



## A Study of Figurative Language Used in the Composition of National Anthems<sup>1</sup>

### การศึกษาภาษาภาพพจน์ในเพลงชาติ

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#### Abstract

This qualitative study aims to (1) identify and classify types of figurative language existing in national anthems and (2) study how figurative language in national anthems conveys meanings to the audience. Twenty four pieces of national anthems in English officially established after 1950 have been researched. To examine the figurative language and its role, the study was designed as a qualitative study with descriptive and interpretative methods of data analysis (Berg, 2004; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The findings revealed that, first, eleven types of figurative language were applied including repetition, alliteration, synecdoche, metonymy, symbol, apostrophe, personification, metaphor, simile, allusion, and hyperbaton. Second, three main themes expressed in the national anthems through the use of figurative language can be classified as the admiration of the institution, the strength of the people, and the pride of a nation. In addition, figurative language

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is used as the effective tool to make a connection of culture and norms between the lyricist and the audience of a particular nation. As a result, the mood of “unity” in the anthem can be created among people in a nation including mutual attitude, social value, and tradition that make all diverse types of audiences become one. To conclude, figurative language can highlight the intended meanings in its message to the audience. Particularly, figurative language can simply be seen when going beyond the denotation of words. Thus, the audience perceives the real message and understands the connotation of lyric in national anthems.

**Keywords:** Figurative language; National anthems

### บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยเรื่องการศึกษารหัสภาษาภาพพจน์ในเพลงชาติ มีวัตถุประสงค์ 2 ประการได้แก่ (1) แสดงและจำแนกประเภทของภาษาภาพพจน์ในเพลงชาติ และ (2) ศึกษาภาษาภาพพจน์ในเพลงชาติว่าสามารถในการถ่ายทอดความหมายแก่ผู้ฟังได้อย่างไร ข้อมูลที่ใช้ในการวิจัยได้แก่ เพลงชาติ 24 เพลง ที่ถูกใช้อย่างเป็นทางการหลังปี ค.ศ.1950 ในการศึกษาภาษาภาพพจน์และหน้าที่ของภาษาภาพพจน์ครั้งนี้ ผู้วิจัยได้ใช้การวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพผนวกกับวิธีวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลเชิงพรรณนาและการตีความในการศึกษาข้อมูลดังกล่าว (Berg, 2004; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Strauss & Corbin, 1998)

จากการศึกษาพบว่าภาษาภาพพจน์ที่พบในเพลงชาติมีทั้งสิ้น 11 ประเภท ได้แก่ repetition, alliteration, synecdoche, metonymy, symbol, apostrophe, personification, metaphor, simile, allusion, และ hyperbaton นอกจากนี้ยังพบอีกว่า แนวคิดหลัก 3 แนวคิดที่สื่อสารในเพลงชาติผ่านการใช้ภาษาภาพพจน์คือ (1) การเกิดทุนสถาบันของชาติ (2) ความเข้มแข็งของประชาชนในชาติ และ (3) ความภูมิใจในชาติ จากการศึกษพบว่า ภาษาภาพพจน์เป็นตัวกลางที่ใช้สื่อระหว่างผู้ประพันธ์เพลงกับผู้ฟังอย่างมีประสิทธิภาพ ทั้งในด้านวัฒนธรรมและบรรทัดฐานของคนในชาติ



ดังนั้น ความรู้สึก “เป็นหนึ่งเดียว” ของคนในชาติถูกรังสรรค์ขึ้นโดยผ่านเพลงชาติ รวมไปถึงการถ่ายทอดทัศนคติร่วมกันของคนในชาติ ค่านิยมทางสังคม และขนบธรรมเนียม ทั้งนี้ปัจจัยดังกล่าวทำให้คนในชาติที่มีพื้นฐานแตกต่างกันเป็นหนึ่งเดียวกันได้ กล่าวโดยสรุปคือ ภาษาภาพพจน์ถูกนำมาใช้เพื่อเน้นการสื่อความหมายที่ผู้ประพันธ์ต้องการสื่อสารแก่ผู้ฟัง โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งเนื้อเพลงของเพลงชาติ ภาษาภาพพจน์สามารถใช้เพื่อสื่อความหมายทางอ้อม ซึ่งบางครั้งไม่สามารถสื่อสารทางตรงได้ เพราะฉะนั้น ผู้ฟังจะสามารถรับข้อความจริงที่ผู้ประพันธ์ต้องการสื่อซึ่งทำให้ผู้ฟังเข้าใจความหมายที่แฝงอยู่ในเพลงชาตินั้น ๆ

