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## An Analysis of Figurative Language in Three Michael Jackson's Songs

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### Abstract

This paper aims to discover the figurative language and its meanings in three Michael Jackson's songs. It employed qualitative method to describe types of figurative language and its meaning in the song lyrics. The findings revealed five kinds of figurative language based on Perrine's theory. The types of figurative language were Metaphor with 16

data (50%), Personification with 06 data (18.8%), Metonymy with 01 data (3.1%), Symbol with 05 data (15.6%), and Overstatement with 04 data (12.5%). It is concluded that metaphor is the most frequent type of figurative language used in three Michael Jackson's songs.

**Keywords:** Figurative Language, Song Lyrics, Michael Jackson

### 1. Introduction

Language is one of the most important means for people to interact and express ideas or emotions to each other. An in-depth analysis of the meaning of a word is crucial for enhancing comprehension. In linguistics, the study of meaning is called semantics (Tô, 2011, p. 9). It is a branch of linguistics that studies the meaning of linguistic expression in a language.

In semantics, there are many ways to deliver an idea or intention to other people. One of them is using a figurative language. Through figurative language, people can understand the messages expressed in everyday communication and in other types of literal work such as novels, poetry, plays, and even song lyrics.

Similar to poems, song lyrics are different from daily expressions that have a straight, clear meaning and literal purposes. Perrine (1992, p. 37) <sup>[22]</sup> said that meaning is a correspondence between word and meaning. In literary works in general and in song lyrics in particular, listeners will find it difficult to understand the messages expressed in the lyrics if they concentrate on denotative meaning. Besides expressing the idea by using diction, imagery, language, rhythm, and so on as aspects of a song, the songwriters can go beyond the limits of the language by using figurative language. Figurative language is one of the branches of semantics; it is defined as any way of saying something other than in an ordinary way. However, people do not realise it is a kind of language. The lyrics in the song "Flashlight" written by Sia, Guzman, Moore, and Smith (2015), used figurative language to describe the image of the lover:

"I'm stuck in the dark but *you're my flashlight*."

(Retrieved from: <https://genius.com/Jessie-j-flashlight-lyrics>)

The phrase "*you're my flashlight*" in the lyrics above is classified as metaphor in comparative figurative language term. The flashlight is one of the sources of light, people often use it to light up the darkness, while the lover lights up the life of her partner (Ha, 2018) <sup>[7]</sup>. Moreover, a flashlight is a small portable electric light which she can hold in her hand and carry with her. It is similar to the hope that when people love someone, they always would like their partners to be together. So that the reason why, the songwriter used the image of flashlight to talk about love.

In another song, the songwriter used personification, one of the types of figurative language to describe water as if it was human.

"I know there is *hope in these waters*"

(Retrieved from: <https://genius.com/Adele-easy-on-me-lyrics>)

Accordingly, we could see that the phrase “*hope in these waters*” in this song was indicated as personification. It is about hope for something, but the songwriter used the word “*waters*” as the things that can be hoped. This phrase used the connotative meaning in the word “*waters*” (Swarniti, 2022)<sup>[27]</sup>.

As a matter of fact, figurative language is one of the favorite topics of a lot of scholars. Although there have been a lot of articles related to figurative language, there is hardly a study which analyses and describes songs sung by Michael Jackson. Additionally, because of the influence of different cultures, figurative language used in songs are somewhat different. It could lead to difficulties for scholars, Vietnamese listeners to understand the lyrics and the content of the songs. Thus, the author of this paper would like to conduct the study “An analysis of Figurative Language in three Michael Jackson’s songs”

In order to fulfil the purposes above, this paper attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What kinds of figurative language used in three Michael Jackson’s songs?
2. What are the meanings of the figurative language in three Michael Jackson’s songs?

## 2. Literature review and theoretical framework

### 2.1 Literature review

Because figurative language is used in everyday life, it is considered one of the topics attracting attention among linguists and researchers all over the world. Up to now, there has been an increasing number of studies referring to figurative language used in songs carried out by a lot of researchers.

