



Figurative Language Used by an American Singer: A Case Study of Lauv's Songs

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Abstract

This study examined the use of figurative language by Lauv, an American singer. As recorded in the literature review, many love songs usually employ the technique of *hyperbole*, which refers to exaggeration. The data was collected from Lauv's songs as he is one of the up-and-coming American singers. Approximately 6,000 words in Lauv's songs were examined for the use of figurative language. There were an entire 59 tokens to be studied. The interpretation of figurative language in this study follows Abrams (1999). The results show that hyperbole occurs the most at 32.2 percent. The common occurrence of hyperbole in Lauv's love songs is explained by human being's hypothetical wish for love. Some people may be successful at love, others may not. Eternal love is someone's yearning, but it might be difficult for them to achieve it in reality. Exaggerating one's forever love (i.e. *I look at you now and I want this forever*) via songs helps capture listeners' attention and motivates one's happiness. Since Lauv's love songs were written based on his experience, the songwriter also emphasizes the disappointment of his love via exaggeration (i.e. *I walk down memory lane late at night*). It is hoped that the results of this study will be beneficial to learners of English as Second Language and English as a Foreign Language to gain a better understanding of figurative language in love songs.

Keywords: *Figurative Language, Hyperbole, Lauv's Songs*

1. Introduction

Figurative language is a comparative language that uses connotation, which refers to words or expressions to convey messages beyond literal meaning (Abram, 1999; Colston, 2015), as in (1).

(1)

(a) There's no place like **home**.

(b) He is **a turkey**.

Home as in (1a) connotes comfort and family. *Turkey* as in (1b) implies stupid. Examples (1a)-(1b) allow us to visualize that figurative language is not a mere direct meaning as available in dictionaries. Nevertheless, figurative language is commonly used in everyday life. Studying a figurative language is beneficial to English language learners to be able to understand the indirect meaning.

Figurative language plays an important role to learners of English as a Foreign Language and English and a Second Language. It helps them gain a better understanding of slang and expand their vocabulary (Lazar, 1996). Moreover, it also motivates English learners' creativity and imagination (Chandhok & Soni, 2016). Also, understanding figurative language helps ESL and EFL learners gain more confidence in their language communication. However, EFL and ESL learners give less attention to the use of figurative language (Lazar, 1996). To fill this gap, encouraging EFL and ESL learners to learn a figurative language is important--to have an upgraded level of English language use.

One of the common sources where figurative language is often found is song lyrics (Khairunnisa, 2016). It is regarded as one of the best ways for English language learners to learn the implied meaning of language through English songs (Khairunnisa, 2016). Understanding figurative language in songs is said to help listeners to tune in with the song thoroughly (Wongthamanon, 2019).

Each songwriter has their unique written style to capture the listener's emotion and feeling. One of the well-known American singers who could use various techniques to express figurative language is Ari Staprans Leff, known as Lauv. Lauv is one of the up-and-coming American singers. Lauv is an American native speaker who grew up in San Francisco, California. He is academically qualified as he got a degree from Music Technology at New York University. Together with his academic qualification and his talented skills, the successful launch of his song *I Like Me Better* made him well-known. This love song has become



a worldwide smash hit with 248 views on youtube (<https://youtu.be/a7fzkqLozWA>). He is considered as the role model of many love songwriters in the 21st century.

Lauv's songs were selected since they were written based on true stories of his love. The data collection in this study is based upon authentic empirical evidence to study a figurative language. Accordingly, this study examined the frequency and interpretation of figurative language in Lauv's album; *I Met You When I Was 18*. It is hoped that this study will gain an insight into the use of figurative language in Lauv's love songs. The results will be beneficial for those English as a Second Language and English as a Foreign Language Learners.

2. Literature Review

As mentioned above, figurative language is defined as an indirect meaning made up of a group of words, phrases, clauses, and sentences to form a figure of speech. Instead of using a direct meaning, it makes the language vivid (Rakchoom, 2014; Colston, 2015; Listiani, 2015). This section provides theories of figurative language, including *allusion*, *hyperbole*, *metaphor*, *metonymy*, *personification*, *simile*, and *symbolism*.

