



Metaphor in Song Lyrics: Implications for English Language Education

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Abstract

Language serves as a primary medium for expressing ideas, emotions, and experiences, particularly in literary forms such as song lyrics. Metaphor, as a central element of figurative language, plays a crucial role not only in meaning construction but also in supporting language learning. This study aims to identify the types of metaphors and interpret their meanings in the song lyrics of Mandy Moore's *So Real* album, as well as to examine their implications for English language education. This research employs a descriptive qualitative method, with data collected through documentation and observation of 13 songs in the album. The findings reveal 28 metaphorical expressions categorized into structural, ontological, and orientational metaphors, with ontological metaphors especially those conceptualizing emotions as containers being the most dominant (35.71%). These results indicate that abstract emotions are systematically represented through concrete domains. Pedagogically, the findings suggest that metaphorical expressions in song lyrics can be effectively integrated into language teaching to enhance learners' interpretative skills, enrich vocabulary acquisition, and facilitate the understanding of abstract meanings. Furthermore, the use of songs as authentic materials can promote student engagement, critical thinking, and cultural awareness, thereby supporting the development of communicative and cognitive competence in English.

Kata Kunci: Metaphor; Figurative Language; Song Lyrics

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INTRODUCTION

Metaphor has long been recognized as a central element in both linguistic expression and cognitive processes, extending beyond its traditional role as a rhetorical device. Early linguistic perspectives viewed metaphor as ornamental language, but modern studies emphasize its role in structuring human thought. Conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) argues that metaphor is fundamental to how individuals conceptualize abstract experiences. Rather than being merely stylistic, metaphors shape perception, reasoning, and communication. This shift in perspective has transformed metaphor studies into an interdisciplinary field. It integrates linguistics, psychology, and cognitive science. However, despite its wide acceptance, CMT has not been free from criticism. Some scholars argue that the theory tends to overgeneralize metaphor as a universal cognitive mechanism while underestimating the role of context, discourse, and cultural variability in shaping meaning. Others question its methodological reliance on intuition rather than empirical validation. These critiques suggest that metaphor should not be viewed solely as a cognitive structure but also as a dynamic and context-dependent phenomenon. Therefore, while CMT provides a valuable theoretical foundation for analyzing metaphor in literary discourse, it must be applied critically by considering contextual and interpretative dimensions (Bekpulatova & Narzullaeva, 2025).

Conceptual metaphor theory, proposed by Lakoff and Johnson, explains that abstract concepts are understood through more concrete experiences via systematic mappings between domains. These mappings involve a source domain, which is concrete, and a target domain, which is abstract. For example, emotions are often conceptualized as physical entities or spatial movements. This mapping process allows individuals to make sense of complex ideas. CMT identifies three main types of metaphor: structural, ontological, and orientational. Each type represents a different cognitive mechanism. Structural metaphors map one concept onto another, ontological metaphors treat abstract ideas as entities, and orientational metaphors relate to spatial orientation.

This classification is widely used in linguistic analysis. It provides a systematic framework for studying metaphor in various contexts (Fitriani et al., 2025).

Recent studies in cognitive linguistics highlight that metaphor is deeply embedded in everyday language and not limited to literary texts. Speakers use metaphorical expressions frequently, often without conscious awareness, indicating their role in shaping how knowledge and experience are structured. Metaphor is also influenced by cultural and social contexts, as different cultures may conceptualize the same abstract idea in distinct ways. This variation creates challenges in cross-cultural interpretation, where similar expressions can produce different or even conflicting meanings depending on cultural background. Some studies report that metaphorical concepts are largely universal due to shared bodily experience (Gibbs, 2017). However, other research emphasizes strong cultural specificity, leading to inconsistencies in findings across contexts (Kövecses, 2020). For example, emotions such as “love” or “anger” may be conceptualized differently across languages, resulting in potential misinterpretation among language learners. These discrepancies suggest that metaphor interpretation is not entirely stable but context-dependent and shaped by both cognitive and cultural factors. Therefore, analyzing metaphor requires an integrated approach that considers both linguistic form and socio-cultural context (Yang, 2024).

