

Reconstructing Implicit Meaning: *Dalālat al-Muqtadā* and the Challenge of Non-Cancellable Implicature in Arabic– English Translation

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Abstract

This paper examines the concept of *dalālat al-muqtadā* (دلالة المُقتَضَى) *the implicature of what is required by the utterance* a key notion within the Arabic linguistic and jurisprudential tradition of *uṣūl al-fiqh* (أصول الفقه) (principles of Islamic jurisprudence), and investigates its relevance to contemporary translation studies between Arabic and English. Rooted in the classical taxonomies of meaning (*dalālah*, دلالة) developed by Muslim scholars such as **al-Ghazālī** (الغزالي, d. 505/1111), **al-ʿAllāma al-Ḥillī** (العلامة الحلي, d. 726/1326), and **al-Shāṭibī** (الشَّاطِبِي, d. 790/1388), *dalālat al-muqtadā* refers to the meaning that is necessarily implied by a given linguistic expression, beyond its explicit semantic content. The paper argues that this classical concept shares significant theoretical terrain with Western pragmatic theories of implicature — particularly Grice's conversational implicature and Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory — while also possessing distinctive features shaped by the unique grammatical and rhetorical structures of Arabic.

By conducting a comparative analysis of these frameworks and presenting case studies drawn from **Qur'ānic** (القرآن), legal, and literary texts, the paper demonstrates that translating *dalālat al-muqtadā* requires translators to navigate complex layers of implied meaning that conventional translation strategies often fail to capture. The study proposes an integrated analytical model that combines classical Arabic *dalālah* theory with contemporary pragmatic approaches, offering translation practitioners a more robust toolkit for handling implied meaning in Arabic–English translation.

Keywords: *dalālat al-muqtadā* (دلالة المُقتَضَى); Arabic linguistics; *uṣūl al-fiqh* (أصول الفقه); translation studies; implicature; pragmatics; Arabic–English translation; Relevance Theory

ملخص

تبحث هذه الورقة في مفهوم دلالة المقتضى — أي ما يلزم من دلالة يقتضيها اللفظ — وهو مفهوم جوهري ضمن التقليد اللغوي والاصولي العربي في أصول الفقه (مبادئ الفقه الاسلامي)، وتستقصي اهميته لدراسات الترجمة المعاصرة بين العربية والانجليزية. يستند مفهوم دلالة المقتضى الى التصنيفات الكلاسيكية للمعنى (الدلالة) التي وضعها علماء المسلمين مثل الغزالي (ت ٥٠٥ هـ / ١١١١ م)، والعلامة الحلي (ت ٧٢٦ هـ / ١٣٢٦ م)، والشاطبي (ت ٧٩٠ هـ / ١٣٨٨ م)، ويشير الى المعنى الذي يلزم بالضرورة من تعبير لغوي معين، بما يتجاوز محتواه الدلالي الصريح. تزعم الورقة ان هذا المفهوم الكلاسيكي يتشارك حيزا نظريا واسعا مع النظريات البراغمية الغربية للالتزام — لا سيما الالتزام الحواري عند غرايس ونظرية الصلة عند سبيربر وويلسون — مع امتلاكه خصائص مميزة شكلتها البنى النحوية والبلاغية الفريدة للغة العربية.

ومن خلال اجراء تحليل مقارن لهذه الاطر النظرية وتقديم دراسات حالة مستقاة من نصوص قرآنية وقانونية وادبية، تبين الورقة ان ترجمة دلالة المقتضى تتطلب من المترجمين اجتياز طبقات معقدة من المعاني المضمره التي كثيرا ما تعجز عنها الاستراتيجيات الترجمة التقليدية. تقترح الدراسة نموذجا تحليليا متكاملًا يجمع بين نظرية الدلالة العربية الكلاسيكية والمقاربات البراغمية المعاصرة، مقدمة لممارسي الترجمة ادوات اكثر متانة للتعامل مع المعاني المضمره في الترجمة من العربية الى الانجليزية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: دلالة المقتضى؛ اللسانيات العربية؛ اصول الفقه؛ دراسات الترجمة؛ الالتزام؛ البراغمية؛ الترجمة من العربية الى الانجليزية؛ نظرية الصلة