Winnie and Akun (2008)<sup>[33]</sup> conducted a study of figurative language in “What My Mother Doesn’t Know” novel by using stylistics theory. Ningrum (2009)<sup>[5]</sup> conducted research about a semantic study on figurative language used in the Westlife’s album. However, this study just analyzed a semantic study of personification language used in the Westlife album. Three years later, Although Diniati and Fitrawati (2012)<sup>[6]</sup> also did research to find types of figurative language and differences of figurative language used in pop-punk song lyrics by Paramore and Blink 182, they just focused on four common types of figurative language which are proposed by GorysKeraf. In their conclusion, they used to state that, there was no hyperbole form in pop-punk song lyrics by Paramore and Blink 182, and metaphor was used dominantly to express the idea in these two rock bands. Having the same idea about figurative language, Maula (2013)<sup>[18]</sup>, in contrast, conducted her research through analyzing classic poetry series by William Blake. By using the theory about figurative language of Giroux, she had found that, there were 11 kinds of figurative language are used in the collection of William Blake’s poem and the most commonly used is Hyperbole. Although Listiani (2015) concerns with the descriptive analysis of figurative language in the song lyric by Taylor Swift’s “Speak Now” album, she had found that the dominant of figurative language that used is hyperbole, which was similar to the conclusion of Maula. Harya (2016) decided to study figurative language used in novel. After analyzing and identifying the data, she concluded that the dominant type of figurative language in the novel is simile. In 2017, Nurhaida and Marlida (2017)<sup>[19]</sup> identified the type and meaning of figurative language in Online Padang Ekspres Newspaper.

Once again, their results were different from the previous studies. They said that metaphor was the most dominant type of figurative language used in newspapers.

From 2018 until now, there have been several research which demonstrate figurative language such as the research of Hasanah, Lumbantoruan; Syafitri and Marlinton; Rohani, Arsyad; and Diani (2018)<sup>[25]</sup>, Rahmani and Nasution; Avillanova and Bram; Tiavawwati and Ningish (2019)<sup>[24]</sup>, Palupi (2021)<sup>[20]</sup>, Laimena and Que; Atmaja, and Santika and Syafryadin; and Agustina and Mustikawati (2023)<sup>[1]</sup>. Although these authors mentioned above did research which related to figurative language, however, they relied on different figurative language theories and their results were quite different.

It has been thought that figurative language is one of the new fields in Vietnam. Although there have been some scholars dealing with figurative language, they just focused on metaphor. Phan (2011)<sup>[23]</sup> studied conceptual metaphor in “Love is a journey” in English and Vietnamese. Likewise, Hồ (2016)<sup>[10]</sup> investigated the conceptual metaphor of Homeland in English and Vietnamese songs and poems. There have been a great number of studies made by linguistics students. Trần (2013)<sup>[32]</sup> conducted a study “conceptual metaphor expressing love and hatred in Trinh Cong Son’s and Bob Dylan’s songs”. The image of lovers under cognitive views was mentioned in the study of Luong (2014)<sup>[17]</sup>. Huỳnh (2015)<sup>[11]</sup>, Nguyễn (2015), and Lê (2018)<sup>[14]</sup> studied conceptual metaphor on “sea”/ “biển”; “rain”/ “mưa”; “sunshine”/ “nắng”; “mother”/ “me” in English and Vietnamese songs. Likewise, Hà (2018)<sup>[7]</sup> did research on the conceptual metaphor of love in English and Vietnamese songs in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

As mention above, there have been a great number of researchers studying figurative language in poems, novels, newspapers and even in songs, there seems to be no study conducted on figurative language in the Michael Jackson’s songs.

### 2.2 Theoretical Framework

Kennedy (1979)<sup>[12]</sup> defined figurative language as the employment of figures of speech in communication. This figure of speech refers to a linguistic device employed to convey a meaning that deviates from the literal interpretation of words. However, Perrine (1992)<sup>[22]</sup> described figurative language as any use of language that goes beyond the literal meaning of words to create a special effect or feeling.

Kennedy (1979)<sup>[12]</sup> likely emphasised the use of figurative language to enhance expression and communication, while Perrine (1992)<sup>[22]</sup> focused on the departure from literal meanings to create special effects or emotions. In addition, lyrics in songs often use figurative language to express emotions, experiences, feelings of wanting, and so on, which sometimes cannot be expressed in words. As a result, this paper will base on the theory of Perrine (1992)<sup>[22]</sup> to find out the figurative language in songs. He divided figurative languages into 10 kinds: Simile, metaphor, personification, metonymy, symbol, allegory, paradox, overstatement, understatement, and irony. Therefore, the author of this paper will base on this categorisation.

