



Figurative Language Found in Indie Songs

Peter Cannon

Department of English, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Rangsit University, Bangkok, Thailand

E-mail: glcan@hotmail.com

Abstract

This study aimed to examine the song lyrics and figurative language used in 30 songs from the genre of Indie Music. The songs were released from 2000 to 2020. The data collection was 12,000 words, and 62 tokens were found. Specific types of figurative language will be analyzed and interpreted. The data was collected from three different singers and bands for analysis and interpretation. The findings showed that 6 different types of figurative language were used. When the implicit meaning of these examples of figurative language was analyzed, it was found that the songs contained these types. Metaphors were the most dominant figure of speech found at 32.25%, followed by personification at 17.7%. Metonymy and hyperbole were found at 14.5% whereas similes and symbolism were found to a lesser and equal degree at 12.9% and 8%, respectively. It is hoped that this study will be useful to both ESL/EFL students and researchers who wish to do further study on figurative language.

Keywords: *Figurative Language, Indie Music, Metaphors*

1. Introduction

Music is a useful tool for studying in English. It reflects society, culture, and beliefs. By introducing songs and figurative language to the EFL/ESL classroom a new dimension can be pursued and explored. More life can be added to dialogue to simply give more meaning to language. As Dunaway (2010) stated that “while students will say, I can’t read poetry, or poetry doesn’t make sense, they will never say I can’t figure out a song, which is in itself another form of poetry.”

Songs are used as a source of pleasure but can also be used as a tool for learning. Songs contain numerous examples of figures of speech and figurative language. By using figurative language, better use of imagination can be conveyed. In Thailand, learning English through songs was given positive feedback from undergraduate students. Thai learners of English claimed that songs allow them to pronounce words correctly; thus, developing positive attitudes (Phanarangsarn, 2000; Suriyatham, 2013). Adjectives such as “fun” and “enjoyable” were common words students used to describe their experience of learning English through song (Phanaransan, 2000; Keskin, 2011). Indie music is a newer genre of rock music that contains vivid figurative language to express the song writer’s ideas, thoughts, and feelings more clearly. From 2000 to 2020 three artists came to the forefront of Indie Rock, and these artists were interesting to explore. Avril Lavigne, Liam Gallagher, and the band LANY have all become top sellers during this period. This study was conducted to study the figurative language used in their songs. It is hoped that by examining the linguistic features in these songs they can be simplified to get the implicit meaning that is contained in the figurative language that was used in their lyrics.

Singer-songwriter Avril Lavigne, singer-songwriter Liam Gallagher, and the band LANY have all been at the forefront of Indie music for the last 20 years. They have released bestselling albums, received extensive radio airplay, and played sold-out concerts around the world. Avril Lavigne is a Canadian singer-songwriter. Her album ‘Avril Lavigne’ from 2013 was a worldwide best-seller. She used figurative language to describe the angst of adolescent life in today’s society. Liam Gallagher was a founding member of the band Oasis, one the first of the big-name Indie bands coming out of Manchester, England. His songs also deal with the hardships of growing up in an industrial city like Manchester. LANY (an acronym for Los Angeles and New York) is an Indie band formed in 2014 in Nashville, Tennessee by Paul Jason Klein, Les Priest, and Jake Clifford Goss. Their two bestselling albums were LANY released in 2017, and Malibu Nights released in 2018. Their songs also deal with the problems of growing up in our turbulent society.



What is a song? The Cambridge Dictionary (2019) defines a song as a set of words arranged with music or a short poem that is meant to be sung. Songs are messages that transfer the point of view of the lyricists to their audience (Holloway & Cheney, 2001). They appeal to people's attitudes as they can stimulate personal feelings of love, confidence, and a desire for freedom. Songs have a long history as they are considered tools in expressing what people think and feel (Locario, 2018). The songs' ability to convey messages incorporated with melodious sounds make songs ubiquitously present in the lives of everyone (Ibid). Songs are the language of the heart; they make people feel and give them certain thoughts and ideas.

