also translated as referring to integrity, which is possibly due to its linkage with the idea of being a good person or a person with integrity. In this ordinary language use, the word *umunthu* is mainly used in different contexts where an individual has done certain actions that are regarded as humane. For example, *umunthu* act refers to instances of action such as,

- (i) Individual *x* has helped a poor person *y*, and,
- (ii) Individual *x* has forgiven a person *y* who wronged him/her.

The word *umunthu* is also used in literal utterances, whose meaning is drawn from the relation involving the utterance, hearer, speaker, intention, and context. For example, in Chichewa language, by uttering, “*John ali ndi umunthu*” (John has humanity), the utterance’s meaning is primarily obtained by looking at the correspondence between this statement and facts. The assumption is that there is a subject “John” in the actual world. It further implies that this subject has a quality of *umunthu*. This shows that *umunthu* is a universal, which is instantiated in the individual known as John. This further requires an understanding of what the speaker intended to refer to by uttering these words. It further requires that the hearer grasps the intention of the speaker to refer to a particular meaning. The context is created by the use, the speaker, and the intended scope of reference. For instance, the context may be a situation where John has forgiven a person who wronged him. This use of *umunthu* in utterances may define different areas where this concept is used, hence leading towards the development of a particular philosophy of *umunthu*.

For example, the ordinary-language use of the concept “*umunthu*” in Malawi may lead to the creation of the central themes of African ethics. In fact, different thinkers such as Richard Tambulasi and Happy Kayuni<sup>32</sup> have suggested *umunthu* ethics as a form of virtue ethics that focuses on other-regarding virtues. The use of this word shown above is indicative of various virtues. For

example, the use in (i) above suggests the other-regarding virtues of solidarity, cohesion, unity, empathy, sympathy, and compassion. Similarly, in (ii) above, the use suggests different other-regarding virtues such as forgiveness, pity, and compassion. This use of *umunthu* has generally led to communitarian ethics that underlines the practice of other-regarding virtues towards the achievement of the greatest good, which is the community. This development may be viewed as a confirmation of the presence of communitarian philosophy in an African setting.<sup>33</sup>

Apart from the ethical perspective that may be developed from the above use of the word *umunthu*, another possible development of African metaphysics may be elaborated by building the African conception of a person. For instance, the use of *munthu* in a statement, “*x ndi munthu*,” in different contexts may suggest an African conception of a person. For instance, when it is used in a context where a child has helped an elder, it shows that being a person is defined by the act of supporting others (solidarity). If this is used in a situation where I have shown compassion, then it implies that being a person is being compassionate. If this is used in a situation where an individual is living well with others in the community, then being a person is living a good life with others (possibly without entering into any conflict). Briefly, the different ways that this concept is used may be indicative of what actions or virtues define a person in this context. Similarly, when people are using the opposite of *munthu* (using the negation *si-* to formulate *si-munthu*) in a statement such as “*y simunthu*” (*y* is not a person), the context may indicate certain actions that do not qualify an individual as such. For example, this may be used in a context where a person is stingy. This is suggestive of the fact that the vice of being stingy does not qualify an individual as a person. I conclude by indicating that both interpretations of *ubuntu* in either ethics or metaphysics may be regarded as partially true in a particular perspective.

#### *Use-Meaning of Figurative Expressions*

Another way of building philosophical perspectives in African thought is through a reflection on the use-meaning of figurative expressions. Similarly, here the assumption is that when African people are using these expressions in different contexts, they create various philosophical themes, which may act as a foundation for developing further perspectives in African philosophy. For instance, this may be demonstrated by considering the following figurative utterances that are used by Chichewa language speakers in Malawi, Zambia and Mozambique.

S/N	Figurative expression	Translation	Reference Perspective
1	<i>Kalikokha nkanyama ali awiri ndi anthu</i>	The one who is alone is an animal, and those that are two are human beings.	communitarianism; humanness; anti-individualism; social capital
2	<i>Wanthu ndi mchenga saundika</i>	Human beings are like sand out of which one cannot make a mountain	individualism; avoidance of generalization
3	<i>Andiyitana pakalowa njoka, pakalowa mbewa akumba okha</i>	They call me when a snake has entered a hole, but when it is a mouse, they dig it out themselves.	individualism; against community manipulation

4	<i>Kufa saferana</i>	You cannot die for another person.	individualism; independence
5	<i>Fodya wako ndiye ali pamphuno.</i>	Your snuff is what you have on your nose.	individualism; independence
6	<i>Mutu umodzi suusenza denga</i>	One head cannot carry a roof.	call for communitarianism; consensus; the value of solidarity; social capital
7	<i>Khasu liposa mako ndi tate.</i>	A hoe is more than your mother and father.	independence; individualism
8	<i>Ukavona amzako akukazinga maso nawenso kazinga ako.</i>	When you see friends frying their eyes, do the same.	solidarity; communitarian
9	<i>Nkuyu zodya ana zidapota akulu.</i>	Fig fruits eaten by kids gave elders a stomach ache.	communal responsibility; community
10	<i>Chaona mnzako chapita mawa chile pa ine</i>	What your friend has seen is gone, tomorrow it will be on you.	solidarity; empathy

The development of philosophical perspectives in African thought through the study of the meanings of figurative expressions such as proverbs has been a common trend among various scholars.<sup>34</sup> The general belief is that African philosophy is generally hidden in various proverbs that are often considered as wisdom sayings.<sup>35</sup> They represent the heritage of the African people, and these have been transmitted orally from one generation to the other. The two fundamental perspectives within African thought that may be developed from the use of the above figurative expressions are communitarian philosophy and individualist philosophy. Of course, a common bias among the scholars is that African thought is communitarian in nature, and individualism is western.<sup>36</sup> On the contrary, ordinary-language use in different situations provides a framework where both perspectives are fundamental in African thought and are encouraged depending on the context.

