



The Investigation of Non-Literal Meaning in Selected American Songs: A Semantic Perspective

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Abstract

This study examines non-literal meaning from a semantic perspective in selected American songs by Sia. It situates the analysis within semantics as the level of linguistic study concerned with meaning, with particular attention to figurative language as a context-dependent mode of interpretation. Using a qualitative approach, the study analyzes the song lyrics “Black and Blue,” “I’m Still Here,” and “Helium” to identify types of non-literal meaning and their communicative functions. The findings reveal that the lyrics employ several figures of speech, including metaphor, simile, personification, hyperbole, and euphemism, which contribute to indirect meaning, emotional expression, and aesthetic effect. The study demonstrates that non-literal meaning plays a crucial role in conveying the songwriter’s intended message and in enhancing the vividness and impact of song lyrics, highlighting the importance of accurate interpretation in understanding creative language.

دراسة المعاني غير الحرفية في أغاني أمريكية مختارة: منظور دلالي

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المستخلص

تتناول هذه الدراسة المعاني غير الحرفية من منظور دلالي في مجموعة مختارة من الأغاني الأمريكية للمغنية سيا. وتندرج الدراسة ضمن علم الدلالة بوصفه المستوى اللغوي المعني بتحليل المعنى، مع التركيز على اللغة المجازية باعتبارها نمطاً تفسيريّاً يعتمد على السياق. واعتمدت الدراسة المنهج النوعي في تحليل كلمات ثلاث أغاني هي *Black and Blue*، *I’m Still Here*، و *Helium*، بهدف تحديد أنواع المعاني غير الحرفية ووظائفها التداولية. وأظهرت النتائج أن كلمات الأغاني تتضمن عدة أساليب بلاغية، من بينها الاستعارة، والتشبيه، والتشخيص، والمبالغة، والكناية، والتي تسهم في نقل المعنى بصورة غير مباشرة وتعزيز التعبير العاطفي والقيمة الجمالية للنص الغنائي. وتؤكد الدراسة أن المعاني غير الحرفية تؤدي دوراً محورياً في إيصال الرسالة المقصودة للمؤلف وفي زيادة حيوية وتأثير كلمات الأغاني، مما يبرز أهمية التفسير الدقيق لفهم اللغة الإبداعية.

Introduction

Language is a primary means through which humans communicate ideas and meanings. While sounds and structures are studied by phonology, morphology, and syntax, meaning itself is examined at the level of semantics. Semantics is considered the most abstract level of linguistic analysis because meaning cannot be directly observed, but is closely related to human cognition and interpretation (Leech, 1981).



Semantics deals with both literal and non-literal meaning. Literal meaning refers to the direct and explicit meaning of words, whereas non-literal meaning involves figurative language, where the intended meaning goes beyond the literal interpretation and depends largely on context. Non-literal meaning is especially prominent in creative language, such as song lyrics, where it enhances expressiveness and aesthetic value. This study investigates types of non-literal meaning in selected English songs to highlight their role in meaning construction and interpretation.

Communication

According to Crystal (2003:85), the spread and response of information, i.e., a message among a verbal exchange and a receiver, involves the use of a signaling system; in linguistic terms, the essential supply of verbal exchange is language. Communication is important to all human beings. Gimson (1974: 3) states that:

Crystal (2003: 85) states that the scientific study of all aspects of communication is covered by communication science; this area contains linguistics, phonetics, and their various branches, such as acoustics and psycholinguistics. Forms of communication differ among humans. They can be verbal and nonverbal. Such contrast is made between linguistic and non-linguistic aspects of communication that exclude facial expressions, gestures, and voice quality. Crystal (2006:3) tells that human communication consists of five modes as there are five senses that can act as channels of information: sound, sight, touch, smell, and taste. Therefore, the use of sound, the auditory vocal mode, is fundamental to the notion of language and is the one that has been adopted widely for human communication. All children learn to speak before they learn to write, except for deaf children (ibid). However, our major means of communication is speech, which is by no means the most broadly used means of exchanging information. Jassem (1983: 27) describes speech as one form of linguistic behavior and a special kind of signal. It consists of signs that bring meanings, and for the speech signal to be effective, these have to be understood. Thus, speech is not effective without it. To considerate speech, there is an improved start to the Semantics.

