



# Metaphors of Sadness in Music

A comparison between the 1980s and the 2020s

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## Abstract

This study examines sadness metaphors from five song lyrics from the 1980s and five from the 2020s, using Conceptual Metaphor Theory by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) as the analytical framework. The purpose of this study is to identify the types of source domains used to express sadness and to explore whether metaphoric representations differ across decades. The data was retrieved from Spotify and Anghami playlists and included only songs whose lyrics reflected sadness. Metaphors were identified through a combined application of MIPVU and MSDIP, resulting in ten source domains. The analysis shows that SADNESS IS A SUBSTANCE IN A CONTAINER appears exclusively in the 1980s material, suggesting that sadness is conceptualized as an internal, contained experience in the set of songs from that decade. A complementary pattern, namely, a greater use of metaphors involving external forces in the 2020s lyrics, which could be expected, given claims about increased externalization of distress in contemporary contexts, was not confirmed. The findings also raise methodological considerations regarding metaphor identification in poetic discourse.

**Keywords:** Conceptual Metaphor Theory, metaphor, emotion, sadness, lyrics, music



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# 1 Introduction

Music and language are two of the most powerful tools for human expression, and their relationship is unique to human species. The combination of the systems enables people to communicate emotions, ideas and experiences that might otherwise be difficult to express. Music has the capacity to transform personal emotions into shared cultural experiences; in other words, song lyrics and music permit the listener to resonate with feelings sometimes difficult to articulate themselves.

This study investigates how the emotion of sadness is conceptualized metaphorically in English-language song lyrics from two distinct decades, the 1980s and the 2020s. Sadness is chosen as a focal emotion due to its central role in musical expression and the choice of the two decades is driven by a curiosity of whether emotions are articulated in the same way as 40 years ago. That is, by comparing two distinct decades, this study aims to explore whether metaphorical representation of sadness has changed over time.

The analysis draws on Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) which views metaphor as a fundamental mechanism of human thought rather than a simple stylistic device. Metaphors shape how we understand, describe and view emotions in everyday life. Within this framework, metaphors structure how individuals understand and describe abstract concepts by relating them to more concrete and often bodily-based experiences. In this sense, examining metaphorical expressions of sadness across two decades may reveal broader cultural patterns related to emotional expression.

To investigate these patterns, the study uses the Metaphor Identification Procedure Vrije Universiteit (MIPVU) and Metaphor Source Domain Identification Procedure (MSDIP), which provide a systematic way to detect metaphors in language. By applying these procedures to lyrics from both decades, the research aims to determine which source domains are most commonly used to express sadness and whether their conceptual structure has shifted over time.

## 2 Aim and research questions

This study aims to provide an in-depth analysis of how sadness is expressed metaphorically in a set of ten song lyrics from the 1980s and the 2020s. The study aims to identify the dominant source domains used to conceptualize sadness and to compare how these conceptualizations operate between the decades. Given the small dataset, the study does not claim to offer a representative account of either period. Instead, the findings are exploratory and should be viewed as a starting point for broader analysis. As discussed in the following sections, the poetic and interpretative nature of song lyrics introduces analytical challenges, and the results should therefore be understood within this methodological context.

The research questions that will guide the study are the following:

- How is sadness expressed metaphorically in a set of selected songs from 1980s and 2020s?
- Are there differences in the types of source domains of sadness between the two decades?
- What might these differences reveal about cultural understandings of sadness in music?

### **3 Theoretical framework**

The present chapter begins with an overview of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, outlining its central assumptions and explaining how metaphor is grounded in bodily experience. This is followed by how CMT applies to emotions, which forms the theoretical foundation of the analysis. It proceeds with a brief outline of the generational context that informs the comparison between the two datasets. Finally, it concludes with a review of previous studies on metaphors in song lyrics.

#### **3.1 Conceptual Metaphor Theory**

Conceptual metaphor theory, introduced by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson 1980, revolutionized the understanding of metaphor by positioning it as central to human cognition. The theory proposes that metaphor is not only a decorative feature of language, but a fundamental mechanism of human thought. While metaphors may appear insignificant in everyday communication, Lakoff and Johnson argue that they are essential to how we understand and navigate the world, although most speakers are not always aware of them (2003, p. 3).

