

**ON THE SYSTEM OF CONVERSATIONAL THINKING: AN
OVERVIEW**

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ajct.v1i1.1>

Submission: April 8, 2021 Acceptance: October 1, 2021

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Abstract

As more researchers are either discussing the approach of Conversational Thinking or deploying it in their work, one question persists; what is the nature of Conversational Thinking? In investigating this question, I will trace the roots of Conversational Thinking as a theory of meaning-making rather than a theory of meaning. I conceptualise meaning-making as an attempt, through the process of creative struggle, to create ‘presence’ from the ‘metaphysics of absence’ and to demonstrate their complementarity as equal binaries. I will show its affinity and divergence from theories of meaning such as analytic philosophy, deconstruction and hermeneutics. I will argue that the preceding three systems overestimate the role of language in the production of meaning and that this was due to the influence and limitations of two-valued logic. To overcome these limitations, I will provide a general overview of the system of Conversational Thinking that encapsulates its foundation, architecture and doctrine, and indicate the logical underpinnings of conversational method to signal [the] methodological shift it represents in philosophy, the humanities and interdisciplinary studies.

Keywords: Conversational Thinking, Philosophy, Method, Logic, Meaning-making.

Introduction

I have discussed different features that characterise Conversational Thinking in various papers that span the last seven years or so. There is, however, not a single paper where I brought together all the three dimensions of Conversational Thinking,¹ and attempted a systematic unbundling and presentation of its logic, method and theory. My thinking has always been to excite the reader to find the various pieces scattered in different essays and books by themselves. It was my supposition that in foraying those works, the reader would not only come to appreciate the crux of the method but also have a full grasp of its doctrine and logic. This is because I have always managed to discuss all three in most of my works. Where one was the focus, I had found space to squeeze in the other two, mainly to show their interconnection. As a result, I had resisted the urge to write a work in which the kernel of Conversational Thinking would be unfolded, feature after feature.

Another reason I had resisted the urge to write an essay of this nature was that I wanted the reader to fully appreciate my thought, how it has evolved and continues to evolve. I was afraid that a work that gives a panoramic view of Conversational Thinking might render others, which harbour very insightful ideas, obscure. That is, in the sense that the reader gets the skeletal gist in a paper but then loses sight of a lot of flesh contained in other essays.

Furthermore, I have always felt that a good philosophical system should appear like a rope that presents a fair challenge to the reader to attempt tying it into a knot, not as a knot that the reader would attempt to untie.² When viewed as the former, the reader is not

¹ Its foundation (logic and ontology), architecture (method) and doctrine (theory).

² I think of a philosophical system as one with various components, each of which makes sense in unique contexts. However, when these components, which might be mutually opposed are brought together into a relationship (of creative struggle), complementarity, rather than contradiction may come to define the interaction of the parts in the whole. This is an intellectual journey from the contextual to the complementary mode of interpretation, otherwise called arumaristics (See CHIMAKONAM 2019, 99; 117). It might be tempting to suppose that the writer should solely make the arumaristic journey while the reader's goal should be to untie the knot as a reverse intellectual journey from the complementary to the contextual modes, otherwise known as ohakaristics (CHIMAKONAM 2019, 117); but the point of the arumaristic experience would be lost to the reader. For example, that the complementation of seemingly opposed variables is necessitated by the drive for

only a consumer of knowledge; they relive the process and experience of writing the work. They assume not only the critical role but the creative one as well. They strive not just to read but to write, not just to decouple but to create; not just to understand, but to think too. I see my readers as co-authors. I evoke examples and use analogies that bring my creative experience close to them.³ They are my partners who cannot afford to be casual.⁴ They must enter the same creative struggle as I did during the writing experience. Part of the beauty of philosophy is that it is a subject that excites the mind. Inasmuch as simplicity is an important component in communication because it enhances the understanding,⁵ philosophy is better presented as that cunning little witch who requires a bit of a hassle and hide-and-seek to find. The preceding is why a good philosophy text is composed in a language in which the reader is adept in using the simplest of words but which meanings are underlying, if not excitingly elusive, when

self-sufficiency of each individual variables is not nearly as clear and precise as to say that the self-insufficiency of individual variables necessitate their complementation. For maximum clarity and precision, the reader has to tie the knot with me, an interpretation of my work from the contextual to the complementary modes.

³ When I evoke examples and analogies, it is not strictly to aid the understanding of the reader as such. My choice of examples and analogies is not determined by a need to explain better and enable the reader to understand my point, which is the conventional role of examples and analogies. My choice is determined by a need to animate the reader to that ‘aha moment’, to feel what I felt, to share in my mindview, to think like I did and to incarnate me in their reading process like it was a writing process – reading as thinking, writing and creating. Getting the reader into such a position can enable them to approach each piece of my work not as a ‘written text’ to be decoupled or untied, but as another evolution of my thought – our thought, in its *ongoingness*! A comprehensive work that includes all aspects quickly becomes a permanent past, a completed evolution.

⁴ A comprehensive presentation of my work in an essay form could encourage a sense of casualness. That is, if all the main concepts are summed up in one essay, the reader would be tempted to approach my concepts directly thus missing the several layers of ideas/meanings embedded in it. Having a sense that a concept floated in one text shares some linkages with other concepts expressed in other texts can expel any lurking sense of casualness.

⁵ A simple and direct presentation of a concept does not task the mind nearly hard enough. There is a temptation to assume that all had been laid bare when the ideas in a concept are simplified, but the more we dwell on a concept, the more it bears witness against itself. The one sure way to ensure that the mind dwells long enough on a concept is to pack its ideas in layers.

read with a sense of casualness. No matter how intelligent, no one should be able to read a philosophy text casually and appreciate all of its underlying meanings! Great philosophers of old were known for different styles of presenting ideas through a dark glass —each peculiar and unique but sharing the same guile, cunning, and seriousness.

It is surprising to me nowadays, and I think this was a problem brought along by analytic philosophers who wanted to divorce a certain cloak of mystique or inscrutability from philosophy, that small pockets of mystique and elusiveness are often derided as bad philosophising. From G.E Moore and Bertrand Russell to Ludwig Wittgenstein, language analysis was presented as the proper aim of philosophy. But I think something important was lost along the way despite the seeming or apparent sense in the proposal for language analysis. Presenting ideas as treasures wrapped in the fine linen of beautiful language does not necessarily evoke ambiguity, vagueness or some form of wanton superfluosness. There is a difference! An expression can be beautiful without being superfluous, artistic without being ambiguous or vague. With analytic philosophy, this aspect of philosophy seems to be on a decline, even demonised in some quarters. The features that have come to be highlighted by analytic philosophers are the rigidity of language and the boring grumpiness of logic. It is no overstatement that many nowadays regard most analytic philosophy conferences as boring and most of its texts as uninspiring. Thus, the explicitness sought after by analytic philosophers, in some ways, has compromised linguistic appeal and even understanding. Needless to talk about the joy of artistic flair, which has been martyred for the glory of language analysis. Conversational Thinking represents a huge innovation in the existing approaches to philosophy. Beyond that, it marks a methodological shift in philosophy.

In this work, I cave to the philosophical community's pressure to compose a piece where some of Conversational Thinking's basic skeletal features are strung together. This is merely to show the structure or an overview of the system and not ultimately to offer a comprehensive presentation as most demand. Readers would still have to be referred to other essays for specialised treatment of various concepts. In doing this, I will clarify the connection between language and conversation; and between conversation and other approaches that

prize language, such as analysis, deconstruction and hermeneutics. I will, however, not give in to the demand for too much analyticity.⁶ Some colleagues have criticised me for the penchant to ‘pack the bus’.⁷ My essays, they complain, are loaded with new concepts that the reader, while not able to pick holes in terms of consistency and coherency of discourse, battle mentally to chase the trail of concepts, most of which are framed in a native African language.⁸ Analytic philosophy would recommend one or two new concepts for one essay in deference to logic. But nothing actually makes a style that unloads, say, five new concepts in an essay inappropriate, much less illegal in deference to logic, insofar as the writer can sustain a consistent, coherent and clear deployment of those concepts in an essay. I see it as a question of capacity. Some could hardly sustain a consistent, coherent and clear discursive presentation of one new concept in an essay. In contrast, some could comfortably do so for five or more new concepts. For the latter type of writers, the burden then shifts to the reader, who would have to maintain a laser-sharp focus to chase their writer. A relapse into casualness could make the reader miss some ideas. When the preceding happens, misreading and

⁶ A student once asked me, “how would you describe yourself, Sir, an analytic or a continental philosopher?” I replied flatly, “none of the above, I am a conversationalist!”

⁷ I coin this expression to characterise my writing style in which several new concepts can be introduced in one essay. It is assumed that a philosophical essay should not be dense on new concepts so as to make the reader’s work light. I disagree with this assumption! Contrast ‘packing the bus’ with the idea of ‘packing the box’ which is used to describe a team in the game of soccer that lines up all of its players in its eighteen-yard box. This tactic is often employed by a team that plans to defend its advantage so as not to concede any goals.

⁸ Some colleagues, especially those from the west pressure me to frame most of my concepts in a widely used language, English, rather than in my native tongue. They claim that it will make my work more accessible to scholars in the west. But English is a colonial language which I use because it is not possible so far to do African philosophy in one African language and gain global readership. Yet, the conversational style requires its users to frame most of their concepts in native African languages. The core ingredient of philosophy, after all are concepts, and if we can frame the concepts of African philosophy in native African languages, we can be relieved that despite the violence of the colonial linguistic structure, our ideas can be carefully preserved in their originality. The fact that I strive to explain my concepts in English more than compensates the reader and reveals the ill-will that might be involved in the pressure to have me drop my native tongue entirely.

misunderstanding of the writer could set in, but this is no fault of the writer. Philosophy, after all, is not for wandering minds.

