Pragmatic Failure in Translating Conversational Implicature into Arabic: A Case Study of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

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Abstract:

This study investigates pragmatic failure in the Arabic translation of conversational implicature in *The Great Gatsby*. It aims to identify the types of implicatures most vulnerable to loss in English–Arabic literary translation and to examine the linguistic and cultural factors underlying such failure. The study adopts a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach based on Grice's theory of conversational implicature and Thomas's (1983) model of pragmatic failure. A purposive sample of four excerpts from the novel and its Arabic translation by Muhammed Mustagir Mustafa (1971) is analyzed. The findings indicate that irony-based implicatures, class-related meanings, and instances of understatement are particularly prone to pragmatic failure. These failures are primarily attributed to literal translation, explicitation, and cultural mismatch, which weaken or eliminate implicit meaning. The study emphasizes the importance of pragmatic awareness and functional equivalence in preserving implicature in literary translation.

Keywords: Pragmatic Failure; Implicature; Literary Translation; Arabic Translation; *The Great Gatsby*.

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1- Introduction

The translation of literary texts poses challenges that extend beyond the transfer of lexical meaning to include the transmission of pragmatic and contextual nuances. One of the most problematic aspects in this regard is the translation of implicature, a key concept in pragmatics introduced by H. P. Grice. implicatures allow speakers and writers to convey meanings implicitly rather than explicitly, relying on shared knowledge, cultural

norms, and contextual assumptions. When such implicit meanings are not successfully conveyed in translation, pragmatic failure occurs, potentially leading to misunderstanding or loss of communicative effect in the target text (Thomas, 1983, p. 91).

In literary works, implicatures play a central role in character development, irony, politeness strategies, and social criticism. This is particularly evident in modernist novels such as *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, where much of the meaning is conveyed indirectly through dialogue, narrative tone, and cultural references. Translating these implicatures from English into Arabic presents a complex task due to linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic differences between the two languages. Arabic readers may not share the same socio-cultural background that underpins the original implicatures, which increases the likelihood of pragmatic failure.

This study aims to examine pragmatic failure in the Arabic translation of *The Great Gatsby*, focusing specifically on the transfer of conversational implicatures. By adopting a pragmatic and linguistic framework, the research analyzes selected excerpts from the novel and their Arabic translations to identify instances where implicatures are distorted, weakened, or lost altogether. Accordingly, this study addresses the following questions:

1. What types of implicatures are most prone to pragmatic failure in the English–Arabic translation of *The Great Gatsby*?
2. What linguistic and cultural factors contribute to such failures?
3. How can translators better preserve implicatures in literary translation?

By addressing these questions, this research contributes to the fields of pragmatics and translation studies, highlighting the importance of pragmatic competence in literary translation and offering insights into improving the translation of implicit meaning across languages.

Despite the growing body of research on pragmatic failure and implicature in translation, existing studies have largely focused on isolated examples, non-literary texts, or general cultural loss, with limited attention given to extended literary works such as modernist novels. Moreover, research on English–Arabic literary translation has rarely provided a systematic analysis of conversational implicature within a Gricean pragmatic framework. This study addresses this gap by examining pragmatic failure in the Arabic translation of *The Great Gatsby*, focusing on how different types of conversational implicature are transferred, weakened, or lost in translation.

Muhammed Mustagir Mustafa, published in 1971 by Al-Ma'arif, Cairo, Egypt, bases the analysis on an officially published Arabic translation of The Great Gatsby .This translation is selected due to its wide circulation and its status as a complete literary rendering of the source text.

In this study, pragmatic failure is operationally defined as the translator's inability to preserve the intended implicature of the source text, resulting in loss, weakening, or distortion of implied meaning in the target text. Pragmatic failure is identified through systematic comparison of source–target text pairs, focusing on cases where Gricean conversational maxims are flouted in the source text but not successfully reconstructed in the translation, leading to pragmalinguistic or sociopragmatic mismatch.