Building on this framework, the linguist Kövecses (2002) further explains that a conceptual metaphor is typically expressed as a mapping between a source domain, that is, a concrete, familiar concept, and a target domain, an abstract and complex concept. For example, in the metaphor THEORIES ARE BUILDINGS, elements from the domain of buildings, foundation, support and construction, are utilized to understand the abstract domain of theories (Kövecses 2002, pp. 5-6). This is shown, for instance, in the sentence:

“Is there a foundation for your theory?”. Typically, these mappings are unidirectional, meaning that we usually cannot map a concrete subject to an abstract one, in other words, while buildings help people conceptualize theories, people do not conceptualize buildings through theories (Kövecses, 2002, pp. 5-6). The mappings consist of corresponding components in source and target domain and indicate that the projection from a source domain to a target domain relies on conceptual materials shared by a community of speakers (Kövecses, 2000 pp. 146-147).

Kövecses (2002, p. ix) notes that certain conceptual metaphors become deeply conventionalized in everyday language. He describes so-called “dead metaphors”, that is, metaphors that have become such an integrated part of everyday language that they have stopped being seen as metaphors. For instance, “A branch of this organization” no longer sounds figurative, but it continues to shape how people conceptualize institutions and continues to bear meaning although not actively being seen by speakers as metaphors.

### **3.2 Metaphor and emotion**

Within the perspective of CMT, metaphors can be applied to understand emotions. Kövecses (2000, p. 186) argues that emotions are not simple, isolated feelings but complex phenomena shaped by multiple dimensions of human life. As he explains, “An emotion concept typically evokes content pertaining to all aspects of experience, social, cognitive and physical.” This means that when people talk about emotions, they draw on a wide range of knowledge.

Furthermore, Kövecses (2000, p. 189) emphasizes that emotion language and words such as sad, happy or angry capture only the most surface level of the emotion. Because emotional experience is rich, nuanced and difficult to explain directly, speakers rely on a broad range of linguistic tools to articulate subtle differences. Among these tools, metaphor plays an important role. Through metaphor, abstract emotional states become describable in terms of more concrete experiences.

### **3.3 Embodiment and emotion**

Since metaphor relies on more concrete domains to structure abstract experience, our bodily experience provides a shared concrete resource for all humans. This is why the embodied relationship between language and experience lies at the heart of CMT. Lakoff and Johnson (2003) emphasize that metaphors are not arbitrary but grounded in the body and shaped by the culture.

This perspective is closely related to the notion of the body as a container of our emotions. Lakoff and Johnson (2003 p. 29) explain that human beings are experiencing the world through spatial orientation with boundaries, they further explain that “each of us is a container with a bounding surface and an in-out orientation” In other words, our bodies are viewed as containers, and our emotions are viewed as substances inside said container.

In addition, our physical orientation and sensory perception provide the foundation for how abstract concepts are mentally structured (Lakoff & Johnson 2003, p. 57). Expressions such as “I’m feeling up” or “I’m feeling down” clearly convey emotional states without explicitly mentioning happiness or sadness. This is not merely casual but

reflects our physical experience. When we are sad, our bodies tend to droop; when we are happy, our bodies and energy rise (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p. 159).

Building on the embodied perspective, Kövecses (2000, p. 39) states that emotions are often organized following basic evaluative dimensions, particularly in terms of positive and negative oppositions. For example, extreme opposites such as *up* and *down* are often being applied to sadness and happiness. Similarly, negative emotions are frequently associated with *darkness* whereas positive emotions are linked to *light*.

In addition, Kövecses (2000, p. 44) notes that negative emotions are often conceptualized in terms of physical harm, illness or injury, which makes them more concrete and physically imaginable. This corresponds to the more general metaphor EMOTIONAL HARM IS PHYSICAL DAMAGE, where emotional suffering is understood through bodily experience .

However, although metaphorical patterns are grounded in bodily experience, they are also shaped by the culture. This requires consideration of contextual and cultural factors. This is addressed in the following section.

### **3.4 Context and culture in metaphor interpretation**

Lakoff and Johnson (2003, p.12) highlight the importance of context in shaping how metaphors are interpreted. Their example “Please sit down in the apple juice seat” demonstrates how meaning emerges not from the phrase alone but from the situational setting. In isolation, the sentence seems nonsensical. However, in the context of a breakfast table where one place setting includes apple juice and others have orange juice,

the meaning becomes immediately clear. Even on the following morning, the phrase still holds meaning because it draws on shared situational knowledge.

