

A Study of Figurative Language That Conveys Connotation Related to American Cultural Values in Pop Songs: The Case of Taylor Swift^{*}

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Abstract

The main objectives of this study are: 1) to identify common connotations expressing American cultural values through figurative language in Taylor Swift's songs, and 2) to analyze how those American cultural values are conveyed by figures of speech. The frameworks employed in this study are those of figurative language and connotation (Partington, 1998 cited Leech, 1974; Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 2005; Ray, 2007; 2008; Carroll, 2008; Pence, 2012) and American cultural values suggested by different experts (e.g. Hofstede, 1984; Nooteboom, 2002; Perry, Chase, Jacob, and Von Laue, 2008; Brewer, 2009; Hollander, 2011; Lamb, Hair, & McDaniel, 2011). This qualitative study employs the methods of descriptive and interpretive content analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

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Three common types of figure of speech that express connotations related to American cultural values were found: metaphor, simile, and hyperbole. Four aspects of American cultural values of love and care, individualism, honesty and trust, and liberalism were revealed through four main themes: bond and relationship, independency, honesty, and dignity respectively. These types of figure of speech play different roles in connoting American cultural values. With shared background knowledge between the lyricist and the audience, metaphors and similes were employed in the songs to help convey American cultural values that the lyricist wanted to share by empowering the intended messages with the device of making indirect and direct comparison between certain entities and intended meanings. The employment of hyperbole was employed to emphasize the intended values by exaggerating the connoted messages. In brief, the three types of figure of speech appear to be powerful tools in Taylor Swift's songs to express American cultural values. This finding seems to suggest that the power of these literary devices should effectively express intended messages in other genres of literary work and in any culture as well.

Keywords: Pop songs; American culture; figurative language

บทคัดย่อ

จุดประสงค์หลักของงานศึกษานี้คือ 1) ระบุความหมายนัยประหวัดที่พบบ่อยที่สื่อถึงค่านิยมทางวัฒนธรรมอเมริกันผ่านภาษาภาพพจน์ในเพลงของเทย์เลอร์ สวิฟต์ (วิเคราะห์ความหมายนัยประหวัดต่างๆ ในเพลงทั้ง 39 เพลงของอัลบั้มทั้ง 3 ที่วางจำหน่ายระหว่าง พ.ศ.2546-พ.ศ.2550) 2) วิเคราะห์บทบาทของภาษาภาพพจน์ว่าสื่อค่านิยมทางวัฒนธรรมอเมริกันออกมาอย่างไร กรอบทฤษฎีที่

ใช้ในงานศึกษาชิ้นนี้ประกอบด้วยภาษาภาพพจน์กับความหมายนัยประหวัด และคำนิยามทางวัฒนธรรมอเมริกันที่กล่าวไว้โดยผู้เชี่ยวชาญท่านต่างๆ งานวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพชิ้นนี้ใช้หลักการอธิบายและตีความข้อมูลตามวิธีวิเคราะห์เนื้อหา

จากการศึกษาพบโวหารภาพพจน์ 3 ประเภทที่สื่อความหมายนัยประหวัดเกี่ยวกับคำนิยามทางวัฒนธรรมอเมริกัน ได้แก่ คำอุปมา การเปรียบเทียบ และอริพจน์ ความหมายนัยประหวัดเหล่านี้เผยให้เห็นคำนิยามทางวัฒนธรรมอเมริกัน 4 ประการ ได้แก่ ความรักและความห่วงใย บัณฑิตนิยม ความซื่อสัตย์กับความเชื่อมั่น และเสรีนิยม ซึ่งถูกถ่ายทอดผ่านความหมายนัยประหวัดของประเด็นความหมายทั้งสี่ที่เกี่ยวกับพันธะกับความสัมพันธ์ ความเป็นปัจเจก ความซื่อสัตย์และความมีเกียรติ ตามลำดับ กล่าวคือด้วยประสบการณ์และภูมิความรู้ทางสังคมที่มีร่วมกันกับผู้ประพันธ์ ได้สื่อลีลาของการใช้คำอุปมาและการ เปรียบเปรยเป็นเครื่องมือในการทำความเข้าใจความหมายของคำนิยามอเมริกันที่ต้องการสื่อสารชัดเจนและมีพลัง นอกจากนี้อดีตพจน์ถูกใช้เพื่อเน้นย้ำคำนิยามที่ผู้ประพันธ์ต้องการสื่อโดยการกล่าวข้อความเกินจริงเพื่อสื่อความหมายนัยประหวัด สรุปคือโวหารภาพพจน์ทั้ง 3 ประเภทที่พบเป็นเครื่องมือที่ทรงพลังในเพลงของเทย์เลอร์ สวิฟต์ที่ช่วยสื่อคำนิยามทางวัฒนธรรมอเมริกันกลับมาสู่ผู้ฟัง ข้อมูลที่พบในงานศึกษาชิ้นนี้ชี้ให้เห็นว่าการถ่ายทอดความหมายต่างๆ ซึ่งรวมถึงคำนิยามทางสังคมด้วยศิลปะการใช้ภาษาภาพพจน์เช่นนี้ อาจนำไปประยุกต์ใช้ได้กับงานวรรณกรรมทุกๆ ประเภท และในทุกๆ วัฒนธรรม