For example, when the speaker utters the figurative expression, “*Kalikokha nkanyama ali awiri ndi antbu*” (The one who is alone is an animal, and those that are two are human beings), he/she is promoting communitarian thinking and discouraging individualist thinking. This proverb has often been used by thinkers holding the radical communitarian perspective among Chichewa language speakers.<sup>37</sup> The proverb has a metaphorical component; it shows that, just as “being alone is to animals,” so “being in the community is to humans.” This leads to the building of the concept of being in African philosophy based on the community factor. Apart from this ontological component, it shows a sociological component, where the community of human subjects is defined by a form of communalism. Similarly, by uttering the proverbs such as “*Mutu umodzi suusenza denga*” (One head cannot carry a roof) and proverbs 8, 9, and 10 in the table above, the speaker is calling for the centrality of communitarian way of thinking and doing things in a particular context.

The beauty of building African philosophy through the perspectival approach from analysis of ordinary language is that, apart from the communitarian perspective demonstrated above, it helps to build African philosophy from the grassroots, taking into account the linguistic variety on the continent. It further provides a chance for bringing to the fore individualism. For example, when in

a particular context a Chichewa language speaker utters, “*Wanthu ndi mchenga saundika*” (Human beings are like sand out of which one cannot make a mountain), he/she is promoting the importance of individuality. While the community is important, individuals and their independence are fundamental in the African context.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, the proverb “*Andiyitana pakalowa njoka, pakalowa mbewa akumba okha*” (They call me when a snake has entered a hole, but when it is a mouse, they dig it out themselves) critiques communitarianism. It shows that the individual is only acknowledged when the community wants to benefit. In those circumstances where the individual wants to benefit, the community does not care. This expression is used in order to defend the individual. Proverbs 4 and 5 in the table above also support situations where individualism matters in African society. In fact, proverb 4 shows that when there is a life-threatening situation, each individual is on his or her own (no one can take his/her place). Similarly, proverb 5 indicates the importance of relying on individual property rather than depending on the community or others. I conclude by noting that individualism or communitarianism deduced from an analysis of language may be considered as partially true in a particular perspective. It follows that the expression that Africans are communitarian in nature is partly true in a particular perspective.

## 6 Conclusion

This paper has discussed the various philosophical methods that use language analysis in the African context, and has further developed a perspectival approach. The rethinking has been motivated by the desire to eliminate dogmatism, which has often obscured the possibility of a genuine African philosophy. In fact, it is unfortunate that most of the interpretations that build on language analysis have often been apologetic towards one dogmatic conceptualization of this thought as a version of communitarianism. Apart from the elimination of dogmatism, the paper has attempted to improve the various implicit perspectival approaches that are reflected in the writings of various thinkers such as Gyekye, Hallen, and Sodipo. A perspectival approach has been founded on doing philosophy through language analysis from a particular perspective. This has allowed for the development of various themes such as individualism and communitarianism that are deducible from the various reflections in the African context. The suggested approach does not embrace extreme relativism because an interpretation in this approach is true based on various factors, such as the utterance, speaker, hearer, intention, and context of application. Partial objective truth is therefore possible, although it is dependent on the named factors. All these elements show that the common problems with various classical versions of perspectivism, such as relativism, are not issues in this context. In fact, it was indicated earlier that the understanding of truth in this approach is that of partial truth. Partiality is determined by the factors indicated earlier.

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perspectivism in natural science as is exemplified by his work “Alternative to Giere’s Perspectival Realism” in *Heythrop Journal* (2019) and earlier in his PhD on the *Logical Concept of Verisimilitude* (2008). His interest is also in building African political philosophy through the analysis of ordinary experience, as is demonstrated in his forthcoming book *Capitalism and Freedom in African Political Philosophy* (Palgrave).

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- <sup>3</sup> See also similar developments in Alexis Kagame, *La Philosophie Bantou-Rwandaise de l’être* (Brussels: Academie Royale des Sciences Coloniales, 1956), *La Philosophie Bantu Compare* (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1976); Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy* (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1959).
- <sup>4</sup> Barry Hallen, *The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful: Discourse About Values in an Africa Culture* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000).
- <sup>5</sup> Some of the fundamental works include: Kwasi Wiredu, “How Not to Compare African Thought with Western Thought,” *Ch’Indaba*, no. 2 (1976): 4–8; Barry Hallen, “Robin Horton on Critical Philosophy and Traditional Thought,” *Second Order* 6, no. 1, (1977): 81–92; Levy Bruhl, *How Natives Think* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985 [1910]).
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- <sup>7</sup> Kwasi Wiredu, *A Companion to African Philosophy* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004).
- <sup>8</sup> Kwasi Wiredu, “The Concept of Truth in the Akan Language,” in *The African Philosophy Reader*, ed. P.H. Coetzee and A.P.J. Roux (New York: Routledge, 2000 [1998]), 280–86.
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- <sup>12</sup> John L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962).
- <sup>13</sup> Segun Gbadegesin, *African Philosophy: Traditional Yoruba Philosophy and Contemporary African Realities* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991).
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- <sup>15</sup> Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, 2nd edition (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).
- <sup>16</sup> Jason Van Niekerk, “The Analytic Appeal of African Philosophy,” *South African Journal of Philosophy* 34, no. 4, (2015): 516–25.
- <sup>17</sup> Didier Kaphagawani, “African Conceptions of Personhood and Intellectual Identities,” in Coetzee and Roux (1998: 240–44).

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