An Analysis Of Figurative Language Used In Bruno Mars' Songs

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Abstract

This study investigates the use of figurative language in Bruno Mars' song lyrics, focusing on how various figurative expressions enhance emotional depth and convey meaning in his works. Guided by Knickerbocker and Reninger's framework, this study uses a qualitative descriptive approach supported by content analysis to identify, classify, and interpret figurative expressions in four Bruno Mars albums: Doo-Wops and Hooligans, Unorthodox Jukebox, 24K Magic, and An Evening with Silk Sonic. The analysis is conducted in four systematic stages: identification, categorization, interpretation, and contextual analysis of the figurative language found in the lyrics. This study is motivated by the growing recognition that song lyrics, particularly in popular music, function as a form of poetic and cultural expression. Bruno Mars was chosen as the focus of the analysis because of his global influence, genre diversity, and the sophistication of his lyrics, which often involve the creative use of figurative language to express universal human experiences such as love, heartbreak, ambition, and joy. The four albums were chosen to explore how the diversity of figurative language reflects his artistic evolution and emotional range throughout his career. The findings reveal eight distinct types of figurative language, with metaphor and hyperbole being the most dominant. These devices serve to intensify emotions, create vivid imagery, and accentuate expressive nuances in his songwriting, while personification, simile, irony, and symbolism add depth and aesthetic variety. The figurative language in Bruno Mars' lyrics serves as an artistic and communicative device that bridges literal meaning and emotional resonance. This study is expected to contribute to the fields of linguistics and stylistics by demonstrating how popular music integrates creative language to express complex emotions and cultural meanings. It also provides a methodological model for analyzing figurative language in various musical works. Furthermore, this research offers pedagogical value for non-native English speakers, helping them interpret English song lyrics more accurately and appreciate their figurative meanings, thereby preventing misinterpretation and enriching linguistic competence and cultural understanding.

Keywords: Figurative Language, Bruno Mars, Song Lyrics, Meaning.

INTRODUCTION

Language is not only a means of communication but also a medium through which human emotions, thoughts, and experiences are expressed artistically. According to Brown (2007), language is a scientific tool commonly used for communication through words or gestures to convey ideas or emotions. Language and thought are closely intertwined, mutually influencing and shaping each other (Haque, 2019). Within literature and music, language takes on an aesthetic and symbolic role that transcends literal interpretation. In song lyrics, figurative language plays a crucial role in transforming ordinary expressions into creative and emotional artistry. Figures of speech such as metaphors, similes, personifications,

and hyperboles enable lyricists to illustrate ideas vividly, evoke emotions, and communicate meanings that deeply resonate with listeners (Nuriadi, 2016). Unlike literal meaning, figurative language involves the use of figures of speech to express deeper meanings (Younas et al., 2024). Understanding figurative language in songs is essential for exploring how artists communicate complex human feelings through linguistic creativity (Ramadhani et al., 2024).

Music, as one of the most universal and influential art forms, reflects not only emotions but also cultural and social realities. It may serve as an effective mode of emotional communication and coordination, playing a central role in social interaction (Rabinowitch, T.-C., 2020). Song lyrics form a literary genre through which songwriters express and convey their feelings, emotions, ideas, and creativity (Subhan & Funck, 2019). These lyrics can be regarded as poetic works containing heartfelt expressions that facilitate interaction between the writer and the listeners, often carrying messages meant to motivate or provoke thought (Dallin, 1994). Songwriters employ various language techniques, whether stylistic choices, vocal delivery, or word variations, supported by melody and musical notation to invite listeners to engage deeply with the songwriter's thoughts (Lestari et al., 2021). According to Perrine (1969), figurative language involves any technique used to convey meaning in a non-literal way. Song lyrics inherently employ figurative language, layering multiple meanings that allow listeners to experience emotions and imagery beyond direct expression. Songwriters, influenced by their life experiences and social environments, craft lyrics to express creativity and emotion (Dewi, W.S. et al., 2025). Figurative language can improve the ability to understand the meaning of phrases or sentences. Figurative language is language that uses figures of speech to be more effective, persuasive, and impactful, according to John Peck and Martin Coyle (2002). Besides that, the use of figurative language enhances emotional resonance while adding aesthetic and semantic value to the lyrics (Mulyarti, 2014).

