

Key metaphors in the most popular love songs speak of proximity and possession

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The study indicates that metaphors represent over 70% of the figurative language used to express feelings of romantic love in pop music. Credit: Tim Mossholder, Unsplash

In both life and music, the secret to success is love. This universal

emotion stands out as the key protagonist in the most listened-to songs of all time. According to a study by Salvador Climent Roca and Marta Coll-Florit from the GRIAL applied linguistics research group (tied to the UOC Faculty of Arts and Humanities), love is central to 52 of the 71 songs that topped the Billboard magazine's year-end charts from 1946 to 2016. "Pop music is created to achieve commercial success, and evocations of feelings of love and unrequited love are powerfully attractive for all types of audiences," said the authors.

Their analysis, published in [open access](#) in the *Text and Talk* journal, explores an area little explored by academics: pop music. "Few studies have qualitatively analyzed the discourse reflected in the lyrics of hit songs. This kind of analysis helps us study social trends on a large scale," explained Climent Roca. The study analyzed the lyrics of the songs most listened to in the USA over seven decades to explore how conceptions of love have changed over time.

The study indicates that metaphors represent over 70% of the figurative language used to express feelings of romantic love in pop music. "This observation corresponds to theoretical predictions that indicate that much of our thinking relies on metaphorical language, as [metaphor](#) helps us to effectively express concepts and complex emotions," said Coll-Florit. By analyzing the metaphors used most often, we can see how love and associated feelings and experiences have been conceptualized over the years.

Metaphors for talking about love

Starting with the smoochy "Prisoner of Love" by Perry Como and ending with the viral hit "Love Yourself" by Justin Bieber, the journey through the most popular love songs of each era also reveals that the way we talk about love has changed in recent history. According to the analysis by Climent Roca and Coll-Florit, each of the songs analyzed

uses metaphor to speak of love. Among the hundreds of love metaphors used most, those that refer to love as proximity, possession, union, [physical contact](#), captivity or as a journey stand out. It is also common to speak of the loved one as 'baby' or in terms of appetizing food.

Three quarters of the most [popular songs](#) about love refer to romantic love, while the rest have erotic themes. Put in perspective, the analysis reflects a curious phenomenon. From the 1970s, US [pop music](#) has used more sensual and explicit metaphors to talk about love. The analysis shows that songs with erotic themes are concentrated between 1977 and 1982, featuring in the six songs most listened to each year. Another boom in explicitly sensual songs occurs between 1996 and 2008, with five such hit songs in those 13 years. The analysis also reveals that 14 of the 15 songs listened to most between 1983 and 2016 refer to the anguish of love.

From physical proximity to possession

Many of the songs refer to love in terms of physical proximity: from the desire to be near the loved one to the contact of fusion between lovers. Many other songs speak of love in terms of possession or captivity. At least a score of the most popular love songs depict an unequal love relationship, in which one of the lovers considers the other to belong to them. In several cases, love is reflected as yet another form of subjugation. Just over two thirds of the songs, in fact, reflect a correlation between metaphors of physical proximity and of possession; in other words, both ideas seem to overlap.

"It's normal that physical proximity metaphors, as emerging naturally from love relationships, would be used in love songs. Metaphors of possession, on the other hand, reflect a cliché deeply rooted in popular culture," said Climent Roca and Coll-Florit. Their "All you need is [love](#)" study invites us to look beyond the catchy melodies and gain a deeper

understanding of lyrics that we have all joined in with at one time or another, singing our hearts out in accompaniment.

More information: Salvador Climent et al, All you need is love: Metaphors of love in 1946–2016 Billboard year-end number-one songs, *Text & Talk* (2020). [DOI: 10.1515/text-2019-0209](https://doi.org/10.1515/text-2019-0209)

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