1. Introduction

The study of meaning in language has occupied scholars across civilizations for centuries, producing rich and varied frameworks for understanding how utterances convey information beyond their literal surface. In the Western tradition, the **pragmatic turn** in linguistics, inaugurated by the philosophical work of **Paul Grice** in the mid-twentieth century, brought attention to the crucial distinction between what is **said** (*mā yuqāl*, مَا يُقَالُ) and what is **implicated** (*mā yulmaḥ ilayhi*, مَا يُلْمَح إِلَيْهِ). Grice's theory of **conversational implicature**, along with subsequent developments such as Sperber and Wilson's **Relevance Theory**, has profoundly shaped contemporary understandings of how meaning is constructed, negotiated, and interpreted in communicative contexts (Grice, 1989; Sperber & Wilson, 1995).

Parallel to these developments, the Arabic linguistic tradition — particularly as systematized within the discipline of **uṣūl al-fiqh** (أُصُولُ الْفَقْهِ) — developed its own sophisticated taxonomy of linguistic meaning. Central to this taxonomy is the concept of **dalālah** (دَلَالَة, *indication/signification*), which classifies the various ways in which words and constructions point to their intended meanings. Among the categories of *dalālah*, the notion of **dalālat al-muqtadā** (دَلَالَة الْمُقْتَضَى) occupies a distinctive position, referring to the meaning that is **necessarily required or demanded** (*al-muqtaḍā*, الْمُقْتَضَى) by the utterance itself, even when not explicitly stated. This concept, elaborated by classical scholars such as **Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazālī** (الْغَزَالِي), **al-ʿAllāma al-Ḥillī** (الْعَلَامَةُ الْحِلِّي), and **al-Shāṭibī** (الشَّاطِبِي), captures a type of implied meaning that operates through **structural necessity** (*darūrah*, ضَرُورَة) rather than contextual inference.

The significance of *dalālat al-muqtadā* for translation studies, particularly in the Arabic–English pair, has received remarkably little systematic attention. Yet the challenges it poses are profound. When a translator encounters an Arabic text — whether a **Qurʾānic** verse, a legal ruling (*fatwā*, فَتْوَى), or a literary passage — the implied meanings carried by *al-muqtadā* often resist direct transfer to English, a language with fundamentally different grammatical structures,

rhetorical conventions, and pragmatic norms. A failure to recognize and adequately render these implications can result in translations that are technically accurate at the lexical level but substantively deficient in capturing the full communicative intent (**qaṣd**, قَصْد) of the source text. This paper seeks to address this gap by providing a comprehensive examination of *dalālat al-muqtadā* and its implications for Arabic–English translation. The study pursues three interrelated objectives:

1. It provides a detailed exposition of the concept as it appears in classical Arabic linguistic thought.
2. It undertakes a comparative analysis with Western pragmatic theories of implicature.
3. It presents practical case studies from diverse text types to demonstrate the translational challenges posed by *dalālat al-muqtadā*.

2. The Concept of Dalālat al-Muqtadā in Arabic Linguistic Tradition

2.1 Defining Dalālah in Uṣūl al-Fiqh

The term *dalālah* (pl. *dalālāt*, دَلَالَات) literally means 'indication' (*al-dalālah*, الدَّلَالَة) or 'signification' (*al-taḍmīn*, التَّضْمِين) and refers to the relationship between a linguistic expression (*lafz*, لَفْظ) and the meaning (*ma'nā*, مَعْنَى) it conveys. In the discourse of *uṣūl al-fiqh*, *dalālah* constitutes a foundational concept, as the derivation of legal rulings (*aḥkām*, أَحْكَام) from primary texts — the **Qur'ān** (الْقُرْآن) and **Sunnah** (السُّنَّة) — depends entirely on understanding how these texts signify their meanings. The classical *uṣūlīs* (أُصُولِيُون) developed an elaborate classification system for *dalālah* that accounts for the various degrees and modes of meaning that linguistic expressions can carry.