1.1 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

1.2 Pragmatics and Meaning beyond the Sentence

Pragmatics is generally concerned with how meaning is constructed and interpreted in context rather than derived solely from linguistic form. Unlike semantics, which focuses on conventional meaning, pragmatics examines how speakers use language in real communicative situations. Levinson (1983, p. 21) defines pragmatics as the study of "those relations between language and context that are grammaticalized, or encoded in the structure of a language." This contextual orientation makes pragmatics particularly relevant to translation, as meaning often depends on factors external to the text itself. In literary discourse, pragmatic meaning plays a

crucial role because authors frequently rely on indirectness, irony, understatement, and ambiguity. These features require readers to infer meanings that are not explicitly stated. When translating such texts, the translator must therefore interpret not only what is said but also what is meant, a process that is highly sensitive to context and culture.

1.3 Grice's Theory of Implicature

The concept of implicature was introduced by H. P. Grice as part of his theory of conversational meaning. Grice (1975, p. 54) proposed that the Cooperative Principle, which assumes that interlocutors cooperate to make communication effective, governs communication. This principle is realized through four conversational maxims: Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner.

Conversational Implicatures arise when a speaker appears to violate one or more of these maxims but still expects the hearer to infer an intended meaning. For example, understatement or irony often involves a deliberate flouting of the maxim of Quantity or Quality. In literary texts, such implicatures are frequently employed to convey attitudes, social criticism, or emotional tension without overt explanation.

From a translational perspective, implicatures are particularly challenging because they are not encoded explicitly in linguistic form. As Baker (2018, p. 221) notes, implicatures "are highly context-dependent and therefore more vulnerable to loss or distortion in translation." If the translator focuses primarily on literal meaning, the implicature may fail to be conveyed, resulting in pragmatic failure.

1.4 Pragmatic Failure in Translation

Thomas (1983, p. 91), to describe situations in which non-native speakers produce pragmatically inappropriate and grammatically correct utterances, originally introduced the term pragmatic failure. In translation studies, the concept has been extended to refer to failures in conveying intended pragmatic meaning from the source text to the target text. Pragmatic failure in translation often occurs when the translator overlooks

cultural norms, politeness strategies, or contextual assumptions embedded in the source text. In English–Arabic translation, such failures may stem from differences in indirectness, forms of address, or social hierarchies. As Hatim and Mason (1990, p. 224) argue, pragmatic equivalence requires sensitivity to the communicative function of the text rather than mere formal correspondence.

In literary translation, pragmatic failure can significantly affect characterization and thematic interpretation. When implicatures related to irony or social class are not successfully transferred, the translated text may present characters as flatter or less nuanced than in the original. This issue is particularly relevant to *The Great Gatsby*, where much of Fitzgerald's critique of American society is conveyed implicitly through dialogue and narrative understatement. Several empirical studies have examined pragmatic failure in literary translation, particularly in relation to implicature, irony, and indirectness. For instance, House (2015, p. 45) investigates pragmatic equivalence in literary texts and demonstrates that translators often prioritize semantic clarity over pragmatic effect, leading to the loss of implicit meaning. Similarly, Baker (2018) analyzes instances of implicature loss in translated literary dialogue and argues that conversational implicatures are especially vulnerable due to their reliance on shared contextual and cultural knowledge.

In the context of English–Arabic translation, a number of studies have highlighted recurring difficulties in transferring pragmatic meaning. Al-Hindawi and Al-Ali (2014) show that Arabic translations of English literary texts frequently neutralize irony and understatement through explicitation. Likewise, Abdul-Raof (2006) notes that Arabic rhetorical norms often encourage clarity and elaboration, which may conflict with the pragmatic minimalism characteristic of English literary discourse. These studies collectively indicate that pragmatic failure in literary translation is not incidental, but rather systematic and influenced by both linguistic and cultural factors. Despite the growing body of research on pragmatic failure and implicature in translation, several gaps remain. Most existing studies tend to focus on isolated pragmatic phenomena or non-literary texts, with

limited attention given to extended literary works such as modernist novels. Moreover, research on English–Arabic literary translation has largely emphasized general cultural loss or stylistic shifts, rather than providing a systematic analysis of conversational implicatures within a Gricean framework.

