



An Analysis of Love Metaphors in Ed Sheeran's Song Lyrics

Yudhi Afrian¹, Indah Tri Purwanti², Maria Safriyanti³

^{1,2,3}Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, Universitas Riau, Pekanbaru, Riau, Indonesia

Article Info	Abstract
Received: 2026-12-10 Revised: 2026-08-29 Accepted: 2026-09-13 Keywords: Conceptual Metaphor; Ed Sheeran; Love Metaphors DOI: 10.24256/ideas.v14i2.8772 Corresponding Author: Yudhi Afrian yudhi.afrian214@gmail.com Universitas Riau, Pekanbaru, Riau, Indonesia	<i>This study examines the use of conceptual metaphors in Ed Sheeran's love-themed song lyrics to understand how emotional meanings are expressed through figurative language. The study aims to classify the metaphors, identify their frequency, and explain their conceptual meanings based on Conceptual Metaphor Theory. A descriptive qualitative design was employed using textual analysis of twenty selected love-themed songs. The lyrics were initially obtained from Genius and subsequently cross-checked with other available lyric sources to ensure consistency. The data were collected through observation and note-taking, followed by metaphor identification, classification, and interpretation. The analysis identified 106 metaphorical expressions categorized into structural, ontological, and orientational metaphors. Structural metaphors were the most dominant, accounting for 53% of the data, followed by ontological metaphors at 34% and orientational metaphors at 13%. The findings show that Ed Sheeran frequently conceptualizes love through dynamic and experiential mappings, particularly journey and unity, while ontological metaphors represent love as a concrete entity that can be held, owned, or contained. Orientational metaphors contribute spatial representations of emotional closeness and intensity. The novelty of this study lies in its systematic examination of conceptual mappings across a corpus of twenty love-themed songs, providing a broader analysis of metaphorical patterns than studies focusing on individual songs or other linguistic features in Sheeran's work. The findings contribute to the linguistic understanding of how metaphor structures emotional meaning in contemporary song lyrics and may also support the use of song lyrics as authentic materials for teaching metaphor and figurative language in English language learning. Although limited to a selected corpus, this study provides a systematic basis for further research on conceptual metaphors across other artists, songs, and musical genres.</i>

1. Introduction

Language is a fundamental medium through which humans' express thoughts, ideas, and emotions. It functions not only as a tool for conveying information but also as a cognitive instrument that shapes perception and guides human interaction (Yule, 2020). As a dynamic and evolving system, language adapts to the needs of its users and plays a crucial role in articulating experience and constructing identity (Akmajian et al., 2017). One of its most significant features is its ability to communicate meanings that extend beyond the literal level through figurative expressions. Among these, metaphor stands out as a pervasive and powerful linguistic device. Contrary to the belief that metaphors belong solely to poetry, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that metaphors structure not just language but also human thought and everyday experience. This conceptual function enables individuals to understand abstract experiences such as love, pain, and intimacy through more concrete imagery.

Song lyrics, as a form of creative expression, frequently employ figurative language to communicate personal emotions, social experiences, and cultural meanings (Low, 2017). Metaphors allow songwriters to express complex feelings that may be difficult to convey literally by relating abstract emotions to more concrete experiences (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The use and interpretation of metaphors can also vary according to cultural backgrounds and personal experiences because metaphorical conceptualisation is influenced by cognitive and cultural factors (Sharifian, 2017). Therefore, examining metaphors in song lyrics can provide insight into how linguistic choices contribute to the construction and interpretation of meaning in music (Zbikowski, 2002).

Research on figurative language has highlighted the role of metaphor in enhancing meaning and representing emotional experiences (Nurgiantoro, 2024). Studies in cognitive semantics further demonstrate that metaphor serves not only an artistic function but also plays a central role in conceptualising abstract and emotional experiences (Kövecses, 2010). At the same time, metaphorical expressions can present interpretative challenges because their meanings may be context-dependent and open to different interpretations, particularly in song lyrics (Pardede, 2013). These characteristics make a systematic analytical framework necessary. Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), provides such a framework by explaining metaphor as a systematic mapping between a source domain and a target domain. The source domain provides a more concrete or familiar structure, while the target domain represents the concept being understood through that structure.

Within CMT, it is important to distinguish between a linguistic metaphorical expression and a conceptual metaphor. A linguistic metaphorical expression refers to a particular word, phrase, or expression that is used metaphorically in a specific context. A conceptual metaphor, in contrast, represents the underlying conceptual mapping that connects two domains. For example, expressions involving travelling or movement may instantiate the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS A JOURNEY, in which the journey functions as the source domain and love or a romantic relationship function as the target domain. Thus, several different linguistic expressions may represent the same conceptual metaphor. This distinction allows metaphor analysis to move beyond identifying individual figurative expressions toward examining the conceptual structures through which abstract emotional experiences are understood (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2010).