Al-Ghazālī, in his seminal work *al-Mustasfā min 'Ilm al-Uṣūl* (المُسْتَصْفَى مِنْ عِلْمِ الْأُصُول), provides one of the most influential taxonomies. He divides *dalālah* into several categories based on the strength and directness of the connection between the expression and its meaning. The primary division is between:

Category	Arabic	Meaning
Definitive indication	<i>Dalālat al-manṭūq</i> (دَلَالَة الْمَنْطُوق)	The meaning directly conveyed by the explicit wording
Non-definitive indication	<i>Dalālat ghayr al-manṭūq</i> (دَلَالَة غَيْرِ الْمَنْطُوق)	The meaning implied but not explicitly stated

Within the definitive category, he further distinguishes between what is indicated by the very formulation of the text and what is indicated by necessity or requirement. It is within this framework that *dalālat al-iqtidā'* (دَلَالَة الْاِقْتِضَاء) — also referred to as *dalālat al-muqtadā* — emerges as a distinct and significant category (al-Ghazālī, 1994, Vol. 1, pp. 325–348).

2.2 Taxonomy of Dalālah: 'Ibārah, Ishārah, and Iqtidā'

To appreciate the specificity of *dalālat al-muqtadā*, it is essential to situate it within the broader taxonomy refined by al-‘Allāma al-Ḥillī in his *Ma‘ārij al-Uṣūl ilā Ma‘rifat al-Uṣūl* (مَعَارِجُ الْأُصُولِ إِلَى مَعْرِفَةِ الْأُصُولِ). These categories lie on a **spectrum of explicitness**:

Category	Arabic	Literal Meaning	Explicitness Level
Explicit indication	<i>Dalālat al-‘ibārah</i> (دَلَالَةُ الْعِبَارَةِ)	Indication of the explicit text	Highest — meaning is immediately apparent
Allusive indication	<i>Dalālat al-ishārah</i> (دَلَالَةُ الْإِشَارَةِ)	Indication of allusion/reference	Medium — meaning is pointed to through context
Required indication	<i>Dalālat al-iqtidā'</i> (دَلَالَةُ الْاِقْتِضَاءِ)	Indication of what is required/demanded	Lowest — meaning is structurally necessitated

Dalālat al-‘ibārah is the most direct form of signification. For example:

الصَّلَاةُ أَقِيمُوا (Aqīmū al-ṣalāh) — "Establish the prayer."
This directly indicates the **obligation** (**wujūb**, وَجُوب) of prayer through its explicit imperative form (**ṣiġhat al-amr**, صِيغَةُ الْأَمْرِ).

Dalālat al-ishārah operates at a slightly more removed level, relying on the reader's ability to recognize associative links. For instance, when the Qur’ān mentions specific punishments for theft (**sariqah**, سَرَقَةٌ), it alludes to the broader legal principle of **proportionality** (*al-tanāsub*, التَّنَاسُب) in sentencing.

Dalālat al-iqtidā' (or *dalālat al-muqtadā*) represents a further step along this spectrum. Here, the meaning is **structurally necessitated** (*muqtadā*, مُقْتَضَى) by the utterance. The critical distinction is one of **necessity** (*darūrah*, ضَرُورَةٌ): whereas *al-ishārah* suggests a meaning that the competent user recognizes through reasoning, *al-muqtadā* identifies a meaning that the utterance itself **demand**s. To deny the implicated meaning of *al-muqtadā* would result in a **logical contradiction** (*tanāquḍ*, تَنَاقُض).

2.3 The Specific Nature of Dalālat al-Muqtadā

The defining characteristic of *dalālat al-muqtadā* is the element of **necessity** (*darūrah*, ضَرُورَةٌ / *ḥatm*, حَتْم). When a text carries *dalālat al-muqtadā*, the implied meaning is **not optional, speculative, or context-dependent** in the way that many forms of Western pragmatic implicature are. Rather, it is an **inescapable component** of the utterance's total meaning.

This necessity operates at two levels:

1. **Linguistic-structural** (*al-mustawā al-lughawī al-tarkībī*, المُستَوَى اللُّغَوِيُّ التَّرْكِيْبِيُّ): The grammar and syntax of Arabic create entailments inherent in specific constructions.
2. **Logical-conceptual** (*al-mustawā al-manṭiqī al-mafhūmī*, المُستَوَى الْمَنْطِقِيُّ الْمَفْهُومِيُّ): The stated proposition necessarily entails certain unstated propositions via logical relationships (cause/effect, condition/consequence).