## 3. Research method

The purpose of this paper is to find out the kinds of figurative language used in three Michael Jackson’s songs

and the meanings of the figurative language used in these songs, the author of this paper will use a qualitative method. The author of this research used the lyrics of three songs composed by Michael Jackson, the selected songs that would be discussed were as below:

- a. Song 1: Heal the World
- b. Song 2: We are the World
- c. Song 3: Black or White.

The writer also adopted the theory from Perrine (1992) [22] to analyse the types of figurative language in the three songs mentioned above.

The writer downloaded and printed the song lyrics, which can be accessed on the website <https://genius.com/>.

In order to analyse the data, several steps were taken in this paper, as follows:

First, the writer read each song’s lyrics and listened to each song (Heal the World, We Are the World, and Black or White) on Michael Jackson’s YouTube channel to make sure that there were no mistakes in the song lyrics.

Second, the writer repeatedly reads and listens to the source to identify the data. Then, the writer annotated sections of the lyrics in the printout that feature figurative language and classified them into different forms of figurative language according to Perrine’s theory (1992) [22].

Then, the writer presented the result in the table, giving each code for each data; S for song, and L for line. Lastly, the writer explained the findings, interpreted the meaning of the types of figurative language used in three Michael Jackson’s songs, and drew the conclusion.

#### 4. Results

##### 4.1 Types of figurative language used in three Michael Jackson’s songs

In this section, the researcher found some data after analysing the three Michael Jackson’s songs. The writer found 32 figurative language in three Michael Jackson’s songs. The types of figurative language were: Metaphor (16), Personification (06), Symbol (05), Overstatement (04), Metonymy (01). There were no Simile, Paradox, Understatement, and Irony form. The percentage of figurative language found in three Michael Jackson’s is shown below:

**Table 1:** Types of figurative language used in three Michael Jackson’s songs

Types of figurative language	Number	Percentage
Simile	0	0%
Metaphor	16	50%
Personification	06	18.8%
Metonymy	01	3.1%
Symbol	05	15.6%
Allegory	00	0%
Paradox	00	0%
Overstatement	04	12.5%
Understatement	00	0%
Irony	00	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>100%</b>

##### 4.2 The meanings of the figurative language in three Michael Jackson’s songs

The writer found five types of figurative language used in three Michael Jackson’s songs were: Metaphor, Personification, Symbol, Overstatement, and Metonymy.

The meanings of the figurative language used in these three songs would be explained as follows:

##### 4.2.1 Metaphor

*SI, LI-2:*

*There’s a place I your heart  
And I know that it is love*

The lyrics above are a metaphor. The abstract concept of love was compared to a physical place within the heart. This emphasised the depth and importance of love, suggesting it occupied a distinct and special space within someone.

*SI, LI9: Love is strong*

The lyrics above are a metaphor. It compared love to something physically strong, like a rock, a mountain, or a fortress. This emphasised its ability to withstand challenges and endure through difficult times.

*SI, L24: Love’s enough for us growing*

The lyrics above are a metaphor. The songwriter compared love to a nurturing force, suggesting that love is all we need to grow and thrive. Through this comparison, the songwriter also would like to remind us that even when we are facing challenges or setbacks, love is enough to sustain us and help us grow.

*SI, L34: And the dream we were conceived in will  
reveal a joyful face*

The lyrics above are a metaphor. The “dream” was compared to an overarching vision, aspiration, or shared ideal that led to the songwriter’s existence. “Joyful face” was compared to the desired outcome, a future filled with happiness, fulfilment, and positive emotions. These metaphors suggested that the initial dream would eventually lead to achieving the envisioned joy.

*SI, L34: And the world we once believed in will shine  
again in grace*

The lyrics above are a metaphor. “The world we once believed in” represented a shared belief or vision that might have been lost or diminished, and “will shine again in grace” expressed the idea that this lost belief or vision would be restored and would radiate with grace, suggesting a sense of beauty, elegance, and divine influence.

*SI, L35: Then why do we keep strangling life*

The lyrics above are a metaphor. The songwriter compared life to something that was being strangled. Actually, strangling is a violent act that can lead to death. By comparing life to something that is being strangled, the songwriter was suggesting that our actions are harming or destroying life.