Among many contemporary musicians, Bruno Mars stands out as one of the most successful figures. Renowned for his vocal talent, songwriting, and versatility, he has won 16 Grammy Awards, including three Records of the Year and two Songs of the Year, making him one of the most awarded artists in Grammy history, His album 24K Magic received the Album of the Year award and several other Grammys, cementing his status as a leading global Madden, S. (2018).). Bruno Mars' work is known for blending genres such as pop, soul, funk, and R&B, while maintaining lyrical depth and emotional honesty. His songs frequently feature figurative language to explore universal themes like love, heartbreak, devotion, and self-confidence. The four albums selected for this study, Doo-Wops & Hooligans (2010), Unorthodox Jukebox (2012), 24K Magic (2016), and An Evening with Silk Sonic (2021), represent distinct stages in his artistic and emotional evolution. This wide-ranging discography provides an ideal body of work for analyzing diverse forms of figurative language and their changing functions over time.

Despite Bruno Mars' widespread popularity and the poetic richness of his lyrics, there is a notable lack of linguistic research systematically examining his use of figurative language. Existing studies on figurative language in song lyrics tend to focus on a single album or a limited range of figures of speech (Rahmadhanti et al., 2022; Jaya et al., 2024; Sa'idah & Permatasari, 2024). Few have explored multiple albums to investigate how figurative language operates across a body of work, contributes to emotional and thematic coherence, and evolves alongside the artist's creative journey. This gap highlights the need for a comprehensive linguistic analysis of figurative language across Bruno Mars' songwriting.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the types and meanings of figurative language found in Bruno Mars' song lyrics and interpret how these linguistic features contribute to emotional expression and artistic style. Using Knickerbocker and Reninger's (1965) framework, this research systematically identifies and categorizes figures of speech in selected lyrics, interprets their contextual meanings, and discusses their thematic and aesthetic functions.

To achieve these objectives, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What kinds of figurative language are used in Bruno Mars' songs?
2. What meanings are presented in Bruno Mars' songs?

This research is expected to offer both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it deepens understanding of figurative language as a stylistic device in popular music and enriches the field of linguistics and literary studies (Knickerbocker & Reninger, 1965). Practically, it provides insights for students, teachers, and non-native English listeners to interpret figurative meanings more accurately and appreciate the artistic and emotional depth of English song lyrics.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language is a powerful tool for expressing ideas, emotions, and artistic creativity (Altun, M., 2023). Beyond literal meaning, language can function imaginatively through figures of speech, which evoke vivid imagery and emotional resonance. Figurative language allows writers and songwriters to communicate abstract ideas, intensify emotions, and transform everyday expressions into artistic discourse. figurative language departs from ordinary word meanings to achieve special effects or convey deeper significance. In literature and song lyrics, figurative language shapes how audiences perceive and emotionally respond to messages. In song lyrics, devices like metaphors, similes, personifications, and hyperboles enrich the poetic and emotional quality of music. Nuriadi (2016) stresses that figurative language enhances artistic expression, helping audiences grasp ideas more vividly. This understanding is essential in analyzing song lyrics, revealing how musicians blend linguistic creativity with emotional storytelling (Ramadhani et al., 2024).

