

Figurative Language and Its Functions in English Songs across Music

Genres on 2023 Billboard Year-End Chart¹

การใช้ภาษาภาพพจน์ในเพลงภาษาอังกฤษประเภทต่าง ๆ

ที่จัดอันดับบน Billboard Year-End 2023

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Abstract

This study investigated the types and functions of figurative language used in popular English songs ranked on Billboard's 2023 Year-End Chart, with attention to genre variations. Forty English songs across five genres (i.e., pop, hip-hop, country, rhythm and blues or R&B, and electronic dance music or EDM) were analyzed, resulting in 202 lyric lines containing a total of 229 instances of figurative language classified into fifteen types. The most frequently occurring types were metaphor, hyperbole, rhetorical question, simile, and meiosis. Figurative language functions in various ways, including comparing two different ideas or entities, conveying particular meanings through emotional intensification and exaggeration, evoking emotions without expecting an answer, and conveying negative attitudes. Genre-specific patterns were also observed: in pop and R&B songs, metaphor and hyperbole are primarily used to express emotions, with metaphor representing abstract ideas and hyperbole amplifying emotional intensity; in hip-hop, metaphor, rhetorical question, and meiosis supported themes of self-expression in a form of negative attitude. Country music emphasized vivid storytelling through metaphor and conveyed devotion through

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hyperbole, while no figurative language was found in EDM. The results confirmed that figurative language is a vital component of songwriting, serving as both a literary device and a communicative strategy. The study benefits EFL teachers and learners, and songwriters in terms of the essential role of figurative language and how it is used in enhancing lyrical sophistication and emotional expression.

Keywords: Figurative language, Functions of figurative language, Popular English songs, Music genres

บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษานี้วิเคราะห์ประเภทและหน้าที่ของภาษาภาพพจน์ (figurative language) ที่ปรากฏในเพลงภาษาอังกฤษยอดนิยมซึ่งได้รับการจัดอันดับใน Billboard's 2023 Year-End Chart โดยให้ความสำคัญกับความหลากหลายของแนวเพลง กลุ่มตัวอย่างประกอบด้วยเพลงภาษาอังกฤษจำนวน 40 เพลง จาก 5 แนวเพลง ได้แก่ ป๊อป (Pop) ฮิปฮอป (Hip-hop) คันทรี่ (Country) อาร์แอนด์บี (R&B Rhythm and blues) และ อีดีเอ็ม (EDM Electronic dance music) ผลการวิเคราะห์พบว่า มีเนื้อเพลงจำนวน 202 ท่อนที่มีการใช้ภาษาภาพพจน์ รวมทั้งสิ้น 229 ตัวอย่าง ครอบคลุมทั้งหมด 15 ประเภท โดยประเภทที่พบบ่อยที่สุด ได้แก่ metaphor, hyperbole, rhetorical question, simile และ meiosis ภาษาภาพพจน์ในบทเพลงเหล่านี้มีหน้าที่หลากหลาย เช่น การเปรียบเทียบสิ่งที่แตกต่างกัน การถ่ายทอดความหมายผ่านการเน้นอารมณ์หรือการกล่าวเกินจริง การกระตุ้นอารมณ์โดยไม่คาดหวัง คำตอบ และการสื่อเจตคติเชิงลบ ทั้งนี้ยังพบลักษณะการใช้เฉพาะตามแนวเพลง ได้แก่ เพลงป๊อปและอาร์แอนด์บี มักใช้ metaphor และ hyperbole เพื่อแสดงอารมณ์ โดย metaphor แทนแนวคิดนามธรรม และ hyperbole เพิ่มความเข้มข้นทางอารมณ์ เพลงฮิปฮอป ใช้ metaphor, rhetorical question และ meiosis เพื่อแสดงออกถึงอัตลักษณ์และความรู้สึกภายใน เพลงคันทรี่ใช้ metaphor และ hyperbole เพื่อเน้นการเล่าเรื่องให้เห็นภาพ โดยมี hyperbole แสดงการอุทิศตน ขณะที่ไม่พบการใช้ภาษาภาพพจน์ในแนวเพลงอีดีเอ็ม ผลการศึกษานี้ยืนยันว่า ภาษาภาพพจน์เป็นองค์ประกอบสำคัญของการเขียนเพลง โดยทำหน้าที่ทั้งในเชิงวรรณศิลป์และกลยุทธ์การสื่อสาร งานวิจัยนี้มีประโยชน์สำหรับผู้สอนและผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศ (EFL) และนักแต่งเพลง ในเรื่องบทบาทสำคัญของภาษาภาพพจน์และการใช้ภาษาภาพพจน์ในการเพิ่มความซับซ้อนของเนื้อร้องและการถ่ายทอดความรู้สึก