*SI, L36: Wound this Earth, crucify its soul*

The lyrics above are a metaphor. The songwriter compared the Earth to a person who is being wounded and crucified. Through this comparison, the songwriter suggested that the

Earth is a living, breathing being that is capable of experiencing pain and suffering.

*S1, L37: Though it's plain to see this world is heavenly*

The lyrics above are a metaphor. The “world” was compared to heaven. Through this indirect comparison, the songwriter would like to confirm that our world is so wonderful.

*S2, L1: There comes a time when we heed a certain call*

The lyrics above are a metaphor. The songwriter compared the call for unity and action to a literal call, emphasising the importance of responding to the world’s needs.

*S2, L8: We are all a part of God's great big family*

The lyrics above are a metaphor. The songwriter compared humanity to a family, emphasising the interconnectedness and shared responsibility we had towards one another.

*S2, L10: Love is all we need*

The lyrics above are a metaphor. It suggested that love was the ultimate solution to humanity’s problems. It was not just a feeling, but a powerful force capable of uniting us and overcoming obstacles.

*S2, L11: We are the world, we are the children*

The lyrics above are a metaphor. The songwriter compared the people of the world to children, emphasising unity, innocence, and the need for collective action. Moreover, it also suggested that we are all interconnected and responsible for shaping the future.

*S2, L18- 19:*

*Well, send them your heart so they'll know that someone cares  
And their lives will be stronger and free*

The lyrics above are a metaphor. The songwriter compared the impact of assistance and care to the strengthening and liberation of lives, highlighting the transformative power of help.

*S2, L29: When you're down and out, and there seems no hope at all*

The lyrics above are a metaphor. The songwriter compared “down and out” to a state of difficulty or despair. It was used to emphasise the emotional struggle.

*S3, L1-3:*

*I took my baby on a Saturday bang  
Boy, is that girl with you?  
Yes, we're one and the same*

The lyrics above are a metaphor. The songwriter compared himself and others to “baby”. This metaphor represented

innocence, vulnerability, and unity. It reminded us that we are all fundamentally the same, regardless of our cultural or racial background.

*S3: L14: I am tired of this devil*

The lyrics above are a metaphor. The songwriter compared the devil to something troublesome or negative, suggesting that the songwriter was exhausted or fed up with a difficult situation.

#### 4.2.2 Personification

*S1, L11: Heal the world*

The lyrics above are a personification. The songwriter considered “the world” as a human, and it could be healed to make it better.

*S1, L18: There's a love that cannot lie*

The lyrics above are a personification. Love is a complex emotion that is often difficult to express or understand. In these lyrics, the songwriter personified love, giving it the ability to speak and tell the truth. He might suggest that there is a kind of love that is pure and honest, and this kind of love cannot be hidden or disguised.

*S1, L19: Love is strong, it only cares for joyful giving*

Besides using metaphor, the lyrics above are also personification. In this case, love was personified as an entity that was “strong” and could “care”. This elevated love from a mere motion to an active force with agency.

*S1, L36: Wound this Earth, crucify its soul*

The lyrics above are also a personification. The songwriter gave the Earth the ability to feel pain and to have soul-like human qualities. He would like to suggest that the Earth is not an object but a sentient being that is being harmed by our actions.

*S1, L37: Let our spirits never die*

The lyrics above are personification. The songwriter gave our spirits the ability to die like humans. This suggested that our spirits are not just mechanical processes but sentient beings capable of experiencing life and death.

*S2, L2: When the world must come together as one*

The lyrics above are a personification. The world was personified as an entity capable of coming together, highlighting the need for global unity.

#### 4.2.3 Metonymy

*S2, L3: There are people dying*

The lyrics above are metonymy. The phrase “people dying” is a metonymy for the larger issues and challenges faced by humanity, emphasising the urgency of the situation.



#### 4.2.4 Symbol

**S1, L1- 3:**

*There's a place I your heart  
And I know that it is love  
And this place, could much brighter than tomorrow*

The songwriter explained the meaning of the symbol “place” directly with the next phrase “it is love”. Through this explanation, we can know that the place symbolizes love.

**S1, L11: Make little space make a better place**

“Little space” in this lyrics was used to symbolise the resting place of the world where there are still wars, violence, or discrimination. Moreover, it also gave more sense to how damaged the world is.