**คำสำคัญ:** ภาษาภาพพจน์ เพลงชาติ

### **Introduction**

Music has been recognized as a universal communicative tool in every society. More importantly, fellows and scholars also claim that music is a part of culture, and thus, it communicates mood and ideas in similar ways to language (Rumery, 1992). In terms of utilization, music is part of communication and culture (Juslin & Sloboda, 2001). In the facet of a socio-cultural context, national anthems can be regarded as a socially constructed pattern of meanings because this type of musical composition is often a primary agent in the construction and conservation of national identity, pride, and sovereignty. Moreover, as music includes the power of melody, rhythm, and harmony, it particularly lends itself as a linkage to promote the translation of social values of the intended message the lyricists wanted to convey to the audience effectively (Biddle & Knight, 2007).

It appears that scholars attempt to investigate the role of musical compositions and their socio-cultural reflection in several aspects. However, language in national anthem that reflects elements of culture and nationalism has not been acknowledged; particularly, the role of figurative language uses to communicate the intended socio-cultural value of the nation to its



people. Therefore, in order to gain better understanding of how figurative language plays role in the national anthems, this study aims to examine (1) types of figurative language existing in national anthems and (2) how figurative language in national anthems convey meanings to the audience. The findings from this investigation should help provide useful suggestions to (1) music practitioners and linguists to gain the most accurate meanings derived from the words of national anthems and (2) the audience to gain better insight into the utmost comprehension and appreciation of the power of figurative language and a national anthem through its lyrics.

The purposes of this study were (1) to identify and classify types of figurative language existing in national anthems and (2) to study how figurative language in national anthems conveys meanings to the audience. The two questions guiding the investigation are (1) What kinds of figurative language are employed in the musical composition of national anthems?; (2) What concepts are conveyed through the use of figurative language in national anthems and how are they conveyed?

## **1. Literature Review**

To address the research questions regarding theoretical concepts related to national anthem, the investigation of this study was mainly based on two theoretical frameworks (Biddle & Knight, 2007; Heywood, 1998). Regarding the investigation into figurative language, the study was mainly based on two theoretical frameworks (Rosa & Eschholz, 1982; Marius, 1991). Regarding the investigation into interpreting the meaning of the text, the theory in connection to linguistic aspect, discourse, and connotative meaning (Abercromble et al., 2000; Sinclare, 2000; Fromkin et al., 2007; Martin & Rose, 2007; McCarthy, 1991) was reviewed.

### **1.1 National anthem based on theoretical framework**

Biddle and Knight (2007) conceptualize a national anthem as a socially constructed pattern of meanings because music is often a primary agent in the construction and conservation



of national identity, pride, and sovereignty. In addition, Heywood (1998) suggests that a national anthem can possibly take the form of patriotism and nationalism.

### **1.2 Figurative language: Its role and importance**

Rosa and Eschholz (1982) define figurative language as the language used in a creative rather than a literal sense. It is most frequently related to poetry and widely used in daily expressions. Through the use of verbal communication, figurative language can be used to liven up the prose and emphasize the idea to shed light on the meaning for readers. In addition, Marius (1991) suggests certain reasons why figurative language has become very dominant as it expresses other possible meanings rather than their literal sense. Moreover, it draws on some common experience that bonds a writer to her audience.