Illustrative Example — Conditional particle *in* (إن, 'if'):

When the Qur'ān states a conditional proposition, the *muqtadā* includes not only the explicit consequent but also the **implicit negation of the consequent in the absence of the antecedent**.

إِنْ تَسْتَغْفِرْ لَهُمْ سَبْعِينَ مَرَّةً فَلَنْ يَغْفِرَ اللَّهُ لَهُمْ

(*In tastaḡfir lahum sab'īna marratan falan yaḡfira Llāhu lahum*) — Qur'ān 9:80.

"If you seek forgiveness for them seventy times, God will not forgive them."

The *muqtadā* structurally necessitates a permanent refusal, not merely a conditional one.

Al-Shāṭibī, in his *al-Muwāfaqāt fī Uṣūl al-Sharī'ah* (المُؤَافَقَاتُ فِي أُصُولِ الشَّرِيعَةِ), expanded the scope of *dalālat al-muqtadā* to include implications derived from the **higher objectives** (*maqāṣid*, مَقَاصِد) of Islamic law. This expansion highlights the challenges it presents for translation, where such layered implications may be culturally specific (al-Shāṭibī, 2003, Vol. 2, pp. 112–145).

3. Conceptual Mapping: Dalālat al-Muqtadā and Western Pragmatic Theories

3.1 Gricean Implicature and Conversational Maxims

Paul Grice's theory of conversational implicature (1989) provides the most obvious point of comparison. Grice proposed that communication operates according to a **Cooperative Principle** (*mabda' al-ta'āwun*, مَبْدَأُ التَّعَاوُن), elaborated through four **maxims** (قَوَاعِد):

Maxim	Arabic	Description
Quantity	<i>al-kammīyah</i> (الْكَمِّيَّة)	Be as informative as required
Quality	<i>al-kayfīyah</i> (الْكَيْفِيَّة)	Be truthful
Relation	<i>al-'alāqah</i> (العَلَاقَة)	Be relevant
Manner	<i>al-kayfiyyah</i> (الْكَيْفِيَّة)	Be clear and orderly

Grice distinguished between **conventional implicature** (tied to specific lexical items, non-cancellable) and **conversational implicature** (derived from context, **cancellable** / *qābil li-l-ilghā'*, قَابِلٌ لِلْإِلْغَاءِ).

Key Difference: Gricean conversational implicatures are cancellable (e.g., "Some went—in fact, all went"). In contrast, the implications of *dalālat al-muqtadā* are typically **non-cancellable** (*ghayr qābil li-l-ilghāʾ*, غَيْرَ قَائِلٍ لِلإِلْغَاءِ), because they are logically entailed by the utterance structure. This demands more structural translation approaches.

3.2 Relevance Theory and Inferential Communication

Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory (1995) posits that cognition is oriented toward the maximization of relevance (cognitive effects vs. processing effort). The theory distinguishes between:

- **Explicature** (*al-tafṣīl*, التَّفْصِيل): The developed logical form explicitly communicated.
- **Implicature** (*al-iltizām*, الإلتزام): What is implicitly communicated.

Comparison: The Relevance-Theoretic **explicature** shares common ground with *dalālat al-muqtadā*, as both require the hearer to complete the logical form (enrichment, reference assignment). However, Relevance Theory relies on **cognitive cost-benefit analysis**, whereas the classical Arabic theory relies on **mastery of structural conventions** (عُرْف, *urf*).

3.3 Points of Convergence and Divergence

Feature	<i>Dalālat al-Muqtadā</i> (دلالة المقتضى)	Gricean Implicature	Relevance Theory
Theoretical Basis	Arabic Linguistics & <i>Uṣūl al-Fiqh</i> (أصول الفقه)	Philosophy of Language	Cognitive Science
Necessity	Non-cancellable (Necessary)	Cancellable (Defeasible)	Varies
Source	Linguistic Structure & Logic	Violation of Maxims	Pursuit of Relevance
Role of Context	Secondary to Form	Primary (Context-driven)	Primary (Cost-benefit)
Relation to Explicit	Integral to Proposition	Supplementary	Explicature vs. Implicature

4. Translating Dalālat al-Muqtadā: Challenges and Strategies

4.1 Linguistic and Cultural Asymmetries

Translating *dalālat al-muqtadā* presents challenges due to **structural asymmetries** (*al-tabāyunāt al-bunyawīyah*, التباينات البنيوية) between Arabic and English. Arabic's inflectional morphology embeds meanings that English must express lexically.

