

## **Al-Farabi on the Power of Language; The role of expression in the formation of societies**

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### **Abstract**

Al-Farabi has discussed language in his philosophical discussions, albeit here and there. His discussions are especially about syntax and logic. Most existing studies have dealt only with the connection between this syntax and logic, and with the conventionality or naturalness of language in Al-Farabi's thought. The question of this article is what are the political implications of Al-Farabi's discussions on language? The results of the study, based on the method of content analysis of Al-Farabi's works, indicate that Farabi specifically related the logic and logical crafts to his political thought; In such a way he expects the realization of the virtuous city on the basis of demonstration (Alborhan); And explains the existence of non-virtuous cities with crafts such as rhetoric, dialectic, poetry and sophistry. In other words, it is the expression which forms the city. These findings help us to analyze Al-Farabi's thought in our own time and ask ourselves what does Al-Farabi's thought has for us? By trying to come closer to the answer of this question I conclude the article with this claim that Al-Farabi's idea of non-virtuous cities is relevant to us today. What remains is our retainment.

### **Keywords:**

Farabi, language, syntax, logic, political application, society.

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## **Introduction**

It seems that without engagement with language no original thought would develop and no significant work could be done. Among the thinkers of the Middle Iranian history, Al-Farabi is of great importance in terms of works and ideas which although are not considered to be directly dealing with “language” as philosophy of language and its relation to politics, they discuss concepts which are related to language, such as “Words”, “letters”, “logic” and “enumeration of the sciences”; furthermore, most of these works discuss language and the linguistic existence of man in relation to human thoughts and actions. The question is, with regard to the status of language in the intellectual climate of Al-Farabi, what relation does he establish between language and power? In specific term, how does Al-Farabi relate the knowledge of logic to his system of political thought? The answer to the above question goes by the method of content analysis of Al-Farabi's works. Clear signs can be spotted which indicate that language plays a substantial role in understanding the political philosophy of Al-Farabi; to the extent that in his ideas about language, he deals with pragmatics, semantics and grammatical discussions, and as a result, he studies both the relationship between language and reality, and the connection between language and the mind. The logic determines the forms of various cities (Madine) .So, it is in the context of language that different types of politics, leadership and Medina are developed and different kinds of authority are formed.

### **1. Literature review**

Researchers have shown interest in the concept of language in the ideas of Al-Farabi both in order to understand his philosophy and to make the marginalized Islamic philosophy more applicable. Leo Strauss (1945 and 1952), in studying Plato's philosophy from the viewpoint of Al-Farabi, mainly focuses on the way of reading Al-Farabi's works and stresses that Al-Farabi, like Plato, uses esotericism and as a result his works are written in an abstruse political language. Strauss deals with some specific aspects of the ideas of Al-Farabi about language to support his claim. In this regard, Miriam Galston (1990) has followed the approach of Strauss and highlights the presence of esotericism in the works of Al-Farabi. There is no doubt that the language has a political role in Al-Farabi's works; but this being political is not because of its esotericism (see: Bahrani, 2014). In the introduction of his *Al-Huruf* (1969), Muhsin Mahdi considers the subject of Al-Farabi book to be language, though he believes that it is an interpretation of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Here, as well as in the article "Logic and Language in Classical Islam" (1970), Mahdi examines the relationship between logic and language and the

relationship between logic and syntax in Farabi's view on Prophet and revelation, and the relationship between philosophy and religion (Mahdi, 2001). Fuad Haddad (1978) tries to extract Al-Farabi's theory of language from his writings; in his next book (1989) he deals with human communication in Al-Farabi's philosophy and extracts the theory of linguistic communication from Al-Farabi's works. Shukri Abed (1991) discusses the Aristotelian logic and Arabic syntax in Al-Farabi.

Street (2013) deals with the historical context of Farabi's logical works. Germann (2016-2015) has addressed the question of whether the origin of language is natural or conventional for Al-Farabi, and in answer to this question, he has extracted an integrated approach. Another important research in this field is the article of Zargar (2019) who also focuses on the "nature of language" in Al-Farabi's works. None of these authors has paid attention to the political usages of language. Salim Kemal (2010), in his study of poetry in the ideas of Al-Farabi and Aristotle, deals with the semantic and grammatical aspects of language, however, he gives some consideration to the power of poetic language in exerting influence on others. What all these works lack is the relationship between language and authority in the ideas of Al-Farabi by referring to logic, which is the main focus of present study. In other words, here I want to show how Al-Farabi uses logical language as a form that shapes the content of thought and action.

