Context of Situation in Imam al-Ghazali's 'al-Mustasfa'

Introduction

This paper is not concerned with the life and thought of al-Ghazali or his book 'al-MustaSfa min Ilm al-USoul'. Rather, it primarily sets out to shed light on context of situation, a significant sociolinguistic topic addressed in-depth in the book. This important topic has a great bearing on unveiling the intended meaning and clarifying otherwise ambiguous discourse. In fact, al-Ghazali often resorted to the context of situation which plays an important role in incorporating meaning into discourse. He, amazingly, drew attention to the influence of habit, the speaker's social class, collocation, intonation, and body language on mapping out discourse meaning. On the other hand, he considered the context of situation a valid reference to decide the generality or specificity of discourse; on the other, it is a tool for unraveling its ambiguity and confirming probability. In this respect, he shows how the context of situation can spell out whether structures are used literally or metaphorically or whether their surface meaning is different from their underlying or intended import. All these aspects are investigated and compared in view of the insights of modern linguistics.

As for 'al-MustaSfa', al-Ghazali states that he wrote it when some students of linguistics incessantly requested him to write a book on the 'USuul al-Fiqh' (roots of philology)(2). What is noteworthy in the books of the Imaam, who died 900 years ago, is that he, being a philologist and philosopher, was conversed in the linguistic lesson in general and in the concept of context of situation in particular. Thus, he can be truly considered as one of those who laid the first bricks of this theory in Arabic some 900 years ago.

Context of situation in a broad perspective

In different contexts, the expression 'al-Hamdu li-llaah' (Praise be to God) have different meanings according to differences in place, time, speaker, situation and its pragmatic effect. Here are a few examples:

Context 1

When uttered by a sheikh after performing the prayer, the expression is used in its literal meaning which is 'Praise be to God' that is the general meaning which is always intended by Muslims in such a situation.

Context 2

In an Arabic social context, when a guest and his host are taking some food and suddenly the guest says 'al-Hamdu li-llaah, thanking God for this blessing, the host may repeat: 'al-Hamdu li-llaah?!', in astonishment, as if inviting his guest for more food. Here, the expression seems to have two meanings: thanking God for the meal and resenting the guest's act (i.e. finishing eating quickly). Thus, in this food context, the expression deviates from its literal meaning.

Context 3

Still in another context, when one is asked how he feels, he may reply with a broken heart 'al-Hamdu li-llaah'. Here, the man's intonation reflects his noticeable misery. Furthermore, the utterance may be accompanied by some body movements that further point to the poor man's conditions. In this context, the expression is meant as a complaint. Therefore, the other person may respond by asking, 'What is wrong with you?'

Now, it is worth delving into the context of situation theory in al-Ghazali's MustaSfa. This is done through collecting its scattered aspects, putting them under clear titles and comparing them with related views in modern linguistics

Context of situation and probability

The meaning of a word or a sentence out of context may be difficult to unravel accurately. Al-Ghazali alludes to this in his book (27), when he talks about the connotation of 'water'. Drawing on our linguistic knowledge, we all know what the expression denotes, yet 'water' can be fresh, pure, salty, or stagnant. It can also be used by animals. Still, it can be hot, cold, or lukewarm. When the term is used in vacuum, which of these meanings is intended? In fact, the context of situation including the participants' conditions, the time and the place of the utterance can resolve this dilemma. For example, in the context of a family sitting at the dining table, 'water' refers to 'pure, fresh and cold drinking water' (28). What is interesting here is that the speaker does not specify any kind of water, but rather leaves the context to explain his intention.

Effect of intonation on communication

Al-Ghazali draws the attention to the effect of intonation on communication. Variation in the rising and falling pitch creates variation in meaning. For instance, the utterance "Mohammad has come" may be indicative, interrogative, or exclamatory depending on the type of intonation accompanying it. This, on the other hand, cannot be determined in written language. Firth asserts that "absence of intonation in the study of grammar renders it incomplete, and this equally applies to the study of spoken discourse without intonation" (30).

The Imam indirectly implies that intonation is a determinant factor of meaning. For example, the utterance "assalaamu 'alykum" (peace be upon thee) may imply greeting or insult (31).

The structure between reality and metaphor

This is also another issue that leads to ambiguity if an expression is divorced from its context. However, this is not intrinsic in the language system, but rather part of the style the speaker employs when enunciating his utterance. An utterance may be construed superficially (41). Al-Ghazali touched upon this issue and asserted that an expression conveys reality unless there is evidence that it is used metaphorically (42). For example, the structure of the utterance "I saw a donkey today, and I met a lion on the road" is fluctuating between reality and metaphor as the expression 'donkey' may mean 'dull' or a real donkey. This equally applies to the expression 'lion'. In fact, disambiguating the above example can be achieved by consulting the social context wherein the utterance was made. The Imam remarks that "dull and brave necessitate further evidence, otherwise the expressions refer to the donkey and the lion" (43).