4.2 Strategies for Rendering Implied Meaning

Strategy	Arabic	Description
Explicitation	<i>al-taṣrīḥ</i> (التصريح)	Making the implied meaning explicit (e.g., adding "must").
Structural Compensation	<i>al-ta'wīḍ al-bunyawī</i> (التعويض البنيوي)	Using English syntax that carries similar entailments.
Lexical Addition	<i>al-idāfah al-lafẓīyah</i> (الإضافة اللفظية)	Adding words like "all," "every," or "entire" to capture genericity.
Modulation	<i>al-taḥwīl</i> (التحويل)	Shifting perspective to preserve the implied meaning.

5. Case Studies in Arabic–English Translation

5.1 Qur'ānic Texts

Case 1 — Qur'ān 2:282:

وَأَشْهِدُوا إِذَا تَبَايَعْتُمْ (Wa-ashhidū idhā tabāya'tum)

"And have witnesses present when you trade with one another."

The *muqtadā* is **obligatory** (*wājib*, واجب). The structure necessitates that **every** trade must have witnesses.

- **Pickthall (1930):** "And have witnesses present when ye traffic..." (Uses *Taṣrīḥ* / Explicitation).
- **Yusuf Ali (1934):** "And get witnesses whenever ye make a commercial contract" (Captures the conditional *muqtadā*).

5.2 Islamic Legal Texts

Case 2 — Legal Maxim:

أَوَّلُ الْأَصْلِ فِي الْكَلَامِ الْحَقِيقَةُ (Al-aṣlu fī al-kalām al-ḥaqīqah)

"The default in speech is the literal meaning."

The *muqtadā* implies that any departure from the literal meaning (**majāz**, مجاز) requires **justification** (*dalīl*, دليل). This structural entailment cannot be cancelled.

5.3 Literary and Rhetorical Texts

Case 3 — Al-Mutanabbī (المُتَنَبِّي):

عَلَى قَدْرِ أَهْلِ الْعَزْمِ تَأْتِي الْعَزَائِمُ ('*Alā qadri ahli al- 'azmi ta' tī al- 'azā'imu*)

"Resolutions come according to the measure of those who resolve."

The *muqtadā* is a **universal principle** (*qā'idah kullīyah*, قَاعِدَة كُلِّيَّة): resolve determines achievement.

- **Wright (1850):** "And worthier the intention, worthier the deed" (*Tahwīl + Muqābalah*).
- **Lynch (2001):** "Determination's measure matches the measure of those determined" (*Taṣrīḥ*).

6. Implications for Translation Theory and Practice

The study of *dalālat al-muqtadā* highlights the need for translation theories to incorporate non-Western linguistic traditions. The proposed **integrated analytical model** includes:

Component	Arabic	Function
Classical Taxonomy	<i>Taṣnīf al-dalālah</i> (تَصْنِيف الدَّلَالَة)	Classifies implied meaning type
Pragmatic Engine	<i>Miḥrak al-istidlāl</i> (مِحْرَك الإِسْتِدْلَال)	Determines necessity (cancellable vs. non)
Strategy Selector	<i>Muntaqā istrāṭijīyyah</i> (مُنْتَقَى اسْتِرَاطِيَجِيَّة)	Chooses <i>Taṣrīḥ</i> , <i>Ta'wīd</i> , etc.

7. Conclusion

This paper has examined *dalālat al-muqtadā* (دَلَالَة الْمُقْتَضَى) as it developed within the Arabic linguistic tradition, explored its relationship with Western pragmatic theories, and demonstrated its significance for Arabic–English translation. The analysis shows that *dalālat al-muqtadā* is a **distinctive and sophisticated** approach to implied meaning, characterized by **necessity** (*ḍarūrah*, ضَرُورَة) and deep connection with **Islamic jurisprudence** (*al-fiqh*, الْفَقْه). By proposing an integrated model, this study provides translation practitioners with a robust toolkit for handling the **non-cancellable, structurally encoded** implications of *al-muqtadā*, encouraging further research into the interface between Arabic linguistics and modern pragmatics.

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