Semantics

According to Crystal (2008: 428), semantics is a division of linguistics focused on the analysis of meaning. The emphasis of the research is on the semantic attributes of natural languages. "Semantics encompasses the examination of meaning," John Lyons (1990:136). Semantics is the examination of how meaning is encoded within a language, primarily focusing on the meanings of words as lexical items and the meanings present at levels of language both underneath and beyond the word. Morphemes are meaningful units; the derivational morpheme prefix "pre" signifies "before." Inflectional morphemes also convey meaning:



"fixed" denotes the past, whereas "fixes" indicates the present and third person singular. Widdowson (2008, p. 53).

Historical Background of Semantics

In the seventeenth century the term "semantics" follows with inside the phrase "semantick" via way of means of philosophy to mean "divination". The French term "sematque" was constructed from the Greek in (1893) via way of means of Boreal. This phrase is no longer used to indicate what it means, but rather its development. In (1900), still, there seemed Brea's book: Semantics: research with inside the technological know-how of which means in which "semantics" has been canned as the "technology" of which means, and that became now no longer by and large involved with adjustments of which means from a vintage factor of view. In 1923, the term "semantics" in its cutting-edge feel was regarded in an appendix by anthropologist Malinowski, known as the difficulty of which means in primitive language. Which has been connected to the book through C.K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, entitled The Means of which means M.M. Dawood (2010:49).

In (1976: 1), Palmer states that, "Semantics is the technical term used to refer to the study of meaning. Saeed (1997: 3) defines semantics as the examination of the meaning of words and phrases. Semantics is a subdivision of linguistics that pertains to meaning. Semantics is defined as the examination of meaning in languages. Semantics has long become a subject of study within philosophy. The term semantics was integrated into the English language in the early 19th century. Prior to the introduction of the phrase in 1894, the word semantics was adapted for immediate usage within the language. The semantic philosophy of divination is now entirely unrelated to its original meaning. This term in English may trace its origins back to the French term "sémantique," which itself is derived from Greek. Palmer (1976: 2) asserts that the forthcoming shape signifies a generation of symbols, yet he contends that these have become obsolete, their relevance not revived until the twenty-first century. Alternative words include semasiology, semiology, semiotics, sememics, and semics; nevertheless, college students often employ some of these terms to express their individual interests and orientations.

In general, Semantics way the examiner interprets what that means. It gives all linguistic details from words, phrases, and sentences in the language. It has moreover been redefined in fact that semantics limitations it has a take on the person of this means that only. It can be associated of relative at the same time as it is look at on in which it has its private contextual because of this that.

Meaning

Language serves as a medium for conveying meanings comprehensible to others. But meanings exist in our minds, and we can express what is in our minds by the spoken and written forms of language (as well as through gestures, action, etc.). At the level of phonology, we study the sound patterns of language, and we



organize the words and sentences that are studied at the level of morphology and syntax. In what manner is language structured to convey meaning? This question emerges when we enquire and seek to respond at the semantic level. Semantics is the domain of linguistic analysis focused on the examination of meaning. This represents the most abstract tier of linguistic analysis, as meaning cannot be visually perceived or recorded in the same manner as sounds. Meaning is intricately connected to the human ability to reason logically and comprehend. In analyzing meaning, we are examining our ability to reason and systematically articulate the essence of meaning. Leech (1981).

According to Leech, the meaning has three perspectives. When we study the connection between language and the outside world, whatever in the world, there are certain types of meanings, which we call the objective meaning and denotative meaning that means, we study the understanding. The relationship between the language and the external entity in the world, this kind has a group of meanings which is objective, denotative meaning, direct meaning.

When the linguist studied the relationship between speaker and listener, we have certain types of meaning, like the affective meaning, emotional meaning, and connotative meaning.