Figurative language is present and prevalent in many songs and can be easily found and studied through the genre of Indie music. According to McQueen (2020), "figurative language makes songs more pleasing to the ears. More importantly it compels the listener to decode exactly what the lyrics are all about." Many figures of speech can be found in songs. They are usually represented by such devices as metaphors, similes, oxymorons, hyperbole, symbolism, and personification among others in song lyrics (Krashen, 1983). These figurations in songs allow students to internalize and think critically about the meaning of the lyrics of the songs, which in turn helps them better understand the songs denotation and derivation. Learning figurative expressions is beneficial to learner's language learning as it allows them to express certain meanings as they speak (Purnamasari, 2009). Learning English through songs may potentially allay emotional filters that hinder language learning. Krashen (1983) stated that affective filters such as fear, anxiety, and boredom may block comprehensible input to the learners as they prevent information about the second language from reaching the language areas of the brain. Murphey (1992) suggested that the use of music in class makes students more receptive to the learning process thus students become more relaxed and engaged in language learning.

Pop songs may facilitate a better musical experience as they do not only promote vocabulary recall but also help in longer utterances and formulaic phrases. (Engh, 2013). Music entertains the students making learning English more fun and effective. Engh (2013) suggested that using pop songs in language teaching facilitates better retention and comprehension as it dispels emotional filters that hinder student's motivation to learn. Moreover, the emphasis on figurative language in songs expedites the learning process as students can think critically and internalize the material being learned. Because of the figurative pattern of much of the ordinary everyday language, native speakers usually do not have difficulty understanding figurative language in literature (Carter, 1997:212 as mentioned in Daskalovska & Dimova, 2012). However foreign language learners are not in such a favorable position because many languages have different ways of expressing the same ideas and notions, and very often the device of metaphors reveals cultural attitudes to particular areas of human activity (Carter, 1997:88 as mentioned in Daskalovska & Dimova, 2012). Therefore, giving foreign language learners opportunities for discussion, evaluation, and understanding the meaning of words and phrases, and developing their interpretational and inferential skills will make them more reflective and effective learners and users of the language (Carter, 1997: 55 as mentioned in Daskalovska & Dimova, 2012). Carter concludes,

It can therefore be argued that to use in the language class only for those types of dialogue that are transparent and transitional and devoid of richness cultural reference, and creativity is to misrepresent what speakers actually do and simultaneously lose an opportunity for interesting language awareness work of the kind which may be an ideal precursor to enhanced literary awareness (Carter, 1997: 55 as mentioned in Daskalovska & Dimova, 2012)

This study will focus on six types of figurative language found in Indie music. These types found were metaphors, similes, personification, hyperbole, symbolism, and metonymy.

Figurative language is language deflection to create certain rhetorical or special meanings (Shen, 2009) as shown below.

"It rains cats and dogs"

This phrase simply means very heavy rain. There is no relationship with animals, in this case cats and dogs (Shen, 2009).



There are many types of figurative language such as a metaphor which is a figure of speech between two ideas with is basically similar. Personification is the attribution of a personal nature of a personal characteristic to something non-human, or the representation of an abstract quality in human form. Hyperbole is the use of exaggeration as a rhetorical device in a figure of speech. While a simile is a figure of speech that directly compares two things or ideas using like or as. Symbolism is the use of symbols to represent ideas or qualities. While metonymy is the substitution of the name or attribute or adjunct for that of the thing or item meant. For example, “suit” for an executive, or “turf” for horse racing. (Salwa, 2016).

This paper will hopefully encourage students who want to study English in more detail and to challenge themselves by learning English through songs and their lyrics. By studying the basics of figurative language, a deeper and more emotional meaning to song lyrics can be discovered. The main theme and more implicit meaning of the lyrics can be discovered and enjoyed.

2. Objectives

The objectives of this study were to 1) classify the figurative language into types, 2) examine the frequency of each type of figurative language, and 3) interpret the figurative meaning found in Indie music.

3. Methodology

3.1 Methods

In conducting this research, the researcher used the descriptive method. The researcher chose to use the descriptive method because in analyzing the figurative language the researcher collected the data by identification and classification, then analyzed the lexical items in the Indie songs of Avril Lavigne, Liam Gallagher, and LANY. Indie music is the shortened term for independent music - meaning that the artists who are classified as “Indie” have not signed with record conglomerates but with record labels that are independent of the mainstream music world. Indie music was the first big thing in university radio stations that really resonated with college-age students and that whole demographic (Minnick, 2013).

