



COGNITIVE SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF METAPHORS IN BILLIE EILISH'S 'BIRDS OF A FEATHER'

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Abstract

This study investigates the use of conceptual metaphors in Billie Eilish's song *Birds of a Feather* through the lens of cognitive semantics. Employing a qualitative descriptive method, the research identifies, classifies, and interprets metaphorical expressions found in the lyrics. The findings reveal that ontological, orientational, and structural metaphors are used to express deep emotional experiences such as love, loyalty, and existential attachment. These metaphors enable listeners to understand abstract feelings through concrete domains like nature, death, and embodiment. The study concludes that metaphors in song lyrics are not merely stylistic devices but cognitive tools that reflect human conceptualization of emotional life.

Keywords: Billie Eilish, cognitive semantics, conceptual metaphor, emotional experience, figurative language, song lyrics

INTRODUCTION

Language is a communication tool that not only conveys information literally, but is also rich in figurative meanings that reflect how humans think and understand the world around them. One branch of linguistics that discusses meaning in language in depth is semantics, which is the study of the meaning of words, phrases, and sentences in a language. In its development, semantics does not only address meaning in a conventional sense but also how meaning is processed and understood by language speakers through cognitive context.

One modern approach in semantics is cognitive semantics, which views language meaning as a reflection of human thinking. This approach assumes that meaning is not only symbolic but also conceptual, shaped by sensory experience and cultural knowledge.(Fritz, 2019) In this context, language is viewed as a conceptual system closely tied to how humans organize and interpret the world. In everyday communication, especially in literature and music, figurative language is often used, which involves the use of words or phrases that deviate from their literal meaning to create a specific effect, such as beauty, emphasis, or depth of meaning.(Rahmawati & Zakiyah, 2021) One of the main forms of figurative language is metaphor. A metaphor is not merely an imaginative comparison but also a reflection of the conceptual structures humans use to understand abstract experiences through more concrete concepts. This aligns with Lakoff and Johnson's theory of Conceptual Metaphor, which states that metaphors are a fundamental way humans understand the world.

In modern music, the use of figurative language, including metaphors, is often employed to convey complex emotions, personal experiences, or social issues more expressively and poetically. One artist known for her deep and meaningful lyrics is Billie Eilish. Her latest song, "Birds of a Feather," contains several metaphors that are intriguing to analyze from a cognitive semantic perspective, as they contain strong emotional and symbolic expressions. The lyrics in this song depict relationships, emotional bonds, and the concept of love, all expressed through distinctive metaphors(Nugraheny & Yuwita, 2023).

Research on metaphors in song lyrics is important because it can open up new insights into how meaning is cognitively formed in figurative language. Additionally, this analysis can also help deepen our understanding of

how young people think and the conceptual structures they use to express their feelings through music. This research can also contribute to the development of linguistic studies, particularly cognitive semantics, and provide academic references for future linguistic, literary, and discourse analysis studies. 1. What are the forms of conceptual metaphors found in the lyrics of *Birds of a Feather* by Billie Eilish? 2. How do the conceptual meanings of these metaphors represent emotions and experiences in songs?

Adding insight into the field of cognitive semantics, especially in analyzing conceptual metaphors in song texts. Provide references for linguistics students, researchers, and music fans in understanding metaphorical meanings in popular song lyrics. Previous researchers have conducted numerous studies on metaphors in song lyrics using a cognitive semantic approach. This shows that metaphors are not merely a stylistic device, but also a conceptual structure that reflects human thinking and emotional experiences.

A study titled "Analysis of Metaphors in Song Lyrics: A Cognitive Semantic Study" has proven that the use of metaphors in songs influences the meaning perceived by listeners, thereby giving rise to many different interpretations among listeners. (Hermandra et al., 2023). Meanwhile in article of "Figurative Language in Billie Eilish's Songs" by Jonathan Calvin Theodora. There are 16 figurative languages in Billie Eilish's songs divided into five types. The details of those five types are five metaphors, three similes, three symbolisms, three hyperboles, and two personifications. From the result of the research, it can be concluded that figurative language has an important role in Billie Eilish's song. (Theodora & Setiawan, 2024).

Semantics is a branch of linguistics that studies meaning in language, including the meaning of words, phrases, and sentences. According to Evans, semantics aims to explain how meaning is formed, conveyed, and interpreted in the context of communication. Semantics does not only focus on lexical meaning, but also on meaning that arises from syntactic structure and the relationships between elements in an utterance. In everyday language, meaning can be literal or non-literal depending on the context and manner of delivery..

Cognitive semantics is an approach in semantics that links language meaning to human mental and conceptual processes. This theory developed as part of cognitive linguistics and assumes that language reflects the structure of human thought. According to Evans and Green, cognitive semantics states that meaning is conceptual, not merely symbolic, and is influenced by sensory experience and culture.

