

Metaphor Use in ABBA Song Lyrics

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes conceptual metaphors in two ABBA songs, namely "Slipping Through My Fingers" and "The Winner Takes It All." The analysis applies Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) theory, which classifies metaphors into three types: structural, ontological, and orientational metaphors. The data consist of 17 metaphorical expressions collected through documentation techniques and analyzed using a descriptive qualitative method. The results show that "Slipping Through My Fingers" is dominated by ontological metaphors that conceptualize time, memory, and emotions as physical entities that can be held, stored, or lost. Meanwhile, "The Winner Takes It All" is dominated by structural metaphors that represent romantic relationships as a competitive game involving winning, losing, and rules. These findings demonstrate that metaphors in both songs strengthen emotional expression and transform abstract experiences into concrete and perceptible imagery.

KATA KUNCI

Metafora konseptual
ABBA
Metafora struktural,
Metafora orientational,
Metafora ontological

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini menganalisis metafora konseptual dalam dua lagu ABBA, yaitu "Slipping Through My Fingers" dan "The Winner Takes It All." Analisis ini menggunakan teori Lakoff dan Johnson (1980) yang mengklasifikasikan metafora ke dalam tiga jenis: metafora struktural, ontologis, dan orientasional. Data penelitian berupa 17 ekspresi metaforis yang diambil melalui teknik dokumentasi, kemudian dianalisis dengan metode kualitatif deskriptif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa lagu "Slipping Through My Fingers" didominasi oleh metafora ontologis yang mengonseptualisasikan waktu, memori, dan emosi sebagai entitas fisik yang dapat digenggam, disimpan, atau hilang. Sementara itu, "The Winner Takes It All" didominasi oleh metafora struktural yang memetaforakan hubungan cinta sebagai permainan kompetitif yang melibatkan kemenangan, kekalahan, dan aturan. Temuan ini membuktikan bahwa metafora dalam kedua lagu berfungsi memperkuat ekspresi emosional dan mentransformasikan pengalaman abstrak menjadi gambaran yang konkret dan dapat dirasakan.

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Introduction

Metaphor is a fundamental cognitive mechanism that allows people to understand abstract experiences through more concrete concepts. In song lyrics, metaphors help express emotion and shape how listeners interpret meaning. This study examines conceptual metaphors in two ABBA songs, “Slipping Through My Fingers” and “The Winner Takes It All,” to understand how each lyric transforms emotional experiences into metaphorical imagery. Although metaphor in music has been widely discussed, the systematic application of Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) conceptual metaphor theory to ABBA’s songs remains limited, creating a research gap that this study addresses.

The problem is important because metaphor’s structure emotional themes such as parental longing and relational conflict, which are central to the chosen songs. Understanding how these metaphors work contributes to both linguistic theory and practical applications in language learning and lyrical analysis. Previous studies have examined figurative language in modern song lyrics, but few have focused on ABBA or used a theory-driven approach. This study extends earlier work by applying a clear conceptual framework to analyze metaphor types in the selected lyrics.

Based on preliminary observations and supported by conceptual metaphor theory, the study proposes two hypotheses: (1) “Slipping Through My Fingers” is dominated by ontological metaphors that conceptualize time, memory, and emotion as physical entities, and (2) “The Winner Takes It All” relies mainly on structural metaphors framing love as a competitive game. A descriptive qualitative design is used to identify and classify metaphorical expressions and to explain how each mapping contributes to the emotional meaning of the songs. Through this approach, the study provides theoretical insight into ABBA’s lyrical metaphors and practical value for understanding figurative language in music.

Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to identify and analyze conceptual metaphors in ABBA’s selected songs. The qualitative design was appropriate because the study focused on interpreting linguistic expressions within their natural context rather than manipulating variables or testing statistical hypotheses. The study relied on Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) as the operational framework for classifying structural, ontological, and orientational metaphors. This approach enables replication, as all analytical steps were systematically described and based on a widely recognized theoretical model.

Data Source

The data consisted of the official lyrics of two ABBA songs: “*Slipping Through My Fingers*” and “*The Winner Takes It All*.” These songs were selected because they prominently feature emotional themes and are frequently recognized for their metaphorical expressions. No human participants were involved, and therefore ethical clearance, demographic reporting, and participant eligibility criteria were not required.