## **2. Language and Politics**

Al-Farabi formulates a normative theory about the society and discusses the issue of language in different places. Most of Al-Farabi's works have somehow addressed the issue of language. His works can be divided into several categories; the first category reflects the cases of Al-Farabi's epistemology, the most important of which are *Fusus al-Hekam*, *Ihsa 'al-Ulum*, *Al-Madakhil Fi al-Manteq*, *al-Ma'ani al-Aql*, and *Al-Jami' bain Raye al-Hakimein* (فصوص الحكم، احصاء العلوم، المدخل في المنطق، رساله في المعاني العقل و رساله (الجمع بين راى الحكيمين). The second category of books and treatises that have dealt with the issue of speech and language: the book of letters, the book of words used in logic (*Utterances Employed in Logic*), the book of Rhetoric, the book of poetry, and the rules of the poetic knowledge. (كتاب الحروف، كتاب الالفاظ). (المستعمله في المنطق، كتاب في الخطابه، كتاب في الشعر، و قوانين صناعه الشعراء And the third category of works that are focused on the political aspect of his thought, which are the views of the members of *The Virtuous City*, *The war of Happiness*, *Aphorisms of the Statesman*, *Attainment of Happiness*, *Civic Politics* (آراء اهل المدينه الفاضله، التنبيه علي سبيل السعاده، الفصول المدني، رساله في تحصيل (السعاده و السياسه المدنيه).

The implications of the political importance of language in Al-Farabi's ideas can be discussed by referring to his works. In his *Ihsa' al-Ulum*, (1931) he considers linguistics as a field of knowledge. In *Sisah al-Madaniah*, (1982) Al-Farabi deals with the social and civic quality of man in the first chapter and, and in the second chapter he focuses on faculty of reason (thinking and speaking); while stressing that man needs to live in community to handle his affairs, he states that "two factors cause a distinction between communities: the habits and mores of the members of a community, which are generally influenced by celestial bodies and active intellect, and language which is by contract; language is used by human beings for speaking and communication. Based on these two factors some communities are small and some are large. Al-Farabi has adopted Aristotle's method in considering language as conventional. In *Fosul al-Muntazi'ah* (1985), he defines society at two levels as necessary and perfect, and differentiates between two kinds of *nutq* (نطق /speech). In the necessary city, the civic quality of individuals is defined through their cooperation in providing the necessities of life such food, clothing and procreation, and in the perfect city, individuals cooperate with each other in achieving the most significant things which form human beings' teleos. So, for the necessary city language is used as speech, and perfect city language is used as demonstration. Hence he introduces the logical categories in the definition of cities.

Al-Farabi's works on language indicate that he discusses language in terms of his own categorization of language, i.e. syntax and logic. It can be said that according to Al-Farabi, syntax technique express the meanings of words, as they are familiar to all people. This device is prior to logic, and logic precedes philosophy or the acquisition of knowledge; so logic is prior to all branches of philosophy, and is an introduction to all sciences which ought to be learned through "speech". (Al-Farabi, 1931: 57).

Language is of great importance to Al-Farabi because, along with syntax and logic, it is the tool for gaining knowledge of happiness, and since knowledge produces and conveys power, the language which is the tool for real/total knowledge, can produce real/total authority. Therefore, language in its logical form, in non-perfect cities, has the same function as in the perfect city, because it is through language that authorities in each city offer a conception of happiness (as the goal of community) and develop tools for its fulfillment. The only difference is that language in the perfect city achieves a teleos which is unique, and therefore power in the perfect city is exclusive and can be gained only through knowledge which is based on demonstration, and this power extends from the head of state to other authorities. (Al-Farabi, 1995: 78; 1931: 58).

In other words, Al-Farabi imposes two duties on the head of the state: offering a conception of happiness, and developing methods for its fulfillment. So, in the perfect city, the leader defines happiness through demonstration, which is the highest level of language in its broad meaning, but utilizes different techniques, such as rhetoric and poetry as well, which are the lower levels of language, to provide tools for their achievement. (Al-Farabi, 1985). The use of these lower levels of logical language also determines the lower forms of the city.

From his point of view, the word *mantiq* (logic منطق) is derived from *nutq* (نطق) and *nutq* denotes three issues: first, the power through which man perceives the intelligible, and through this sciences and techniques are achieved, and the proper and improper (good and bad deeds) are distinguished from each other; second, the intelligible which are perceived through understanding and thinking, and these two comprise the *nutq* of the inside, and third, the linguistic expressions of what is in the inside which is called *nutq* of the outside. The logic secures faculty of reason and prevents it from mistakes. (Al-Farabi, 1931).

