

## **A Medieval Conception of Language in Human Terms: Al-Farabi**

Mostafa Younesie, Independent Scholar – Philadelphia

### Abstract

With regard to the new directions in the Humanities, here I am going to consider and examine the approach of al-Farabi as a medieval thinker in introducing a new outlook to “language” in difference with the other views. Thereby, I will explore his challenges in the frame of “philosophical humanism” as a term given by Arkoun (1970) and Kraemer (1984) to the humanism of the Islamic philosophers and their circles, mainly in the tenth and eleventh centuries.

Al-Farabi’s conception of philosophical humanism, in which philosophy is thick and religion is thin, makes its agony with the other versions of humanism and also orthodox Islam. It means that his introduction of a humanistic understanding of language should be placed in such a multi-level contested environment.

According to al-Farabi, language as a universal category has relation with reason that logic should function as its proper instrument. As a result, there is no specific privileged predetermined language, but the position of any language is shaped by its relation with human reason and formal logic that is something human-made. And such a conception means language in human terms.

Key Terms: Al-Farabi; Language; Philosophical Humanism; Arabic: Greek

As the title of the paper shows, I am going to explore and introduce Al-Farabi's conception of language within a specific kind of mediaeval Islamic model named "humanism". Therefore, when I speak of "language in human terms" it means that I will examine it within a specific version of humanism which is called "philosophical humanism" and I will begin my presentation with that.

### 1- Philosophical/ Falsafi Humanism

Beyond the absolute optimistic and pessimistic perspectives, in considering the use of Philosophical Humanism for medieval Islam, here I explore it in a specific way. The compound term "philosophical humanism" denotes that there are possible forms of humanism which we deal with one of them. Besides, this term literally implies that we want to consider a form of humanism that is realizable through philosophy that functions as its moving force. And more importantly, among other possibilities and options, we want to consider philosophical humanism in relation to a specific context and thinker that belong to the mediaeval Islam. This very notion can make great debate about the relevancy of such a connection that in its own turn will have consequences for the term "philosophical humanism" as a whole and for each word separately. Here in regard to such relation and the relevancy of the term for Al-Farabi, I will take a middle position between the absolute negation and absolute affirmation (for the main proponents of these two camps within and without the Arabo-Islamic culture see: Joel L. Kraemer 1984, 140- 146). As a result, I want to speak of humanism among one of the Muslim *falāsifa* named Al-Farabi who lived in a specific time and place of the medieval era. In this period, a kind of "the Graeco-Arabic renaissance" at the apogee of the Abbasid epoque in the ninth and tenth centuries shaped and came to completion (Joel L. Kraemer 1984, 135). When we consider our intended version of humanism within this specific context, it has three basic components: unity of mankind; love of mankind; and appropriative reception / interpretation of Hellenism and classical Graeco- Roman authorities and resources (Joel L. Kraemer 1984, 136). Now we consider briefly these three features:

- a- Unity of Mankind. In this specific period, the application and use of different notions such as Islam; Arab; Arabic and the like with the purpose of making connections and reducing barriers for making an Islamic empire contributed to a specific sense of limited

brotherhood and kinship among different people that lived in separate lands. Thus, in “the Graeco-Arabic renaissance” the idea of human fellowship that has roots in the ancient Greek/Latin, Hellenism and also the Islamic resources found its political realization in the form of a cosmopolitan entity and to the point that this cosmopolitanism was alive, the idea that supported it had validation and power.

- b- Love of Mankind. It is natural that limited kinship of human kinds leads minds to the criteria that make men related to each other, and as a result to extol and glorify such standards. Here lies a more advanced phase of humanism because a long list of values that manifest humanness such as virtue, reason, language, goodness, faith, character, education, knowledge, culture and the like come to the fore. Thereby, loving these values makes us human and connects us with each other as a human family and the opposite of those values makes distinctions between human and any kind of non-human. Therefore, believing and practicing these humane values means loving human beings because of these lovable virtues.
- c- Reception of Hellenism and Classical Graeco- Roman Resources/Authorities. Such an enigmatic topic in continuation of our previous title has importance for both our discussion on humanism in medieval Islam and the adjective philosophical / *falsafi*. In relation to humanism in the Graeco-Arabic renaissance, the issue is about the nature and quality of engagement of those thinkers who contributed to such a development. For it is granted that they had reception from the Hellenism and classical Graeco- Roman resources and thinkers, then the issue is about the humane / moral quality of such an involvement in general.