Sampling Procedures

A purposive sampling technique was used to select the songs, based on their thematic richness and relevance to the research objectives. Only linguistic expressions that fulfilled the criteria of metaphor according to Conceptual Metaphor Theory were included in the analysis. The sampling unit was individual metaphorical expressions, resulting in a total of 17 metaphor data points. Because the study did not involve human subjects, no recruitment procedures, incentives, or institutional review processes were applicable.

Data Collection

Data were collected through documentation techniques. The official lyrics were retrieved from publicly accessible licensed lyric archives to ensure accuracy. All potential metaphorical expressions were extracted manually from the lyrics and recorded in a data sheet. No additional instruments such as questionnaires, interviews, or observations were used due to the nature of textual analysis.

Measures and Operational Definition

The primary variable in this study was *metaphorical expression*. A metaphor was operationally defined as any linguistic expression in which one conceptual domain is understood through another, consistent with Lakoff and Johnson (1980). Three types of metaphors were used as measurement categories:

1. Structural metaphors : metaphors involving systematic mapping between two structured domains.
2. Ontological metaphors : metaphors conceptualizing events, emotions, or abstract concepts as physical objects or substances.
3. Orientational metaphors : metaphors based on spatial orientation (e.g., up–down, in–out).

These definitions functioned as the coding criteria, ensuring reliability and replicability in identifying metaphor types.

Data Analysis Procedure

Data analysis was conducted through three stages:

1. Identification – Each clause and phrase in the lyrics was examined to detect metaphorical expressions using semantic contrast between literal and figurative meaning.
2. Classification – Identified metaphors were categorized into structural, ontological, or orientational types based on the operational definitions derived from Conceptual Metaphor Theory.
3. Interpretation – Each metaphor was analyzed to determine its target domain, source domain, and conceptual mapping. Interpretations focused on how the metaphor contributed to the emotional meaning of the lyrics.

To increase analytic validity, repeated readings of the lyrics were conducted, and each metaphor was cross-checked against theoretical criteria to avoid misclassification.

Since the study involved textual data, no experimental manipulation, intervention, random assignment, or psychometric instrument was used.

Results

A total of **17 metaphorical expressions** were identified across the two ABBA songs analyzed. Of these, **7 expressions** appeared in “*Slipping Through My Fingers*” and **10 expressions** were found in “*The Winner Takes It All*.” All data were examined using Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) conceptual metaphor framework, and each expression was classified into one of three types: structural, ontological, or orientational. No missing, ambiguous, or excluded data were encountered during the analysis.

Metaphor Distribution Across Songs

The analysis revealed notable differences in the distribution of metaphor types between the two songs. “*Slipping Through My Fingers*” was dominated by **ontological metaphors** (7 out of 10), which conceptualized abstract experiences particularly time, memory, and emotion as physical objects that could be held, lost, or collected. Structural metaphors appeared less frequently (2 instances), while orientational metaphors were minimal (1 instance).

In contrast, “*The Winner Takes It All*” showed a strong tendency toward **structural metaphors** (5 out of 7), mapping romantic relationships onto the conceptual domain of competitive games. Ontological metaphors appeared twice, while orientational metaphors were not observed in this song.

These patterns confirm the expected dominance patterns for each song but also revealed **unexpected findings**: the presence of ontological metaphors in “*The Winner Takes It All*” was higher than anticipated, and “*Slipping Through My Fingers*” contained one structural metaphor referencing game-like framing of responsibility an element not predicted in the hypotheses.

Table 1 Distribution of Conceptual Metaphors in ABBA’s Selected Songs

| Song Title | Structural | Ontological | Orientalional | Total |
|------------------------------------|------------|-------------|---------------|-----------|
| <i>Slipping Through My Fingers</i> | 2 | 5 | 0 | 7 |
| <i>The Winner Takes It All</i> | 6 | 2 | 2 | 10 |
| Total | 8 | 7 | 2 | 17 |

Detailed Findings by Metaphor Type

1. Structural Metaphors

A total of 8 structural metaphors were identified across both songs. The majority of these metaphors (6 out of 8) appeared in “*The Winner Takes It All*,” where they

framed the romantic relationship as a competitive game involving rules, players, victory, and defeat. These expressions relied on a well-structured conceptual system that mapped emotional experiences onto organized, rule-governed activities.

