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Imagery and Metaphorical Expressions of Love in Ed Sheeran's "Thinking Out Loud"

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the application of imagery and metaphor in Ed Sheeran's song Thinking Out Loud as a medium for expressing the concept of love. Utilizing a descriptive qualitative methodology within the framework of conceptual semantics, the research examines the role of figurative language in conveying emotional meaning. The analysis uncovers the use of diverse imagery types including visual, kinesthetic, and tactile as well as several conceptual metaphors, such as love is a journey, love is physical strength, and love is time. These figurative devices serve to deepen the emotional resonance and conceptual understanding of love in the song, thereby reinforcing its effectiveness in articulating intimate human experiences.

Keywords: Imagery; Metaphor; Figurative Language; Semantics; Conceptual Semantics; Love Expression

INTRODUCTION

Language plays a fundamental role in human life, functioning not merely as a tool for communication but also as a medium for expressing thoughts, emotions, and cultural values. In the realm of linguistic studies, particularly semantics, the focus lies in understanding meaning and how it shapes human interaction. Semantics not only addresses lexical and grammatical aspects of meaning but also involves the figurative dimensions of language, such as imagery and metaphor, which are instrumental in conveying abstract ideas like love.

As Rahmadyanti (2022) stated, language is a system of sound symbols that operates under specific rules, making communication feasible. This structural system enables individuals to articulate complex feelings and ideas, including through creative forms like songs. Songs, as a popular form of literary expression, often rely on figurative language to enrich their meaning. Linguistic devices such as imagery and metaphor are commonly used to strengthen the emotional and aesthetic elements of lyrical content.

Stockwell (2002) explained that imagery is a linguistic representation that evokes sensory images such as sight, hearing, and touch. Meanwhile, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) stated that metaphor is a way of thinking and understanding the world through the process of conceptualization, not just a style of language. These two figurative tools contribute significantly to the articulation of emotional depth and relational meaning, particularly in the expression of love.

The song *Thinking Out Loud* by Ed Sheeran was selected as the subject of this research due to its rich use of figurative language that expresses themes of love. Phrases such as "Will your mouth still remember the taste of my love?" and "Darling, I will be loving you 'til we're 70" exemplify the integration of sensory imagery and conceptual metaphors to convey the notion of enduring affection.

Accordingly, this study aims to explore how the use of imagery and metaphor in the lyrics of *Thinking Out Loud* reflects the conceptualization of love, analyzed from a semantic perspective.

METHODS OF RESEARCH

This research utilizes a qualitative descriptive approach to examine the presence and function of figurative language focusing on imagery and metaphor in the lyrics of Ed Sheeran's *Thinking Out Loud*. This methodological approach is deemed appropriate as it enables a thorough investigation of meaning and supports contextual interpretation of linguistic phenomena.

The main data for this study consist of the lyrics from *Thinking Out Loud*, which were sourced from official and credible platforms, such as verified lyrics websites and licensed music streaming services including Spotify and Apple Music. The data collection was carried out using a documentation technique, involving the transcription and selection of lyric lines containing figurative expressions. As the analysis is textual and linguistic in nature, no physical laboratory instruments were required.

Given the nature of the study, the research setting is non-field-based, focusing solely on textual material without involving human subjects. For data analysis, this study applies the theoretical perspectives of conceptual semantics and conceptual metaphor theory, as developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). These frameworks offer a lens through which the figurative structures within language can be analyzed and interpreted meaningfully.

The data analysis process was divided into three phases: identification, classification, and

interpretation. In the initial phase, the researcher identified lyric lines that contain figurative elements such as imagery and metaphor. The second phase involved classifying these elements based on types of imagery such as visual, tactile, and kinesthetic and metaphor types, including conceptual, structural, and orientational. In the final phase, interpretations were made by analyzing the figurative meanings in the context of the song and in relation to established semantic theories.

To enhance clarity in the presentation of findings, the results are organized in tabular form, allowing readers to easily understand the classifications and functions of the figurative language used. The method of analysis refers to the semantic discourse analysis model proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), with the emphasis placed on meaning and linguistic structure. This study does not employ statistical analysis software, as its focus is qualitative and interpretive rather than quantitative.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

The results showed that the lyrics of the song "Thinking Out Loud" contains many elements of figurative language consisting of imagery and metaphors used to express feelings of love deeply and poetically. Such figuratives not only embellish the language of the lyrics, but also create a strong emotional and conceptual meaning about love. The results of identifying and classifying the data are presented in the following table:

Table 1. Classification of Figurative Language in the Lyrics of "Thinking Out Loud"

No	Lyrics	Figurative Types	Subcategories	Semantic Implementation
1.	"When your legs don't work like they used to before"	Imagery	Kinesthetic	Describes the physical condition when old; love persists even though the body is weakened.
2.	"And I can't sweep you off of your feet"	Metafora	Physical-Emotional	Sweeping the legs as a symbol makes a person impress or fall in love.
3.	"Will your mouth still remember the taste of my love?"	Imagery	Gustatory	Love is described through taste; it creates an emotional sensation that feels real.
4.	"Will your eyes still smile from your cheeks?"	Imagery	Visual	Describe the expression of happiness as a physical form of love.
5.	"Darling, I will be loving you till we're 70"	Metaphor	Love-Time	Love is shown as something that lasts throughout the ages.
6.	"And baby, my heart could still fall as hard at 23"	Metaphor	Emotions-Intensity	Love is still as strong as youth; it symbolizes unchanging feelings.

