

Metaphorical Figurative Language in Literature: A Translation Perspective

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Abstract

This study explores the use of figurative language in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992, reprinted 2010), a novel known for its narrative complexity and rich symbolic texture. The main objective is to identify and analyze the dominant types of figurative expressions based on Colston's (2015) framework, which includes six categories: metaphor, idiom, hyperbole, verbal irony, indirect request, and contextual expression. Using a descriptive qualitative method, the study classifies and interprets each occurrence of figurative language in the novel. The findings show that metaphor is the most prevalent type, while contextual expressions occur least frequently. This supports linguistic theories suggesting that metaphor is central to human cognition and communication, appearing frequently even in everyday conversation. The novel's reliance on metaphor contributes significantly to its thematic and psychological depth, helping to convey abstract ideas and emotional tension. In contrast, the minimal use of contextual expressions highlights their dependence on cultural specificity. Overall, the study reveals how figurative language shapes literary meaning beyond the literal, enhancing the reader's interpretive engagement. This research underscores the importance of stylistic and cognitive approaches in literary analysis and affirms the essential role of figurative language in enriching narrative discourse.

Keywords: *figurative language, metaphor, literature*

Introduction

Figurative language has long played a pivotal role in enriching literary texts. It serves not merely as a decorative linguistic element but also as a cognitive and communicative tool that shapes how meaning is constructed and interpreted. In literary studies, the analysis of figurative language allows both readers and scholars to uncover layers of symbolic and emotional resonance that go beyond literal interpretation. One notable example is Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, a psychological thriller known for its dense, evocative prose and complex narrative. The novel's rich use of figurative expressions invites a deeper investigation into how language shapes character, theme, and mood.

The study of figurative language in literature can also provide valuable insights from a translation perspective. Translating metaphors, idioms, irony, and other non-literal expressions requires more than linguistic equivalence—it demands cultural and contextual sensitivity. This becomes especially crucial when the source text, such as *The Secret History*, relies heavily on symbolic and metaphorical constructions rooted in Western literary and philosophical traditions. Therefore, analyzing the types and

frequency of figurative language in such a novel not only contributes to literary criticism but also informs translation practices and cross-cultural interpretation.

This research is motivated by the recognition that *The Secret History* presents a unique case study in the interplay between literary style and figurative meaning. Previous studies (e.g., Colston, 2015; Subagiharti et al., 2023) have emphasized the ubiquity of metaphor and other figurative devices in everyday communication, but their literary deployment—particularly in psychologically nuanced narratives—remains relatively underexplored. The novel's use of metaphor, irony, hyperbole, idioms, and indirect speech acts illustrates the complexity of human cognition as reflected through literature. Systematically exploring these features enables a more nuanced appreciation of Tartt's stylistic choices.

Furthermore, this study addresses a gap in identifying and classifying specific types of figurative language within a coherent analytical framework. Drawing on Colston's (2015) typology, the research focuses on six categories: metaphor, idiom, hyperbole, verbal irony, indirect request, and contextual expression. By quantifying their occurrences and analyzing representative examples, this study aims to determine which types are most prevalent and how they contribute to the novel's narrative depth. The findings are expected to enhance our understanding of the emotional and rhetorical dynamics embedded in the text.

In summary, this study seeks not only to categorize the forms of figurative language in *The Secret History* but also to examine their cognitive and aesthetic functions. It contributes to the fields of literary stylistics, translation theory, and applied linguistics by demonstrating how figurative expressions mediate between language, thought, and reader perception. Ultimately, this research reaffirms the central role of figurative language in shaping literary meaning and in enriching readers' engagement with the text across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

1.1. Types of Figurative Language

Figurative language serves as a medium for non-literal communication. For example, when someone says, "*You are a star*," the literal interpretation would suggest that the person is an actual celestial body, which is, of course, impossible. However, in colloquial usage, the phrase implies that the person is outstanding or highly admired. Figurative expressions, such as allusions, are often associated with literary works—such as books or poems—that evoke imaginative or symbolic meanings. These expressions help learners and instructors navigate complex concepts by enabling them to visualize and interpret content more clearly. The use of figurative language can make situations more engaging, insightful, and emotionally resonant. When combined with an author's distinctive style, figurative language produces a unique narrative voice that may even facilitate cross-linguistic and cross-cultural understanding.

