

FIGURATIVE MEANING IN THE POP SONG LYRICS "SOMEONE LIKE YOU" BY ADELE: A COGNITIVE SEMANTICS STUDY

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Abstract

Song lyrics represent a distinctive form of poetic discourse in which figurative language serves as the primary vehicle for communicating emotional experience. This study investigates figurative meaning in Adele's pop song "Someone Like You" (2011) using a cognitive semantic framework. A qualitative descriptive method is employed, drawing on conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), emotion metaphor theory (Kövecses, 2002), and metonymy theory (Radden & Kövecses, 1999). The Metaphor Identification Procedure (Pragglejaz Group, 2007) served as the primary analytical instrument. Analysis of the complete lyric text identified 25 figurative expressions across five categories: conceptual metaphor (48%), hyperbole (20%), personification (16%), metonymy (12%), and simile (4%). Four dominant conceptual schemas organize the emotional landscape of the lyrics: LOVE IS A JOURNEY, GRIEF IS A PHYSICAL BURDEN, MEMORY IS A PHYSICAL SPACE, and TIME IS A MOVING ENTITY. These schemas reflect deeply embodied cognitive structures documented across languages and cultures, confirming the universality of emotion metaphor mechanisms. The findings demonstrate that pop song lyrics encode systematic figurative complexity comparable to established literary genres and support the productivity of cognitive semantic analysis as a methodology for musical discourse research.

Keywords: cognitive semantics, conceptual metaphor, figurative language, song lyrics, Adele

Abstrak

Lirik lagu merupakan bentuk khusus wacana puitis yang menjadikan bahasa figuratif sebagai sarana utama dalam mengkonstruksi dan menyampaikan realitas emosional. Penelitian ini mengkaji makna figuratif dalam lirik lagu pop "Someone Like You" karya Adele (2011) melalui kerangka semantik kognitif. Metode deskriptif kualitatif diterapkan dengan menggunakan teori metafora konseptual (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), teori metafora emosi (Kövecses, 2002), dan teori metonimi (Radden & Kövecses, 1999). Metaphor Identification Procedure (Pragglejaz Group, 2007) digunakan sebagai instrumen analisis utama. Analisis terhadap teks lirik secara keseluruhan mengidentifikasi 25 ekspresi figuratif dalam lima kategori: metafora konseptual (48%), hiperbola (20%), personifikasi (16%), metonimi (12%), dan simile (4%). Empat skema konseptual dominan melandasi lanskap emosional lirik tersebut: CINTA ADALAH PERJALANAN, KESEDIHAN ADALAH BEBAN FISIK, KENANGAN ADALAH RUANG FISIK, dan WAKTU ADALAH ENTITAS YANG BERGERAK. Skema-skema ini mencerminkan struktur kognitif yang berakar pada pengalaman tubuh dan telah terdokumentasi lintas bahasa dan budaya, sehingga menegaskan universalitas mekanisme metafora emosi. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa lirik lagu pop mengandung kompleksitas figuratif yang

sistematis dan sebanding dengan genre sastra yang sudah mapan, serta mendukung produktivitas analisis semantik kognitif sebagai metodologi kajian wacana musikal.

Kata kunci: semantik kognitif, metafora konseptual, bahasa figuratif, lirik lagu, Adele

INTRODUCTION

Language is not merely a neutral medium for conveying information; it functions as an active cognitive instrument through which people construct and organize their understanding of the world. Among the many registers of human linguistic creativity, song lyrics occupy a particularly compelling position — combining the formal density of poetry with the cultural reach of popular media. They simultaneously address wide and diverse audiences while encoding complex figurative structures that merit serious scholarly investigation.

Figurative language — including metaphor, metonymy, simile, hyperbole, and personification — has long been central to literary stylistics and linguistic inquiry. Traditional rhetorical approaches treated these devices as ornamental departures from literal meaning, valued primarily for aesthetic effect. This view was fundamentally challenged by the emergence of cognitive semantics in the late twentieth century. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) demonstrated that metaphor is not rhetorical decoration but a pervasive cognitive mechanism through which people systematically conceptualize abstract domains in terms of more concrete, bodily grounded ones. This insight repositioned figurative language from the margins of poetics to the center of cognitive science.

