

## Voices of Emotion: Figurative Language and Identity Construction in Eminem's Rap Lyrics

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### Article history:

**Received**

19-05-2025

**Revised**

31-07-2025

**Accepted**

31-07-2025

### Keywords:

figurative language;  
lyrics; identity; emotion

### Kata kunci:

Gaya bahasa; lirik;  
identitas; emosi

**Abstract:** This study examined the use of figurative language in Eminem's song lyrics and its role in expressing emotion, constructing identity, and performing symbolic resistance. Using a qualitative descriptive design, the research combined stylistic analysis (Leech, 1969; Keraf, 2010) with critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995). The data consisted of lyrics from five purposively selected songs: Mockingbird, Cleaning Out My Closet, Stan, Lose Yourself, and The Way I Am. The lyrics were obtained from official sources and cross-checked for accuracy. NVivo 12 was used to identify and analyze the presence of metaphor, hyperbole, personification, irony, alliteration, simile, and imagery. The findings revealed that figurative language in Eminem's lyrics served three interrelated functions: (1) expressing psychological turmoil and emotional complexity; (2) constructing identity through negotiation with external forces; and (3) resisting dominant cultural narratives. Unlike previous studies that emphasized categorization, this research highlighted how figurative expressions operate discursively and ideologically. Eminem's lyrics function not only as personal expression but also as critical engagement with social power.

**Abstrak:** Penelitian ini menganalisis penggunaan gaya bahasa figuratif dalam lirik lagu Eminem dan perannya dalam mengungkapkan emosi, membentuk identitas, serta menyuarakan resistensi simbolik. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain deskriptif kualitatif dengan pendekatan stilistika (Leech, 1969; Keraf, 2010) dan analisis wacana kritis (Fairclough, 1995). Data berupa lirik dari lima lagu pilihan—Mockingbird, Cleaning Out My Closet, Stan, Lose Yourself, dan The Way I Am—yang dipilih secara purposif. Lirik diperoleh dari sumber resmi dan divalidasi silang untuk memastikan keakuratannya. Analisis dilakukan dengan bantuan perangkat lunak NVivo 12 untuk mengidentifikasi dan menafsirkan metafora, hiperbola, personifikasi, ironi, aliterasi, simile, dan citraan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa gaya bahasa figuratif dalam lirik Eminem memiliki tiga fungsi utama: (1) mengekspresikan tekanan psikologis dan kompleksitas emosi; (2) membangun identitas melalui negosiasi dengan kekuatan eksternal; dan (3) menolak narasi budaya dominan. Berbeda dari penelitian sebelumnya yang bersifat deskriptif, studi ini menekankan fungsi diskursif dan ideologis dari bahasa figuratif dalam lirik rap sebagai bentuk perlawanan simbolik terhadap wacana sosial.

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**Citation:** Budiman, R.A., Dwijayanti, D. (2025). Voices of Emotion: Figurative Language and Identity Construction in Eminem's Rap Lyrics. *Translation and Linguistics (Transling)*, 5 (2), 180-189.  
<https://doi.org/10.20961/transling.v5i2.105168>

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Rap music constitutes a prominent form of popular cultural expression that encapsulates a wide range of linguistic, social, and ideological dimensions. Emerging from marginalized communities, rap serves not merely as a form of entertainment but as a powerful vehicle for social commentary, affective expression, and the construction of both individual and collective identities. These functions are often achieved through complex and subversive linguistic strategies. Within this framework, linguistic investigations into rap lyrics offer fertile ground for exploring how language operates as a tool for articulating resistance, negotiating identity, and mediating socio-political realities. Among contemporary rap artists, Eminem stands out as a particularly salient figure due to the intricacy of his lyrical constructions and his persistent engagement with themes such as trauma, conflict, and marginality. His deployment of figurative language—including metaphor, hyperbole, irony, and personification—functions not merely as aesthetic ornamentation but as a discursive mechanism through which personal narratives and ideological stances are constructed and communicated. Eminem's lyrics, often reflective of psychological turmoil and societal critique, render his body of work a compelling subject for both linguistic and stylistic inquiry.