1.1.1. Metaphor

Metaphor According to Subagiharti et al. (2023), Drewer (2003) describes metaphor as a "thinking tool" and "knowledge for media" and provides heuristic advantages for scientific studies. Metaphorization has a theoretical constitutive effect and helps us develop new hypotheses, giving science a creative opportunity to reshape our understanding of the universe. Junge (2010) highlights the importance of metaphor as a tool for knowledge creation, emphasizing its capacity to generate new concepts that draw attention to previously overlooked relationships. Colston also discusses the use of

metaphor in evocative and emotional descriptions, and how it is influenced by various elements, including the physical, social, emotional, and cognitive environments.

1.1.2. Irony

Irony in language occurs when those who are supposed to be observing become confused about what they are actually seeing. Speakers intentionally use humor in various ways to relieve stress in various situations. One example is a character who walks into a storm and says, "Wow, that's so nice!" even though the storm is still going on. In one example, an aunt says, "Wow, you could win an award for cleanliness!" even though her daughter is not that old. Pexman (2008:286) defines verbal irony as nonliteral language that highlights the difference between expectations and reality.

1.1.3. Hyperbola

Hyperbola In Aljadaan, Claridge (2018) As soon as X becomes less than When trying to define the meaning that is used in speaker, hyperbole, and exaggeration, use caution. In the context of our understanding, the use of hyperbole implies that the subject is dramatic or somewhat exaggerated in terms of some attribute or characteristic.

1.1.4. Contextual Expression

Contextual expression is divided into several learning categories. It has several structures, such as nominal verb language and noun language combinations, and which are based, at least in part, on contextual discourse. From this perspective, contextual linguistic varieties are defined as the types of language that are most prevalent in mutually exclusive environments (Herbert, 2015:112).

1.1.5. Idiom

According to McCarthy and O'Dell's Idiom in Wahyuni (2022), an idiom is a word that cannot be understood literally but in context; in addition, idioms have different meanings depending on the words. Miller (2019) gives an example in the title "On the other hand". Without context, it may be difficult to understand this quote, but Miller clarifies that it means "from a different perspective." Another example from Miller is "to hit the book," which is interpreted as learning.

1.1.6. Indirect Request

The type of indirect request used to express a desire or change direction is called a non-linear question. A non-silent request is a request made by someone to ask another person to give them information, give them something, or give them something from another party. For example, when someone asks, "can you tell me how much you make?" they politely answer that they do not want to understand the person in question. According to Pradopo (2002) in Enjelina (2022), style is the use of certain language to gain artistic value. Writing has the ability to reveal secret information or social media comments that may be in the text. A deeper analysis will help readers understand the metaphors and symbolism that contribute to the overall impact of the novel.

1.2 Translation Perspective

The aim of translation is to formulate principles that explain and predict phenomena related to language, cognition, ideology, and culture, particularly as they pertain to the process of transferring meaning from one language to another within a specific sociocultural context. Figurative language—such as metaphor, verbal irony, hyperbole,

contextual expressions, idioms, and indirect requests—poses significant challenges in translation due to its reliance on cultural references and contextual subtleties.

Through the use of such devices, authors are able to infuse their work with artistic depth and emotional resonance. For readers, the presence of figurative language enhances literary appreciation by offering a richer interpretive experience and a deeper engagement with the text's thematic and stylistic layers. This study focuses on Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, examining how she employs figurative language to articulate complex ideas and evoke vivid imagery. Her skillful integration of these expressions demonstrates not only linguistic creativity but also the capacity of literature to transcend literal meaning and communicate on symbolic, philosophical, and emotional levels.

Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative methodology, as it focuses on analyzing textual data derived from previous studies and relevant references. Qualitative research emphasizes the interpretation of meaning within its natural context and typically yields descriptive data in the form of written narratives, documented statements, or textual analysis related to the subject under investigation. The data for this research are collected through close reading and identification of figurative language expressions found in *The Secret History* novel by Donna Tartt. Additional references from linguistic and literary sources are also used to support the classification and interpretation process. The purpose of using a descriptive qualitative approach is to provide an in-depth analysis and nuanced insights that may not have been revealed in prior studies. This method enables the researcher to explore the types and functions of figurative language within the novel more accurately and contextually.