In literary works, metaphor plays a crucial role in enhancing aesthetic value and emotional depth. It allows writers to express complex feelings and ideas in a concise and imaginative way. Song lyrics, as a form of literary expression, heavily rely on metaphorical language. They use metaphor to convey emotions such as love, heartbreak, and desire. This makes song lyrics rich in figurative meaning. Listeners interpret these meanings based on their own experiences. As a result, metaphor contributes to the emotional impact of songs. It also enables multiple interpretations. Previous studies support this view. Nasution et al. (2023) state that “metaphor in song lyrics functions as a cognitive tool that helps listeners understand abstract emotional experiences through more concrete representations” (p. 160). Similarly, Trisnadi and Djuharie (2025) argue that “the use of metaphor in contemporary song lyrics enhances expressive meaning and allows deeper emotional engagement from the audience” (p. 82). They use metaphor to convey emotions such as love, heartbreak, and desire, making song lyrics rich in figurative meaning. Listeners interpret these meanings based on their own experiences, which contributes to the emotional impact of songs and enables multiple interpretations. Therefore, metaphor is essential in understanding lyrical discourse. However, previous studies on metaphor in song lyrics often focus primarily on identifying and classifying metaphor types, with limited attention to in-depth contextual interpretation. In addition, many studies rely on isolated song analysis or small data samples, which may not adequately capture the overall pattern of metaphor usage within a cohesive body of work such as a full album. Methodologically, some research also tends to emphasize frequency counts without sufficiently exploring the relationship between metaphor, meaning, and thematic development. Furthermore, the pedagogical implications of metaphor analysis are frequently underexplored, particularly in relation to how song lyrics can be used to enhance learners’ interpretative and communicative competence. These limitations indicate the need for a more comprehensive and context-sensitive analysis that integrates classification, interpretation, and educational relevance within a unified framework. Therefore, metaphor is essential in understanding lyrical discourse (Nasution et al., 2023).

Several empirical studies have analyzed metaphors in song lyrics using conceptual metaphor theory. These studies consistently show that ontological metaphors are the most dominant type. Ontological metaphors often represent abstract concepts such as love and emotion as concrete objects or containers. Structural metaphors are also frequently found, particularly in expressions describing relationships. Orientational metaphors appear in expressions related to emotional states. The dominance of certain metaphor types reflects how humans conceptualize emotions. These findings suggest that metaphor usage is not random but systematic. It follows cognitive patterns shaped by human experience (Putri et al., 2023).

Research on contemporary song lyrics demonstrates that metaphor is used to represent emotional experiences in creative and innovative ways. In Mandy Moore’s *So Real* album, metaphorical expressions are used to convey emotions such as love, vulnerability, and personal struggle. These metaphors do not merely reflect general patterns but are closely tied to the thematic context of each song. By employing familiar conceptual domains, the metaphors help listeners interpret abstract feelings more clearly and meaningfully. This use of metaphor also enhances the expressive power of the lyrics and strengthens the emotional connection between the singer and the audience. Therefore, in the context of this study, metaphor is understood not only as a general linguistic feature but also as a context-specific strategy that contributes to meaning construction within the *So*

Real album (Trisnadi & Djuharie, 2025). Furthermore, metaphor analysis in song lyrics contributes to the field of cognitive stylistics, which examines the relationship between language and mental processes. Cognitive stylistics explores how readers interpret figurative language. It emphasizes the role of imagination and experience in meaning-making. Metaphor is a key element in this process. It bridges the gap between linguistic form and cognitive interpretation. By analyzing metaphor, researchers can uncover underlying conceptual structures. This approach provides deeper insights into literary texts. It also highlights the cognitive dimension of language use (Nasution et al., 2023).