Twelve types of figurative language used as a framework of this study are conceptualized as follows: (1) simile defines a compressed but explicit comparison by “like” or “as” (Guth, 1997) (2) metaphor refers to an implicit comparison between dissimilar ideas or things (Furniss & Bath, 2007) (3) synecdoche refers to figurative language in which a part represents the whole (Encyclopedia Britanica, 2008) (4) personification defines the object or animal which is given human quality for making comparison (Memering & O’Hare, 1980) (5) symbol stands for something other than literal meanings which can be the form of objects, pictures, and abstraction (Barnet, 1992) (6) allusion defines the figurative language that is deeply related with symbol as it reveal hidden meaning in ancient work of history, literature, and bible (Robert, 1992) (7) apostrophe defines the addressing of someone absent or dead or some nonhuman objects as if that thing or person were alive (ARP, 1984) (8) repetition defines the repeated words or phrases in everyday life for pleasure to the ear (Roykaew, 1999) (9) alliteration can be conceptualized as the repetition of initial consonant sounds in two or more words in a line of verse (Chatraporn, 1996) (10) hyperbaton refers to a transposition of words or phrases from



their normal order (Farlex Encyclopedia, 2008) (11) rhetorical question defines any question asked for a purpose other than to get the information the question asks (rhetorical question website, 2008) and (12) metonymy refers to figurative language that consists of using the name of one thing for that of something else with which it is associated or assume that the two things are somehow associated (Panther & Radden, 1999).

### **Meaning interpretation; discourse, and connotative meaning**

The meanings of any communicative discourses are primarily developed from linguistic statements. However, it appears that the key factor that crucially adds the essence to those meanings is a situational context. In addition, it can be noted that linguistic statements can convey both literal meanings and connotative meanings.

Situational context refers to non-linguistic features in a certain communicative event or forum that contribute to the forming of whole meaning of the utterances or texts within the discourse (Fromkin et al., 2007). To create effective communication, shared knowledge is considered as a vital factor to support meanings presented in statements; in other words, it constitutes non-linguistic elements. Furthermore, it can bind a linkage between the reader and the author. In musical composition, particularly, shared knowledge bridges musical comprehension between the audience and the lyricist (McCarthy, 1991). As a consequence, connotative meanings conveyed through linguistic devices can be perceived.

In the arena of socio-cultural aspect, concepts of culture are normally signified within certain social groups that can well hold mutual cultural perception of ways of life, attitudes, beliefs, languages and even music (Abercromble et al., 2000). In terms of meaning in communication, both denotative and connotative meanings are derived together from a word. Denotation defines the literal meaning of a word or the “dictionary definition”. Conversely, connotation refers to the connections that are linked to a word or the emotional suggestions related



to that word (Denotation and Connotation: Figures of Speech website, 2008). In terms of music, connotation means indirect meaning that can not be directly derived from music (Barthes, 1998).

Since each musical text is created interactively between the lyricist and the audience, the interpretation of cultural values can be manifested from both literal and connotative meanings. Thus, the shared knowledge of certain semantic features integrated in the linguistic devices including figurative language that lyricists employ plays a significant role in almost all approaches of lyric interpretation (Martin & Rose, 2007). In addition to the literature related to the theoretical concepts that would guide the investigation, previous studies on related topics were also review to help make more insightful explanation on the phenomena.

Phrommazui (2000) studied language use in English Pop Songs. The objectives of this study were to analyze the denotative meanings and connotative meanings and figurative language in each song. The findings revealed that to understand connotative meaning made the song become easier to listen to, whereas to recognize denotative meaning made the audience understand the real intended meanings. Lastly, understanding figurative language is advantageous for interpreting and appreciating the literal and underlying meaning of the text.

Chaihiranwattana (2008) investigated the figurative language used in central Thai folk songs and studied socio-cultural reflections in central Thai folk songs by means of analyzing the figurative language found. Seven types of figurative language were found including metaphor, simile, alliteration, metonymy, hyperbole, onomatopoeia and personification.

