

An Analysis of Figurative Language in Taylor Swift's Songs

Angelina Sandjaja*, Afriana

Universitas Putera Batam, Batam, Indonesia

Received: 17th January 2025 | Revised: 10th February 2025 | Accepted: 18th February 2025

*Corresponding author. E-mail: pb211210002@upbatam.ac.id.

Abstract

The study aimed to explore the figurative language used in Taylor Swift's songs, with an emphasis on identifying the various types of figurative language employed. The descriptive qualitative research method was used to identify and analyze the figurative language present in the songs of Taylor Swift. This approach involved a detailed examination of the lyrics, focusing on categorizing and interpreting various forms of figurative language. Utilizing a theory developed by Greg Johnson and Thomas Roscoe Arp, in collecting the data, the researcher used a non-participation technique. The songs of Taylor Swift served as the object of this investigation. The findings of this study indicated that 18 data of figurative language were identified and categorized. The researchers discovered that simile was the most prevalent form of figurative language. Figurative language was found in several of Taylor Swift's songs, including "Red" from the Red album, "Shake It Off" from the 1989 album, "Back to December," "Mean," and "Enchanted" from the Speak Now album, "Cruel Summer" and "Daylight" from the Lover album, "Blank Space" and "Style" from the 1989 album, and "Slut" from the Midnights album.

Keywords: Figurative Language; Song; Taylor Swift.

How to Cite:

Sandjaja, A., & Afriana, A. (2025). An Analysis of Figurative Language in Taylor Swift's Songs. *Humanitatis : Journal of Language and Literature*, 11(2), 141-148.

Copyright ©2025 The Authors.

This article is published by Universitas Bumigora under the [CC BY-SA](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/) license.

1. INTRODUCTION

Song is one of the entertainments in our daily life. Most people are listening to a song. Song also used for people to communicate to express their emotions. Some people can increase their mood just by listening to a song. Besides how entertain and how people listen to a song in their daily life, the lyric of songs has meaning and sometimes the meaning of songs is difference from the literal interpretation. Songwriters and composers often employ figurative language in their lyrics to make the music more beautiful and meaningful (Ardhyanti & Supriyatiningih, 2020; Ashtiani & Derakhshesh, 2015; Murtadho & Amelia, 2022).

Figurative language is persuasive language (Johnson & Arp, 2017). This is another technique to give a new dimension to the phrase that will pique the reader's interest. Figurative language delivers meaning or heightens the effect of words, giving them additional significance, beautifying and emphasizing their meaning (Chen & Wyer, 2015; Thelwall, 2020; Werner, 2021).

Semantics is the branch of linguistics concerned with the meaning of language. It focuses on analyzing and understanding how meaning is conveyed through words, phrases, and sentences (Colston, 2021; Lai & Nissim, 2024; Pertiwi & Handayani, 2023). Expressions of linguistic things include words, phrases, and sentences. A linguistic

object's syntactic arrangement or pronunciation is not an issue or requires special attention. Figurative language is used when a word or statement has a different meaning than its literal translation (Nursolihat & Kareviati, 2020). Figurative language involves the use of figures of speech, meaning it consists of expressions that should not (and cannot) be interpreted literally (Johnson & Arp, 2017).

There are some kinds of figurative language namely; personification, simile, metaphor, hyperbole, Irony, Alliteration and Imagery:

Personification is a phrase that describes how inanimate objects mimic human behaviours. According to (Johnson & Arp, 2017), personification is a figure of speech in which human traits are attributed to animals, objects, or abstract ideas. For example: "Your fragrance still penetrates and breaks me down" (Agustina & Mustikawati, 2023).

A simile is a figure of speech that highlights a comparison between two fundamentally different things. It makes a direct comparison based on shared qualities and is typically identified by the use of words like "like" or "as" (Reijnierse et al., 2018; Thibodeau et al., 2017). According to Johnson and Arp (2017), a simile is a figure of speech that explicitly compares two fundamentally different things. Several words or phrases, such as "like", "than", "as", "resembles", "similar to" or "seems", are used to make the contrast obvious. For example: "Featured like him, like him with friends possessed" (Yulianda & Sunra, 2022).

