

THE CONCEPT OF TRUTH IN THE AKAN LANGUAGE

KWASI WIREDU

Ask any ordinary Akan who speaks English what the Akan word for truth is, and unless he/she has made a special study of the matter, the chances are that the answer will be *nokware*. In a certain sense this would be right. A little reflection, however, discloses a complication. The opposite of *nokware* is *nkontompo* which means lies. But the opposite of truth is falsity, not lies.

What seems to have happened is that the Akan has correlated the word truth with a primarily moral rather than cognitive concept of truth in the Akan language. There are three reasons why this occurred. Firstly, the main preoccupation with truth in traditional Akan society was moral. Secondly, the moral concept of truth presupposes the cognitive concept of truth, and thirdly, the English word truth itself is ambiguous. When high-minded publicists wax eloquent in praise of the eternal verities of Truth, Beauty, and Goodness, what they have in mind in this reference to truth is truthfulness rather than truth. And it is not only in particularly high-minded contexts that truth is used as a synonym for truthfulness; it is quite a common usage. So we have to say that our non-too-sophisticated Akan had some excuse for his/her translation.

It emerges, then, that *nokware* translates as truthfulness rather than truth in the cognitive sense. Naturally we must go on to show how the latter, i.e. the cognitive concept of truth, translates into Akan. But before this, let us note one or two things about *nokware*. This word is made up of two words: *ano*, meaning mouth and *koro*, meaning one. *Nokware*, then, means literally being of one mouth. Less literally, it means being of one voice. It is sometimes suggested that this oneness of voice refers to communal unanimity, so that the truth is that which is agreed to by the community. Obviously, the authors of this suggestion have failed to distinguish between *nokware* and the purely cognitive concept of truth. It is intelligible, though extremely implausible, to suggest that truth in the cognitive sense is constituted by communal agreement, but it is not intelligible at all to make the same suggestion about truthfulness. Truthfulness has to do with the relation between what one thinks and what one says. To be truthful is to let one's speech reflect one's thoughts. In this, what others think or say has no particular role to play. And this was not lost upon the traditional Akan. One may conceive of thinking as a kind of talking to oneself without embracing behaviourism; all that is needed is a little flight of metaphor. It then becomes possible to see truthfulness as saying unto others what one would say unto oneself. This is the oneness of voice that is etymologically involved in the word *nokware*.

The idea that truth (cognitive truth) consists in agreement among the members of a community is, in fact, far from the traditional Akan mind, for there is a sharp awareness of the disparity between the cognitive capabilities of the wise persons of the community (*anyansafo*) and the populace (*akwasrafo*). No elitist contempt for the populace is implied here. The Akan are communally oriented people, and consensus is one of their most prized values. Nevertheless, to make communal agreement the essence of truth is an epistemological aberration that cannot be imputed to the Akan.

Of course, truth has something to do with agreement, which is evident in the fact that to say of something that someone has said it is true implies agreeing with him/her. This is agreement between two points of view which does not necessarily involve a whole community. But community-wide or not, agreement cannot be the essence of truth in the primary sense, for when there is agreement in cognition it is about something being so; the agreement is that something is so, i.e. that it is the case. It is this notion of something being so that connects agreement with truth at all. It is, indeed, a notion that will loom large in our discussion of the concept of truth in Akan.

It is important to note that *nokware* (truthfulness) involves the concept of truth. To say that somebody is speaking truthfully is to say that the person genuinely believes what he/she is saying to be *true*. Moreover, it also implies that it is in fact true. Apparent counter-examples are easily accommodated. If, for example, a man speaking sincerely says that there is a cat on the mat when there is, in fact, no cat on the mat, there is a sense in which he speaks truthfully. Certainly, we would not say that he was telling lies. But it would be misleading to say simply that he spoke truthfully when he said that there was a cat on the mat. The most that can be said is that he was being truthful in conveying the impression that he believed that the cat was on the mat.

