

# The tradition of metaphorical interpretation in Turkish folk songs

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**Abstract:** In this article, a semantic classification of metaphors used in Turkish folk songs was carried out. We hope that our article will be of interest to other young scholars who wish to conduct research on various aspects of the relationship between language, art and metaphor.

**Keywords:** Turkish folk songs, literature, art, metaphor, music.

**Introduction:** "Defining a metaphor is as difficult as understanding imagination itself because a metaphor is also a product of creativity." [1, 3].

The concept of metaphor originates from Latin. In Ancient Greek, the word meta means "beyond," while phoros means "to carry" or "to transfer from one place to another." Its synonyms in Turkish include metaphor, analogy, allegory, figure of speech, and simile. It is defined as "borrowing through the use of something else." A metaphorical explanation is achieved by replacing one mode of expression with another, whereas a literal expression conveys meaning logically and consistently. Metaphorical expression allows for a freer and more flexible mode of articulation, depending on the speaker's preference. Stern distinguishes between literal meaning and metaphorical connotation, considering metaphor an arbitrary interpretation of expressions [2, 274].

To explain the difference between metaphorical and literal expressions, let's examine an example from folk poetry:

"Bir of çeksem karşıdaki dağlar yıkılır" ("If I sigh, the mountains before me will collapse")

And

"Çok üzgünüm" ("I am very sad").

Both expressions convey the same emotion. However, the first employs figurative language, while the second presents a direct, literal meaning. The first example provides a more intense emotional impact. These

characteristics of metaphorical expression can be found in all cultures. In other words, all of humanity uses metaphors to express the intensity of emotions. Based on this, Nietzsche proposed the idea that "Man is a metaphor-producing animal." [3, 880].

Another distinctive feature of metaphorical style is its abstract nature. To use a figurative expression, we compare and relate our thoughts to other objects or phenomena. Johnson explains this concept as follows: "Metaphors essentially create theories that reveal our thoughts about experiences. All theories are based on metaphors because our abstract concepts can only be defined metaphorically." The abstract nature of metaphor is a key reason why it is widely used by humans, as conscious beings.

This article focuses on the tradition and text of Turkish folk music, specifically analyzing the metaphors used in lyrics. In other words, the discussion of metaphors is limited to textual analysis. Other musical elements, such as melody, mode, and rhythm, are beyond the scope of this article. However, before delving into Turkish folk song lyrics, it is important to examine the role of figurative expression in art.

## 1. Why is metaphor more effectively used in art?

Through primitive actions, humans gain experience and begin to comprehend life: "A person interacts with the external world, perceives and experiences it in different ways, and forms various thoughts about it. The essence of a person's identity, activities, and thoughts depends on these initial interactions with the

world." This initial attempt at understanding reality marks the beginning of metaphor usage.

Metaphors are used in various fields such as poetry, literature, aesthetics, mathematics, logic, and folklore. They are especially preferred in artistic expression, which allows for greater freedom. Symbols employed in artistic descriptions often take on a metaphorical form. In fact, metaphors are used even more effectively in art.

Ziss, in his work *Aesthetics*, describes the purpose of using metaphor in the following way: "A metaphor is a technique that allows an artist to liken their object of thought to elements of the perceptible world, enabling artistic comparison. It is the process of illuminating the inner essence of one phenomenon using another that possesses an externally similar characteristic. Through metaphor, aesthetic thinking and artistic comparison emerge." [4, 292].

Kennedy, in his research, describes how metaphors are expressed through movement, determination, and stability [5, 447]. Similarly, Spitzer emphasizes the use of metaphor in musical elements such as melody, harmony, rhythm, text, and lyrics. From the colors used in paintings to the sounds and words employed in music, all forms of emotional expression stem from figurative language.

In other words, what differentiates artistic expression from logical expression is the use of metaphorical or literal modes of speech. Metaphor, which is widely used in art, also carries cultural significance. Lakoff explains this by stating: "Metaphorical mapping is often flexible—some are universal, some are widespread, and others are specific to particular cultures." For example, just as the color purple symbolizes femininity, a red rose represents love, minor scales in Western culture convey sadness, and major scales express joy, all regionally specific examples indicate that artistic expression and metaphorical style are deeply rooted in cultural context.

## 2. The Use of Metaphor in Turkish Folk Songs

Language, as one of the most important components of culture, plays a crucial role in conveying metaphors. Many scholars agree that metaphor, in terms of its characteristics, is more creative, distinctive, captivating, free, rich, interesting, complex, and interpretative in literary and artistic language compared to non-literary texts. Lakoff also expresses a similar view on poetry: "Poetic metaphor is the most significant extension of our daily lives; it is a traditional system of metaphorical thinking."