คำสำคัญ: ภาษาภาพพจน์, หน้าที่ของภาษาภาพพจน์, เพลงภาษาอังกฤษยอดนิยม, ชนิดของดนตรี



Introduction

Across cultures, music, especially songs, has long been intertwined with human life, serving multiple purposes on various occasions. For example, mothers sing lullabies to soothe their babies to sleep, soldiers use songs as morale boosters before entering battle, and couples select songs to convey emotional messages. In today's society, songs continue to hold significant influence across diverse fields, including the film industry, healthcare, and education. Songs have become a key contributing factor to the drive of education, where they are closely linked to human creativity and are recognized as a form of creative writing (Zhou, 2021).

In language learning, specifically, Shen (2009) noted that songs are impactful in effectively combining language and music to reflect cultural realities, thus assisting learners in developing better literacy in their target language. Similarly, Suriyawongpaisal (2013) emphasized that songs serve as an educational tool that facilitates classroom participation and promotes individual creativity. Likewise, Siallagan et al. (2017) acknowledged the literary value of songs and described them as mediums that songwriters typically employ to communicate emotions, ideas, confidence, desires, and a sense of freedom to their audiences. Songs are naturally integrated into daily life.

In research, numerous studies have analyzed songs, particularly focusing on lyrical content. As Siallagan et al. (2017) suggested, lyrics play a critical role in enhancing the beauty and emotional expression of songs, thereby increasing listeners' engagement. One key feature is figurative language, a stylistic device widely studied in semantics and literature. According to Marius (1998) and Carroll (2004), figurative language is used in a non-literal sense, requiring interpretation based on context, cultural understanding, and imagination. Saeed (2009, as cited in Pathumratanathan, 2012) also stated that figurative expressions serve to beautify meaning. Likewise, Arp and Johnson (2021) and Perrine (1977) stated that figurative language allowed speakers and writers to convey meanings indirectly, bringing vividness and emotional depth. Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen (2021) explained that figurative expressions conveyed symbolic or imaginative messages. Song lyrics help initiate storytelling, generate fantasy, and draw creative comparisons. Scholars such as Areerasada & Tapinta (2015) and Crystal (1991) further asserted that figurative language functioned not only as a decorative device but also as a cognitive and rhetorical strategy in the communication of people.



While music enables listeners to connect with melodies and emotions without necessarily understanding the lyrics, language-related factors such as tonal variation and pronunciation differences can still influence how songs are written and performed. This is particularly true for tonal languages like Thai, where shifts in pitch affect word meaning, often making it challenging to align lyrical content with conventional lyric patterns in English. According to Nilthongkum (2022), such linguistic complexities may lead some Thai artists to use English as a way to reach international audiences. In Thailand, where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL), the adoption of English in songwriting has become increasingly common among emerging artists. Nilthongkum (2022) also suggests that the rise of music streaming platforms may be one of the key reasons behind this trend, as wider access to global listeners encourages more Thai artists to use English as their main medium of expression. This development is reflected in the success of artists such as H3F, HYBS, Phum Viphurit, MILLI and Pyra, whose English-language songs have garnered recognition from international audiences, including receiving awards and invitations to perform in major concerts abroad. Despite this growing adoption of English in songwriting, linguistic challenges remain at a deeper level. One significant issue is the effective use of figurative language, which can be particularly difficult for Thai artists, as it is rarely addressed in a systematic way within formal language education. Figurative devices, such as metaphor, irony, symbol, and allusion often require advanced knowledge and cultural familiarity with English, which, unfortunately, is not commonly emphasized in formal EFL instructions.

Based on these observations, the present study aimed to examine the use and functions of figurative language in widely popular English song lyrics composed by native English speakers. The analysis focused on 40 English songs selected from the 2023 Billboard Year-End Chart, covering five music genres. Insights from this research aim to support EFL songwriters by providing guidance on how figurative expressions can be naturally and effectively incorporated into English lyrics. Additionally, the study investigated whether different song genres influence the use of figurative language. The findings were expected to offer valuable contributions not merely to the fields of music and songwriting education but also to song writers particularly the novices who are interested in semantics in different song genres.



Objectives of the Study

This study explores figurative language in English songs featured on the 2023 Billboard Year-End Chart. It focuses on identifying the most frequently used types of figurative language, examining their functions, and analyzing how they vary across the chart's most dominant music genres. The three objectives are as follows:

1. To identify the types of figurative language most frequently used in 2023's most popular English songs
2. To identify the functions of figurative language used in these songs
3. To find the most dominant types of figurative language used in each of the song's most dominant genres

Literature Review

Figurative language and music genres significantly influence the style and meaning of song lyrics. This section outlines the theoretical foundations of figurative language, describes key music genre classifications, and reviews previous research on figurative language use in musical contexts.