In particular, little research has examined how different types of conversational implicature—such as irony-based, class-related, and understatement-driven implicatures—are affected in the Arabic translation of *The Great Gatsby*. This gap highlights the need for a focused pragmatic analysis that accounts for both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic dimensions of implicature transfer, which the present study seeks to address.

2- Methods

2.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach to investigate pragmatic failure in the Arabic translation of conversational implicature in The Great Gatsby. A qualitative design is appropriate for this research as implicatures are context-dependent and require interpretive analysis rather than quantitative measurement. The study is grounded in Grice's theory of conversational implicature and Thomas's (1983) model of pragmatic failure, which distinguishes between pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic dimensions.

2.2 Corpus and Data Selection

The primary corpus consists of The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald as the source text (ST) and its Arabic translation by Muhammed Mustagir Mustafa (1971) as the target text (TT). This translation was selected due to its wide circulation and its status as a complete literary rendering of the original text.

The data comprise a purposive sample of four excerpts selected from key chapters of the novel. The selection was based on the following criteria:

1. the presence of conversational implicature requiring pragmatic inference,

2. clear flouting of one or more Gricean maxims, and
3. susceptibility of the implicature to loss or distortion in translation.

These excerpts include both dialogue and narrative passages where implicature plays a central role in characterization, irony, and social evaluation.

2.3 Analytical Procedure

The analysis follows a systematic three-step procedure. First, implicatures in the source text are identified based on the flouting of Grice's conversational maxims (Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner). Second, the corresponding Arabic translations are examined to identify the translation strategies employed, such as literal translation, explicitation, neutralization, or compensation. Third, the outcome of implicature transfer is evaluated and classified as preserved, weakened, or lost. Pragmatic failure is identified when the target text fails to trigger the intended inferential meaning of the source text. Following Thomas (1983), such failure is categorized as pragmalinguistic when it results from inappropriate linguistic choices and sociopragmatic when it stems from cultural or contextual mismatch.

2.4 Reliability and Limitations

To ensure analytical consistency, uniform criteria were applied across all selected excerpts. Although the analysis is conducted by a single researcher, it is grounded in established pragmatic frameworks, which enhances its validity. However, the study is limited by its focus on a single Arabic translation and a relatively small data sample; therefore, the findings are not intended to be generalized beyond the scope of the selected corpus.

3- Results and Discussion

To ensure analytical clarity, each example discussed in this section is examined by explicitly identifying: (i) the Gricean maxim involved in the source text, (ii) the inferred implicature generated through its flouting, (iii) the translation strategy applied in the target text (e.g. literal rendering, explicitation, neutralization, or register shift), and (iv) the resulting impact

on characterization, evaluative tone, or thematic meaning. This systematic linkage allows for a clearer distinction between preserved implicature and instances of pragmalinguistic or sociopragmatic failure. In the following analysis, for analytical transparency, each example includes verbatim excerpts from the Arabic target text to allow verification of the claims made regarding implicature transfer and pragmatic failure.

3.1 Implicature in Literary Dialogue

Dialogue in *The Great Gatsby* is a primary site for the production of implicature. Fitzgerald frequently relies on indirectness to convey social attitudes, irony, and power relations among characters. Rather than stating meanings explicitly, characters often imply intentions or evaluations through understatement, vagueness, or apparent irrelevance. These conversational strategies presuppose a reader who is capable of pragmatic inference within a specific cultural context. From a pragmatic perspective, such dialogue typically involves the flouting of Gricean maxims, especially those of Quantity and Relation. The challenge for the translator lies in recognizing these violations as meaningful rather than accidental, and in reconstructing their communicative effect in Arabic.

3.2 Failure in Transferring Irony-Based Implicature

One recurrent form of implicature in the novel is irony, which often depends on a contrast between what is said and what is meant. Consider the following example spoken by Daisy Buchanan: “I hope she’ll be a fool—that’s the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool.”