Abrams (1999) defined allusion as an indirect reference to literary or historical people, places, events, or other literary work as in (2).

(2)

- (a) Don't act like a **Romeo** in front of her.
- (b) This place is like a **Garden of Eden**.

(Wongthamanon, 2019, p. 10)

Romeo as in (2a) is derived from Shakespeare's Romeo who is Juliet's passionate lover in *Romeo and Juliet*. *A Garden of Eden* as in (2b) is a biblical allusion to the Garden of God in the Book of Genesis. Besides allusion, hyperbole is defined as an exaggeration (Abrams, 1999) as in (3).

(3) Your luggage weighs a **ton**.

The weight of the luggage as in (3) is overstated. It is implied that the luggage is extremely heavy. Apart from hyperbole, metaphor is a figure of speech to make a comparison of two dissimilar things. Metaphor differs from a simile in that metaphor does not use the words *like* and *as* (Abrams, 1999), as in (4).

(4) I have got a **mountain of work** to do.

(Samuelsson, 2013, p. 10)

The metaphor as in (4) is illustrated through *a mountain of work* (Samuelsson, 2013). Unlike metaphor, metonymy is defined as the words referring to the association of names with things or concepts. It is used to replace the name of one object that is closely connected with it (Abrams, 1999) as in (5).

(5) **The chicken salad** is ready for his check.

(Samuelsson, 2013, p. 11)

The expression of *the chicken salad* in (5) refers to a person eating the salad. The chicken salad represents the person. In addition to that, personification refers to an inanimate object or an animal that is given human attributes or feelings as in (6) (Abrams 1999).

(6) **The sun played** hide and seek with the clouds.

(Listiani, 2015, p. 26)

Example (6) implies that the weather always changes. Aside from personification, simile refers to a comparison between two unlike things, which are indicated by the word *like* and *as* as in (7).

(7) Her eyes are **like** a star, east star.

(Listiani, 2015, p. 24)

The word *eyes* and *east star* as in (7) are explicit comparisons since it expresses those words with the same purpose. This example is clearly simile as it uses the keyword *like* to compare between two unlike things. (Listiani, 2015). Symbolism refers to a figure of speech where an action, person, place, object, or situation has another meaning in addition to its literal meaning. According to Abrams (1999), there are two types of symbolism. One of them is conventional symbolism, a standard symbol such as colors and nature that refers to symbolic objects that are determined within a particular culture as in (8).



(8)

(a) A red rose is commonly understood as a symbol of romantic love.

(b) Island means isolation.

Another kind of symbolism is personal symbolism, which is an object, event, or action and a particular concept created by the writers as in (9).

(9)

Caged Bird

“A free bird leaps

on the back of the wind

and floats downstream

till the current ends

and dips his wing

in the orange sun rays

and dares to claim the sky.”

(Angelou, 1969)

In this poem, *a free bird* refers to a white person, whereas *a caged bird* refers to a black person. However, *a free bird* and *a caged bird* can mean other things in other poems. This research relies upon Abrams’s (1999) theory to interpret figurative language in Lauv’s songs.

These theories of figurative language are commonly applied to various studies. One of the popular sources is songs. One of the intriguing studies is Listiani’s (2015) study who used Taylor Swift’s romantic song lyrics. The results showed that hyperbole is the most frequently used in Taylor Swift’s *Speak Now*, as in (10).

(10) Well you can take me down with just one single blow.

(Hyperbole)

(Listiani, 2015, p. 42)

The interpretation of hyperbole as in (10) is due to the word *blow* that describes the air sent out from the mouth. The expression *take me down with just one single blow* is clearly overstated (Listiani, 2015). Similar to Listiani’s study, hyperbole is the most common figurative language in Kaewmontha’s (2015) study of the Bee Gee’s song, as in (11).