Adele's "Someone Like You," released in 2011 on the album *21* and co-written with Dan Wilson, ranks among the most emotionally resonant pop songs of the twenty-first century. Its lyrics address romantic loss, unresolved longing, nostalgic retrospection, and the painful acceptance of irreversible change — rendered through a dense and systematic network of figurative expressions that have not previously been analyzed within the cognitive semantic tradition. Existing scholarship on Adele's work has focused primarily on musicological, affective, and cultural dimensions, leaving the linguistic architecture of her lyrics largely unexplored.

Research Problem

Despite the growing body of cognitive semantic research applied to song lyrics, Adele's "Someone Like You" — one of the most commercially and emotionally significant pop songs of the past two decades — has not been subjected to systematic cognitive semantic analysis. Existing studies either focus on other artists or approach Adele's work from non-linguistic perspectives. Two specific gaps motivate the present study: (1) the types of figurative language in the lyrics of "Someone Like You" have not been systematically identified and classified; and (2) the conceptual structures through

which these figurative expressions construct emotional meaning have not been described using a cognitive semantic framework.

Research Objectives

This study is guided by two research objectives:

- (1) To identify and classify the types of figurative language present in the lyrics of Adele's "Someone Like You" using the Metaphor Identification Procedure (Pragglejaz Group, 2007).
- (2) To analyze how these figurative expressions construct emotional meaning through conceptual structures as described by cognitive semantic theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2002; Radden & Kövecses, 1999).

Literature Review

Cognitive Semantics and Embodied Meaning

Cognitive semantics is a subfield of cognitive linguistics concerned with the relationship between language, meaning, and the cognitive structures through which human beings organize their experience of the world. Its foundational premise, developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and elaborated by Langacker (1987), Fillmore (1985), and Fauconnier and Turner (2002), is that linguistic meaning does not arise from a simple correspondence between language and objective reality. Rather, it emerges from the embodied interaction of cognitive agents with their physical and social environments.

A central concept within this framework is the image schema, defined by Johnson (1987) as a recurring dynamic pattern of sensorimotor experience that structures abstract cognition. Image schemas such as CONTAINMENT, SOURCE–PATH–GOAL, and BALANCE emerge from repeated bodily engagement with the environment and provide pre-conceptual scaffolding for higher-order cognitive processes, including language and reasoning.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Conceptual metaphor theory, as developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and extended by Kövecses (2002, 2010), holds that metaphor involves a systematic cross-domain cognitive mapping in which the conceptual structure of a source domain is projected onto a target domain, enabling the latter to be understood in terms of the former. The mapping is selective: only certain aspects of the source domain are projected, and these simultaneously highlight some features of the target domain while obscuring others.

Kövecses (2002) demonstrated that emotion concepts — inherently abstract and resistant to direct conceptualization — are systematically structured through metaphorical mappings from concrete physical and spatial source domains. Among the most pervasive emotion metaphors in English are LOVE IS A JOURNEY, SADNESS IS DARKNESS, and GRIEF IS A PHYSICAL BURDEN. These mappings are grounded in the physiological dimensions of emotional experience: the body's response to grief provides the experiential basis for the conceptual mapping from physical burden to emotional suffering.

Metonymy in Cognitive Semantics

Within cognitive semantics, metonymy is understood as a cognitive operation rather than a simple word substitution. Radden and Kövecses (1999) define metonymy as a process in which one conceptual entity (the vehicle) provides mental access to another entity (the target) within the same idealized cognitive model (ICM). This distinguishes metonymy from metaphor: whereas metaphor involves a cross-domain mapping, metonymy operates within a single conceptual domain. The metonymy HEART FOR EMOTION, for instance, uses the organ conventionally associated with emotional experience to provide access to the emotional state itself.

Prior Studies on Figurative Language in Song Lyrics

The linguistic analysis of song lyrics has attracted growing scholarly attention across disciplines. Steen et al. (2010) applied the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIPVU) to a corpus of popular songs and found that pop lyrics contain significantly higher densities of metaphorical language than ordinary conversational discourse, confirming the heightened figurative character of musical language. Stockwell (2002) demonstrated that the same cognitive mechanisms underlying everyday language also structure the aesthetic experience of literary and poetic texts.