Previous research has examined metaphors and other linguistic features in song lyrics across different languages, genres, and artists. Jannah and Istiqomah (2021) analysed conceptual metaphors of love in selected Kahitna songs using Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) framework and identified conceptualisations such as LOVE IS A JOURNEY, LOVE IS SACRIFICE, and LOVE IS UNITY. Their study demonstrates how conceptual metaphor can

be used to examine representations of romantic relationships in Indonesian song lyrics. In research focusing on Ed Sheeran, Nasution et al. (2018) investigated deixis in Ed Sheeran's *Divide* album and demonstrated how linguistic forms foreground personal experience and emotional intimacy, although their study focused on deixis rather than metaphor. Bora and Agung (2023) examined figurative language in Ed Sheeran's "Give Me Love" and found that metaphor was the most dominant figure of speech, indicating the importance of metaphor in expressing emotional meaning.

Similarly, Perkasa et al. (2024) examined figurative language in Sheeran's songs and identified metaphorical patterns including LOVE IS FIRE, LOVE IS WAR, and LOVE IS A JOURNEY. Fajar et al. (2024) also examined figurative language in Ed Sheeran's love-themed songs and found that metaphors frequently construct love as a dynamic emotional process. Beyond Ed Sheeran's work, Thu (2019) analysed structural metaphors in late-twentieth-century English love songs and identified recurring conceptualisations such as LOVE IS A JOURNEY and LOVE IS A GAME.

Although these studies establish the relevance of metaphor to the expression of love in song lyrics, they differ in terms of corpus, research focus, theoretical application, and analytical scope. Jannah and Istiqomah (2021) focused on selected Indonesian songs, whereas Thu (2019) examined English love songs from a broader corpus. Among studies of Ed Sheeran, Nasution et al. (2018) examined deixis rather than metaphor, while Bora and Agung (2023) focused on figurative language in a single song. Perkasa et al. (2024) and Fajar et al. (2024) examined figurative language in Sheeran's songs, but their broader focus differs from the present study's systematic examination of conceptual metaphor across a selected corpus of twenty love-themed songs. Consequently, although previous research has already investigated figurative language and metaphor in Ed Sheeran's songs, a focused analysis of how metaphorical expressions is distributed and organised into conceptual mappings across twenty love-themed songs remains valuable.

Therefore, the present study focuses on twenty love-themed songs by Ed Sheeran and examines how love and related emotional experiences are conceptualised through metaphor. Rather than claiming to investigate Sheeran's metaphors for the first time, the study contributes a systematic analysis of metaphorical expressions and their conceptual mappings across a relatively broad, thematically focused corpus. It examines both the distribution of metaphorical expressions and the conceptual structures underlying them, thereby providing a more linguistically oriented account of how emotional meaning is constructed through metaphor in contemporary song lyrics.

This study addresses the following research questions: (1) What conceptual metaphors related to love are found in Ed Sheeran's selected songs? (2) How frequently do these conceptual metaphors occur in the selected songs? and (3) How are love and related emotions conceptualised through these metaphors? The first question focuses on the classification of the conceptual metaphors identified in the lyrics, the second examines their distribution and frequency, and the third focuses on their conceptual interpretation and source-to-target mappings. By examining these dimensions, the study contributes to linguistic research on conceptual metaphor by demonstrating how abstract emotional experiences are systematically structured through metaphorical language in contemporary song lyrics.

2. Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to analyse metaphorical expressions of love in selected Ed Sheeran song lyrics. A qualitative approach was chosen because it enables an in-depth examination of linguistic features and how meanings are constructed and interpreted within their textual contexts (Creswell, 2014).

The study used textual analysis to identify, classify, and interpret metaphorical expressions and their underlying conceptual meanings (Smith, 2017).

The data consisted of the lyrics of twenty love-themed songs by Ed Sheeran. The songs were selected through purposive sampling based primarily on their thematic relevance to the study. Specifically, the selected songs focus on romantic love, relationships, or closely related emotional experiences and contain linguistic expressions relevant to the analysis of conceptual metaphor. This criterion was used to ensure that the selected corpus was directly aligned with the research objective of examining how love is metaphorically conceptualised. The selected songs and their corresponding albums, years of release, and number of lyric lines are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. List of Ed Sheeran's Selected Love Themed Songs

Title	Number of Lines	Album	Year
Autumn Leaves	34	+ (Plus)	2011
Drunk	50	+ (Plus)	2011
Give Me Love	64	+ (Plus)	2011
Kiss Me	52	+ (Plus)	2011
Sunburn	41	+ (Plus)	2011
Nina	78	x (Multiply)	2014
One	40	x (Multiply)	2014
Photograph	58	x (Multiply)	2014
Tenerife Sea	46	x (Multiply)	2014
Thinking Out Loud	38	x (Multiply)	2014
Bloodstream	70	x (Multiply)	2014
All of the Stars	45	x (Multiply)	2014
Dive	57	÷ (Divide)	2017
Happier	44	÷ (Divide)	2017
Hearts Don't Break Around Here	68	÷ (Divide)	2017
How Would You Feel	40	÷ (Divide)	2017
Perfect	35	÷ (Divide)	2017
Save Myself	37	÷ (Divide)	2017
Shape of You	91	÷ (Divide)	2017
Supermarket Flowers	38	÷ (Divide)	2017

The lyrics were initially obtained from Genius.com and subsequently cross-checked against other available lyric sources, including Ed Sheeran's YouTube channel, Spotify, and Apple Music, to ensure consistency of the textual data. The cross-checking process was conducted to minimise discrepancies between lyric sources. Data were collected through observation and note-taking. The researcher repeatedly read the selected lyrics and listened to the corresponding songs to understand their textual and emotional contexts. The researcher then identified expressions that conveyed metaphorical meanings related to love and related emotional experiences and recorded them for further analysis.