Studies on metaphor in different cultural contexts reveal that metaphor usage is influenced by cultural norms and values. In the context of this study, however, the analysis is limited to the song lyrics in Mandy Moore's *So Real* album, which reflects a particular cultural and socio-emotional background associated with Western popular music in the late 1990s. Rather than comparing across cultures, this study focuses on how metaphor operates within a relatively shared cultural framework, where concepts such as "heart," "love," and "emotion" are commonly used to represent personal feelings and relationships. These expressions are shaped by mainstream pop culture conventions, which emphasize individual emotional experience, romantic relationships, and introspection. While the concept of "heart" is widely used to symbolize emotions, its usage in this album aligns with culturally familiar representations within English-speaking contexts, making it more accessible to listeners who share similar cultural references. Therefore, cultural context in this study is understood not as a comparative variable but as a background framework that informs how metaphorical meanings are constructed and interpreted within the album (Suryadi & Uctuvia, 2022).

In addition to its literary function, metaphor has significant implications for language learning and teaching. Many language learners struggle to understand metaphorical expressions. This difficulty arises because metaphors often involve implicit meanings. Without proper understanding, learners may misinterpret texts. Therefore, teaching metaphor is essential in language education. It helps learners develop interpretative skills. It also enhances their ability to understand authentic texts such as songs. Consequently, metaphor analysis has practical applications in education (Yang, 2024).

Despite extensive research on metaphor, there are still gaps in the analysis of specific albums and artists. Many studies focus on individual songs rather than entire albums. This limits the scope of analysis. A comprehensive study of an album can reveal patterns of metaphor usage. It also provides insights into the artist's thematic focus. Such analysis contributes to a more holistic understanding of metaphor. Therefore, further research is needed in this area. This study addresses this gap by analyzing metaphors in a complete album. Moreover, the integration of conceptual metaphor theory with qualitative analysis methods has proven effective in identifying and interpreting metaphors. Qualitative approaches allow researchers to examine context and meaning in detail. They provide flexibility in analyzing complex data. This is particularly important in literary studies. Song lyrics often contain nuanced and layered meanings. Quantitative methods alone may not capture these complexities. Therefore, qualitative analysis is essential in metaphor research. It ensures a deeper and more accurate interpretation of data (Ningrum & Wibowo, 2024).

In conclusion, the literature demonstrates that metaphor is a fundamental aspect of language, cognition, and literary expression. Conceptual metaphor theory provides a robust framework for analyzing metaphor. Previous studies highlight the importance of metaphor in song lyrics. They also reveal patterns of metaphor usage and their cognitive basis. However, gaps remain in the analysis of specific albums. This study builds on existing research by providing a comprehensive analysis of metaphors in song lyrics. It contributes to both theoretical and practical aspects of metaphor studies. Despite the growing body of research on metaphor in linguistic and literary studies, several challenges remain unresolved in the analysis of metaphorical expressions in song lyrics. One major issue lies in the tendency of previous studies to focus primarily on identifying and classifying metaphor types without sufficiently exploring their contextual meanings and broader educational implications. Many studies emphasize metaphor as a linguistic phenomenon but pay limited attention to how metaphorical expressions function within specific lyrical contexts to construct emotional and thematic meaning. In addition, existing research often examines individual songs rather than analyzing a complete album as an integrated discourse, resulting in a fragmented understanding of metaphor patterns. Another limitation concerns the insufficient discussion of how findings from metaphor analysis can be applied in English language education, particularly in developing learners' interpretative competence through authentic literary materials. These gaps indicate the need for a more comprehensive analysis that not only categorizes metaphorical expressions but also

interprets their meanings within a cohesive body of work and examines their pedagogical relevance. Addressing these limitations, this study investigates metaphorical expressions in Mandy Moore's *So Real* album through the lens of Conceptual Metaphor Theory and explores their implications for English language education.