คำสำคัญ: เพลงป๊อป; วัฒนธรรมอเมริกัน; ภาษาภาพพจน์

Introduction

Songs are messages that transfer the points of view of the lyricists to their audience (Hollaway and Cheney, 2001). They appeal to people's attitudes as they can stimulate personal feelings of love, confidence, desire or freedom.

In this modern era, a variety of modern genres have been developed. American artists are regarded as one of the most influential groups inspiring these modern genres of songs such as pop, R&B and hip hop. In particular, pop songs appear to be one of the most interesting and popular genres because their lyrics make use of simple language features that connote the popular cultures of the society. As a result, the messages conveyed through pop songs can be easily perceived by a wide variety of audience (Frith, Wil, and John, 2001).

One of the outstanding American pop song lyricists in the twenty-first century is Taylor Swift. One reason for her popularity results from the fact that her lyric style is considered exceptional and distinguishes her from other lyricists since her lyrics tell her own life stories from the past to the present (Hirschberg, 2009) which seems to reflect some major American cultural values shared among the members of the society. Hence, her songs should provide some interesting pictures of American cultural values.

A prominent language feature which is commonly used in pop songs is connotation (Elicker, 1997). Instead of expressing intended messages directly, they provide the audience a wide range of opportunities for interpretation. Figurative language is commonly employed as a tool to construct connotations (Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen, 2005).



Figure 1 Taylor Swift

from: www.guitargirlmag.com

Since songs reflect social phenomena, one aspect of the messages in pop songs regards cultural values that are shared between lyricists or singers and the audience (Frith et al., 2001). The term “cultural value” is described as general beliefs or perceptions of people towards the cultures of a certain society. Since the messages found in American pop songs mostly concern American cultural values, it is interesting to study perspectives towards such values; however, there seems to be a small number of studies regarding connotations that express American cultural values in American pop songs. Hence, it is the main interest of the present study to explore the phenomenon of this connection which is explicitly displayed through the work of Taylor Swift.

Research Questions

1. What are the common American cultural values connoted by the figures of speech in Taylor Swift's songs?
2. How are those common American cultural values conveyed by the figures of speech in Taylor Swift's songs?

Review of Literature

This part presents the literature related to theories including connotation, figurative language, and American cultural values to construct a theoretical framework for the data analysis and the discussions of this study.

Connotation and Figurative Language

Connotation is a meaning that deviates from the core meaning of lexicon (Partington, 1998 cited Leech, 1974) which is constructed by figurative language (Caroll, 2008). In literary works such as lyrics used in songs, figurative language is commonly employed to connote cultural values (Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen, 2005) using entities or concepts that are commonly shared between senders (e.g. lyricists) and the receivers (e.g. the audiences) to express the intended messages, such as cultural values in a society.