However, this category of writers owes a duty to the reader to tease and excite them with beautiful, free-flowing language that compels reading while imposing a task of logic on their mind at the same time. It is this combination that should make a philosophy text *unputdownable*. Added to the above is the ritual of unloading new concepts to spice up such a discourse. The preceding completes a dossier that has become my style!

In this essay, I discuss the importance of language in conversation. In doing so, I show the divergence between the conversational conception of language as a tool for meaning-making and other approaches that prize the centrality of language in discourse. I provide an overview of the system of Conversational Thinking, and in line with the above, I attempt to address the question that motivates this research, i.e. spelling out the technicalities of Conversational Thinking.

Meaning-making: The Way of Conversation

Being, knowledge and value are possible through conversation.⁹ In conversation, we find a path to philosophy that leads straight to meaning as both external and internal experiences. The ultimate goal of philosophy should be meaning-making,¹⁰ and conversation is a relational process for meaning-making or meaning-formation!¹¹ It is a theory of meaning-making. I conceptualise meaning-making as an

⁹ By conversation, I mean a technical term for the processes of creative struggle or meaning-making both within an agent and between agents such as nwa-nsa and nwa-nju. I will provide a discussion on this later.

¹⁰ Analytic philosophy presents ‘truth’ as the ultimate goal of philosophy. Continental philosophy tends to favour meaning, but Conversational Philosophy postulates meaning-making instead. First, all truthful propositions are meaningful, but not all meaningful propositions are truthful. So, meaning precedes truth. However, meaning, like truth is a quality or attribute which we apply to deserving propositions. We can identify which propositions are truthful or meaningful, but we cannot create the idea of truth or meaning. The goal of philosophy is the goal of philosophers. As epistemic or moral agents, their goal should be an activity in its ongoingness – meaning-making. Truth and meaning are necessary logical and epistemic ingredients that aid a philosopher’s pursuit of meaning-making.

¹¹ I employ the two concepts as synonyms in this work.

attempt through the process of creative struggle to create presence from the metaphysics of absence and to demonstrate their complementarity as equal binaries.

By presence, I mean meaningfulness; and by metaphysics of absence, I mean the source of meaningfulness. For example, ‘something’ does not come from ‘nothing’ as some school metaphysicians suggest. It comes from another type of something – an absent presence, that is why it is a metaphysics and not because it is a baseless supposition! All meanings, and all meaningful propositions, have their source in the metaphysics of absence.¹² But metaphysics of absence is only a characterisation of the entity itself. I have described that entity as ‘okwu’ – the ancestor of ‘word’, raw and formless, from which words as the basic units of language are formed (CHIMAKONAM 2018a, 2019).

Conversation makes use of language and other tools in the creative struggle for meaning-making, but it is not linguistic as such. Creative struggle is a relational process of meaning-formation. In this process, existence is conversation! Knowledge is conversation!! Value is conversation!!! Everything that is meaningful,¹³ it can be argued, proceeds from the metaphysics of absence through a conversation. Philosophers are those who put things through conversation to make meaning. For example, in social change, philosophers fight for meaning and not necessarily the margins, let alone the centre. They are not those who are inside or outside the border. They are simply *unbordered*. Philosophy takes a mind beyond the constraints of borders. Thus, philosophers fight the borders not only because it keeps the margins out but also because it imprisons

¹² My coinage of metaphysics of absence is not to be mistaken as the opposite of Jacques Derrida’s “metaphysics of presence” (1976). And my use of presence is definitely not the same as his use of “metaphysics of presence”. By metaphysics of presence, Derrida refers to the baseless privileging of what is out there or readily available as meaningful. A type of worldview that promotes immediate access to meaning in a specific existent and the residualisation of its opposite binary. For example, male connotes the presence of phallus, which automatically residualises female in whom *koleós* denotes the absence of phallus.

¹³ The sense of meaning implied here is more existential than linguistic. Meaningfulness as a presence is created from meaninglessness as a metaphysics of absence. Metaphysics of absence refers to the ‘absent presence’ of meaning: being, knowledge and value. See my engagement with deconstruction in section 4.c.

the insider. The programme of meaning-making is hardly successful where there are borders. Borders strangle meaning. In the geography of *knowledgeless*,¹⁴ everyone is both an insider and outsider. There is an insider in every outsider and vice versa, which explains how creative struggle can be both internal and external. The liberating goal of philosophy is to set peoples and cultures free from the chains of border.

But since borders are often erected and maintained by the centre, philosophers become intellectual rebels. In this way, they rebel against constraining paradigms such as modernity, colonialism, structuralism, neo-colonialism, imperialism and coloniality. Conversation is a tool for rescuing meaning from such paradigms. It can be viewed as an advancement in the programmes of the postmodernists, postcolonialists, post-structuralists, deconstructionists and ultimately decolonialists. It can also be a tool for the everyday folk whose agency is constantly under threat from the borders erected by social forces.¹⁵ The postmodernists, in their critique took off from modernity; postcolonialists from colonialism; post-structuralists from structuralism; deconstructionists from constructionism; and decolonialists from coloniality. Conversationalists take off from coloniality but branch off to other paradigms along the way.

In coloniality, language serves two purposes: communication and understanding, in which the insider enjoys the exclusive right to communicate and the outsider is assigned the task of understanding. The ego-politics of knowledge which is driven by the unequal binaries set up on the classical two-valued logic that undergirds the European modernity, positions the European male as *the* meaning-maker. The feminist agitations in Europe, beginning with the intellectual rebellion gazetted in publications by Mary Wollstonecraft (1792) and John Stuart Mill (1869) represented an internal fracture to the plate of European modernity. Added to the preceding are the postmodern, poststructuralist and deconstructionist thinking, which variously seek to reconstruct modernity from within. But these efforts are said to be

¹⁴ This is a typical metaphysics of absence. Knowledge is created from knowledgeless. Knowledgeless is not ignorance; it is the absent presence of knowledge.

¹⁵ As language is a social tool, I use the term 'social' to represent all forms of forces that exist in the social space including economic, political and educational.

insufficient precisely because they were inspired from within the border where the bite is not as painful as from the outside. Enrique Dussel (2002) has argued that modernity is no longer a European phenomenon but a global phenomenon sucking every part of the world in only to unleash the worst form of marginalisation to the peripheries. Efforts from within the border, he argues, while being commendable, are simply not just enough. There is an urgent need for an outsider-led campaign against modernity.

Nowadays, there is an increasing interest to extend critical theory in the same fashion to critical border thinking. Decolonialists like Walter Dignolo (2007) and Ramon Grosfoguel (2009) talk about critical border thinking as an outsider-led intellectual onslaught against colonial difference preceded by both the theo-politics and the subsequent ego-politics of knowledge. The colonial difference is the wall of difference that prevents the insider from catching a glimpse of the true state of reason outside the walls. So, there is no recognition that any form of wisdom exists outside the border. The wall of difference is thus a frontier, but not the type of frontier that unfolds the new and the great. It is a frontier that signifies the end of wisdom and the beginning of folly. Beyond the wall of difference lies nothingness as a sign of perennial idiocy, perpetual emptiness, persisting silence and perduring foolishness. Critical border thinking seeks to dismantle this false narrative as it bids to negotiate the chasm between theo-politics and ego-politics of knowledge and the geo-politics and body-politics of knowledge. On the one hand, while the theo-politics of knowledge enthroned God as the superior pair in an unequal binary of the medieval age, the ego-politics replaces that with the European male in western modernity. Meaning-making, if construed from the prism of critical theorists would thus be presented as an exclusive preserve of the superior part of the pair insofar as they are silent on body-politics involving race, sex, intersectionality and various forms of gender discourses. On the other hand, decolonialists bid to displace the ego-politics of knowledge with geo-politics and body-politics of knowledge. The latter two are programmes that endorse territorialisation and embodiment of knowledge. They claim that in this way, coloniality of power, knowledge and being could be dismantled. I look at this as democratisation of border. It does not bring border to an end. Every border that emerges from the strangle-

hold of the norm is a potential norm, which can in various ways seek the re-normalisation of other borders. It does appear that the anti-border programmes, from postmodernism to decoloniality are inadequate.¹⁶

Thus, the purposes of language in coloniality are lopsided and constraining because they create unequal binary oppositions of speech and comprehension, speaker and listener, writer and reader.¹⁷ We must, therefore, think of language more broadly as serving three purposes: communication, understanding and conversation,¹⁸ which are also not aligned to bordering. I employ the concept of bordering to characterise the modernist practice of erecting an imaginary wall of difference in which the inside is construed as the zone of existence, and the outside is construed as nothingness.

Communication is not an act performed by an actor (speaker, writer, gesticulator), as it would be under coloniality in which understanding is elicited or demanded in return. In Conversational Thinking, we conceive it as an external relationship involving three signs¹⁹: signifier, significists and signified. The signifier or word, is employed by the significists²⁰ (nwa-nsa and nwa-nju), to convey an idea or the signified. So, this external relationship occurs between significists in their use of the signifier and their creation of the signified. Communication, in this conception, is not composed by these three signs; it is the interaction or an external relationship of creative struggle between significists. We must flee from the conception that communication is transmitting information through

¹⁶ I have explained in a recent lecture that the logic undergirding decoloniality is, unfortunately the same with the logic that grounds coloniality and all the principal tropes of modernity. It is the classical two-valued logic that upholds unequal binaries (CHIMAKONAM 2021, March 22).

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida (1976) in his deconstruction programme criticizes western philosophy as logocentric and of promoting an underlying metaphysics of presence that creates unequal binaries

¹⁸ These three concepts are employed here in technical and unique senses.

¹⁹ Two contemporaries Gottlob Frege (1892) and Ferdinand de Saussure (1959) employed the concept 'sign' in their theories of meaning. De Saussure, however breaks it up into signifier (word) and signified (idea), while Frege talks about sense, thought and reference.