1. Theoretical Framework: Figurative Language

This present study adopts Perrine's (1977) framework as the principal reference for identifying figurative language types, due to its established relevance in literary analysis. To complement this foundation, selected categories from Suriyawongpaisal (2013) were also integrated. Suriyawongpaisal's framework is based on earlier classifications developed by Ray (2007, 2008), Pence (2012), and Burton (2007), offering an expanded perspective on figurative expression. Following the study's objectives, this research included only the types most relevant to meaning. A total of fifteen figurative types were selected: simile, metaphor, personification, antithesis, synecdoche, metonymy, symbol, paradox, hyperbole, understatement, irony, oxymoron, rhetorical question, meiosis, and allusion. These selected types serve as the core analytical tools for examining how figurative language contributes to lyrical meaning across different music genres.



2. Music Genres

Music genres may function as both social constructs and stylistic frameworks that influence musical structure and lyrical content. As suggested by Fabbri (1981) and Merwe (1989), genre can be viewed as a set of musical events shaped by shared conventions, while He and Dong (2023) point to the role of cultural context and thematic evolution in shaping genre boundaries. In the context of lyrical analysis, genre appears to influence not only thematic content but also the use and stylistic presentation of figurative language. Therefore, an established classification system was needed to support the genre analysis in this study. To support genre classification in this study, the GTZAN dataset (Andrada, n.d.) and Picken (2024a, 2024b) were adopted as the primary framework, as it is widely recognized in music genre recognition research for its structured and reliable taxonomy (Sturm, 2013). Based on this classification, three genres were identified: pop, hip-hop, and country. Following a preliminary study and expert verification, two additional genres were included, namely Rhythm and Blues (R&B) and Electronic Dance Music (EDM), according to the classification proposed by Picken (2024a, 2024b). These five genres provided the basis for analyzing figurative language use across the selected songs.

3. Previous Related Studies

Previous studies on figurative language in English songs have often concentrated on particular themes, artists, or genres. For example, Suriyawongpaisal (2013) analyzed figurative language in Taylor Swift's lyrics through a combined framework of nineteen types adapted from Ray (2007, 2008), Burton (2007), and Pence (2012), highlighting the expression of American cultural values. The most prominent types were metaphor, simile, and hyperbole. Tanbanjong (2016), in an analysis of Lady Gaga's lyrics, found metaphor, symbol, and personification to be the most frequently used, while irony was notably absent. Likewise, Areerasada & Tapinta (2015) explored feminist themes in the lyrics of several prominent female artists, applying the frameworks of Perrine (1977), Arp and Johnson (2009), and Straker (2013), and identified metaphor, simile, and parallelism as key devices used to express feminist perspectives. Furthermore, Jitmart and Wongkittiporn (2021) focused on Lauv's love songs and reported hyperbole as the most dominant device used to convey emotional intensity. In contrast, the current study broadens the perspective by analyzing multiple types and functions of figurative language across five music genres, offering a more comprehensive view of how figurative devices operate in contemporary English music.

Methodology

Data Collection

The data of this study were the English songs ranked on the Billboard Year-End Hot 100 Chart of 2023, which was selected for its global recognition and its reflection of mainstream music trends. Among these 100 songs, only 91 English-language songs were considered, with songs in other languages excluded. To verify the classification of genres of these songs accurately, the researchers used three trusted sources, namely Apple Music, Spotify, and Chosic's Music Genre Finder, as well as additional verification from music experts with certifications and professional experience in the music industry. These sources were selected for their recognized reliability and popularity.

Using the frameworks of Andrada (n.d.) and Picken (2024a, 2024b) along with the above sources and the music experts, five main genres were identified across these English songs: pop, hip-hop, R&B, country, and EDM. From the list of 91 English songs, 40 were purposively selected for detailed analysis. This selection was based on a preliminary assessment indicating that all five genres were sufficiently represented in terms of the number of songs selected, with a genre distribution similar to that of the full set of 91 English songs. Specifically, songs were purposively selected with the same proportion of the genres found in 91 English songs, which included twelve pop songs, eleven country songs, ten hip-hop songs, six R&B songs, and one EDM song.

