



A Study of Figurative Language in Love Songs

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Abstract

This current study examines the use of figurative language in love songs: a case study in Abel Makkonen Tesfaye, a Canadian singer, and Kiana Ledé, an American singer. While previous studies investigating figurative language in English songs selected the data of English pop music and original soundtracks, this study contributes to the views of love songs thanks to their popularity among listeners (Greschner, 2016). The data were gathered from Abel Makkonen Tesfaye and Kiana Ledé's songs based upon purposive sampling method. The singers selected in this study are also English songwriters whose songs were written based upon their own experience of love. This piece of data collection is viewed as highly authentic since song lyrics were written based upon their own personal experience of love stories. An entire 37 love songs contain a total of 78 tokens of figurative language. The data analysis in this study follows Colston (2015). Since this study only focuses on meaning; not sound devices, there are four metaphorical devices of figurative language focusing on meaning that is simile, metaphor, hyperbole and personification. In regard to data validation, three linguists were asked to validate the data analysis for the outcome of reliability and accuracy. With this method, the results reveal that hyperbolic expression is mostly used at 64 percent where hyperbole is the metaphorical device working well with love songs. Aside from that, the metaphorical devices of simile, metaphor and personification occurs at 23 percent, 6.4 percent and 6.4 percent, respectively. With the results of this study, it is interpreted that exaggeration and overstatement could motivate listener's feeling and emotion effectively in love songs. It is hoped that this study will be beneficial for learners of English as a Foreign language (EFL) concerning the use of metaphorical devices in figurative language effectively and appropriately.

Keywords: *Figurative language, hyperbole, love songs, meaning*

1. Introduction

English is known as an international language where the number of populations who communicate in English in the present day is ranked the top five in comparison with other languages (Melchers & Shaw, 2013). Knowing English allows us to contact with other people across different countries around the world easily in this globalization era. Moreover, it also supports us to gain more knowledge as most literature or written texts available around the world is written in the English language. So, knowing English is considered as a pathway of success and accomplishment, such as better job opportunity and higher international education.

In order to gain this achievement, it is important for us to practice various English skills in order to improve our *linguistic competence* (Radford, 2009), referring to the ability to apply language use fluently and accurately. Although there are various ways to improve our English ability, one of the best suggested ways is to listen to English songs (Paquette & Rieg, 2008). Practicing listening to English songs complies with the psychological theory of *Behaviourism* due to positive reinforcement from musical entertainment (Castagnaro, 2006) to encourage us to study language. It is noticeable that the contents of English songs are always written with repetitions and rhymes that help English language learners acquire and remember the English language efficiently and effectively (Paquette & Rieg, 2008), as in (1).

- (1)
 London Bridge is falling down
 Falling down, falling down
 London Bridge is falling down
 My fair lady [...]

[87]



It can be seen from example (1) that English songs often use the strategies of *repetition*, which is an important part of learning and acquiring notion of language. Moreover, the positive reinforcement of good feeling when listening to songs is another factor to motivate English language learners to enjoy learning more and more. Furthermore, not only does listening to English songs help us improve our English ability, such as wider range of vocabulary and different grammatical forms via implicit learning approach, but it also entertains us to learn the English language simultaneously (Kuśnierek, 2016). When students are free from tension and anxiety, they can acquire language better. This is regarded as one of the best learning strategies to enhance learners' English proficiency. Accordingly, English language learners could employ English songs to learn form, meaning and use concurrently.

Even though English songs is regarded as one of the creative pedagogical approaches to acquire the English language (Paquette & Rieg, 2008), English songs are made up of both idiomatic and figurative meanings. In other words, figurative language is basically known as indirect meaning beyond sentences (Colston, 2015). Although we occasionally try to look up the meaning of unknown lexical items in English dictionary, it does not help us understand what is written figuratively by song writers. Due to figurative language, some English language learners are currently faced with difficulty and confusion in understanding the metaphorical meanings of figurative language in English songs. Several classic examples are given in (2).