Logic is both similar to and different from syntax in some respects. Syntax, regarding expressions and speeches, offers rules which are related to the language of a specific nation, while the technique of logic advances verbal rules common to all languages. Logic enables the leader to establish his perfect city through truth. Between syntax and logic, Al-Farabi favors logic because due to the plurality (diversity) in different kinds of grammars, power will be divided; but logic as the science of single thinking, disregards the linguistic plurality and differences, and offers unique knowledge of truth which provides the leader with a unique authority in defining happiness as the goal of society and directing it towards the fulfillment of the goal. It can be inferred that through syntax, which is diverse and related to outside aspect of speech, one can rule only a small number of people, but through logic, which is common among all languages and included the inside aspect of speech, one can rule over a large number of people and rules over their souls. (Ibid) As Al-Farabi divides communities into three kinds of small, medium and large groups it can be claimed that from the viewpoint of Al-Farabi governing large communities is possible only through logic (in the meaning Al-Farabi has in mind). Al-Farabi states that in the absence of logic, humanity is distorted. (Ibid).

It is of great importance that one of the conditions of the head of Medina is that he should be eloquent and fluent in speech; moreover, “the having languages”, i.e. the orators, poets and scribes, have the second place in the five stages of Al-Farabi’s perfect city. But the heads of the non-perfect

cities, lack high capacities of language and as result, in defining happiness or developing methods for its fulfillment, they employ sophistry or poetry. Therefore, language and linguistic techniques play their part in all kinds of city. Rhetoric as one category of logic is the ability to communicate with others to persuade them. The virtuous people use it in good deeds and the non-virtuous use it in evil (Ibid, 55). Evil is the case in which Al-Farabi recognizes the existence of non-virtuous cities and it is this aspect of his thought that works in our time. (I will return to this point).

### **3. The Logical Five Crafts and the Civic Categories**

If we want to find the trace of logic in the realm of politics it is importance to point out the functions of logic. Logic, for Al-Farabi, has two functions: one is its relation to the real world; and second, its importance in relation to moral matters.

From the first dimension, Al-Farabi, by explaining the contractual relationship between words and the intellects of those words, speaks of the naturalness of the relationship of the same intellects with beings outside the soul. Since the relation of the meanings of words to the outside world is based on human nature, the meanings of the words or rational perceptions as well as sensory perceptions are common to all human beings. (Zargar, 1398) The mind represents the outside world. According to his Aristotelian ontology, Al-Farabi sees the mind as a mirror in which the outside world is reflected. The criterion for the validity of this reflection is the theory of correspondence.

Ethically, each particular craft explains a particular way of being. While the demonstration (برهان) expresses complete correspondence or truth, other crafts project parts of this correspondence or truth. Hence, the civil teleos that is argumentative on the base of demonstration is considered absolute goodness and supreme happiness, which is wisdom (حکمت) and the city that is formed on the basis of this demonstrative goodness, is the virtuous city. Other cities are defined on the basis of other craft, which, due to their distance from the demonstration, also have a degree of validity.

So logic has both ontological and moral significance. It is the combination of these two aspects that highlights the issue of good and evil in Al-Farabi's thought. After explaining natural evil, Al-Farabi deals with voluntary evil (الشر الارادی): "Voluntary evil, which is the bad thing, is issued by man himself." In this phrase, Al-Farabi gives full responsibility to the commitment of evil to man himself (with the emphasis: "Voluntary evil is committed exclusively by human beings"). (Al-Farabi, 1982, p. 80). Of course, he stutters a little in explaining voluntary evil and writes: "Voluntary evil occurs as I say and that neither the imagination nor sense faculty (قوای متخیله و حساسه) can recognize the true happiness; Even the rational faculty (قوه

ناطقه) can't recognize happiness in all cases; ... There are many things that one can imagine that are the purpose of life, such as pleasurable and profitable things, and such as dignity and the like. So when man becomes incapable of completing the theoretical faculty of the soul and is unable to recognize happiness, and his appetitive faculty (قوه نزوعيه) does give him something as happiness that is not happiness, something like profitable things and pleasurable things or domination or dignity, and inclines towards it with the same faculty ... and all other rational, imaginative and sensitive faculties help him in these things, the voluntary evil happens completely." (Al-Farabi, 1982, p. 81).