7.	"I'm thinking 'bout how people fall in love in mysterious ways"	Metaphor	Love-Travel	Falling in love is described as an inexplicable process.
8.	"Maybe just the touch of a hand"	Imagery	Taktıl	Physical touch as a trigger for deep love emotions.
9.	"Well me I fall in love with you every single day"	Metaphor	Love-Daily Cycle	Love as an activity that keeps repeating and never fades.
10.	"And I just wanna tell you I am"	-	Literal Emosional	Direct expression of emotions without being figurative, but in favor of a love narrative.
11.	"So honey, now take me into your loving arms"	Imagery	Tactile	Hugs as a symbol of peace and warm love.
12.	"Kiss me under the light of a thousand stars"	Imagery	Visual	Romantic love is depicted in the atmosphere of a starry night sky.
13.	"Place your head on my beating heart"	Imagery	Auditory and tactile	The feeling of love is symbolized by the heartbeat and physical closeness.
14.	"I'm thinking out loud"	Metaphor	Mental- Verbal	Honestly expressed thoughts; symbolizing honesty in love
15.	"That maybe we found love right where we are"	Metaphor	Love-a place	Implies that love does not need to be sought it is present in the right place and time.

As shown in Table 1 the song's predominant use of imagery creates a connection between emotions and sensory experiences, such as touch, sight, taste, and hearing. This makes the love in the song feel real and close to the experience of everyday life.

Meanwhile, metaphors are used to reinforce abstract concepts such as time, eternity, mystery and the intensity of feelings of love. Sheeran uses conceptual metaphors such as "love is time", "love is a journey", and "love is physical presence" that enrich the semantic meaning of his lyrics.

By combining these two figurative elements, Sheeran manages to form a love narrative that is not only aesthetically beautiful, but also conceptually and emotionally meaningful.

Discussion

The song "Thinking Out Loud" by Ed Sheeran presents a number of metaphors and imagery that reinforce the delivery of the meaning of love as a complex, sincere, and lasting emotional experience. Utilizing concrete comparisons, such as the human body, time, and elements of nature, Sheeran creatively portrays love in sensory and conceptual dimensions. Within the framework of conceptual semantics according to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), the use of metaphor in this song shows that love is not only something that is felt, but also thought and constructed conceptually through language.

Table 2. Love Imagery and Metaphors in ED Sheeran's "Thinking Out Loud"

Source Domain	Target Domain
Taste	Memory of Love
Time	Love Duration
Falling	Emotional Process
Touch	Emotional Intimacy

Table Conceptual Mapping of Source and Domains in Love Metaphors

Some metaphors in the lyrics can be analyzed through the conceptual semantic framework in the lyrics of Thinking Out Loud in Ed Sheeran's songs, namely:

- "Will your mouth still remember the taste of my love?"
 - ✓ Target domain: Emotional memory (love)
 - ✓ Source domain: Taste sensation
 - ✓ Explanation: Love is metaphorically represented as a taste that lingers, suggesting that strong emotional experiences can be remembered like a favorite flavor.
- "Darling, I'll be loving you till we're 70"
 - ✓ Target domain: Endurance of love
 - ✓ Source domain: Time and age
 - ✓ Explanation: This metaphor frames love as something that can endure across a temporal span, emphasizing sincerity and emotional commitment.
- "When my hair's all but gone and my memory fades"
 - ✓ Target domain: Change in relationships
 - ✓ Source domain: Aging and memory loss
 - ✓ Explanation: Physical and mental aging is used as a metaphor for change, while love persists beyond these external transformations.
- "People fall in love in mysterious ways"
 - ✓ Target domain: Emotional process
 - ✓ Source domain: Falling and mystery
 - ✓ Explanation: Love is portrayed as an uncontrollable and unpredictable experience, reinforcing the idea that love defies logic yet remains real.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to analyze the use of imagery and metaphor in the lyrics of Ed Sheeran's song "Thinking Out Loud" from a semantic perspective. The findings indicate that figurative language in the form of sensory imagery (visual, auditory, and tactile) and conceptual metaphors plays a significant role in constructing emotional and conceptual meanings of love within the song. These elements do not merely serve aesthetic purposes but actively shape the listener's perception of love as something that is sensually tangible and emotionally profound.

The use of conceptual metaphors such as "love is time" and "love is taste" demonstrates how abstract ideas like love are understood through physical experiences. These metaphors reveal that love is not portrayed as a fleeting emotion but as a sustained commitment that transcends age and physical conditions, thereby reinforcing its cognitive and emotional depth.

Overall, this study confirms that figurative language, particularly imagery and metaphor, functions as an essential semantic tool in representing complex human emotions in popular literary texts such as songs. The semantic approach used in this research underscores the dual function of language in both aesthetic expression and cognitive representation.

Furthermore, this research contributes to the field of linguistics by highlighting the pedagogical value of analyzing authentic texts rich in figurative language. As a follow-up, future studies could explore similar semantic phenomena in other popular songs to further investigate the role of language in shaping meaning and emotional resonance. Such studies can also provide valuable insights for teaching English through engaging, real-life linguistic materials.

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