A total of 202 lyric lines containing figurative language were identified from these 40 songs. The number of lines varied slightly between genres due to differences in song length and lyrical style. Music genres may function as both social constructs and stylistic frameworks that influence musical structure and lyrical content. As suggested by Fabbri (1981) and Merwe (1989), genre can be viewed as a set of musical events shaped by shared conventions, while He and Dong (2023) point to the role of cultural context and thematic evolution in shaping genre boundaries. In the context of lyrical analysis, genre appears to influence not only thematic content but also the use and stylistic presentation of figurative language. Therefore, an established classification system was needed to support the genre analysis in this study. To support genre classification in this study, the GTZAN dataset (Andrada, n.d.) and Picken (2024a, 2024b) were adopted as the primary framework, as it is widely recognized in music genre recognition research for its structured and reliable taxonomy (Sturm, 2013). Based on this classification, three genres were identified: pop,



hip-hop, and country. Following a preliminary study and expert verification, two additional genres were included, namely Rhythm and Blues (R&B) and Electronic Dance Music (EDM), according to the classification proposed by Picken (2024a, 2024b). These five genres provided the basis for analyzing figurative language use across the selected song style, the dataset was considered adequate for identifying meaningful patterns and functions across genres. To support this analysis, a summary of the selected songs and their genre distribution is provided in Table 1.

Table 1 List of Selected Songs, Artists, and Music Genres

| No. | Songs | Artists | Genres |
|-----|-------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------|
| 1 | Last Night | Morgan Wallen | Country |
| 2 | Flowers | Miley Cyrus | Pop |
| 3 | Kill Bill | SZA | R&B |
| 4 | Anti-Hero | Taylor Swift | Pop |
| 5 | Creepin' | Metro Boomin, The Weeknd & 21 Savage | Hip-hop |
| 6 | Calm Down | Rema & Selena Gomez | R&B |
| 7 | Die For You | The Weeknd & Ariana Grande | R&B |
| 8 | Fast Car | Luke Combs | Country |
| 9 | Snooze | SZA | R&B |
| 10 | I'm good (Blue) | David Guetta & Bebe Rexha | EDM |
| 11 | Unholy | Sam Smith & Kim Petras | Pop |
| 12 | You Proof | Morgan Wallen | Country |
| 13 | Something In The Orange | Zach Bryan | Country |
| 14 | Rich Flex | Drake & 21 Savage | Hip-hop |
| 15 | As It Was | Harry Styles | Pop |
| 16 | Rock And A Hard Place | Bailey Zimmerman | Country |
| 17 | Under The Influence | Chris Brown | Hip-hop |
| 18 | Cruel Summer | Taylor Swift | Pop |
| 19 | Thinkin' Bout Me | Morgan Wallen | Country |
| 20 | Boy's A Liar, Pt. 2 | PinkPantheress & Ice Spice | Pop |
| 21 | Favorite Song | Toosii | Hip-hop |
| 22 | Thought You Should Know | Morgan Wallen | Country |

| No. | Songs | Artists | Genres |
|-----|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------|
| 23 | Thank God | Kane Brown With Katelyn Brown | Country |
| 24 | Sure Thing | Miguel | R&B |
| 25 | All My Life | Lil Durk Featuring J. Cole | Hip-hop |
| 26 | Karma | Taylor Swift Featuring Ice Spice | Pop |
| 27 | Just Wanna Rock | Lil Uzi Vert | Hip-hop |
| 28 | Cuff It | Beyonce | Pop |
| 29 | Vampire | Olivia Rodrigo | Pop |
| 30 | Fukumean | Gunna | Hip-hop |
| 31 | Lavender Haze | Taylor Swift | Pop |
| 32 | Players | Coi Leray | Hip-hop |
| 33 | Need A Favor | Jelly Roll | Hip-hop |
| 34 | Dance The Night | Dua Lipa | Pop |
| 35 | Love You Anyway | Luke Combs | Country |
| 36 | One Thing At A Time | Morgan Wallen | Country |
| 37 | Superhero (Heroes & Villains) | Metro Boomin, Future & Chris Brown | Hip-hop |
| 38 | Bad Habit | Steve Lacy | R&B |
| 39 | Golden Hour | JVKE | Pop |
| 40 | Religiously | Bailey Zimmerman | Country |

Data Analysis

In this study, each song was analyzed to identify occurrences of figurative language based on a framework adapted from Perrine (1977) and Suriyawongpaisal (2013). Fifteen types of figurative language were considered: simile, metaphor, personification, antithesis, synecdoche, metonymy, symbol, paradox, hyperbole, according to these predetermined types, and its function was determined through contextual analysis.

Additionally, a genre comparative analysis was conducted to explore whether the use of particular figurative types varied across music genres. Figurative language types and their functions observed in the five genres were systematically documented. To enhance the reliability of the findings, an inter-rater reliability process based on Miles and Huberman (1994) was



implemented, with 70% of the analyzed data reviewed by specialists in linguistics and literature. An inter-rater reliability rate of 97.2% was achieved, confirming the credibility and trustworthiness of the data analysis. The disagreed items were reviewed and justified by the supervisor of this research serving as the third rater for the final classification and interpretation.