²⁰ I coin this concept to designate the epistemic agents nwa-nsa (proponent) and nwa-nju (opponent). Both agential capacities are roles that each can fill in different contexts.

some media as the hermeneuticists suggest because it represents one of the linguistic agenda of coloniality.

Understanding is also not an act performed by the actor: listener, reader, significist (nwa-nju), as it would be under coloniality following an act of communication. Conversationalists conceive it as an internal relationship of creative struggle that occurs inside a significist involving the signified, the receptor-senses and the mind/brain. Understanding is not composed of these three; it is the interaction of the three— an internal relationship that occurs inside the significist. It is not the word that is understood, but the speaker, writer or gesticulator made possible through creative struggle that takes the significist's worldview and mindview into account. The latter point has been made somewhat differently by the hermeneuticists. I will revisit it in a later section.

On its part, conversation is not a simple exchange between interlocutors; it must be seen as a context for the interaction of significists (nwa-nsa and nwa-nju). It is a context for meaning-making. In such a context, there is creative struggle. Context, here, is a place-space-holder for ideas. It can be divided into two types: platial (physical) and spatial (mental). During a conversation between significists, communication occurs in a place, but understanding occurs in space. There are always contexts, and so many contexts within contexts. *Context, therefore, upsets fact* since what is true or meaningful in one context can be false or meaningless in another. There are no meaningful words and statements as the logical positivists and analytic philosophers claim. Meaning is not embedded in words or in immediate experiences to which they are said to refer. Meaning is a product of a process known as creative struggle. It is a relationship – a conversation! Instead of theories of meaning, we should be talking about theories of meaning-making.

Meaning-making as a conversational practice that proceeds through communication and understanding within specific contexts does not place premium on words. Words (signifier) cannot be communicated; only ideas can. But we communicate ideas (signified) through words. The significist (nwa-nsa) does not communicate words neither does the significist (nwa-nju) receive words. No two linguistic beings associate precisely the same ideas to the same words. But in using a language to which they have a similar understanding of

its rules, which also grovels at the laws of the same logic they share similar understanding; they choose words that approximate the ideas each of them has. When a speaker or writer or actor does this fairly well, and the listener or reader or audience is able to associate those ideas with a set of words that approximates the former's 'state of mind', we say that they are in a conversation. When two significists (nwa-nsa and nwa-nju) fail at this task of conversation, meaning is jeopardised. We say that there is a tension of incommensurables. That is, we say that the words which they have chosen or the ideas that each associate with the other's words could not approximate their states of mind. This idea of 'state of mind' is central to meaning-formation. The latter occurs at two points with nwa-nsa and nwa-nju. First, it occurs when nwa-nsa chooses a set of words they believe can 'convey' (conveyance of idea) the ideas that capture the meaning in their states of mind. Second, it also occurs when nwa-nju selects a set of words they believe can be 'associated' (association of idea) to the ideas which nwa-nsa has conveyed. There is no expectation that the words chosen by nwa-nsa will precisely match the meanings they had created, and the same can also be said of nwa-nju whose selected words are not expected to match the meanings intended precisely.

Thus, meaning is conveyed by nwa-nsa but received as ideas by nwa-nju, who must undergo a process of meaning-formation by first associating the received ideas with a set of words, interpreting the ideas in order to make their own meanings. What they are looking for is 'Approximate Linguistic Transference of Idea' (ALTI). ALTI is the range of meaning(s) that can possibly be made out of a conveyed and received set of ideas. ALTI can be measured in degrees (maximum to minimum) because it is an approximation.²¹ I will explain the idea of degrees of meaning embedded in ALTI much later. Suffice it here to say that ALTI is an imaginary bar that comes short of precision but does not go below a minimum that marks the point where meaning moves from being varied to being distorted. ALTI symbolises degrees of alternatives that indicates that all meanings are alternatives to actual meanings which cannot be communicated. If it is possible that they can be communicated, it is not possible that they can be received. This must be the problem that puzzled the ancient Greek sceptic Gorgias who declared that nothing exists; but if something

²¹ See fig 4 in section 4.c for a diagrammatic representation of this process.

actually exists, there is nothing that can be known about it; and even if we can know something about it, such knowledge cannot be communicated to others (JOHNSTONE 2006, 272). While Gorgias deposition is on the extreme side of things, as ideas can at least be conveyed in the conversational scheme, it shows the difficulty involved in meaning-making. The maximum point of ALTI also represents the benoke point beyond which meaning-making is impossible. As ‘distortions in meanings’ set in below the minimum point (tension of incommensurables), ‘crisis in meanings’ set in above the maximum point (benoke point). The benoke point and tension of incommensurables, thus, represent the limit and failure of meaning-making, respectively. When the limit of meaning-making is exceeded, “conversationund” results (CHIMAKONAM 2015a, 470). This occurs when significists believe under a false assumption that they have found words to precisely convey the meanings in their states of mind or that they have words to precisely associate with the ideas received; and that all discrepancy of meaning has been extinguished. The false belief is that meaning may now be conveyed precisely, and received as meaning without any need for nwa-nju to go through the process of meaning-formation. Also, when there is a failure, we say that the conversation has collapsed.

But ideas must be distinguished from meanings. Words do not convey meanings as Gottlob Frege (1892), suggests in his theory of meaning.²² Sense, reference and thought are the key concepts Frege relied on to tease out his theory of meaning. A word, sign or proper name has a sense and what it refers to is its reference or meaning. For sentences, sense is the thought expressed by a sentence, while its reference is its truth-value.

So, words have senses and what they point at is their references or meanings. Frege begins from the correspondence theory of truth, in which ideas are said to correspond to reality or facts. Words and sentences have ideas or thoughts or senses that point at something else, their references. Frege’s articulations rival what was common in his day; namely, idealism. Idealism is the theory that everything is

²² WVO Quine (1951) has thankfully identified this unjustified supposition as the second of the two dogmas of empiricism. It is a kind of unfounded logical reductionism in the philosophy of language that meaningful statements depend logically on words that refer to facts or that our ideas reduce to units of experiences.

mind-dependent. George Berkeley (1710) epitomises this view. His famous Latin statement “esse est percipi” which translates to “to be is to be perceived”, became canonical for idealists. Frege rejects this view and argues to the contrary that ideas actually refer to external objects.²³

Immanuel Kant in both his *Critique of Pure Reason* and *Critique of Judgement* argued that the noumena (reality) cannot be known by us. What we can know are the phenomena (appearances). The categories of the mind enable us to structure the world as it appears to us. These categories are as follows: quantity (unity, plurality, totality), quality (reality, negation, limitation), relation (substance and accident; cause and effect; reciprocity), modality (possibility/impossibility; existence/non-existence; necessity/contingency) (KANT 1787, 1790). This was inspired by Aristotle’s list of ten predicates or categories, substance, quantity, quality, relation, action, affection, place, time, position, and state (BARNES 1984). Aristotle has argued that those predicates can be asserted of just about anything. Kant elaborated on the idea and distinguished between what appears and what is real. Since we can only know the world as it appears to us, and the categories of the mind believed to be completely useless in studying the noumena, it implies that our knowledge of the world is informed by our perception of it. So, reality may not depend on the mind as idealist claim, but our perception of it does.

To understand the meaning of a word or sign or proper name, Frege follows Kant to think in analytic or a priori and synthetic forms. The proposition $x = x$ is analytic but $x = y$ is synthetic. We can verify the truth of the former without recourse to experience, but we must rely on experience to verify the truth of the latter.²⁴ The truly interesting thing, however, is the nature of synthetic a priori propositions such as ‘ $3 + 4$ ’ or ‘a thing cannot be up and down at the same time’. These are propositions in which a) its predicate is not logically or analytically contained in its subject, thus requiring experience to verify its truth (synthetic), and b) the one in which its

²³ Quine rejects this supposition as an unjustified dogma of empiricism. See footnote 15.

²⁴ This is the first dogma that Quine identified. The analytic/synthetic distinction and their unjustified definitions.

predicate is logically or analytically contained in its subject thus its truth can be verified independent of experience (analytic or a priori). The problem that synthetic a priori propositions pose in logic is how to determine the identity of references. Addressing this has implications for the concept of meaning.

Frege employs the ideas of sign, sense and reference to address the puzzle. His famous example was that Hesperus (morning star) and Phosphorus (evening star) are identical. The reference is the same, Venus. Hesperus and Phosphorus are identical signs that have different senses, namely, morning and evening stars, but refer to the same object. So, while Hesperus is Hesperus is an a priori or analytic proposition, Hesperus is Phosphorus is both analytic and synthetic. If you knew that they refer to the same object, it is analytic. If you did not know, you would have to appeal to experience to verify it, in which case it would be synthetic. Thus, even though it fulfils the requirement for a synthetic proposition, it is actually a synthetic a priori proposition. What makes synthetic propositions interesting is that although Hesperus is Hesperus is analytic and can be known a priori, it does not give us new information. But Hesperus is Phosphorus, which is synthetic and/or synthetic a priori, gives us new and more information.

When sentences are involved, Frege says that the sense of a sentence is the thought it expresses, while its reference is its truth-value. Here, Frege finds a footing in propositional logic. A word has a sense and refers to something called reference or its meaning. A sentence expresses a thought that can be evaluated as either true or false in two-valued logic. To understand the world and the objects in it, language becomes important. Language can be broken down into syntactic units such as words, parts of speech, simple and compound sentences. It can also be broken down into semantic units such as sense, thought, reference or meaning and truth-value. The careful use of these along the lines of logical principles and laws, Frege seems to suggest, enables us to understand the world with clarity.

