



The Nature of Language: Three Muslim Thinkers' Perspectives

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1 INTRODUCTION

Language has been investigated from different perspectives in different fields of study such as philosophy, linguistics, education, sociology, political sciences, anthropology, etc. The study of language from a philosophical perspective goes back to ancient Greek philosophy and can be found in Aristotle's works too. The close tie between the study of language from a philosophical perspective and theology has attracted the attention of Muslim thinkers. Of particular interest to them are the following:

1. What is the origin of language?
2. How does language work? Does language reflect reality or rather the inner perceptions of its speaker?
3. Which criteria are used to judge the validity and rightness of different types of *kalam* (speech, word)? How are they evaluated?
4. Is the nature of God's *kalam* different from that of man?

In this study, the answers Muslim thinkers provide to these questions may throw light on the questions raised in the abstract. In other words, Muslim thinkers' arguments and views with regard to the four questions here and their answers to them are the basis for answering the questions of this study. The rationale is that these two sets of questions are interrelated. For instance, to know Muslim thinkers' views on the origin of language, how it was formed, whether its main elements are internal to the *mutakallim* (the

one who makes words and speech) or external etc., reveals the answers to the first question. Similarly, to know Muslim thinkers' views on how language works (i.e. whether it reflects inner perceptions or external realities) is connected with question number two in the abstract. Finally, answers to questions three and four here provide the starting point to answer question three in the abstract. Of course, it should be noted that Muslim thinkers approach these issues from a primarily religious rather than philosophical perspective, even though their approaches could be analysed in what is known today as philosophy of language.

The four questions here demonstrate that Muslim thinkers address two main issues when they deal with language: theological and philosophical. The theological aspect refers to the belief that the forms as well as meanings of the Quran are eternal miracles. God communicates with man through verbal and non-verbal signs (*ayat*). As far as the verbal signs are concerned they are the Quran and revelation in other Scriptures. This belief is rooted in the verses of the Quran. For example, the Quran says (2:23):

If you have doubts about the revelation We have sent down to Our servant, then produce a single sura like it – enlist whatever supporters you have other than God – if you truly [think you can]¹

In this verse, and in some other similar verses, it is indicated that no one can produce even one verse like those of the Quran. To prove that the Quran is a miracle, Muslim thinkers pose different questions and propose different arguments and explanations that in turn result in different schools of thought. Some of these questions include: As for men, *kalam* is context-dependent; what about God's *kalam*? How is God's *kalam* related to His nature? Following these fundamental questions, Muslim thinkers have dealt with challenging questions such as: What is the nature of language – is it of man or of God? What is the relationship between language and thought and reasoning? By studying the nature of word and language, Muslim thinkers aimed to answer a key question: How does God speak? More specifically, they intended to find out whether God speaks as men do or if the whole concept of God's speech is different. This question is so significant for Muslim thinkers that some contemporary scholars (e.g. Namani²) regard it as the

¹Cf. *The Qur'an. A new translation by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem*, Oxford University Press 2004.

²Cf. Sh. Namani, *Tarikhe Elme Kalam [History of Ilm al-Kalam]*, Tehran 2007.



main cause and root of the birth and development of Islamic theology – *ilm al-kalam*³ (literally science of discourse).

Abu Nasr al-Farabi, the founder of Islamic philosophy, is the first thinker that addressed the “whatness” of language and word and its relation with thinking and reasoning from a philosophical perspective. His studies then can be regarded as what we call the philosophy of language today. Other thinkers, however, dealt with the same issue from the perspective of *ilm al-kalam* and philosophy of religion. In other words, the latter group studied the concept and meaning of *kalam* in order to explain what it means that God is a *mutakallim* (speaker). The main issue for the *mutakallimun* (the theologians) is to explain a paradox: How is it possible to perceive God’s speech and His words as the same as man’s and at the same time hold the belief that God is *qadim* (i.e. eternal⁴)? To answer this question, some denied that God speaks at all. Some others including Fakhr ad-Din ar-Razi and al-Ghazali argued that God’s speech is the same as man’s and this does not contradict God’s Divinity and Greatness. Both thinkers maintained that when we say God’s *kalam*, we use *kalam* in the sense used among and by men.