Three artists were selected for this study: Avril Lavigne, Liam Gallagher, and the band LANY. Ten songs from each artist were analyzed for figurative language content. The function of figurative language used in Indie songs is to give a concrete explanation to something abstract. It also gives a clear explanation of the lyrics, and gives images, emotions, and feelings to make the songs more expressive and enjoyable to listen to.

3.2 Data Collection

With regards to data collection, the songs analyzed were then divided into six types of figurative language. These were metaphors and similes indicating comparison. Hyperbole was used to show exaggeration. Personification was used to give non-human entities a human quality. Symbolism was used to give ideas and qualities to symbols. Finally, metonymy, the substitution of a name or attribute or adjunct for the thing or item meant, was used.

- 1) The researcher collected the lyrics from the given artists' albums from the period of 2010- 2020.
- 2) The researcher studied the theories of the six types of figurative language to be analyzed, which done to gain an in-depth knowledge of figurative language before beginning any analysis.
- 3) After researching the songs and the lyrics the researcher selected the related figurative language.
- 4) The chosen examples of figurative language were used to establish the scope of the study.
- 5) The researcher used the selected figurative language to analyze and interpret the content of the songs.

4. Results and Discussion

As the results show, the tokens of figurative language identified for this study consisted of 62 samples of 6 types of figurative language found in 30 songs. There were 20 examples of metaphors, which was the most found rhetorical device. Personification was found 11 times, while metonymy and hyperbole were found equally at 9 times. Similes were found 8 times, and the least found type was symbolism at 5



times. After analyzing the meaning of each type and example of figurative language the researcher found many examples that were specific to the idea of love and relationships. Happiness, sadness, and heartbreak were common themes in many of the analyzed songs, suggesting that figurative language is often rooted in songs about the emotions involved in human relationships with their ever-changing and evolving feeling of happiness, sadness, and heartbreak. The following table shows the results of the frequency of the types of figurative language found in the analyzed songs.

Table 1 Frequency of figurative language used in the selected artists songs.

Figurative Types	Times	Percentage
Metaphors	20	32.25%
Personification	11	17.7%
Metonymy	9	14.5%
Hyperbole	9	14.5%
Simile	8	12.9%
Symbolism	5	8%

Table 1 indicates, all six types of figurative language were used in 30 selected songs. In addition, it was found that metaphor was used in the highest frequency among all 30 selected songs. The examples of metaphor were presented below:

- 1) “He was a boi and she was a girl
Can I make it any more obvious?
He was a punk, she did ballet
What more can I say?
He wanted her, she’d never tell
Secretly she wanted him as well”
(From Skater Boi by Avril Lavigne)

“Can I make it any more obvious?” is a rhetorical question that introduces the whole metaphor of this stanza and indeed of the whole song’s theme. “He was a punk” indicates he comes from a lower class of society than a young girl studying ballet, which is a very expensive dance form to learn. “He wanted her, she’d never tell, secretly she wanted him as well, uses a metaphor to explain that even though she was in love with “the punk” she felt she could not express her feelings due to the difference in social status that may come about because of parental pressure.

- 2) “All of her friends stuck up their nose
They had a problem with his baggy clothes”
(From Skater Boi by Avril Lavigne)

This metaphor is based on the fact that those who are in a higher social status are considered to be more important than those of a lower social scale. People who are higher on the social scale often use disdainful gestures towards those in a lower social position. They quite literally “stick up their noses” in front of other citizens who are below them to show they are not worth paying attention to.

- 3) “He was a skater boi, she said see you later boi
He wasn’t good enough for her
She had a pretty face, but her head was up in space
She needed to come back down to earth”
(From Skater Boi by Avril Lavigne)

The metaphor “He wasn’t good enough for her” is used to show that the boy did not have enough “goodness” (probably referring to his social position) to satisfy what the girl deserves. The metaphor “She had a pretty face, but her head was up in space, she needed to come back down to earth” is used to show



that although she was pretty, she was confused perhaps from social and parental pressure and she needed to become more grounded and aware of her true surroundings.