It is the connection between truthfulness and truth which makes the ambiguity of the English word truth so confusing when it comes to translating it into Akan. To say that an *asem* (statement) is *nokware* implies that it is true (cognitively). And so long as one is preoccupied with the affirmative, one might be tempted to think that this is all it means. As soon, however, as one considers the negative, i.e. the case in which we say that something someone has said is not *nokware*, it becomes clear that there is also an element of moral comment in the use of *nokware*. There are a couple of words in Akan which have the same significance as *nokware*, for example, *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 the phrase *eye asem pa*, literally "it is a good piece of discourse". *Ewom* literally means "it is in it".

We shall now consider the Akan rendition of truth, in its purely cognitive sense. And here we meet with the remarkable fact that there is no one word in Akan for truth. To say that something is true, the Akan say simply that it is so, and truth is rendered as what is so. No undue sophistication is required to understand that although the Akan do not have a single word for truth, they do have the concept of truth. This concept they express by the phrase *nea ete saa* (a proposition which is so). The word *nea* means "that which", *ete* which is a form of "to", which is the verb "to be" in Akan, means "is", and *saa* means "so". *Asem* is an all-purpose word which means, in the present context, statement or proposition.

Notice that in the case of the adjective "true", the Akan have a single word *saa* which provides a simple translation. (*Saa*, you will recall, means "so".) But in English one has both "is true" and "is so", whereas in Akan one has only *te saa* (is so). This obviously does not indicate any insufficiency in the Akan language, for if "is true" means the same as "is so", then one can get along as well with either one of them as with both, as far as the making of truth claims (i.e. "is-so" claims) is concerned.

Another linguistic contrast between Akan and English is that there is no word in Akan for the English word "fact". A fact in Akan is simply that which is so

(*nea ete saa*). Again no insufficiency is indicated; whatever can be said about the world in English using the word “fact” can be said in Akan using the notion of what is so.

These linguistic contrasts have some very interesting consequences for the theory of truth. Consider the correspondence theory of truth. This is supposed to assert something like this: “p is true” means “p corresponds to a fact”. What does this come to in Akan? Simply that “p *te saa*”, which in truth is nothing more than saying that “p *te saa*” means “p *te saa*”. In other words, the correspondence definition amounts to a tautology in Akan. In a certain sense, this might be taken as a verification of the correspondence theory, for it might be said that being a tautology is an especially splendid way of being true. Be that as it may, one thing that cannot be pretended in Akan is that the correspondence theory offers any enlightenment about the notion of being so.

This comes out even more clearly in connection with the following variant of the correspondence theory. Some proponents of the theory sometimes formulate it by saying that a proposition is true if, and only if, things are as they are said to be in the proposition. Now, as pointed out above, in Akan “p *te saa*” translates as “p is so”, and this obviously is an abbreviation of “what the proposition p says things are is as they are”. Accordingly, the theory reduces to tautology that things are as a proposition says they are if and only if things are as they are said to be in the proposition.

Aristotle’s famous dictum about truth and falsity which provided Tarski’s (1956) intuitive motivation in his semantic conception of truth is a close approximation to the formulation commented upon in the last paragraph. Aristotle says in his *Metaphysics*, “To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, or of what is not that it is not, is true.”

This is very compressed phrasing indeed. “What is”, in Aristotle’s context, is of course short for “what is so”. Translating into Akan then yields: “To say of what is so that it is not so, or of what is not so that it is so, is (to say what is) not so, while to say of what is so that it is so, or of what is not so that it is not so, is (to say what is) so.” One might perhaps derive some lesson about double negation from this piece of discourse, but certainly no insight into the notion of something being so.

