



Comparing the Views of Muhammad and Ahmad Ghazali on the Nature and Characteristics of Language

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Abstract

Muhammad and Ahmad Ghazali, two prominent Iranian thinkers of the sixth century, have thought-provoking views on the nature and characteristics of language. The present essay, written in a descriptive-analytical manner and with a phenomenological approach, examines and compares the views of these two brothers in the field of the nature and characteristics of language and tries to answer these two questions: Give that: 1- What are the similarities and differences between the opinions of the two brothers in the discussion of language opinions, especially "the nature of language"? 2- What approach does each of the Ghazalians use to explain the concept of language? The results of this study show that the examination of the concept of "what is language" is tied to the category of "heart" both in the eyes of

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Muhammad and in the eyes of Ahmad Ghazali; In other words, "heart" is the common point of two points of view. In the process of examining "language in the general sense", the opinion of both thinkers converges in reaching the area of "silence". But in the discussion of "language in a special sense", Mohammad Ghazali has a linguistic approach in the design and description of linguistic concepts and terms; That is, like a linguist, he examines language as an object. While Ahmad Ghazali's encounter with language is an existential encounter, and it is as if language is truly the house of existence for him.

Keywords: *Language in the Words of Muhammad Ghazali, Language in the Words of Ahmad Ghazali, The Nature of Language, Characteristics of Mystical Language.*

1. Introduction

The discussion of the nature and characteristics of language has long been among humanity's intellectual concerns. Thinkers from diverse disciplines have addressed this issue throughout history. Among them, two renowned scholars of the sixth century AH—who, intriguingly, were brothers—presented thought-provoking insights into the essence and qualities of language. These are Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali (450–505 AH), the eminent Shafi'i jurist, theologian, Sufi, and prolific writer of both Arabic and Persian works, and his brother Ahmad al-Ghazali (452–520 AH), a mystic primarily devoted to spiritual realization.

2. Literature Review

Mirdar-Rezaei and Baloo (2022) in their article "*The Nature of Language and its Components in the Thought of Imam Muhammad al-Ghazali*" have analyzed Muhammad al-Ghazali's linguistic views. However, no research so far has specifically examined "*Ahmad al-Ghazali's reflections on the nature and characteristics of language*" nor compared the linguistic perspectives of the two brothers. The present study fills this gap by exploring and contrasting their respective views on the essence and qualities of language.

3. Methodology

This paper, employing a descriptive–analytical method and based on documentary research, examines and compares the works of Muhammad and Ahmad al-Ghazali regarding their understanding of what language is. It seeks to answer two central questions: 1. What similarities and differences exist between the linguistic views of the two brothers, particularly concerning the "essence of language"? 2. From what

epistemological and mystical perspectives does each brother approach the explanation of language?

4. Results

The linguistic ideas of the Ghazali brothers can be categorized into three domains: (1) the heart (and its relation to language), (2) language in a general sense, and (3) language in a specific sense. A comparative reading reveals that both thinkers, in accordance with the intellectual paradigm of their time, link the concept of *language* to the notion of *heart (del)*. The “heart” functions as the common axis of both perspectives: each seeks to interpret language through the light of this inner faculty. For Muhammad al-Ghazali, the creation of humankind results from the union of *body* and *heart*—the outer and inner dimensions of being. The heart, as the essence of the inner world and the sovereign of the bodily kingdom, is the source of salvation or punishment and corresponds to soul, spirit, or self. For Ahmad al-Ghazali, whatever meaning or concept resides in the heart manifests itself through the vessel of language—the means of expressing inner realities. In this view, *language* is an instrument for articulating the meanings pre-existing in the heart. Mystic thinkers regard the heart as the locus of divine manifestation with all God’s attributes—first and last, outward and inward—so, just as God is beyond limits, the heart too defies true definition. The various manifestations of the heart in humankind thus mirror the diverse manifestations of God in the cosmos. Divine manifestation through the name *al-Zāhir* created the visible world, while manifestation through *al-Bāṭin* produced the unseen world.

In describing the general sense of language, the two brothers, while differing in approach, converge in the notion of *silence*. They meet at the threshold of quietude: for Ahmad al-Ghazali, silence is not mere muteness but a form of transcendence—*trans-silence*, a state beyond speech. His concept of the *heart* resembles Ferdinand de Saussure’s notion of *langue*—a system that transcends individual acts of speaking and exists as a collective mental repository, while *parole* represents the individual, voluntary act of speech. In this general conception, Ahmad al-Ghazali’s view also parallels Ludwig Wittgenstein’s “language-game” theory, wherein language comprises multiple games or functions corresponding to distinct forms of life. Ahmad suggests that within social life, each group or class possesses its own mode of speech and domain of meaning; every language functions as a window

into a particular form of human existence. To grasp a language game, one must participate in its form of life.

Regarding language in its specific sense, the brothers diverge sharply. Muhammad al-Ghazali adopts a linguistic–analytic approach, treating language as an object of study and identifying key aspects such as: 1. the relationship between *word (signifier)* and *meaning (signified)*; 2. the process of forming spoken language; 3. the evolution of written language; and 4. language as a functional tool. By contrast, Ahmad al-Ghazali approaches language existentially. When he speaks of language, his view is not *subject–object* but *subject–subject*, emphasizing participation and presence. His explicit awareness of linguistic diversity and of the human function of language, as seen in his analysis of “speech,” “silence,” and the meta-linguistic stage of mystical ascent, is highly significant. While Muhammad al-Ghazali focuses on the cognitive and expressive capabilities of language from an analytic perspective—tracing its development from mental conception to phonetic and written realization—Ahmad al-Ghazali views language as a dynamic manifestation of being within the path of mystical self-discovery

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