The unit of analysis was the linguistic metaphorical expression related to love. A metaphorical expression was treated as a word, phrase, or other linguistic expression whose contextual meaning involved a metaphorical conceptualisation of love or a related emotional experience. The identification process consisted of several stages. First, the researcher read the lyrics repeatedly and examined the contextual meaning of potentially metaphorical expressions. Second, expressions that represented love or related emotions

through a non-literal conceptual relationship were identified and recorded. Third, the identified expressions were compared with their surrounding textual contexts to determine their underlying conceptual meaning. Finally, the expressions were grouped according to their conceptual mappings and metaphor types using Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory, supported by Kövecses (2010).

For counting purposes, identical metaphorical expressions were treated as one expression, even when the same wording was repeated within a song or occurred in more than one selected song. Therefore, repeated occurrences of the same expression were not counted as separate metaphorical expressions. Using this procedure, the study identified 106 distinct metaphorical expressions. These expressions were subsequently organised into 27 conceptual mappings across structural, orientational, and ontological metaphors.

The analysis was guided primarily by Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory, particularly their classification of structural, orientational, and ontological metaphors. Kövecses (2010) was used to support the interpretation of metaphorical conceptualisation, particularly in relation to emotional experience and the relationship between source and target domains. The data analysis consisted of identification, classification, frequency calculation, and interpretation. First, metaphorical expressions related to love were identified from the selected lyrics. Second, the expressions were classified according to their underlying conceptual mappings and grouped into structural, orientational, and ontological metaphor types. Third, the frequency of each metaphor type and conceptual mapping was calculated. Finally, the identified mappings were interpreted by examining how knowledge from the source domain was used to structure the target domain of love and related emotional experiences.

Miles and Huberman's (1994) interactive model was used as a general framework for organising the qualitative data, particularly through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involved selecting expressions relevant to the research questions, while data display involved organising the identified expressions and their classifications in tables. Conclusion drawing involved interpreting the conceptual mappings and their contribution to the representation of love. The substantive analytical procedure remained focused on metaphor identification, classification, frequency calculation, and conceptual interpretation.

For the descriptive frequency analysis, the frequency of each major metaphor type was calculated from the total of 106 metaphorical expressions. The percentage for each category was calculated using the following formula:

$$\text{Percentage} = (\text{Frequency of category} / \text{Total number of metaphorical expressions}) \times 100$$

Thus, structural metaphors accounted for 56 of 106 expressions (53%), ontological metaphors accounted for 36 (34%), and orientational metaphors accounted for 14 (13%).

To strengthen the credibility of the analysis, the initial classification and interpretation were reviewed by three linguistics experts familiar with Conceptual Metaphor Theory. The experts reviewed the researcher's existing classifications and interpretations rather than independently coding the entire dataset. They examined whether the identified metaphorical expressions were appropriately classified according to their conceptual mappings and whether the interpretations were consistent with the theoretical framework. The experts provided comments and corrections where necessary, and their feedback was considered in refining the final categorisation and interpretation.

3. Result

The analysis identified a total of 106 metaphorical expressions of love across the selected Ed Sheeran song lyrics. These linguistic expressions were analysed using Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory and classified into three major metaphor types: structural, orientational, and ontological metaphors. From the 106 metaphorical expressions, 27 conceptual metaphors were identified. The distinction between these two figures is important. The 106 metaphorical expressions refer to individual linguistic realizations of metaphor occurring in the lyrics, whereas the 27 conceptual metaphors refer to recurring conceptual patterns or mappings through which those expressions are understood. Thus, several different linguistic expressions may instantiate the same underlying conceptual metaphor.

The classification was based on the dominant conceptual mapping expressed by each linguistic realization and its relationship to the source domain described in Conceptual Metaphor Theory. In cases where a linguistic expression may allow more than one interpretation, the classification adopted in this study follows the conceptual mapping that is most consistent with the expression's contextual meaning and the pattern established by the other expressions grouped under the same conceptual metaphor. Therefore, the categories represent the analytical interpretation adopted in this study rather than a claim that an expression cannot support an alternative interpretation.

The distribution of the 106 metaphorical expressions shows that structural metaphors constitute the largest category, with 56 instances (53%), followed by ontological metaphors with 36 instances (34%), and orientational metaphors with 14 instances (13%). The percentages are calculated using the total of 106 metaphorical expressions as the denominator. The findings therefore indicate that structural metaphors occur most frequently in the selected lyrics.

Table 2. Types of Love Metaphors in Ed Sheeran's Song Lyrics

Type of Metaphor	Frequency	Percentage
Structural Metaphor	56	53%
Orientalational Metaphor	14	13%
Ontological Metaphor	36	34%
Total	106	100%

The three major metaphor types contain 27 conceptual metaphors. These conceptual metaphors should not be understood as 27 additional units separate from the 106 expressions. Rather, they represent recurring conceptual patterns instantiated by the 106 expressions. For example, 15 metaphorical expressions were classified under LOVE IS A JOURNEY, meaning that the same conceptual metaphor is realized through multiple linguistic expressions. To ensure consistency, the percentages for all individual conceptual metaphors presented below are also calculated using the total of 106 metaphorical expressions as the denominator.