It seems, then, that there are some apparently important issues that can be formulated in English but not in Akan. Such, for example, is the question, “How are true propositions related to facts?” Since this is not because of any insufficiency in the Akan language it might be tempting, at least to an Akan philosopher, to suggest that the issues in question are not really philosophical issues but narrowly linguistic ones due to the character of the vocabulary of English. Now, although it is, I think, correct to say that a problem like the one about the relation between truth and fact arises out of the nature of the vocabulary of English, it does not follow that it is not a genuine philosophical issue in English. The concepts of truth and fact are among the most fundamental concepts of human thought. Without the notion of something being a fact or of a proposition being true, thinking is inconceivable unless it be a mere succession of ideas, and even that can be doubted. It seems obvious then that the relation between the terms truth and fact is a philosophical issue; for, of course, one cannot give a fundamental clarification of either of these foundational concepts in English without relating them one to the other. Yet, since these terms need not both be present in all natural languages, as the case of Akan

shows, this task is not inescapable for the human mind. From which it follows that some philosophical problems are not universal. Of course, there must be others that are universal. It must, for example, be apparent from a remark just made that the clarification of the notion of something being so is a universal philosophical problem.

As the point that a problem may be genuinely philosophical and yet dependent on some contingent features of a particular natural language may possibly be controversial, I shall endeavour to reinforce it by analogy with a simple illustration still involving a linguistic contrast between English and Akan. In the English language there occur both the statement forms “p is equivalent to q” and “p if and only if q”. It seems obvious that any natural language should have the means of expressing the idea of equivalence; and, indeed, in Akan we have a way of doing so, albeit somewhat circuitously. We say of two equivalent statements that they have the same destination: *ne nyinaa kosi faako*, or, more literally, “they both reach the same place”. Since equivalence is distinct from identity of meaning, we might note parenthetically that we have a different way of expressing the latter. We say *nsem no mienu ye baako*, “the two pieces of discourse are one”. The point now is that in Akan we have no such statement form as might be rendered as “p if and only if q”. We can, of course, assert “if p then q” (*se p a ende q*) and “only if p then q” (*se p nkoara a na q*), and the conjunction of these two forms is equivalent to “p if and only if q”. But the conjunction is not the same form as the biconditional. If we now assert that the statement form “p if and only if q” is equivalent to “(if p then q) and (if q then p)” we are obviously asserting a logical truth in English, but no such logical truth exists in Akan. There is nothing necessary about the form “p if and only if q”, so that it might be thought obligatory that Akan should have a phrase literally corresponding to it. Whatever can be expressed by means of that form can be expressed by the Akan way of expressing equivalence as indicated above. It follows that the question whether the relation between “p if and only if q” and “{(if p then q) and (if q then p)}” is really one of equivalence is a genuine logical issue in English which is, nevertheless, not universal.

The analogy with the question of the relation between truth and fact is quite complete. Just as the relation between “p if and only if q” and “{(if p then q) and (if q then p)}” is a genuinely logical question which is dependent on a contingent feature of English vocabulary (and that of any similar language), so is the relation between truth and fact a genuine philosophical issue dependent on the English language. And just as any reasoner in English, whether he/she be a native speaker or not, will have to be conversant with the logic of the two statement forms, so anybody essaying a theory of truth in the medium of the English language will have to give some attention to the relation between truth and fact. It is probably the case that there are ontological pitfalls for native as well as non-native speakers of English in their thought about this relation.

There is a fairly obvious lesson that can be drawn from the foregoing observations. If some philosophical and logical problems – for logical problems are philosophical problems – are relative to particular natural languages, then they cannot be as fundamental as those that are universal to all natural languages. Take, for example, the concept of implication. Any natural language will have to be capable of expressing this concept. Furthermore, if we use the term “entailment” to refer to the relation between the premises and conclusion of a valid argument, then

we can raise the question whether and how entailment can be defined in terms of implication. Such a question would be universal to all natural languages in the sense that it can be posed for any intuitively workable logic that may be constructed in any natural language. In comparison with this, the question of the relation between “p if and only if q” and “[if p then q] and (if q then p)” is of very much less moment for the analysis of human reasoning.

Consider now the issue of the relation between fact and truth on the one hand, and the problem of clarifying the notion of something being so, on the other. Since, as I have suggested above, no cogent thinking is possible without the notion of something being so, but one can reason to one’s heart’s content in Akan without any recourse to any word or phrase separately standing for *fact* (that is, in addition to the term expressing the idea of being so), it follows that the second problem (that is, concerning being so), is more fundamental than the first (that is, as to the relation to truth of fact).