- 4) “Oh, woman, now you are feeling the fear
Cause you’ve never been alone before, oh
And the wolf is at the door, oh
Now it’s better if you hold your breath and don’t look down
At the pages of your paper crown” (From Paper Crown by Liam Gallagher)

A long metaphor is used here to show how an ex-girlfriend that always had men attracted to her is now alone. “The wolf is at your door” shows the nicer men she dated before have been replaced by “wolves” or men who have bad intentions. “Don’t look down at the pages of your paper crown” shows she thought she was above the men in her previous relationships like a queen. Now she is alone and has no relationship at all.

- 5) “There’s no reason, there’s no rhyme
I find myself blindsided by
A feeling I have never know” (From Malibu Nights by LANY)

This sentence uses a metaphor to show the boy does not know what is going on in his relationship with the girl. The word “blindsided” indicates his shock at the breakup, and he has never felt this feeling of sadness before.

- 6) “Phone is quiet, walls are bare” (From Malibu Nights by LANY)

In this metaphor, the songwriter is trying to express his loneliness from a modern perspective as his phone has not received any calls or messages. He mentions “the walls are bare” which gives the listener a hint that he has removed all the photos of them as a couple, thus trying to erase his bad memories of the breakup.

- 7) “Well, the cops are taking over
While everyone is in Yoga
‘Coz happiness is a warm gun” (From China Town by Liam Gallagher)

This is a metaphor with a direct reference to the Beatles song “Warm Gun”. The songwriter is making a direct reference to police brutality. The song was written during the riots that occurred at the beginning of Britain’s Brexit campaign. An unfired pistol is referred to as “cold steel”, while a pistol that has fired a shot is referred to as a “warm gun”.

Following metaphor, the second type of figurative language found among the selected 30 songs was personification. The examples of personification used in the selected songs were demonstrated below.

- 8) “The echoes are gone in the hall
But I still remember the pain of December” (From Hurts by LANY)

The use of “pain in December” is personification referring to the month of a bad breakup.

- 9) “Throwing empty bottles in the fire
Whiskey’s got us singing like a choir” (From Breaking in Summer by Avril Lavigne)



Personification is used here to show that a lot of alcohol has been drunk, lowering the inhibitions of the songwriter. Here indicating that persons in the song are in an intoxicated state when the melody they sing is perfect and they sound like a choir.

- 10) “I wish that this floor would come to life and tell the story.
‘Cause no one knows where I missed my move” (From Let Me Know by LANY)

This phrase is personification. The floor is a non-living inanimate object, but the singer is wishing that it was alive and could recall and narrate the events that led up to and caused the breakup of his relationship, in hope of restoring it.

- 11) “Hands talk, won’t stop
We go to war” (From Thick and Thin by LANY)

This phrase uses personification to show that they are gesticulating wildly while having a profound argument. When a couple argues it’s not just the voice that conveys emotions, but also the gestures used during the argumentative exchange.

- 12) “When I hear a song, it takes me back.” (From 17 by Avril Lavigne)

This line from the song is a very clear example of personification. Of course, a song cannot take you back in time but the melody and lyrics of a song have the ability to take the listener back in time. You can recall where you were, who you were with, and what you were doing when you hear a favorite song from your past.

- 13) “God told me to live a life of luxury
All our lives we have both been waiting.” (From China Town by Liam Gallagher)

This is personification. We as humans cannot talk to God. With the line “God told me to live a life of luxury”, the songwriter is referring to the past. He and his brother dealt with many problems growing up including poverty and an abusive father. God’s words did not come true, he and his brother are both scarred from these memories.

Apart from metaphor and personification, the results showed that metonymy was also used in the selected songs. The examples of metonymy found were presented below.

- 14) “What do you do with a broken heart
Once the light fades everything is dark” (From Malibu Night by LANY)

This phrase is an example of metonymy. Here “the light” refers to happiness in a relationship while “everything is dark” indicates the happiness is now gone and has been replaced by sadness.

