Expressing Emotion: The Figurative Language in Olivia Rodrigo's Songs

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the use of figurative language in Olivia Rodrigo's song lyrics as a means of expressing emotion. Using a qualitative approach with a document analysis method, the researcher examines the types of figurative language found in three of Rodrigo's popular songs: Driver License, Enough for You, and Happier. The analysis reveals five main types of figurative language used: metaphor, imagery, simile, hyperbole, and symbolism. Each of these elements enhances the emotional depth and appeal of the lyrics, creating a strong connection between the singer and the audience. These songs reflect universal emotional experiences such as love, heartbreak, and self-discovery, which are especially relevant to the younger generation. The findings of this study demonstrate that figurative language not only enriches the lyrical aesthetic but also plays a crucial role in building emotional resonance and the cultural appeal of popular music.m.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Language serves as a fundamental mechanism for expressing human emotions and experiences, particularly within the realms of literature and music. It forms the crucial medium of communication that significantly shapes human interaction and understanding. Figurative language, as a pivotal component of creative writing, enriches texts by using non-literal expressions that ignite the imagination and evoke emotional responses from audiences. According to Vinanda Yusnitasari et al. (2022), figurative language transcends literal meanings, opening dimensions of interpretation that deepen the aesthetic and emotional value of a text.

Music, especially popular music, relies heavily on figurative language to communicate complex emotions and personal experiences in a relatable and impactful manner (Ibrahim et al., 2019). The strategic use of literary devices enables songwriters to transcend simple narratives and evoke vivid images and feelings. In this context, Olivia Rodrigo's work stands out as an example wherein figurative language plays an essential role in crafting lyrics that resonate globally. Her breakout hit "Driver's License" showcases meaningful lyrics, primarily composed of metaphorical language that contributes significantly to its widespread popularity and emotional connection with listeners.

The song delves into themes such as love, heartbreak, and yearning, deploying an array of literary figures such as metaphor, simile, imagery, hyperbole, and symbolism. These devices are instrumental in vividly illustrating emotional states and experiences. Previous studies in similar contexts, such as those by Dewi et al. (2020), have identified hyperbole and repetition as predominant features in popular music lyrics, intensifying the emotional depth and memorability of songs. For instance, metaphors like driving symbolize personal growth and

progression, whereas imagery such as "red lights, stop signs" conjure concrete memories, thereby allowing listeners to share the songwriter's emotional landscape. Hyperbole in expressions like "I've never felt this way for no one" underscores the uniqueness and intensity of the speaker's feelings.

Given the profound success and emotional impact of Rodrigo's music, a scholarly investigation into the usage of figurative language in her songs is both timely and pertinent. This study aims to systematically identify and analyze the types of figurative language she employs and elucidate how these contribute to the songs' emotional resonance and cultural relevance.

1.1   Background of Figurative Language in Music

Figurative language is a cornerstone in artistic expression, particularly within music, where it enhances the communicative power of song lyrics by allowing artists to present emotions and ideas beyond the literal plane (Vinanda Yusnitasari et al., 2022). As popular music predominantly serves an emotional and social function, language that can deepen the listener's engagement becomes vital. Dewi et al. (2020) emphasize that hyperbole is widely used in song lyrics to amplify emotional intensity, thus reinforcing the listener's experiential connection. Similarly, Alek et al. (2020) have found that repetition fosters memorability and strengthens thematic emphasis.

Metaphors enable songwriters to convey abstract concepts and inner emotions through relatable images, while similes clarify ideas by drawing explicit comparisons, helping listeners to grasp nuanced feelings (Ortony, 2016). Empirical research by Ibrahim et al. (2019) shows that metaphoric language enhances songwriter-audience connection by evoking personal memories and shared experiences, making the emotional content accessible and engaging. In Olivia Rodrigo's case, these approaches allow her to articulate adolescent emotional complexity with sophistication, contributing to her appeal within younger demographics (Megazain et al., 2022).

Despite a growing body of research on figurative language in music, comprehensive studies focusing explicitly on Olivia Rodrigo's songwriting remain relatively sparse. This study aims to address this gap by providing a detailed qualitative analysis of her use of metaphor, simile, imagery, hyperbole, and symbolism, and by exploring their functional role in shaping listeners' emotional responses.

1.2   Research Questions and Objectives

This study is guided by the following research questions:
1.   What types of figurative language predominantly appear in the lyrics of Olivia Rodrigo's songs?
2.   What meanings do each of these types of figurative language convey within her songs?

The objectives of this research are:
1.   To identify the various forms of figurative language present in Olivia Rodrigo's song lyrics.
2.   To investigate how these literary devices are employed to express themes of love, heartbreak, and self-discovery.
3.   To analyze the role of figurative language in enhancing the emotive appeal of her songs.
4.   To evaluate the contribution of figurative language to the cultural significance and popularity of Rodrigo's music, particularly among youth.

2.   FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS
2.1   Types of Figurative Language in Olivia Rodrigo's Songs

The analysis reveals five primary types of figurative language across three songs—"Driver's License," "Enough for You," and "Happier"

● Metaphor : Used extensively to symbolize abstract emotional states and life transitions. For example, the "driver's license" metaphor portrays independence and the passage into adulthood, simultaneously encapsulating the bittersweet experience of moving on after heartbreak.