Results

The author will go over the six types of metaphorical language used in the *Secret History* book in certain types of figurative language; metaphors, verbal irony, hyperbole, contextual expressions, idioms, and indirect requests.

1.2. Metaphors

The data illustrating this type of figurative language include the following example: *"That night I wrote in my journal: 'Trees are schizophrenic now and beginning to lose control, enraged with the shock of their fiery new colors.'"* This metaphor reflects the character's perception of nature as emotionally unstable, projecting human psychological states onto the surrounding environment. The figurative expression *"trees are schizophrenic"* attributes human mental illness to inanimate natural elements, highlighting both the narrator's psychological turmoil and the novel's atmospheric intensity.

Another example is the reference: *"Someone—was it van Gogh?—said that orange is the color of insanity."* This metaphor is both symbolic and intertextual, linking color with emotional and psychological conditions. The association of orange with madness finds cultural resonance in the figure of Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, ritual frenzy, and ecstasy, who is traditionally depicted in orange attire. In psychological contexts, the color orange has also been used in institutional settings, such as psychiatric hospitals, to evoke warmth or uplift mood.

These metaphorical parallels reinforce the novel's underlying theme of psychological descent and chaotic transformation. The characters' engagement in

Dionysian rituals mirrors their progressive loss of rational control, with the color imagery serving as a symbolic bridge between classical mythology, individual madness, and group disintegration.

1.3. Idioms

The data illustrating this type of figurative language includes the expression: *"He knew I had nowhere to go for winter vacation and enjoyed rubbing salt in my wounds."* The idiom *"rubbing salt in my wounds"* metaphorically conveys the act of aggravating an already painful or unpleasant situation. In this context, the character deliberately intensifies Richard's emotional distress by emphasizing his vulnerability. The figurative use of this idiom reflects not only the speaker's insensitivity but also reveals the psychological power dynamics between the characters.

Another idiomatic expression appears in the line: *"Piece of cake," he said.* Literally referring to the ease of eating cake, the idiom *"piece of cake"* signifies that something is very easy to accomplish. In the narrative context, this phrase underscores a character's casual confidence in performing a task, thereby adding to the informal and colloquial tone of dialogue. Such idioms enhance the realism of character interactions while also providing cultural insight into their attitudes and personalities.

1.4. Hyperbole

The data illustrating this type of figurative language includes the expression: *"I hope we're all ready to leave the phenomenal world, and enter into the sublime?"* This utterance, spoken by the character Julian, reflects his intellectual enthusiasm and anticipation for the class's next exploration of philosophical themes—particularly those related to Plato, metaphysics, and the concept of madness. The expression metaphorically suggests a transition from the ordinary, tangible realm (the phenomenal world) to a higher, abstract realm of aesthetic or philosophical experience (the sublime). This aligns with the novel's overarching engagement with classical Greek thought, particularly the Dionysian tradition that celebrates transcendence, ecstasy, and irrationality.

Another hyperbolic expression is found in the line: *"There was a life-or-death attempt being made near my table."* This statement is a clear example of exaggeration used to dramatize the urgency and chaos of a seemingly trivial event—students energetically collecting money for a party or "beer blast." From Richard's perspective as the narrator, the hyperbole underscores the absurd intensity of the moment, implying that the situation felt as critical and chaotic as a literal life-or-death scenario. This use of hyperbole not only amplifies the emotional tone of the scene but also contributes to the novel's broader portrayal of youthful recklessness and psychological disarray.

1.5. Verbal Irony

The data representing this type of figurative language illustrates the use of **verbal irony** in emotionally charged dialogue. In one instance, a character exclaims: *"All night long you say offensive things about Arabs,"* followed by *"You don't know what Arabic is."* and *"I know it, in my heart."* culminating in the sarcastic remark: *"You and your buddy Saddam Hussein."* The phrase *"your buddy"* is not intended as a positive indication of friendship; instead, it functions as a sarcastic insult. By associating Adnan with Saddam Hussein—a figure often vilified in Western political discourse—the speaker, Mr. Hundy, weaponizes irony to express contempt and racial stereotyping without making a direct accusation. This form of sarcasm reveals implicit prejudice while maintaining a thin veneer of humor, thus reinforcing social tension through indirect verbal aggression.