- 15) “Every time I leave the house
Something reminds me
Of what’s now left behind me” (From Thru These Tears by LANY)

Here metonymy is used. “The house” refers to the song writer’s memories. So, every time the songwriter leaves the house and closes the door he is reminded of his broken relationship with his former girlfriend. “Something” refers to his ex-girlfriend. Because before they always left the house together, now he leaves alone.



- 16) “You won’t forget the rest of your life
So, come on over to the wild side
Buckle up baby and hold on tight” (From Bad Girl by Avril Lavigne)

“Buckle up baby and hold on tight” is an example of metonymy. The phrase “so come on over to the wild side”, indicates the woman is open to a sexual experience. Metonymy is used to show he should put on a seat belt as he is going to experience an exciting ride.

- 17) " I was champagne.
You were Jameson.
Every bad thing” (From Hello Heartache by Avril Lavigne)

Metonymy is used here to show the difference in the character of the two lovers. Champagne brings up happy images of parties and fun. While Jameson is a much stronger Scotch whiskey indicating the boy is more mature and serious as Scotch is not often drunk by the younger generation. The line “every bad thing” is used to show how different they were, and the relationship did not end well.

- 18) “When the sun is going down
We will be raising our cups” (From Here’s to Never Growing Up by Avril Lavigne)

Metonymy is used in the line “We will be raising our cups”. “Cups” refers to alcoholic beverages. Teenagers often sneak away and secretly drink, very often around sunset.

- 19) “Love that once hung on the wall
Used to mean something, now it means nothing” (From Let Me go by Avril Lavigne)

This is metonymy because love is an abstract concept that cannot, in fact, be hung on a wall. But the photographs of the couple together did once hang on their walls. So, the photographs have been taken down as no relationship exists anymore.

Also, it was found that hyperbole was used in the same percentage as metonymy. The examples of hyperbole used among the selected songs were shown below.

- 20) “Frozen with my thoughts
Wasting all my younger days
And I just can’t decide, should I be alone” (From Hurts by LANY)

This phrase expresses hyperbole. A human cannot be frozen and live, but by using the word “frozen” it can be seen that his thoughts can’t be forgotten, they will always remain much as frozen ice remains throughout the winter.

- 21) “In my defense all my intentions were good.
And heaven knows a place somewhere for the misunderstood
You know I’d give a pint of blood if it would be enough”
(From For What It’s Worth by Liam Gallagher)

The songwriter is using hyperbole to apologize for past mistakes. The mistakes were in the form of verbal abuse to those closest to him. To atone for these mistakes, he uses hyperbole and the ultimate physical sacrifice, the giving of his own blood to help those he hurt.



- 22) “Wish it didn’t have to be this way but
You and I will spin the world to make love.
Goodbye my friend” (From Hello Heartache by Avril Lavigne)

This is an example of hyperbole. Humans cannot spin the world. The meaning is the young couple will do everything possible to keep their young love alive and going strong. For simile, the results showed that, among all 30 songs, simile was used 8 times. The examples of simile used in the selected songs were demonstrated below.

- 23) “One day you will shatter like a wall of glass
Wall of glass
Wall of glass” (From Wall of Glass by Liam Gallagher)

Here a very simple explanation for a simile can be found. We all know what glass is like when it shatters. It breaks into many small pieces and often falls to the floor, which shows that the relationship is totally over and is broken beyond repair.

- 24) “It could change, but this feels
The calm before the storm” (From 13 by LANY)

This is a simile describing the song writers’ feelings about his deteriorating relationship with his girlfriend. The relationship is not stable but right now they are getting along. But the feeling is that it is like “the calm before the storm” an idiom meaning that things are alright now but could easily change very quickly as a “storm” of some sort is approaching. In this case most probably another big argument.

- 25) “She’s got a spinning head
Like seeing the Grateful Dead” (From Greedy Soul by Liam Gallagher)

This example of a simile is interpreted as a reference to the “Grateful Dead” a 70’s and 80’s touring rock band. The followers of this band often took the psychedelic drug LSD to experience the concert. “She’s got a spinning head” refers to the feeling one gets under the influence of this drug, which is said to expand your sensory awareness.