A metaphor is a figure of speech that describes one thing by comparing it directly to another, unrelated thing. Unlike a simile, a metaphor doesn't use the terms "like" or "as." Such a statement only makes sense if the reader knows the relationship between the two objects being compared. Johnson and Arp (2017) also stated that metaphor is a figure of speech that makes an implicit comparison between two fundamentally different things. For example: "That butterflies were a good omen" (Harya, 2017).

Hyperbole is a figure of speech that uses deliberate exaggeration to highlight a point or to produce a humorous effect. It is utilized to give a statement depth and color. It can be used for a serious, sarcastic, or humorous impact (Munte & Afriana, 2023). According to Johnson and Arp (2017), overstatement and hyperbole are just exaggerations, but they are exaggerations in defense of the truth. For example: "There ain't no gold in this river" (Swarniti, 2022).

Irony is an expression for expressing strong emotions while advocating for a specific cause. Irony, as defined, is a figure of speech where words are used to convey the opposite of their literal meaning. For example: "And when you're feeling down, you know the way to go" (Milana & Ardi, 2021).

The repetition of the same consonant at the beginning of one or more closely related words is called alliteration. It is frequently used to accentuate emotion or to provide a more detailed description. Johnson and Arp (2017) stated that alliteration is the sound of accented syllables or key words is emphasized by the repetition of starting consonants at regular intervals. For example: "But I can shake it, shake it, like I'm supposed to do" (Loveana et al., 2021).

Imagery is the use of literal or figurative language, which allows readers to imagine the objects depicted in a literary work. Johnson and Arp (2017) stated that imagery is representation through sensory experience language. For example: "Glitter in the sky, glitter in my eyes" (Putri et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the phenomena of figurative language that the researchers found is in social media, Twitter. An account, @MartaRo97406493 tweeted "You are my sunshine Jimin". This sentence means that the person, Jimin, always brightens up the sender's life. This sentence is included to metaphor, one of the types in figurative language which a statement that compares two unlike things.

Another experience that the researchers found is in the song from singer The Weeknd with title "Die For You". In this song in line 20, the lyric said that "Baby, I would die for you.". The sentence "I would die for you" is not necessarily mean that one person is accurately willing to die for someone, but is used to exaggerate the amount of love one has for another. "Die" is only used to indicate the level of affection. This sentence is included to hyperbole, one of the types in figurative language. According to Johnson and Arp (2017), Hyperbole is an exaggerated expression used to highlight a point or to evoke humor.

This research examined the use of figurative language in several songs by Taylor Swift. The specific phenomenon that emerged and become an important idea is the researchers has found in Taylor Swift's song with title "Red". In this song in the first line, the lyric said that "Loving him is like driving a new Maserati down a dead-end street.". This sentence is included to simile, one of the types in figurative language which compares two things that are not the same and uses the words "like" or "as" which are commonly used in everyday communication (Johnson & Arp, 2017).

Taylor Alison Swift, commonly referred to as Taylor Swift, is a globally recognized singer, songwriter, producer, director, actress, and entrepreneur. This singer, born on December 13, 1989, in Pennsylvania, USA, is an exceptional performer because of a series of remarkable successes. She began her musical career at the age of 15 and has continued to make amazing successes to this day. Taylor Swift's music is distinguished by her ability to tell her life experience via honest and profound lyrics. She also frequently writes about personal situations that are later translated into songs, which allows her to connect with her followers.

There are some researches about figurative language. The first is by Syafitri and Marlinton (2018) with title "An Analysis of Figurative Language Used in Edgar Allan Poe's Poems". This analysis used descriptive qualitative method in analyze the data. Based on the result, in 8 Edgar Allan Poe's poems (Annabel Lee, The Sleeper, A Dream Within A Dream, Alone, To One in Paradise, Spirit of the Dead, The Lake, and Evening Star), there are 96 figurative languages, with 25 personifications, 6 similes, 16 metaphors, 11 hyperboles, 2 ironies, 9 paradoxes, 6 metonymies, and 21 symbolisms. There are 42 connotative definitions, 30 social definitions, 16 reflecting definitions, and 8 reflective definitions. In poetry, collocative meaning can be found as the meaning of figurative language. The use of figurative language also helps poetry seem more beautiful, and the use of figurative language also draws the reader's attention to the poem. The author utilizes metaphorical language carefully in the composition of this poem to reinforce the message of the poem.

