



# A Comparative Study of the Figures of Speech between Top 50 English and Persian Pop Song Lyrics

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## Abstract

This paper is a corpus-based comparative discourse analysis of top fifty pop English and Persian song lyrics in 2014 to investigate the production of four figures of speech including metaphor, simile, personification, and hyperbole. The English corpus was compiled from the End-Year 2014 Chart of Billboard and the Persian corpus was compiled from the most downloaded songs and the results of an informal inquiry among the researchers' friends and colleagues for the most favorite songs in 2014. Firstly, the four figures of speech were identified and counted in the English and Persian verses twice by the researchers who were Persian graduates of TEFL and a doctoral candidate of English Literature. Then, a joint session was held among them, and a consensus was reached on the discrepancies. Afterwards, the frequencies were submitted to chi-square analysis. The results revealed that there was a significant difference in the usage of figures of speech between the two languages. Persian song lyrics contained more figures of speech both overall and separately; although, there was not any significant difference in the frequency usage of simile and metaphor between the two languages, Persian lyricists used hyperbole and personification more frequently compared to English lyricists.

**Keywords:** song lyrics, figures of speech, simile, metaphor, hyperbole, personification

## 1. Introduction

Communication is like swimming, language is the swimming skill, and water is the context. They are inseparable and integral. To propose an instance of this nexus, we could consider songs as the context in which the communication is to be performed, writing the texts or lyrics as the skill through which the communication is to be performed, and transfer of the intended meaning through singing the written lyrics as the communication itself. As Juslin and Sloboda (2001) state, music is part of culture and communication. This cultural and communicative role of music could be multiplied when accompanied by language and verbal utterance.

Verbal songs could be the best examples of an indirect communicative event. People, who are building members of a society, are always in touch with songs almost every day and everywhere. Songs contain the power of the music as well as the power of lyrics. While music penetrates our souls and emotions, the lyrics flow into our minds and draw us into their own worlds. The world of lyrics that consists of histories, parables, maxims, beliefs, critics and so forth may be uttered through special discourse features such as figures of speech. The lyrics or words in a song are not only representative of the linguistic items but also highlight the ideologies of the lyricist as a constituent member of a community. Accordingly, lyrics have a social and linguistic power to influence the society. Pettijohn and Sacco (2009) argued that:

Lyrics are an important form of communication, serving a variety of purposes as documented in the psychology of language literature. Lyrics tell stories and communicate with audiences in a manner similar to how people have conversations with each other [...] when accompanied with words, songs allow us to communicate emotions, tell stories, and even express our opinions and attitudes. (p. 297)

One of the very significant and effective literary devices is the valuable role of figurative language. Perrine (1992, p.61) defines figures of speech as "any way of saying something other than the ordinary way." Roza and Eschholz (1982) defined figurative language as the language used in a creative rather than a literal sense. Figurative language embellishes our words and makes our intended meaning more influential and interesting. What is common among the various definition of figurative language is the indirect and unconventional way of expressing feeling, opinion, and belief. Figurative language is a language which the poet or lyricist benefits to say something unusual or indirectly.

With a view to the related literature, we find many studies (Falk, 2012; Kreyer & Mukherjee, 2007; Logan, Kositsky & Moreno, 2004; Petrie & Pennebaker, 2008; Pettijohn & Sacco, 2009) that have been conducted on the discourse analysis and comparison of song lyrics across genres and lyricists. Nevertheless, we encounter a shortage of researches that probe song lyrics across languages to understand the differences and similarities in the usage of figurative languages and their sociocultural implications. What we intend to do in this study is to investigate the presence of the figures of speech of an indirect communication, i.e. lyrics, in a musical context, i.e. songs.

## 2. Review of Literature

### 2.1 Songs and lyrics

The Greeks defined a lyric as “a song to be sung to the accompaniment of a lyre (*lyra*)” (Cuddon 1979, cited in Puigderajols, 2001, p. 30). Lyrics are words, which are uttered in harmony with songs. The writer of lyrics is a lyricist. Some lyrics reflect the reality or ideal fact of social life and the experience of the writers, and some lyrics reflect the imaginations and figments of the writers. Songs are potentially valuable to improve many capacities of the human. In a study, Ashtiani and Zafarghandi (2015) showed that singing songs positively influences learners’ ability to produce connected speech and thus makes their speech and articulation more fluent and natural. However, songs and lyrics can be of other values and benefits when the listeners could connect the pleasure of listening to the music, and the communicative use of language in the lyrics, which could be uttered in a figurative language to transfer a message.

