

# Handout for ‘Syntax and meaning in al-Sīrāfī and Ibn Sīnā’

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## 1. Blind adherence to Aristotle

(a), (b) Sīrāfī reported in D. S. Margoliouth, ‘The discussion between Abu Bishr Matta and Abu Sa’id al-Sirafi on the merits of logic and grammar’, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 1905, 79–129.

(a) . . . your next point would appear to be that there is no evidence save the intellects of the Greeks, no demonstration save what they invented, and no verity save what they brought to light. (p. 114)

(b) I will not release you till the spectators are convinced that you are an impostor and a cheat. Here is something yet easier. One man says to another, “How much are the two dyed garments?” Another says, “How much are two dyed garments?” Another says, “How much are two garments, dyed?” Explain the senses which these several questions contain. (p. 123)

(c) Ibn Sīnā, *Mašriqiyyūn* 3.1–5 trans. Gutas:

(c) But [Aristotle’s] successors were unable to free themselves of the imperfections of what they inherited from him, and they spent their lives in efforts to understand what he accomplished best and in Partisan Adherence (*ta‘aṣṣub*) to some defective theories he originated. These people occupy themselves all their lives with what has already been done, neither finding time in which to consult their own minds nor, had they found it, thinking it permissible to consider the statements of the ancients in need of addition, correction, or revision.

(d) Ibn Sīnā, *Qiyās* 41.10–15:

(d) But the absolute proposition itself doesn't have to have either of these latter two meanings ... specifically, and it's unhelpful that the definitions given in the First Teaching always interpret the content in [one of these two ways]. One ought to look for an account of all this that covers the broad range. Perhaps it is that [the subject] is said to be an *A* so long as some affirmative condition holds. It so happens that we have here a case of the error that we mentioned earlier; in fact what the condition expresses is about something like time. [The result is that] even when we have the contradictory negation, we can't operate with it intuitively.

## 2. Statements as artefacts

(a) Sīrāfī reported in D. S. Margoliouth, 'The discussion between Abu Bishr Matta and Abu Sa'id al-Sirafi on the merits of logic and grammar', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 1905, p. 123.

(a) Now the word 'garment' is applied to a number of things by which the object became a garment: it was woven after being spun, and its warp will not suffice without its woof, nor the woof without the warp; the composition of the discourse is like the weaving, its elegance resembles the exercise of the fuller's art on the garment; the fineness of the thread resembles the beauty of the sound; and the coarseness of the spinning resembles the harshness of the letters. The sum of the whole is a garment, but only after the performance of all the necessary operations.

(b) Ibn Sīnā, *Qiyās* 6.4–12. Cf. *Madkal* 22.1–7 comparing the construction of a house with the construction of a compound meaning.

(b) Proof is an art in which an aim is achieved. Every art is composed of a matter and a form, and the products of the art are distinguished both by their matter and by their form. Sometimes the form is excellent but the matter is not, as when a house happens to be built with rotten wood and clay that consists of manure, but the form and the design are just as they should be ... And sometimes the matter is excellent but the form is not excellent, when a house happens to be built with solid wood and solid stones, but no attention was paid to its construction and situation and harmony and shape, so the advantage of the quality of its wood and stone goes missing, resulting in corruption of the form. And sometimes the two things come together. So likewise reasoning can be infected by corruption.

(c) Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (late 11th c), *Dalā'il*, trans. Kamal Abu Deeb in *Al-Jurjani's Theory of Poetic Imagery*, Aris and Phillips, Warminster 1979, p. 36.

(c) Know that the composer of speech is like a man who takes a number of pieces of gold or silver and melts them one in another until they all become one piece. For when you say 'Zaid hit 'Amran on Friday very hard in order to correct him', you get from the combination of these words a single conceptual complex which is one meaning and not several meanings.

### 3. Speech acts

(a) Sīrāfī *Šarḥ* ii.395.10f.

(a) What makes [a description] praise and commendation or abuse and mockery is the intention (*qaṣd*) of the speaker.

(b) Ibn Sīnā, *ʿIbāra* 31.8–15. This is a comment on Aristotle *De Int* 4, 17a2 'Not every sentence is declarative'.