(2)

- (a) He is a chicken.
- (b) The window has eyes.

Example (2a) does not mean that the guy looks as though he is a cock which has two wings, two feet and some colourful feathers. However, the utterance (2) figuratively implied that the guy's personal characteristic is coward and stupid. Instead of uttering the direct statement *he is coward* so as to make a impolite subjective comment, the writer applies the metaphorical device of *metaphor* in figurative language to make a comparison of two entities between a person and a chicken without using *like* or *as*.

In (2b), we all know that it is impossible for the window to have eyes according to our encyclopaedic knowledge. However, the writer applies the notion of personification to make an implication what is said needs to be careful as someone may accidentally hear it. With this illustration, English language learners could take advantages of English songs to study and gain better understanding of figurative language in the English language used through English songs. As a result, creativity in language use could, therefore, be developed.

The tremendous availability of figurative language in English song lyrics makes them become difficult to translate from the original version. Moreover, direct translation does not help understand utterances and it can make utterances become more ambiguous and perplexing. This is because figurative language also involves with various indirect meaning, connotations, interpretations and emotional expressions. Due to these reasons, it is significant for English language learners to learn figurative language, especially from English song lyrics. Apart from that, English language learners who take advantages of studying figurative language allow them to study various features concerning the theories of figurative language, such as simile, metaphor, hyperbole and personification. These are crucial metaphorical devices in figurative language (Colston, 2015) that we can normally experience in everyday life and routine conversation. The study of figurative language in this study selected English love songs, which were written by own experience of song writers. This reason makes this study become different from other love song in previous studies. Accordingly, having this study would help upgrade English language learners' English capability and proficiency to other levels.

As mentioned earlier, this study will be beneficial to learners of English as a Foreign Language. English language teachers could apply love songs as materials to teach figurative language to their students. With this approach, it could be a new challenge for English language learner to learn figurative language in addition to their textbooks. As a small- scale research, this study gathered 37 love songs to study figurative language. This information leads to the following research questions and research objective in the following section.



Research Question

What are the interpretations of figurative language in Abel Makkonen Tesfaye and Kiana Ledé's love songs?

Objective of the Study

To examine figurative language used in Abel Makkonen Tesfaye and Kiana Ledé's love songs

Research Hypothesis

According to Jitmart and Wongkittiporn (2021) who studied figurative language in love songs, love songs lyrics' composers are likely to make exaggeration through the metaphorical device of hyperbolic expression in order to attract listeners' deep feeling and emotion as much as possible. With the results from the previous study, it is hypothesized that the hyperbolic expression in figurative language has a high tendency to be used with love songs lyrics.

2. Literature Review

This section provides review of literature concerning theoretical concepts and classifications of figurative language, such as simile, metaphor, hyperbole and personification. Aside from that, previous studies relating to the study of figurative language in English song lyrics will be addressed.

2.1 Figurative Language and Types of Figurative Language

Figurative language is generally defined as indirect meaning beyond literal meaning (Colston, 2015). For example, the name of the protagonist in the movie *Titanic* called *Rose* connotes love. This connotes her love toward the main protagonist *Jack*. Some English language learners may ask a question as to why English songs writers are likely to employ various classifications of figurative language in songs and what are reasons for this. One of the supporting reasons to answer this question is that it helps the listeners to tune in with music easier. Moreover, it helps create and motivate listeners' imagination and emotion while they are listening to songs. For example, while someone cries while listening to sad songs, others feel motivated when listening to rock music. Because of this reason, it is intriguing to study how metaphorical devices in figurative language works effectively and efficiently toward listeners of English love songs. Therefore, various classifications of figurative language are addressed in the following section.