This study applies Knickerbocker and Reninger's (1965) comprehensive framework for figurative language, which classifies figures of speech into eleven major types: simile, metaphor, personification, hyperbole, irony, symbol, synecdoche, metonymy, paradox, allusion, and dead metaphor. Each type offers a unique method of extending meaning beyond literal language. For example, a simile uses connecting words like "like" or "as" to compare unlike things, while a metaphor equates two unlike things directly. Personification attributes human qualities to non-human entities, and hyperbole exaggerates for dramatic effect. Irony conveys meaning opposite to the literal, and symbols represent abstract ideas through concrete objects. Synecdoche and metonymy use parts or related concepts to stand for wholes. Paradoxes juxtapose contradictions to reveal deeper truth, while allusions refer indirectly to shared cultural knowledge. Dead metaphors become clichés through overuse. This taxonomy is chosen for its clarity, completeness, and adaptability to song lyric analysis, enabling systematic identification, classification, and interpretation of figurative expressions across contexts (Knickerbocker & Reninger, 1965).

Several researchers have investigated figurative language in songs, confirming its crucial role in artistic expression and audience engagement. Jaya et al. (2024) analyzed Madison Beer's *Life Support* album, noting metaphors and hyperboles as dominant figures intensifying emotional depth. Rahmadhanti et al. (2022) focused on metaphorical expressions conveying environmental messages in *Different World*. Sa'idah and Permatasari (2024) conducted a stylistic analysis of figurative language's functions in One Direction's *Four (Deluxe)*. While these studies highlight figurative language's richness in music, most focus on single albums or specific figures, mainly prioritizing identification over interpretation. Few have explored the evolution of figurative language across multiple albums or how it functions to express emotion, identity, and culture. This study expands on prior work by analyzing four Bruno Mars albums with Knickerbocker and Reninger's (1965) framework, providing structural and interpretive insights into figurative language as a vehicle for emotional expression and artistic development.

Building on these discussions, Knickerbocker and Reninger's (1965) theory serves as the primary analytical lens for this study. It facilitates systematic identification and

classification of figurative language types, and interpretive analysis of their meanings and functions in Bruno Mars' song lyrics. The framework connects linguistic form with emotional and aesthetic purpose, supporting the study's goals of uncovering how figurative devices express emotion, construct identity, and engage listeners. This theoretical foundation positions the research at the intersection of linguistics and popular music studies, demonstrating that figurative language operates not only as a stylistic device but also as a mode of emotional and cultural communication.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design to analyze and interpret the use of figurative language in Bruno Mars' song lyrics. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows an in-depth understanding of linguistic expression, emotional meaning, and artistic intent rather than relying on numerical data. As Ary, Jacobs (2015) emphasizes, qualitative research focuses on understanding phenomena holistically through meaning and interpretation. Accordingly, this method is appropriate for exploring how figurative language functions as both a stylistic and communicative device in song lyrics.

The data of this study consist of the complete lyrics from all songs contained in Bruno Mars' four major albums: *Doo-Wops & Hooligans* (2010), *Unorthodox Jukebox* (2012), *24K Magic* (2016), and *An Evening with Silk Sonic* (2021). The inclusion of all songs was intentional, as each album demonstrates unique stylistic tendencies and emotional tones that influence the types and frequency of figurative language used. Analyzing every song allows for a more comprehensive comparison of figurative language across different creative periods in Bruno Mars' career, ensuring that variations in figurative use are fully captured and accurately interpreted.

Data were collected using a documentation method. The researcher listened to all songs from the four albums repeatedly to grasp their overall lyrics and meaning. The official lyrics were obtained from verified online sources such as *Spotify* and *AZLyrics* to ensure textual accuracy. Each lyric was carefully read and examined phrase by phrase, or expressions containing figurative elements were identified, underlined, and compiled into a data corpus organized according to album and song title. This systematic process ensured that no instance of figurative language was overlooked.