Table 3. Distribution of Conceptual Metaphors by Major Metaphor Type

Major Metaphor Type	Conceptual Metaphors	Amount	Percentage
Structural Metaphor	LOVE IS A JOURNEY	15	14%
	LOVE IS A WAR	2	2%
	LOVE IS A UNITY	6	6%
	LOVE IS A SHELTER	3	3%
	LOVE IS A PHYSICAL FORCE	4	4%
	LOVE IS A LESSON	2	2%
	LOVE IS A GAME	3	3%
	LOVE IS A FIRE	6	6%
	LOVE IS FOOD	1	1%
	LOVE IS MUSIC	3	3%
	LOVE IS A NATURAL FORCE	1	1%
	LOVE IS RAPTURE	3	3%
	LOVE IS MADNESS	1	1%
	LOVE IS MAGIC	1	1%
	LOVE IS A PAIN	5	5%
Orientational Metaphor	LOVE IS UP	2	2%
	LOVE IS DOWN	1	1%
	LOVE IS CLOSENESS	11	10%
	LOVE IS AN OBJECT	10	9%
	LOVE IS A HIDDEN OBJECT	5	5%
	THE LOVED PERSON IS A VALUED OR AESTHETIC OBJECT	4	4%
	LOVE IS A THEFT	1	1%
	LOVE IS WATER	1	1%
	LOVE IS A CONTAINER	4	4%
	LOVE IS A POSSESSION	6	6%
	LOVE IS A CAPTIVE ANIMAL	2	2%
	LOVE IS A NUTRIENT	3	3%
Total		106	100%

Note. Percentages are calculated using the total of 106 metaphorical expressions as the denominator. Frequency refers to the number of metaphorical expressions that instantiate each conceptual metaphor.

Structural Metaphors

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) state that structural metaphors occur when one concept is understood in terms of another, typically more concrete and familiar. Through this process, abstract experiences become easier to comprehend because they are organised using the structure of a well-known domain. In Ed Sheeran's lyrics, this is evident when love is conceptualised through ideas such as journeys, unity, or fire. By mapping love onto these familiar experiential structures, Sheeran portrays romantic relationships as dynamic, evolving, and deeply grounded in human experience.

Love is a journey

The conceptual metaphor LOVE IS A JOURNEY structures romantic love through elements associated with physical travel, such as movement, direction, distance, guidance, and destination. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) describe the JOURNEY source domain as a way of structuring experiences in terms of a path toward a destination. Therefore, an expression

is considered part of LOVE IS A JOURNEY when the movement or direction in the lyric can be mapped onto the development or experience of a relationship.

For example:

"But both of our hearts believe"

*"All of these stars will **guide us home**"*

(All of the Stars) (Sheeran, 2014)

The expression "guide us home" activates the source-domain elements of guidance and destination. The stars function as something that provides direction, while "home" represents a destination. These elements can be mapped onto the experience of love, in which the relationship is conceptualized as a path requiring direction toward a desired emotional destination. Thus, the lyric represents love as a journey because the relationship is structured through the concepts of guidance, movement, and destination.

Another example is:

*"I **drove miles and miles**, but would you do the same for me?"*

(Save Myself) (Sheeran, 2017)

The expression "drove miles and miles" directly evokes physical distance and movement. Within the metaphorical mapping, physical distance corresponds to the effort or extent to which a person is willing to go for another person. The question "would you do the same for me?" further connects the physical journey with emotional commitment and reciprocity. Therefore, the lyric conceptualizes love as a journey that may require effort, distance, sacrifice, and endurance.

Love is a unity

The conceptual metaphor LOVE IS A UNITY conceptualizes a romantic relationship as a unified whole formed by two individuals. This metaphor is supported by the source-domain concept of unity, in which separate parts become connected or form a single entity. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) explain that conceptual metaphors are based on systematic mappings between domains; therefore, expressions involving the formation, maintenance, or breaking of a unified entity can structure the experience of a relationship.

For example:

*"And time's the only reason that we could **break up**"*

(Nina) (Sheeran, 2014)

The expression "break up" is particularly relevant to the UNITY source domain because something that is unified can be separated or broken apart. In this context, the relationship is conceptualized as a unified entity that can be disrupted by an external force, represented by time. The metaphor therefore maps the physical experience of something being united and subsequently separated onto the emotional experience of a romantic relationship ending.

This interpretation is consistent with Kövecses (2010), who explains that emotional relationships can be conceptualized through physical structures and connections. The relationship is therefore not simply described as ending; it is structured as a unity that can be maintained or broken.

Love is a fire

This The conceptual metaphor LOVE IS A FIRE uses the experiential properties of fire, particularly heat, burning, ignition, and intensity, to structure the experience of love. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) explain, abstract emotional experiences are frequently understood through physical experiences. Fire provides a concrete source domain for expressing emotional intensity and passion.

For example:

*"She is the **flint** that **sparks the lighter**"*

*"And the **fuel** that will hold the **flame**, oh"*

(Hearts Don't Break Around Here) (Sheeran, 2017)

The expressions "flint," "sparks," "fuel," and "flame" clearly activate the FIRE source domain. The loved person is conceptualized as the source that initiates and sustains the flame. The mapping therefore connects the ignition and continuation of physical fire with the emergence and maintenance of romantic feelings. The metaphor portrays love as something that can be ignited, sustained, and intensified.

