

Disambiguation page for Figurative Speech (‘ilm al-bayān)

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Overview

Encyclopedia Interpretation

The Arabic rhetorical devices of [Figurative Speech](#) (*‘ilm al-bayān*) can overlap because they all move beyond direct literal expression. These devices may involve comparison, transfer, implication, indirect targeting, or semantic ambiguity. This page distinguishes the six devices by their primary operative mechanism.

One-Sentence Discriminators

- Simile**: explicitly compares two similar things while preserving both poles of the comparison in the expression, even if the comparison particle or shared attribute is omitted.
- Metaphor**: uses a word non-literally for something else on the basis of similarity, with one pole of the underlying comparison omitted and the literal meaning blocked by a contextual indicator.
- Relational Transfer**: uses a word, expression, or attribution non-literally, where the transfer is grounded in a relationship other than similarity, and a contextual indicator blocks the literal meaning.
- Implicit Reference**: conveys an intended meaning through the implication carried by the uttered expression itself, while the literal meaning of that expression remains genuinely possible.
- Indirect Address**: delivers a message to a real target through speech formally directed at a different party or cast in general terms, where meaning reaches the target through the direction and context of the speech rather than through any implication in the wording itself.
- Pun**: exploits a single polysemous word carrying two meanings, where the apparent near meaning presents itself first and distracts from the intended distant meaning.

Primary Distinctions

The six devices of [Figurative Speech](#) (*‘ilm al-bayān*) may be distinguished through several points of distinction.

Point of Distinction	Distinguishing Question
Explicit comparison vs. omitted comparison pole	Are both poles of the comparison explicitly maintained within the comparison structure (Simile), or is one pole omitted (Metaphor)?
Similarity vs. non-similarity relationship	Is the transfer grounded specifically in resemblance (Metaphor), or in another recognised relationship such as cause, effect, part, whole, place, time, or instrument (Relational Transfer)?
Literal meaning blocked vs. literal meaning remaining possible	Does a contextual indicator (<i>qarīna</i>) prevent the literal meaning from being intended (Metaphor / Relational Transfer), or does the literal meaning remain genuinely possible (Implicit Reference / Pun)?
Wording-based indirection vs. targeting-based indirection	Does the intended meaning arise from implication carried by the wording itself (Implicit Reference), or from the direction and context of the speech toward a real target (Indirect Address)?
Expression-level implication vs. single-word ambiguity	Is the indirect meaning carried by the expression as a whole (Implicit Reference), or concentrated in a single polysemous word (Pun)?

Comparison Table

Device	Core Mechanism	Literal Meaning Possible?	Transfer Based on Similarity?	Structural Pattern	Main Distinguishing Feature
				Both the likened-to (<i>mushabbah</i>) and the	

Simile	Explicit comparison between two entities on the basis of a shared attribute	Yes	Yes	likened (<i>mushabbah bih</i>) remain explicitly maintained within the comparison structure — even when the comparison particle (<i>adāt al-tashbīh</i>) or shared attribute (<i>wajh al-shabah</i>) is omitted, as in the Effective Simile (<i>tashbīh baligh</i>)	Both poles of the comparison remain explicitly maintained within the comparison structure; the expression can be paraphrased as "X is like Y in respect of Z"
Metaphor	Transfer of a word to another thing through a shared point of resemblance, with one pole of the underlying comparison omitted	No — a contextual indicator (<i>qarīna</i>) blocks the literal meaning	Yes — similarity (<i>mushābaha</i>) is the specific relationship motivating the transfer	One of the two poles of the underlying comparison (<i>mushabbah</i> or <i>mushabbah bih</i>) is absent from the utterance; a contextual indicator signals the figurative reading	The literal meaning is blocked; the transfer is motivated by similarity; only one pole of the comparison is present
Relational Transfer	Non-literal use of a word, expression, or attribution, grounded in a recognised relationship other than similarity — or a shift in attribution itself	No — a contextual indicator (<i>qarīna</i>) blocks the literal or original meaning	No — the relationship (<i>‘alāqa</i>) is not similarity; if it were, the expression would be Metaphor	A word or expression is used in other than its original meaning (Associative Transfer), or an action or quality is attributed to other than its real agent or source (Predicative Transfer)	The literal meaning is blocked; the motivating relationship is not similarity but another recognised relation (cause, effect, part, whole, place, time, instrument, etc.) or a shift in attribution
Implicit Reference	Indirect implication — an expression whose literal meaning is possible implies an intended meaning through a relation of entailment (<i>mulāzama</i>)	Yes — no contextual indicator blocks the literal meaning; both literal and intended meanings may be simultaneously valid	Not the operative dimension	The expressed word or phrase implies the intended meaning; the transition to the intended meaning occurs through the implication carried by the expression itself, with or without intermediary steps	The intended meaning is reached through the implication of the uttered expression itself; the literal meaning remains genuinely possible and is never blocked
Indirect Address	Oblique targeting — speech formally directed at one party reaches a real target through the direction and context of the speech	Yes — the surface wording is literally applicable to its surface addressee	Not the operative dimension	Two distinct audiences are present: a surface addressee (who may be a real person, a named group, or no one in particular) and a real target who understands from the situation that the speech is aimed at them	The real target receives the message through the direction and context of the speech, not through any implication in the wording; the meaning is carried by who is present and how the speech is aimed, not by what the words themselves imply
Pun	Dual semantic activation — a single polysemous word carries a near meaning and a distant intended meaning	Yes — as the near meaning, which presents itself first	Not the operative dimension	A single word (<i>lafz mushtarak</i>) carries two recognised meanings; the near meaning is apparent and springs to mind first; the distant meaning is intended and pointed to by a contextual clue (<i>qarīna</i>) without being made explicit	The ambiguity is located in a single polysemous word; the near meaning presents itself first, while the distant meaning is the intended one