Another research that analyze about figurative language is by Ambalegin and Arianto (2020) with title "Figures of Speech Reflection Loathing", which analyze about figurative language from social media, Twitter. This study employed an observational approach and a non-participatory technique for data collection. Based on the result, simile, metaphor, allusion, and personification are present in the tweet. The majority of the expressions refer to comparison, and the comparison is expressed by some negative comments or answers. Comments or reactions in a tweeter post that contain unpleasant information assaulting someone's face.

The previous research and the current study share a common focus on figurative language. However, the key distinction lies in the data source, as this study utilizes Taylor Swift's songs. Inspired by these two aspects and previous studies, the researcher decided to carry out this investigation. The aim of the study was to examine the figurative language used in Taylor Swift's songs, with a specific focus on identifying the different types of figurative language present. As the object of this research, the songs "Red," "Back to December," "Mean," and "Enchanted" are from Taylor Swift's *Red* and *Speak Now* albums, while "Shake It Off," "Blank Space," and "Style" are from *1989*. "Cruel Summer" and "Daylight" appear on *Lover*, and "Slut" is from *Midnights*.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The researchers used qualitative methods in this study (Creswell, 2013). Identification methods were used by using senses, which are see, listen, and feel. The data collection process began with the researchers listening to the selected songs and transcribing the lyrics into written form. Once the lyrics were transcribed, the researchers carefully read through them, highlighting sentences or phrases that contained figurative language. The technique used in the analysis was adapted from Sudaryanto (2015), which is the identify method. The analysis was adapted from Johnson and Arp (2017) theory, which is focused on identifying the figurative language according to its type and understanding its function in the lyrics. Finally, the researcher conveyed the findings by organizing the categorized data into a narrative paragraph format.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this sub-chapter, the researcher analyzed the figurative language used in selected songs by Taylor Swift. The songs chosen for this study include "Red," "Shake It Off," "Back to December," "Cruel Summer," "Mean," "Enchanted," "Blank Space," "Slut," "Daylight," and "Style." These songs span across multiple albums, including *Red* (2012), *1989* (2014), *Speak Now* (2010), *Lover* (2019), and *Midnights* (2022). The selection of these songs provides a comprehensive representation of Swift's lyricism, showcasing her use of various figurative language techniques to convey emotions, themes, and personal experiences. Through this analysis, a total of 18 data of figurative language were identified. There were 6 data of simile, 1 data of alliteration, 2 data of personification, 4 data of hyperbole, 2 data of metaphor, and 3 data of imagery.

Data 1

Loving him is like driving a new Maserati down a dead-end street.

The lyric above is from Taylor Swift's song *Red* and uses the word "like." Therefore, this lyric can be categorized as a simile, as it compares "Loving him" to "driving a new Maserati down a dead-end street." *Red* is a song about a passionate and intense relationship. It talks about the strong emotions that come with love—both the happy, exciting moments and the painful, heartbreaking ones. Swift uses the color red to represent the deep feelings of love and loss.

Data 2

I shake it off, I shake it off.

The song lyric above is categorized as alliteration in figures of speech. Alliteration is a form of figurative language, a literary device where the same consonant sound is repeated at the beginning of one or more words in close succession. In the lyric above, the author uses the same sound and the same sentence. This lyric is taken from Taylor Swift's song, *Shake it Off*. *Shake It Off* is an upbeat, fun song about ignoring negative comments and staying true to yourself. Swift talks about people criticizing her and others, but the song encourages letting go of those judgments and enjoying life and being yourself.

Data 3

And then the cold came, the dark days when fear crept into my mind.

The song lyric above is categorized as personification in the figure of speech. The meaning "crept" is to move slowly to the ground like an insect or reptile or humans like a baby. It means that fear can creep into someone's mind. This lyric is taken from Taylor Swift's song, *Back to December*. *Back to December* is a sad song where Swift apologizes for letting a good relationship slip away. She reflects on her mistakes and wishes she could go back and change things, showing how much, she regrets losing someone she loved.