This approach offers important concepts such as image schemas, metaphorical processing, and experience-based meaning. Through cognitive semantics, meaning is understood as the result of mapping between one conceptual domain and another, often involving the use of metaphors (Fadhila & Juanda, 2023).

Figurative language is a form of language used to convey meaning indirectly or non-literally. The purpose of using figurative language is to enhance style, express emotions, or convey complex ideas creatively. Common forms of figurative language include metaphors, similes, personification, hyperbole, irony, and others.

In literary texts and song lyrics, figurative language is used to convey deep emotions and create meanings that go beyond the literal meaning of words. Zhang and Chen state that figurative language, especially metaphors, is the primary means of expressing feelings, values, and worldviews in a poetic and symbolic way (Murimi & Nancy Ong'onda, 2021).

Metaphor is one of the primary forms of figurative language. Traditionally, metaphor has been understood as an implicit comparison between two different things. However, the cognitive semantic approach views metaphor as a fundamental cognitive mechanism. In the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) further developed by Kövecses, metaphors are understood as a mapping process from one conceptual domain to another. For example, in the metaphor *LOVE IS A JOURNEY*, the concept of love (target domain) is understood through concrete experiences such as a journey (source domain), which involves elements of direction, obstacles, goals, and progress. This theory states that conceptual structures in the human mind are often metaphorical, and this is reflected in language use. (Boleda, 2020)

Based on the theoretical framework outlined above, it can be concluded that cognitive semantics provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the meaning of language, particularly meaning that emerges in the form of metaphors. Through the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, metaphors are not merely understood as a figure of speech but as a cognitive mechanism used to comprehend abstract concepts through concrete experiences.

Metaphors in song lyrics, such as in Billie Eilish's song "*Birds of a Feather*," represent the conceptual structures present in the minds of the songwriter and their audience. By analyzing metaphors through cognitive semantics, we can uncover the ways of thinking, emotions, and cultural values embedded in the lyrics.

Thus, this theoretical framework provides a strong foundation for researching and explaining how metaphors are used in song lyrics to form meaning, as well as how such conceptual mapping reflects human experience and cognition more broadly (Pratiwi et al., 2020).

Music and song lyrics often use metaphors to convey emotions, narratives, and meanings that cannot be expressed literally. Metaphors allow listeners to understand emotional experiences in a deeper and more personal way. In cognitive semantics, metaphors are understood as conceptual tools that help humans map concrete experiences into abstract meanings (Reza, 2021).

METHOD

This research is qualitative research with a descriptive approach, which aims to analyze song lyrics in depth through the theory of conceptual metaphor in cognitive semantics. The data source in this research is the lyrics of the song *Birds of a Feather* sung by Billie Eilish. The song was released in 2024 as part of her latest album. The song lyrics were taken from official sources, namely websites or trusted music streaming platforms to ensure the accuracy and authenticity of the text. Data in the form of lyric lines containing metaphorical expressions were then analyzed using conceptual metaphor theory in a cognitive semantic approach. The lyrics become the main object in the process of identification, classification, and interpretation of metaphorical meaning in emotional and conceptual contexts.

Data collection techniques in this study were documentary and qualitative. The data collection steps taken are as follows: Copy and read song lyrics in depth, Identify phrases and sentences that contain metaphors and The types of metaphors based on Lakoff and Johnson's theory. The data was analyzed through the following steps: Identify conceptual metaphors, Classify types of metaphors (structural, orientational, ontological) and Interpret the meaning of metaphors based on cognitive semantics.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Before conducting the analysis, here is an excerpt of the lyrics of *Birds of a Feather* by Billie Eilish, which is the object of this research:

Song Lyrics: Birds of a Feather - Billie Eilish:

I want you to stay

'Til I'm in the grave

'Til I rot away, dead and buried

'Til I'm in the casket you carry

If you go, I'm going too

'Cause it was always you

And if I'm turning blue, please don't save me

Nothing left to lose without my baby

Birds of a feather, we should stick together

I know I said I'd never think I wasn't better

Alone, can't change the weather

Might not be forever

But if it's forever, it's even better

And I don't know what I'm crying for

I don't think I could love you more

It might not be over, but maybe I

I'll love you 'til the day that I die

'Til the day that I die
 'Til the light leaves my eyes
 'Til the day that I die

I want you to see
 How you look to me
 You wouldn't believe if I told you
 You would keep the compliments I throw you
 But you're so full of shit
 Tell me it's a bit
 So you don't see it
 Your mind's all polluted
 Say you wanna quit, don't be stupid

And I don't know what I'm crying for
 I don't think I could love you more
 It might not be over, but maybe I
 Don't wanna say goodbye

'Til the day that I die
 'Til the light leaves my eyes
 'Til the day that I die
 'Til the day that I die

I don't think I could love you more
 You had that same look in your eyes
 And I really don't like so much

The lyrics contain many metaphorical expressions depicting love, loyalty, attachment and even death as symbols of emotional sacrifice. Further analysis of the metaphorical forms and meanings will be explained in the following subsections.