(11) And I will give you all my life.

(Hyperbole)

(Kaewmontha, 2015, p. 16)

In (11), it is exaggerated because giving one’s own life to other people sounds impossible. The songwriter is likely to imply that he can give a beloved girl everything (Kaewmontha, 2015). Along the same lines, Wongthamanon (2019) analyzed figurative language in Rod Stewart’s songs. The result also showed that the most productive figurative language is hyperbole as in (12).

(12) We are sailing stormy waters.

(Hyperbole)

(Wongthamanon, 2019, p. 36)

Example (12) is interpreted as hyperbole because the songwriter uses *stormy waters* to refer to obstacles (Wongthamanon, 2019). Similarly, Puchakarn (2015) analyzed the use of figurative language by American songwriters from the 1980s. The theme of her study is based on love and character. The results showed that hyperbole reaches the highest frequency as in (13).

(13) A man can tell a thousand lies.

(Hyperbole)

(Puchakarn, 2015, p. 32)

Example (13) is interpreted as hyperbole. This sentence is exaggerated as it sounds impossible for a man to tell a thousand lies (Puchakarn, 2015). Furthermore, Khairunnisa (2016) studied figurative language in One Direction’s song lyrics. This study showed that hyperbole is the highest frequency as in (14) (Khairunnisa, 2016).

(14) I’m blinded, cause you are everything I see.

(Hyperbole)

(Khairunnisa, 2016, p. 8)

Example (14) is interpreted as hyperbole since a human being cannot see only just one thing if his eyes are normal. He could see everything around him. Furthermore, Arifa (2016) studied figurative language



in five of John Legend's songs. This study focused on the analysis of the types of figurative language in John Legend's songs. The results showed that hyperbole is the most frequent type due to exaggeration for special effects (Arifa, 2016). Besides, this study showed that the use of a figure of speech is connected to the imagination of composers in applying their mind to the language differently to see the condition that occurs in songs (Arifa, 2016) as in (15).

(15) And we both still got room left to grow, and though love sometimes hurts, I still put you first.
(Arifa, 2016, p. 55)

Example (15) is an exaggeration in that love will not fade away despite having many temptations. However, his love remains robust for a woman (Arifa, 2016). Also, Sangthong (2014) studied figurative language in Jesse McCartney's love songs. The results showed that hyperbole occurs the most as in (16).

(16) She's all up in my veins.
(Hyperbole)
(Sangthong, 2014, p.37)

While hyperbole is likely to occur frequently in love songs, some studies show that metaphor is occasionally used. Khumsuwan (2019) studied figurative language in Brian Mcknight's love songs. Most of Brian McKnight's songs addressed love. The results showed that the most productive use of figurative language is a metaphor as in (17).

(17) Now I'm in the rain.
(Metaphor)
(Khumsuwan, 2019, p. 29)

Example (17) is interpreted as a metaphor because the songwriter compares the rain with a feeling of sadness. Besides, Dorry (2016) studied figurative language in Joni Mitchell's songs. The results showed that the highest frequency is a metaphor as in (18).

(18) Love is touching souls.
(Metaphor)
(Dorry, 2016, p. 21)

Example (18) is interpreted as a metaphor because the word *is* is compared between *love* and *souls*. It implies the relationship between mind and soul. Silapachai (2015) studied figurative language in love theme songs. The results showed that the most productive figurative language is a metaphor as in (19).

(19) She's a bubble bath and candles.
(Metaphor)
(Silapachai, 2015, p. 65)

Example (19) is interpreted as a metaphor because the songwriter compares the girl with bubble baths and candles. It is implied that he feels comfortable when she is around him (Silapachai, 2015). Based upon the findings of previous studies, love songs commonly used the technique of hyperbole. This study examined that Lauv's love songs on the album *I met you when I was 18* would frequently employ the technique of hyperbole. The data collection is explained in the following section.