2 AL-FARABI (872–950)

Al-Farabi (known as Alfarabius in the West) was the first Muslim philosopher who discussed and interpreted philosophical issues in a classic and organised manner⁵. His investigations and works in philosophy and theology have formed the basis for other philosophers. For two reasons, al-Farabi has been included in this study: to investigate the roots and the origins of the issue in the Islamic World, and, to make attempts to find answers to philosophical issues raised in this study.

According to al-Farabi, the formation of human communities necessitated language since man wanted to convey what was going on inside his mind to those around him. To satisfy such a need, man first used vocal signs that signified his intentions. The vocals gradually developed and writing symbols were created for them⁶.

³It is the science of arguing for and defending religious beliefs through reasoning and making reference to religious texts.

⁴It must be distinguished from *azal* and *abad*. *Azal* is the constant duration of existence in the past, as *abad* is its constant duration in the future.

⁵D. R. Ardakani, *Al-Farabi*, Tehran 1995, p. 46.

⁶Al-Farabi, *Kitab al-Huruf [Book of Letters]*, Beirut 1986, p. 101.



Al-Farabi believes that to understand the nature of language, one needs to first study and determine its constituent elements and the role each constituent plays. The most important elements are the 'external', 'reasoning', 'utterance', and 'meaning'. According to al-Farabi, the external is the origin and the essence of all truths which is reflected in man's imaginations, reasoning and words. Through reasoning, man learns about and understands entities that are beyond the reach of soul (*nafs*⁷). Feelings, imaginations, and suppositions are the primitive forms of reasoning which turn into understandings and reasoning at higher levels. As for utterances, al-Farabi argues that man's intelligent attempts to understand entity through reasoning are reflected in mutually understandable and perceivable forms which are called words and appear in written, spoken, and other modes (e.g. gestures). The nature of utterance is the sign that signifies another thing; therefore, the signified plays a pivotal role in understanding the nature of utterance. Finally, *kalam* is a kind of communication established between two people who have knowledge and common sense. The purpose of this communication is to convey a non-materialistic reality called meaning.

Referring to Aristotle's ideas, al-Farabi argues that to know the nature of words, we need to know their relation to entities on the one hand, and their relation to writing on the other. Only then, we can get close to knowing names and speech.

Al-Farabi states that the written directly signifies speech and that through the Aristotelian categories it also signifies percepts. Al-Farabi believes that some thinkers have misinterpreted Aristotle in saying that Aristotelian categories signify external existents and that the latter is signified by the former. A vocal does not signify an external; rather it signifies Aristotelian categories and the written is a signifier for which there is no signified.

Contrary to the above argument, al-Farabi maintains, Aristotle does not disagree with the relation between categories and the externals. Al-Farabi criticises the above interpretation saying that the categories signify only percepts and not the externals. The categories signify percepts to the extent that a definition and an understanding of them are provided, whereas vocals do not signify their own signified; they are just signs – common and agreed upon – that people use. As people use them, the words bring to the mind what has been mutually agreed upon. So the signifier role of words is lim-

⁷*Nafs* is an Arabic word (cognate of the Hebrew word *nefesh*) occurring in the Quran and means self, psyche ego or soul.



ited to being a sign; words are signifiers in the sense of being signs. They act similarly to many other signs that men generally use; they are reminders and nothing more. So is the relation between written and vocal; it reminds us of something. As a result, one should not define and assess the relation between categories and externals with the premise that words signify meanings. Briefly then, the written is a sign that signifies speech and the speech is a sign that signifies categories.