Types of Figure of Speech

There are various types of figure of speech employed in literary works. In the genre of poetry, nine types of figure of speech are described in Ray (2007; 2008) as common devices. Thus to suit the objective of this present study, Ray's list of these devices will be employed. Also, from the previous studies reviewed (Dhepanont, 2005; Chaktirit, 2008) and the

preliminary survey of the thirty-nine Taylor Swift's songs, ten more common types of figure of speech suggested by Pence (2012) were added. This finally added up to a framework of 19 types of figure of speech employed as a guideline in this study as summarized below. It should be noted that 1) for the purpose of clarity, examples are provided for some less common devices; 2) due to space constraints, details of some suggested devices that were rarely evidenced in this present study (e.g. meiosis, polyptoton, antithesis, pun, litotes, allegory, paradox, oxymoron, rhetorical question, personification, metonymy, allusion, synecdoche and anaphora) are not presented.

1. Metaphor: an expression of the similarities between two dissimilar entities that have something in common for the purpose of making comparison.
2. Simile: an expression that parallels two entities using a word such as 'like' or 'as'.
3. Hyperbole: an exaggeration of the stated fact through use of words to emphasize the intended message. For example, the expression "I can't breathe without you," emphasizes how important the person is to the speaker by exaggerating the feeling that the speaker can no longer live without the person he/she was addressing.
4. Irony: a way in which a word or a statement conveys contrastive meaning to the content. For example, when a plump boy is told that he is slim, the statement is irony.

American Cultural Values

Cultural values are social concepts that are judged by groups of people who share common agreements within a particular society (Lamb, Hair and McDaniel, 2010). Similarly, American cultural values are concepts

shared and understood among the members in American society. Meanwhile, some cultural values that appear universal but are also found prominent in American society are considered as 'American' as well.

In American society, there is a great variety of cultural values that dwell and guide Americans' ways of living. The following section presents the reviewed literature regarding the prominent American values including those that seem to originate in American society and other values perceived universally but also appear common in America. (Due to space constraint, details of some American cultural values that were rarely evidenced in this present study (e.g. materialism, capitalism and hope) are not presented.)

(a) Individualism is a principle that emphasizes the significance of an individual who can achieve goals on their own accord. This principle is reflected through the behaviors or characteristics of self-reliance, self-confidence, commitment and pride etc. in each person which can be observed in a variety of actions (Hofstede, 1984; Oyserman and Markus, 1993 cited in Brewer and Hewstone, 2004). For example, a person who takes up a part-time job to support and pave his own way in life without aid from his guardians is a proof that he believes in himself to achieve his objectives.

(b) Liberalism is the belief that every individual has his rights which need to be respected by community members. In other words, the belief emphasizes dignity and freedom in each individual (Perry et al., 2008). On the other hand, some scholars (Lukes, 1991 cited in Ashford and LeCroy, 2008) mentioned the principle of 'tolerant liberalism' which denotes the fact that aside from receiving respect from other members in

the society, each individual has to learn to accept the differences of the members as well. For example, in accordance to the principle that any member in a society is equal, the right to believe in any religion of members of a certain minority group should be accepted in that society.

(c) Honesty and Trust is a value denoting people's behavior of stating the truth to avoid suspicion (Nooteboom, 2002). In addition to what Nooteboom suggested, Kohls (1988 cited in Funke 1989) also pointed out that, in American society, the value is perceived as people speaking their minds, avoiding using language that can cause ambiguity. In addition, the sense of being honest does not only involve telling the truth to other people, but also accepting one's defection (e.g. mistakes, guilt, and faults) as well (Hamilton, 1995).

Trust needs truth and time that people provide to one another. If one bends the truth or lies to other people, they will not be trusted. Worse, mutual relationships among people will be hard to form if they are dishonest to one another before establishing the relationships (Eberly, 1998).

(d) Love and Care in American culture involves various aspects of love, namely romantic love, realistic love and family love (Hollander, 2011; Knox and Schacht, 2011). In American society, romantic love is generally recognized as love at first sight. This kind of love is normally characterized by passion, and excitement which occurs between lovers. This kind of love can be developed into realistic love.

Realistic love involves a sense of security, comfort and welfare between the couple. Third, the love among family members tends to be longer lasting than romantic relationships since parents share duties to look after their offspring.