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative research design to explore and interpret metaphorical expressions found in song lyrics. This approach is appropriate because the research focuses on understanding meanings, patterns, and linguistic phenomena rather than measuring numerical data. Qualitative design allows for in-depth interpretation of figurative language, particularly metaphors, within their contextual usage. The study is grounded in conceptual metaphor theory, which examines how abstract ideas are expressed through more concrete domains. By applying this framework, the research systematically categorizes and interprets metaphors. The descriptive nature of the study ensures that findings are presented clearly without manipulation of variables. Furthermore, this design supports a detailed examination of language as it naturally occurs in song lyrics. Alternative approaches such as corpus linguistics or mixed methods were not employed in this study. Corpus-based analysis typically requires large-scale datasets and emphasizes frequency patterns, which may overlook the nuanced and context-dependent meanings of metaphors in a relatively small and cohesive dataset such as a single album. Similarly, mixed methods approaches, while offering methodological triangulation, may shift the focus toward quantification and reduce the depth of interpretative analysis. In contrast, the qualitative descriptive approach provides a more flexible and context-sensitive framework, allowing for detailed exploration of metaphorical meaning, emotional nuance, and thematic coherence within song lyrics. This makes it particularly suitable for analyzing literary texts like song lyrics, where meaning is often implicit, layered, and open to interpretation. Therefore, the qualitative descriptive approach is considered the most suitable method for achieving the research objectives.



Figure 1. Research Flow Diagram

The population of this study consists of all song lyrics included in the *So Real* album by Mandy Moore. The album contains 13 songs, which serve as the primary source of data. Since the dataset is manageable in size, this study applies a total sampling technique, meaning all songs are included in the analysis. The unit of analysis is not the entire song, but rather specific phrases, clauses, or sentences that contain metaphorical expressions. These selected linguistic units are treated as data points. The sample is therefore purposive, focusing only on parts of the lyrics that demonstrate metaphor usage. This approach ensures that the analysis remains relevant to the research objectives. By including all songs, the study provides a comprehensive overview of metaphor usage within the album. Consequently, the findings reflect the overall stylistic pattern of the artist's lyrics.

Data were collected using documentation and observation techniques. The researcher first obtained the official song lyrics from reliable sources. After that, each lyric was carefully read multiple times to ensure full comprehension. The next step involved identifying metaphorical expressions by marking relevant words, phrases, or sentences. To support systematic analysis, the researcher developed an analysis instrument in the form of a classification table. This table includes columns such as song title, lyric excerpt, type of metaphor, and interpretation of meaning. The instrument is based on conceptual metaphor categories: structural, ontological,

and orientational metaphors. This framework helps ensure consistency in data classification. In addition, the researcher applied careful interpretation to avoid misidentifying literal expressions as metaphors. The use of structured instruments enhances the reliability and clarity of the data collection process.

The data analysis was conducted through several systematic steps. First, all identified metaphorical expressions were compiled and organized. Second, each expression was classified according to its type based on conceptual metaphor theory. Third, the researcher analyzed the relationship between source domain and target domain in each metaphor. Fourth, the meaning of each metaphor was interpreted contextually within the song lyrics. Fifth, the results were summarized and quantified to identify dominant patterns. Finally, conclusions were drawn based on the overall findings. This step-by-step analysis ensures that the interpretation is logical and well-structured. The qualitative nature of the analysis allows for deeper exploration of meaning. At the same time, simple quantification (frequency and percentage) is used to strengthen the findings. Therefore, the analysis combines interpretative depth with systematic organization.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of song lyrics in the *So Real* album by Mandy Moore identified a total of 28 metaphorical expressions distributed across three major categories: structural, ontological, and orientational metaphors. These findings indicate that metaphor usage in song lyrics follows systematic cognitive patterns rather than occurring randomly. The dominance of ontological metaphors suggests that abstract experiences, particularly emotions, are conceptualized through concrete representations. This pattern reflects how human cognition relies on embodied experience to interpret abstract meaning. Furthermore, metaphorical expressions contribute significantly to emotional intensity and interpretative depth in lyrical discourse. The results are consistent with previous research showing that metaphor is central to meaning construction in language and literature. Thus, metaphor functions as both a linguistic and cognitive tool in song lyrics. These findings reinforce the argument that metaphor is embedded in everyday communication and artistic expression (Fadhila & Juanda, 2023). This perspective is also supported by empirical analysis of metaphor in song discourse (Istama et al., 2024).