(b) There are also other kinds of compound expression. This is because the need for the phrase is due to its signifying what is in one's mind, and this signifying is either intended for its own sake, or it is intended for something else that [the speaker] expects to get from the interlocutor. When the signifying is intended for its own sake, it communicates information, either straightforwardly or obliquely. Communicating obliquely can be for example expressing favour or surprise, though in each case it derives from the information content. When the intention of the signifying is to get something from the interlocutor, this thing can be another signifying, or it can be an action and not a signifying. If another signifying was wanted, then the conversation will be an enquiry or a question. If what was wanted was for [the person addressed] to perform some kind of deed or action rather than a signifying, then if [the speaker] has equal status [with the person addressed] it is described as pressing; if [the speaker has ] higher status it is described as a command or a prohibition; if lower status then it is described as begging or request.

(c) Ibn Sīnā, *Mašriqiyyūn* 60.3–11. Cf. Ibn Sīnā. *Išārāt* iii.1 Remark, 'Concerning the types of proposition'.

(c) We consider atomic meanings and expressions. (With them we consider meanings and expressions with 'non-' [added to something atomic]; these are in effect atomic, and it would be legitimate to use an atomic expression to signify the same as they signify.) These items can occur in forms of composition that are not all primarily aimed at assertion or denial; in fact many of these compositions have other aims. Thus when I say

(1) Give me a book.

the primary sense that you find for this sentence is not one that is appropriate for truth or falsehood. Nevertheless it does have another sense which in a way signifies the situation, namely that one meaning leads to another meaning that is appropriate for truth or falsehood, because you can become aware from this [utterance] that

(2) He wants the book.

Likewise when he says

(3) Maybe you could give me ...

or

(4) If only you would give me ...

or

(5) Have you got anything that would explain ...?

or similar things, then in all of these cases there is no primary sense that is appropriate for truth and falsehood, though they do have a secondary sense which is of course appropriate for truth and falsehood.

#### 4. Irrelevance of the first imposition

(a), (b) Ibn Sīnā, *ʿIbāra* 3.6–17 and *Madkāl* 25.15–18 on how meaning depends on the current decisions of the speaker.

(a) It makes no difference whether (1) an expression is a thing of inspiration and vision which the first teacher learned from Allah the Exalted; or (2) the character of the expression arose from giving the meaning a sound that is linked to it, just as ‘cutting’ (*qaṭā*) is so-called because of how it sounds ; or (3) people met and made a conventional agreement; or (4) one of these happened in the first place and then [the signification] was converted by gradual steps into something different without anybody realising, or (5) different cases apply to different expressions. In fact signification is by convention, I mean that there is no necessity for any person to apply any particular expression to any particular meaning, and there is nothing in human nature to bring people to such a position. Rather, a successor would agree a meaning with his predecessor as the predecessor passed it down to him. We can imagine the predecessor making an agreement with his successor to use, instead of the expression he used himself, another expression that was inherited or newly invented. So the second person would be taught it, and he would have a decision to make about whether to use it, just like his predecessor’s decision. So even if there was a first teacher who taught people these expressions, and the way they worked out just from Allah the Supreme, who made an imposition or arranged it in some other way — whatever you want, still the significations of expressions could well be different from how [Allah] worked them out if in fact he did make a imposition. Hence this richness [of language].

(b) Thus the expression in itself doesn’t have a signification at all; otherwise every expression would carry a criterion that comes from its meaning and doesn’t go beyond it. In fact it just signifies according to the intention of the utterer. The utterer sends it out to signify a meaning, like the *ʿayn* which is the water source, and so that becomes its signification. Then he sends it out to signify another meaning, like the *ʿayn* that is a dinar coin, so that that becomes its signification.

(c) Sīrāfī *Šarḥ* ii.342.7–9 on imposition of ‘this’.

(c) A proper noun is imposed on a thing in connection with its properties, so that by it the thing is distinguished from other individuals. This is like the way that ‘this’ is imposed by pointing to a specific thing. So the two [(the proper name and ‘this’)] share a meaning (*ma<sup>c</sup>nā*) in the way we described. What makes them definite is their primary properties; the pointing involved in imposing the noun on that unique thing is like the imposition through [actually] pointing at the thing.

## 5. Explicit and implicit meanings

(a) Ibn Sīnā, *Najāt* 12.14f (Daneshpazuh). Cf. Kees Versteegh, *Landmarks in Linguistic Thought III: The Arabic Linguistic Tradition* ch. 11 on the linguistic and theological Zāhirists, including Ibn Sīnā’s younger contemporary, the Andalusian theologian and logician Ibn Ḥazm.

(a) The opinion of the Zāhirist logicians boils down to saying that the essential is what is said in answer to ‘What is it?’. But in fact the essential includes more than this.