Data 4

I miss your tanned skin, your sweet smile, so good to me so right, and how you held me in your arms that September night, the first time you ever saw me cry.

The song lyric above is categorized as imagery in figures of speech. Imagery is one of the figurative languages used to describe objects from the physical senses. In this lyric, the writer is trying to describe the man in the song "Back to December."

Data 5

And I cried like a baby comin' home from the bar.

The above lyrics are included in a simile. This can be seen from the lyrics above, which compare "I" to "a baby" that cried. This lyric is taken from Taylor Swift's song "Cruel Summer." *Cruel Summer* is a fast-paced, emotional song about a hot, intense romance that comes with both excitement and pain. Swift sings about the thrill of being in love but also the difficult and secretive parts of the relationship that make it hard.

Data 6

He looks up, grinning like a devil.

The song lyrics above are included in the simile. This is because the lyric above compares “he” and “devil.” This lyric is taken from Taylor Swift’s song, Cruel Summer.

Data 7

You can take me down with just one single blow.

The song lyrics above are included in hyperbole. If we see the song’s meaning, “Blow” here is not meant to be a blow but rather a malicious comment that people give to the author. He meant that their bad opinion had made her very sad. This lyric is taken from Taylor Swift’s song, Mean. Mean is a song about standing up to bullies and critics. Swift sings about people who try to bring her down, but instead of getting upset, she turns it into a message of strength, showing that their words do not really matter in the end the result of this analysis.

Data 8

I’ll spend forever wondering if you knew, I was enchanted to meet you.

The lyrics of the song above fall into hyperbole because she wants to spend forever wondering whether “you” know that she was amazed to meet him. This lyric is taken from Taylor Swift’s song “Enchanted.” *Enchanted* is a sweet song about the feeling of falling in love for the first time. Swift sings about meeting someone new and feeling an instant connection, hoping the other person feels the same way.

Data 9

My thoughts will echo your name until I see you again.

The song lyrics above are included in personification. Thoughts are the act of considering or thinking about something, a concept or opinion, or a group of thoughts regarding a specific issue. So, it means that “thoughts” cannot echo anything. This lyric is taken from Taylor Swift’s song, *Enchanted*.

Data 10

Missing him was dark grey all alone.

The song lyrics above are included in the metaphor because the author compares unrelated things, “Missing him” and “dark gray all alone.” This describes that the author lost someone and missed him, like facing winter, darkness, and loneliness. This lyric is taken from Taylor Swift’s song “Red.”

Data 11

Tell myself it’s time now gotta let go, but moving on from him is impossible.

The song lyrics above are hyperbole because the author considers moving on from him to be impossible even though it has not been done. This lyric is taken from Taylor Swift’s song “Red.”

Data 12

Forgetting him was like trying to know somebody you never met.

The song lyrics above are included in the simile because they compare “Forgetting him” to “trying to know somebody you never met.” This lyric is taken from Taylor Swift’s song “Red.”

Data 13

I can read you like a magazine.

The song lyrics above are included in the simile because they compare “I can read you” to “a magazine.” This lyric is taken from Taylor Swift’s song “Blank Space.” Blank Space is a playful song in which Swift pokes fun at the way the media portrays her love life. She imagines herself as a “crazy” lover and sings about the ups and downs of relationships with a cheeky, sarcastic tone.

Data 14

Love’s a game, wanna play?

The song lyrics above are included in the metaphor because they compare two unrelated things that are not the same, namely "Love" and "Game." This statement means that love is a game. This lyric is taken from Taylor Swift's song, *Blank Space*.

Data 15

Rose garden filled with thorns.

The song lyrics above include imagery, describing a rose garden filled with thorns, which depicts a relationship full of love, but both hurt each other. This lyric is taken from Taylor Swift's song, *Blank Space*.

Data 16

And if I'm gonna be drunk, I might as well be drunk in love.

The song lyrics above are hyperbole because they state that the author is intoxicated by love or is in love. This lyric is taken from Taylor Swift's song, *Slut*. *Slut* is a bold song that talks about how women are often judged for their actions, especially when it comes to love and relationships. Swift stands up against these double standards, taking control of how others see her.

Data 17

My love was as cruel as the city I lived in.