Al-Ghazali then comes to grips with the ancillary issue of the "dead metaphor" (44) which he describes as the abandoned metaphor. It is known that expressions have a duly changing nature, the thing that leads to their development and different connotations, such as generality, specificity or sublimity" (45). This is not what the Imam meant. Rather he believed that an expression which was once used as a metaphor can be used to convey reality at the present. As an example, the Imam gives the expressions "gha'iT" (human waste) and "athira" (urination). The former originally means "low" (46), while the latter originally denotes "house yard" (47), as people used to urinate in yards. However, the meaning of the latter has become "urination" (46) because if a man wanted to "get rid of the waste material" he would

go to a low piece of land (48). Thus, the socio-cultural context and decorum have resulted in this linguistic evolution. If used to convey the traditional (old) meaning, the previous expressions will be ambiguous, for the traditional meaning has become archaic or even completely abandoned. "But if a metaphor becomes a traditional expression, then the tradition prevails" (49).

Generality and specificity

There is an ongoing debate that revolves around three approaches. These concern specificity, generality and probability respectively. Proponents of the first approach believe that the word, atheist, for example, specifies a particular atheist rather than indicating them all. On the contrary, proponents of the second hold that the word has a holistic meaning, so if it is used to indicate 'some', it becomes contrary to the truth. Those who advocate the third approach, however, think that the term can probably refer to some or all according to what the speaker/writer actually intends (15).

al-Ghazali discusses this notion in five chapters. In these, he addresses the contrast between the general issues, the specific evidence, the potential general, the form of the general, the exceptions and the conditionals. (16) He mainly focuses on whether or not the Arabs have a form of generality. It is noteworthy that the main issue he addresses is the context of situation as the determinant factor, in most cases, of the specific and the general. Therefore, he very often, opts for external elements laden with connotations such as the speaker's body movements, his apparent qualities, signs, and habits that relate to the specific and/or the general. The Imam's final judgment in this respect is that "Generality is evidenced in the speaker's signs, movements, facial expressions, and his habits and intentions in addition to other

elements that cannot be assigned to a single category but are rather like signs indicating shyness or cowardice". (17)

An important element in al-Ghazali's approach is his delving into the real picturesque verbal activities which are encoded in expressions clarifying the social, communicative act. He sometimes examines some interesting matters in order to (in)validate generality. Of such matters are religious, linguistic and mental views together with some social circumstances relevant to the communicative act. One of the chapters in his book revolves around the notion that "generality has no place in oral communication" although it is difficult to determine generality or specificity in a written text. But the context of situation of that text can resolve this ambiguity. The example al-Ghazali cites in this concern is when a man says to all his wives: 'You are divorced', generality will have no room here, though apparently it does exist. But the context of situation of this speech event points to specificity. To explain this, the Imam notes that the divorced wife is the one who is addressed face-to-face by the man (18). Another example is when a man meets a group of young and adult people and says: 'Ride with me.' Here the man definitely means those who can ride will do, so his speech is meant to address some of them (19).

Between generality and specificity

Al-Ghazali indicates a stylistic rule that is inherent in Arabic discourse. That is, a person may express generality while intending specificity. A case in point is when one says, 'A killer does not inherit anything', and another comments, 'The executioner and the one who kills for retaliation,' then the potential generality in the first speaker's speech is removed by his asking, 'What do you mean?' (20). The question shows the person's ignorance of the implied meaning (21). The Imam also asserts that "specificity is commonly implied by generality" (22), and this is decided

by the context of situation. The reader should not however think that the Imam resorts only to the context of situation in determining the degree of generality and/or specificity. For he remarks that specificity can be indicated verbally, which shows the importance of the textual component in removing ambiguity. For example in saying, "all the students have come to class" (23). On the other hand, specificity is apparent when there is evidence as when a sick man says to his servant (24), "Don't let people come in," but the boy lets a group of nasty people come in under the pretext that they were not meant by his master (25).

Stylistic variation

The Arabic verb is of three types: present, past and imperative. However, this classification does not determine the time of the verb outside the context. Assuming that "yatahajjad" (to pray) is present is not always correct. It may be past or future in certain contexts. Al-Ghazali remarks that positive and negative imperative can also be decided by the social context. For example, the imperative does not always stipulate consent to carry out what is being ordered (32). Imperative, in Arabic, can convey threat as in saying "do whatever you like", or permission as in "when you finish the 'haj' (pilgrimage) rituals, hunt freely" (33). In the later case, if the imperative means command, 'hunting' becomes obligatory for every one who completes the 'haj' rites. The Imam cites fifteen contexts where the imperative can function differently, in seven of which it means negative imperative as this is used in Arabic for prohibition, hatred, insult, admonition, invocation, and instruction. On the other hand, positive imperative can mean necessity, advice, permission, courtesy, insult, etc. (34). Drawing on some previous linguists, Al-Ghazali wonders whether or not the imperative form "if'al" (do) necessitates order without any contextual clues (35). In his "Mustasfa", the Imam seems to be divided between the co-textual and contextual