However, the number of lyric lines containing figurative language varied across genres. Notably, no figurative language was identified in the EDM songs analyzed in this study, while genres such as pop, hip-hop, and country appeared to contain a greater number of analyzable lines. The total number of lyric lines and the specific lines containing figurative language could not be controlled, as it is natural for songs to differ in length and in the extent to which figurative language is used. As such, this study focused on the relative proportions of figurative language use within each genre. This genre-based approach was intended to support more balanced interpretations.

Results

This section presents the results related to the types and functions of figurative language found in 40 selected English songs. A total of 229 instances of lyrics containing figurative language were identified, covering fifteen distinct types. The most frequent types were metaphor, hyperbole, rhetorical question, simile, and meiosis. Functional analysis was also conducted to illustrate how each type operates within its lyrical context.

Types of Figurative Language

Table 2 shows the types of figurative language found in the selected songs of the study, in response to the first research objective. Every instance of figurative expression found within the lyrics was categorized.

Table 2 Types of Figurative Language Used in The Study

| Types of figurative language | Number found | Percentage (%) |
|------------------------------|--------------|----------------|
| Metaphor | 51 | 22.27% |
| Hyperbole | 44 | 19.21% |
| Rhetorical question | 30 | 13.10% |
| Simile | 24 | 10.48% |
| Meiosis | 21 | 9.17% |
| Antithesis | 17 | 7.42% |
| Personification | 12 | 5.24% |

| Types of figurative language | Number found | Percentage (%) |
|------------------------------|--------------|----------------|
| Irony | 9 | 3.94% |
| Allusion | 8 | 3.49% |
| Understatement | 4 | 1.75% |
| Metonymy | 3 | 1.31% |
| Symbol | 2 | 0.87% |
| Synecdoche | 2 | 0.87% |
| Oxymoron | 1 | 0.44% |
| Paradox | 1 | 0.44% |
| Total | 229 | 100.00% |

As seen in Table 2, the analysis of 40 English songs revealed a total of 229 instances of figurative language identified across 202 lyric instances. Fifteen types of figurative language were found in the data, with metaphor emerging as the most frequent device, followed by hyperbole, rhetorical question, simile, meiosis, antithesis, personification, irony, allusion, understatement, metonymy, symbol, and synecdoche, respectively. The least frequently occurring types were oxymoron and paradox. Overall, these findings confirm that figurative language is an integral component of English song lyrics and serves as a major stylistic feature.

Five figurative language types were used most frequently across the songs. Metaphor accounted for 22.27% of the total instances, highlighting its distinct role in creating imaginative and symbolic meanings. Hyperbole was the second most frequent type, representing 19.21%, often employed to intensify emotional expression. Rhetorical question constituted 13.10% of the occurrences, illustrating their role in engaging audiences or dramatizing messages without expecting actual responses. Simile appeared at a frequency of 10.48%, emphasizing direct comparisons between entities, while meiosis accounted for 9.17%, typically used to subtly understate emotions or situations.

Functions of Figurative Language

To satisfy the second research objective, which is “to identify the functions of figurative language used in these songs,” the contextual analysis was made and revealed the following variation of functions.

1. **Metaphor** compares two different beings, things, ideas or entities (e.g., “*We were gold*”) and to make a reference to a particular thing or situation (e.g., “*Built a home and watched it burn*”).



2. **Hyperbole** exaggerates the statement for stronger sentiments (e.g., “*Ain’t a home when you not here*” and to convey a particular meaning (e.g., “*Just know that I would die for you*”).

3. **Rhetorical question** evokes feelings, not to seek the answer (e.g., “*How’s the castle built off people you pretend to care about?*”).

4. **Simile** compares two different beings, things, ideas or entities, similar to metaphor, but typically using comparison markers such as “as”, “like”, “as same as”, or “as if” (e.g., “*Make you cry like a baby, yeah*”).

5. **Meiosis** conveys one’s negative attitude toward another by using inappropriate words or offensive language, often with the intention to insult, belittle, or express hostility (e.g., “*you ain’t shit but a bitch with a badge*”).

6. **Antithesis** expresses two contrastive ideas by using conjunctions such as “but”, “or” or “and” or punctuation marks to conjoin them in the same sentence (e.g., “*Some said I’d never be a superstar, but I know I’m different*”).

7. **Personification** creates clearer senses of imagination to the statement (e.g., “*When my depression works the graveyard shift*”).