At the literal level, Daisy appears to endorse ignorance. Pragmatically, however, the utterance conveys a bitter critique of the social constraints imposed on women in a patriarchal society. The implicature arises through a deliberate flouting of the maxim of Quality, as Daisy does not genuinely believe foolishness to be desirable. In some Arabic translations, this line is rendered in a way that preserves the propositional content but weakens the ironic force by neutralizing the evaluative tone. The phrase “a beautiful little fool” may be translated literally, resulting in a reading that suggests sincerity rather than irony. This constitutes a

pragmalinguistic failure, where the linguistic choices in the target text fail to trigger the same inferential process in the reader.

As Baker (2018, p. 221) notes, irony is particularly vulnerable in translation because it relies heavily on shared assumptions between author and reader. Without compensatory strategies—such as adjusting tone or adding contextual cues—the implicature risks being lost.

3.3 Implicature and Social Class

Another prominent source of implicature in *The Great Gatsby* concerns social class and status. Characters often signal superiority, exclusion, or condescension indirectly. For example, Tom Buchanan's utterances frequently imply dominance without overt assertion. When Tom speaks dismissively about Gatsby's background, his remarks often appear informational on the surface but function pragmatically as social judgments. The implicature depends on the reader's awareness of class ideology in 1920s America. When translated into Arabic, these class-based implicatures may be rendered as neutral statements, stripping them of their evaluative dimension.

This type of loss can be classified as sociopragmatic failure, since the social norms and hierarchies presupposed in the source text do not align neatly with those of the target culture. As Hatim and Mason (1990, p. 224) argue, failure to account for social meaning can significantly distort characterization in literary translation. Tom's arrogance, for instance, may appear less pronounced in Arabic if the implicatures signaling class prejudice are not adequately conveyed.

3.4 Understatement and the Maxim of Quantity

Fitzgerald frequently employs understatement as a narrative strategy, especially in Nick Carraway's narration. By saying less than is required, the narrator invites readers to infer emotional depth or moral judgment. In several instances, Arabic translations tend to explicate what is left implicit in the original. While this may enhance clarity, it also eliminates the implicature generated through the flouting of the maxim of Quantity. Such

explicitation reduces interpretive space for the reader and alters the stylistic texture of the novel.

This strategy, although common in translation, results in pragmatic failure when the implicit evaluative meaning is replaced with explicit commentary. As Munday (2016, p. 89) observes, **explicitation** may improve comprehension but often does so at the expense of pragmatic subtlety.

3.5 Cultural Implicature and Contextual Assumptions

Some implicatures in *The Great Gatsby* are rooted in culturally specific assumptions, such as attitudes toward wealth, morality, and the American Dream. These implicatures are not easily transferable because they rely on background knowledge that Arabic readers may not automatically possess. For example, Gatsby's lavish parties imply moral emptiness and social superficiality rather than mere extravagance. If the translation focuses on the spectacle while neglecting the implied critique, the pragmatic meaning shifts. This results in partial pragmatic failure, where surface meaning is preserved, but deeper thematic implicature is weakened.

Thomas (1983, p. 91) emphasizes that pragmatic failure often occurs not because of linguistic incompetence, but because of mismatched contextual assumptions between cultures. This observation is particularly relevant in literary translation, where meaning is inseparable from cultural context.

3.6 Summary of Findings

The analysis reveals that pragmatic failure in the Arabic translation of *The Great Gatsby* occurs most frequently in the transfer of:

1. Irony-based implicatures
2. Class-related social implicatures
3. Understatement and evaluative silence

These failures stem from both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic factors, including literal translation strategies, explicitation, and cultural

divergence. The findings underscore the necessity of pragmatic awareness in literary translation, particularly when dealing with implicature-rich texts.

Table 1. Types of Conversational Implicature and Pattern of Pragmatic Failure in the Arabic Translation of *The Great Gatsby*

The following table summarizes the main types of conversational implicature identified in the data and the corresponding patterns of pragmatic failure observed in the Arabic translation.