contexts. Accordingly, the form 'if'al' acquires its functional value from the co-text and the context (36). Some linguists hold that the mere form (if'al) denotes command (37). They claim that if uttered by a sleeping person or a lunatic, it will not be so (38). In fact, al-Mubarred, before the Imam, held that forms may be similar on the surface but different in their underlying propositions. Invocation, request, order, and negative imperative are but a few examples. Here, al-Mubared argues that "invocation can be command or negative imperative, but the former is called command and the latter negative imperative for the clarity of meaning. The form is the same as when you say, May God forgive me, and May God not cut Zaid's arm, etc." (39).

Al-Ghazali spells out the advantage of context in clarifying the meaning in the expression "fast" (refrain from eating and drinking) which is ambiguous and may have three probable meanings out of context. 1) The verb itself may stipulate submission or more preferably selectivity. 2) As for the time, fasting should be done either spontaneously or can be deferred. 3) As for the amount, it can be done now and then throughout one's life. The Imam attributes this ambiguity to the lack of the context which explicates the intended meaning of the expression (40).

Marginal connotations and emotive meanings

Surprisingly, al-Ghazali draws attention to the marginal connotations of the speaker's/writer's psychological and emotional feelings that can undoubtedly be added to the central connotation which is part and parcel of the textual structure. This results in a difference between two meanings of some lexical items, the first is the referential meaning and the other the emotive, marginal one. The latter refers to emotional implications and peripheral meanings which vary according to individuals, cultures and intuition (54). A case in point is the connotation of the word 'sea' which is ominous to those who lost some dear person(s) in it and a refuge to others. The

referential meaning is the same in the two cases, but the connotative meaning is different. Olman remarks that a word may have many emotive connotations. One is that the term itself may invoke emotions and strong feelings; another is that the term may refer to strong ethical values, such as freedom, justice and right or to good or bad qualities as good, bad, mean, kind, etc., all of which have emotional connotations (55).

In fact, Olman's conclusions have been arrived at by al-Ghazali who started with what al-Mu'tazila believe with regard to the actions they classified as good or bad. Al-Ghazali refuted their conceptions and devised his own opinion according to which actions are generally divided into three types: the first refers to those actions that agree with the doer's purposes; those that contradict his; and the third indicates the undecided actions that may agree or disagree with his purpose. Users of languages, therefore, vary with respect to their emotive connotations and marginal meanings. Al-Imam cites the example of the terms 'murder' and 'black'. When a king is murdered this will be applauded by his enemies and condemned by his followers. Similarly, some people find a black person beautiful; others view him ugly. Thus, good and bad or beautiful and ugly are contingent upon people's reactions (56).

Impact of habits on meaning

Al-Ghazali considers the language user's habit in communication as having some bearing on the meaning of his discourse. It sometimes provides an index of the intended meaning, whether it be specific or general. We are referring here to Firth's theory concerning the speaker/listener relationship (57). An example of this is when someone says, "give whoever enters my house what he needs," and everyone knows that the speaker does not befriend bad people. This knowledge rules out what may strike the hearer's mind. The hearer may ask for more clarity, "even if he was an

atheist and nasty!". Here, the hearer judges by what he knows of the speaker's habit, which is something recommended since the speaker does not customarily refer to nasty people (58).

The speaker's habit is also reiterated by the Imam within the social context when he discusses what he calls "the factors of informativity". He holds that the speech event has to be supported by some factors. If one factor is missing, the speech act may be less or more informative (59). However, al-Ghazali does not leave this matter open-ended. Instead, he believes that other factors may be brought into play and make up for the missing factor (60). The example he cites is when five or six people were informed of the death of someone, this speech event is supported by the context and those people's conditions. The factor that complements informativity is the involvement of the dead person's father in the speech event (61).

Beyond the words

The said and the unsaid

At another linguistic level, al-Ghazali draws the attention to the fact that the meaning of an utterance is not the total meaning of its constituent lexical elements. Other verbal and nonverbal determiners play an important role in creating the meaning. Thus, browsing through 'al-Mustasfa', the reader comes across clues to this effect. Of these is when meaning is sought solely on the basis of the word forms, which can be misleading (62). He also adds that it is not the forms of words but their content and implication that help in creating the meaning of an utterance. The speaker's movement/expression may convey more meaning than the forms of his words (63). Indeed, in our daily use of language, body movements play a major role in communication. In his 'Mustasfa', al-Ghazali allots a whole chapter to addressing

"understanding what is unsaid from the context" (64). This has been confirmed by John Loyns, among others. Loyns remarks that the meaning of a word is more than what is said or what is previously presupposed, and the context is strongly related to the meaning of language units (65). Lyons also asserts that some of the unsaid is more important to meaning than what is said. For example, in our communication we very often use implicit meanings that are not directly relayed by the actual words we use (66). Lighter's views are in line with those suggested by the Imam (67).