Here, in explaining this group of non-virtuous cities, Al-Farabi returns the source of evil to ignorance or unawareness. But in fact, there is nothing ignorant here. As the definition of the virtuous city is based on the criterion of demonstration, the definition and explanation of the non-virtuous cities and their teleos is not based on ignorance, but on other crafts, namely sophistry, dialectic, rhetoric and poetry (سفسطه و جدل و خطابه و شعر), or in other words, on the imaginary and sensitive components of the soul, which, in his view, are contrary to demonstration and proofs or philosophy. Ignorance in his view is the lack of argumentative philosophy. The problem of deviation or being non-virtuous in these cities is not that their objects are ignorant. According to him, the objects of immoral city (الفاسقه) also have an understanding of happiness but do not pursue that understanding. "Also, when a person understands happiness and knows it, but doesn't realize it in his life, or have no desire for it, or show a weak enthusiasm to it, and put the actual end of his life something other than happiness, and use all faculties of the soul to reach that end, at this time all aspects of his life and what happens to him are evil." (Ibid, 81). Even Al-Farabi's attitude toward the misguided city (الضاله) doesn't lead to the fact that the members of those city lack knowledge. They imitate and accept and follow what others consider to be their happiness; so here, too, there is a degree of knowledge. In all non-virtuous cities, he pays attention to the categories of prosperity, virtues, justice, leadership, benefit and other political and social goods, except that he does not consider them real and, in his own words, the theoretical foundations of those goods do not arise from "correct philosophy"; they are the result of incomplete and distorted epistemological sources such as sophistry, dialectic, rhetoric and poetry. (Al-Farabi, 1990, p.87).

In other words, for Al-Farabi, what is evil equals what is not evil and is good. Al-Farabi introduces this goods in five categories: wisdom, dignity, wealth, pleasure, and freedom. (Al-Farabi, 1982 & 1985 & 1995). Based on these works, evil and good correspond to an epistemological system (or a

special logical craft) and, as a political consequence, they are intertwined with a political order; every good connects with a specific kind of knowledge and political system: argumentative philosophy (demonstration) crafts wisdom; Rhetoric crafts dignity; Dialectic causes wealth; Poetry creates pleasure; And sophistry creates freedom. These crafts introduce five cities, five leaders, and five human beings or the objects of state. The virtuous city, centered on the goodness of wisdom, is the proposition of demonstration. (البرهان = المدينة) (الفاضله). Other non-virtuous cities are also compatible with their own logical crafts. As sophistry explains the relations in the free city (المدینه = السفسطه) (الاحرار/ المدينة الجماعيه الخطابه = المدينة). Rhetoric propose s the city of dignity (المدینه = جندل = المدينة التغلبيه); the city of power is the suggestion of dialectic (الشعر = المدينة النذاليه/ بداله) (بداله)

What is the basis of all these classifications is the kind of knowledge that represents a certain logical craft which define the city and its relations through the presentation of the supreme good (teleos الغايه). While for him the foundation of the virtuous city is the priority of the craft of demonstration (and the knowledge derived from it, that is, philosophy or wisdom) over other crafts, he himself appeals to other methods of acquiring knowledge arising from various epistemological sources, like the crafts of rhetoric, dialectic and poetry.

Al-Farabi associates the faculties of the soul with the logical crafts. In the first step, all the five crafts are born of theoretical rational faculty (قوه ناطقه) (نظري). But if this power is weak, other sensitive, imaginative and poetic faculties can take control of the rhetoric and poetic and dialectic crafts. (Al-Farabi, 1982, p.45). By this criterion, man or his opinion and action on the subject of happiness (the good or the teleos of being in a city) are both based on the "faculty of reason; that such a human being is a virtuous human being and their society is a virtuous society. Or, at the other end of the spectrum, the opinion and action of some human beings to pursue happiness arises from the quasi-happiness. (السعادة المحكى). Such people are misguided who walk the path of error, and their community is a misguided community (المدينة الضاله). In the middle of these two ends of the spectrum, on the one hand, are human beings whose views and actions are both based on the faculties of the senses, imagination or sophistry (ie, imperfect philosophy); such a man is ignorant of the true happiness, and depending on what the other faculties of soul show for him as the supreme good, all kinds of necessary, stingy, vile, honorable, dominant, and free human beings (ضروري، خسيس، نذيل، كريم، غالب و حُر) are obtained, and the community of each of them would be communities of necessity, stinginess, vileness, dignity, domination and freedom. ( ضروريه، )



(خساسة، نذاله، كرامت، غلبه و حريه). The last type of man is a man whose opinion arises from the power of reason, but whose action is in contradiction with it. This man is a sinner and their society is a sinner (المدينه الفاسقه). (Ibid., P. 90; Al-Farabi, 1995, 45). All kinds of ignorant people and cities are involved in evil to varying degrees. In his view, all kinds of ignorant rulers, no matter how hard they try, cannot establish a virtuous community; Because the laws they issue are from sources other than philosophy (ie from sophistry, rhetoric, dialectic and poetry), and therefore their proposed policies for the city are non-argumentative and impure policies (Al-Farabi, 1995, p. 78; Al-Farabi, 1405, 66; Al-Farabi, 1986, Book of dialectic, Vol III, pp. 39-42.)