The analysis followed the theoretical framework of Knickerbocker and Reninger (1965), which classifies figurative language into ten types: simile, metaphor, personification, hyperbole, irony, symbol, synecdoche, metonymy, paradox, and allusion. The analytical process consisted of three main stages. First, all figurative expressions identified in the lyrics were categorized based on their linguistic characteristics according to the Knickerbocker and Reninger typology. Second, the meanings of each figurative expression were interpreted phrase by phrase within the lyrical and emotional context of the song. This interpretative process aimed to uncover how each figure of speech contributes to the expression of emotion and thematic construction. Third, the results were contextualized across the four albums, allowing the researcher to identify patterns of figurative language variation and their relation to Bruno Mars' evolving artistic identity.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study applies Knickerbocker and Reninger's (1965) theory, which originally identifies eleven types of figurative language: simile, metaphor, personification, hyperbole, irony, symbol, synecdoche, metonymy, paradox, allusion, and dead metaphor. However, in Bruno Mars' four albums (*Doo-Wops & Hooligans*, *Unorthodox Jukebox*, *24K Magic*, and *An Evening with Silk Sonic*), only eight of these figurative types were found: metaphor, simile, personification, hyperbole, irony, symbol, allusion, and dead metaphor.

The absent types synecdoche, metonymy, and paradox were not detected, likely because Bruno Mars' songwriting style emphasizes emotional clarity and accessible imagery over complex or abstract rhetorical devices, which these three figures commonly embody. His lyrical focus on relatable emotions and storytelling may explain the exclusion of these less frequently used, more nuanced figurative forms.

1. **RQ1:** What kinds of figurative language are used in Bruno Mars' songs?

	Doo-Woops & Hooligans	Unorthodox Jukebox	24K Magic	An Evening with Silk Sonic
Hyperboles	20	15	5	12
metaphors	25	32	14	21
Personification	4	1	1	2
Simile	5	3	-	4
Irony	2	2	1	3
Symbol	2	1	-	4
Alliteration	-	-	1	-
Paradox	-	-	-	-
Allusion	-	1	1	1
Metonymy	-	-	-	-
Dead Metaphor	1	-	-	-

From the Data above, we can see the frequency of various types of figurative language used in four albums. The data show that the most dominant figurative language used is metaphor, with the highest count in all albums, especially in "Unorthodox Jukebox," where it reaches 32 instances. Hyperbole is the second most common figurative language, with counts ranging from 5 to 20 across the albums. Irony also appears consistently but with lower frequency, ranging from 1 to 4 occurrences. Other figurative languages, such as simile, symbol, personification, allusion, and dead metaphor, are used moderately, while synecdoche, paradox, and metonymy are not at all in some albums.

This pattern suggests that songwriters frequently use metaphors to create vivid imagery and convey deeper meanings in lyrics. Hyperbole is also commonly employed to emphasize emotions or ideas strongly, making the songs more impactful for listeners. The moderate use of irony, simile, and personification helps add variety and richness to the lyrics, providing creative ways to express feelings and stories. Meanwhile, the less frequent use of other figurative devices indicates they may be used more selectively to avoid overwhelming the listener and to maintain clarity in the songs.

RQ2: What Meanings Are Presented in Bruno Mars Songs?

The explanation for RQ2 uses a general explanation, using samples that represent the themes and meanings conveyed in each album

Doo-Wops & Hooligans (2010)

The album reflects youthful themes of love, hope, heartbreak, and joy. Hyperbole and metaphor vividly portray young love's intensity and vulnerability. For example, the hyperbolic phrase "When you smile, the whole world stops and stares for a while" (*Just the Way You Are*) exaggerates the impact of a lover's smile, emphasizing deep admiration and affection. The metaphor "You're my golden star" (*Treasure*) elevates the subject to an idealized,

precious figure, symbolizing the value and brightness of love. Each phrase carefully evokes emotional experiences of infatuation and devotion that resonate with youthful sincerity.