3. Methodology

The data in this study was collected from an American singer Ari Staprans Leff, known as Lauv. Lauv (2020) wrote his songs based upon his own experience of love. For example, the song *The Other* was written when he had broken up with his girlfriend in 2014. When this song was uploaded into Soundcloud, it suddenly skyrocketed to the Global Top 100 on Spotify. This has made Lauv become one of the up-and-coming American singers.

The data collection in this study is based upon the composer's true story of his love depicted in love songs. Not only is the data collection in this study interesting, but also it is based on authentic empirical evidence of one life written into songs. As indicated by Daskalovska (2014), it is useful for ESL and EFL learners to learn from authentic sources of texts. With this reliability, it is a good idea to study figurative language in the songs of a successful American singer. In this mini-scale study, the data to study figurative language is taken from Lauv's song lyrics *I Met You When I Was 18*. The selection of this album is because it is Lauv's most successful album, which has peaked on music charts in many continents around the world, such as America, Europe, and Oceania. The theme of song lyrics in this album is based on a love story about when he fell in love for the first time. Seventeen songs will be analyzed from the *I Met You When I Was 18* album as follows:



- | | |
|---------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Adrenaline | 10. I Like Me Better |
| 2. Bracelet | 11. Never Not |
| 3. Breathe | 12. Paranoid |
| 4. Chasing Fire | 13. Paris in The Rain |
| 5. Come Back Home | 14. Question |
| 6. Comfortable | 15. Reforget |
| 7. Easy Love | 16. The Other |
| 8. Enemies | 17. The Story Never Ends |
| 9. Getting Over You | |

The 17 songs above are made up of 6,000 words. There are 59 tokens of figurative language extracted from this album to be studied. Apart from the frequency of figurative language, quantitative data is also used to support the frequency. How the data in this study is analyzed is exemplified as follows:

- (20) Like a spotlight the water hits me.
 Ran it extra cold to shake the words from my mouth.
 Though I know that no one's listening.
 I nervously rehearse for when you're around.
 And I keep waiting like you might change my mind.
- (21) Who wrote the book on goodbye?
 There's never been a way to make this easy.
 When there's nothing quite wrong but it doesn't feel right.
- (22) Either your head or your heart, you set the other on fire.

(Arifa, 2016)

Example (20) is interpreted as simile as indicated by the word *like*. It is a comparison between the words *spotlight* and *water*. It is implied that his decision will cause him pain. Example (21) is interpreted as symbolism as indicated by the word a *book* as a good source of learning. It is implied that it is not easy to say goodbye. Example (22) is interpreted as hyperbole. In reality, people cannot set their heads or hearts on fire. It is rather implied that there are two alternatives between the logical decision he wants or the emotional standpoint to tell the girl what to do.

For the data analysis, there are several steps in how the data was collected to be analyzed. First of all, the researcher listened to 17 songs from Lauv's song lyrics from the album *I Met You When I Was 18* to ensure that there was adequate figurative language to be analyzed. Secondly, the song contents in this album were searched on the internet. The researcher read each song carefully again to extract the contents that contain figurative language. Once this process was completed, the researcher interpreted each token carefully. Under this process, three experts in the field of English were asked to check the data analysis. This process was based on IOC, referring to Index of Item – Objective Congruence.

Table 1 Process of data validation

Tokens	Interpretation	Agree	Disagree	Comments
1. I could spend my whole life getting over you.	Hyperbole	✓		
2. I've seen your soul grow just like a rose .	Simile	✓		
3. Trade your heart for bones .	Metaphor	✓		

Three experts in the field of English were asked to validate the interpretation of the data in Lauv's songs. If an expert agrees with the analysis, a score will be given. However, if an expert disagrees with an interpretation, a score will be zero. Therefore, a token that was marked *disagree* will be reconsidered. With this analysis, the result and discussion of this study are given as follows:



4. Results

With approximately 6,000 words from *I Met You When I Was 18* by Lauv, there are a total of 59 tokens as summarized in Table 2.

