



## A Cognitive Analysis of Conceptual Metaphor in the Lyrics of Taylor Swift

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### Abstract

Where there is a language, there is a metaphor. Metaphor is a kind of cognition phenomenon that can reflect and influence human beings' mindset, so does lyrics. The present study aims to explore the general distribution and practical meaning of conceptual metaphor theory in the identified conceptual metaphors in the lyrics written by Taylor Swift. Based on a corpus of all the lyrics from the selected twenty Taylor Swift's most popular songs, the identified and categorized conceptual metaphors in the data are analyzed by discourse analysis in accordance to Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory. Upon investigation, the general distribution of conceptual metaphors in the selected lyrics written by Taylor Swift is mainly divided into two categories, structural metaphor and ontological metaphor. The result of the discourse analysis implies that conceptual metaphor plays a key role in the lyrics written by Taylor Swift.

**Key words:** Conceptual metaphor theory; Taylor swift; Lyrics; Structural metaphor; Ontological metaphor

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

As a universal phenomenon in language, metaphor has always been the research focus of linguists. Metaphor

is the necessary cognitive tool in the composition of the system of human thought, which is conceptual. Metaphor is ubiquitous, and that is the prominent characteristic of lyrics as well. Hence, this paper set to explore the general distribution and practical meaning of conceptual metaphor theory in the identified conceptual metaphors in the lyrics written by Taylor Swift, one of the most successful singer-songwriters in United States. On the basis of a self-built corpus contained all the lyrics from the selected twenty most popular songs written by Taylor Swift, the present study identifies and categorizes conceptual metaphors in the data with the application of AntConc in accordance to Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory, mainly presented in discourse analysis in detail. The result reveals that the general distribution of conceptual metaphors in the selected lyrics written by Taylor Swift is mainly divided into two categories, structural metaphor and ontological metaphor. To be more specific, three sub-metaphors that describe the existence and status of a love relationship, LOVE IS A JOURNEY, LOVE IS A GAME and LOVE IS HEART metaphors are identified and analyzed in detail. In terms of practical meaning, conceptual metaphor is such an important tool for Swift to express her feelings in the love relationship in the lyrics. Being a role model for the teenagers and an indispensable power of feminism in this era, Swift goes to great lengths to write songs that do make teenagers think about themselves, analyze how the young feels about something and then simplify how they feel by the adoption of all kinds of conceptual metaphors in her lyrics, which is exceedingly meaningful and worthy of appreciation. Hopefully this study may attract more attention of researchers on the application of conceptual metaphor.

### 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The earliest study of metaphor can be traced back to Aristotle (1952), who defined it as a kind of rhetorical.

In the work of Aristotle, Rhetoric and Poetics, metaphor is analyzed from many aspects in details including definition, working system and main functions of metaphor. In 1980s, Lakoff and Johnson published *Metaphors We Live By*, which is the representative of the cognitive study of metaphor. They systematically discuss the cognitive view of metaphor in the book, and argue that metaphor is not only the problem of language or words, on the contrary, people's thinking process is metaphorical. They put forward the conceptual metaphor theory, which aims to explain the metaphorical mapping between the cognitive domain and how the metaphor restricts human thinking and behavior.

In the meanwhile, the pervasiveness of conceptual metaphor used in lyrics context has called for much more enthusiastic academic endeavor in recent years. Quite a few scholars studied conceptual metaphor identified in lyrics from the perspective of Conceptual Metaphor Theory within the field of cognitive linguistics. Wu (2019) analyzed the lyrics of Chinese band, Mayday, and American band, Maroon 5, to determine the characteristics and style of lyrics of the two bands, and thus found the similarities and differences of the distribution of conceptual metaphors between Mayday' and Maroon 5's lyrics. Similarly, based on the theory of cognitive poetics and conceptual metaphor, Li (2018) analyzed the metaphorical languages in Bob Dylan's lyrics and their functions. Alternatively, other scholars had explored metaphorical phenomenon in lyrics written by Fang Wenshan (Zhang 2019) and Cui Jian (Xin 2015). What's more, one used the mixed method of combining the quantitative with qualitative analysis to investigate the conceptual metaphors applied in Faye Wong's lyrics (Liu 2015). However, neither foreign female singer nor foreign female songwriter is noticed in this field of study yet. Therefore, if take one of the most successful singer-songwriters in United States, Taylor Swift, as an example, what is the general distribution of conceptual metaphors in the selected lyrics written by Taylor Swift? What is the practical meaning of the application of conceptual metaphors in a large proportion of Taylor Swift's lyrics?