Another example of verbal irony appears in the following exchange: “Judy, what would you do if you had one hundred and three degrees of fever?” to which Judy replies, “I would go to the fucking doctor,” without looking away from the television. Her use of expletive-laden sarcasm highlights both her frustration and the obviousness of the answer. In context, the question was directed at Richard, who had failed to take Charles—who was seriously ill—to the doctor. Judy’s tone and avoidance of eye contact suggest that her response is rhetorical, intended to criticize Richard’s inaction without directly confronting him. The emphatic use of profanity (“fucking doctor”) intensifies the ironic tone, blending irritation with dark humor.

These examples underscore how verbal irony in *The Secret History* serves both expressive and interpersonal functions. It conveys layered meanings, exposes underlying conflicts, and enables characters to express hostility, frustration, or judgment without overt confrontation. As such, verbal irony is not merely a stylistic device, but a critical pragmatic strategy that shapes character interaction and reveals deeper psychological and social dynamics within the narrative.

1.6. Contextual Expression

The data illustrating this type of figurative language is exemplified in the expression: “Well, well, speak of the Devil” (Book 1, p. 441). This phrase is an idiomatic expression used to indicate the sudden or unexpected arrival of someone who has just been mentioned in conversation. In the context of the novel, Mr. Corcoran utters the phrase at the exact moment Henry enters the room, making the utterance both situationally ironic and contextually appropriate.

Historically, the idiom “speak of the devil” can be traced back to 17th-century English usage. For instance, in *Piazza Universale* (1666), the saying appears as “The English say, Talk of the Devil, and he’s presenting your elbow,” while a variation in *Cataplus, a Mock Poem* (1672) states, “Talk of the Devil, and see his horns.” These early attestations reflect the superstitious belief that mentioning the Devil could invoke his presence, a concept that later evolved into a humorous or ironic idiom in modern English usage.

As used in *The Secret History*, this expression exemplifies a complex form of figurative language that combines idiomatic, metaphorical, and cultural dimensions. It draws on folkloric tradition while functioning pragmatically to comment on an unfolding situation. The idiom thus serves both a narrative and stylistic purpose: it reinforces character interaction, reflects cultural knowledge, and adds a layer of humor and spontaneity to the dialogue.

1.7. Indirect Request

The data illustrating this type of figurative language involves indirect requests, where speakers express intentions or commands implicitly, without directly stating them. One example occurs when Henry says: “Bunny, I wish I’d known you were coming. But Richard and I have got to leave in a few minutes.” On the surface, this appears to be a polite statement of fact; however, pragmatically, it functions as an indirect request for Bunny to leave. Henry avoids direct confrontation by using a softened tone and suggesting time constraints, thereby maintaining social politeness while signaling his desire for Bunny’s departure.

Another instance is found in the line: “Are you going to drink that Coke?” Although phrased as a yes-no question, the utterance is not a genuine inquiry about Richard’s intentions. Instead, it is a veiled request by Bunny to take the Coke for himself. The

absence of a real information-seeking motive indicates that the speaker expects the listener to infer the intended meaning based on context and tone.

A third example of an indirect request is expressed by Charles: "*Gosh, it's so hot in here,*" while simultaneously removing his wet coat and throwing it over a chair. Though no explicit request is made, the utterance is intended to prompt Richard to take action—such as opening a window or turning on a fan. This type of expression relies on shared contextual understanding and presumes that the listener will interpret the complaint as a request for assistance.

These examples demonstrate how indirect requests in *The Secret History* reveal subtle power dynamics and social strategies among characters. Rather than issuing direct commands, speakers encode their intentions within statements or questions, relying on inference and politeness conventions. Such indirectness not only reflects the psychological complexity of the characters but also contributes to the novel's nuanced depiction of interpersonal interaction.

Discussion

This study provides a detailed analysis of the use of figurative language in *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt, utilizing Colston's (2015) theoretical framework which classifies figurative language into six key categories: metaphor, idiom, hyperbole, verbal irony, indirect request, and contextual expression. The qualitative data reveal a total of 108 instances of figurative language distributed across these categories. Among them, metaphors dominate the dataset with 50 occurrences, constituting 46% of the total, indicating their central role in the novel's stylistic and thematic construction.