Another example is:

*"I feel the **chemicals burn** in my bloodstream"*

(Bloodstream) (Sheeran, 2014)

The word "burn" evokes the physical experience of heat and burning. In the context of the song, this physical sensation is used to represent the intensity of emotional experience. The metaphor consequently gives the abstract experience of love or emotional passion a bodily and physical quality.

Oriental Metaphors

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) explain that orientational metaphors organise concepts in relation to spatial direction, such as up, down, in, or out. These metaphors do not structure one concept in terms of another but instead provide a coherent spatial orientation that shapes how people understand emotional or abstract experiences. In Ed Sheeran's lyrics, orientational metaphors are frequently used to express emotional states and relational dynamics through vertical and spatial imagery, allowing listeners to conceptualise feelings of intimacy, elevation, or decline in terms of physical direction.

Love is up

The conceptual metaphor LOVE IS UP maps positive emotional states onto upward spatial orientation. This interpretation is consistent with Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) discussion of the association between being up and positive or desirable states.

For example:

*"**Getting high** as two kites when we needed to breathe"*

(Nina) (Sheeran, 2014)

The expression "getting high" describes upward movement and elevation. Within the context of the relationship, this upward orientation represents a positive emotional state and a feeling of relief or happiness. The comparison with "two kites" further strengthens the image of physical elevation. Thus, the spatial experience of being high is mapped onto the positive emotional experience associated with love.

Love is down

In contrast, LOVE IS DOWN conceptualizes negative emotional experiences or vulnerability through downward movement. In Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) framework, DOWN is commonly associated with negative states, loss of control, and diminished conditions.

For example:

*"**I could fall or I could fly** here in your aeroplane"*

(Dive) (Sheeran, 2017)

The word "fall" activates downward spatial orientation and contrasts with "fly," which represents upward movement. In the context of the relationship, falling can be interpreted as the possibility of emotional vulnerability or hurt, while flying suggests emotional

elevation. The contrast between the two directions therefore reflects the uncertainty and potential risks associated with romantic involvement.

Love is closeness

LOVE IS CLOSENESS is grounded in the spatial experience of physical proximity. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) identify the relationship between physical closeness and intimacy as a conventional conceptual mapping: emotional intimacy is understood through the experience of being physically close to another person. Kövecses (2010) similarly notes that emotional relationships are frequently conceptualized through bodily and spatial experiences.

For example:

"Holdin' me closer 'til our eyes meet"
(Photograph) (Sheeran, 2014)

The expression "holding me closer" explicitly activates physical proximity. The physical act of moving closer to another person is mapped onto emotional intimacy and attachment. The meeting of the eyes further reinforces interpersonal connection. Therefore, the lyric conceptualizes love through the spatial experience of closeness, where physical proximity represents emotional intimacy.

Ontological Metaphors

Lakoff and Johnson explain that ontological metaphors allow abstract concepts to be viewed as entities, objects, or substances. Through this process, an intangible experience such as love becomes something that can be held, found, kept, contained, or possessed. In Ed Sheeran's lyrics, ontological metaphors play a significant role in giving emotional experiences a concrete and physical quality. By treating love as an entity with form, boundaries, and substance, Sheeran makes complex feelings more tangible and relatable to listeners.

Love is an object

The conceptual metaphor LOVE IS AN OBJECT conceptualizes love as something that can be given, received, or physically handled. The metaphor is supported when an abstract emotional experience is treated as an entity that can participate in actions normally associated with physical objects.

For example:

"Give me love like never before"
(Give Me Love) (Sheeran, 2011)

The verb "give" normally involves the transfer of an object from one person to another. However, "love" is not a physical object that can literally be transferred. The expression therefore treats love as an object that can be given and received. This mapping makes the speaker's desire for affection more concrete and understandable.

Another example is:

"Your love was handmade for somebody like me"
(Shape of You) (Sheeran, 2017)

The word "handmade" normally describes a physical object produced or crafted by hand. By applying this property to "love," the lyric conceptualizes love as a crafted object. The metaphor suggests that the love is distinctive and particularly suited to the speaker.

Love is a possession

LOVE IS A POSSESSION conceptualizes love or the emotional relationship as something that can be owned or possessed. This classification requires more than the simple presence of possessive words; the expression must activate the source-domain concept of ownership or possession. This distinction is important because not every

expression containing “my,” “your,” “mine,” or “hers” necessarily constitutes a possession metaphor.

For example:

“But, darlin', just kiss me slow”

“Your heart is all I own”

“And in your eyes, you're holdin' mine”

(Perfect) (Sheeran, 2017)

The expression “Your heart is all I own” provides a clear mapping from the domain of possession to the domain of love. The heart, which represents the person's love or affection, is conceptualized as something that can be owned. The source-domain element of ownership is therefore mapped onto emotional attachment and commitment. This makes the example a stronger representation of LOVE IS POSSESSION than an expression that merely uses possessive grammar.

A similar example appears in:

“She was mine, I was hers and all that's in-between”

(Sunburn) (Sheeran, 2011)

The expressions “mine” and “hers” explicitly evoke the source domain of possession. Within the context of the relationship, the language frames the partners as belonging to one another. The metaphor therefore conceptualizes romantic attachment through the notion of possession and belonging.