Table 2 Frequency of figurative language use in *I Met You When I Was 18* by Lauv

Types	Frequency	Percentage
Hyperbole	19	32.2%
Simile	13	22%
Metaphor	11	18.6%
Personification	9	15.3%
Symbolism	6	10.2%
Metonymy	1	1.7%
Total	59	100%

In the song on Lauv in *I Met You When I Was 18* albums, six categories of figurative language were found. The highest frequency is hyperbole at 32.2 percent. Some examples of figurative language are given as follows:

The most frequent occurrence in *I Met You When I Was 18* by Lauv is hyperbole at 32.2 percent as shown in (23)

(23)

- (a) We'll melt into the bedroom floor.
- (b) We keep our bodies tied together.
- (c) It's the way you make me lose my mind.

(Arifa, 2016)

Example (23a) is interpreted as hyperbole because the body cannot melt into the floor. The songwriter implied that they are one. Example (23b) is interpreted as hyperbole because they cannot tie their bodies together. However, it is rather implied that they were together. Example (23c) is interpreted as hyperbole. In fact, he cannot lose his mind. The songwriter implied that he could not think normally because of his girlfriend. In addition to hyperbole, simile also reached a higher frequency as in (24).

(24)

- (a) Sweeter than sugar rocks.
- (b) I've seen your soul grow just like a rose.
- (c) Anywhere with you feels like Paris in the rain.

(Arifa, 2016)

Example (24a) is interpreted as a simile because the songwriter uses sweeter compared to sugar rocks by using the word *than*. It is implied that the relationship between the two is so sweet. Example (24b) is interpreted as a simile because the songwriter uses the girl's soul compared to a rose by using the word *like*. It is implied that he has seen the change of his ex-girlfriend from a little girl to a beautiful girl. Example (c) is interpreted as a simile because the songwriter compares *being with her* to *Paris in the rain*. It is implied that wherever he goes with his girlfriend, it's always romantic. The third frequency in Lauv's love songs is a metaphor, where some examples are provided below.

(25)

- (a) Cause I just can't stop this pendulum in my head.
- (b) But all apologies are just a miscommunication.



(c) Didn't wanna be a ghost.

(Arifa, 2016)

Example (25a) is interpreted as a metaphor because the songwriter compares his feelings to a pendulum. The songwriter implied that he cannot stop thinking about his ex-girlfriend. Example (25b) is interpreted as a metaphor because the songwriter compared *apologies* with *miscommunication* to explain whatever he says to his girlfriend is his fault. Example (25) is interpreted as a metaphor because the songwriter uses metaphor to describe the feeling that he didn't want to be invisible as *a ghost*. Regarding personification, this section provides examples of personification as found in Lauv's songs.

(26)

- (a) My heart is about to, about to jump out of my chest.
- (b) I never thought a sunrise could burn more than a midnight without you.
- (c) Doubt, doubt, doubt it kills everything that you love.

(Arifa, 2016)

Example (26a) is interpreted as personification because the heart is a part of the body that cannot jump as humans. The songwriter implied that his girlfriend can make his heart beat faster because he fell in love with her. Example (26b) is interpreted as personification because sunrise is a time in the morning when the sun rises so it cannot affect us. Example (26c) is interpreted as personification. Doubt is unable to kill as humans can because doubt is a feeling or emotion of uncertainty. Apart from personification, this section provides examples of symbolism below.

(27)

- (a) But I need room to breathe, yeah.
- (b) Who wrote the book on goodbye?
- (c) Stick, stick to your stones 'cause that's all you know.

(Arifa, 2016)

Example (27a) is interpreted as symbolism because the songwriter used *room to breathe* to imply that he just wants a private place for himself. Example (27b) is interpreted as symbolism. This could be supported by a book which is a good source of learning. The songwriter implied that it is not easy to say goodbye. In example (27c), the meaning of stones is concerned with stability and being grounded and it is interpreted as symbolism. Based upon the results of this study, the discussion is given in the following section.