In a study by Adams and Fuller (2006), the lyrics of rap were investigated and they identified six themes, which were misogynistic and repeatedly occurring in the lyrics. The derogatory statements, which targeted women in relation to sex and bore violent actions towards women, referred to women as the causes of trouble for men and useless.

In a study by Katznelson, Gelman, Lindblom and Caput (2010), a corpus-based research spanning twenty years of pop, rock, country, and hip-hop music was done. They created a 400-song corpus via Antconc software and mainly focused on the meaning and use of the verb “to take” and its phrasal variations across different genres. They proved that some of the phraseologies of “take” were universal while others were genre-specific. In Rock, the unique *take* phraseology is in reference to challenging someone, while in Pop and Hip Hop there was a sexually suggestive *take* phraseology. They also extracted the top content words used in each genre. The analysis of the top 100 most frequent words showed extensive overlap across genres. For example, the word “Love” was the most frequent word in Rock, Pop, and Country but not among the first ten words in Hip Hop. The words “Baby,” “Time,” “Way” and “Life” were the most frequent words common among all the four genres and some words were unique in just one genre such as “Night” and “Day” in Country, “Boom” in Pop, “Bitch”, “Money” and “Ass” in Hip Hop, and “Head” and “Eyes” in Rock.

In a comprehensive thesis by Puigderajols (2001) in Barcelona, she analyzed the songs of a representative number of Disney feature-length cartoons and investigated the kind of “linguistics magic” from a discourse point of view. This research aimed at studying how lyricists communicate thoughts and construct messages and how the audience can work towards interpreting them. After investigating 47 lyrics, the researcher concluded that the lyrics of the songs were created and used to express special feelings and enhance the message of the cartoons. She discussed that topics were of universal profundity and transcendence, timelessness and agelessness and the lyricists had resorted to different linguistic devices so that any part of the speech could produce a magic effect towards captivating the audience.

Falk (2012) investigated the lyrics of rock music. A corpus composing of almost 53000 words was compiled for the research. The focus lied on a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the vocabulary as well as of the stylistic markers. The research intended to determine in what ways rock lyrics were either more spoken-like or written-like, whether rock lyrics mirrored the general word usage in society, and in what ways Rock lyrics were comparable to other genres. Falk compared the most frequently used words among the decades from 50 to 90 and showed that “Love” and “Baby” were the most used during the decades and the number of words used in the lyrics during the 70s was the highest. The results also revealed that rock lyrics were more spoken-like.

Petrie and Pennebaker (2008) juxtaposed and analyzed the lyrical style of three songwriters of Beatles between 1960 and 1970 to see how they changed in their writing styles over time. Through semantic analysis, they revealed a number of interesting psychological issues over the career of the band. Songs from the early years of the Beatles were characterized by positive emotion with many tunes concerning the joys of new romantic relationships. However, later on, Beatles writing showed less connection to the present and future, more complexity and intellectualism, and emotional changes compared to their early lyrics. This study provided a framework to follow how individual or group’s psychological dynamics changes over the course of time.

Mangseth (2010), who believed teenagers use certain non-standard language features in prestigious language probably because of listening to music, studied the non-standard English features of lyrics in the best-selling music in Sweden. He investigated to what extent non-standard English features were used in the lyrics of popular music in Sweden today. Music is known to be played and sung by both men and women of all ages throughout the world, and he wanted to see to what extent men and women contributed as lyric writers of popular music. From a linguistic approach, does the language in the lyrics of pop music show any signs of non-standard English, and if so, to what degree? His hypothesis was that there were plenty of non-standard expressions in popular music, and proved if exposed to repeatedly, these non-standard features may influence listeners’ language.

DeWalt, Pond, Campbell and Twenge’s study (2011) attempted to determine whether lyrics in popular US songs have changed over time. However, their focus was on manner that mirrored documented psychological changes across the same period. Their research claimed that “cultural products can also be used to understand psychological changes *within*

a culture over time, exploring whether the linguistic contents of popular song lyrics change over time in tandem with generational shifts in personality traits over the same period of time” (p. 201). According to DeWall, et al., feelings of loneliness and social isolation rose 250 percent between 1985 and 2004.

## 2.2 Figures of speech

Figurative language is a tool to decorate the language. When words are literal, they mean precisely what they say, but these stylistic ornaments are non-literal ways of talking and need to be interpreted to be understood. Figurative language includes myriad types for clarity, comparison, freshness, emphasis, and many other intentions. These figures of speech could be considered as spices in cuisine. They transmute ordinary and mundane taste of the language to a funnier, more attracting and influential one to convey the intended meaning.