8. **Irony** conveys contrastive ideas in a sarcastic or humorous way. It is commonly used to express sarcasm, critique, or social commentary (e.g., “*I have this thing where I get older, but just never wiser*”).

9. **Allusion** makes an indirect reference to a particular thing, such as a well-known person, character, event, or setting, that carries deeper associations or meanings. Its interpretation depends on the audience’s familiarity with the person, context, or cultural reference being mentioned (e.g., “*I ain’t no Superman, I’m just the way I am*”).

10. **Understatement** conveys a particular meaning, in contrast to hyperbole, by downplaying or minimizing the significance of something. It generally uses restrained expressions to achieve a subtle emotional effect or to sound modest or indirect. It generally makes use of restrained expressions to reduce the perceived intensity of an emotion or situation. (e.g., “*take it to the grave*”).

11. **Metonymy** makes a reference to a particular thing by substituting a related concept (e.g., “*He live in the bottle, that’s the way it is*”).

12. **Synecdoche**, like metonymy, also functions to reference a particular thing, but through the use of a part to represent the whole (e.g., “*My hips make you cry when I’m moving around you*”).

13. **Symbol** makes a reference to a particular thing that represents more than its literal meaning. Unlike allusion, which relies on the audience’s familiarity with external references, a symbol carries meaning through its inherent association with broader concepts (e.g., “*Somethin’ ‘bout a ring makes you think we’re better*”).

14. **Oxymoron** presents a combination of contradictory terms within a single phrase to create a paradoxical or striking effect. This device is often used to reflect emotional tension or complexity (e.g., “*Durkio told me he been on some positive shit*”).

15. **Paradox** conveys two contrastive ideas in a single statement, creating a more vivid or imaginative interpretation. Although it appears illogical at first, it often reveals a deeper truth upon reflection (e.g., “*I was all alone with the love of my life*”).

Dominant Figurative Language Types and Genres of Songs

As for the third research objective, which is “to find the most dominant types of figurative language used in each of the song’s most dominant genre,” the researchers integrated the results of the figurative language analysis and expert consultation to describe the prevalence of figurative language types within each song genre. Table 3 presents the dominant figurative language found in each dominant genre.

Table 3 Music Genres and Dominant Figurative Language Types Found in Each Genre

| Music genre | Types of figurative language with highest occurrences | Highest frequency of figurative language type / total number of figurative found in each genre | Percentage (%) |
|-------------|---|--|----------------|
| Pop | Metaphor | 24/83 | 28.92% |
| Hip-hop | Metaphor | 14/67 | 20.90% |
| Country | Metaphor | 10/49 | 20.41% |
| | Hyperbole | 10/49 | 20.41% |
| R&B | Hyperbole | 8/30 | 20.51% |
| EDM | - | 0 | 0.00% |



In terms of genre distribution, Table 3 shows that figurative language was unevenly represented across the five genres investigated in this study. Pop songs had the highest number of figurative instances, totaling 83 instances, and demonstrated a dominant use of metaphor, followed by hyperbole and rhetorical questions. Hip-hop songs ranked second, containing 67 instances of figurative language, and were similarly dominated by metaphor, followed by rhetorical questions, while meiosis, which is also significantly present, is found to reflect the genre's tendency toward self-criticism, mockery, indirect expressions of toughness, and offensive language that conveys negative attitudes toward others. These are key features of hip-hop's critical and expressive lyrical style, which are key characteristics of hip-hop's critical and expressive lyrical style.

Country songs contained 49 instances of figurative language, with metaphor and hyperbole being equally prominent, followed by antithesis, highlighting the genre's traditional emphasis on vivid, narrative storytelling. As for R&B songs, a total of 30 instances of figurative language were identified, with hyperbole being the most frequently used device, followed by rhetorical questions and similes, contributing to the conveyance of emotional and romantic depth. In contrast, EDM songs showed no occurrences of figurative language, possibly due to the genre's stylistic focus on rhythm, atmosphere, and instrumental dominance rather than lyrical complexity, in addition to the fact that only one EDM song was included in the dataset.

Across these five genres, metaphor remained the most frequently used figurative device, suggesting its universality in popular songwriting. Moreover, rhetorical questions were also widely used across multiple genres, appearing frequently in pop, hip-hop, R&B, and country songs. Genre-specific preferences, however, were observed; meiosis was significantly more prominent in hip-hop songs, reflecting the genre's critical and self-expressive style. Additionally, some figurative devices exhibited genre-specific tendencies. For instance, oxymoron occurred almost exclusively in pop and R&B songs, reflecting a stylistic inclination toward layered emotional expression.