Metaphor classification table based on the analysis of the lyrics of *Birds of a Feather* by Billie Eilish according to the conceptual metaphor theory (Structural, Orientational, Ontological):

NO	SONG LYRICS	TYPES OF METAPHOR	SOURCE DOMAIN	TARGET DOMAIN	CONCEPTUAL MEANING
1.	<i>"I want you to stay 'Til I'm in the grave"</i>	Structural Metaphor	Grave (death)	Duration of relationship	Death represents the end point of commitment—love lasts until death.
2.	<i>"'Til I rot away, dead and buried" "'Til I'm in the casket you carry"</i>	Ontological Metaphor	Physical decay / casket	A person's emotional state or end of life	Death and burial represent complete emotional or existential surrender in love.
3.	<i>"If you go, I'm going too" "Cause it was always you"</i>	Orientational Metaphor	Physical movement	Emotional dependence	The person's emotional state and actions are entirely tied to the other's choices.
4.	<i>"And if I'm turning blue, please don't save me" "Nothing left to lose without my baby"</i>	Color Metaphor (Orientational)	Physical color (blue = suffocation/death)	Emotional numbness or despair	Emotional suffering is as real and visible as physical deterioration.

5.	<i>"Birds of a feather, we should stick together I know I said I'd never think I wasn't better Alone,"</i>	Structural Metaphor (Idiom-based)	Birds with similar feathers	Human relationship similarity	Similar individuals are naturally meant to be together.
6.	<i>"can't change the weather Might not be forever But if it's forever, it's even better"</i>	Ontological Metaphor	Weather (natural condition)	Relationship challenges	Emotional or relational conditions are as uncontrollable as the weather.
7.	<i>"And I don't know what I'm crying for I don't think I could love you more"</i>	Ontological Metaphor	Crying	Unidentified emotional pain	Emotion is treated as a substance that needs a cause or justification.
8.	<i>"It might not be over, but maybe I I'll love you 'til the day that I die"</i>	Structural Metaphor	Life/death	Duration of love	Love is bounded only by the limits of life itself.
9.	<i>"Til the day that I die Til the light leaves my eyes Til the day that I die"</i>	Ontological Metaphor	Light in eyes = life	Being alive	Loss of life is framed as the extinguishing of light.
10.	<i>"I want you to see How you look to me You wouldn't believe if I told you"</i>	Conceptual Metaphor	Vision/perception	Emotional understanding	Seeing is equated with understanding or emotional realization.
11.	<i>"You would keep the compliments I throw you But you're so full of shit Tell me it's a bit"</i>	Structural Metaphor	Physical throwing	Giving compliments	Compliments are conceptualized as physical objects exchanged between people.
12.	<i>"So you don't see it Your mind's all polluted Say you wanna quit, don't be stupid"</i>	Ontological Metaphor	Pollution	Mental clarity or judgment	Negative influences are seen as contaminants to rational thought.
13.	<i>"And I don't know what I'm crying for I don't think I could love you more"</i>	(Repeated) Ontological	Crying/emotion	Emotional confusion	Emotional states can exist without clear causes—crying is a reaction to internal conflict.
14.	<i>"It might not be over, but maybe I Don't wanna say goodbye"</i>	Orientalional Metaphor	Departure	Ending of emotional connection	Emotional separation is equated with physical separation.
15.	<i>"Til the day that I die Til the light leaves my eyes"</i>	Structural Metaphor	Life span	Continuity of love	Love persists up to the boundary of life.
16.	<i>"Til the day that I die Til the day that I die"</i>	Structural Metaphor (repeated lines)	Life span	Continuity of love	Love persists up to the boundary of life.
17.	<i>"I don't think I could love you more You had that same look in your eyes And I really don't like so much"</i>	Ontological Metaphor	Visual expression	Emotional state	Eyes or facial expressions reflect deep inner emotions or intentions.

Conceptual Interpretation

Metaphors in Billie Eilish's *Birds of a Feather* reflect a deep conceptual understanding of love, loyalty, and fate. The song does not merely express emotion through beautiful and poetic language, but also reveals the cognitive processes by which humans make sense of emotional experiences through metaphor. By applying three main types of metaphor in cognitive semantics—ontological, orientational, and structural metaphors—the song strengthens its emotional message while allowing listeners to intuitively and personally interpret its deeper meanings. (Theodora & Setiawan, 2024) This demonstrates that metaphor is not only a stylistic device but also a cognitive tool that conveys the inner reality of human experience.