On the whole, the Islamic medieval thinkers had different selective, constrictive, transformative (Falatouri 1973), and ideological/translational (Gutas 1998) readings of the Hellenism and classical Graeco- Roman resources and thinkers for their theoretical / practical purposes in order to support and validate their own basic principles that they usually attributed to Islam.

Thereby, we can enter to our intended meaning of the adjective philosophical/ *falsafi*. During the ninth and tenth centuries within Muslim empire, humanism with the mentioned characteristics in definite ways is promoted and gained prominence by a group of scholars who as a whole were described and called by a specific epithet. It means that in the tenth century among different learned assemblies, there formed specific interconnections between humanism

and a group of friendly scholars / *falasifa* ,called Baghdad school, that beyond their religions shared the common language of Arabic and worked mostly on the ancient Greek wisdom/ philosophy / *falsafa* as the crown of both knowledge and education/*adab*. Thereby, we can see some components of the dominant ethos and spirit of the Baghdad school as the symbol of “philosophical humanism” that have affected its members and among them Al-Farabi. In this relation, notions such as the universality, truthfulness, valuableness, commonality, and transmission of ancient Greek knowledge / *falsafa* are significant in constructing the intellectual identity of Baghdad school in distinction of the other contemporary rival and extant schools.

Interestingly, within this intellectual milieu, though the same term and detailed discussion about the term humanism is absent in Al-Farabi’s writings, his brief analysis and conception about another related term that is humanity/ الانسانيه (Kitab al-Huruf / Book of Letters 1969, 82) is available. According to his short analysis, it seems that he has two notions of it in his mind: the quality that all men share in common which is their human nature; and the virtues that make an individual humane such as being refined, rational, social, civil, brave, polite, and the like. We use these meanings of “humanity” as heuristic notions in order to reach to a possible and justifiable notion about “humanism” in Al-Farabi. With limiting ourselves to *Kitab al-Huruf* that is also the focus of this paper, I will infer that giving priority to “reasonability” and “sociability” can be the possible Al-Farabian version of “Humanism” that he argues and justifies such a meaning by “philosophy”. For these virtues make connections among people and thereby, they love each other for the reason that they have such excellences (though in different degrees because all are not equal in having them) as the essence of humanism, and as a result a kind of connection realizes among those who are like each other in these two virtues. At the same time, our intended thinker justifies such a love and unity by philosophy (not any other discipline) that comes back to ancient Greek and reaches to its completion by Aristotle (143).

## 2 - Language in Human Terms

Now on the basis of Al-Farabi’s intellectual milieu, school, masters and his general mode of thinking and behavior that is a specific kind of philosophical/ *falsafi* humanism, I want to consider his conception of language through zooming on the second part of *Kitab al-Huruf / The Book of Letters*.

To explore and examine language, he chooses a specific Aristotelian anthro-topological introduction (114) in which on the earth all the people with native wit are distributed in

different and definite livable local units. On this basis, for exploring language, his units of analysis are “intelligent people” (not isolated unintelligent individuals) who live in specific “territories”. It is noteworthy that both the distribution of the different people on different parts of the earth and also their abodes on one specific land are very essential in Al-Farabi’s account on language in human terms. Though he begins with the more general image of human distributions on earth but when he comes to the issue of the more pure /unmixed /correct or grammatical language, his account becomes more specific and internal and says that such a language can be gained from those who live on deserts or in the middle of any specific geographical unit. And in this relation, he mentions to the situation of medieval Iraq and how those who lives in urban areas acquire the correct and eloquent Arabic language from those who live in deserts (not town) and middle (not border) parts of this specific territory (133;134;135).

Thus, human beings – constituted of bodies and souls - who live in different specific abodes have definite natural inborn qualities and characteristics that through them make progressions. As a result, in the initial phase of men existence in different living units, human beings use their bodies and souls in ways that are “easier, spontaneous and natural” for them (114;115. The direct connections of these terms are very evident in 115), in differentiation of pre-thought and designed endeavors and efforts. Therefore, in this initial period that all the people as unities and communities are distributed in different aboding units they are connected and distinguished from each other. And for Al-Farabi in this primitive phase, it is natural - in distinction of what is in human constitution / فطرت , habituation/ اعتياد and art / صناعت - for the people that use and direct the related functions of their bodies and souls in the ways that were easier and typical for them. We can say he speaks of the living of the “natural men” in the “natural state”.