### 3. METHODS

This study focuses on investigating two categories of conceptual metaphor identified in the lyrics of Taylor Swift's songs, which are structural metaphor and ontological metaphor. The data of this research are adopted from the lyrics written by a renowned singer-songwriter, Taylor Swift. The author selects twenty Taylor Swift's most popular songs and collects the lyrics from the Taylor Swift's official website. The selected songs share the same topic, love, which makes the research more targeted. Then a small corpus of all the lyrics, 7449 words in total, is built up. In accordance to Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory during the identification

and categorization of conceptual metaphors in the data, the author searches a great many key words with the application of AntConc and found that Swift uses LOVE IS A JOURNEY metaphor for at least eleven times, LOVE IS A GAME and LOVE IS HEART metaphors each for at least seven times to describe the existence and status of love. These three sub-metaphors and their concrete examples in the data will be analyzed in the next part accordingly, by presenting the mappings between three different source domains in the lyrics, which are journey, game and heart, and one shared target domain, which is love.

## 4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Analysis

Lakoff and Johnson stated that "because the metaphorical concept is systematic, the language we use to talk about that aspect of the concept is systematic (1980)". In *Metaphors We Live By*, they divided conceptual metaphor into three categories, namely structural metaphor, orientational metaphor and ontological metaphor. Since their classification of conceptual metaphor is accepted by the majority of the metaphor researchers, this paper follows their classification of conceptual metaphor. Due to the restrict of the content, the following analysis focuses on investigating two categories of conceptual metaphor identified in the lyrics of Taylor Swift's songs, which are structural metaphor and ontological metaphor. Having analyzed the data from the self-built corpus of the lyrics of twenty Taylor Swift's most popular songs with the assistant of AntConc, it is found that Swift uses LOVE IS A JOURNEY, LOVE IS A GAME and LOVE IS HEART metaphors to describe the existence of love. Love is the most frequently adopted word in Swift's songs. Furthermore, love is the permanent topic that can be identified in lyrics of all kinds of singers. Therefore, all the sub-metaphors analyzed below are related to love which will be elaborated in this part.

#### 4.1.1 Structural Metaphor

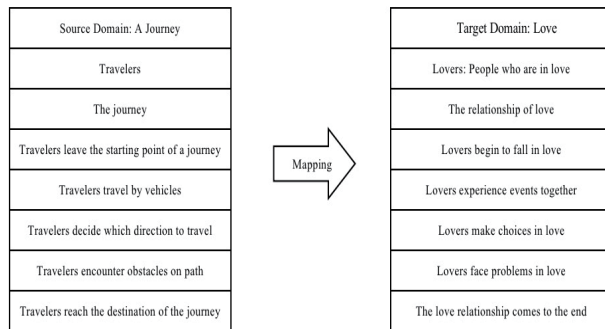
Structural metaphors are, defined by Lakoff and Johnson, cases where one concept is metaphorically structured in terms of another (2003). Source domains provide frameworks for target domains and that determines the ways in which people think and talk about the entities and activities to which the target domains refer, and even the ways in which people behave or carry out activities.

##### 4.1.1.1 JOURNEY Metaphor

###### a. The Journey Denoting The Relationship of Love

The JOURNEY metaphor is a famous example of metaphor in English. In the well-known book *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) analyzes this metaphor and provides several metaphorical expressions in plain English. What's more, Kövecses (1986, 1988,

2000) furthers the discussion about this metaphor in detail. Being in a love relationship is like starting a new journey. There will be different stages and, sometimes, intervals as a love relationship develops. So do a journey. After lovers start a journey of their own, they would keep moving from one stage to another and during the process problems or difficulties may occur. Love shares the similar features with those of a journey, this metaphor therefore constructs the mapping between journey and love.