Unorthodox Jukebox (2012)

Figurative language in this album explores more complex, layered themes such as desire, complicated relationships, nightlife, emotional instability, materialism, and social realities. In *Gorilla*, the metaphor and irony in lines like "Making love like gorillas" vividly depict raw, primal passion while introducing tension between civility and instinct. In *When I Was Your Man*, the metaphorical imagery, e.g., "My heart breaks a little when I hear your name," expresses guilt and regret with poignancy, using heartbreak as a tangible physical sensation. Each figurative phrase conveys emotional turbulence and self-reflection characteristic of this life phase.

24K Magic (2016)

This album thematically centers on luxury, confidence, celebration, and glamour. Hyperbole predominates, energizing the lyrics with extravagant self-assurance. For instance, the phrase "I'm a dangerous man with some money in my pocket" uses playful exaggeration to express bold swagger and success. Metaphorical references to wealth and style adorningly portray identity and joy, syncing with the upbeat funk and R&B soundscape, fostering a celebratory and empowered mood.

An Evening with Silk Sonic (2021)

The figurative language here evokes romantic, heartfelt nostalgia. Personification, symbols, and allusions enrich the themes of gentle love, longing, intimacy, and emotional struggle. For example, "I'm sippin' wine in this room" (*Leave the Door Open*) personifies the setting, creating a warm, intimate atmosphere. The dreamy metaphor "Blast off and kiss the moon tonight" evokes romantic fantasy and desire. Each phrase conjures emotional resonance, blending vintage charm with modern sensibility.

Types of Figurative Language Found

This study identified eight types of figurative language in Bruno Mars' songs from his four albums: hyperbole, metaphor, personification, simile, irony, symbol, allusion, and dead metaphor. Synecdoche, paradox, and metonymy were notably absent. Paradox, which involves statements that seem contradictory yet reveal deeper truths, may not fit well with Mars' straightforward emotional storytelling style, which emphasizes clarity and relatability over abstract contradiction. Metonymy, which uses the substitution of words closely associated with each other, was also not prominently used, likely because Mars focuses on direct emotional expressions rather than symbolic or associative substitutions common in more complex poetic styles. Similarly, synecdoche, where a part stands for the whole or vice versa, requires implicit and symbolic interpretation. Mars' lyrical style prioritizes explicit, accessible language that resonates immediately and intimately with listeners and thus favors clear communication over complex figurative forms.

Meaning Presented Through Figurative Language

1. *Doo-Wops & Hooligans* portrays themes of love, romantic relationships, and youth, expressing hope, heartbreak, sacrifice, and joy. Hyperbole and metaphor vividly evoke the intensity and vulnerability of young love, exemplified by "When you smile, the whole world stops and starts for a while" (hyperbole) from *Just the Way You Are* and "You're my golden star" (metaphor) from *Treasure*.

2. *Unorthodox Jukebox* explores more complex, layered themes including complicated relationships, desire, nightlife, emotional highs and lows, materialism, and social realities. Figurative language portrays the turbulence of this phase, as seen in *Gorilla* where metaphor and irony depict raw passion, and *When I Was Your Man* illustrates guilt and regret through metaphorical imagery.

3. *24K Magic* emphasizes luxury, confidence, celebration, and glamorous lifestyle. Hyperboles dominate lyrics that celebrate identity and success, with lines like "I'm a

dangerous man with some money in my pocket" conveying playful exaggeration synced with funk and R&B energetic tone.

4. *An Evening with Silk Sonic* evokes romantic, heartfelt, and nostalgic atmospheres. Figurative devices like personification, symbols, and allusions enrich themes of gentle love, longing, emotional struggle, intimacy, and connection. Examples include "I'm sippin' wine in this room" (*Leave the Door Open*) and "Blast off and kiss the moon tonight," which create dreamy emotional resonance.

Evolution and Comparison Across Albums

Bruno Mars's use of figurative language evolves from the simplicity and directness of youthful romanticism (*Doo-Wops & Hooligans*), through a more mature and complex balance of emotional states and self-reflection (*Unorthodox Jukebox*), to confident, celebratory expressions of identity and success (*24K Magic*), and finally to nuanced, sensual, nostalgic storytelling (*An Evening with Silk Sonic*).