Several recent studies have applied cognitive semantic frameworks to specific song lyrics. Yansyah, Arifin, and Setyowati (2022) analyzed figurative language in Ed Sheeran's Divide album and identified metaphor, simile, and hyperbole as the dominant devices. Rahmawati and Zakiyah (2021) examined conceptual metaphors in Indonesian pop songs produced during the COVID-19 pandemic and revealed how abstract social and emotional states are rendered through concrete physical and spatial mappings. Jannah and Istiqomah (2021) studied Kahitna's song lyrics and identified LOVE IS A JOURNEY and LIFE IS A BURDEN as the most frequently deployed schemas. These studies collectively confirm the productivity of cognitive semantic analysis for popular music discourse and provide the comparative foundation for the present study.

Definitions of Figurative Devices

For the purposes of this study, five principal types of figurative language are recognized. Metaphor refers to an implicit conceptual mapping between two domains in which the properties of the source domain structure understanding of the target domain (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Metonymy refers to a within-domain mapping in which one conceptual entity provides access to another within the same ICM (Radden & Kövecses, 1999). Simile is an explicit comparison between two entities using comparative markers such as like or as. Hyperbole is a deliberate overstatement of quantity, degree, or intensity for expressive effect (Claridge, 2011). Personification is the attribution of human qualities, actions, or intentions to non-human entities, realizing the conceptual metaphor NON-HUMAN ENTITY IS A PERSON (Kövecses, 2002).

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design. This design is appropriate for inquiry directed toward interpreting linguistic meaning within naturally occurring textual data rather than toward statistical generalization. As Creswell and Creswell (2018) observe, qualitative research is suited to investigations that seek to understand the meaning structures through which human agents make sense of their experience. The present study falls within this paradigm in that it aims to describe and interpret the cognitive structures underlying figurative expressions in a specific lyric text, without seeking statistically generalizable claims.

Data Source and Collection

The primary data source is the complete lyric text of "Someone Like You" by Adele Adkins and Dan Wilson, released on the album 21 (XL Recordings, 2011). The lyrics were retrieved from the officially published source and cross-verified against multiple authoritative lyric publications to ensure textual accuracy. The unit of analysis is the individual line, clause, or phrase that exhibits figurative character, considered both in isolation and within its immediate textual context.

Data collection proceeded through systematic reading and annotation of the complete lyric text. Each lexical unit was examined for potential figurative character using the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) as specified by the Pragglejaz Group (2007). The MIP requires the analyst to: (a) establish the contextual meaning of each lexical unit within the lyric; (b) determine whether the lexical unit has a more basic or concrete meaning in other contexts; and (c) assess whether the contextual meaning can be understood through comparison or contrast with that basic meaning.

Lexical units satisfying these criteria were flagged as metaphorically used. Non-metaphorical figurative devices — hyperbole, personification, and simile — were identified through analogous procedures based on the definitions in Section 2.5.

Data Analysis

Identified figurative expressions were analyzed across three stages. In the first stage, each expression was classified according to its figurative type. In the second stage, each metaphorical expression was analyzed in terms of the conceptual mapping it instantiates, identifying the source domain, target domain, and specific entailments projected from the former onto the latter. In the third stage, the underlying image schemas and conceptual structures were identified and interpreted in relation to Kövecses's (2002) emotion metaphor frameworks. Data validity was ensured through theoretical triangulation of the three principal frameworks and systematic cross-referencing of interpretive claims against established cognitive semantic literature.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of Figurative Devices

Systematic analysis of the complete lyrics of "Someone Like You" yielded 25 instances of figurative language distributed across five categories. The distribution is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of Figurative Devices in "Someone Like You" by Adele

Figurative Device	Instances	Percentage	Discussed in
Conceptual Metaphor	12	48%	Section 4.2
Hyperbole	5	20%	Section 4.4
Personification	4	16%	Section 4.5
Metonymy	3	12%	Section 4.3
Simile	1	4%	Section 4.6
Total	25	100%	—

Table 2. Selected Lyric Examples per Figurative Category

Category	Lyric Example	Conceptual Schema
Conceptual Metaphor	"I'll find someone like you"	LOVE IS A JOURNEY