The song lyrics above are included in the simile because they compare "My love was cruel" to "the city I lived in." This lyric is taken from Taylor Swift's song "Daylight." Daylight is a song about finding peace after going through hard times. Swift sings about how love has helped her heal and grow and how she's finally seeing things clearly and feeling happy again.

Data 18

You got that James Dean daydream look in your eyes, and I got that red lips classic thing that you like.

The song lyric above is categorized as imagery in figures of speech. In this lyric, the author describes his ex, Harry Styles, as looking like James Dean. This lyric is taken from Taylor Swift's song, *Style*. *Style* is a song about a relationship that's complicated but also magnetic. Swift sings about a love that keeps drawing her back in, even though it's not always easy. The song captures the mix of attraction and longing between two people who can't quite let go of each other.

The analysis of figurative language in Taylor Swift's songs reveals how effectively she uses literary devices to convey deep emotions and complex themes. Whether expressing the pain of lost love, the empowerment of shaking off negativity, or the excitement of new beginnings, Swift's use of figurative language—such as similes, alliteration, metaphors, personification, hyperbole, and imagery—enhances the emotional impact of her lyrics. Through these tools, she creates vivid, relatable stories that connect with her audience on a personal level, making her music catchy and rich with meaning. The findings from this study highlight the significance of figurative language in Swift's songwriting and its role in storytelling, which has made her a global music icon.

This study aligns with earlier research, including studies by Syafitri and Marlinton (2018) and Ambalegin and Arianto (2020), which focus on figurative language. However, it sets itself apart by specifically analyzing figurative language in Taylor Swift's songs, as outlined in the study *An Analysis of Figurative Language in Taylor Swift's Songs*.

4. CONCLUSION

Figures of speech or figurative language are frequently used in literary works to provide readers with an aesthetic effect. The song writer is able to express their feelings on songs. Sometimes, songs have a lot of figurative language to make it more aesthetic so it cannot be translated in literal. Taylor Swift's songs contained figurative languages; 6 data of simile, 1 data of alliteration, 2 data of personification, 4 data of hyperbole, 2 data of metaphor, and 3 data of imagery. The most dominant data that the researchers has found is simile. The researcher found

figurative language in some songs of Taylor Swift's, which are Red, Shake it Off, Back to December, Cruel Summer, Mean, Enchanted, Blank Space, Slut, Daylight, and Style.

REFERENCES

- Agustina, A. E., & Mustikawati, Y. (2023). Analysis of Figurative Language in Song Lyrics "Make It Right" and "Permission to Dance" by BTS. *ELITERATE : Journal of English Linguistics and Literature Studies*, 2(2), 23–31. <https://doi.org/10.26858/eliterate.v2i2>
- Ambalegin, A., & Arianto, T. (2020). Figures of Speech Reflecting Loathing. *Jurnal BASIS (Bahasa dan Sastra Inggris)*, 7(2), 423–434. <https://doi.org/10.33884/basisupb.v7i2.2487>
- Ardhyanti, S. V., & Supriyatiningasih, S. (2020). Figurative Language Analysis in Celine Dion's Song Lyrics Falling Into You Album. *PROJECT (Professional Journal of English Education)*, 3(1), 11. <https://doi.org/10.22460/project.v3i1.p11-19>
- Ashtiani, F., & Derakhshesh, A. (2015). A Comparative Study of the Figures of Speech between Top 50 English and Persian Pop Song Lyrics. *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, 6(5). <https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.all.v.6n.5p.225>
- Chen, F., & Wyer, R. S. (2015). The effects of affect, processing goals and temporal distance on information processing: Qualifications on temporal construal theory. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 25(2), 326–332. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcps.2014.09.004>
- Colston, H. L. (2021). Cognitive Linguistics and Figurative Language. In *The Routledge Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics*. Routledge.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. SAGE.
- Harya, T. D. (2017). An Analysis of Figurative Languages Used in Coelho's Novel Entitled "Alchemist". *Premise: Journal of English Education and Applied Linguistics*, 5(2), 46–63. <https://doi.org/10.24127/pj.v5i2.815>
- Johnson, G., & Arp, T. (2017, January 1). *Perrine's Literature: Structure, Sound, and Sense* (13th edition). Cengage Learning.
- Lai, H., & Nissim, M. (2024). A Survey on Automatic Generation of Figurative Language: From Rule-based Systems to Large Language Models. *ACM Computing Surveys*, 56(10), 1–34. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3654795>
- Loveana, N. F., Hawa, F., & Wahyuni, S. (2021). The Analysis of Figurative Language Used in Meghan Trainor's Album "Title". *Proceeding of English Teaching, Literature and Linguistics (Eternal) Conference*, 1(1), 418–426. <https://conference.upgris.ac.id/index.php/etll/article/view/2739>
- Milana, H., & Ardi, H. (2021). An Analysis of Figurative Language in The Song Lyrics By Saif Adam. *English Language and Literature*, 9(2), 325. <https://doi.org/10.24036/ell.v9i3.111364>
- Munte, M., & Afriana, A. (2023). Hyperbole Expression in "Cinderella" 2021 Selected Soundtrack Songs. *IDEAS: Journal on English Language Teaching and Learning, Linguistics and Literature*, 11(2), 1202–1220. <https://doi.org/10.24256/ideas.v11i2.3880>
- Murtadho, A. M., & Amelia, A. (2022). An Analysis of Figurative Language Used in Westlife's Selected Songs. *Journal of English Language and Literature (JELL)*, 7(1), 73–84. <https://doi.org/10.37110/jell.v7i1.145>
- Nursolihat, S., & Kareviati, E. (2020). An Analysis of Figurative Language Used in the Lyric of "A Whole New World" by Zayn Malik and Zhavia Ward. *PROJECT (Professional Journal of English Education)*, 3(4), 477–482. <https://doi.org/10.22460/project.v3i4.p477-482>