5. Discussion

As this study is in the process of a pilot study, this section discusses the top three occurrences of figurative language in Lauv's songs. Hyperbole is the most productive technique used in Lauv's songs on the album *I Met You When I Was 18*. Hyperbole, referring to exaggeration, is regarded as a powerful technique that is commonly used in love songs. As can be seen, the high productivity of hyperbole presented in this study complies with previous studies (Sangthoong, 2014; Kaewmontha, 2015; Khairunnisa, 2016; Listiani, 2015, Silapachai, 2015, Khumsuwan, 2019). Besides, simile and metaphor are also productively found in this study, which also complies with previous studies (Dorry, 2016).

It is unavoidable to say that love is everyone's desire. Moreover, forever love is someone's yearning. According to Maslow's **hierarchy of needs**, there are physiology, safety, love, esteem, self-actualization. It can be seen that love is one of the fundamental human being's needs (Huitt, 2007). When the songwriters understand this human being's wish. He plays with human feelings by using the word *forever* to convey love, as in (28a) and *whole life* as in (28b) and *heart* in (28c)

(28)

- (a) I look at you now and I want this **forever**. (Hyperbole)
- (b) I could **spend my whole life getting over you**. (Hyperbole)
- (c) In my **heart** with the **memories** we made. (Hyperbole)

(Arifa, 2016)

In (28a), a woman falling in love with a man in a situation where a guy keeps a closer look on her and this look will be forever. This does not only capture the listeners' attention, but it also helps to arouse the



listener's romantic emotion. Similarly, some expressions, such as *my whole life getting over you* as in (28b) allows the listeners to interpret that true love is where one guy remains with one woman. This exaggeration is explained in that he cannot forget the girl he loved. Instead of using direct meaning, the songwriter used *I could spend my whole life getting over you* to make listeners deeply understand his feelings in that certain situation. In (28c), the heart is a part of our body where people's emotions cannot be kept. However, the songwriter uses his imagination to depict that he can use his heart as a record of his memory. These exaggerations as shown in (28) motivate listeners' romantic emotions.

Although true love is people's need and some people have become successful with their love, others may not. The songwriter seems to know that disappointment in love is something that can occur generally. However, the songwriter tries to relate the disappointment of his love with other people's experiences through the **hypothetical world**, referring to imaginative situations (Duffley, 2003). Various use of figurative language as hyperbole, metaphor, and simile are depicted as in (29).

(29)

- | | |
|---|-------------|
| (a) I walk down memory lane late at night. | (Hyperbole) |
| (b) It's like dancing when the song's already over. | (Metaphor) |
| (c) Wound me like a toy spinning too fast in every direction. | (Simile) |

(Arifa, 2016)

In (29a), in reality, we cannot walk inside our memory since our memory is used to record something that happened in the past. However, the songwriter tries to address that the situation of his love made him think about his ex-girlfriend. It made him recall the pictures of his past events. The broken-hearted person tends to lure himself to stay in his imaginative world as he is not ready to accept the truth, as shown in (29b). The songwriter addresses that he tried so hard with this relationship. Although he was left by the girl, he felt as if he was dancing though the song was already over. He was not ready to accept the truth of being left alone. In (29c), the songwriter tries to address that he was being wounded as if he was a toy. This technique allows the listeners to get inside the songwriter's feelings easily, concerning his suffering in love.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, hyperbole is a powerful technique used in love songs. It can capture the listeners' attention and stimulate the listeners' imagination. Besides, love songwriters realize that the situation of true love is not easy to happen for everybody. With this understanding, they try to fulfill human needs by using the technique of hyperbole in love songs to make the listeners get this hypothetical wish. The result of this study is limited to Lauv's love songs. Generalizing the results of this study to other love song albums may not be optimal. It is recommended that future research to investigate figurative language in love songs should add more data collection to make the result of the study generalizable. Also, investigating other types of songs, such as pop and rocks are also encouraged to compare with the results of this current study.

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