The foregoing was the birth of analytic philosophy which prizes language analysis as crucial to the production of philosophical goods such as meaning and truth. Frege, who is regarded as the founding father of analytic philosophy argues in one of his very important essays that:

The word " true " indicates the aim of logic as does " beautiful " that of aesthetics or "good" that of ethics. All sciences have truth as their goal; but logic is also concerned with it in a quite different way from this. It has much the same relation to truth as physics has to weight or heat. To discover truths is the task of all sciences; it falls to logic to discern the laws of truth. (1956, 289)

By this masterstroke, Frege had set a new standard for philosophy in the West. His ideas were not popularly received in his homeland until some philosophers in Britain took interest beginning with Bertrand Russell and GE Moore. In just a few years, analytic philosophy was born and blossomed in the Anglo-American world. By the mid-twentieth century, the triumph of capitalism and democracy had carried analytic style of philosophising to many parts of the world, including Africa. The German-French style of philosophy, now called continental philosophy was seriously challenged, even discriminated against as less of philosophy.

A New Logical Path

All ideas have their source in the metaphysics of absence. The task of various epistemologies is first and foremost to create presence as meaning. Being, knowledge, value are presences defined and structured by their absences, beingless, knowledgeless, and valueless. Absence is not vacuum; it is an absent presence, a 'transcendental-is' or okwu as explained earlier. Meaning-making then is a process of creative struggle to carve out meaningfulness out of meaninglessness. The sciences and the arts deal with ideas, but where do they come from? Surely it could not have been from nothing, for ideas are things. And it could not have been from concrete things, for ideas are intangible. The okwu or 'transcendental-is' or the metaphysics of absence, therefore, is what it makes sense to call the realm of things that are not concrete. Before the creation of ideas, every thought existed as okwu. The striving to create presence is, in a way, the attempt to overturn the dominance of absence. Absence was always naturally privileged. The deconstructionists were mistaken in thinking that presence was privileged and that absence constituted a foil for

residualising otherness. Presence is the ‘off spring’ of the metaphysics of absence. Koleós precedes phallus, but they are complementary binaries, for the latter naturally points towards the former, as the former unclasps towards the latter. Philosophers generally and analytic philosophers specifically who privilege one pair of a binary, and the hermeneuticists who privilege sound over silence, are guilty of painting the world as unequal binaries.

Conversational philosophy is a theory that endorses the binary complementarity of metaphysics of absence and presence. It is not a theory of meaning, but a theory of meaning-making or meaning-formation. The goal of conversational philosophy is meaning-making. As much as we laud analytic philosophy, deconstruction, hermeneutics and recognise conversational philosophy’s debt to those approaches, there is a new logical path that conversational philosophy represents. We will survey a few of those parting points momentarily.

- a. Sign and sense:* We agree with Frege that a sign has a sense, but we think of sense as something that is not fixed. A sign can have multiple senses depending on the context. For example, consider the Igbo proverb: ‘*uzụ na-amaghị akpụ egbe, nere egbe anya n’ọdụ*’ (the blacksmith who is ignorant of how to fashion rifle butts should take a look at a kite’s tail). Here, *egbe* is a sign with two different senses in the proposition. In the first occurrence, it has the sense of a ‘rifle’, while in the second, it has the sense of a ‘kite’. So, we have two identical signs, with two different senses and references. The identity puzzle that Frege solves with substitutivity principle collapses.

Let us use *e* to symbolise the first occurrence of *egbe*, and let us use *e* to symbolise the occurrence of the second *egbe*.

For the first occurrence, we can produce the identity:

1. $e = e$ which holds a priori and is thus analytic.

For the second occurrence, we can also produce the identity:

2. $e = e$ which again holds a priori, and is thus analytic.

But can we produce the bi-conditional of 1 and 2 in a two-valued logic system? On paper, it looks straightforward, but the logical fallacies of *quarternio terminorum* and equivocation would be committed if we make such a move. This is because there are different senses of the same sign *e* involved. In 1, it is the sense of a rifle and in 2 it is the sense of a kite. So, the expressions 3, 4 and 5 below where we combine 1 and 2 to form three different compound propositions which look valid are actually nonsensical.²⁵

- | | |
|--|---|
| 3 $(e = e) \equiv (e = e)$ | egbe (rifle) is not equivalent to egbe (kite) |
| 4 $(e \supset e) \equiv (e \supset e)$ | egbe (rifle) is not equivalent to egbe (kite) |
| 5 $(e \equiv e) \supset (e \equiv e)$ | egbe (rifle) does not imply egbe (kite) |

The three propositions above are nonsensical if we take into account what the variables symbolise. So, what do we do with such a proposition that expresses more than one thought? How do we evaluate it? It becomes clear that the classical two-valued logic is limited, and so is the analytic power of analysis that rests on it. Conversational philosophy is designed to handle such propositions, which we describe as *ohakaristic* propositions.²⁶ The logic of Ezumezu, with its three supplementary laws of thought that is trivalent is formulated to drive it. In determining the truth-value of *ohakaristic* propositions, binary complementarity and not binary contradiction is established.

- b. *Thought and context:*** We also agree with Frege that propositions express thought, except that such thoughts are not fixed. A proposition may express different thoughts, which may require the complement of the two seemingly opposing thoughts to be inferred. For example, in one context, call it context A, the proposition ‘*uzu na-amaghi akpu egbe, nere egbe anya n’odu*’ expresses the thought that the tail of a kite can serve as a model to a blacksmith who wishes to venture

²⁵ This is one way of demonstrating that Quine’s claims about the two dogmas are actually sensible.

²⁶ See the section below on ‘Ezumezu: The Foundational Dimension’ for the statement of the laws and the definition of the two types of propositions in Ezumezu logic.

into fashioning rifle butts. In another context, call it context B, the same proposition expresses the thought that a perennial failure can learn from the successes of others. Unlike in Frege's case on the puzzle of the identity of references, here we have a different puzzle with a sign having two senses or thoughts, call it the puzzle of 'dual senses' for proper names or 'dual thoughts' for propositions. Since the thought expressed by a sentence determine its truth-value, the puzzle of 'dual thoughts' definitely would affect the truth-value status of propositions.²⁷ How can the truth-value of a proposition like the one above with dual thoughts be determined? This puzzle exposes the limitation of two-valued logic upon which much of western philosophy rests. In conversational philosophy that is driven by Ezumezu logic, we address the puzzle of 'dual thoughts' using two principles; complementary and Contextual principles. For the complementarism principle, as we call it, 'a statement can be both necessary and impossible in a complementary mode of thought', we bring in the idea of complementary mode to resolve the puzzle. The above is an example of an ohakaristic proposition that affirms and denies both thoughts simultaneously, so the complement of the two can be inferred. The three supplementary laws that explain this process are stated in the next section.

- c. ***Truth-values and propositions:*** In conversational philosophy that is grounded in a truth-glut, three-valued logic, we can also address the puzzle of 'dual thoughts' using the contextual principle. The principle of 'Context-dependence of Values' (CdV), as we call it, is evoked to demonstrate how context can play a fundamental role in the evaluation of propositions. In a recent work, I formulated the principle as saying that "...credible value judgements are the ones based on contexts..." and went further to argue that it "...is formulated to justify the claim of the 'logical thesis' that 'what we call truth [or even meaning] may not always be dependent on the collection of facts which a proposition asserts but rather, on the context in which that proposition is asserted'"

²⁷ In particular, this puzzle demonstrates that the theory of logical positivism that sees all meaningful statements as testable in sensory experience is flawed.

(CHIMAKONAM 2019, 119). This is not the same as one of Frege's three fundamental principles, that is, the second principle of 'context of a proposition', stated thus: "never to ask for the meaning of a word in isolation, but only in the context of a proposition" (1960, xxii).

In Frege's principle, propositions are the contexts, whereas in mine, propositions are in contexts. The former stipulates the rigidity of propositions and their primacy in value analysis. These are underplayed by the latter in which propositions are fluid and assume a secondary role in value-determination. Also, for Frege, the meaning of words (both their senses and references) are determined in the context of a proposition where they appear. In mine, meanings of words do not depend on the context of a proposition but on the context where such propositions are asserted. This is the basis for my argument that "context upsets fact" (CHIMAKONAM 2019, 122). Again, for Frege, the thought expressed in a proposition determine its truth-value. For me, truth-values or meanings of propositions do not depend on the thoughts expressed in them but on the context in which those propositions are asserted.²⁸

The above is a whole lot to digest for a non-logician, and my favourite analogy that helps the reader understand the logical intricacies involved is below:

'...you need to drink water to stay alive'. When considered from the Boolean algebraic equation, [in light of two-valued logic] this [synthetic] proposition will have the value 1. But this may be a little hasty if we take into consideration, as I think we should, such a serious concern as the context of that proposition. For one who is in the middle of the Sahara desert on a hot afternoon, the value of the proposition will be 1; but for one who is drowning in the River Niger, even if on a hot afternoon, that proposition cannot be true, its Boolean value will be 0. A drowning man may not need to drink water to stay alive. What he needs to stay alive is air, water will simply kill him. (CHIMAKONAM 2019, 122)

²⁸ This demonstrates that the claim about the contingency of synthetic propositions is vacuous.

Thus, in theorising context, I have in mind the world as it appears to us (worldview) and how we restructure what appears to us (mindview). The propositions that can be considered in light of CdV are synthetic propositions of the arumaristic kind, which truth values are contingent and not necessary. Analytic propositions are not subject to the principle of CdV. One more thing which the CdV does is to enable us to address the limitation in two-valued logic. With the propositions ‘you need to drink water to stay alive’, and ‘*uzu namaghị akpu egbe, nere egbe anya n’odu*’, we are presented with two curious scenarios. In the first, we have an arumaristic proposition that expresses one thought but which has different values in two different contexts. In the second, we have an ohakaristic proposition that expresses two different thoughts that can both be asserted simultaneously in a complementary mode. We have discussed the latter type of proposition. What we will address here would be the former type. In arumaristic propositions, the value depends on the context where one has chosen to assert the proposition. So, ‘...you need to drink water to stay alive’, would be true if asserted in the context of the Sahara desert and false if asserted in the context of River Niger mentioned above. The laws of thought that axiomatise this type of inference are stated and explained in the next section.