(b) is Ibn Sīnā’s introduction of the ‘conditions for contradiction’ at *‘Ibāra* 43.8–44.7. He refers back to this passage often in the *Šifā’* (e.g. *‘Ibāra* 45.9, 102.12 and *Safsata* 22.3, 28.4f, 97.1). See also *Mašriqiyyūn* §17 ‘Testing the predicate’ for a long list of similar conditions.

(b) I mean that the affirmation and the denial are genuinely opposites. And this opposition is determinate if the meaning in the affirmation is determined from every aspect, so that the denial includes all these same [determinations]. I mean that the subject is a single meaning, and likewise the predicate, and that any part [of the proposition] giving the intended aspect of the subject or the predicate is kept the same. So it is not as when someone says

(6)           The human sees.

i.e. with his eye, then says

(7)           I mean that the human doesn’t see with his hand.

and people think (6) and (7) are opposites. Or when it is said

(8) The Ethiopian is black (i.e. in his skin).

then it is said

(9) [The Ethiopian is not black (i.e. in his flesh).

and people think that this is an opposite opinion. And if one of the two meanings is taken in a potential sense then the other has to be taken in a potential sense. Thus if one said

(10) Alcohol is forbidden.

meaning what is in fact alcoholic, and it is also said

(11) Alcohol is not forbidden.

meaning things that are naturally alcoholic but have since become denatured, people think that there are opposite opinions here. [The same goes for] place if a place is intended, or the time if a time is intended, or any aspect or consideration or relation if one is intended. An example of aspect is saying that a body has been modified, i.e. in its colour, and not modified, i.e. in its dimensions. An example of relation is saying that three is half, i.e. of six, and not half, i.e. of ten. The fact is that a proposition in its intended meaning is not true or false at all, or conceded or rejected, or even conceptualised, to say nothing of its having an opposite, unless it is determinate in terms of all the attachments to its meaning that we have mentioned. When there is an affirmation from one of these angles, then its denial has to be from the same angle.

## 6. Grammatical meanings

(a), (b) Sīrāfi *Šarḥ* i.177.10f and ii.346.1f.

(a) And likewise ‘Zayd hit <sup>c</sup>Amr’, the vowel of ‘Zayd’ is different from the vowel of ‘<sup>c</sup>Amr’, corresponding to a difference of the two meanings (*ma<sup>c</sup>nā*), since one of the two is agent and the other is object.

(b) [This expression] is allowable together with ‘this’, because if he said ‘This all man’, then it would be allowable and it would signify the meaning (*ma<sup>c</sup>nā*) of exaggeration.

(c) Ibn Sīnā, <sup>c</sup>*Ibāra* 38.4–12. The ‘third element’ is surely based on Aristotle’s *trítton* (*De Int* 10, 19b19), though Aristotle seems to mean a part of the sentence and Ibn Sīnā is explicit that he is talking about a part of the meaning.

(c) So if it’s intended that the [outer] expression should run parallel to the inner heart [of the proposition], the expression needs to contain three signifying elements: an element that signifies the meaning of the subject, a second element that signifies the meaning of the predicate, and a third element that signifies the connecting link between the two meanings. The bringing together of [HUMAN] and [ANIMAL] in the mind, and the contemplation of both of them together without further information about them, doesn’t make it determinate that either of the two is predicate or subject, or more generally that either of them is related to anything. So if you left out the expression that signifies this attachment, then you would just leave out what the mind relies on, and you would leave out what indicates a syntactic relation attaching to one or both of the expressions in an attachment that signifies this meaning (*ma<sup>c</sup>nā*). We can have here a syntactic device to signify this meaning without needing any separate expression that plays this role. But having one of the expressions follow immediately after the other doesn’t in itself signify how the two meanings are related to each other by a kind of signifying that comes from the two expressions being put together.

(d) Ibn Sīnā, <sup>c</sup>*Ibāra* 19.7–9:

(d) It is not far-fetched to think that if ‘I am walking (*‘amšī*)’ is a compound or in effect a compound, then also ‘He is walking (*yamšī*)’, which is neither true nor false, will be a compound. Then the *yā’* will signify something obscure.

For Aristotelian compositionality, Wilfrid Hodges, ‘Formalizing the relationship between meaning and syntax’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Compositionality*, ed. M. Werning, W. Hinzen and E. Machery, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2012, pp. 245–261.