Love is a hidden object

LOVE IS A HIDDEN OBJECT conceptualizes love as an entity that exists but is concealed and must therefore be searched for, discovered, or found. The classification is supported when the lyric combines love with source-domain actions such as looking, finding, hiding, or discovering.

For example:

*“Maybe we **found love** right where we are”*

(Thinking Out Loud) (Sheeran, 2014)

The expression “found love” treats love as something that can be discovered. The verb “found” normally applies to an object that exists in a particular location and can be located by someone. Love is therefore conceptualized as a hidden or undiscovered entity that becomes recognizable through the relationship.

Another example is:

“Well, I found love hidden inside”

“The arms of a woman I know”

(Hearts Don't Break Around Here) (Sheeran, 2017)

The expression “found love hidden inside” combines the concepts of discovery and concealment. Love is treated as something that exists within a particular location but is not immediately visible. This maps the physical experience of finding a hidden object onto the emotional experience of discovering love.

The findings show that structural metaphors are the most predominant type of metaphor in the data, with LOVE IS A JOURNEY being the most frequent structural metaphor identified. The selected examples show that the journey metaphor is supported by systematic source-domain elements such as movement, distance, guidance, and destination. Other structural metaphors, including LOVE IS A UNITY and LOVE IS A FIRE, conceptualize relationships through physical structures and experiences such as connection, separation, heat, ignition, and burning.

Orientational metaphors occur less frequently, with LOVE IS CLOSENESS being the most dominant. This metaphor is particularly grounded in the bodily experience of physical proximity, which is mapped onto emotional intimacy. The distinction between LOVE IS UP and LOVE IS DOWN is likewise supported by the conventional association of upward orientation with positive states and downward orientation with negative or vulnerable states (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Ontological metaphors form the second-largest category. The examples demonstrate how love is conceptualized as an object, possession, or hidden entity that can be given, owned, found, or discovered. These mappings give an abstract emotional experience a more concrete structure, making it possible to describe love through physical actions and relationships with entities in the physical world (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2010).

These interpretations are of significance as they illustrate how love is conceptualised within the lyrics, rather than making claims about Ed Sheeran's personal intention. The metaphors are therefore interpreted based on the linguistic expressions and the systematic mappings between their source and target domains.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study show that Ed Sheeran's selected song lyrics contain three types of conceptual metaphors: structural, ontological, and orientational. These three categories represent twenty-seven conceptualisations of love. This range of metaphors shows that love is conceptualised through different experiential domains, allowing an abstract emotion to be understood through familiar physical, spatial, and relational experiences. This finding aligns with Lakoff and Johnson (1980), who argue that metaphor is not merely a stylistic device but an important mechanism of human cognition.

Compared with previous studies, the metaphors identified in Ed Sheeran's lyrics show greater variation. Research by Thu (2019) and Jannah and Istiqomah (2021) also found structural metaphors to be prominent in love songs. However, direct claims that Ed Sheeran's metaphors are more varied than those in previous studies should be made cautiously because the studies differ in the number and selection of songs, research contexts, and analytical procedures. Therefore, the present findings are better understood as providing a detailed account of the metaphorical patterns identified within the selected Ed Sheeran lyrics rather than establishing greater variation across different song datasets.

Structural metaphors are the most dominant type at 53 percent. This suggests that love is frequently conceptualised through source domains that provide a structure for understanding movement, development, connection, and transformation. The mapping LOVE IS A JOURNEY is the most frequent example and frames relationships through elements such as movement, direction, obstacles, and destinations. In this mapping, lovers can be understood as travellers, the relationship as a path, difficulties as obstacles, and relationship goals as destinations. For example, "All of these stars will guide us home" maps guidance and destination onto the experience of love, while "I drove miles and miles" maps physical movement and distance onto emotional effort and commitment. Thus, the journey metaphor does not simply describe movement but provides a way of understanding love as an experience involving progression, effort, and direction. While Thu (2019) also identified LOVE IS A JOURNEY, differences in corpus size and selection criteria prevent a direct conclusion that Sheeran uses this metaphor differently from Indonesian love songs.

Orientational metaphors are the least frequent (13%) but remain important in establishing emotional meaning. The dominant mapping LOVE IS CLOSENESS reflects intimacy, attachment, and emotional proximity, while LOVE IS UP and LOVE IS DOWN representing positive and negative emotional states through spatial orientation. For example, "Holdin' me closer 'til our eyes meet" maps physical proximity onto emotional

intimacy. Similarly, upward and downward orientations can represent emotional elevation and vulnerability. These findings support studies by Pfaff et al. (1997) and Hermintoyo (2018), which also found that spatial orientation can be used to express emotion. However, although these metaphors are grounded in physical and spatial experience, their meanings in the selected lyrics are primarily psychological and emotional. Upward and downward orientations symbolize emotional satisfaction or disappointment, highlighting the mental states associated with romantic experience. Therefore, orientational metaphors in Ed Sheeran's selected lyrics function as spatially grounded ways of representing emotional states and changes within romantic relationships.