The above are different species of synthetic propositions that cannot be analysed using two-valued logic. They give us much more information than a regular synthetic proposition that expresses one thought. Analytically, they demonstrate that language can further be analysed in ways that challenge the orthodoxy of atomic facts and atomic propositions and of analyticity itself. Besides atomic propositions, conversational philosophy studies what can be called ohakaristic propositions, such as one of the two examples I have been using. Ohakaristic propositions are propositions that express more than one thought but which can simultaneously be inferred. It seems futile to evaluate such propositions similar to quantum propositions using classical two-valued logic, which explains why some physicists, mathematicians and philosophers of science have attempted various programmes in quantum logic since Garrett Birkhoff and John von Neumann (1936, 823-843).

Unfortunately, there are scholars who believe that the classical two-valued logic provides an adequate basis for the theory of quanta (MAUDLIN 2005, 185). As a result, they question the necessity of the quantum logic project. Tim Maudlin, for one, is a harsh critic in this regard. In his words, “the horse of quantum logic has been so thrashed, whipped and pummeled, and is so thoroughly deceased that I won’t bother to promise not to beat it further. The question is not whether the horse will rise again, it is: how in the world did this horse get here in the first place?”²⁹ The tale of quantum logic is not the tale of a promising idea gone bad, it is rather the tale of the unrelenting pursuit of a bad idea” (MAUDLIN 2005, 184). While I agree with Maudlin that the pursuit has yet to yield the goods as he stated down the passage, I think that he is mistaken in supposing that quantum logic was a bad idea. It is not a bad idea; it is rather a good idea that just happens to go bad. And my reason for this view is simple, most workers in quantum logic could not bring themselves to a path that disrespects the classical laws of thought. To formulate a logic that can axiomatise quantum theory, demands, perhaps, not a rejection of the classical laws, but some form of weakening of those laws so as to admit new laws that can drive the new system.³⁰ Hans Reichenbach’s discussions on three-valued logic as a system that can axiomatise quantum mechanics (REICHENBACH 1944, 139-165) clearly suggests why such a drastic measure is necessary if ever we can devise a logic that can ground quantum theory. Ezumezu represents a simple but crucial change in the direction of such a logic project. It purveys not just a way of making complementary inferences that are truly complementary (truth-glut), but also a way of analysing what we describe as ohakaristic and perhaps, quantum propositions.

Three Dimensions of Thought in the System of Conversational Thinking

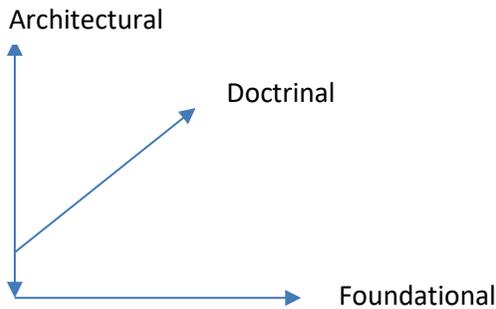
The system of Conversational Thinking, as are other systems, can better be understood from three dimensions; namely, the foundational

²⁹ Maudlin (2005, 158-59, 185) blames this on Quine’s “Two Dogmas of Empiricism.”

³⁰ Quine (1951: 40) felt the same way towards the classical two-valued logic and its laws and suggested their revisions.

(that deals with the background logic and ontology), architectural (that deals with the method (s) and doctrinal (that deals with theory). A typical system can only have one system of logic at its foundation that defines the laws (formal and informal) that guide thought or the relationship of variables in such a system. A system can, however, have multiple methods which define the various application of the laws of the logic that grounds the system. The doctrinal dimension represents the specific organisation of thought using any of those methods. Below, I diagram a typical three dimensions of thought in any well-formulated system.

Fig. 1: Three Dimensions of Thought



In the next three sub-sections, I will discuss the system of Conversational Thinking following the three dimensions of thought above.

a. Ezumezu: The Foundational Dimension

At the foundation of every discourse is logic and ontology. The former deals with the laws that guide reasoning and the latter deals with the realities involved in the reasoning process. At the beginning of a discourse is history. At the foundational beginning is logical and ontological history. The logical history is different from the history of logic in that while the former is the logical grounding of the evolution of thought, the latter is the historical account of the development of logic. With the lapses established so far in the classical two-valued logic and its laws, Conversational Thinking as a system of meaning-making opts for a new system of logic called Ezumezu for the grounding of its statements. It is a trivalent truth-glut system that weakened the classical laws of thought to be discussed in the next

section in order to expand its principles. For each of the three classical laws, identity, contradiction and excluded-middle, Ezumezu accumulates another law to supplement it. The three supplementary laws are formulated as below:

- **Njikoka:** An arumaristic proposition is true if and only if it is true in a given context and can be false in another context.
 $(T) Ax \updownarrow [(T) Ax \mid \rightarrow (F) Ax]$, which reads that Ax is true in a given context if and only if Ax is true in that context wedges that Ax is false in another. The notation wedged-arrow functions only as a context indicator here.
- **Nmekoka:** If an arumaristic proposition is true in a given context, then it cannot be false in the same context.
 $(T) Ax \mid \rightarrow \sim(F) Ax$, which reads that if Ax is true in a given context, then Ax cannot be false in the same context. The notation wedged-arrow functions both as a material implication and a context indicator here.
- **Qnqna-etiti:** An ohakaristic proposition is both true and false in a complementary mode of thought
 $[(T) Ax \wedge (F) Ax] \updownarrow (C) (Ax \wedge \sim Ax)$, which reads that Ax is true and Ax is false if and only if Ax and not Ax are complements.

These are the basic laws that guide reasoning in the system of Conversational Thinking. Since the classical laws also apply in Ezumezu logic, and since Ezumezu logic can be construed as a further development of the discipline of logic, the three new laws of thought becomes supplementary to the old ones.

With the above laws, we discern two types of inferences and propositions that go by the same name; namely, arumaristic and ohakaristic inferences and propositions.

An example of an arumaristic argument that I have used elsewhere (2019, 144) is below:

Premise 1: Momoh is immortal

Premise 2: Momoh is an African

Conclusion: Therefore, all Africans are immortal

In the conclusion, we have a species of a synthetic proposition, the value of which can vary from one context to another. In the contexts of re-incarnation or even ancestorhood, the Boolean value would be 1, whereas in the context of biology, its Boolean value would be 0.

An example of ohakaristic argument that I have used elsewhere (2019, 145) is below:

Premise 1: All Africans are immortal

Premise 2: Momoh is an African

Conclusion: Therefore, Momoh is immortal

In the conclusion above, we have a species of a synthetic statement that expresses more than one thought. That Momoh is immortal can be read as expressing the thought that ‘the legacies of the individual called Momoh cannot die’, or that ‘the individual called Momoh cannot die because at the expiration of one life cycle, he can transition to ancestorhood and continue to live or re-incarnate back into the world and continue to live’. Ezumezu logicians may therefore infer the complement of the two thoughts in the determination of the statement’s truth-value or the argument’s validity.

An arumaristic proposition or statement affirms *or* denies that *in a given context* all or some of the members of one category (the subject term) are included in another (the predicate term). An ohakaristic proposition or statement affirms *and* denies *in a complementary mode* that all or some of the members of one category (the subject term) are included in another (the predicate term)

With the above, Ezumezu boasts of six laws of thought in which the classical ones are secondary. It is a three-valued system that unfolded from the two-valued system. There are, nowadays, other systems of three-valued logic, the most notable of which is one developed by the Polish logician Jan Lukasiewicz (1970). But Ezumezu is quite unlike the Lukasiewicz’s system.

Both systems of logic are three-valued. The fundamental difference between the two lies in their conceptualisations of the third value. While the Lukasiewicz’s system reads it as ‘neither true nor false’, which is a direct affront on the law of excluded middle,

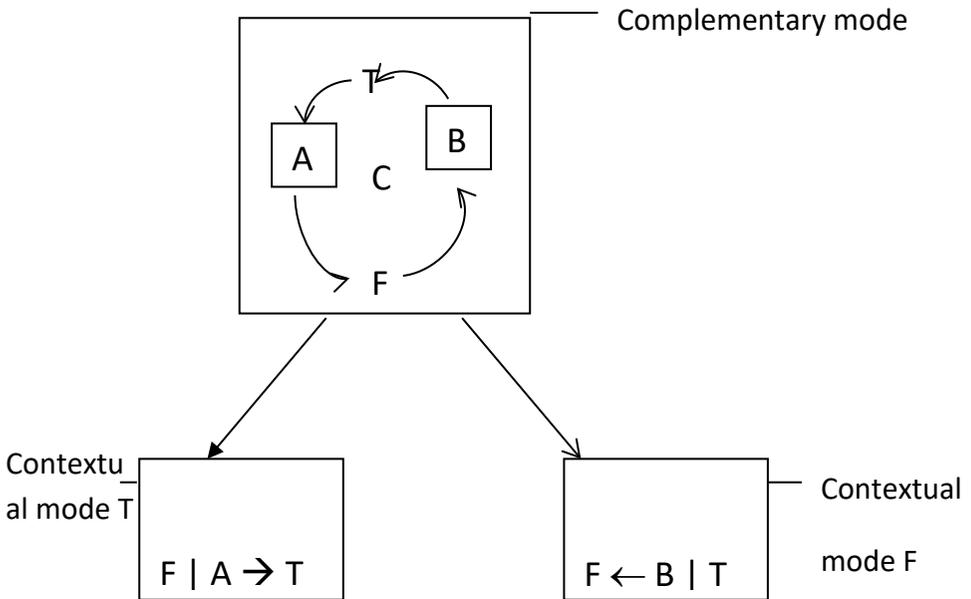
Ezumezu system reads the third value as ‘could be both true and false’, which is an indirect rebuttal of the law of excluded middle. Whether direct or indirect, their opposition to one of the classical laws affects their connection with the other two. For example, the Lukasiewicz’s reading of the intermediate renders both the law of contradiction and identity sterile. The theses of bivalence and determinism both collapse in his system. The latter two outcomes are however not the case in Ezumezu system that admits three supplementary laws to help it negotiate the pitfalls.