Suppose the problem of relating truth to fact is solved in the English language. Still, if there is a problem of truth in the Akan language at all – and there surely is – the position would be that the question has not even begun to be raised. In Akan the question would correspond to: “What is meant by saying that a statement is so, that is, what is meant by saying that things are as a statement says they are?” It is here obvious that certain versions of the correspondence theory of truth can at best only be part of the fundamental problem of truth, not part of its solution. The correspondence theory begins to shape up as an attempted solution at all when a certain account of the nature of facts is offered. Some accounts, whether correct or incorrect, will not satisfy this requirement. For example, defining “fact” simply as “true proposition” may be correct, but it would leave us exactly where we started in the matter of the more fundamental problem of truth. On the other hand, an ontological interpretation of “fact” may take us somewhere, though not necessarily in a desirable direction. Suppose, for example, that facts are construed as interconnected objects of a certain sort, then to say that a statement corresponds to fact would mean claiming a certain relation between the statement and the interconnected objects in question. From the point of view of the Akan language this could be interpreted as saying that being so is a relation between a statement and a certain configuration of objects.

In the following passage taken from his *Philosophical essays*, Russell seems to be advancing a theory of this sort:

When we judge that Charles I died on the scaffold, we have before us, (not one object but) several objects, namely, Charles I and dying and the scaffold. Similarly, when we judge that Charles I died in his bed, we have before us Charles I, dying and his bed. . . . Thus in this view judgement is a relation of the mind to several other terms: when these other terms have *inter se* a “corresponding” relation, the judgement is true; when not, it is false (1966:153).

(Note that since Charles I died many years ago, the objects which one is supposed to have before one’s mind when one makes a judgement now to that effect must be of a rather unearthly nature.) Russell gave a somewhat more refined formulation of the correspondence theory in later life (cf. Russell 1948:170). However, refined or not, it seems to me that when the correspondence theory is fleshed out in an ontological fashion it becomes open to fatal objections.

But it is not my intention to discuss the merits or demerits of the correspondence theory. I merely wish to make a metadoctrinal point which reflection on the Akan

language enables us to see, which is that a theory of truth is not of any real universal significance unless it offers some account of the notion of being so. This some correspondence theories fail to do.

Let me in this connection make one or two comments about Tarski's (1956) semantic conception of truth since it is closely related to the correspondence theory of truth and is, besides, of great independent interest. The apparent intuition which motivates Tarski's theory is the same as that which underlies the correspondence theory at the level at which, as I have tried to show, it has a philosophical interest only relative to the English language and kindred languages. (Recall, in this regard, our comment on Aristotle's dictum.) Still, Tarski's theory – or a part of it – has the merit of providing a logically precise formulation of the idea of a statement being so, that is, the idea of things being as a statement says they are. A Tarskian "T" sentence to the effect that "Snow is white" is true if and only if "Snow is white" may be taken as a logically precise instantiation of the idea that to say that a statement is true is to say that things are as they are said to be in the statement. In Akan, since "is true" is *te saa* which means "is so", that is, "is how things are", the Tarski sentence becomes " 'Snow is white' is as things are if and only if snow is white." In this form the sentence sounds trivially truistic, and is indeed so if it is intended even as a partial theory of truth.

But it can acquire a more substantial significance if it is made the starting point of an inquiry into the status of the second "snow is white" in the Tarski equivalence. This component gives a "concrete" instantiation of the idea of something being so. If, as I suggest, the puzzle about truth is a puzzle about the notion of something being so, then the use of Tarski's equivalence (in this connection) can only be to provide us in its second component with a vivid instantiation of our abstract notion of something being so. Such presentation can concentrate the mind and possibly lead to an illuminating elucidation. However, in itself, Tarski's "T" sentence, even as completed by the rest of the theory, can only provide a possible starting point in the solution of the problem of truth.

The other main theories of truth, namely the pragmatic and coherence theories, do not suffer any trivialisation on being translated into Akan, but they do take on a new look if they are measured against the task of elucidating the notion of something being so, which reflection on the concept of truth in the Akan language presses on our mind.