Diversities and differences of writing systems and signs in different communities among different people exist while the categories which are the origins and sources of different signs are not different for different people. In other words, a given category is shown by a certain sign. So it is understood that the 'whatness' of words, unlike categories, does not depend on man's nature. If it did, they would be common to all men. The most important reason for the independence of the 'whatness' of vocals and man's nature is that words – similar to behaviours – are either determined by elites (a reference group) or by the state governors and authorities. Others then have to observe and comply with them. But the relation between categories and external truths is not like that; it is not determined by some rules or laws. In his *Fusus al-Hikam (The Bezels of Wisdom)*, al-Farabi defines *kalam* as:

Kalam is like a picture in which lies things the *mutakallim* has in his *batin* (the inside). He tries to draw the same picture in the receiver's *batin*. As the *mutakallim* has no direct access to that, he resorts to spoken or written linguistic devices or even sign language.⁸

It should be noted that the main purpose of *kalam* is to communicate meaning from one *batin*⁹ to another. To do that, it is necessary for the *mutakallim*'s world to be the same as receiver's world or at least similar to it. That is why not everybody can be the receivers or addressees of God's *kalam*. The truth about *kalam*, then, is an act of negotiation between two or more individuals. In other words, when one individual attempts to share a meaning with someone else then he has practiced *kalam* with his interlocutor. Vocals, and language do not lie in the *batin* of *kalam*; they are just devices used for that negotiation. Al-Farabi's interpretation shows the difference between God's

⁸Al-Farabi, *Fusus al-Hikam [The Bezels of Wisdom]*, Qom 1405 AH, p. 88.

⁹The *batin* is defined as the interior or hidden meaning of the Quran. This is in contrast to the Quran's exterior or apparent meaning (the *zahir*).



kalam and man's *kalam*. God's *kalam* is like an eternal call; he has shared all meanings with everybody and the addressees need to have the necessary reception. Man's *kalam*, nonetheless, is context-dependent and is developed at a specific time.

Comparing al-Farabi's views with those of Wittgenstein, it can be argued that al-Farabi's views of language are close to the "language game" perspective proposed by Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*¹⁰. According to Wittgenstein, context plays a key role in understanding words. In other words, words have meaning only in the context of a game.

3 FAKHR AL-DIN AR-RAZI (1149–1209)

Fakhr ad-Din ar-Razi, most commonly known as Fakhraddin Razi was an Iranian Muslim theologian and philosopher who wrote in Arabic.

To explain and interpret God's 'speaking', ar-Razi focuses on the nature or 'whatness' of God's *kalam*. He approaches the issue from a religious perspective. He begins by asking a fundamental question: God is devoid of all change, movement, time and place, so how can one explain His speech? Words and speech are time, place and condition dependent; as the conditions cease to be, words disappear. Therefore, the attribution of such changing and varying features to God – as *qadim* – results in inconsistencies.

To solve this problem, ar-Razi suggests three different solutions. The first line of argument is the total rejection and denial of God's speaking/speech, a view which is in sharp contrast with the Quran. The second argument is to consider and define words as eternal as God. This is also inconsistent with one of the basic principles among Muslim thinkers; they consider God as the only *qadim* and nothing can be as eternal as Him. The alternative way – the third argument – is to accept the fact that speech should be re-defined. In the new definition, it is also assumed and accepted that the 'whatness' of speech is different from that of speech-maker. This way, attributing speech to its maker is not problematic. In his redefinition of speech, ar-Razi argues that although speech originates from 'the *qadim*', it is not necessarily as eternal as Him, rather it is subject to change despite the fact that the *qadim* is its cause and origin.