This evolution aligns with changes in genre and artistic collaboration, reflecting personal growth and experimentation while maintaining a core of accessible emotional expression. Figurative language becomes increasingly layered and sophisticated, matching expansions in musical style and thematic exploration.

Socio-Cultural and Pedagogical Context

The dominance of metaphor and hyperbole reflects contemporary pop music's reliance on vivid imagery and emotional amplification to connect with audiences. Mars combines poetic devices with Afro-American musical traditions, communicating universal values such as love, hope, perseverance, and identity through accessible figurative imagery. Understanding these figurative devices is essential for non-native English listeners to grasp the full emotional and cultural depth of his lyrics. This study highlights the pedagogical importance of figurative language analysis in fostering deeper interpretation and appreciation of popular music across diverse audiences.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the first research question about the types of figurative language used in Bruno Mars's songs from the four albums Doo-Wops & Hooligans, Unorthodox Jukebox, 24K Magic, and An Evening with Silk Sonic, it was found that Bruno Mars actively employs eight types of figurative language to convey messages and emotions. These include hyperbole, metaphor, personification, simile, irony, symbol, allusion, and dead metaphor. Among these, the three most dominant and frequently used types across the albums are hyperbole, metaphor, and personification.

Hyperbole is widely used to add emphasis and express strong emotions, creating dramatic impressions that highlight the intensity of feelings the singer wants to communicate. Metaphors enrich the lyrics by indirectly comparing two different things, allowing deeper meanings and more layered interpretations. Personification gives human qualities to objects or abstract ideas, enhancing emotional depth and helping listeners connect more personally with the songs. The consistent use of these three types shows Bruno Mars's mastery of figurative language as an artistic and emotional expression tool. Less frequent types still contribute to the lyrical richness.

Regarding the second research question about the meanings presented in Bruno Mars's songs, thematic analysis shows that each album highlights different focuses. Doo-Wops & Hooligans primarily explores love and romantic relationships, portraying emotions like sacrifice, hope, heartbreak, and joy in youthful love. Unorthodox Jukebox deals with more complex themes such as complicated relationships, desire, nightlife, emotional turmoil, materialism, and social issues. 24K Magic centers on themes of luxury, confidence, and celebration, featuring glamorous lifestyles, physical attraction, and upbeat romance full of style and optimism. An Evening with Silk Sonic offers a more tender and heartfelt mood,

emphasizing gentle love, longing, emotional struggles, and intimacy, enriched with nostalgia and hopeful expressions of love.

SUGGESTIONS

Weaknesses

This study has some limitations that should be considered. Firstly, the research focused only on four albums by Bruno Mars, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to his other works or to different artists. Secondly, the analysis relied solely on the lyrical content without incorporating listener interpretations, cultural backgrounds, or the artist's personal experiences that might influence the meaning and reception of the songs. Furthermore, this study only used qualitative descriptive methods, which, while providing depth, lack the statistical analysis that might quantify the prevalence or impact of certain figurative language types. Finally, the research focused on the explicit figurative language in the lyrics and did not explore other musical elements or production techniques that might also contribute to emotional and hematic expression.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research could expand the scope by including more albums from Bruno Mars or by comparing his use of figurative language with that of other artists in similar or different genres to provide broader insights. It could also integrate listener surveys or reception studies to understand how audiences interpret and emotionally respond to figurative language in songs. Including cultural, socio-economic, or historical contexts could deepen the analysis of how figurative language is used and understood differently across varied listener groups. Employing quantitative methods or mixed methods might also allow researchers to measure the frequency and effects of figurative language in music more precisely. Finally, future studies could explore the interaction between lyrics and other musical aspects such as melody, harmony, and rhythm to better understand how these elements combine to communicate emotion and narrative in songs.

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