Previous Studies

In the study of Figurative Language in Sir Cliff Richard's Top Ten Songs of Pinichka (2005), it was suggested that metaphor, simile and hyperbole were prominent figurative language devices used to connote cultural values of western society such as religious belief (e.g. Christianity), and perspectives in social norms (e.g. expression of love). Similarly, in 'A Study of Figurative Language and Socio-Cultural Reflections in Central Thai Folk Songs' of Chaihiranwattana (2008), the researcher aimed to identify prominent Thai cultural values that were connoted by figures of speech in Thai folk songs. The result of the study suggested that metaphor, simile, hyperbole, personification and allusion were prominent figures of speech to express prominent Thai cultural values which were male dominance in the society, religious beliefs (e.g. Buddhism), and simple Thai ways of life. Chaktirit's study (2008) entitled 'Figurative Language and Influences of American Country Songs on Thai Audiences' also showed the effectiveness of figures of speech in connoting intended messages. The researcher aimed to identify the predominant figures of speech used in American country songs from the 1960s to the 2000s that influence the messages of American country songs for Thai audience. The result revealed that simile, metaphor, hyperbole and personification were prominent figures of speech used in the American country songs that influenced and sound stimulated emotions in Thai audiences. Interestingly, the researcher also reported that the Thai audience perceived that the American country songs influenced their life in that they promoted clearer understanding of the American rural life-style. Nevertheless, specific themes related to American cultural values were not reported.

Methodology

Based on the principles of qualitative investigation, this study applied a descriptive and interpretative method of content analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The theoretical concepts that guided the framework of investigation in this study are related to figurative language (Leech, 1974 cited in Partington, 1998; Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen, 2005; Ray, 2007; 2008; Carroll, 2008; Pence, 2012) and American cultural values (e.g. Hofstede, 1984; Nooteboom, 2002; Perry et al., 2008; Brewer, 2009; Hollander, 2011; Lamb, Hair, and McDaniel, 2010).

1. Data Collection

The source of data comes from Taylor Swift's thirty-nine songs which were taken from three albums, namely *Taylor Swift*, *Fearless*, and *Speak Now*, from 2006 to 2010. The lyrics of each song were collected from <http://search.letssingit.com/cgi-exe/am.cgi?a=search&l=archive&s=taylor+swift> (accessed 2 May 2012) because this website shows the most accurate lyrical content reviewed by web surfers. The thirty-nine songs in the three albums were selected based on their high popularity rating of the songs compared with other albums at that time.

2. Procedures

After gathering the lyrics, the researcher underwent the method of labeling and coding (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Strass and Corbin, 1998) to identify the figures of speech and the connotations regarding American cultural values. To ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis in this study, 30 percent of the analysis was submitted to validators to ensure at least 80 percent agreement with the researcher's interpretation before further analysis

was undertaken (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The frequencies of the types of figure of speech were then examined and presented in percentage form. The connotations that were interpreted from the figures of speech were derived into common themes. The researcher then made connection of the derived themes with the figures of speech to understand how each figure of speech connotes the meaning from the lyrics. Finally, the researcher developed theoretical concepts derived from the overall findings to provide a common picture of this phenomenon.

Results of the Study

The results presented in this section address the first research question: "What are the common American cultural values connoted by figures of speech in Taylor Swift's songs?" and the second research question: "How are those common American cultural values conveyed by the figures of speech in Taylor Swift's songs?".

To address the first research question, common themes of connotation of American cultural values as well as the common types of figure of speech employed will firstly be reported.

Types of figures of speech

The results revealed that three types of figure of speech occurred more frequently than 8 percent (totaling approximately 63.79 percent of the overall findings). These included metaphor (43.89%), simile (11.76%), and hyperbole (8.14%) which were considered as common devices in the present study. The frequencies of the remaining eleven types of figure of speech (totaling approximately 36.14 percent of all data) were between 0.45-6.33 percent. These figures of speech included symbols, metonymy,

synecdoche, allusion, personification, antithesis, rhetorical questions, irony, paradox, anaphora and oxymoron.