Al-Razi believes that one needs to distinguish two aspects of *kalam*: the

¹⁰B. Maggee, *Mardane Andishe [Men of Ideas]*, Tehran 1999, p. 59.



origin or the deep sphere that lies within the *mutakallim* and its realization and manifestation which is external. According to ar-Razi, to analyse *kalam* we need to examine whether the deep and surface levels of *kalam* go together or not. In other words, the question in analysing *kalam* is: does the surface of *kalam* represented as spoken or written language show its deep counterpart as it is? Ar-Razi's answer is negative; language as one reflection of the deep part of *kalam* might go against the *mutakallim*'s will and knowledge.

In ar-Razi's view, when the will, determination, power and knowledge of the speech-maker is compared with his speech, it is understood that the nature and 'whatness' of the two are different and do not sit together. More specifically, there might be a distance between the will of the speech-maker and the speech. This holds true for the relation between the power and knowledge of the speech-maker and the speech. Ar-Razi provides substantial reasoning to advocate his arguments.

To explain the difference or the distance between will and *kalam*, ar-Razi refers to the wants and wishes of mankind in general. The wants and wishes are the same, irrespective of time and place, even though they are expressed through different words and in different times. For instance, the vocal "Give me some water" shows a certain want or demand within the producer before being uttered in actual words. The producer expects the fulfilment of his desire through the uttered word. The 'whatness' here is the 'want', and the word and language are contradictory because the first [whatness] does not change in different times and places while the latter does.

Ar-Razi's second reasoning is the fact that man's wants and wishes do not lend themselves to mutual agreements of some kind whereas words do. Words are subject to agreements between men; they might undergo changes and even get used differently from what is most common. For example, the word "leave" can be used for "eat" if agreed but the "will to eat" cannot be substituted with the "will to go"; wills cannot be conventionalised.

Imperatives are in contrast with not only speech but also with wants and wishes since in most cases there is an imperative or an order without a will. This is the case when one has to order someone's murder. In summary, the word and speech which depend on the producer is something different from will and power. Ar-Razi's purpose in demonstrating differences and disagreements between *kalam* and the inner world of the *mutakallim* is to challenge the unity assumed to exist between *kalam* and the *mutakallim*. This way, he intends to answer several questions pertaining to how materialistic



and context-bound features can be explained with God's being eternal.

The above reasoning, if unchallenged, explains imperatives only. What about declaratives? Statements that tell the truth and facts of the universe are not subject to man's conventions and agreements. Thus, the relation between declaratives and their producers needs to be resolved.

Ar-Razi argues that declaratives are just abstract words of the truths of the universe and their relation to the knowledge and belief of the producer should be examined. Ar-Razi asks the following question: are these abstract words the same as the knowledge and belief in the producer's mind or different? He maintains that similar to will, declaration is different from knowledge and belief.

The reason, he proposes, is the existence of fallacious notions in the mind. Mental statements are not of knowledge or belief type and nature because the mind is responsible for data processing which ends up with both right and wrong notions. So the wrong and fallacious notions are also produced in the mind. For example, despite the knowledge that the universe is not "the ancient", one might choose, for one reason or another, to make the opposite assumption in one's mind and express this¹¹. This example verifies that there are a large number of declaratives that the speaker/producer makes without himself believing in their truths.

Like al-Farabi, ar-Razi believes that the essence and truth about *kalam* is to convey meanings and messages. He uses Ash'arism to argue that God's *kalam* is eternal and at the same time its nature is independent of the *mutakallim*. He turns to disagreements between two major groups in philosophy, i.e. the Ash'arites and the Mu'tazilites to explain God's *kalam*. According to Robinson¹² the Ash'arites were a group of Islamic thinkers who insisted that reason should be subordinate to *wahy* ("revelation"). They accepted the cosmology of the Mu'tazilites but raised some doubts over their theological principles. The Mu'tazilites are considered a competing group of thinkers that sought to give a rationally coherent explanation of Islamic beliefs. Not only did they have an atomistic view of the universe, but also they generally believed in five theological principles. The two most important were the unity of God and divine justice. Unlike the Mu'tazilites, the Ash'arites believed that:

¹¹Ar-Razi, *Kitab al-Arba'in fi Usul ad-Din* [The Forty Chapters on the Principles of Religion], Cairo 1986, p. 125.