A number of previous studies have addressed the use of figurative language in song lyrics, particularly within Eminem's repertoire. Aisyarah and Wahyuni (2024), for instance, conducted a descriptive analysis of figurative expressions in Eminem's songs; however, their approach remained limited to categorization, without engaging with the broader socio-discursive implications. Similarly, Hanisfi et al. (2023) examined figurative language in Adele's lyrics, emphasizing identification over interpretation. Syaputri and Leonardo (2019) also investigated Eminem's lyrics but focused primarily on frequency of occurrence rather than the discursive function of the figurative elements. This tendency is echoed in both international and national scholarship. For example, Wibisono and Widodo (2020) analyzed figurative language in short stories published in *The Jakarta Post*, yet their study was confined to classifying types of tropes without addressing their expressive or ideological functions. In a similar vein, Nurdiani et al. (2021), in their analysis of Leila S. Chudori's *Laut Bercerita*, emphasized the aesthetic dimension of figurative language but did not examine its role in constructing identity or articulating social resistance. Likewise, Adiwijaya et al. (2020), in their stylistic analysis of *Perahu Kertas*, maintained a formalist orientation that overlooked connections between language, subjectivity, and discourse. Even in studies involving themes of marginality, such as that by Arifiyanto et al. (2020), figurative language was treated primarily as a literary ornament, rather than as a critical or ideological resource.

What these studies collectively reveal is a recurring limitation: the tendency to treat figurative language as a purely formalistic or rhetorical device, with insufficient attention to its functional roles in identity construction, emotional expression, and symbolic resistance. This study aims to address that gap by adopting an interdisciplinary methodological approach that synthesizes the stylistic frameworks of Leech (1969) and Keraf (2010) with Fairclough's (1995) model of Critical Discourse Analysis. This integrated framework enables a more nuanced interpretation of figurative language—

not merely as aesthetic ornamentation, but as a discursive and ideological act that encodes emotional struggle, articulates social critique, and contests dominant cultural narratives. The novelty of this research lies in its application of a multi-theoretical and discourse-sensitive lens to the analysis of rap lyrics. In contrast to previous studies—both local and international—that remain largely descriptive or taxonomic, this investigation offers a critical engagement with the performative, affective, and ideological dimensions of figurative language. By doing so, it seeks to deepen our understanding of how popular music—particularly Eminem’s body of work—functions as a discursive arena for negotiating emotion, identity, and sociopolitical realities.

In response to the gaps identified in previous scholarship, this study formulates three central research questions aimed at uncovering the discursive and ideological dimensions of figurative language in Eminem’s lyrics. First, it seeks to identify the types of figurative language utilized to articulate themes of trauma, identity, and resistance. Second, it investigates how these figurative expressions function discursively to construct ideological stances and convey emotional narratives within the sociocultural context of rap music. Third, it examines how the integration of stylistic analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of figurative language as a form of symbolic resistance. Through these questions, the study aims to move beyond mere categorization by exploring how language operates as a performative and ideological resource in the negotiation of selfhood and social critique.

## 2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach framed within critical stylistics, wherein the analysis of figurative language is combined with critical discourse analysis to explore the relationship between rhetorical choices and the construction of emotional identity in Eminem’s lyrics. Conceptually, the stylistic framework (Leech, 1969; Keraf, 2010) is utilized to identify and categorize various types of figures of speech—such as metaphor, hyperbole, personification, irony, and alliteration—while Fairclough’s (1995) discourse criticism theory aids in understanding the ideological and performative aspects, specifically how the language in the lyrics shapes and asserts the artist’s social position within popular culture. The combination of these two approaches represents a methodological innovation, as previous studies have generally applied stylistics without incorporating lenses of ideology and power.

The research data consist of officially published song lyrics from five of Eminem’s songs, namely “Mockingbird,” “Cleaning Out My Closet,” “Stan,” “Lose Yourself,” and “The Way I Am.” These songs were selected using purposive sampling, based on their lyrical richness, emotional depth, and representativeness of core identity themes across different periods in Eminem’s career.

The lyrics were collected from verified publisher sources, such as Genius.com and official album booklets, and then cross-checked with printed materials (e.g., CD inserts or officially licensed lyric books) to ensure transcription accuracy and textual integrity. This step is essential because online lyric platforms often contain user-submitted content that may be inaccurate or incomplete.

There are several criteria applied in selecting the song title, such as: presence of diverse figurative language features (e.g., metaphor, hyperbole, personification, irony, alliteration); thematic relevance to identity construction and emotional narrative; and cultural or social commentary embedded in the lyrics.

The data analysis was conducted through a two-tiered interpretive procedure that integrates both stylistic and critical discourse perspectives.