Within his short Aristotelian anthro/topological account, Al-Farabi presents an evolutionary and historical process that leads to language. For when natural human beings as functional intelligent collectivities are distributed and dwelled in different parts of the earth, they want to inform the other people of what are in their “minds”, and as a result they need media that at first are visible gestures / اشاره and then are speech-sounds/ صوت (116. Leneshmidt). For him, it is granted that human beings as social /intelligent and not individual/unintelligent animals want to communicate and make what are in their

“minds” understandable for the other people, and this issue necessitates provision of specific instruments that make such a purpose possible. This idea is very crucial and we should be remembered that for Al-Farabi what are in our “minds” have some relations with “things” and “objects” that are outside of our souls (detailed account in Germann 2015-2016.140 -145). Therefore, here Al-Farabi speaks of those people who have passed from the first phase in forming conception and abstraction of the things they conceive; and then by suitable instruments they want to represent and communicate those intelligibles. Thus, Al-Farabi takes the first phase for granted; and now zooms on the relation of suitable instrument for signifying what are in their minds to the other people. Accordingly, complete form of this process has three components; thing, thought and representing-thought and here he deals with the two latter. At this phase, human beings seek an “instrument” in order to “represent/ دلالت” what is in their thoughts that they have reached through thinking, and such a thinking is the same for all of the people, and it makes a communicability and unity among human beings. And within philosophical humanism, this notion means language in human terms, because the natural commonsensical human beings who live in the same dwelling want to communicate and represent to the same people what they have in their minds as intelligibles that are abstractions of objects.

For al-Farabi, all people see direct relation between thought and communication of thought in which the latter somehow should “represent / mimesis” the former. The initial, natural and easy pre-language instrument is “gestures/ الاشارة” (116) that can be seen in a limited visible range by the people involved. Though gestures are unavoidable media but they are not sufficient and complete, and as a result the people spontaneously go towards deploying “speech-sounds/ التصويت” (116). In this relation, Al-Farabi gives a short bisection of the speech-sounds into direct address / ندا ; and speech-sounds in particular (116). As the term direct address [vocative in grammar] indicates, it is directed to specific people to the exclusion of the others and it occurs “when he [every human being] restricts himself to signifying what he has in mind by means of a gesture about sense perceptions that are in his mind” (116). But it is not sufficient and human beings go toward speech-sound in particular that has oral and written manifestations. First, we read the oral aspect: “Then after that he uses different speech-sounds by each of which he signifies one of the things he signified by gesturing to it or to sense perceptions of it” (Leneshmidt 116). Then

he mentions to “letters of the alphabet/ حروف المعجمه ” ( 118) as the representors of vocal sounds. It means that speech-sounds according to the meaning/concept that they want to represent, can be materialized in the form of simple / individual or complex/compound letters. Thus, when individual sounds are insufficient and we should combine some speech-sounds with each other in order to form an utterance/ لفظ (119), the same will be done in relation with the letters too.

In relation to the production of speech-sounds, Al-Farabi mentions to the specific roles and functions of the human organs specially “tongue” in their pronunciations. More importantly, the functions and moves of tongue inside the human mouth are dependent on the specific different characters and constitutions of the organs of the people who live and reside in different places of the earth. As a result, the people, who live in a particular land and their speech-sounds organs have common constitution and quality, move their tongue in specific ways and pronounce this or that speech-sound, in distinction of the people who live in another land and their speech-sounds organs have different qualities.

Accordingly, we can say that Al-Farabi considers a progression and evolution from the initial body movements of hands or head, that is gesturing/ الاشارات ; to direct addressing/ ندا as the middle phase, and lastly, to speech-sounds/ التصويت (118) . The third phase is an advancement because the intelligent people who live as a community in a definite territory want to communicate their thoughts by different and distinct sounds or a group of sounds. While, in the initial primitive phase meanings are made known by “gestures”, and in the second or middle phase intentions are understandable through direct address, in the advanced phase distinct communities of people want to signify things by going beyond gesturing and addressing, that is, they pronounce sounds that represent specific meaning (s) and have relations both with their pertinent objects; and our perceptions of them. And in this evolutionary process, the core issue and function is “representation/ mimesis”: the letters signify speech-sounds, the latter the intelligibles, and the last sensible things /objects (Al-Farabi supposes that we knew this chain of Aristotelian background.)

Up to here as we have seen, in the process that leads to language formation on the two levels of voice and letter, human beings as social intelligent animals who live in different dwellings (not scattered and isolated individual or divine entities) have an exclusive role. At least, there should be two individuals in which one of them as maker/speaker wants to

communicate and signify his or her thoughts to the other individual who is listener in order to reach a limited agreement about language and by spreading such communication and agreement among the other people of the same habitation (120), they gradually make many complex sounds-letters among and for themselves.