There are various categories of figurative languages as divided in metaphorical meaning and sound devices. However, this study focused of four types of metaphorical meaning: hyperbole, metaphor, personification and simile. The word *hyperbole*, as derived from a Greek word, is defined as a figure of speech, representing an exaggeration, such as *a ton of love*. Hyperbolic expression is usually found to be used in comedy and amusement (Colston, 2015). *Metaphor* is a comparison between two things. However, this comparison does not employ the lexical words like *as* and *like*. It is an implicit comparison of two unlike entities (Colston, 2015). Aside from that, *personification* is defined as creating a non-human being or inanimate subject to act like human beings. For example, this tree is laughing hilariously (Colston, 2015). *Simile* is combination between two objects via lexical devices, such as *like* or *as* (Colston, 2015). This theory of figurative language is presented with example as follows:

(3) I will give you all my life.

(Kaewmontha, 2015, p. 16)

Example (3) is figuratively interpreted as hyperbolic expression because it seems impossible for a person to give his or her own life to another people. Another example is demonstrated in (4).

(4) She's a bubble bath and candles.

(Silapachai, 2015, p. 65)

Example (4) is figuratively interpreted as metaphor. The songwriter intends to make a comparison as if his lover likes a bubble and candles which could make him feel good and comfortable in which to stay. This theoretical background information is applied with numerous studies which will be summarized in the following section.



2.2 Previous Studies of Figurative Language in English Songs lyrics

A number of previous studies investigated figurative language in English song lyrics. One of them is Yaito and Termjai (2021) who studied figurative language in British and American pop songs. The results shows that metaphor occur mostly at 75 percent. This comparison in pop songs usually involved with someone's feeling, emotion and thought. In addition, Zain (2013) deployed Christian religious songs, such as *for the rest of my life* and *hold my hand*, to study figurative language in English. The results show that the linguistic devices of hyperbolic expression occur frequently to refer to God. This could be one of the reasons who people who listen to these songs feel impressive or emotionally cry. When it comes to Arifah's (2016) study, the researcher used the song John Legend's Lyric and found that hyperbolic expression is commonly used in this song. Furthermore, Dewi, Hidayat, and Alek (2020). used song lyrics with the theme of romantic songs to study figurative language. It was found that metaphor is commonly used with love songs. Love songs are usually metaphor to make a comparison of two objects in an implicit way. Adhi (2022) used the song *Something in Your Eyes* to study metaphorical expressions in figurative language. It was found that personification is mostly used at 30 percent. Aside from that, Tirrahmah (2018) selected Raef's songs to study figurative language and the results show that metaphor occur the most at 42 percent. Alfarisi (2017) selected Bruno Mars's song to study and the results shows that repetition occur the most at 36 percent. Finally, Nursolihat and Kareviati (2020) selected the song *A Whole New Word* to study and the results reveal that personification is used frequently in this song.

2.3 Hyperbolic Expression

Since it is hypothesized that hyperbolic expression is frequently used in love songs. The characteristics of hyperbole will be specifically noted in this section. Ruminda and Kharimah (2017) addresses that hyperbole is an exaggeration that is usually found in song lyric as the song writers would like to make their songs more meaningful and valuable. With the quality of hyperbole in love songs, it could make the listeners to get a pleasure (Ruminda & Kharimah, 2017). There are several characteristics of hyperbolic expressions. Firstly, the statement of hyperbole is contrast to actual facts. The statement of hyperbole can be noticed from the use of lexical items, such as *dramatic*, *tremendous*, *colossal*, *very* and *devastating* (Ruminda & Kharimah, 2017). Another characteristic of hyperbole is called an encyclopaedic meaning approach to meaning. For example, the speaker will produce an utterance with their extensive knowledge as in *Jane got the super deluxe car with 25 wheels*. The speaker has an encyclopaedic knowledge that *a car* has four wheels. However, he/she tries to overstate concerning the speciality of the car. Another classification of hyperbole is that it is gradable. In order to exaggerate about something, it must be gradable. For example, the differences between *fat* and *obese* refers to more pounds (Ruminda & Kharimah, 2017). This information leads to the methodology in the following section.