First, even though the reading of the intermediate in Ezumezu appears to reject the law of excluded, and conflict with the laws of contradiction and identity, it does not do so directly. By indirect opposition to the law of excluded middle, I mean a structure in which there is room for concessions. For example, as I cited Sogolo somewhere, “[W]hile identity and contradiction imply absolute identity in which things are mutually exclusive, excluded-middle imply absolute difference (CHIMAKONAM 2019, 138). So, while the Lukasiewicz’s system challenged the prescriptions of the classical laws, and failed to breach determinism, Ezumezu stopped short of an outright rejection of the classical laws. In addition, Ezumezu incorporates three additional laws called the supplementary laws of thought. The job of these supplementary laws, as their name goes, is to supplement the original three. Elsewhere, I explained that “njikoka and onona-etiti mitigate absolute identity in which things are mutually exclusive by implying relative identity in which things are mutually inclusive instead. Nmekoka on the other hand mitigates absolute difference by implying relative difference in which things are mutually inclusive” (CHIMAKONAM 2019, 138). Thus, what Ezumezu system does to the prescription of the law of excluded middle is to mitigate its claims to absolute identity and difference. And this is done so as to make room for the accommodation of other spheres such as the future contingents, complementary inferences and developments in quantum theory which are beyond the expressive power of two-valued logic.

Second, both bivalence and determinism survive in Ezumezu paradigm, although marginally. The initiation of complementary inference in Ezumezu system begins from bivalence before transitioning into trivalence. At that basal level, the thesis of determinism holds even if temporarily. What explains these two

seeming anomalies is what is called the inferential modes, which are of two types, contextual and complementary. At the contextual mode (cmi^2), variables are evaluated independently of other variables but strictly on the peculiar characteristics. But when they move away from cmi^2 to the complementary mode (cmi^1), where they interact and co-exist with other variables, they are re-evaluated, taking into account the characteristics of all the variables that are in that interaction. So, the value which variables/propositions have in the complementary mode can quickly change once each disconnects from the whole and returns to the contextual mode and vice versa.

Fig. 2:Diagram of the Modes of Inference



SOURCE: JO Chimakonam 2015d.

There are also two types of motion that order the movement of variables. They are conjunctive and disjunctive motions. While the former accounts for their movement into the complementary mode,

the latter accounts for their movement away and towards the contextual mode. The modes and the motions explain the two types of inferences in Ezumezu logic, namely, arumaristics and ohakaristics. While arumaristics is an inference from the periphery to the centre for necessary complementation, ohakaristics moves from the centre to the periphery mediated by relevant contexts. I will expatiate on these concepts in the next section.

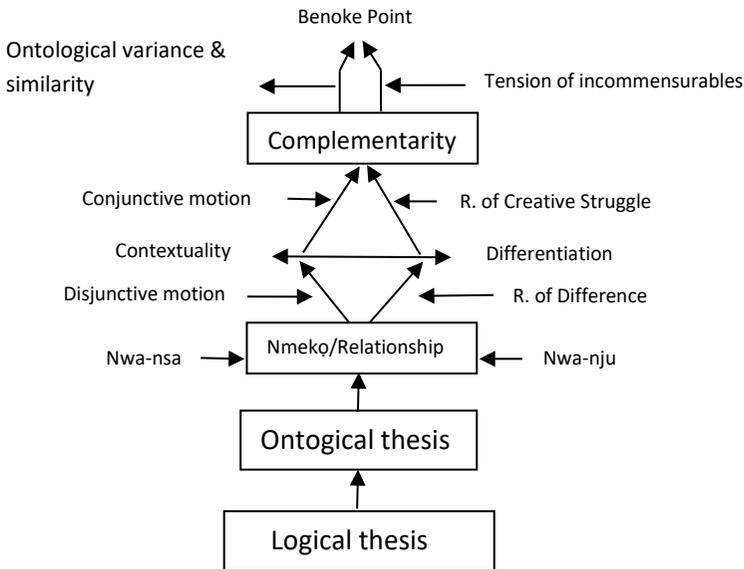
b. Conversational Method: The Architectural Dimension

Conversational method represents a methodological shift in philosophy (CHIMAKONAM 2017a; 2017b). It is sometimes called Conversational Thinking or even conversationalism. But while Conversational Thinking specifically refers to the system itself and conversationalism specifically refers to the movement or school of thought, both are nowadays used as synonyms for conversational method.³¹ I have no intention of deviating from this popular usage by many conversationalists insofar as one knows the specific differences. This methodological shift in philosophy can also be regarded as postmodern, postcolonial and decolonial since it deviates from the logical order of modernity, colonialism and coloniality.

As I explained under the discussion on the three dimensions of thought, methods are various applications of background laws of logic. The conversational method agglutinates some notions that reflect the laws underlying Ezumezu logic. Some of the notions include in no special order, nwa-nsa and nwa-nju, nmeko or relationship, context, complementation, differentiation, logical thesis, ontological thesis, conjunctive and disjunctive motions, relationships of creative struggle and difference, tension of incommensurable, benoke point, etc. I provide below a diagram that demonstrates the pattern of the method.

³¹ For the etymology and historical development of the concept, see JO Chimakonam (2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2018b).

Fig. 3: Diagram of Conversational Method



By way of explanation, we can see from the diagram that at the foundation is logic, the thesis of which states that ‘the value of a proposition is to be determined not on the bases of the facts it asserts but on the basis of the context in which the proposition is asserted.’ Resting on top of it is the ontological thesis, which states that ‘a variable is an independent unit that exists as a necessary link in a network of other variables.’ Next are the epistemic agents, nwa-nsa and nwa-nju, who must enter into a relationship of one or the other kind for a conversation to take place. There are two types of relationships.³² First is the relationship of difference which is driven by disjunctive motion (arumaristic inference) and leads to differentiation (internal conversation) and contextuality (that affirms identity). The laws of njikoka and nmekoka axiomatise this type of

³² I am not unaware that Thaddeus Metz (2007) has identified and discussed identity and solidarity as two types of relationships in African thought. However, his treatment of the terms was ontological whereas mine is logical. Also, he offered empirical proofs while I offered axiomatic proofs. A digressive discussion on this will be available in an essay form.

relationship. The second is the relationship of creative struggle which is driven by conjunctive motion (ohakaristic inference) and leads to complementarity (external conversation that affirms solidarity). This type of relationship is axiomatised by the law of *onona-etiti*. Complementarity is not always sustainable. It is not a permanent state. Variables are always in motion and they have two main characteristics, ontological variance (properties that differentiate them), and ontological similarity (properties that they share in common). While the properties that differentiate them necessitate complementation by triggering the conjunctive motion, it establishes the benoke point to prevent individual identities' dissolution. The benoke point is an imaginary point that represents the limit of complementation. Similarly, while the properties that they share in common do not necessitate complementation by triggering the disjunctive motion, it generates the tension of incommensurables, thereby preserving individual identities. In conversational method, complementation is desirable insofar as it does not cross the benoke point. As the relationship of creative struggle brings seemingly opposing variables together, it is the relationship of difference that preserves their separate identities such that communal values do not consume individual endowments. Therefore, the conversational method purveys an axiomatic mechanism for resolving the community/individual relational imbroglio that has characterised discussions in Afro-communitarianism since the publication of Menkiti's essay in 1984.

If you are trained in the western philosophical tradition, whether you studied logic or not, the logic that underlies what you are taught and how you are taught is most likely the two-valued logic. It is called 'two-valued' mainly because 1) syntactically, propositions of a language are structured to align with the three classical laws of thought without which meaningfulness and communication in all cultures that accepted such a logic would be impossible. And 2) semantically, using those laws, the propositions are evaluated as either true or false (law of excluded middle), where a proposition cannot have both values at the same time (law of contradiction), and if a proposition has one of the values, then that is its value, and it cannot have a different value (law of identity). In symbolic form, the law of excluded middle can be stated as $p \vee \sim p$, that is, either the variable p or its opposite $\sim p$ is true, but not both. For the law of contradiction,

it is $\sim(p \wedge \sim p)$, that is to say, that a proposition and its opposite cannot both be true, or else they will contradict each other. The law of identity can be symbolised simply as p is p or $p = p$. In the language of predicate calculus, it will be rendered as, for all p : $p = p$, or $(\forall x)(x = x)$, where $(\forall x)$ is a universal quantifier. That is to say that p is true is identical to p is true. Ontologically, it can be expressed as whatever is, is. So, it cannot be the case that a proposition that is true is at the same time not true, or that something that exists does not exist at the same time.

These are the logical bases of the western canon. Some scholars have challenged the impregnability of those laws.³³ Even Aristotle himself conceded that they could not accommodate future contingent propositions.³⁴ In my book *Ezumezu...* I identified two more areas in which the laws come short, such as their failure to express complementary inferences and issues in the axiomatisation of the theory of quanta (CHIMAKONAM 2019, 138).

Thus, the classical laws uphold only the two-valued system of logic of which the Aristotle's formulation is its best known. A two-valued logic is then described as bivalent. So, the theses of bivalence and determinism are usually appealed to when explaining the expressive power and limitations of a two-valued system. Whereas the thesis of bivalence states that "every proposition is either true or false", that of determinism states that "every statement is either necessary or impossible" (CHIMAKONAM 2019, 132). There is something peculiar to both theses, and it is the denial or rejection of the possibility of the third or intermediate value. This point is not lost on the formulation of the three laws. According to Godwin Sogolo (1993), the formulations of the three classical laws imply absolute difference and absolute identity in which things are mutually exclusive. In other words, there is no room for inclusivity that can be found in the intermediate position. There is no intermediate position. The two polar values that represent extreme positions are the measuring rods of truth, value and reality. One advantage of this structure is that it allows for precision in thought. The confusion or vagueness that will ordinarily be generated with statements like 'not

³³ Georg Hegel, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (KORNER 1967) have all raised credible objections to the inviolability of the traditional laws of thought

³⁴ See Aristotle, Collected works (BARNES 1984).

altogether true' and 'not altogether false' is avoided. But many-valued logicians would contend that so much is sacrificed for this precision. In fact, they might contend as Quine's criticisms show that this precision is not worth its name in the pursuit of knowledge. I will not follow this detour for obvious reasons.