The third group, when the meaning is attempted through the way items are used, especially with extra-linguistic elements or situations, so we have certain meanings such as contextual meaning and stylistic meaning, then we have three main groups of meaning according to the way either through or emphasize the relationship between the language and the external world, so here we have mind. The third group, study the relationship or the way in which the meaning or the words said, means the emphasize on the extra-linguistic denotative meaning but if we study the relationship between the speaker intentions and the listener understanding, here we have two main group first one we called then emotional, affected meaning which second group we call then intellectual meaning because it related to the situation, we call then contextual meaning or stylistic meaning.

Some linguists say we have lexical meaning. When the meaning emphasizes the lexical expression, we have a phonological point, a syntactic point, when the emphasis is on the structure and syntax, we have semantic meaning when the meaning emphasizes the semantic. When we come to more details about these meanings. The first meaning, which is what we call the thematic meaning, means that when the meaning is transferred to two others, either to grammatical construction or through phonological aspect.

Literal Meaning and Non- Literal Meaning

When the listener grasps the speaker's concept, it indicates that they can retain the meaning, facilitating effective communication between them. The significance of words plays a central role in communication. The noun "meaning"



has significance as posited by semanticists; Leech enumerated the meanings as follows:

1. Meaning entails the speaker's focus on conveying a certain significance that may or may not be apparent from the speech itself.
 2. Therefore, interpretation by the nearest is likely contingent upon the context.
 3. Meaning, in this context, refers to an action rather than a statistical existence.
- (Leech: 23).

Hartman (1972: 354) states, "Meaning is the intended conveyance, particularly through language, encompassing significant qualities, implications of concealed or particular significance, and the logical connotation of words or phrases." Lyons (1977: 2) asserts, "The meaning can be discerned by the method of substituting alternative words in the same context and examining whether the resultant sentences are equivalent."

Consequently, meaning can be categorised into two types: literal meaning and non-literal meaning. Many words possess several meanings; nonetheless, this diversity does not disrupt standard language usage, as context typically clarifies the intended meaning. The term "black" possesses various meanings depending on the context, which can be categorised into literal and non-literal interpretations. From a literal perspective, darkness is characterised by the absence or minimal presence of light, but from a figurative standpoint, black may symbolise magic, malevolence, or fear. Song lyrics often employ figurative language to enhance their meaning, which can evoke various effects on the listener or reader.

Gray (1984) states, "Literal meaning is its most exact, precise, and limited meaning, without reference to secondary or symbolic or metaphorical meaning". In the literal meaning, there is no misunderstanding or confusion between the speaker and listener.

Figurative Language

Beckson and Ganz (1975:80) assert that "figurative language employs specific devices known as 'figures of speech', primarily techniques for comparing disparate objects, to attain effects that exceed the limitations of literal language." According to Crystal (1999:116), "a figure of speech is an expressive linguistic device in which words are employed non-literally to evoke enlightening comparisons and similarities." Perrine identifies four primary reasons for employing metaphorical language.

Firstly, figurative language provides readers with the creative enjoyment of literary compositions. Secondly, it serves as a means of incorporating supplementary imagery into poetry, rendering the abstract tangible and enhancing the sensuousness of literary works. The third, metaphorical, serves to enhance emotional intensity in otherwise purely informative utterances, while communicating attitudes with information. Lastly, it is a means of conveying substantial information concisely. (Perrine: 727).



Types of Figurative Language

1- Metaphor

A metaphor is a rhetorical figure of speech that alludes to one entity while referencing another for impact. We can say that a metaphor is a comparison of two different entities, directly concrete vs. abstract. www.merriam-webster.com online dictionary.