Conceptual Metaphor	"I had to get it off my chest"	GRIEF IS A BURDEN
Conceptual Metaphor	"Don't forget me, I beg"	MEMORY IS A SPACE
Conceptual Metaphor	"Time stood still"	TIME IS A MOVING ENTITY
Hyperbole	"Nothing compares, no worries or cares"	Absolute negation
Personification	"Time stood still"	Time as animate agent
Metonymy	"Get it off my chest"	CHEST FOR EMOTION
Simile	"Someone like you"	Structural analogy

The data in Table 1 confirm that conceptual metaphor is the overwhelmingly dominant figurative device in the lyrics, accounting for nearly half of all instances. This is consistent with Steen et al.'s (2010) corpus-based finding that pop lyrics contain elevated metaphor densities relative to conversational discourse, and aligns with Kövecses's (2002) theoretical claim that abstract emotional experience is primarily conceptualized through metaphorical mappings. Table 2 provides selected lyric examples illustrating each category discussed in the sections that follow.

Conceptual Metaphor

LOVE IS A JOURNEY

The most pervasive conceptual metaphor in the lyrics is LOVE IS A JOURNEY, which maps the structural features of a physical journey — departure, travel, obstacles, destination, and separation — onto the abstract domain of romantic love. This schema is one of the most widely attested emotion metaphors across languages, reflecting the grounding of romantic relationships in the embodied experience of spatial movement toward a goal (Kövecses, 2002).

The lyric "I hate to turn up out of the blue uninvited" deploys this schema through the spatial language of physical arrival. The phrasal verb turn up encodes movement toward a location, while out of the blue implies unplanned and unannounced travel — an unscheduled arrival in the addressee's life. The SOURCE–PATH–GOAL image schema is operative: the speaker figures her emotional intrusion into the addressee's life as an unannounced physical journey. Similarly, "I'll find someone

like you" encodes a prospective journey toward an indeterminate future destination, figuring the pursuit of a new partner as a physical search through space.

GRIEF IS A PHYSICAL BURDEN

The second dominant conceptual metaphor is GRIEF IS A PHYSICAL BURDEN, through which emotional loss is mapped onto the sensation of carrying a heavy physical load. This metaphor belongs to the broader schema identified by Kövecses (2002) in which negative emotional states are conceptualized as downward physical pressure that the experiencer must bear or discharge.

The lyric "I had to get it off my chest" clearly instantiates this mapping. The expression projects the emotional experience of unspoken grief onto the physical sensation of a weight pressing on the thorax. Relief through verbal expression is figured as the literal removal of a physical burden from the body. The FORCE image schema is operative: grief exerts a compressive force that requires active effort to discharge.

MEMORY IS A PHYSICAL SPACE

The conceptual metaphor MEMORY IS A PHYSICAL SPACE conceptualizes memories as objects stored in a bounded spatial container. This metaphor activates the CONTAINMENT image schema: the mind is figured as a container, and memories are objects occupying its interior. Forgetting corresponds to the removal or loss of these objects from the container.

The line "Don't forget me, I beg" encodes this schema through its negative imperative construction. The verb forget implies the displacement of a mental object from its storage location. The speaker's plea is, in cognitive semantic terms, a request for the addressee to retain her as a mental object within his memory space — to prevent her displacement from the interior of his mind to the exterior, where she would no longer be accessible.

TIME IS A MOVING ENTITY

The conceptual metaphor TIME IS A MOVING ENTITY is activated in the lyric "Time stood still / The beauty of it all." The expression projects temporal passage onto the concrete domain of physical locomotion and its cessation. Moments of intense emotional significance are cognitively constructed as moments in which the movement of time is suspended — a subjective dilation of the present that reflects heightened attentional engagement. This metaphor is grounded in a cross-linguistic pattern of spatial metaphors for temporal conceptualization analyzed in detail by Boroditsky (2000) and Evans (2004).

Metonymy

Three instances of metonymy were identified, all involving body-part or part-for-whole relations within the ICM of the human person. The expression "I had to get it off my chest" operates metonymically as well as metaphorically: the chest, as the physical location of the heart, metonymically stands for the emotional interior of the person (CHEST FOR EMOTIONAL INTERIOR). Radden and Kövecses (1999) identify this type of metaphor-metonymy interaction as characteristic of complex figurative expressions in which both processes are simultaneously operative.