Panichka (2005) conducted a research study that aimed to examine figurative language in Sir Cliff Richard's top ten songs to see how the words in his songs presented images and communicated to listeners with mental images. The findings showed that the writer used four types of figurative language, metaphor, simile, personification, and imagery most frequent.



## 2. Methodology

This qualitative study employed a method of content analysis with descriptive and interpretative methods of data analysis of the figurative language and its role in the national anthems (Berg, 2004; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Struass & Corbin, 1998). Based on the theoretical framework regarding figurative language (Rosa & Eschholz, 1982; Marius, 1991), the first part of the study aimed to investigate types of figurative language existing in national anthems. Consequently, types of figurative language most frequently used in national anthems were identified. The second part of the study aimed to investigate how figurative language in national anthems conveys meanings to the audience. The methodology used in this part was content analysis to identify, describe, interpret and conceptualize the meanings conveyed by the figurative features found in the works.

To explain, the analytical strategies were applied to the labeled and coded data. Afterward, the focused data were further interpreted and examined. For clarity, the procedures of analysis were carried out in the following steps. For the identification of the employed figurative language, the types of figurative language were identified and twelve existing categories of figurative language were used as the framework in this analysis. These include Simile (Sim), Metaphor (Meta), Synecdoche (Syn), Personification (Per), Symbol (Sym), Allusion (Allu), Apostrophe (Apo), Repetition (Rep), Alliteration (Alli), Hyperbaton (Hyp), Rhetorical Question (R.Q.), and Metonymy (Meto). Labels and codes were assigned to the identified figurative language. Then, the texts were reexamined and the frequency of recurrence of figurative language used was explored in all musical compositions ranging from the most to the least frequent use.





To portray the concepts presented in these national anthems, themes derived from the identified figurative language in each unit of analysis were interpreted. Importantly, to verify the trustworthiness of the identified data and preliminary interpretation of meaning derived from the researcher, 30% of the coded data were validated by an expert in the field. After gaining 80% of agreement from the expert, further identification and interpretation was conducted with the remaining data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Finally, the common pattern of figurative language application was described and the coded data was sorted into common categories in order to develop the common themes that express meanings by figurative language. Likewise, to illustrate the complete picture of this phenomenon, conceptual explanations for the findings were finally further developed. That is, the meanings of the text conveyed through figurative language were interpreted and how figurative language plays a role in the national anthems was explained.

### 3. Discussion of Findings

This part presents the findings to address the two research questions of this study. The results of this study were divided into two parts: the first part addresses the first research question “What kinds of figurative language are employed in the musical composition of national anthems?” in connection with the research question 2 regarding the concepts conveyed in the national anthem. The second part presents the findings for the research question 2 “What concepts are conveyed through the use of figurative language in national anthems and how are they conveyed?”

Regarding the types of figurative language used in the national anthems, eleven types were applied including repetition, alliteration, synecdoche, metonymy, symbol, apostrophe, personification, metaphor, simile, allusion, and hyperbaton. The use of figurative language extended from the most to the least frequent use. Types of figurative language in percentage form are shown as follows: repetition (28.95%), alliteration (28.82%), synecdoche (12.12%), metonymy



(7.07%), symbol (6.06%), apostrophe (4.713%), personification (4.713%), metaphor (3.703%), simile (1.346%), allusion (1.683%), and hyperbaton (1.346%). It is noted that the most three common uses of figurative language in this study were repetition, alliteration, and synecdoche.

Furthermore, three main themes expressed in the national anthems through the use of figurative language were classified as the admiration of the institution, the strength of the people, and the pride of a nation. It was found that each theme conveyed particular message suggesting certain aspects of a nation's background and history. The subsequent examination has revealed a connection between these themes in the national anthems in accordance with the use of figurative language and their possibility of occurrence.