Discussion

This study investigated the types and functions of figurative language used in popular English songs, with a particular focus on how figurative devices were employed across different music genres. The findings offer valuable insights into how songwriters incorporate figurative

language as an integral element of their lyric composition, contributing significantly to the overall expressive quality of their work.

An analysis of 40 English songs revealed that figurative language constitutes a pervasive and impactful feature of modern songwriting. Across the 229 figurative language instances identified, figurative expressions were found not to be used arbitrarily but were thoughtfully applied to fulfill specific communicative functions. This observation aligns with earlier assumptions that figurative language enhances the vividness, creativity, and emotional depth of song lyrics (Areerasada & Tapinta, 2015; Crystal, 1991; Syafitri & Marlinton, 2018). Songwriters tend to employ figurative devices not only to enrich their lyrical and personal styles, but also to convey sophisticated emotions, articulate abstract ideas, and establish deeper emotional connections with their audiences. This finding further supports Siallagan et al. (2017) in that song lyrics can be regarded as a form of literary expression, utilizing rhetorical strategies to optimize the communication of nuanced and layered meanings.

To address the first research objective, metaphor was identified as the most frequently used figurative device, followed by hyperbole, rhetorical questions, similes, and meiosis. This finding is consistent with the earlier studies by Suriyawongpaisal (2013) and Tanbanjong (2016), which similarly found metaphor and hyperbole to be the prevalent types in songs. Additionally, this current study shows that the figurative expressions in these songs primarily served five communicative functions: (1) comparing two different ideas or entities, (2) conveying particular meanings by intensifying or exaggerating emotional expressions, (3) exaggerating statements to express stronger sentiments, (4) evoking emotions without expecting an answer, and (5) conveying negative attitudes toward someone or something. This finding further supports the view of Areerasada & Tapinta (2015) and Syafitri and Marlinton (2018) that figurative language makes a significant contribution to both the emotional depth and literary quality of songwriting.

For the second and third research questions, the key findings suggest the three main themes: (1) multifunctionality of figurative devices, (2) variation of figurative functions across genres, and (3) challenges in interpreting ambiguous or overlapping devices.



Multifunctionality of Figurative Devices

Through a detailed examination of both types and functions of figurative language, this current study demonstrated that a single lyric instance may occasionally involve more than one figurative device. For example, in the song 'Creepin', the lyric *"Did he touch you better than me?"* functions both as a rhetorical question and as an instance of irony. Although the question does not seek an actual answer, its sarcastic tone presents feelings of sadness and jealousy, demonstrating how the songwriter is able to express multiple layers of emotional meaning using brief but emotionally resonant language through the figurative language. This example illustrates how a single lyric can simultaneously function as a rhetorical question and an ironic statement, highlighting the multifunctional nature of figurative expression in songwriting.

Variation of Figurative Functions across Genres

In terms of genres, metaphor was found to be especially dominant in pop and R&B songs. Lyrics such as *"I'm the problem, it's me"* in the song 'Anti-Hero', and *"You got a fast car"* in the song 'Fast Car' illustrate how metaphor enables the artists to express internal experiences and abstract emotional states that may not be easily conveyed through literal language (Arp & Johnson, 2021; Perrine, 1977). In contrast to Tanbanjong's (2016) study, which observed no instances of irony, this study discovered irony within pop songs, suggesting an evolving complexity in modern pop lyricism over time.

Hyperbole, the second most frequent figurative device, appeared widely across pop, hip-hop, R&B, and country songs. Lyrics such as *"I would die for you"* in the song 'Die For You' exemplify how hyperbolic expressions intensify the themes of love, loss, and vulnerability, allowing listeners to grasp the emotional extremes conveyed by the artists. This finding aligns with Jitmart and Wongkittiporn's (2021) observation that hyperbole serves as a powerful stylistic tool for communicating heightened sentiment, particularly in songs centered on romantic experience.

Rhetorical questions also featured prominently, particularly in pop and hip-hop genres. Rather than functioning as literal requests, rhetorical questions in these songs were employed to evoke emotional reflection and hesitation. For example, in the song 'Snooze', the repeated question *"How you threatenin' to leave and I'm the main one cryin'?"* exemplifies emotional conflict and



vulnerability. This observation is consistent with Crystal's (1991) assertion that rhetorical devices function to engage audiences by stimulating internal reflection rather than providing direct answers.

The genre-specific use of figurative language is further illustrated through the distribution of hyperbole and rhetorical questions. Although hyperbole and rhetorical questions were found across multiple genres, they were among the most frequently used in R&B songs, following metaphor. A similar pattern appeared in pop songs, where both types also occurred frequently. Their prominence in R&B and pop may relate to the genres' frequent focus on romantic themes, where emotional intensity and expressive uncertainty are central.