The line "Don't forget me, I beg" additionally operates as a part-for-whole metonymy at the discourse level: the single cognitive act of retaining a memory stands for the totality of ongoing relational significance and emotional presence. To be remembered is, metonymically, to continue to exist in a meaningful relational sense within the cognitive world of the addressee.

Hyperbole

Five instances of hyperbole were identified, all functioning to amplify the emotional magnitude of the speaker's experience. The expression "Nothing compares, no worries or cares" employs absolute hyperbole through the totalizing negation nothing, encoding the subjective perception of irreplaceable loss. This absolutism is characteristic of grief discourse, in which the lost object is often perceived as incomparable — a perception associated with the attentional narrowing that accompanies acute bereavement (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008).

The expression "Who would have known how bittersweet this would taste?" deploys synesthetic hyperbole by applying a gustatory quality (taste) to an abstract emotional retrospection. The synesthetic transfer — describing experience in one sensory modality in terms of another — intensifies the vividness and embodied immediacy of the emotional recall, making the abstract experience of bittersweet retrospection perceptually concrete for the listener.

Personification

Four instances of personification were identified, all attributing human or animate properties to abstract entities. The expression "Time stood still" personifies time as a physical being capable of locomotion and its voluntary suspension. This is interwoven with the conceptual metaphor TIME IS A MOVING ENTITY discussed in Section 4.2.4: the metaphor provides the abstract structure, while personification adds intentionality — suggesting that time itself chose to pause in recognition of the emotional significance of the moment.

The phrase "The beauty of it all" personifies beauty as an active presence — an entity that inhabits and animates the remembered experience rather than a quality passively attributed to it. This personification elevates beauty from a predicated property to a participant in the experiential scene, consistent with the cognitive poetic observation that personification transforms abstract qualities into agents within imagined experiential scenarios (Stockwell, 2002).

Simile

One explicit simile is present in the lyrics: the titular phrase "someone like you." Despite its structural simplicity, this expression is conceptually rich. The comparative construction like you frames the imagined future partner not as identical to the addressee but as structurally analogous — similar enough in relevant respects to fulfill the emotional role once occupied by the addressee, yet definitionally different.

This simile encodes what Fauconnier and Turner (2002) would identify as a conceptual blending operation, in which the mental space of the imagined future partner is structured by inputs drawn from the mental space of the original beloved. The blended space contains both sameness and difference, capturing the song's central emotional tension: the desire to replicate an irreplaceable experience in an inherently non-identical form. The recurrence of this simile throughout the song — most prominently in the chorus — foregrounds this cognitive and emotional tension as the song's defining thematic preoccupation.

CONCLUSION

This study has systematically analyzed the figurative meaning of Adele's "Someone Like You" through the theoretical apparatus of cognitive semantics, in direct response to the two research objectives stated in the introduction. Regarding the first objective, the analysis identified 25 figurative expressions distributed across five categories: conceptual metaphor (12 instances, 48%), hyperbole (5, 20%), personification (4, 16%), metonymy (3, 12%), and simile (1, 4%). Regarding the second objective, four principal conceptual schemas were shown to structure the emotional landscape of the lyrics: LOVE IS A JOURNEY, GRIEF IS A PHYSICAL BURDEN, MEMORY IS A PHYSICAL SPACE, and TIME IS A MOVING ENTITY. These schemas reflect deeply embodied cognitive structures documented across languages and cultures, confirming the universality of the mechanisms through which human beings conceptualize emotional experience.

The findings make three principal contributions. First, they provide empirical evidence for the systematic figurative complexity of pop song lyrics as a genre, supporting the view that popular music

is a legitimate and productive object of linguistic inquiry. Second, they demonstrate the interpretive value of cognitive semantic frameworks — specifically conceptual metaphor theory, emotion metaphor theory, and metonymy theory — when applied to musical discourse. Third, they identify a specific pattern of emotion conceptualization in "Someone Like You" that illuminates the phenomenology of romantic grief and loss as both culturally constructed and cognitively organized.

This study has certain limitations. It focuses on a single song and relies exclusively on English-language theoretical frameworks. Future research might extend the analysis to a broader corpus of Adele's discography, examine how figurative structures interact with musical features such as melody and rhythm, or conduct cross-linguistic comparisons of the song's translated versions to investigate how figurative meaning is preserved or transformed across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Such directions would further consolidate the emerging field of cognitive approaches to popular musical discourse.

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