The figures of speech are the soul and spirit of the literature as they add variety, beauty, flavor and various colors and shades to the writing. We have to admit that literature will be colorless and less effective in the absence of some particular uses of literary devices. The writers use it to add spices to their writing, criticize, and comment upon others; they can express their feelings in a novel and precise manner contrary to a long narration, which will be boring and dull. Ogunsiji (2000, cited in Yeibo, 2012) continues that language could be said to operate in two broad dimensions of literal and figurative. “The literal dimension of language use deploys words in their usual and obvious sense without any additional suggestions and figurative dimension deals with the suggestive or connotative use of language.” Four figures of speech, which were under investigation in this research are extracted from Flex Your Literary Muscles (2004, part 6) as a source of definition and listed below.

### 2.2.1 Personification

Personification means assuming the nonhuman and inanimate things live and human. It is when you describe something inanimate and nonliving as if it had human traits and behavior. Perrine (1992) defines personification as a way of giving attributes of a human being to an animal, an object, or a concept. An example of personification is “Before I knew it, my credit card leaped out of my wallet and bought a CD player.” The credit card is considered as a living thing. It is clear that a credit card cannot leap out of a wallet and make a purchase. The point to make this personification is that he or she is not able to withhold buying the CD player and does not have any willpower over making the purchase.

### 2.2.2 Simile

Simile means comparing two different and unlike things in entity while holding some similarities in some attributes. Similes generally use the term *like* or *as* in the comparison. Bentley (1972) says that simile is the comparison of two objects, which are totally unlike but possess some features that are common in both. An example of simile is “The old man’s skin was as thin as tissue paper.” The old man’s skin is being compared with tissue paper, meaning that his skin is extremely thin, even to the point that, like tissue paper, it is translucent.

### 2.2.3 Metaphor

A metaphor implies a comparison between two seemingly dissimilar things by saying that one of them is the other. According to Bentley (1972) metaphor is a comparison that does not use words such as *like* and *as* but identifies one object with another. An example of a metaphor is “The attorney’s eyes were laser beams.” The attorney’s eyes and laser beams are being compared. In what way could eyes and laser beams be alike? They could both be very intense and penetrating. The meaning is that the attorney has very intense, penetrating eyes, eyes that narrow and focus hard on anyone the attorney is looking or staring.

### 2.2.4 Hyperbole

A hyperbole is a figure of speech in which the author makes an obvious exaggeration but as Perrine (1992) says, it is an overstatement that is in the service of truth. As in other figurative languages, the words do not literally mean what they say and the reader needs to interpret the author’s intended meaning. An example of hyperbole is “My high school English teacher had eyes in the back of her head.” In this example, the exaggeration is “had eyes in the back of her head.” The meaning is that the teacher seems to see everything that goes on in the classroom.

## 3. Research Questions

As Cook (1989, p. 50) suggests, “Discourse analysis examines how stretches of language, considered in their full textual, social, and psychological context, become meaningful and unified for their users.” A comparative discourse analysis of pop song lyrics across two languages or more could shed light on sociocultural matters, which to some extent reflects the amount of the influence and popularity of each literature in its society, the public literacy level, and aesthetic sense of its members. Sociocultural conjectures and discourse goals could be drawn from a discourse analysis of pop song lyrics through the most frequently occurring figurative languages. To fill this gap in the literature, we did a corpus-based comparative discourse analysis on the lyrics of top 50 pop songs of English and Persian in 2014 to explore them with a focus on simile, metaphor, hyperbole, and personification. The research addresses the following research questions:

- 1) Is there any difference between Persian and English pop song lyrics in terms of the use of figures of speech?
- 2) Is there any difference between Persian and English pop song lyrics in terms of the use of each figure of speech, i.e. metaphor, simile, personification, and hyperbole?

#### 4. Method

This is a corpus-based study. According to McEnery and Wilson (2001, cited in Wang, 2005), several benefits could be earned by using a corpus-based approach such as probing the word usage, frequency, collocation and concordance. The research was proceeded through the following stages to reach the objective of the study.

##### 4.1 Materials

The materials utilized in this research were English and Persian pop song lyrics, which were among 50 top songs in 2014. The English pop song lyrics were chosen from Year-End 2014 Chart of Billboard. Then the lyrics were collected from [www.azlyrics.com](http://www.azlyrics.com) and edited by omitting the redundancies that did not belong to the original text. Due to the non-existence of any official source of sales statistics in Iranian music market, the researchers who were Persian and fan of pop music chose top 50 Persian songs based on the most heard ones and holding an informal inquiry among their friends and colleagues asking for the best songs and singers in 2014. The songs were found among the most-downloaded songs of [www.Radiojavan.com](http://www.Radiojavan.com) as one of the best-known online music markets for Persian songs. The lyric of songs were collected from online sources and edited through omitting the redundancies.