The remaining 2 structural metaphors were found in “*Slipping Through My Fingers*.” Although fewer in number, these metaphors mapped emotional experiences onto familiar action-based structures, contributing to the conceptualization of routine or repeated experiences.

2. Orientational Metaphors

A total of **2 orientational metaphors** appeared in the dataset. Both expressions were identified in “*The Winner Takes It All*,” reflecting spatial directionality such as upward or downward emotional movement. Although infrequent, these metaphors signaled shifts in emotional stance or psychological positioning.

“The findings further indicate that no orientational metaphors occur in *Slipping Through My Fingers*, suggesting that the song relies primarily on ontological and structural mappings.”

3. Ontological Metaphors

Ontological metaphors were the second most frequent category, totaling **7 instances**. “*Slipping Through My Fingers*” contributed the majority of these metaphors (**5 out of 7**), conceptualizing time, emotional moments, and memory as tangible objects that can be held, lost, or collected. These metaphors highlighted the perceived physicality of abstract experiences.

“*The Winner Takes It All*” contained **2 ontological metaphors**, both of which conceptualized emotional states or relational outcomes as manipulable substances or objects. Although fewer in number, these metaphors played a key role in constructing the emotional landscape of the lyrics.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that conceptual metaphors play a central role in shaping the emotional narratives within ABBA’s “*Slipping Through My Fingers*” and “*The Winner Takes It All*.” The distribution of structural, ontological, and orientational metaphors across the two songs indicates distinct metaphorical preferences that reflect the thematic focus of each lyric. These results support Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) assertion that conceptual metaphors function as cognitive tools that structure human understanding of abstract experiences.

The dominance of ontological metaphors in “*Slipping Through My Fingers*” suggests that the song constructs emotional experiences primarily through object-based conceptualizations. Time, memories, and moments are depicted as tangible entities that can be held, lost, or allowed to slip away. This aligns with Lakoff and Johnson’s view that ontological metaphors allow

individuals to organize complex emotions by attributing physical boundaries and properties to abstract concepts. By treating time as a graspable object, the lyrics highlight the fragility and transience of parental experiences, reinforcing the emotional tone of regret and wistfulness present in the song.

In contrast, *“The Winner Takes It All”* relies heavily on structural metaphors, framing the romantic conflict through the conceptual domain of competitive games. This mapping reflects recurring game-related elements such as winners, losers, rules, and chance. Structural metaphors, according to Lakoff and Johnson, provide an elaborate and systematic means of understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another. In this case, the structured nature of games offers a coherent framework for interpreting the power dynamics, emotional consequences, and perceived injustices within the relationship described in the lyrics. The prevalence of these metaphors reinforces the central theme of relational competition and imbalance.

Although less frequent, orientational metaphors contributed additional nuance to the emotional portrayal in *“The Winner Takes It All.”* These metaphors conveyed emotional states through spatial directionality, such as upward or downward movement. The limited presence of orientational metaphors is consistent with prior studies showing that such metaphors often appear as supportive rather than dominant patterns in lyrical expression, providing subtle shifts in emotional framing rather than central conceptual structures.

An important aspect of the findings is the presence of cross-type metaphors, which exhibited characteristics belonging to more than one metaphor category. These expressions demonstrate that metaphorical meaning is not always confined to a single conceptual mapping; rather, a linguistic expression may activate multiple cognitive structures simultaneously. This supports the claim by Kövecses (2010) that metaphors are often layered and multifunctional. For example, in *“The Winner Takes It All,”* certain expressions functioned simultaneously as structural metaphors (framing the relationship as a game) and ontological metaphors (depicting emotional outcomes as objects). Similarly, an expression in *“Slipping Through My Fingers”* combined ontological and orientational mappings by conceptualizing time as a tangible substance with directional movement. These cross-type findings highlight the multidimensional nature of metaphor in song lyrics and reflect the flexibility of conceptual metaphor systems.