- 26) “You came back to find I was gone
And that place is empty, like the hole you left in me
Like we were nothing at all” (From Let Me Go by Avril Lavigne)

This is an example of a simile. “Like the hole you left in me”, certainly means the emptiness the songwriter now feels in her life after being left by a boy. In this study, it was found that symbolism was used with the lowest frequency, only 5 times in all 30 selected songs. The examples of the use of symbolism in the selected songs were presented below.

- 27) “Emotions aren’t that hard to follow
When loves the word you never learned
And in a room for of empty bottles
If you don’t give me what I want
Then you will get what you deserve” (From Give Me What You Like by Avril Lavigne)



The songwriter uses the words “empty bottles” to show there is nothing left in the relationship. Literally it refers to bottles leftover after a long night drinking session, but figuratively she is expressing emptiness in the relationship.

- 28) “Half my clothes are at your house,
And I don’t want them back
The smell of you is too much” (From 13 by LANY)

“The smell of you is too much” is an example of symbolism. The symbol is the clothes he does not want back. He can smell her scent on the clothes he left at her house. When he uses his sense of smell his other senses and emotions are triggered, and he feels sadness and loneliness because they have broken up and she is gone. He does not want these emotions to surface as they cause him emotional pain.

- 29) “No hericane
I’m not running from all my pain
But it can’t go without saying” (From Hericane by LANY)

“Hericane” is an example of symbolism. A hurricane is a violent swirling storm. “Her” is a pronoun for a woman, so here “Hericane” is spelled using “her” to indicate that a woman is the source of the problems occurring in the relationship.

- 30) “We’ll be living fast, kicking ass together
Like high school lovebirds” (From Breaking in Summer by Avril Lavigne)

Symbolism is used here, where “lovebirds” refers to a relationship. It means that they are boyfriend and girlfriend while in high school. This could well be first love, often quite a strong emotionally, as it has not been felt before by teenagers.

The results of this study were in line with the study conducted by Suriyawongpaisal (2013) who investigated American cultural values in Taylor Swift’s songs. She concluded that metaphors were the most dominant form of figurative language at 43.89 percent. This was followed by simile at 11.70 percent and hyperbole at 8.14 percent. Also, the results of this study were similar to Adhuri (2017) who observed the figurative language found in Whitney Houston’s songs in the sense that metaphor, simile, and personification were the dominant forms of figurative language. However, Sutiyono (2013) in a previous study of Avril Lavigne’s songs from the album *The Best Damn Things* found that hyperbole was the dominant figurative language found in the songs, followed by similes and repetition. Therefore, the results of the present study could be used as evidence showing that the use of figurative language in songs was prominent. However, a reason why the results of the previous studies differ could be that each song writer may employ different types of figurative language, depending on their styles and preferences.

5. Conclusion

When the results of the frequency of usage of the figurative language found in the 30 selected examples of songs were tabulated it was clearly shown that metaphors were the most dominant figure of speech found at 32.25%, followed by personification at 17.7%. Metonymy and hyperbole were found at 14.5% whereas similes and symbolism were found to a lesser and equal degree at 12.9% and 8%, respectively.

Songs are a useful and powerful tool in the study of English as a foreign language. Language and music are closely tied together in brain processing by pitch, rhythm, and syntactical phrasing (Lake, 2003). This study focused on an analysis of the figurative features found in the use of figurative language in Indie songs from 2010 to 2020.



The effect of introducing figurative language to the EFL classroom can be a great benefit to the learner. By using songs and music to study figurative language the students themselves can choose the musical style and the artist that they enjoy and are most familiar with, which will increase their desire to get involved in these types of learning while at the same time making it more enjoyable and fun. By delving deeper into the meaning of the songs and their lyrics, the concept of critical thinking can begin to be introduced. The reason for the songwriter choosing certain lyrics and styles of figurative language can be studied in much greater depth, for even greater comprehension of the song lyrics. Since the data was limited, adding more data in future studies will make the study more generalizable—researchers who wish to do further studies of figurative language in songs can use this study as a springboard for further studies of poems, advertisements, product slogans, and even movie scripts.

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