##### 4.2 Procedure

In order to obtain the occurrence frequency of the figurative language under the study, the researchers, independently, counted each figure of speech in Persian and English lyrics and highlighted them with different colors. The repetitive verses in each song lyrics that contained the repetition of a figure of speech in that song were not included. However, the lines of the lyrics, which could be counted as either one figure of speech or another, were counted twice for the representing figures of speech. The researchers consulted the definitions of the figurative languages during the analysis in order to avoid any probable risk of amiss identification. Subsequently, the researchers shared their results to iron out the discrepancies. Also, for coding the figurative language in English lyrics two people were involved; a native speaker of English and a PhD student of English literature. First, they did the coding on an individual basis and then in a joint meeting they shared their findings and resolved the mismatches.

#### 5. Data Analysis and Results

The first step at this stage was to code figures of speech. As was stated before, the figures of speech in Persian lyrics were coded by the researchers and the figures of speech in English lyrics were coded by an English native speaker and a PhD student of English literature. The result of the counting is represented in the table below.

Table 1. The frequency usage of the figures of speech

	<b>Metaphor</b>	<b>Simile</b>	<b>Personification</b>	<b>Hyperbole</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Persian Lyrics</b>	94	22	41	64	221
<b>English Lyrics</b>	91	34	17	16	158

In order to answer the research questions, the data were submitted to SPSS version 17. The first research question asked for the difference in the number of times Persian and English lyrics used figurative language. The  $\chi^2$  value of 10.74, DF =1 was found to have an associated probability value of 0.01. Thus, we can accept that there is a significant difference between the observed and expected frequencies, and can conclude that figures of speech are not equally used in the two languages.

The second research question asked if each figure of speech is used differently in the lyrics of the two languages. Again, a chi-square test was performed for this purpose. According to the results of the SPSS, the occurrence of simile was equally distributed in the two languages,  $\chi^2$  (1, N = 56) = 2.51, p = 0.1. A similar result was obtained for the use of metaphor. Although metaphor was used slightly more frequently in Persian lyrics than English lyrics, the difference was not significant,  $\chi^2$  (1, N = 185) = 0.04, p = 0.8.

However, the results of the chi-square showed significant differences for the other two figures of speech. The number of times personification was used in Persian lyrics was 41 whereas the number in English lyrics was only 17. The difference in number is significant,  $\chi^2$  (1, N = 58) = 9.93, p < 0.05. Similarly, with regard to hyperbole, it was found that remarkably more instances of hyperbole occurred in Persian lyrics compared with English lyrics. Statistically, this difference was significant  $\chi^2$  (1, N = 80) = 28.8, p < 0.05.

#### 6. Discussion & Conclusion

Behind the use of each figure of speech, there is a communicative goal such as comparing, humoring, provoking, bolding, objecting, emphasizing, deemphasizing, and so forth. By considering the communicative goals, we could track down why pop song lyricists as members of the society use figures of speech. In a research which was carried out in the psychology department of the universities of Maryland and Memphis by Roberts and Kreuz (1994), 20 discourse goals were determined to identify the intentions of using figures of speech among 134 participants. According to the findings of that study concerning the intentions of using figures of speech, here we could claim that both English and Iranian cultures benefit metaphor and simile approximately to the same extent to add interest, compare similarities, and provoke thought and feelings in their intended meaning and utterance. However, there is a slight upward inclination of using simile in Persian lyrics. Glucksberg and Keysar (1990) and Roberts and Kreuz (1994) stated metaphors are used more

for forceful comparisons and similes for less strong comparisons since there is more seriousness in metaphors and maybe more humor in similes. In addition, Ortony (1995) argued that metaphors are used to fill the gaps in the lexicon, to provide succinct ways of stating ideas that are lengthy or awkward to formulate in literal terms, and to add vividness to a message.

Based on the results of the present study, the usage frequency of hyperbole and personification in Persian lyrics was significantly higher than English lyrics by a landslide. Blair (1983, cited in Dodson, 2008) suggests that people personify in order to express passionate emotions. In fact, personification is a sign of strong passions. This significant difference in the usage of hyperbole and personification and generally figurative language in pop song lyrics could bring up sociocultural implications for both cultures and societies. Ogunsiyi (2000, cited in Yeibo, 2012) avers that, "if one writes without using figures of speech, one's speech or writing will be 'dry'" (p.56).

As the results showed, Persian pop song lyrics contained more figures of speech and hereby we could claim that Persian lyrics are more indirect and connotative because as was cited before by Hermean and Waluyo (1995), they use much figurative language in conveying the meaning and feeling.

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