First, a stylistic analysis was employed by adopting the frameworks of Leech (1969) and Keraf (2010) to systematically identify, categorize, and interpret various forms of figurative language—such as metaphor, hyperbole, irony, personification, alliteration, and imagery—within the selected song lyrics. This stage focused on the micro-linguistic structure of the texts, examining how language devices function aesthetically and rhetorically.

Second, a critical discourse analysis (CDA) was applied using the theoretical model proposed by Fairclough (1995). This stage aimed to explore the socio-cultural, ideological, and identity-related dimensions embedded in the figurative expressions identified during the stylistic analysis. It emphasized how language functions not only as a medium of expression but also as a tool for performing identity, asserting agency, and negotiating power relations within popular music discourse.

This dual-layered analytical approach enables a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between linguistic form and socio-discursive function. Through this integration, the study interprets figurative language in Eminem's lyrics not merely as literary ornamentation but as a meaningful strategy for emotional articulation and symbolic resistance.

To assist with data organization and coding, the NVivo 12 software was used to mark patterns and themes related to figurative devices and their discursive functions. This ensured a systematic categorization of stylistic forms and their interpretive implications.

To enhance the validity, credibility, and trustworthiness of the research findings, a comprehensive validation strategy was implemented through multiple triangulation techniques. These procedures were designed to minimize bias, ensure consistency, and reinforce the interpretive depth of the analysis:

### **2.1 Source Triangulation**

All song lyrics were cross-validated using multiple official sources, including publisher-authorized lyric websites (e.g., Genius.com, MetroLyrics) and printed media (e.g., official CD booklets and licensed lyric anthologies). This process was essential to eliminate transcription inconsistencies and to preserve the accuracy and authenticity of the textual data analyzed.

### **2.2 Analyst Triangulation**

A second independent coder was involved in the process of identifying and categorizing figurative language using NVivo 12 software. Inter-coder agreement was statistically assessed through Cohen's Kappa coefficient, with a threshold of  $\geq 0.80$  adopted to indicate substantial reliability. This step ensured that the coding process was not solely dependent on a single interpretation and enhanced the objectivity of data classification.

### 2.3 Theoretical Triangulation

The data were interpreted through a dual-theoretical framework, combining stylistic analysis (Leech, 1969; Keraf, 2010) with critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995). This enabled the study to capture both micro-linguistic patterns (stylistic features) and macro-discursive dynamics (ideological, affective, and sociocultural meanings), leading to a more nuanced and layered interpretation of the lyrics.

### 2.4 Respondent Validation

In order to understand how the target audience interprets the emotional and ideological content of Eminem's lyrics, selective respondent validation was conducted through semi-structured online interviews with listeners and fans on platforms such as Reddit (r/Eminem) and Genius annotation threads. These audience responses served to triangulate the researcher's interpretations and provided insight into real-world reception, thus strengthening the contextual grounding of the analysis.

Through the implementation of these triangulation methods, the study ensures that its findings are not only analytically rigorous but also grounded in data accuracy, interpretive reliability, and audience relevance.

## 3. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The stylistic analysis of Eminem's selected songs—Mockingbird, Cleaning Out My Closet, Stan, Lose Yourself, and The Way I Am—reveals the prominent use of metaphor, hyperbole, personification, irony, alliteration, simile, and imagery. These devices are not deployed randomly but appear strategically in emotionally dense and socially charged moments of the lyrics.

Table 1. Figurative Instances in Eminem's Lyrics and Their Discursive Functions

No.	Figurative Device	Lyric Sample	Song Title	Discursive Function
1	Metaphor	"Papa was a rolling stone"	<i>Mockingbird</i>	Represents paternal instability and absence; reflects intergenerational trauma.
2	Hyperbole	"I'ma give you the world"	<i>Mockingbird</i>	Emphasizes emotional sacrifice and protective instinct of fatherhood.
3	Metaphor	"I'm sorry Mama, I never meant to hurt you"	<i>Cleaning Out My Closet</i>	Illustrates guilt and emotional conflict within family dynamics.
4	Hyperbole	"Sewed it shut and put screws in my neck"	<i>Cleaning Out My Closet</i>	Dramatizes psychological trauma through grotesque imagery.
5	Irony	"Stan, I'm glad you sent that letter, but Stan..."	<i>Stan</i>	Critiques obsessive fandom and media distortion through ironic detachment.
6	Alliteration	"His palms are sweaty, knees weak, arms are heavy"	<i>Lose Yourself</i>	Conveys embodied anxiety and mental tension under performance pressure.