Connotation expressing American cultural values

Among the connotations with common occurrences of figures of speech as reported above, the results showed four prominent themes of American cultural values relevant to the framework suggested by different experts as presented in the present study. These themes include bond and relationship (51.88%), independency (19.81%), honesty (13.2%) and dignity (5.66%) revealing aspects of American values namely love and care, independency, honesty and trust, and liberalism respectively.

To address the second research question, a discussion on how figurative language was applied to connote those American cultural values is presented in the following section.

The theme of bond and relationship was found to show a relationship between lovers or family members. The theme includes several sub-themes of making an impression, establishing a relationship, maintaining a relationship, breaking up a relationship and the aftermath of a broken relationship. In relation to this theme, the American cultural value of **love and care** is expressed in the songs. As this theme is frequently presented, it seems to complement the popular culture of love (Frith et al., 2001) which is one of the dominant features of pop songs. The prominent figures of speech that connote this theme are metaphor (39.81%), simile (13.18%) and hyperbole (10.18%). For example, in the expression “*And the story of us looks a lot like a tragedy now*” in the song *The Story of Us*, a device of simile (e.g. like) was employed. The simile makes a direct comparison between the breaking up of a romantic relationship or the unfulfilled love of

the speaker and her boyfriend to a tragedy. Like commonly perceived in any culture, the perspective of unfulfilled love bringing about sadness appears to be an understanding of a negative aspect of love and care among American pop songs. Thus, it can be said that the high frequency of this theme in American pop songs reflects that this is also a common sentiment or cultural value of American people.

The theme of independency includes the sub-themes of self-esteem, self-realization, self-confidence, self-commitment, self-responsibility, achievement and pride which are related to the value of **individualism** as presented in this study. The prominent figures of speech that are employed to connote this theme are metaphor (47.5%), simile (15%) and hyperbole (10%). For example, metaphors that connote the theme were found in the song *Long Live*. In the expression "*We were the kings and the queens*," the metaphors *the kings* and *the queens* which compare the speaker and the person to whom she refers with kings and the queens implies a sense of being an individual with high quality, for instance, because of their successes, pride, and self-confidence. This sense appears to be commonly shared among members of any society, and it commonly occurs in the songs of Taylor Swift; hence, it seems to reflect that the American cultural value of individualism is well-perceived among her audiences.

The theme of honesty includes the sub-themes of telling the truth, showing signs of betrayal or dishonesty, and atonement which are related to the value of **honesty and trust**. The prominent figures of speech that connote the theme are metaphor (41.93%), hyperbole (12.9%) and symbol (12.9%) (Despite the fact that the frequency of the device of symbol is as high as simile in this theme, the rate of occurrences is quite low in the

overall findings. Hence, the device of symbol is excluded from the following discussion.) For example, a hyperbole was found in the expression “I go back to December turn around and make it alright,” in the song *Back to December*. It exaggerates the fact that the speaker tried to make an attempt to turn back time to make amendment of her fault. This seems to reflect her belief that realizing and accepting her mistake is an important practice to show one’s honesty as Hamilton (1995) suggested. Thus, the employment of hyperbole can be regarded as a successful device to convey this common perception and cognition of the American cultural value of honesty and trust.

The theme of dignity includes the sub-themes of maintaining one’s pride, respecting people’s rights, and regarding the differences of others. These sub-themes are related to what Ashford and LeCroy (2008 cited Lukes, 1991) describe as “*tolerant liberalism*”. With this principle, Americans believe that the society needs to respect one’s rights or decisions. On the other hand, actions that violate this principle are considered as indignity. Among the three common figures of speech, two devices namely metaphor (36.36%) and simile (18.18%) were prominent. In addition, irony (18.18%) appears to have a frequency as high as simile in this particular theme. Thus, the use of this figure of speech for this theme is illustrated. In the song *Better than Revenge*, the use of irony was found in the expression “*let’s hear the applause,*” in the verse “*The story started when it was hot and it was summer, and I had it all I had him where I wanted him. She came along got him alone, and let’s hear the applause. She took him faster than you can say sabotage*”. The device connotes the meaning that contradicts the context by making a mockery of the statement which is normally and literally used to signify positive acceptance. As

a result, its connotation is that the girl mentioned by the speaker lacked the sense of dignity since she cannot find a rightful way to have her own boyfriend; thus, she had to steal him from another girl. This kind of action seems to be commonly perceived as an unacceptable practice in any society. That is, improperly taking somebody or somebody belonging to someone is regarded as breaking moral practice as well as breaking his or her basic ownership or violating his or her right (Perry et al., 2008). Taylor Swift frequently portrays this negative aspect of liberalism in many songs of hers. The device of contrasting intended meaning to the literal meaning of the context should promote a vivid perception in the audience's mind on how a vicious one could ruin someone's right.