What I will focus on briefly is the influence of logic on language. It might be shocking to say that without logic we cannot say anything meaningful about language, if not about anything else. Even language is strung up on the laws of logic. According to analytic philosophers and the logical positivists, words that are the atomic units in a proposition are meaningful because they have senses, and they refer to some things. The use of a word in a sentence structure must be guided by a set of syntactic and semantic rules that in turn grovel at the laws of logic. Logic then is basic to the structure of a language such that when the laws of a given logic are limited, the language that it underlies would be limited too in its claims to meaning.

From the above, a language in which philosophy is done must accommodate the prescriptions of the laws of thought for its statements and expressions to make sense to members of that linguistic community. Thus, whether a philosopher who was trained in a tradition that rests on such a bivalent logic has studied logic formally or not, they will learn to observe those laws even if not consciously. I will come back later to show how the two-valued logic props the analytic method and how the latter varies from the conversational method.

Another type of logic that is structurally trivalent or three-valued on which the method of Conversational Thinking rests is Ezumezu. Of course, there are some other systems out there, both African and western-developed. Susan Haack, Stephen Kleene, and before them, Jan Lukasiewicz have all worked on various versions of three-valued logic in western philosophy. Innocent Asouzu (2004, 2013) and Chris Ijiomah (2006, 2014), both of the Calabar School have developed their own systems in African philosophy. While Ijiomah's system called harmonious monism is three-valued, Asouzu sees his version known as complementary logic as many-valued (2013, 97). My system of Ezumezu is three-valued, and I have in the previous section briefly contrasted it with that of Lukasiewicz' system.

c. Conversational Philosophy: The Doctrinal Dimension

In analysing propositions, analytic philosophy wants to break down the whole into parts so as to understand the whole in terms of its parts (compositionality principle that leads to the atomic proposition). Conversational philosophy does the same but only as a complement to another, which is to constitute parts into a whole so as to understand the parts in terms of the whole (complementary principle that leads to ohakaristic propositions). Further than this, conversational philosophy analyses language not to obtain meaning but to understand how words and propositions play out in different contexts. Ludwig Wittgenstein (1922) thinks that the goal of philosophy is the logical analysis of language. Conversationalists hold that such should be a part of the aims of philosophy but that philosophy does not and should not consist of language analysis alone because meaning is not embedded in words and propositions. The goal should be conversation. And conversation is not linguistic, it is relational. The linguistic goal of philosophy relays to the conversational goal. Language analysis only conveys ideas in the forms of senses of the sign or signifier and the references of the signified. The reference of the signifier is not its meaning. The conversationalists would think that the analytic philosophers who follow Frege in such conception are mistaken. Ideas (sense and reference) are the raw materials for meaning-making. Meaning is a product of conversation, a context-based relationship involving significists, signifier, signified and receptor-sensus.

In conversation there are no stable facts. Facts are like the shooting stars that lighten up at different points. So, facts are unreliable; they are always changing and cannot be captured by language as analytic philosophers and the logical positivists suppose! The goal of conversation is to make meaning. Meaning is an individual's appreciation of an idea which approximates the appreciation of the significist who conveyed the idea. The aim of the conversationalists is to sustain the process of meaning-making while their goal is to make-meaning!

The deconstructionists accentuate the conversationalist rejection of language analysis as the sole goal of philosophy. Jacques Derrida, who is regarded as the father of deconstruction holds an

interesting view. Deconstruction is a postmodern theory/method of criticising philosophy/modernity using language. Derrida holds that the history of philosophy is logocentric in that it presumes the absolute nature of truth through language. Derrida thought that this was incorrect due to the undecidability of language. Words cannot be pinned down to specific meanings. Analytic philosophers did not like this and attacked Derrida in various ways, which we cannot delve into without a major detour.

But Derrida is more than a deconstructionist. He is also said to be a poststructuralist for criticising Ferdinand de Saussure, a linguist and a structuralist who was a contemporary of Frege and held similar views with Frege on the study of reality through language. De Saussure's (1959) central position is that language is made up of signs with two sides: signifier (words) and the signified (the idea conveyed), and that signs depend on each other for meaning. Derrida borrowed this idea and extended it by saying that signs are also present in the meanings of other signs. This was encapsulated in his idea of 'trace and *differance*'.

Deconstruction, for Derrida, is different from analysis and even hermeneutics in that it attempts to expose the internal contradictions of a text. But it is not just a destruction; it is also a construction in that it attempts to create a different meaning from what is destroyed, a strategy he describes as *arche-writing* (1976). Derrida holds that there is a hidden but ever-present metaphysics in the logocentric approaches like analytic philosophy. It is a metaphysics of pure presence that is hidden but always and already present in language. He articulates such a contradiction as *trace* (1976). *Trace* is the idea that language, as used in western history and philosophy, has been about the affirmation of being as presence. *Trace* becomes a contingent concept that marks the absence of a presence that is always and already an absent present. Derrida argues that the approach to language analysis that marginalises absence also privileges presence. This sets up his discussions on unequal binary oppositions. The meaning of a sign (Frege) or signifier (de Saussure) should not exclusively be one determined by a metaphysics of presence, but one determined by its *differance* from other signs or signifiers. More importantly, the difference represented by the other pair in the binary. For example, the meaning of man is generated by the meaning of woman. Derrida argues that much of western philosophy is based on

unequal binary opposition, where one of the pairs is taken to have more truth, is more natural and thus privileged over the other. The term woman is not an absence or a residualised pair in an unequal binary. Thus Derrida says that language is subjective and meaning differs from person to person, time to time, [and possibly place to place]. There cannot possibly be a shared objective truth.

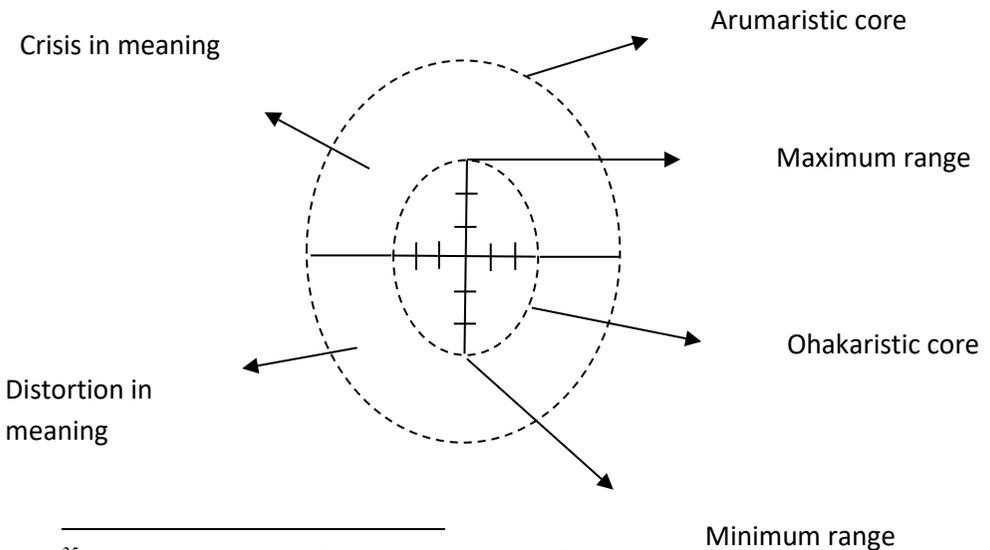
One point of divergence between conversation and deconstruction is the deconstructionist supposition that meaning is a product of trace and *differance*. A second point is a view on the impossibility of shared objective truth. In the first, conversationalists would see trace and *differance* as part of the processes of meaning-formation, but meaning-making itself is an agential experience of a relationship as already explained earlier! What Derrida sees as meaning is nothing but a collection of ideas that are not in the signs themselves. Signs are incapable of conveying meaning because they are not meaning-making agents. They are units in a language that contains raw materials for meaning-making. Meaning is not a kind of idea; it is an experience that may vary from agent to agent both in 'substance and in degree'. The idea of substance and degree brings us to the second point of divergence between conversation and deconstruction.

Conversationalists subscribe to the possibility of a shared notion of truth, even if not an objective one. Such a shared notion of truth would be one that varies in degree. When nwa-nsa and nwa-nju are in a conversation, each undertakes individual tasks of meaning-making. Their exchanges through speech, writing or gesticulation convey ideas. The signifier and the signified are ideas which the significists appreciate differently. Meaning is a subjective experience of a significist who must initiate the process of meaning-making to disclose that experience. This does not always work as expected because other significists do not receive what is disclosed as it was in the mind of the nwa-nsa. It reaches them as ideas. The choice of words and language had entirely been that of the nwa-nsa. The nwa-nju must then undergo their own process of meaning-formation by interpreting those words and language in light of their own worldview and mindview. This is what the conversationalists call "creative struggle". The result is a set of meaning— their own meaning (subjective

experience) to the ideas conveyed by the words and language chosen by nwa-nsa.

There are three possible outcomes for any conversation. First, the meanings made by both significists from the same set of ideas conveyed through the same word and language choices can vary radically and maintain a ‘negative arumaristic core’ in which case we say that there is a difference in substance or a tension of incommensurables. Here, the type of meaning that is produced is below the ‘minimum range’. That is, what is received is a ‘distortion’ of what was conveyed. Where conversation fails, the devil takes over! Second, they can vary slightly but maintain an ‘ohakaristic core’,³⁵ in which case we say that they vary in degree. I have provided some insight on the idea of degrees or mutuality of meaning in my earlier discussion on the concept of ALTI. Third, the meanings can match precisely and maintain a ‘positive arumaristic core’,³⁶ in which case we say that benoke point has been crossed and conversationund has set in, a ‘crisis of meaning’. Here, the type of meaning that is produced is above the maximum range. I have demonstrated this with a diagram below.