**Figure 1**  
**Journey metaphor**

Were driving down **the road**  
 I wonder if you know  
 There's a glow off **the pavement**  
 —*Fearless*  
 Don't know what's down this **road**  
 I'm just walking trying to see through the rain coming  
 down  
 —*A Place in This World*  
 Now I'm pacing down the hall chasing down **the street**  
 —*If This Was A Movie*

In Example (1), Swift draws a picture that a boy and a girl are in love and going out for a date. The boy drives along the road and the girl feels so relaxed and happy that she notices and appreciates the beautiful glow of the sunshine on the pavement. Actually “the road” indicates that their love relationship is established. They just start a journey and hit the road together. The girl in Example (2) also falls in love, however, she does not fully understand the situation nor have a confident foresight of this relationship, because she is not sure whether they will get along well with each other and how will this love influence her. For Example (3), the girl is quite courageous and decides to face up with her feelings and chase after love.

I tried to take the **road** less traveled by  
 But nothing seems to work the first few times  
 —*The Outside*  
 He can't keep his wild eyes on the **road**  
 —*Style*  
 Here, road is mapped onto the love relationship between two lovers. In Example (4), “the road less traveled by” stands for a kind of love relationship that

adopts very unique pattern which eventually fails. While Example (5) describes a bad lover who could not satisfy with one exclusive lover but continuously searches for another.

**b. Travelers travel by vehicles denoting lovers experience events together**

So baby **drive slow**  
 ‘Til we run out of road in this one horse town  
 —*Fearless*  
 Small talk, he **drives**  
 Coffee at midnight, polite reflects  
 —*You Are In Love*

Example (6) and (7) both illustrate a classic scene that two lovers stay in a car and have a good time. People in love do not care about the speed of the drive or the time of the date, as long as they can stay together.

So I **drive home alone**, as I turn out the light  
 I'll put his picture down and maybe get some sleep  
 tonight  
 He's the reason for the teardrops on my guitar  
 —*Teardrops on my Guitar*  
 Midnight, you come and pick me up  
 No head lights  
**Long drive**, could end in burning flames or paradise  
 —*Style*  
**The drive** was the fairy worst  
 When the flowers that we'd grown together died of  
 thirst  
 —*Clean*

Nonetheless, lovers will eventually experience some relatively disappointing issues during the process. Example (8) (9) (10) imply that situation by evaluating “the drive” as lonely, long and worst.

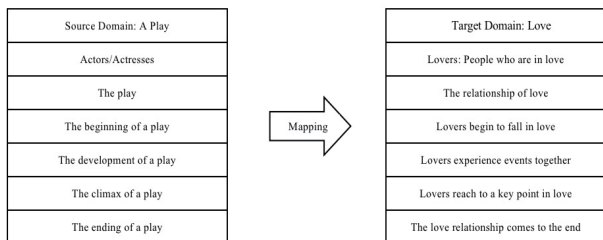
**c. Travelers reach the destination of the journey denoting the love relationship comes to the end**

His love was like driving a new Maserati down a **dead end street**  
 Faster than the wind, passionate as sin, ending so  
 suddenly  
 —*Red*

As is mentioned above, journey is not always smooth, so probably some of the couple could not resolve their problems and finally reach the destination of their journey, which is the end of their relationship as well.

**d. PLAY metaphor**

This structural metaphor constructs a metaphorical mapping which is presented by the form here: source domain is play, and the target domain is love. In addition to music, plays, an innovative way to express emotions, are playing an important role in our daily life. Generally speaking, a play is comprised of four sections: beginning, development, climax and ending. The process of a love relationship between lovers tend to have the same stages, too. Hence, the features of a play can be mapped onto those of love.



**Figure 2**  
**PLAY metaphor**

**a. A play denoting a love story**

If you and I are a **story**  
That never gets told

—*Stay Beautiful*

And you come away with a great little **story** of a mess  
of a dreamer with the nerve to adore you.

—*Cold as you*

I used to think one day we’d tell the **story** of us  
How we met and the sparks flew instantly  
When it all broke down  
The story of us looks a lot like a **tragedy** now

—*The Story Of Us*

Different plays represent different kinds of love. Almost everyone in the beginning stage of love is so enthusiastic that he or she want to tell every detail of their love story to people around. It is hard to admit, however, some love stories are merely tragedies in the end.