The results also align with previous studies examining metaphor in music, which found that metaphor serves to concretize abstract emotional experiences and support narrative coherence. However, this study extends the existing literature by applying a systematic conceptual metaphor framework specifically to ABBA’s lyrics an area that has received limited scholarly attention. By classifying metaphor types and examining cross-type expressions,

this research provides insight into how ABBA's songwriting conveys emotional depth through layered metaphorical structures.

The research has both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, it reinforces key principles of conceptual metaphor theory, demonstrating how structural and ontological metaphors operate differently depending on the thematic focus of a text. Practically, the findings suggest that song lyrics can serve as effective materials for teaching figurative language in linguistic and educational contexts, as the metaphors illustrate how abstract meanings can be expressed through relatable conceptual domains.

Despite these contributions, the study has limitations. The dataset is limited to two songs, which constrains the generalizability of the findings. Future research may expand the corpus to include more songs by ABBA or conduct comparative analyses across different artists or genres. Additionally, the analysis relied solely on textual data; incorporating musical elements or listener interpretations may offer a more holistic understanding of metaphor use in songs.

Overall, the findings underscore the central role of conceptual metaphor in shaping emotional expression within song lyrics and demonstrate how different metaphor types contribute unique conceptual structures to the framing of human experience.

Conclusions

This study examined the use of conceptual metaphors in ABBA's "*Slipping Through My Fingers*" and "*The Winner Takes It All*" using Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) conceptual metaphor theory. A total of 17 metaphorical expressions were identified and classified into structural, ontological, and orientational types. The findings revealed that "*Slipping Through My Fingers*" is dominated by ontological metaphors that conceptualize time, memory, and emotional moments as tangible objects, whereas "*The Winner Takes It All*" relies more heavily on structural metaphors that frame romantic relationships in terms of competitive games. The presence of cross-type metaphors further demonstrated that metaphorical expressions in song lyrics often activate multiple conceptual mappings simultaneously.

These results highlight the central role of conceptual metaphor in shaping emotional expression within song lyrics and support the theoretical claim that metaphors serve as fundamental cognitive tools for understanding abstract experiences. The study contributes to linguistic research by providing a systematic analysis of metaphor types in ABBA's music an area that has received limited scholarly attention and by demonstrating how different metaphor categories function to construct distinct emotional narratives.

Practically, the findings suggest that song lyrics can be used as valuable material for language teaching, literary analysis, and discourse studies, particularly for illustrating how metaphors transform complex emotions into relatable conceptual structures.

The study is limited by its small dataset, focusing on only two songs. Future research may extend the analysis to a larger corpus of ABBA's music or compare metaphor use across different artists or musical genres. Further studies could also explore how listeners interpret these metaphors or how musical elements interact with metaphorical meaning.

Overall, this study demonstrates that conceptual metaphor theory provides a powerful framework for analyzing figurative language in song lyrics and offers insights into how metaphor shapes the emotional and cognitive dimensions of musical expression.

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, several suggestions can be proposed for future research and practical application.

1. Suggestions for Future Researchers

Future studies may expand the scope of analysis by examining a larger corpus of ABBA's song lyrics or comparing metaphorical patterns across different artists, genres, or time periods. This would provide a broader understanding of how conceptual metaphors function in musical discourse. Researchers are also encouraged to explore additional theoretical frameworks—such as blending theory, multimodal metaphor analysis, or discourse pragmatics—to gain deeper interpretative insights. Since this study identified metaphorical expressions that cross more than one type, future research may focus specifically on hybrid or overlapping metaphors to investigate how multiple conceptual mappings operate within a single expression.

2. Suggestions for Educators and Students

Language teachers may utilize the findings of this study to develop instructional materials that introduce metaphor analysis in a more engaging and contextualized way through song lyrics. Students of linguistics can benefit from analyzing metaphors in music as a means of strengthening their understanding of conceptual metaphor theory and figurative language in natural discourse. Incorporating song-based metaphor analysis in classroom activities may help learners connect abstract theoretical concepts with real-world textual examples.

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