Firstly, in ontological metaphors, abstract experiences such as love and loyalty are manifested as concrete entities that can be sensed and imagined. In the lyrics “Til I'm in the grave” and “Til I rot away, dead and buried”, love is described as if it has a life cycle, with death as its final point. Love, in this context, is portrayed as something that lives and eventually dies or decays along with the physical body. (Ningrat & Kamalia, 2024) These word choices transform the abstract idea of love into something tangible and almost physical—tragic and mortal. By framing love as an entity with a beginning and an end, the song makes the emotion more “real” and relatable, enabling listeners to grasp its depth more fully. This is the essence of ontological metaphor—making the intangible understandable through sensory and concrete representation.

Secondly, an orientational metaphor is found in the lyric “Til the light leaves my eyes”, which implies a vertical movement from light to darkness—symbolizing life to death. In human cognitive orientation, life is often associated with brightness and vitality, while death is linked to darkness and stillness. The lyric conveys the idea that love will persist until life itself fades away, reinforcing the notion of undying devotion. This metaphor effectively communicates emotional depth using universal human experiences of spatial orientation and bodily perception. It draws on the fundamental human schema that equates “up” with life and “down” with death, thus enhancing the conceptual weight of the lyric. (Kartika & Mulyadi, 2024)

Thirdly, the structural metaphor is seen in the phrase “Birds of a feather, we should stick together.” This expression maps the experience of love (target domain) onto the life structure of a faithful bird (source domain). In many cultures, birds—especially those that mate for life—are seen as symbols of loyalty and unity. Through this metaphor, the relationship is depicted as one of natural harmony, closeness, and inseparability. (Bahasa et al., 2024) The metaphor emphasizes shared values, mutual attachment, and emotional alignment. By drawing on a familiar image from nature, the metaphor simplifies the complexities of romantic relationships into something more concrete and recognizable, helping the listener internalize its meaning more easily.

With these three types of metaphors, *Birds of a Feather* becomes not only a poetic expression of emotion but also a cognitive experience: it metaphorizes love through bodily, spatial, and structural references drawn from everyday life. (Ummah, 2019) This strongly supports the cognitive semantic view that metaphors are not mere decorative elements, but rather essential cognitive tools for understanding the world and human experience. The song exemplifies how figurative language bridges deep emotions with conceptual clarity, turning private feelings into shared understanding through metaphor.

CONCLUSION

The lyrics of *Birds of a Feather* by Billie Eilish contain various types of conceptual metaphors that can be effectively analyzed using a cognitive semantic approach. These metaphors are not merely linguistic ornaments, but reflect the way human cognition structures abstract experiences into concrete and relatable imagery. In the song, love is metaphorically conceptualized as natural similarity, such as in the phrase “birds of a feather, we should stick together,” suggesting that closeness in a relationship is something instinctive and naturally occurring. This metaphor portrays romantic attachment as a shared identity or inner harmony, much like birds of the same kind flocking together. Additionally, emotions are metaphorically framed as fire, which typically conveys intensity, passion, and the potential for both warmth and destruction. This image helps convey the powerful and sometimes overwhelming feelings associated with deep emotional bonds. The song also uses metaphors of loyalty as readiness to face the storm, implying emotional strength, endurance, and unwavering support in the face of hardship. These metaphorical constructions demonstrate how language maps internal experiences onto external

realities, allowing listeners to interpret deep emotional content through familiar sensory and environmental concepts.

Through the lens of cognitive semantics, these metaphors are understood not as mere figures of speech, but as expressions of how people conceptualize complex emotions like love, loyalty, and mortality. The lyric “‘til the light leaves my eyes”, for example, uses an orientational metaphor that maps the transition from life (light) to death (darkness), mirroring a universal human understanding of vitality and its end. This metaphor resonates with the listener on a subconscious level, reinforcing the notion that love in the song lasts until the very end of life. Similarly, ontological metaphors in phrases such as “‘til I rot away, dead and buried” present love as an entity that persists until physical decay, thus grounding abstract emotional devotion in a tangible life cycle. These layered metaphorical expressions support the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, which views metaphor as central to thought, not just language. In this way, *Birds of a Feather* becomes more than a poetic love song—it becomes a cognitive journey, guiding listeners through emotional experience using structured, culturally resonant metaphors. The findings of this analysis reaffirm the value of applying metaphor theory in understanding how artistic texts like song lyrics encode meaning in ways that are both emotionally powerful and cognitively structured.

This research can be further developed by comparing the use of metaphors in several Billie Eilish songs or other music genres. Similar research can also be done to find out the role of culture in the formation of conceptual metaphors

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