In Al-Farabi, this normal and customary process continues until the necessity of some professionals is felt to do the same task in the fields which the ordinary people have never thought about. It means “someone emerges who governs their affairs/ يدبّر امرهم and devotes himself to making emerge the [complex] speech-sounds they need for the remaining matters that no one among them happened to signify by speech-sounds. He, then, will be the one who sets down/ واضع the language/ لسان of that inhabitants” (120). From then on, formation of language continues among those who govern the affairs of any specific abodes (a platonic idea that we can read in *Cratylus*).

On this basis, we can consider Al-Farabi account of language formation in the human communities in the form of a pyramid in which at the bottom line the process in its general natural meaning begins with the multitude of the natural commonsensical people who dwell on any geographical area in spontaneous and rational ways, then gradually this process goes upward and we reach to the top of the pyramid in which a few professional experts who are responsible for deliberating the community affairs and working on the unexplored aspects of language deal with language formation in its specific meaning in a step by step way that includes seven stages ( we can read the details of them in 120, 121).

From here on, another and more developed dimension of language in human terms manifest itself. According to Al-Farabi, if the inhabitants of different territories be naturally “moderate” and tend toward “intelligence and knowledge”(122) an advanced and complementary kind of working with language takes shape. It means that human beings with specific ethical and rational qualities, in a more advanced phase should venture these two tasks on the semantic and structural levels respectively (Germann 2015-2016, 149): to bring the constructed utterances close to [representational of] their pertinent “meanings”; and then organize the utterances in accordance with [mimetic of] the “organization” of the meanings (122). (Though, natural native language is not always exact and correct and sometimes it needs correction by qualified individuals.)



In this relation, the qualified distinguished individuals as wise men - who according to 130 can be oral transmitters of speeches; poems and memorizers of the historical reports - have the basic and initial capacity (123) to distinguish and classify different percepts, intelligibles, utterances and meanings (mainly into universal and individual) in order to make justifiable and reasonable connection; classification; and terminology. The result of such rational efforts is the production of different kinds of utterances such as ambiguous/مشكك; equivocal/مشتك; synonymous مترادف; and figurative / مجاز in different branches(124-127).

Accordingly, the native (not foreign), perfect, correct and standard natural language of each specific human community is shaped internally by those rational/moderate people who are born and live in their own community and shape their language as something habitual, familiar and friendly construct that over a long period of time, generation after generation, it is formed and transmitted to the next younger generations (128, 130). It is interesting that Al-Farabi narrates a familiar account for the shaping of the art of the knowledge of language / صناعت علم اللسان (132,138). This art is formed gradually by some interested individuals in language that take it through time from the native, accustomed, correct and unmixed language of the non-urban and natural (that according to 134 is equal to savage and wild) people who live in deserts and middle of the inhabited lands (133). And in this regard on the basis of Al-Farabi direct experience and knowledge, Arabic language and the Arabs have no privilege and different position in comparison with the other languages and people.

As a result, in the framework of the “medieval Muslim philosophical humanism”, and Al-Farabi’s “Aristotelian anthro-topological” account about language (and also the art of the knowledge of language), it comes out of the endeavors and doings of rational/logical (Carter 1997, 28,29), language (Makdisi 1990, 15;19;20) and social human beings in an evolutionary way in order to signify and represent (make mimesis of) what is in their minds of the things and share it with their fellow people.

## References

- George Makdisi, The Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West: With Special Reference to Scholasticism, Edinburgh University press 1990.
- Muhsin Mahdi, Alfarabi's Book of Letters (Kitab Al-Huruf) Beirut: Dar El- Machreq 2004.
- Leneshmidt, [http://www.leneshmidt-translations.com/alfarabi\\_book\\_of\\_letters\\_english/t2.htm](http://www.leneshmidt-translations.com/alfarabi_book_of_letters_english/t2.htm)
- Muhammad Ali Khalidi (editor), Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings , Cambridge University Press 2005.
- Michael G. Carter, in Humanism, Culture, and Language in the Near East: Studies in Honor of Georg Krotkoff, Eisenbrauns 1997.
- J. L Kraemer, "Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam: A Preliminary Study," JAOS 104 (1984).
- M. Arkoun. Contribution à l'étude de l'humanisme arabe au IVe / IXe siècle : Miskawayh (320/325-421) = (932/936-1030), philosophe et historien, Paris: J. Vrin 1970.
- Nadja Germann, Imitation – Ambiguity – Discourse: Some Remarks on al- Fārābī's Philosophy of Language, Melanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph, Volume LXVI – 2015-2016.
- Abd Al-Jawad Falatouri, Umgestaltung der griechischen Philosophie durch die islamische Denkweise, Cologne 1973.