Overall, the results seem to reveal that the themes of bond and relationship, independency, honesty and dignity are prominent as presented in the songs of Taylor Swift are parts of American culture. Considering these perspectives within the bigger framework of American cultural values, it appears to portray the values of love and care, individualism, honesty and trust, and liberalism respectively. Since these values have been presented through American pop songs, and especially in Taylor Swift's highly popular songs, it is possible that these American cultural values reflect the values of her audience in American society.

In sum, the illustrations of the excerpts analyzed above should provide more insight into the way figurative language empowers the intended message that the lyricist wishes to express. In brief, different figures of speech help create vivid images or concepts of American cultural values in different styles which can eventually build up the audience's perception and cognition of them.

Discussions and Implications of the Study

The study revealed four common themes of connotation which are bond and relationship, independency, honesty and dignity. The themes are related to prominent American cultural values of love and care, individualism, honesty and trust, and liberalism. These cultural values are connoted by three common types of figure of speech using different patterns which make connections between entities and the intended meanings, bearing in mind the fact that the senders and the receivers of the messages share the common background knowledge required for understanding (Caroll, 2008). These patterns are 1) making indirect comparison between an entity and an intended meaning 2) making direct comparison between an entity and a concept and 3) exaggerating facts (e.g. actual events or incidents, phenomena) to emphasize and make sense of the intended concept (Ray, 2007; 2008, and Pence, 2012).

As evidenced in this study, the most commonly found figures of speech namely metaphor, simile and hyperbole appear to be highly effective tools that convey key messages to the audience in different fashions. To illustrate, the three common devices make the intended meanings more vivid and concrete, which finally results in creating perception and cognition in the audience's mind. For example, the metaphor 'the kings and the queens' helps create a perception and a cognition of the intended meaning that successful people are appreciated in the American cultural value of individualism. In short, the power of metaphor solidifies the key message.

Similarly, simile helps create perception and cognition, for instance, in this study of American cultural values, by making direct comparison

between an abstract idea and a concrete object known by the sender and the receiver of a message. For example, the concept of sadness caused by the breaking up of romantic relationship is compared to a tragedy.

Aside from the devices of making both indirect and direct comparison as aforementioned, the device of exaggerating facts using hyperbole appears to have a strong influence in shaping perception and cognition of the intended meaning by the audience. For example, in this study, the lyricist used hyperbole to generate perception and cognition in the audience's mind that realizing one's fault is a way to express honesty in American culture.

In conclusion, the findings in this study seem to suggest that the authors of any form of literary work can effectively use the devices of figurative language to express the intended messages to communicate with his or her audience. In particular, the methods of making indirect and direct comparisons and exaggerating facts to emphasize concepts appear to effectively deliver the message and create perception and cognition of meaning as appearing in the songs of Taylor Swift. Hence, this study should help create insight for writers who are interested in using figures of speech to frame their key messages and effectively conduct communication. In addition, this insight should promote awareness among receivers of messages (i.e. listeners and readers) of figurative language in constructing meanings when they consume any form of message.

Recommendation for the Further Studies

Aside from major American cultural values such as the value of love and care, individualism, honesty and trust, and liberalism that the

researcher found in this present study, it appears that some cultural values are overlapping and reinforcing one another. For example, the American cultural value of love and care seems to frequently occur with the value of honesty and trust while the cultural value of individualism is occasionally occurred with the value of liberalism. Hence, the suggestion for further study is to investigate in the relationship among different cultural values to conceptualize what senses of cultures lyricists tries to reflect or express to his or her audiences and how the combination of different cultural values reinforce one another.

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