3. Methodology

Since this study focuses on love songs lyrics, *purposive random sampling* method is applied to gather information to be interpreted figurative language. Abel Makkonen Tesfaye and Kiana Lede's love songs that has higher 10 million on Youtube were selected to study figurative language. The songs that selected to examine figurative language in this study must has higher 10 million views on YouTube This data collection via *purposive random sampling method* is the way to collect data based upon researchers' convenience so this way of collecting the data helps the researcher to save time and money. The data in this study is available on YouTube.

3.1 About Singer

While Abel Makkonen Tesfaye is a Canadian singer and songwriter, Kiana Lede is an American singer and songwriters who was born in California, USA. Their love songs are regarded as highly authentic as they were written based upon their own experience of love. This study selected 37 songs to study as presented in Table 1 and Table 2.



3.2 Source of Data

The sources of data in Abel Makkonen Tesfaye include *the hills, can't feel my face, starboy, I feel it coming, I feel it coming, save your tears, call out my name, earned It, blinding lights, often, reminder, wicked games, pray for me, party monster, heartless, in your eyes, after hours, king of the fall, die for you, in the night* and *escape from LA*.

The sources of data in Kiana Lede's Songs cover *ex, show love, plenty more, I feel it coming, no take back, stuck in the middle part, this day, labels, I choose you, written in the Star, one of them day, voice mail, count me in, in your eyes, shawty, can't feel me face, if you hate me, lady like* and *none for you*

Song lyrics available in this study are made up of 37 songs where they were taken to examine metaphorical expression of figurative language. The data collection in this study is demonstrated as follows:

Hey, hm
 We went from 2 AM calls to zero communication, yeah
We spent too long in heaven that [HYPERPOLIC EXPRESSION]
 We felt the elevation
 Just 'cause it's different and we're not the same
 Doesn't mean things have to change
 I got no trouble with my pride, got trouble cutting ties
 I don't wanna be your ex
 We way too good at being friends
 Can we still hangout
 On the low, get wild
 I don't wanna be your, I don't wanna be your
 Hit ya girl up with a text, when you're alone and feeling stressed
 I don't gotta be in love with you, to love you
 I don't wanna be your, so don't treat me like your
 E-e-e-e, e-e-ex
 I don't want to be your
 E-e-e-e, e-e-ex

(Ex, Kiana Lede)

3.3 Data Analysis

As mentioned earlier, this study is a mini-scale research paper. The data analysis in this study is based upon Colston (2015). Colston (2015) indicates that the study of figurative language could be divided into two types, which are sound devices, such as alliteration. Another type is based upon meaning. This study excluded sound devices. This is because a mixture of two types would make the results of the study become unreliable. Therefore, the focus of this study is metaphorical meaning of figurative language. There are four classifications of figurative language, including simile, metaphor, hyperbole and personification as presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Data Analysis of Figurative Language in Love Songs

(5)	
Classifications	Examples
Hyperbole	(a) <i>Just know that I would die for you.</i>
Metaphor	(b) <i>In my city I'm a young god.</i>
Personification	(c) <i>Hills have eyes.</i>
Simile	(d) <i>Legend of the fall took the year like a bandit.</i>

In (5a), it is interpreted as hyperbole, or exaggeration. *I would die for you* means he could not live for the one he loves just because he cannot imagine a life without her. In (5b), it is interpreted as metaphor. In the lyric, he compares as if he is the god of the city of Sin referring to Las Vegas. Sentence (5c) is interpreted as personification due to the fact the hills cannot have eyes like humans or animals.

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3.4 Data Validation

The data analysis above were validated according to the following process as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2 Data Validation of Figurative Language in Love Songs

Classifications	Example	Validator1		Validator 2		Validator 3	
		A	D	A	D	A	D
Hyperbole	(a) <i>Just know that I would die for you.</i>	✓		✓		✓	
Metaphor	(b) <i>In my city, I'm a young god.</i>	✓		✓		✓	
Personification	(c) <i>Hills have eyes.</i>	✓		✓		✓	
Simile	(d) <i>Legend of the fall took the year like a bandit.</i>	✓		✓		✓	

With the process of the data validation, three linguists are instructed to check the accuracy of the data analysis. While A represents agreements, D represents disagreements. If two or more linguists put a tick on the column A, the data analysis gained validity and reliability. However, if only one or zero linguist puts a tick on the column A, the data needed reanalysing based upon the linguists' recommendation. With this method, it leads to the following result and discussion.