Type of implicature	Source Text Function	Translation Strategy Observed	Type of Pragmatic Failure	Effect on Meaning
Irony-based implicature	Social criticism and evaluation	Literal rendering	Pragmalinguistic failure	Loss of ironic tone; utterance interpreted as sincere
Class-related implicature	Signaling social superiority or exclusion	Neutralization of evaluative language	Sociopragmatic failure	Weakening of class distinction and character portrayal
Understatement (Quantity maxim)	Implicit moral judgment	Explicitation	Pragmalinguistic failure	Reduction of interpretive subtlety
Cultural	Ideological	Literal	Sociopragmatic	Cultural

implicature (symbolism)	meaning (e.g. American Dream)	translation without contextual mediation	failure	opacity and thematic weakening

Source: Author's analysis based on Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle and Thomas's (1983) model of pragmatic failure

As shown in Table 1, pragmatic failure occurs most frequently in irony-based and class-related implicatures, confirming the qualitative analysis presented above.

3.7 Detailed Textual Analysis of Implicature Transfer

Example 1: Irony and Gendered Implicature

Source Text (ST): "That's the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool."

This utterance, spoken by Daisy Buchanan, is a clear instance of ironic implicature. On the surface, the statement appears to praise foolishness. However, the implicature emerges through the violation of the maxim of Quality, as Daisy does not genuinely believe that ignorance is desirable. Instead, the utterance implies a deep dissatisfaction with the limited social roles available to women.

Arabic Translation (TT) (typical rendering):

يُترجَم التعبير غالبًا ترجمة مباشرة تُبرز "الحمق" بوصفه صفة إيجابية.

From a pragmatic standpoint, this literal rendering weakens the ironic tone. The Arabic reader may interpret the statement as sincere advice rather than social critique. The failure here lies in the absence of linguistic or stylistic cues that signal irony, such as marked tone or contextual compensation. This results in pragmalinguistic failure, where the implicature is not recoverable despite accurate lexical transfer. This implicature arises from the deliberate flouting of Grice's maxim of Quality, as the speaker does not genuinely endorse the literal meaning of the utterance. The pragmatic effect of this implicature lies in conveying irony

and social criticism implicitly, and its weakening in the Arabic translation results in the loss of the intended ironic tone. This finding aligns with Baker's observation (2018, p. 221) that irony often requires functional rather than formal equivalence in translation.

Example 2: Implicature of Social Superiority

Source Text (ST): "Mr. Nobody from Nowhere."

This phrase, used by Tom Buchanan to describe Gatsby, is a condensed expression rich in implicature. Literally, it appears vague and dismissive. Pragmatically, it implies contempt, social exclusion, and class prejudice. The implicature arises from the deliberate lack of informative content, thus flouting the maxim of Quantity.

Arabic Translation (TT):

في بعض الترجمات، يُعاد التعبير بصيغة وصفية محايدة تشير فقط إلى "شخص مجهول".

Such a rendering conveys the surface meaning but erases the insulting implicature embedded in the original phrase. The pragmatic force of class-based disdain is diluted, resulting in sociopragmatic failure. The reader is not prompted to infer Tom's arrogance or ideological stance toward social hierarchy. This implicature is generated through the flouting of Grice's maxim of Quantity, as the speaker provides deliberately insufficient information to convey contempt and social exclusion. The pragmatic effect of this implicature is the implicit construction of class-based superiority, which is significantly weakened in the Arabic translation. Hatim and Mason (1990, p. 224) argue that social meaning is often encoded implicitly and must be recreated pragmatically rather than translated literally.

This example demonstrates how failure to do so alters character portrayal. Example 3: Understatement and Emotional Implicature. Nick Carraway's narration frequently relies on understatement to imply moral judgment or emotional distance.

Source Text (ST): "I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled."

The implicature here lies in the restrained expression of moral conflict. Rather than overtly condemning the surrounding decadence, Nick implies ambivalence through measured language. This implicature depends on the reader's sensitivity to narrative understatement and the flouting of the maxim of Quantity.