Metaphor is a kind of figurative language that is an embedded comparison in which two different objects are compared by identifying or substituting one with other. Foss illustrates metaphors as *"nonliteral comparisons in which a word or phrase from one domain of experience is applied to another domain"*. She continues that, meanwhile, truth is referred to by the language we use to define it; metaphor uses the shape of the world and our connections to

2- Metonymy

Frost (2006) asserted that metonymy is a rhetorical device that employs a concept intimately associated with the intended subject. Metonymy is a rhetorical device that involves substituting the name of one entity with that of another to which it is related. For example:

- *"We spent the night reading Shakespeare."*

3- Irony

Irony is the employment of language that expresses a meaning distinct from our true intent. Irony is a form of figurative language that expresses contradictory meanings and dissent from reality. The etymology of the term "irony" derives from the Greek word "eironia," signifying "trick" or "deception." There is indeed contention on the definition of irony, although all interpretations revolve around the concept of incongruity between what is articulated and what is meant, or between the knowledge or expectation of a reality and the actual occurrence. For example:

- *"She still feels lonely in the busy city."*

4- Hyperbole

Hyperbole is the employment of exaggeration by an author to depict a situation as more favourable or unfavourable, or more substantial or diminutive than it truly is. It is a purposeful exaggeration not meant to be interpreted literally. It serves to underscore the veracity of the assertion. It communicates more than the veracity regarding the extent, magnitude, or intensity of anything without the intention to mislead. The term 'hyperbole' originates from the Greek language. The term derives from two words: 'Hyper' signifies 'over', and 'ballein' means 'to throw'. For instance:



- He loves her for a thousand years.

5- Litotes

Litotes is a rhetorical device whereby the speaker accentuates a statement by negating its contrary. Litotes are defined as a type of understatement that is always intentional and intended to emphasize a point subtly. However, context, including cultural context, can influence how litotes are interpreted. It might also rely on emphasis and accent when speaking. Litotes are particularly appealing to some cultures, such as northern Europeans and the British. The Icelandic sagas and Old English poetry both use it as a method of stoic restraint. For instance:

- *"This tea is not hot."*

6- Simile

Frost (2006) claims that a simile is a stylistic device in which a comparison is expressed by the limited use of a word or phrase, such as: like, as, seems, or as if. For example:

- *"Busy as a bee."*

7- Personification

Personification is the process of giving an idea, an animal, or an object human characteristics. It is actually a subtype of metaphor, an implicit comparison in which a human being is always used as the figurative concept. (Perrine, 730)

Personification is the process of the personification consists an object with human characteristics. Personification is derived from the Latin term "persona," which means "person," "actor," or "mask" in theater, while "fic" means "to make."

For example:

- *"My teddy bear gives me a kiss."*

- *"The sky is full of dancing stars."*

8- Euphemism

Euphemism is a form of figurative language employed as a substitute for an acceptable or objectionable term, replacing one that is harsh, indelicate, or otherwise unpleasant or taboo; it serves to mask an offending concept with a more palatable expression. Webster (1971, p. 784). This would serve the purposes of civility, prudence, and other methods of alleviating communication. Euphemisms are analogous to an octagon; so, when a red octagon is present, all vehicles must halt.

What is a song?



A song is a musical arrangement designed for vocal performance. This is frequently executed at certain and predetermined pitches (melodies) utilising patterns of sound and silence. Songs encompass diverse structures, including the recurrence and variation of portions. Semantic broadening allows the term "song" to encompass instrumental compositions. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Song>.

The writers try to explain the song. Basically, a song is a short piece of music that usually includes words or song lyrics. It combines melody and vocals, though some composers have written instrumental pieces or musical works without words, which mimic the quality of a singing voice.

According to Grolier, a song is a short musical work set to a poetic text with a similar situation, set to music and words. In addition, according to Hornby (1995), a song is defined as a short poem or several verses set into music and intended to be sung. From the definitions of song above, the author might arrange that a song is any artwork that is intended to be sung either with or without active accompaniments. A worthy song yields similar feelings relative to a given matter or experience. Also, natural lyrics can be encouraged by attractive melodies.

A songwriter's creativity influences the interplay between a song's lyrics and melody, as well as how various versions evoke distinct feelings. Song lyrics are uniquely differentiated from other types of creative writing due to their intrinsic connection to the music that conveys the words. The emotional essence of poetry is intrinsically linked to the words themselves, their auditory quality when articulated, and their interrelation.