4. Result and Discussion

This section provides the results and discussion of figurative language in love songs. With the 37 songs of the Weeknd Songs Lyrics, there are 78 tokens, the percentage of this study was given in Figure 1.

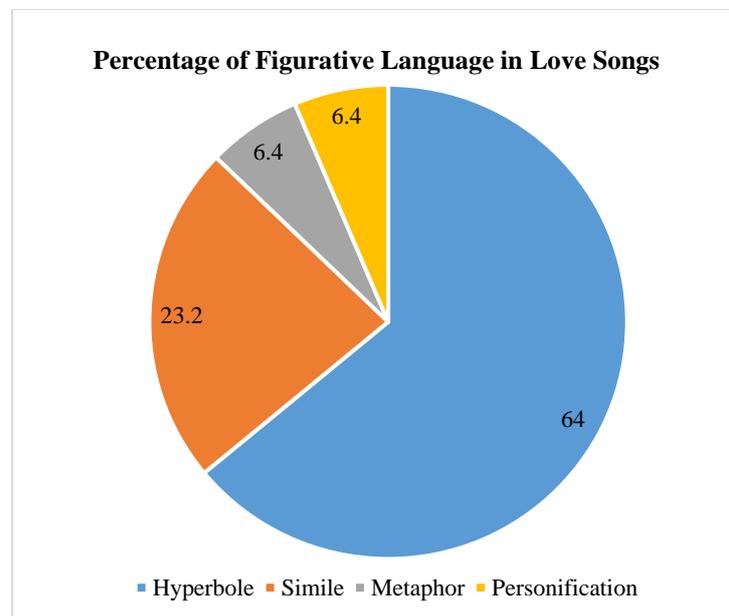


Figure 1 Classifications of Figurative Languages in Love Songs

Figure 1 represents classifications of figurative language in love songs based upon metaphorical meaning. There are four types in this study including hyperbole, metaphor, personification and simile. The results of this study go along the same line with the hypothesis. The most frequent figurative language found was hyperbolic expression at 64 percent, followed by simile at 23.2 percent. However, metaphor and personification were only found at 6.4 percent each. The results of the study lead to discussion and conclusion in the following section.

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5. Exemplifications of Figurative Language in Love Songs

5.1 Hyperbole

This section presents several examples of figurative language that were found in this study. The explanation of each example will also be given at the following section.

(7)

- (a) We spent too long in heaven that we felt the elevation.
- (b) Say hello to the skies, spread my wings and fly away
- (c) I know we're written in the star.

Example (4a) is figuratively classified as hyperbole because people cannot go to heaven and there is no empirical evidence that the heaven exists in the real world. Example (4b) is also classified as hyperbole as the statement is overstated. Human beings do not have wings to fly. In (4b), if the star in the utterance (4c) is interpreted that it is on the sky, it is impossible for use to write something on it.

5.2 Simile

Simile is the figurative device that make a comparison of two things by using the linguistic devices, such as like and as such as (8).

(8)

- (a) lips like Angelina
- (b) Your soul breathes into my body like a cloud of smoke

In (8a) it is a comparison of the features of a woman the song writer is observing. The song writers compare his lover with Angelina Jolie's full lips. In (8b), the song writer tries to make a comparison between soul breathes as if it is a cloud of smoke.

5.3 Personification

As mentioned in the literature review, personification is to person as action as if a human being and animal. The example of personification is explained as follows.

(9)

- (a) Hills have eyes.
- (b) Your smile creeps inside my heart.

In our encyclopaedic knowledge, hills are inanimate entities. It is impossible for hills to see someone or something. The authors create this imagination by adding human being's organ to the hills. In (9b), it is totally impossible for someone's smile to walk slowly into someone's heart.