Fig. 4: The Scale of Mutuality of Meaning



³⁵ A close degree of similarity despite some differences.

³⁶ A perfect match in the absence of any differences.

However, the third possibility is a mere assumption. It does not exist as a true outcome but only as a false one. A conversation must have been botched before conversationund can result. There is a limit to what a credible conversation can be. That limit is called “benoke point”, beyond which there cannot be any processes capable of yielding meaning (whether varying in substance or degree) from a set of ideas conveyed through some chosen words and languages.

One area in which the above position can have some implications is hermeneutics. Nowadays, it is broadly construed as a theory and methodology of interpretation dealing with communication, and understanding among others. In it, communication is studied as a cluster of media for passing information, while understanding is roughly seen as the preferred outcome of a properly executed interpretation. The catch-concept in the method of hermeneutics is interpretation. In ancient time, and this involves different literate cultures in Egypt, Mesopotamia, China and Greece, etc., there were forms of scholarly interpretations of laws, texts and testaments of notable rulers (See PALMER 1969, 13-32; VIAL 2013, 48). The Code of Hammurabi, for example, was a subject of various interpretations by people of letters in different kingdoms. Some thought they were draconian; others lauded their wisdom. But it was Aristotle’s book *De Interpretatione* along with some of Plato’s dialogues like *Cratylus* that one can say provided textual basis for the blossoming of hermeneutics as textual interpretation.

In its medieval forms, it was seen as an art of exegesis or interpretation of biblical texts. In the modern time, the stock of hermeneutics appreciated immensely, which saw its application in diverse fields such as environment, theology, law, archaeology, sociology, architecture and several others. In philosophy, it has been appropriated by many, including some notable names like Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricouer, and has even been applied in some movements like Marxism. So, there are now many interpretations of this art of interpretation. I will not survey the history and strands here. What I will do is to identify some common threads that have come to form the core of what hermeneuticists attempt to do and show how conversational philosophy differs from it.

The two concepts that precede interpretation in the method of hermeneutics are communication and understanding. Conversationalists also list these as preceding conversation in their three purposes of language, as I have discussed in an earlier section. So, while hermeneutics anchors on interpretation, conversational philosophy anchors on conversation. This much shows what the two share a lot in common, but they also have some serious divergences. What the hermeneuticists mean by communication and understanding are quite different from the position of the conversationalists. While for the hermeneuticians, communication is principally about transmitting information and the media involved; it is much more complicated than that for the conversationalists who see it as a kind of external relationship they describe as creative struggle that involves the significists (nwa-nsa and nwa-nju), signifier and signified. So communication only occurs when the three are present. It is not a process or an act; it is a relationship. Communication ceases once the relationship collapses. The preceding is why conversationalists do not include presuppositions and pre-understandings as the hermeneuticists do in the list of communication media. The two cannot possibly be part of internal and external creative struggles.

Also, for the hermeneuticists, understanding is what happens when interpretation is done well. That is not the case for the conversationalist. The latter conceives understanding as an internal relationship of creative struggle that involves the signified, receptor-sensus and the mind/brain. It is not what happens or an outcome of some action; it is a relationship in its on-goingness. Once the relationship breaks, understanding halts.

Friedrich Schleiermacher who is widely regarded as the father of modern hermeneutics provides what is the basic structure of hermeneutics (see PALMER 1969; SCHLEIERMACHER 1998; VIAL 2013). He was the one that framed hermeneutics as a method that can apply to diverse topics and fields. Like most medieval scholastics, he ventured into the interpretation of biblical texts, but not after he had formulated hermeneutics as a neutral method of inquiry. He sees authors as producers of thought and text, no matter on the topic and in what field. And language is what they use to communicate their thoughts. Language then is a motor not just for documenting thoughts but for their external expression in texts. Schleiermacher identifies two main approaches to hermeneutics: the grammatical and

technical or psychological forms of interpretation. The jobs of a hermeneuticist who undertakes the task of interpreting a text, for Schleiermacher, are dual corresponding to the two approaches he identified: to interpret the language of the text and to interpret the inner thoughts of the author. Language is key to these two approaches. As he put it, “The language is what mediates sensuously and externally between utterer and listener. On its own the technical side can only take up the analogy [of the sensuous outer world] in the inner process of thought, thus only non-sensuously and internally” (1998, 232). As is that of interpretation, the goal of communication is to reach an understanding of the text. Understanding itself is both historical and psychological in that the former treats specific understanding reached by the reader as their incremental understanding of the language of communication. The latter sees it as a process that discloses the shared experiences of the author and interpreter or reader as humans. Thus, Schleiermacher argues that “...understanding is a sequence one can only ever come to the next member via the preceding one, and true understanding is only possible in a step by step progression” (1998, 235). Conversationalists do not think of understanding in historical and psychological terms or as something that depends on language.

Schleiermacher (1998, 230-231) further talks about misunderstanding as something that can occur when the two approaches to interpretation fail. When grammatical interpretation fails, the misunderstanding of the language of the text results. Also, when technical interpretation fails, the misunderstanding of the author’s inner thoughts occurs.

On the whole, the views of Schleiermacher were largely sustained in the twentieth century except that in theology, the advent of the idea of ‘new hermeneutic’³⁷ extended hermeneutics from textual interpretation to the interpretation of individual’s lived experiences. This is an existentialist outlook exemplified in the ideas of Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur and so on.

From the above, one can readily spot conversational philosophy’s debt to hermeneutics, but there are some striking

³⁷ See Robinson (1964), who also claims that the *s* in hermeneutics has no philological justification and that removing it will properly suggest a new turn in the theory of hermeneutics.

divergences. I have earlier shown the differences in their conceptions of communication and understanding. I will highlight a few more. Hermeneuticists prize language (speech and writing) as basic in the quest for meaning, conversationalist find language very useful but prize creative struggle. Meaning can be made internally without speech and writing. And even externally with the aid of gesticulation, but neither of the two is possible without creative struggle. That is why the significist is a meaning-maker. Hermeneutics seeks to interpret text and lived experiences, conversational philosophy interprets ideas. Interpretation is thus only an aspect of internal creative struggle, whereas it is the method of hermeneutics. Schleiermacher prescribes that interpretation must consider the text and the author's inner thoughts before understanding can be reached, conversational philosophy prescribes the interpretation of received ideas and a significist's worldview and mindview in the process of meaning-making. In Schleiermacher's hermeneutics, when the two approaches of interpretation fail, two types of misunderstandings result from the interpretation of a text. In conversational philosophy, misunderstanding³⁸ is not possible in meaning-making. One cannot misunderstand; it is either they understand or they don't, because every understanding is different. How do you begin to determine which is correct and which is not? If misunderstanding is possible in meaning-making, every understanding would be a misunderstanding. What is possible in conversational philosophy are distortions in meaning and crisis in meaning as shown in fig 4. The conception of understanding in conversational philosophy is different from the conception Schleiermacher provided. Thus, for Schleiermacher (1998, 228), "The goal of hermeneutics is understanding in the highest sense". This contrasts with the goal of conversational philosophy, which is meaning-making. I have demonstrated that earlier.

Thus, the analytic philosopher who believes that they reach precise meaning when they analyse language; the deconstructionist who believe that they generate meaning from language through trace; and the hermeneuticist who believe that they tease out meanings when they interpret texts and lived experiences are all mistaken. They all presume that language somehow harbours meaning, which is not the case. Meaning is an experience produced through creative struggle,

³⁸ Assuming its technical usage mentioned in an earlier section.

and always remains so. Language is a tool we have invented to help us achieve mutuality³⁹ in terms of degrees of meaning. What is sometimes called sign-language or even gesticulation, which is its crudest form, is capable of yielding closer mutuality of meanings, but for its crude form. Imagine a world, a crowded park, an outdoor event, or a concert, or even a board meeting where everyone is gesticulating? How can a gesticulator address some one hundred thousand people in a stadium? The invention of spoken and written word has proven very resourceful in many regards. But despite the resourcefulness of speech and writing, gesticulation, a general term I use for all forms of sign-language remains the most powerful in yielding mutuality of meaning. None however, can yield precision.

We try to make meaning through conversation. We employ signs, where the signifier cannot speak, but we speak through it. We try to make the signified as clear as possible not in reference to the signifier, but in reference to the human agent. Meaning is when we understand the agent not the signifier. So, one cannot say, 'I know what the word means'; they can only say, 'I know what X means by the word'. If we can understand ourselves, then, a conversation can proceed. The aim of a significist is to understand the speaker, writer, gesticulator, and not the words. To understand the speaker, writer or gesticulator, you need to understand their worldview and mindview. By worldview, we mean the way the world appears to nwa-nsa, and by mindview we mean the way nwa-nsa goes on to restructure what appears to them. So, worldview influences mindview, but the latter restructures the former. Both account for context, which is a fundamental idea in meaning-making. Each individual's meaning-making processes is a unique cognitive context. No two worldviews are the same because the world does not appear to people the same way, even though the objects of experience may be the same. Similarly, no two mindviews are the same because even if people wear the same Kantian cognitive cap, their utilisation of the mental categories naturally will vary. To help *mutualise* the degree of meaning, what epistemic agents do instinctually is to take into account each other's worldview and mindview that provide them with a

³⁹ I employ this to describe the range of degrees of meaning that is possible during a conversation through 'Approximate Linguistic Transference of Idea' (ALTI).

context for interpreting their ideas and eventual meaning-formation. How well this is done determine the degree of mutuality of meaning that is produced in a conversation.

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