Data Analysis

Figurative language comprises words and idioms employed in poetry and music to communicate meanings and interpretations that transcend their literal significance. The judicious application of figurative elements can elevate the work and generate a significant depth of meaning that an audience can appreciate while interpreting. I identify three instances of metaphorical language in popular English songs: "Black and Blue," "I'm Still Here," and "Helium" by Sia Kate.

“Black and blue.”

The song conveys that regardless of the circumstances affecting two individuals in love, including breakdowns and tears, the writer remains steadfast employs hyperbole and personification by depicting the word "tear" as an entity or individual capable of breaking upon striking the ground. Instruct myself, "Accomplish it." No items are discoverable. The author employs a metaphor by using the term "fighter." At times, I am certain that I have lost my faith. On certain days, I struggle to locate my faith, yet I persist in my endeavours. The composer used hyperbole by stating she lost her faith through exaggeration. Employ



personification by depicting religion as a person who has been misplaced, as in the expression, "some days I cannot find my faith."

"And I am a wounded warrior. And now that the enemy is closing in."

The writer uses **hyperbole** by exaggeration, and also I think type of **Metaphor**.

"I am a wounded warrior, looking for someone to let me in." The writer uses here **metaphor** and **hyperbole**. *"And I am a wounded warrior. And "now that the enemy is closing in. I am a wounded warrior."*

"Looking for someone to let me in."

"Black and blue, I'm begging you. Take me in, I'm surrendering."

"Black and blue, but if I'm with you. If I'm with you, I'll live to fight on through" the writer uses **euphemism**, she is begging him. She is insisting used **hyperbole**.

"I'll let go, walking into the unknown. If I surrender, if I lay my arms down."

"Am I a fighter?" The writer uses **personification** by the word unknown. The writer used hyperbole. *"Am I a fighter? Cause I've been fighting so long, baby."*

"And I am a wounded warrior. And now that the enemy is closing in."

The writer uses **personification** when the enemy is closing in: *"I am a wounded warrior, looking for someone to let me in."*

The writer use **metaphor** when uses the looking for someone to let me in.

"And I am a wounded warrior. And now that the enemy is closing in

Black and blue, I'm begging you. Take me in, I'm surrendering."

The writer uses the word "**metaphor**", when putting the two words Black and blue.

"Black and blue, but if I'm with you. If I'm with you, I'll live to fight on through".

The songwriter exaggerates the way to illustrate the main character's presence to the listeners. At the beginning of the song 'Every night in my dream I see you, I feel you', the writer uses imagery to create a visual impact of the singer's dream and her beloved. 'Love' is personified in the lines 'love can touch us one time'. The writer used **personification**, another type of figurative language.

The composer employs the personification *"Love can touch us one time."* This implies that love requires only a singular encounter between the two individuals to endure.

"I'm Still Here"



We identified another data point in *"I'm Still Here"* by Sia Kate. There are meanings found in it involving literal and non-literal meaning, so we listed just the non-literal meaning.

"I'm fighting a battle; I'm fighting my shadow, Herd fears like they're cattle."

Most believe the song is about fighting an addiction. The songwriter uses **hyperbole** because she exaggerates the way to illustrate that it is a battle and she is defending herself. We also find a **personification**; she says I'm fighting my shadow. As a person, she fights it. The writer uses a **simile** when she says Herd fears like they're cattle. The word like means that the writer looks at the fears like cattle.

"Where did we go wrong? I'm fighting for me, though."

"I'm lighting the long way home."

The writer in the lyrics above uses **hyperbole** to exaggerate the way that can light the long way home; it is a rhetorical style.

"Oh, the past, it haunted me. Oh, the past, it wanted me dead. Oh, the past tormented me."

Here, Sia talks about how the past haunted them and how sticking to the past is not good, but Sia somehow won, and the battle was lost because they're still standing and alive in the lyrics above. The writer uses **personification** because the past is personified as a hunter, and in the second line.

"Oh, the past, it wanted me dead."

Sia talks about her ongoing battle. She is fighting something that is very closely attached to her, like her shadow. The writer uses **personification** because the shadow here is personified as a person to touch her; whatever she is fighting is a part of her. She admits that she is fighting a battle, and it seems as if she committed her youth to this battle. She also knows that there's no one else who could fight this battle for her. So, she is taking the battle head-on.