5.4 Metaphor

Metaphor is basically a comparison of two entities without the use of *like* or *as*, such as (10).

(10)

- (a) You say I was your backbone.
- (b) I'm a young god.

In (10a) the songwriter makes a comparison between a person as if she is his backbone. Backbone is an important part of body, without backbone, human cannot live them normal. In (11b), the songwriter tries to make a comparison as if he is a young god as he is renowned for his sexual prowess among the Toronto ladies.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to interpret the use of figurative language in The Weeknd's Song lyrics. With 37 songs, there are 57 tokens of different figurative language in this study where hyperbole is found as the majority.

(11)

- (a) Say hello to the skies, spread my wings and fly away
- (b) I'll hold your heart if you'll let me, oh



(c) Put your heart in my hands

(d) We spent too long in heaven that we felt the elevation.

The song writer knows that we all need love and try to exaggerate or overstate the meaning of love so this makes the listener tune into this song easily. As a result, his songs were ranked higher on YouTube View.

Although hyperbole is often used in comedy and amusement, hyperbole is an excessive over-exaggeration usually found in love songs to make it effective toward listeners. Especially the singer and songwriter wrote his songs based upon his love experience so he probably wanted to put emphasis on his experience of sadness, pain, disloyalty, and intoxication through the lyrics of his songs. Moreover, Colston (2015) indicates that hyperbole is the best metaphorical device to enhance the beauty and appeal of the music. It can pull out the human beings' feeling of love and sadness effectively.

This study goes along the same line with Zain (2013) who discovered that hyperbole is the most dominant device in figurative language. If love is a faith in someone or something, there is no doubt why hyperbole is also predominant in religious songs which is based upon human being love and faith. Therefore, hyperbole is frequently used in our everyday life as found in play, prose and song lyrics (Arifah, 2016).

However, this study is similar to Nursolihat and Kareviati (2020) who found that simile is commonly used in "A Whole New World," which is from the Aladin Soundtrack. As we all know, simile is used as a comparison of two things via the metaphorical devices of *like* and *as*. The Weeknd's songs express how beautiful the world is by using metaphorical and metaphorical language though simile.

As mentioned by Jitmart and Wongkittiporn (2021), they addressed Maslow's hierarchy of need. This theory indicated most people need safety, love, esteem and self-actualization. Therefore, all human beings need love which is considered as a basic need for human being (Huitt, 2007).

(12)

(a) We spent too long in **heaven** that we felt the elevation.

(b) Say hello to the **skies**, spread my wings and fly away

(c) I know we're written in **the star**.

As indicated by Ruminda and Kharimah (2017), when using the powerful word like heaven, sky, and the star, this plays with listeners' feeling and make the listener feel comfortable to listen to love song.

Due to the limitation to this study, the results of figurative language in this study can be generalized to only love songs. Generalizing the data in this study to other types of data, such as newspapers and magazines may not be applicable to the optimal levels. For future research studies, it is recommended that studying figurative language in other types of music, such as rock music will contribute something new to the field. Due to the limitation in this study, the sample size in this study is rather small. It is recommended that future studies should add more data collected for the sake of generalizability.

7. Pedagogical Implication

As mentioned earlier, this study will be useful to learners of English as a Foreign Language. Since figurative language required English language learners to interpret its indirect meaning, this is regarded as a big challenge of English language learners to be able to classify figurative meaning correctly and appropriately. To reduce this anxiety and tension in learning the chapter of figurative language in classroom, English language learners could use songs and English music as materials to help English language learners to understand the theory and practice of each metaphorical device, such as simile, metaphor, hyperbole and personification. Learning figurative language from English songs is effective as English language learners could learn form, meaning and use at the same time. English language teachers could use English songs in English classroom. Not only do English songs entertain English language learners, but they are materials that are suitable for everyone referring to different age and genders. This study will encourage learners to learn both types of meaning in English in both idiomatic and figurative languages. Both are important for every day language use.



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