Ontological metaphors are the second largest category with 34 percent. These findings show that love is also conceptualised as a tangible entity that can be given, possessed, discovered, or experienced as a substance. For example, "Give me love like never before" treats love as something that can be transferred, while "Your heart is all I own" conceptualises emotional attachment through possession. Similarly, "Maybe we found love right where we are" represents love as something that can be discovered. Studies such as Hermintoyo (2018) also identified object and container metaphors in song lyrics. The present findings further include mappings such as LOVE IS A NUTRIENT and LOVE IS A CAPTIVE ANIMAL, showing that ontological metaphors can highlight different aspects of emotional experience, including nourishment, vulnerability, and constraint.

The dominance of structural metaphors can be understood through the relatively rich structure provided by their source domains. Concepts such as movement, progress, connection, and struggle are grounded in everyday experience and can provide relationships among several elements of an emotional situation (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2010). In particular, the JOURNEY source domain allows relationships to be represented through movement, direction, difficulties, and goals, which may correspond to the temporal and narrative development expressed in the selected lyrics. This interpretation is consistent with findings from Bora and Agung (2023) and Perkasa et al. (2024), although the present study does not claim that structural metaphors generally dominate popular music.

The findings also suggest that love can be understood through multiple conceptual mappings. A relationship may be conceptualised as a journey in one expression and as an object, fire, or source of pain in another. Such mappings are not necessarily contradictory because each source domain highlights a different aspect of the target concept (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2010). This demonstrates that metaphor can provide multiple perspectives on the same abstract experience rather than representing love through one fixed conceptualisation. However, the present study does not claim that this pattern is unique to Sheeran or that popular songs generally emphasize less complex emotional states, as such claims would require broader and comparable evidence.

The findings support a fundamental principle of Conceptual Metaphor Theory. Expressions such as LOVE IS A JOURNEY, LOVE IS A HIDDEN OBJECT, and LOVE IS A FIRE demonstrate how abstract emotional experiences are structured through familiar physical and experiential domains. The source-to-target mappings show that metaphor contributes to the organization of emotional meaning rather than functioning only as decorative language. The study therefore contributes to cognitive-linguistic research by demonstrating how different experiential domains provide systematic ways of conceptualising love in the selected song lyrics. In addition, the findings have pedagogical implications for EFL contexts, as metaphor-rich song lyrics can be used to teach figurative language, vocabulary in context, and critical reading by encouraging learners to identify the relationship between literal source domains and abstract meanings.

The findings should be interpreted within the limitations of the study. The analysis is based on a relatively small and purposively selected set of songs, and metaphor identification and classification involve an element of researcher interpretation. Some expressions may also involve overlapping conceptual domains. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to all of Ed Sheeran's songs or to popular music more broadly, and comparisons with previous studies should be interpreted cautiously because of differences in corpus size, song selection, cultural context, and analytical procedures.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the use of conceptual metaphors of love in a selected corpus of Ed Sheeran's song lyrics and identified twenty-seven metaphors across structural, ontological, and orientational types. The findings indicate that structural metaphors are the most prominent, suggesting that Sheeran frequently portrays love through dynamic and experiential concepts such as journeys or evolving processes. These results align with the core principles of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, emphasising that metaphorical expressions in the lyrics serve not merely as stylistic devices but as cognitive tools for understanding abstract emotions. However, the conclusions drawn from this study must be interpreted within its limitations, particularly the restricted number of songs analysed and the focus solely on love-related metaphors. Due to these boundaries and the inherently subjective nature of metaphor interpretation, the findings cannot be generalised to all of Ed Sheeran's works or to popular music more broadly.

Future research could expand the dataset by including a larger and more diverse selection of Ed Sheeran's songs or by comparing metaphor use across different artists, genres, or cultural contexts. Such comparative and cross-cultural studies may offer deeper insights into how figurative language reflects varying emotional or societal frameworks. Researchers may also consider integrating quantitative corpus-linguistic methods to capture broader patterns, or audience-reception approaches to examine how listeners perceive and interpret metaphors in music. Additionally, studies in applied linguistics could explore the pedagogical value of metaphor-rich song lyrics as learning materials for teaching figurative language in English, thereby extending the implications of this research into educational practice.

6. References

- Akmajian, A., Demer, R. A., Farmer, A. K., & Harnish, R. M. (2017). *Linguistics: An introduction to language and communication*. MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/4252.001.0001>
- Bora, J. T., & Agung, I. G. A. M. (2023). Figurative language used in Ed Sheeran's song "Give Me Love." *ELite Journal: International Journal of Education, Language and Literature*, 3(2), 67–76. <https://doi.org/10.26740/elitejournal.v3n2.p67-76>
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. SAGE Publications.
- Hermintoyo, M. (2018). Metaforis dalam lirik lagu populer bertemakan percintaan [Metaphors in popular love-themed song lyrics]. *Nusa: Jurnal Ilmu Bahasa dan Sastra*, 13(2), 291–300. <https://doi.org/10.14710/nusa.13.2.291-300>
- Jannah, R., & Istiqomah, K. (2021). Conceptual metaphor in Kahitna's song lyrics. *NOBEL: Journal of Literature and Language Teaching*, 12(2), 199–213. <https://doi.org/10.15642/nobel.2021.12.2.199-213>
- Kövecses, Z. (2010). *Metaphor: A practical introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. University of Chicago Press.
- Low, P. (2017). *Translating song: Lyrics and texts*. Taylor & Francis.

- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Nasution, D. R. A., Setiadi, G., & Ilza, S. S. (2018). Deixis analysis in the song lyrics of Ed Sheeran's *Divide* album. *English Language and Literature International Conference (ELLiC)*, 2, 376–382.
- Newmark, P. (1988). *A textbook of translation*. Prentice-Hall International.
- Nurgiantoro, B. (2024). *Teori pengkajian fiksi [Theory of fiction analysis]*. Gadjah Mada University Press.
- Pardede, P. (2013). Strategi penerjemahan metafora Bahasa Indonesia ke dalam Bahasa Inggris dalam antologi puisi *On Foreign Shores: American Image in Indonesian Poetry* [Strategies for translating Indonesian metaphors into English in the poetry anthology *On Foreign Shores*]. *Jurnal Dinamika Pendidikan*, 6(2), 56–62.
- Perkasa, I. M. D. F., Netra, M., & Beratha, N. L. S. (2024). Figurative language and its meaning on Ed Sheeran's song lyrics. *Kulturistik: Jurnal Ilmu Bahasa dan Budaya*, 8(1), 51–58. <https://doi.org/10.22225/kulturistik.8.1.6821>
- Pfaff, K. L., Gibbs, R. W., & Johnson, M. D. (1997). Metaphor in using and understanding euphemism and dysphemism. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 18(1), 59–83. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0142716400009875>
- Sharifian, F. (2017). *Cultural linguistics: Cultural conceptualisations and language*. John Benjamins Publishing.
- Sheeran, E. (2011). *Autumn Leaves. On + (Plus) [Album]*. Asylum Records. Retrieved from <https://genius.com/Ed-sheeran-autumn-leaves-lyrics>
- Sheeran, E. (2011). *Drunk. On + (Plus) [Album]*. Asylum Records. Retrieved from <https://genius.com/Ed-sheeran-drunk-lyrics>
- Sheeran, E. (2011). *Give Me Love. On + (Plus) [Album]*. Asylum Records. Retrieved from <https://genius.com/Ed-sheeran-give-me-love-lyrics>
- Sheeran, E. (2011). *Kiss Me. On + (Plus) [Album]*. Asylum Records. Retrieved from <https://genius.com/Ed-sheeran-kiss-me-lyrics>
- Sheeran, E. (2011). *Sunburn. On + (Plus) [Album]*. Asylum Records. Retrieved from <https://genius.com/Ed-sheeran-sunburn-lyrics>
- Sheeran, E. (2014). *All of the Stars. On X (Multiply) [Album]*. Atlantic Records. Retrieved from <https://genius.com/Ed-sheeran-all-of-the-stars-lyrics>
- Sheeran, E. (2014). *Bloodstream. On X (Multiply) [Album]*. Asylum Records. Retrieved from <https://genius.com/Ed-sheeran-bloodstream-lyrics>
- Sheeran, E. (2014). *Nina. On X (Multiply) [Album]*. Asylum Records. Retrieved from <https://genius.com/Ed-sheeran-nina-lyrics>
- Sheeran, E. (2014). *Photograph. On X (Multiply) [Album]*. Asylum Records. Retrieved from <https://genius.com/Ed-sheeran-photograph-lyrics>
- Sheeran, E. (2014). *Thinking Out Loud. On X (Multiply) [Album]*. Asylum Records. Retrieved from <https://genius.com/Ed-sheeran-thinking-out-loud-lyrics>
- Sheeran, E. (2017). *Dive. On ÷ (Divide) [Album]*. Asylum Records. Retrieved from <https://genius.com/Ed-sheeran-dive-lyrics>
- Sheeran, E. (2017). *Hearts Don't Break Around Here. On ÷ (Divide) [Album]*. Atlantic Records. Retrieved from <https://genius.com/Ed-sheeran-hearts-dont-break-around-here-lyrics>
- Sheeran, E. (2017). *How Would You Feel. On ÷ (Divide) [Album]*. Asylum Records. Retrieved from <https://genius.com/Ed-sheeran-how-would-you-feel-lyrics>

- Sheeran, E. (2017). Perfect. On ÷ (Divide) [Album]. Atlantic Records. Retrieved from <https://genius.com/Ed-sheeran-perfect-lyrics>
- Sheeran, E. (2017). Save Myself. On ÷ (Divide) [Album]. Atlantic Records. Retrieved from <https://genius.com/Ed-sheeran-save-myself-lyrics>
- Sheeran, E. (2017). Shape of You. On ÷ (Divide) [Album]. Atlantic Records. Retrieved from <https://genius.com/Ed-sheeran-shape-of-you-lyrics>
- Smith, J. A. (2017). Textual analysis. In *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods* (pp. 1–7). <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118901731.iecrm0248>
- Thu, N. T. H. (2019). Structural metaphor of love in English songs in the late 20th century from stylistic and cognitive perspectives. *JOALL (Journal of Applied Linguistics & Literature)*, 4(2), 185–202. <https://doi.org/10.33369/joall.v4i2.7797>
- Yule, G. (2020). *The study of language*. Cambridge University Press.
- Zbikowski, L. M. (2002). *Conceptualizing music: Cognitive structure, theory, and analysis*. Oxford University Press.