7	Personification	"And I am whatever you say I am"	<i>The Way I Am</i>	Illustrates media-imposed identity; power asymmetry in public perception.
8	Simile (implicit)	"Lose yourself in the music, the moment, you own it..."	<i>Lose Yourself</i>	Compares immersion in music to transcendence and control.
9	Imagery	"There's vomit on his sweater already, mom's spaghetti"	<i>Lose Yourself</i>	Visually evokes performance anxiety and emotional pressure.

The analysis of five representative songs — Mockingbird, Cleaning Out My Closet, Stan, Lose Yourself, and The Way I Am — reveals a diverse use of figurative language that includes metaphor, hyperbole, personification, irony, alliteration, simile, and imagery. These elements are not only stylistic devices but also act as vehicles of meaning for Eminem's themes of trauma, identity, and resistance.

Table 1 summarizes selected figurative instances. Among them, metaphor and hyperbole are most frequently used, followed by personification and irony, which appear in moments of socio-emotional tension. This finding is consistent with Aisyarah and Wahyuni (2024) and Syaputri and Leonardo (2019), who documented the prevalence of these devices in Eminem's lyrics. However, unlike their descriptive focus, this study analyzes how these forms participate in discursive meaning-making.

Furthermore, the inclusion of simile and imagery, which were underrepresented in previous research, demonstrates a broader spectrum of stylistic richness. These elements contribute not only to the emotional intensity of the songs but also to their narrative structure and ideological function.

### 3.1 Discursive Functions: Emotional Narratives, Identity Construction, and Symbolic Resistance

Each figurative form plays a role in shaping discursive functions that align with Eminem's lyrical preoccupations. The following subsections examine how specific devices contribute to the construction of emotional narratives, identity performance, and sociopolitical critique.

#### 3.1.1 Expressing Trauma and Psychological Turmoil

Metaphor and hyperbole are Eminem's primary tools for articulating internal emotional states. In Mockingbird, the line "Papa was a rolling stone" metaphorically encodes the emotional instability of fatherhood. It is not merely a symbolic phrase, but a representation of intergenerational trauma that defines Eminem's narrative persona.

Similarly, in Cleaning Out My Closet, the hyperbolic statement "Sewed it shut and put screws in my neck" dramatizes the emotional pain of familial conflict. These exaggerated visuals express psychological violence that, while deeply personal, resonates with broader experiences of suppressed trauma. This aligns with Nurdiani et al. (2021), who also recognized the affective dimension of figurative language, although their study lacked a discursive orientation.



These examples support Fairclough's (1995) view of discourse as identity performance, where personal trauma is not only confessed but also framed within cultural scripts that the audience can interpret and internalize.

### **3.1.2 Performing Identity under Societal Gaze**

Eminem frequently negotiates his public identity using figurative strategies. In *The Way I Am*, the line "I am whatever you say I am" exemplifies personification as a means to show how media and fans impose an identity on the artist. This figurative statement constructs a critique of fame by portraying identity as externally imposed rather than internally generated.

In contrast, simile—though less frequent—is used to perform emotional states. For example, in *Lose Yourself*, the implicit comparison between the intensity of performing and being physically overwhelmed ("palms are sweaty...") conveys the anxiety of exposure. While Kholilullah (2020) identified such lines as rhythmic, this study interprets them as embodied metaphors for emotional vulnerability.

This approach deepens the work of Wibisono and Widodo (2020), who classified figures of speech without exploring how they function to construct identity under social surveillance.

### **3.1.3 Resisting Dominant Ideologies and Social Norms**

Irony and imagery are used to critique institutions such as the media, fan culture, and even the music industry. In *Stan*, the ironic reversal of a fan's obsession into tragedy becomes a commentary on the pathological consequences of celebrity worship. Eminem critiques not only his fan but also his own commodification.

This use of irony recalls the work of Rashid & Rafik-Galea (2019), who analyzed political irony in discourse. However, unlike political speeches, Eminem's lyrics demonstrate how irony functions interpersonally—as a way to destabilize expectations and highlight contradictions in public discourse.

Imagery, such as in the line "knees weak, arms are heavy" from *Lose Yourself*, intensifies the somatic portrayal of anxiety. This stylistic embodiment resists hegemonic portrayals of male strength and control, aligning with Thornborrow & Coates (2005) who argue that identity is discursively constructed under cultural pressure.