¹²N. Robinson, *Islam: A concise introduction*, Oxon 1998, p. 62.



1. God's speech depends on His existence and is in contrast with will, knowledge and belief. This has briefly been discussed above.
2. Speech is one of the attributions of God. God communicates His messages and Himself through speech and words. The reason for this lies in the fact that God enjoins the Good and prohibits the Forbidden. Such enjoinders and prohibitions have been communicated to men via Messengers and Prophets.
3. The Mu'tazilites believe that God speaks with sounds or letters. Ar-Razi argues that his views are not basically in opposition to those of the Mu'tazilites, but rather that they share the basics since making sounds or letters and communicating through them is not an impossibility. After all, the purpose of speech is to convey meaning to the addressee, a view with which the Mu'tazilites do not disagree.
4. All imperative, prohibitive, narrative, etc. statements are similar in meaning. In other words, different forms of speech such as imperatives and prohibitive statements are narrative in nature. For example, an imperative is actually letting someone know that if he does something, he will be praised or rewarded.

4 AL-GHAZALI (1059–1111)

Al-Ghazali known as Algazel to the Western medieval world, was a Muslim theologian, jurist, philosopher, and mystic. Like ar-Razi, al-Ghazali believes that God's speech is *qadim*. In al-Ghazali's view, God's speech is not made of sounds and letters and does not mean lip or tongue movement. His existence does not resemble other types of existences so His speech is also different.

Generally speaking, speech has an internal truth as well as an external representation. The true essence of speech resides within the speaker (*kalam an-nafs*; literally, the discourse of the soul) but the external part gets materialised in different forms and shapes, e.g. sounds, letters, gestures, etc. Therefore, the surface of speech is not the same as the speech itself but a sign of it. The implication of this understanding is that what is termed God's speech in the Quran is only the surface and not the deep layer. In other words, the surface acts like a sign of the true essence of His speech. And this deeper layer or the true essence of His speech is a secret no one can unravel.

Al-Ghazali refers to a classic question in literature of theology and philosophy to explain his ideas. The age-old question asks how one (i.e. the Prophet



Moses) can “hear” God’s true speech with the ear, and at the same time arguing that the speech is not made of sounds. Al-Ghazali refers to the Day of Judgment when God can be seen maintaining that God will be seen then even though he is free from the quality of substance, colour and quantity. By the same token, it is possible to hear His speech which is not sound or letters. To further support his argument, al-Ghazali gives an example. He notes that if signs and written letters were to transfer existence, then as soon as one writes “fire” on paper, it should burn¹³ (Al-Ghazali, 1425: 308).

The problem with the above argumentation and example is that the controversy is not over whether language transfers existence or not (the fire example). The point is the transfer of meaning through language and words. Since there is some overlap and agreement between al-Ghazali’s views with those of ar-Razi, it is not necessary to repeat the views discussed above.

It should be mentioned that both ar-Razi and al-Ghazali are known as anti-philosophers in Islamic philosophy. Ar-Razi’s arguments against Ibn Sina (Avicenna) in his *Sharh al-Isharat (Commentary on the Isharat)* and al-Ghazali’s *Tahafut al-Falasifa (The Incoherence of the Philosophers)* against philosophers might be considered enough to confirm this. The main motive for these two thinkers to deal with philosophy was to make attempts to solve problems pertaining to *kalam*. As Ash’arite theologians, they tried to theorise and defend their beliefs and views by standing against the then dominant school of *kalam*, i.e. the Mu’tazila. Therefore, to understand these two thinkers’ reasoning and arguments, it is necessary to know about the Mu’tazila.