At this point, a socio-linguistic idea strikes the mind, that is the speaker may allude to what is not said by what is said, and the recipient picks up the unsaid as an important contextual index. For example from Al-Mustasfa , is when one of the two persons who have already started doing a particular activity, suddenly says, "God, what a hot day!", and the other, who is willing to continue working, responds by opening the window or switching on the fan, etc. Thus, the first speaker did not in fact intend to exclaim or to inform but rather to request something, and hence his utterance had a pragmatic effect on the hearer who undertook the task of compiling with the request.

Complete/incomplete discourse

The sleeping speaker

The Imam defines the 'statement' as something that can be true or untrue as in saying "Zaid is awake" (74). He found this definition incomplete without a specific context. After all, Zaid may be awake or not. If said by a sleeping or an intoxicated speaker, it would not be a true statement at all. But it becomes a true statement when intended to be so by a sober speaker (75). Thus, al-Ghazali takes into consideration the tenor (the speaker-hearer relationship) and the communicative setting in his definition of the term 'statement'. In other words, the Imam visualizes language as a

code that has to poles which attract the speech event, so the statement is not true unless attested by the context (76).

The speaker's intention

The Imam argues that in order for the discourse to be interpreted accurately (77), the speaker, who is the first pole, has to relay his message using the language code that is intelligible to the addressee. For the speaker can use the language code to gibber meaningless discourse. One cannot say "abjad hawaz" (a, b, c, d etc.) while intending to ask people to do the prayers or to fast" (78).

The third factor in creating discourse is, as previously mentioned, that addressing animals or inanimate objects is not discourse at all. This includes the discourse made by a mad person or an infant (79).

Discourse, to al-Ghazali, is not maintained only by uttering but this should be supported by the context. For instance, the word "ain", may mean different things such as "an eye", "the sun", and "the scales". But when we say that "the color can be recognized by the eye" the other two meanings would be completely implausible (80). The Imam gives the word "creation" as another example of a word that may have different meanings to show how the intended meaning can be worked out of the given context (81). Still another example is the Quranic verse "Woe to praying people" which will not be understood unless it is continued and then we know that 'woe' will befall those who do not observe their prayers strictly or those who pray out of hypocrisy (82).

Meaning-indicative clues

Al-Ghazali recognizes verbal and non-verbal clues in indicating the intended meaning. The latter does not stem from the structure but from certain social acts or

signs (83). A sign, to Ibn Hazm, can be made by words or by senses (84). Al-Baji asserts that meaning can be indicated by the word, the act, the signal, and the context" (85).

Meaning, to the Imam and al-Jahiz, involves five factors: the word, the signal, al-aqd (kind of math), writing and the context (86). Signaling can be by the hand, the head, the eye, the eyebrow or the shoulder (87). To al-Jahiz, the signal and the word are partners, and the signal can often replace the word (88). Contemporary linguists have considered these functional clues which sometimes play the role of actual words (89). Some of them address those clues as part of body language, which is actually meant by the Imam and al-Jahiz (90).

As for understanding discourse, al-Ghazali states that the text may be ambiguous without some contextual clues. These can be of three types: explicit words, mental images, and the clues of signals, signs, movements, etc. (91). Of these are the clues related to senses and expressed via body language. Often than not, the Imam views these clues as separate from the words, as is held by some fundamentalists (92). It is dubious that there is a consensus as to whether or not the speaker's movement, manners, habits, changeable color and facial expressions, head movement and eyes are part of his speech. Rather, these are independent clues that have particular meanings (93). Some of such meanings are, the Imam suggests, what we know about the lover's feelings by his acts nor by his words (94). Some modern linguists have dwelled on the speaker's facial expressions (95) as part of the important clues to meaning. In the socio-linguistic context, these clues ensure continuity of discourse (96). Of these are the movements of the hand, the face, the yes, the way one sits and stands (97). Al-Ghazali argues that these clues are not specific to a particular

type and are indescribable (98). Finally, whoever seeks meaning merely from words will lose the thread of communication.

We would like to end this article as we started it (99) by asserting our admiration, re-emphasis, and denial. al-Ghazali's establishing the importance of context to students of linguistics and which has later been taken over by modern linguistics merits our admiration. We also re-emphasize the significance of this notion in revealing the intended meaning, the thing that Olman describes as the cornerstone in semantics (199). Finally, we deny the modernists unfounded claim that this notion is their creation, and the notion context of situation has never been addressed before.

Footnotes

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