"I'm fighting a battle; I'm fighting my shadow."

The writer used a type of **metaphor** to create the lyric "I'm fighting a battle. It is a non-literal meaning being, which she can achieve as having the characteristic of a man who fights in the battle; she is a metaphorical representation of bravery as brave as the brave men do in the battle. The word "shadow" in the second line, here the writer uses personification, which is not a real person the writer fights. The composer says that means that.

"I'm really strong because I'm able to fight the weak."

"Herd fears like they're cattle, I'm fighting a battle, yeah, I'm fighting my ego."



The composer employed **personification** and a **simile** in this lyric. The lyric contains the term "fears," which is personified as a creature producing sound audible to the author. The usage of "likes" exemplifies a simile, drawing a parallel between "cattle" and "I'm fighting." This lyric signifies that the powerful must engage in combat.

"Lost youth, where did we go wrong? I'm fighting for me, though, I'm lighting the long way home."

The lyric lost youth where did we go wrong implies a type of **hyperbole** because the writer used exaggeration.

"I'm fighting for me though; I'm lighting the long way home" in fact "she" as a human cannot lose the youth because the youth is not given by a human being, just my God enable that. The meaning of this lyric is that she gets the future when do right.

"Oh, the past haunted me, oh, the past it wanted me dead, oh, the past tormented me, oh, the past it wanted me dead."

Here, Sia talks about how the past haunted them and how sticking to the past is not good, but Sia somehow won, and the battle was lost because they're still standing and alive. The word "haunted" means the type of **personification** because it can haunt, like the features of the human being, the past as a haunter.

"But the battle was lost, I'm still here."

Here" by Sia. But it is quite effective in the context of the song.

Another example for English song by the same singer, Sia Kate, "**Helium.**"

"Helium"

We interpret the lyrics to suggest that a person's wealth or position of authority does not distinguish them from a poorer individual. In addition, everybody experiences emotional and mental highs and lows at some point in their lives. As we are all human, we shouldn't prioritize ourselves over others. I believe it indicates that, like helium, his love gives her a boost before quickly fading.

"I'm trying, but I keep falling. I cry out, but nothing comes now."

The phrase conveys the sentiment of enduring love, articulated through **hyperbole**, as it is impossible to inhabit another person's body. When she states, "I'm filled with his great love, I literally feel like I float like I'm full of happiness," The phrase "I'm found" indicates the author's use of a **simile**. "I'm taken care of—not by a person, but by a real superhero who sacrificed his life to enable the author to employ **hyperbole** and bestow upon me immortality. I was confident in my ability to manage this alone, although before allowing him entry, I experienced the sensations she articulated; I continued to descend. Since



his presence in my life, I have grown stronger, more audacious, and experienced an unparalleled sense of love that elevates me like helium. The author utilises a metaphor to convey this type of love or to substitute the term helium.

Conclusions

Subsequent to our data analysis, the authors delineated many conclusions, as follows:

The lyrics of Sia's songs embody specific forms of non-literal significance. The lyrics of "Black and Blue" have various forms of non-literal meaning. The five categories are personification, simile, metaphor, hyperbole, and euphemism. The lyrics utilise five forms of non-literal interpretation to convey their significance indirectly.

In the lyrics of "I'm Still Here," there are five forms of figures of speech or non-literal meanings, whereas "Helium" contains five types of non-literal meanings over eighteen lyrics. The employment of figures of speech is essential to attain aesthetic value and enhance the vibrancy of the songs. In this method, the investigator articulates the conclusions outlined in the subsequent paragraphs. This research indicates that song lyrics, particularly those employing non-literal meanings, must be comprehended accurately to ensure the intended messages of the composer are effectively conveyed. All forms of language functions are present in the proposed sorts of figurative language within the songs. Each category of figure of speech serves multiple distinct functions. Moreover, to create a significant impact in a song, the composer intends to employ appropriate language to evoke an emotional response from the listeners.

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