The perceptions of happiness, which arise from the logical crafts, not only represent the types of cities, but also the types of leadership. Therefore, in his view, leadership is of two kinds: "one who seeks true happiness (السعادت الحقيقية/ الغايه القصوى) and has two basic forces: the ability to have general rules and to be equipped with practice and experience; and the second who seeks quasi-happiness (السعادت المظنونه)". (Al-Farabi, 1931, pp. 66-64). So we can talk about the types of necessary, stingy, vile, honorable, dominant, and free leaders. Although they are looking for goods such as wealth, pleasure, power, etc., which are considered evil according to Al-Farabi because they are not "true", but their most important task is to acquire, maintain, distribute and survive those goods in a way that secure their community. The job of these leaders is to curb evil! Al-Farabi attributes the virtue to these leaders. "The virtuous leader in these cities is the one who can provide the most popular and desirable thing for the people of city with good planning, thought and contemplation; Of course, a leader who is truly virtuous is rejected and even killed among them." (Al-Farabi. 1982, p.101).

Overall, civil knowledge (العلم المدني) which is used in both virtuous and non-virtuous cities) has a strong connection with logic. This knowledge "includes the view of happiness, which is in fact happiness, as well as the happiness that is thought to be happiness and is not in fact happiness, as well as the view of matters that, if used in city, bring happiness to the people of city." (Al-Farabi, 1982, p. 73; Al-Farabi, 1986, pp. 59-57). Al-Farabi's civil knowledge is the science of dealing with the virtuous and non-virtuous cities simultaneously.

### **Conclusion**

The ideas of Al-Farabi about power of language can be considered from two aspects: first, through the role of language in facilitating human communities and forming them in which it causes transformation in authority from individual aspect to the collective aspect, which is manifested in "cooperation ; (تعاون)" secondly, with regard to different kinds of linguistic

expression, it helps the leaders to develop a specific form of city through providing a definition of happiness (الغايه ) teleos (and the means) tools (الفضائل) (for its fulfillment) (الردايل). In the first feature, language has a conventional position, and in the latter, language has innate or natural origin; especially since, according to Al-Farabi, not everyone can achieve rationality. The first is close to syntactic language and the second to logical language. According to Al-Farabi concepts such as happiness, justice, virtue, perfection, friendship, leadership and city have many meanings (الاشتراك في اللفظ), ranging from true to false, and here the role of syntax and logic is of importance in forming and finding teleos of a civil community and acquiring authority to fulfill it. Language can demonstrate its power when it moves beyond syntax and joins logic; syntax cannot bring about thought and knowledge on its own, but it only provides the ground for words and speech. It is the logic which provides language with the possibility of such a power. For Al-Farabi, all logical crafts are valid and their argumentations are justified. However, in his thought on virtuous city, he attaches importance to the craft of demonstration, and in the thought of his non-virtuous cities, he takes other crafts seriously.

The problem with al-Farab's idea of the virtuous city is that it does not recognize the issue of evil. But in other cities there are spaces where social evil is recognized, and so we can use logical crafts to control its instances. In this sense, his ideal is not our ideal. His philosophy, when it becomes absolute (that is, it ignores the limitations of man and city), deals with the virtuous city. This part of his philosophy cannot be considered philosophy or political philosophy for us, because it is outside the realm of human understanding and action about social evil. In other words, our argument in establishing and monitoring society is not a logical demonstration, but it is the problem of evil and its control by every craft that is suitable. As far as Al-Farabi's view of language, and especially logic, is concerned with power (and not the society), it cannot contain value for us in the modern situation. Language can then create value, and be powerful, that pursues the value of integration. This is the difference between traditional and modern utopianism: traditional utopianism referred to nowhere; the modern ideal, however, is something that can be achieved by ultimately manifesting itself in curbing and controlling the social evils (as like violence, suppression, exploitation...) in corporal, social and global relations.

The major point of this study is the explication of the fact that rationality must also be a matter of contract and convention. Human beings must learn to use her\his intellect in order to have social integration and a happy life. It is not that reason is specific to certain people whom Al-Farabi

refers to as philosophers. Rationality is a necessity of modern life. It is this necessity that legitimizes the modern age.

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