### **3.1 The admiration of institution**

The first main theme, the admiration of the institution, was categorized into four sub-themes: (1) the admiration toward monarchy and religion, (2) the admiration toward legislation and religion, (3) the admiration toward religion, and (4) the admiration toward monarchy and legislation. In addition, there were nine countries sharing the same main theme, the admiration of the institution, in their national anthems. These nine countries include Malaysia, Russia, Cook Island, Bahrain, Brunei, Liechtenstein, Georgia, Pakistan, and Lesotho which prioritized the significance of institutions namely monarchy, religion, and legislation. Moreover, seven types of figurative language were applied to express the main themes. They consisted of repetition, alliteration, metaphor, allusion, synecdoche, metonymy, and symbol. Lastly, the occurrences of alliteration were the most frequently found followed by repetition and synecdoche.

### **3.2 The strength of the people**

The second main theme indicated in these national anthems was the strength of people. There were four sub-themes under this mentioned theme which could be demonstrated as



follows: (1) the unity of the people (2) the happiness of the people and (3) the bravery and integrity of the people and (4) the cleverness of the people. It was evidenced that seven countries including Singapore, Bangladesh, Canada, East Timor, India, Sri Lanka, and Mongolia mutually shared a variety of outlooks under the concept of the strength of people. To convey the idea of the strength of people in national anthems, six types of figurative language including synecdoche, repetition, symbol, alliteration, personification, and metonymy were applied.

### **3.3 The pride of a nation**

Finally, the last main theme, the pride of a nation, in the national anthems was investigated in this study. In terms of number, this theme was discovered the most frequently and it could be segregated into seven sub-themes under the broad concept of the pride of a nation, which are shown as follows: (1) the superiority of a country (2) the pride and prosperity of a country (3) the pride of a nation in terms of wealth (4) the pride and beauty of a country (5) the prosperity of a country (6) the love of a nation and (7) the victory over colonialism.

One of the superlative linguistic devices that reflect this nation is the figurative language used in the anthems. Moreover, ten types of figurative language were employed to convey this main theme including simile, metaphor, synecdoche, personification, symbol, apostrophe, repetition, alliteration, metonymy, and hyperbaton. In conclusion, figurative language can clarify the intended meaning to the audience, especially the sense of the admiration of the institution, the strength of the people, and the pride of the nation in a national anthem. To summarize, figurative language plays a significance role in establishing and empowering the spirit of a nation.



#### **4. Conclusion**

As the discussion of findings in addressing the two research questions have been presented, it is summarized that eleven types of figurative language employed in 24 national anthems. Obviously, rhetorical question was the only type of figurative language that was not found in the national anthems. Four types of figurative techniques namely repetition, alliteration, metaphor, and metonymy were found the most common devices. In addition, three main themes, admiration of the institution, the strength of the people, and the pride of the nation, were found in the national anthems.

Interestingly, both the single use and the combination of figurative language application in the national anthems were found. In addition, the three main single types of figurative language applied independently as a major device including metaphor, allusion, and metonymy. Furthermore, the combination use of figurative language was classified into two, three, and four types of combination which included: (1) repetition and alliteration (2) symbol and metaphor (3) alliteration and metonymy (4) symbol and repetition (5) synecdoche, repetition, and metonymy and (6) synecdoche, repetition, alliteration, and allusion. It was also investigated that approximately 6% of single use of figurative language is applied in the entire national anthems in this study. On the other hand, 94% of the combination of figurative language was applied in the whole text.

#### **5. Implications**

It is obvious that the study of figurative language in national anthems provides the perspective of figurative language role in creating vivid meanings of text in the form of musical composition. In terms of linguistic features, it creates the figure of rhyme and visual image within the text. Therefore, the findings of the study create knowledge which can be beneficial for lyricists, poets, linguists, and listeners to gain more understanding of the national anthem meaning.



## 6. Recommendations for Further Study

To any future studies on the framework of figurative language, numerous characteristics of figurative language and their application can be in the researchers' interest as figurative language normally presented in various styles of language. Moreover, to broaden more insight into the power of figurative language, other aspects of its roles can be investigated. For example, the power of figurative language at both individual and aggregate level in any kinds of genre is worth studying.



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