**S1, L44: See the nations turn their swords into ploughshares**

The symbol “turn their swords into ploughshares” is used to express the hope of the songwriter for a world where people live in harmony and peace. He envisioned a world where nations had abandoned war and violence in favour of cooperation and understanding.

**S2, L4- 5:**

*Oh, and it's time to lend a hand to life  
The greatest gift of all*

“Lend a hand” in the lyrics above, is a symbol. It symbolised support, help, and active participation in making a difference.

**S3, L19: I ain't scared of no sheets**

The lyrics above used symbols. In the past, “sheets” was the symbol for the white robes associated with the Ku Klux Klan

#### 4.2.5 Overstatement

**S1, L3: And this place, could much brighter than tomorrow**

The lyrics above are an overstatement. It is unlikely that any place on Earth can eliminate these negative emotions (hurt and sorrow). However, the songwriter exaggerated the extent to which the place in question could eliminate hurt and sorrow. He might try to convey the idea that this place is a place of great peace and comfort.

**S2, L4- 5:**

*Oh, and it's time to lend a hand to life  
The greatest gift of all*

The lyrics above are an overstatement. The symbol “lend a hand to life” as “the greatest gift of all” employed overstatement, emphasising the immense value of helping others.

**S2, L8: We are all a part of God's great big family**

The lyrics above are an overstatement. Besides using metaphor, the phrase “God's great big family” could be also seen as an overstatement, exaggerating the size and significance of the human family to emphasize the unity and importance of love.

**S2, L15: We're saving our own lives**

The lyrics above are an overstatement. The lyrics emphasised the significance of taking action and making a difference. It suggested that by helping others and making the world a better place, we were improving our own lives.

#### 5. Discussion

According to the Table 1 above, there are 32 figurative language found in three Michael Jackson's songs. These data involves five types of figurative language: Metaphor, personification, metonymy, symbol, and overstatement. Based on the data findings above, it can be seen that the metaphor expression was mostly used in three Michael Jackson's songs, the percentage was 16 (50%). Other type of figurative language which is in the second percentage was personification and symbol. There were 06 (18.8%) and 05 (15.6%). There were 04 (12.5%) for overstatement, and 01 (3.1%) for metonymy. In this result, three Michael Jackson's songs dominantly used metaphor expression over other types of figurative language.

Metaphor is used to describe two different things by using “is” or something similar to “is”, such as *Love is strong* (S1, L19), *Love's enough for us growing* (S1, L24), *We are all a part of God's great big family* (S2, L8), or *Love is all we need* (S2, L10). It can be seen that “Love” in Michael Jackson's songs are usually compared to a physical place “a place in your heart”, something physically strong “strong”. Besides, the songwriter also compares “world” to heaven, “life” to something that is being strangled, and “dream” to an overarching vision, a shared belief.

Personification is used to describe an inanimate object as if it was alive such as “the world” and “the Earth” is considered a human who can be heal or has the ability to feel pain, and as an entity capable of coming together, or “love” is personified as a person who has the ability to speak and tell the truth.

Symbol is used for an object or action that means something more than its literal meaning. For example, “love” is a place, “little space” symbolizes the resting place of the world where still wars, violence, or discrimination, or “sheets” is a symbol for the Ku Klux Klan.

Overstatement occurs when the songwriter uses words that exaggerates in comparison to reality, such as “We're saving our own lives” (S2, L15). It can be used to create a humorous, sad, or give effects for the lyrics.

Metonymy is when the songwriter uses the words or name of something that can be related to another thing, such as “people dying” (S2, L3).

#### 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the writer conducted this paper to find of types of figurative language used in the three Michael Jackson's songs. The writer only found five types of figurative language identified by Perrine's theory. They were metaphor, personification, symbol, overstatement, and metonymy. Metaphor with 16 data, personification with 06 data, metonymy with 01 data, symbol with 05 data, and

overstatement with 04 data. The percentage showed that metaphor had 50%, personification had 18.8%, symbol had 15.6%, overstatement had 12.5%, and metonymy had 3.1%. Based on the findings, it was found that metaphor is the most prevalent type of figurative language used in the three Michael Jackson's songs namely Heal the world, we are the world, and Black or White. It indicated that Michael Jackson used a lot metaphor to create something aesthetic, artistic, and meaningful.

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