● Imagery : Vivid sensory descriptions such as "red lights, stop signs" create concrete mental pictures that evoke setting and mood, enriching the emotional ambiance of the lyrics.

● Simile : Functions as a direct comparison, clarifying feelings and relationships. "She's so much older than me" conveys the speaker's sense of insecurity and perceived inadequacy in relation to a romantic rival.

● Hyperbole: Dramatic exaggeration emphasizes emotional depth, as in "I've never felt this way for no one," underscoring the unparalleled intensity of the speaker's feelings.

● Symbolism : Reflects deeper meanings beneath surface expressions, such as "forever" standing for broken promises and shattered expectations of lasting love.

Tables summarizing figurative language examples highlight key lyric excerpts corresponding with each literary device, aiding in classification and analysis of their contribution to storytelling and emotional effect.

2.2　　　Detailed Meaning and Functions of Figurative Language Types

● In "Driver's License", the metaphor of the driver's license reflects liberation coupled with loneliness inherent in personal growth and separation. Imagery like "red lights, stop signs" triggers recollection of past relationship moments, mediating emotional nostalgia. The simile comparing the speaker to an older rival reveals vulnerability. Hyperbole magnifies emotional uniqueness, while symbolism exposes the contrast between hopeful promises and stark reality.

● In "Enough for You", metaphorical references to makeup indicate efforts to alter self-image for acceptance, while imagery captures intimate knowledge of a partner, reinforcing emotional closeness. Similes compare the speaker unfavorably to stereotypical ideals, exposing feelings of alienation. Hyperbole dramatizes sudden abandonment, and symbolism of "self-help books" reveals a quest for self-betterment motivated by romantic yearning.

● "Happier" employs metaphor to describe shared social networks and lingering emotional bonds, whereas imagery portrays jealousy and pain. Similes express the futility of disparagement to influence feelings. Hyperbole presents conflicted wishes for an ex's happiness diminished relative to past intimacy. Symbolism critiques insincere romantic declarations, reflecting disenchantment.

2.2　　　Discussion

Olivia Rodrigo's use of figurative language exemplifies a sophisticated artistic approach that heightens emotional resonance and narrative complexity within her lyrics. The interplay of metaphors, similes, imagery, hyperbole, and symbolism constructs multilayered storytelling that resonates universally across listeners' experiences of love, heartbreak, and identity formation.

This study underscores how figurative devices allow songwriters to engage audiences beyond surface-level interpretation, fostering empathy and connection. Rodrigo's success illustrates the enduring power of well-crafted language to articulate the subtleties of human emotion, reinforcing music's role as a profound communicative medium in contemporary popular culture.

3.　　RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative research method with a document analysis approach to deeply examine the figurative language in the lyrics of Olivia Rodrigo's songs. The qualitative method suits the research objective of exploring meanings, functions, and emotional effects of figurative language, aiming to understand how these literary devices contribute to the songs' emotional resonance and aesthetic impact.

3.1　　Research Method

The qualitative approach enables an in-depth investigation of language phenomena that are complex and nuanced. Document analysis is employed as the primary technique for systematically describing and interpreting the selected song lyrics as textual data. This method facilitates thorough examination without the need for direct interaction with subjects, focusing instead on available written materials (the lyrics) to draw meaningful conclusions.

3.2　　Data Sources

The primary data consist of the official lyrics from Olivia Rodrigo's songs, particularly "Driver's License," "Enough for You," and "Happier." These lyrics are sourced from verified platforms such as Genius and AZ Lyrics to ensure accuracy. Supplementary secondary data include interviews with the artist, music reviews, and media articles. These additional materials provide context and enrich the analysis by offering insights into the intended meanings and emotional nuances of the figurative language used.

3.3　　Data Collection

Data collection follows the documentation technique, wherein song lyrics are gathered methodically and organized for analysis. The lyrics are repeatedly read to gain a comprehensive understanding of the themes, emotions, and messages conveyed. Supplementary secondary sources are also collated to enhance interpretation and support findings.

3.4　　 Data Analysis

The study applies a content analysis method as outlined by Kleinheksel et al. (2020), focusing on identifying and interpreting the smallest meaningful components in the text that convey the central concepts. The analysis proceeds through systematic steps:

1. Comprehensive Reading: Each song's lyrics are read multiple times to ensure full comprehension of content and context.
2. Figurative Language Identification: Instances of figurative language are detected, including metaphors, similes, imagery, hyperbole, and symbolism.
3. Classification:I dentified figurative language elements are categorized according to Leech's (1981) framework or equivalent literary theories.
4. Meaning Analysis: The meanings and emotional contributions of each type of figurative language are interpreted to ascertain how they express themes such as love, heartbreak, and longing.
5. Relationship to Emotional Impact: The connection between use of figurative language and emotional resonance with listeners is evaluated, considering factors influencing the song's popularity.
6. Contextual Interpretation: Findings are discussed within the broader cultural context, particularly regarding their significance and appeal to younger audiences.

To aid systematic analysis, tables were designed to catalog various figurative language examples extracted from the lyrics, clearly marking which devices are present in respective lines or phrases. This structured approach enables pattern identification and offers insights into how figurative language informs emotional expression and artistic depth in Olivia Rodrigo's songwriting

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