Table 1. Distribution of Metaphor Types

No	Type of Metaphor	Frequency	Percentage
1	Structural Metaphor	6	21.42%
2	Ontological (Container is a State)	10	35.71%
3	Ontological (Personification)	6	21.42%
4	Oriental Metaphor	6	21.42%
Total		28	100%

Source: Primary Data Research 2025

The distribution of metaphor types reveals that ontological metaphors, particularly the container subtype, occur most frequently. This dominance indicates that emotional and psychological states are often conceptualized as bounded entities. Structural, orientational, and personification metaphors appear with equal frequency, suggesting a balanced yet secondary role in shaping meaning. The findings demonstrate that metaphor usage is not evenly distributed but influenced by cognitive tendencies. Previous studies have similarly reported the predominance of ontological metaphors in song lyrics (Nasution et al., 2023). These studies argue that such metaphors help simplify complex emotional experiences and enhance comprehension (Trisnadi & Djuharie, 2025). Therefore, the distribution pattern observed in this study aligns with broader trends in metaphor research.

Structural metaphors in the analyzed lyrics demonstrate how one concept is understood through another more concrete domain. These metaphors often represent relationships, identity, and emotional attachment. For example, expressions such as “you are my dream” conceptualize a person as an idealized goal or aspiration. This mapping reflects a cognitive process where emotional experiences are structured through familiar conceptual frameworks. Structural metaphors enable listeners to interpret abstract feelings using relatable experiences. They also enhance the clarity and coherence of meaning in song lyrics. The use of such metaphors indicates that songwriters rely on shared cognitive patterns (Ningrum & Wibowo, 2024). These patterns allow audiences to easily understand complex emotional expressions and meanings (Bui & Bram, 2021). Consequently, structural metaphors function as a bridge between abstract and concrete meaning.

Ontological metaphors are the most dominant type identified in this study, particularly those categorized as “container is a state.” These metaphors conceptualize emotions as physical objects or bounded spaces. For instance, the expression “put my heart in your hands” represents emotions as transferable entities. This reflects a cognitive tendency to objectify abstract experiences. By treating emotions as tangible objects, these metaphors simplify complex psychological states. They also make emotional experiences more accessible and interpretable. Previous research confirms that ontological metaphors are widely used in song lyrics (Suryadi & Uctuvia, 2022). This suggests that human cognition naturally relies on physical analogies to understand abstract concepts (Nasution et al., 2023). Therefore, the dominance of ontological metaphors supports the principles of conceptual metaphor theory.

Personification, as a subtype of ontological metaphor, is also frequently observed in the data. This type of metaphor assigns human characteristics to abstract concepts or inanimate entities. For example, expressions such as “the nonsense stops here” imply that abstract ideas can perform intentional actions. This enhances the expressive quality of the lyrics. Personification allows abstract concepts to be perceived as active agents. This makes them more relatable and emotionally engaging for listeners. It also contributes to the dramatic effect of the lyrics. Previous studies have shown that personification is commonly used in song lyrics to intensify emotional expression (Istama et al., 2024). It provides vivid and dynamic representations of abstract experiences (Trisnadi & Djuharie, 2025). Therefore, personification plays an important role in both cognitive and stylistic aspects of language.

Oriental metaphors structure abstract concepts based on spatial orientation, such as up-down or in-out relationships. In the analyzed lyrics, these metaphors are often used to describe emotional states. Expressions like “feeling up” or “falling down” reflect emotional highs and lows. These metaphors are grounded in bodily experience. Humans naturally associate positive emotions with upward movement and negative emotions with downward movement. This spatial mapping is considered universal across cultures. Oriental metaphors provide an intuitive way to express emotions. Although they are less dominant, they still contribute significantly to meaning construction (Zhang & Hu, 2021). Their role in embodied cognition has also been widely discussed in language studies (Fadhila & Juanda, 2023).

The findings of this study strongly support conceptual metaphor theory, which argues that metaphor is a fundamental aspect of human cognition. The dominance of ontological metaphors indicates that abstract concepts are frequently understood through objectification. Structural metaphors further demonstrate how complex ideas are mapped onto familiar domains. Meanwhile, orientational metaphors reflect embodied experience and spatial reasoning. Together, these findings confirm that metaphor is not merely a stylistic feature but a cognitive mechanism. Previous research has consistently shown that metaphor shapes how individuals think and communicate (Nasution et al., 2023). It also influences how meaning is constructed in discourse (Ningrum & Wibowo, 2024). Therefore, the results align with theoretical perspectives in cognitive linguistics.