5 CONCLUSION

The main motive for Islamic thinkers in dealing with language is to explain God’s speaking and His *wahy* (revelation) from the perspective of Islamic theology. From a philosophical view, language is a device men use to send meanings in the *mutakallim*’s inner world to the hearer. From this perspective, then, the function of language is to symbolise conceptions. Linguistic symbols help the hearer or the addressee develop a mental picture of what lies inside the *mutakallimun*. As a result, if symbols turned back into their original forms, they would appear as conceptions and not out-of-mind en-

¹³Cf. Al-Ghazali, A. , *Ihya Ulum ad-Din (Revival of the Religious Sciences)*, Beirut 1425 AH.



tities. When dealing with *language*, philosophers make attempts to find its relation with the mind on the one hand and with the external world on the other. All this requires an epistemological analysis. The theologians, however, aim to explain an ontological issue: what is the nature or 'whatness' of *kalam* – one of the attributes of God?

Based on Ash'arism, al-Ghazali and ar-Razi argue that God's *kalam* is eternal and at the same time its nature is independent of the *mutakallim*. Accordingly, the eternal God can use linguistic devices to transfer meanings and conceptions to man without a change in Himself. Juxtaposing two attributes of *kalam* (i.e. both eternal and changing) has led these thinkers to struggle with some paradoxes. For instance, to explain that God's *kalam* is eternal they state that declarative propositions in His divine revelation do not correspond with His knowledge.

The authors believe that even though the Ash'arites' interpretation and explanation of man's *kalam* might be acceptable, their explanation of God's is not. The main cause for this paradox is not the definition of *kalam*; rather, it is their perception and understanding of *sifat* (attributes) and their insistence on *sifat's* being *qadim*.

The answer to such a paradox might be found in MullaSadra's thinking. MullaSadra – one of the great philosophers in the Muslim world – believes that *kalam* like any other reality has different levels. On the level of God's *batin*, *kalam* corresponds to His essence and is therefore necessary and ancient. At the level of contingency, His *kalam* is both possible and changing; the change in God's *kalam*, however, is not linked to a cause but to *batin*¹⁴.

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¹⁴S. M. H. Tabatabai, *Al-Mizan*, Qom 1995, p. 170; M. Sadr al-Muta'allihin, *Al-Hikma al-muta'aliya fi-l-asfar al-'aqliyya al-arba'a [The Transcendent Philosophy of the Four Journeys of the Intellect]*, vol. 1, Beirut 1981, p. 271.



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ABSTRACT, KEYWORDS, ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Abstract

One of the key issues attracting thinkers throughout the history of science was to set and define criteria for studying language – whether that of man or God – and to study its relation to the mind on the one hand and to the external world on the other. The purpose of this paper is to investigate three Muslim thinkers' views about the nature and 'whatness' of language by focusing on their works. The rationale to choose these three thinkers is the fact that their views and ideas cover the issues inherent in the purpose of this study extensively. The issues addressed in paper include:

1. What are the constituent elements of language?
2. How does it affect mind and thought?
3. What is its semantic function?

Our findings indicate that the 'whatness' and nature of language of both God and men are the same. The elements are written and spoken, gestures and entity that serve to communicate meaning. As for the second question, language elements act like signs which evoke meaning and assist communication. As far as the semantic functions of language elements are concerned, when the communication of meaning is undertaken, the truth of *kalam* (speech, word) is different from the 'whatness' of meaning and the *mutakallim* (the one who makes words and speech). As a result of this discrepancy, language communicates something (i.e. meaning) different from the *mutakallim's* inner world.



Although the constituent elements of language and how they affect mind and thought have been thoroughly investigated in Western philosophy (e.g. Wittgenstein), there has been little attention to such issues in Eastern philosophy. This paper is believed to be one of the few investigations that adopt a new perspective in attempting to provide a definition for language based on three Muslim thinkers' dialectics and logics. The paper contributes to the field by defining language in a way that all its functions, particularly the religious function – that explains the relation between man and God – are taken into account.

Keywords: *language, word, islamic philosophy.*

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