Decision Tree

1 Is there an explicit comparison between two entities based on a shared attribute?

- Both the likened-to and the likened are present, or the comparison can be paraphrased as “X is like Y in respect of Z” →

Simile

2 Is a word or attribution used non-literally, with the literal meaning blocked by a contextual indicator?

- The transfer is grounded in similarity, and one pole of the underlying comparison is omitted → [Metaphor](#)
- The transfer is grounded in a relationship other than similarity (cause, effect, part, whole, place, time, instrument, etc.), or the shift lies in attribution rather than in the word itself → [TRANSFER](#)

3 Does the intended meaning arise from the wording itself while the literal meaning remains possible?

- The intended meaning is implied through a relation of entailment (*mulāzama*) carried by the uttered expression itself → [Implicit Reference](#)
- A single polysemous word carries a near apparent meaning and a distant intended meaning → [Pun](#)

4 Does the intended meaning arise from who is being targeted rather than from the wording itself?

- The speech is formally directed at one [addressee](#) while a different real [addressee](#) understands that the message is aimed at them → [Indirect Address](#)

Key Pairwise Distinctions

The following pairs are most likely to be confused in practice.

Simile vs. Metaphor

In Simile, both the likened-to (*mushabbah*) and the likened (*mushabbah bih*) remain explicitly maintained within the comparison structure — even when the simile element and the shared attribute are omitted, as in the Effective Simile (*tashbīh baligh*). In Metaphor, one of the two poles is absent, and a contextual indicator blocks the literal meaning of the transferred word. The diagnostic test: can the expression be paraphrased as “X is like Y in respect of Z” with both X and Y identifiable? If yes, Simile; if one pole is absent and the literal reading is blocked, Metaphor.

Metaphor vs. Relational Transfer

Both involve a non-literal use of a word or expression whose literal meaning is blocked by a contextual indicator. The distinction lies in the motivating relationship: in Metaphor, the relationship is specifically similarity (*mushābaha*); in Relational Transfer, the relationship is something other than similarity — such as cause, effect, part, whole, place, time, or instrument — or the non-literality lies in attribution rather than in the word itself.

Implicit Reference vs. Relational Transfer

Both convey a meaning beyond the surface wording. The critical difference is whether the literal meaning is blocked. In Relational Transfer, a contextual indicator prevents the literal meaning from being intended. In Implicit Reference, no such indicator is present: the literal meaning remains genuinely possible and may be simultaneously valid alongside the intended meaning.

Implicit Reference vs. Indirect Address

Both allow the literal meaning to stand and both convey an intended meaning beyond the surface. The difference lies in the mechanism. In Implicit Reference, the intended meaning is carried by the implication of the uttered expression itself — the word or phrase entails the intended meaning through a relation of *mulāzama*. In Indirect Address, the intended meaning is not implied by the wording but is carried by the direction and situation of the speech: a real target who is present understands from context that the speech is aimed at them. Ibn al-Athīr further notes that Indirect Address operates exclusively through compound expressions, while Implicit Reference may operate through either a single word or a compound expression.

Implicit Reference vs. Pun

Both allow the literal meaning to stand. The difference is structural: in Implicit Reference, the meaning operates at the level of the expression as a whole, through implication. In Pun, the ambiguity is located in a single polysemous word; the near meaning presents itself first, while the distant meaning is the intended one.

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