Language is culture; therefore, "the structure and semantic composition of language have been

influenced by factors such as the culture and traditions of people, their religious beliefs, the impact of surrounding cultures, and geographical location." According to Lakoff, "Metaphors are often based not on similarities but on our own experiences" [6, 245]. Thus, language is the primary medium reflecting a nation or society's perception of the world and emotions. The meanings and metaphors embedded in language provide significant information about the beliefs of people during pagan times, their historical past, and methods of production, making it one of the most crucial elements of abstract cultural fragments.

One of the most effective cultural forms where language is utilized is music. This is because music is a powerful form of expression that encompasses not only melodies but also emotional words. Therefore, in order to achieve this emotional expression, not only melodies but also metaphors play an essential role.

Anatolia is one of the oldest cultural geographies in the world. It is also among the first settlements where agriculture and the Neolithic period began. Turkish folk music reflects influences from diverse cultural elements such as Paganism, Buddhism, idolatry, and Zoroastrianism, apart from Islam and Sufism. Naturally, it is impossible to present all traces of pre-Islamic Anatolian culture and beliefs within Turkish folk music lyrics. In this article, the metaphors found in folk songs are classified based on their meanings. Additionally, it is evident that many common metaphors exist across various languages spoken in this region. For example, the word "crane" (*turna*) is a metaphor in Armenian as well and carries sacred meanings.

There is a universal truth applicable to almost all folklore genres in Anatolia and the Middle East: the importance of song lyrics. One of the most significant elements providing emotional depth to Turkish folk music is its lyrics. What brings emotional depth to folk songs is their figurative expression. The metaphorical style in Turkish folk songs is rooted in traditional, deeply embedded motifs of folk literature. For example, "illness" symbolizes love, "cure" represents the beloved, and "healer" refers to an ineffective remedy for this illness. Likewise, "mountain" signifies separation, while "road" represents lifestyle and philosophy. This unique metaphorical style in Turkish folk songs differentiates them into traditional and regional categories. The metaphors listed below are all variations representing worldly love: Lover-beloved, hunter-prey, and doctor-patient are all continuations of this primary metaphor.

Every musical genre is closely linked to the culture of the society to which it belongs. Accordingly, in times when patriarchy dominated, folk songs reflected

patriarchal values and found their metaphorical expressions accordingly. Since folk songs primarily represent the world of men, women were perceived as objects of love and were given meaning through comparisons to various creatures.

**Metaphors such as gazelle, deer, partridge, and others:** Firstly, comparing a woman to a gazelle or deer originates from the hunter-prey metaphor mentioned above. Since the hunter chases after his prey, he is likened to the young man, while the hunt or prey is compared to the beloved. In folk songs, which predominantly reflect the male world, the beloved is portrayed as a gazelle, partridge, or other animals that serve as objects of the hunt.

Kekliğim kekliğim kınalı kekliğim

Suya mı gidersin yolunu bekliyim [7, 167]

**Metaphors such as apple, cherry, almond, and others:** In folk songs where women are depicted as objects of love, poets often emphasize their physical appearance. The lover, who is willing to dig mountains or endure prison for his beloved, describes her eyebrows, eyes, gaze, cheeks, lips, and hair metaphorically. The beloved has "pencil-thin eyebrows," "almond-shaped eyes," "apple-like cheeks," "cherry-red lips," "sweet words," and "golden hair." The similarities in metaphors used to describe women in folk songs may be linked to the widespread nature of folk songs across different regions.

Fark etmez naz etsen de çekerum her nazını

Kiraz dudaklı Ayşem yerim senin ağzını [8, 292]

Hanım kızlar kızlar canım kızlar kızla

Bezenmiş düğüne gider elma yanaklı kızlar [9, 4]

At first, people intuitively felt the meanings they had not yet named, but they expressed these meanings through comparisons and analogies. This method has been frequently used as a form of artistic expression throughout different periods in art history. From this perspective, metaphor was a powerful tool for folk poets, known as "bards." In Middle Eastern culture, melody nourishes words, while words serve as the cornerstone preventing the cultural heritage from being forgotten. Therefore, words in Anatolian folk songs are an inseparable part of musical structure. In Turkish folk songs, metaphor is created through concretization and personification. The sources of metaphors in both religious and non-religious folk songs primarily stem from elements of nature, such as mountains, cranes, deer, gazelles, roses, nightingales, cherries, and apples. Additionally, if we consider metaphors used to describe more abstract situations: "Illness" represents love, "cure" symbolizes the beloved, "healer" denotes the ineffective remedy for

love, "mountain" signifies separation, and "road" represents lifestyle and philosophy.

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