Overall, these devices offer more than aesthetic beauty; they become strategic tools for social critique, challenging the mainstream narratives about masculinity, fame, and psychological resilience.

## **3.2 Integrating Stylistics and Critical Discourse Analysis: A Multi-Layered Interpretation**

The integration of Leech (1969) and Keraf's (2010) stylistic taxonomy with Fairclough's (1995) critical discourse analysis provides a dual lens to interpret Eminem's lyrics. This framework bridges micro-level analysis (figurative forms) with macro-level discourse functions (ideology, identity, emotion).

Unlike prior studies such as Hanisfi et al. (2023) or Adiwijaya et al. (2020), which treated figurative language as ornament or literary feature, this research emphasizes how style encodes ideology. For example, Eminem's hyperbole is not just exaggeration—it is

protest. His metaphor is not poetic license—it is psychological survival. His irony is not play—it is resistance.

Moreover, the incorporation of NVivo-based coding and audience triangulation via platforms like Reddit and Genius enriches the empirical grounding of the findings. This is in contrast to studies that ignore audience reception entirely, rendering their conclusions text-bound and decontextualized.

The findings of this study demonstrate that Eminem's use of figurative language fulfills three interrelated discursive functions: expressive, constructive, and resistant. First, the expressive function allows for the externalization of deeply personal emotions—particularly trauma, anxiety, and psychological turmoil—through metaphor and hyperbole. These devices transform internal suffering into culturally intelligible forms, enabling the audience to engage affectively with the lyrical persona. Second, the constructive function emerges through the strategic use of personification and simile, wherein identity is not presented as innate or static but rather as a discursive negotiation with external forces such as media, fans, and industry expectations. This aligns with Thornborrow and Coates's (2005) argument that identity is socially constructed and textually performed. Third, the resistant function is enacted through irony, imagery, and embodied language that subvert dominant cultural narratives, question normative ideologies, and critique the commodification of vulnerability within popular culture. Such stylistic choices not only articulate individual resistance but also expose the structural constraints embedded in the discourse of fame and masculinity.

In contrast to previous studies that treated figurative language primarily as rhetorical ornamentation (e.g., Aisyarah & Wahyuni, 2024; Syaputri & Leonardo, 2019), this research reveals its ideological utility. Eminem's lyrics, when read through the integrated lenses of stylistics and critical discourse analysis, emerge as sites of negotiation—where language becomes a performative tool for constructing selfhood, articulating dissent, and challenging hegemony. Hence, figurative language in his music transcends its poetic function; it becomes a means of critical engagement with identity politics, emotional expression, and cultural discourse. Through this, Eminem repositions rap not as mere entertainment, but as a powerful platform for discursive resistance and socio-affective articulation.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study asserts that the figurative language in Eminem's song lyrics serves not only as an aesthetic element but also as an effective rhetorical instrument for voicing personal trauma, identity conflict, and critique of social structures. The use of metaphor, hyperbole, personification, irony, and alliteration forms a complex and meaningful discourse that is inseparable from Eminem's biographical context and the music industry structure he critiques. Through a combined approach of stylistics and critical discourse analysis, this research reveals that Eminem's stylistic choices possess profound ideological value, demonstrating how lyrics become a medium for expression and resistance against stereotypes, social pressures, and public expectations.



This study contributes both theoretically and methodologically to linguistic research, particularly in the fields of critical stylistics and popular text analysis. Theoretically, it shows that the stylistic elements in popular music texts can be interpreted as a form of articulation of identity and the subject's position within social power networks. Methodologically, this approach demonstrates the effectiveness of employing microtextual analysis (stylistics) combined with macrotextual context (social and cultural structures), resulting in a more comprehensive and ideological reading of the lyrical text.

Implications for future research include expanding the scope to encompass the lyrical corpus of other musicians with narrative and political power, such as Kendrick Lamar, J. Cole, or local artists like Iwa K or Morgenshtern. Further studies could also explore the relationship between the use of figurative language and audience responses through reception studies or psycholinguistics. Additionally, integrating multimodal approaches—which include visual aspects in music videos and stage performances—could open new avenues for understanding how lyrical texts operate within the realm of contemporary visual culture.

Thus, this research not only offers a new reading of Eminem's work but also opens interdisciplinary spaces for linguistic studies to continue evolving in response to popular cultural texts as legitimate and relevant scientific objects.

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