The predominance of container metaphors suggests that emotions are frequently conceptualized as entities that can be contained, transferred, or controlled. This reflects how individuals experience emotions as internal states. It also highlights the role of metaphor in expressing vulnerability and intimacy. The combination of different metaphor types indicates stylistic variation in song lyrics. Songwriters use multiple metaphorical strategies to enhance meaning and emotional impact. This variation contributes to the richness of lyrical expression. Furthermore, metaphor usage reflects both cognitive patterns and artistic creativity (Suryadi & Uctuvia, 2022). It also strengthens the connection between language and emotional experience (Istama et al., 2024).

The findings of this study show the dominance of ontological metaphors, particularly those conceptualizing emotions as containers, which is consistent with several previous studies in metaphor analysis of song lyrics. Prior research generally argues that ontological metaphors are prevalent because they allow abstract experiences to be represented in more concrete and accessible forms. However, not all studies report similar patterns. Some researchers have found that structural metaphors are more dominant, especially in lyrics that emphasize relational dynamics or identity construction. This difference suggests that metaphor usage may vary depending on the thematic focus and genre of the songs being analyzed. While this study highlights emotional conceptualization as the central pattern in the *So Real* album, other findings indicate that metaphor can also function primarily as a structural mapping tool rather than an emotional container. These variations imply that

metaphor distribution is not universal but influenced by the specific discourse context and artistic intention of the songwriter.

Furthermore, discrepancies in previous findings may also be linked to methodological differences. Studies employing corpus-based approaches often prioritize frequency and pattern detection, which may lead to different conclusions compared to qualitative analyses that emphasize contextual interpretation. For instance, corpus-driven studies tend to identify recurring metaphor patterns across large datasets, while qualitative studies, such as the present research, provide deeper insights into meaning construction within a limited but coherent dataset. As a result, what appears as dominant in one methodological framework may not be equally prominent in another. This inconsistency highlights the importance of methodological awareness in metaphor research. Therefore, the findings of this study should be understood not as definitive but as context-bound, reflecting both the specific characteristics of the *So Real* album and the interpretative nature of qualitative analysis.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that metaphor is a central component of song lyrics. It functions as both a cognitive and stylistic device. The dominance of ontological metaphors highlights how abstract concepts are grounded in physical experience. Structural and orientational metaphors complement this by providing additional layers of meaning. The results confirm that metaphor usage follows systematic patterns shaped by human cognition. These findings are consistent with previous research in linguistic studies (Trisnadi & Djuharie, 2025). They also emphasize the importance of metaphor in interpreting literary texts (Fadhila & Juanda, 2023). Therefore, analyzing metaphor provides valuable insights into meaning construction in song lyrics.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the types and meanings of metaphors found in the song lyrics of the *So Real* album by Mandy Moore through the lens of conceptual metaphor theory. The findings demonstrate that metaphor is a key element in shaping meaning, particularly in conveying emotional experiences. A total of 28 metaphorical expressions were identified and categorized into structural, ontological, and orientational metaphors. Among these, ontological metaphors—especially those representing emotions as containers—were the most prevalent, indicating that abstract feelings are frequently conceptualized as bounded and tangible entities. In addition, structural metaphors help organize abstract ideas through more familiar conceptual domains, while orientational metaphors provide spatial representations of emotional states. These patterns suggest that metaphor usage in song lyrics is systematic and closely linked to human cognitive processes rather than being merely decorative language.

Moreover, the study highlights the role of metaphor in enhancing both the expressive and interpretative dimensions of song lyrics. By transforming intangible emotions into more concrete forms, metaphors allow listeners to better understand and relate to the meanings conveyed. This demonstrates that metaphor functions as a bridge connecting language, cognition, and emotional experience. However, the scope of this research is limited to a single album, which may affect the generalizability of the results. Therefore, future research is encouraged to explore a broader range of musical works, incorporate cross-cultural perspectives, or apply mixed methods approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of metaphor usage in different contexts.

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