The study also revealed that figurative language served different communicative functions depending on genre and lyrical context. Although similar types of figurative devices appeared across multiple genres, their functions differ considerably based on the emotional tone and thematic focus of each song. For instance, hyperbole in pop songs often conveyed romantic or emotional longing, whereas in hip-hop, they are more commonly linked to personal struggle or assertions of dominance. These patterns tend to emphasize the role of figurative language as a reflection of genre-specific communicative styles and narrative demands. In other words, the function of figurative language may shift in response to the songwriter's intent and the thematic focus of each song. By analyzing a wide range of genres and examining over 200 lyrical instances from an up-to-date source like Billboard's 2023 Year-End Chart, the present study suggests a broader and more representative perspective than previous research, which often focused on specific topics or individual artists. While Areerasada & Tapinta (2015) specifically analyzed feminist expressions through figurative language in the lyrics of six female artists, and Tanbanjong (2016) concentrated on a single artist, this study attempts to investigate more genres to provide new insights into how figurative devices are distributed and function differently across musical styles. The findings thus contribute to a deeper understanding of figurative language in contemporary English songs, highlighting genre-based tendencies in both the types and communicative functions of figurative expressions.

Challenges in Interpreting Ambiguous or Overlapping Devices

The findings of this study show that some figurative lines may allow for multiple interpretations depending on the lyrical context. For example, rhetorical questions may function both as expressions of doubt and as emphatic emotional appeals. These findings suggest that



certain figurative types tend to be favored in specific genres, even if not exclusive to them. This reflects the interpretive ambiguity that can arise when lyrics invite more than one possible interpretation.

Another genre-specific pattern emerged in the use of meiosis, which appeared prominently in hip-hop lyrics. Defined in this study as language expressing negative attitudes through inappropriate or offensive terms, meiosis was often realized through explicit words such as *"bitch"* in the song 'Snooze'. Additionally, some lyrics used seemingly neutral expressions with sarcastic or ironic intent. For instance, the phrase *"baby boy"* in 'Die For You' functioned as meiosis when used to undermine the subject's emotional maturity. These examples suggest that the identification and interpretation of meiosis are possibly context-dependent, underscoring its rhetorical role in expressing contempt or emotional distancing in hip-hop.

The interpretation ambiguity or overlapping devices maybe problematic for the learners when studying the figurative language in songs and for the novice songwriters when they try to compose their English songs using figurative language to make their song more beautiful and meaningful.

Implications

This study recognizes figurative language as an essential element of songwriting, serving not only as a literary device but also as a communicative strategy. It offers practical implications for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, educators, and songwriters, particularly Thais, who may apply these insights to craft more expressive and sophisticated English lyrics. For example, Thai songwriters could explore genre-specific figurative patterns identified in this study and apply them to enhance emotional depth and stylistic appeal in their English lyrics. Educators, particularly in EFL and media-related fields, might integrate lyric analysis into the curriculum as a means of teaching rhetorical strategies and cultural nuance. Classroom activities could include identifying figurative devices in songs, crafting metaphorical expressions in songwriting workshops, or analyzing emotional tone via figurative language use to develop both linguistic and cultural competence. Moreover, the findings emphasize the importance of teaching figurative language not only for literary analysis but also for creative production in disciplines such as music and mass communication. The further studies can be suggested as follows:



First, as many studies on figurative language including this study focus on the investigation of figurative language in written texts used by the writers, it is interesting to explore how the readers or listeners perceive or interpret figurative language used by the writers in order to understand their receptive viewpoint on the use of figurative language. Qualitative or quantitative survey methods can be used to reveal the insight of this aspect and how figurative expressions can affect their aesthetic and emotional experience.

Next, expanding the scope of linguistic and cultural contexts when figurative language types are used by analyzing those in songs composed in other languages such as Thai, Chinese, Korean, Spanish, or Japanese may contribute to the understanding of the use of figurative language across cultural contexts. This will offer insights into both its use across culture and across linguistic system, providing a wider range of understanding on figurative language.

Finally, further studies may use more or various types of texts such as English songs from global music charts, different time periods and regions, or various genres including the modern ones. A longitudinal study may provide deeper understanding on rhetorical strategies and stylistic trends and reveal the trends of figurative language types and functions used in different contexts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, figurative language remains an indispensable tool in English songwriting, transforming seemingly simple lyrics into emotionally resonant and artistically meaningful expressions. By examining its functions across genres, this study underscores the richness and adaptability of figurative language in popular music, revealing how it reflects both individual emotion and broader cultural context embedded in songs from diverse backgrounds.

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