**b. The beginning of a play denoting lovers begin to fall in love**

I can see the end as it **begins**

—*Wildest Dreams*

But on a Wednesday in a cafe  
I watched it **begin** again.

—*Begin Again*

The beginning of a love story is always beautiful and innocent, just like those of many famous plays. But love is complicated and hard to guess sometimes. Perhaps some stories have already set some clues of bad ending as is described in Example (15) or some will have surprising turning points in the later stage as Example (16).

**4.1.1.2.3 The ending of a play denoting the love relationship comes to the end**

Oh, we’re scared to see the **ending**  
But the story of us might be **ending** soon

—*The Story Of Us*

All well that **ends** well to end up with you

—*Lover*

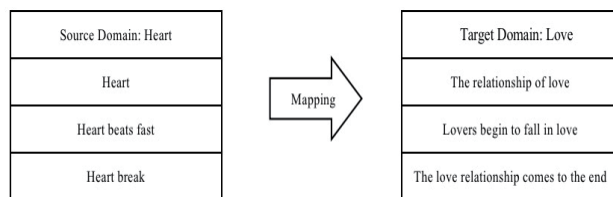
The cruel fact that not every love relationship works out and has happy ending is also reflected in plays. However disappointing, we all have to accept that there is an ending of a play, no matter how wonderful it was. An ending is another beginning, as is discussed in the above. Carry on, go ahead to admire another play or engage in another love relationship are not necessarily bad things.

**4.1.2 Ontological Metaphor**

Ontological metaphor, entity metaphor or substance metaphor, is based on the experience of physical objects and substances. The experiences of objects provide the material foundation to understand abstract conceptual expression as entity. Understanding the experiences in terms of objects and substances allows people to pick out parts of their experience and treat them as discrete entities or substances of a uniform kind. Once we can identify our experiences as entities or substances, we can refer to them, categorize them, group them, and quantify them—and, by this means, reason about them (Lakoff and Johnson 2003). People understand unfamiliar, intangible and abstract concept through familiar, tangible and concrete concept.

**4.1.2.1 PERSON metaphor**

Entity and substance metaphor means regarding experience as entity or substance, and understanding the former through the latter, therefore, experience can be described materially, such as reference, quantification and classification. In other words, entity and substance metaphor treats abstract concept as visible concrete objects. Love is again the target domain, and heart is mapped onto love.



**Figure 3**  
**Person metaphor**

**a. Heart denoting the relationship of love**

Last night I heard my own **heart beating**  
Sounded like footsteps on my stairs

—*If This Was A Movie*

That July 9th  
The beat of your **heart**  
It jumps through your shirt

—*Last Kiss*

My **heart** been borrowed and yours has been blue

—*lover*

They say home is where the **heart** is

—*London Boy*

Example (19) highlights heart beating to express the girl’s complex mental state of falling in love, suggesting that she is excited, curious and confused at the same time; Example (20) uses the beat of one’s heart to indicate the existence of that person and the love relationship; Example (21) means that one is engaged in a relationship while the other one is hurt by someone else before they finally meet with each other.

## b. Heart break denoting the love relationship comes to the end

**Heart break** is the national anthem

—*New Romantics*

He's the reason for the teardrops on my guitar

The only one who's got enough for me to **break my heart**

—Teardrops on my Guitar

Why would you wanna **break a perfectly good heart?**

—A Perfectly Good Heart

This is one of the most pervasive metaphors used in lyrics, poetry or plays whose theme is love. By heart break, it means that one party is deeply hurt by the other party when the two establish a love relationship. Example (23) builds the image of an independent and powerful woman who is not afraid of failing in love and keep trying, while Example (24) and (25) are the reflection of teenage love in which the girl is the one who tend to be degraded by the boy she loved