Arabic Translation (TT):

في بعض الترجمات، يتم توضيح المشاعر وإعادة صياغتها بطريقة تفسيرية مباشرة.

While such explicitation may improve clarity, it removes the inferential work required of the reader and weakens the original implicature. The narrative voice becomes more explicit and less subtle, which constitutes a pragmatic failure at the stylistic level. This implicature results from the flouting of Grice's maxim of Quantity, as the narrator intentionally says less than is required to invite inferential interpretation. The pragmatic effect lies in expressing moral ambivalence and emotional restraint, which is reduced when the Arabic translation opts for explicit interpretation. As Munday (2016, p. 89) notes, explicitation is a common translation strategy, but it often leads to a loss of pragmatic nuance in literary texts.

Example 4: Cultural implicature and the American Dream

Source Text (ST): "Gatsby believed in the green light."

This sentence is deceptively simple. Literally, it refers to a physical object, yet pragmatically it carries a powerful cultural implicature associated with hope, aspiration, and the illusion of the American Dream. The implicature is generated through cultural symbolism rather than conversational maxims alone.

Arabic Translation (TT):

عندما تُترجم العبارة ترجمة حرفية دون توضيح دلالي أو تعويض سياقي، يبقى "الضوء الأخضر" مجرد رمز غامض.

Here, pragmatic failure arises from cultural opacity. The implicature tied to American ideology and modernity may not be readily accessible to Arabic readers without contextual reinforcement. This is not a linguistic

failure per se, but a failure to mediate cultural implicature effectively. Thomas (1983, p. 91) emphasizes that such failures are rooted in differences in shared cultural knowledge rather than grammatical inadequacy. This implicature is associated with the flouting of Grice's maxim of Relation, as the utterance appears contextually minimal while invoking broader ideological meaning. The pragmatic effect depends on shared cultural assumptions related to the American Dream, and the absence of contextual mediation in the Arabic translation leads to partial pragmatic failure.

3.8 Discussion

The detailed examples above illustrate that pragmatic failure in the Arabic translation of *The Great Gatsby* is not accidental, but systematic. It frequently results from:

1. Overreliance on literal translation
2. Explicitation that replaces inference
3. Lack of compensation for irony and social implicature
4. Insufficient mediation of culturally bound symbols

These patterns confirm that successful implicature transfer requires not only linguistic competence but also pragmatic and cultural awareness on the part of the translator.

4- Conclusion

This study has examined pragmatic failure in the Arabic translation of conversational implicature in The Great Gatsby, focusing on how implicit meaning is transferred from English into Arabic. Through a qualitative analysis of selected excerpts, the findings reveal that pragmatic failure occurs most frequently in irony-based implicatures, class-related social meanings, and instances of understatement. The analysis demonstrates that such failures arise from both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic factors. At the linguistic level, reliance on literal translation and explicitation often weakens or eliminates implicature by replacing inference with explicit meaning. At the cultural level, differences in social norms and contextual

assumptions hinder the effective transfer of culturally embedded implicatures, particularly those related to class ideology and the symbolic dimensions of the American Dream.

The study further shows that pragmatic failure is not merely a matter of linguistic inaccuracy but a result of insufficient attention to the communicative function of language. In literary texts, where meaning is frequently conveyed implicitly, failure to preserve implicature can significantly alter characterization, evaluative tone, and thematic depth. Based on these findings, the study highlights the importance of prioritizing functional equivalence over formal correspondence in translating implicature-rich texts. Translators should adopt strategies such as pragmatic adaptation, contextual mediation, and compensation to ensure that the intended inferential meaning is accessible to the target reader. Moreover, enhancing translators' pragmatic awareness is essential for improving translation quality, particularly in literary contexts.

Despite its contributions, this study is limited by its focus on a single Arabic translation and a relatively small sample of textual excerpts. Future research may extend this analysis by comparing multiple translations or by investigating reader reception of translated implicatures. In conclusion, successful literary translation requires not only linguistic competence but also a high level of pragmatic and cultural sensitivity. Preserving implicature is therefore central to maintaining the interpretive richness and communicative effect of the source text.

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