- Pertiwi, P. E., & Handayani, N. D. (2023). Semantic Analysis of Figurative Language Found in Nikkie Tutorials Product Review. *IDEAS: Journal on English Language Teaching and Learning, Linguistics and Literature*, 11(2), 1119–1131. <https://doi.org/10.24256/ideas.v11i2.3505>
- Putri, A. A., Molla, N. L., & Jamaludin, S. (2022). An Analysis of Figurative Language and Imagery Used in Dua Lipa's Song "Levitating". *PROJECT (Professional Journal of English Education)*, 5(6), 1156–1165. <https://doi.org/10.22460/project.v5i6.p1156-1165>
- Reijnierse, W. G., Burgers, C., Krennmayr, T., & Steen, G. J. (2018). DMIP: A Method for Identifying Potentially Deliberate Metaphor in Language Use. *Corpus Pragmatics*, 2(2), 129–147. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41701-017-0026-7>
- Sudaryanto, S. (2015). *Metode dan Aneka Teknik Analisis Bahasa*. Sanata Dharma University Press.
- Swarniti, N. W. (2022). Analysis of Figurative Language in "Easy On Me" Song Lyric. *RETORIKA: Jurnal Ilmu Bahasa*, 8(1), 13–18. <https://doi.org/10.55637/jr.8.1.4708.13-18>
- Syafitri, D., & Marlinton, M. (2018). An Analysis of Figurative Language Used in Edgar Allan Poe's Poems. *Linguistic, English Education and Art (LEEA) Journal*, 2(1), 43–59. <https://doi.org/10.31539/leea.v2i1.453>
- Thelwall, M. (2020). Pot, kettle: Nonliteral titles aren't (natural) science. *Quantitative Science Studies*, 1(4), 1638–1652. https://doi.org/10.1162/qss_a_00078
- Thibodeau, P. H., Hendricks, R. K., & Boroditsky, L. (2017). How Linguistic Metaphor Scaffolds Reasoning. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 21(11), 852–863. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2017.07.001>
- Werner, V. (2021). Catchy and conversational? A register analysis of pop lyrics. *Corpora*, 16(2), 237–270. <https://doi.org/10.3366/cor.2021.0219>
- Yulianda, N., & Sunra, L. (2022). An Analysis of Figurative Languages Used in William Shakespeare's Sonnets. *ELITERATE : Journal of English Linguistics and Literature Studies*, 1(3), 21–32. <https://doi.org/10.26858/eliterate.v1i3>