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## DISCUSSION

Taylor Swift, born on December 13, 1989 in Pennsylvania, USA, winner of the highest achievement AMA award, ARTIST OF THE DECADE, ten Grammy Awards and millions sold copies of her albums in solely U.S. market, is one of the most successful singer-songwriters in America. More than a half of the songs in all her albums are composed by herself. All the trophies received recognize Swift's hard work in music who elaborates the topic "love" in an overwhelming proportion of her songs, using LOVE IS A JOURNEY, LOVE IS A GAME, LOVE IS HEART and many other metaphors. There are critics and media, however, criticize Swift of the fact that she wrote many love songs to express her feelings in the love relationship with male. They put a very irritating, negative, spin on her lyrics, even her style of making music, as if it is oversharing or too much information, which has merely been the way she lived her life and run her career. Furthermore, the truth is that there are also a large number of male musicians and songwriters who write songs about their girlfriends and ex-girlfriends, but no criticism, even no joke, is never made about them. The great achievements and the determined continuous hard work made by Swift are, therefore, the demonstration of the power of feminism in this era. Especially, Swift has built a huge platform among a very vulnerable but impressionable set of the population, among which are mostly the teenagers. So Swift, in terms of not only lyrics of her songs but personal image, is bearing huge responsibility of guiding those teenagers to correctly build up their self-esteem and self-image in their formative years.

By putting such emphasis on expressing and reflecting on the topic of love, Swift is actually turning her lens of

music inward and turning it from the diary perspective to send a broader message to girls who would be really receptive to hearing about positive ideas and the colorful world outside. Swift writes about sweet love story when she is in a happy love relationship and sad story when she is treated in the rude way by male. There are all kinds of emotions involved in a love relationship, and Swift set them down in plain words but also combined with accurate metaphors. The significant message delivered by Swift's lyrics is that a female is able to talk about her intimate feelings towards love relationship, which contributes to the thrive of girl power. It is such important that a 12-year-old girl understands what that means and thereafter knows what it is to be a woman in today's society, in the workplace or in the media or perception. Moreover, at any age, but mostly the age of one's adolescence, what can be so overwhelming is that one is experiencing so many things at the same time that it is difficult to actually understand what those emotions are, which is likely to turn to anxiety very quickly. Therefore, the best thing Swift can do for the teenagers is continue to write songs that do make them think about themselves and analyze how they feel about something and then simplify how they feel by the adoption of all kinds of metaphors in her lyrics.

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## CONCLUSION

On the basis of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the main body of this paper deals with the interpretation of conceptual metaphors in the selected lyrics written by Taylor Swift. To answer the first research question, the general distribution of conceptual metaphors in the selected lyrics written by Taylor Swift is mainly divided into two categories, structural metaphor and ontological metaphor. To be more specific, three sub-metaphors that describe the existence and status of a love relationship, LOVE IS A JOURNEY, LOVE IS A GAME and LOVE IS HEART metaphors are identified and analyzed in detail. For the second research question, it has been answered in the discussion part in Chapter 4. Furthermore, conclusions can be drawn as follow. First, conceptual metaphor is such an important tool for Swift to express her feelings in the love relationship in the lyrics. Second, having analyzed the data from the self-built corpus of the lyrics of twenty Taylor Swift's most popular songs with the application of AntConc, it is found that top three source domains in the lyrics are journey, game and heart, and they all project to the same target domain, which is love. Last but not least, Taylor Swift is a role model for the teenagers and an indispensable power of feminism in this era. Her unwavering efforts to write songs that do make teenagers think about themselves and analyze how they feel about something and then simplify how they feel by the adoption of all kinds of conceptual metaphors in her lyrics is meaningful and worthy of appreciation.

The present study provides reference for future related researches as to better understand and explore the application of conceptual metaphors in lyrics and other similar literary forms. Owing to the inevitable limitation of qualitative analysis approach, however, the manual identification of conceptual metaphors is somewhat subjective and needs to be further discussed on the basis of more researches in this area. Despite that the identification and categorization of conceptual metaphors in the excerpt text are strictly conducted in accordance with the standard and definitions compiled and evaluated by prestigious researchers in this field, the result still reflects a sense of subjectivity. Future research, therefore, may scale up the materials to be analyzed and conduct research with both qualitative and quantitative analysis approaches in order to be more persuasive and as objective as possible. All in all, hopefully there will be more and more studies on relevant topics of conceptual metaphor.

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