The prominence of metaphor suggests that Tartt employs this device not only as a rhetorical embellishment but as a fundamental cognitive and narrative strategy. Metaphors in the novel serve to externalize the psychological states of characters, build complex imagery, and frame philosophical ideas central to the plot, such as identity, madness, and morality. For example, expressions like "*Trees are schizophrenic now...*" exemplify how metaphor translates internal instability into vivid, sensory-rich language, reinforcing the novel's psychological tension.

Idioms, accounting for 22% of the data, are also frequently used to portray informal and culturally embedded expressions of emotion and interaction. Idiomatic phrases such as "*rubbing salt in my wounds*" and "*a piece of cake*" reflect the characters' social dynamics and add colloquial authenticity to the dialogue. These idioms often reveal character relationships and implicit power struggles, particularly among the novel's core group of students.

Hyperbole, representing 15% of the data, functions to amplify emotional responses and dramatize situations. Statements like "*There was a life-or-death attempt being made near my table*" exemplify how Tartt exaggerates ordinary events to convey the heightened perceptions of her protagonist. Hyperbole here serves a dual function: it reflects the narrator's internal monologue while also aligning with the novel's overall tone of existential drama and psychological intensity.

Indirect requests and verbal irony, which constitute 9% and 7% of the data respectively, are used more subtly. These expressions are crucial in illustrating the complex social interactions and unspoken tensions between characters. For instance, utterances such as "*Are you going to drink that Coke?*" function not as genuine inquiries but as masked demands. Similarly, ironic statements are employed to critique, satirize, or deflect confrontation, reinforcing the novel's underlying themes of ambiguity, repression, and fractured identity.

Contextual expressions, while only comprising 1% of the data, hold particular significance in their intertextual and cultural references. Phrases such as "*Speak of the Devil*" carry folkloric and historical connotations, suggesting the intrusion of fate or uncanny coincidence—motifs that align closely with the novel's fatalistic atmosphere.

Taken together, the dominance of metaphor and the strategic deployment of other figurative devices underscore Tartt's stylistic precision and narrative sophistication. Figurative language in *The Secret History* is not merely decorative, but integral to how characters are constructed, themes are conveyed, and meaning is layered. It enables the author to blend classical references with contemporary psychological realism, producing a richly textured literary experience.

This analysis also demonstrates the value of applying a structured typology to figurative language in literary texts. By identifying and quantifying the use of each type, the study not only clarifies the rhetorical strategies used by the author but also contributes to broader discussions in stylistics and translation studies. The findings suggest that future research could examine how these figurative forms are rendered in translated versions of the novel, or how they compare across genres or authors with similar narrative complexity.

Conclusion

This study has examined the use of figurative language in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, focusing on six categories: metaphor, idiom, hyperbole, verbal irony, indirect request, and contextual expression, as classified through Colston's (2015) framework. The analysis identified metaphor as the most dominant type, highlighting its central function in shaping meaning, mood, and character psychology within the narrative. Other forms such as idioms and hyperbole also contribute significantly to the stylistic and thematic layers of the novel.

The findings demonstrate that Tartt's figurative language is not merely ornamental but integral to the narrative's depth and complexity. Metaphors are used to express abstract concepts and psychological states; irony and indirect requests convey social dynamics and hidden tensions; while idioms and contextual expressions enrich the novel's cultural texture. These linguistic choices reflect the author's ability to intertwine aesthetic style with cognitive resonance, enhancing the reader's interpretive engagement.

Moreover, this study underscores the importance of figurative language analysis not only in literary interpretation but also in translation studies. Since figurative expressions are often culturally embedded and context-dependent, understanding their forms and functions is essential for accurate translation and cross-cultural appreciation.

In conclusion, the study affirms that *The Secret History* is a linguistically rich literary work in which figurative language plays a central role in constructing narrative meaning. By identifying and analyzing these expressions, this research contributes to broader discussions in stylistics, discourse analysis, and intercultural literary studies. Future research may consider comparative analysis across genres or explore how figurative language affects reader perception in translated versions of the novel.

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