This simple example demonstrates an important principle: that metaphors are not interpreted in a vacuum. Their meaning depends on contextual cues, cultural assumptions and the surrounding linguistic environment. In other words, co-text is of great importance when analyzing metaphors, which results as essential for analyzing song lyrics.

### **3.5 Generational and cultural context**

A recent report from King's College London (2024) highlights significant generational differences in how emotional distress is understood and discussed. According to their survey, people from the UK and Australia think emotional life has shifted in later decades and that distress among young people has increased in recent years. However, it also shows that Baby boomers (born between 1946-1964), and Gen X (Born between (1965-1980), were reported to be twice as likely as Gen Z (Born between 1997-2009) to say that mental health problems among young people are increasing because young people today are less resilient. The younger generation also tend to say that things such as the level of worry, future prospects, pressure to do well at school and making friends is much more difficult today than when their parents were their age.

These differences may reflect broader cultural shifts in attitudes toward emotional expression, including a greater acceptance of emotional vulnerability in more recent decades. In the present study, such shifts are relevant, as they may influence how sadness

is conceptualized. In the context of this study, it is hypothesized that this may influence how sadness is conceptualized metaphorically and could potentially show a more suppressed expressed sadness in the 1980s compared to the 2020s material.

### **3.6 Metaphors of sadness: previous approaches**

Building on the foundational work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980), Barcelona (1986) identified a wide range of source domains used to conceptualize depression in American English. His study identified a broad set of source domains used to structure the conceptualization of sadness including:

1. SADNESS IS DOWN
2. SADNESS IS DARKNESS
3. SADNESS IS A LACK OF HEAT
4. SADNESS IS A LACK OF VITALITY
5. SADNESS IS A FLUID IN A CONTAINER
6. SADNESS IS A PHYSICAL FORCE
7. SADNESS IS A NATURAL FORCE
8. SADNESS IS AN ILLNESS
9. SADNESS IS INSANITY
10. SADNESS IS A BURDEN
11. SADNESS IS A LIVING ORGANISM
12. SADNESS IS AN OPPONENT

Kövecses (2000, p. 25) later expanded these findings, presenting a similar list of source domains, while adding two domains: *SADNESS IS A CAPTIVE ANIMAL* and *SADNESS IS A SOCIAL SUPERIOR*. These additional mappings show how sadness may be experienced as something overpowering or controlling, positioning the individual as subordinate to the emotion.

### **3.7 Aspects of emotion concepts**

Kövecses (2000, p. 40) argues that most source domains used in emotion metaphors are not exclusive to a particular emotion. Instead, he emphasizes that emotions are structured through a set of conceptual patterns that highlight aspects of emotional experience. For example, metaphors that frame an emotion as a force may emphasize passivity, or being affected by something external, while metaphors that frame an emotion as a substance highlight the presence of the emotion within the self.

Kövecses further explains that this has important theoretical implications:

We do not understand abstract domains in unique ways (...) Instead, we seem to build up an abstract domain from “conceptual materials” that we make use of in other parts of our conceptual system as well. For example, we employ metaphors for “control” in whatever domain that requires it (Kövecses 2000, p.50).

Thus, emotions do not differ because they have their own dedicated set of metaphors. Rather, they differ because different metaphors highlight different dimensions of emotional experience. What distinguishes emotions is therefore not the domain itself but which aspect of emotion it highlights.

Kövecses (2000 pp. 41-46) identifies several aspects of emotion that generate major metaphor types. Some of the most relevant include:

- Existence: EXISTENCE OF EMOTION IS PRESENCE HERE
- Intensity: INTENSITY OF EMOTION IS AMOUNT/QUANTITY
- Passivity: PASSIVE EXPERIENCES ARE THE PHYSICAL EFFECTS OF FORCES
- Control: ATTEMPT AT CONTROL IS STRUGGLE WITH FORCE, LOSS OF CONTROL IS LOSS OF CONTROL OVER FORCE
- Positive-negative evaluation: NEGATIVE EMOTIONS ARE ILLNESSES
- Difficulty: EMOTIONAL DIFFICULTIES ARE BURDENS
- Harm: EMOTIONAL HARM IS PHYSICAL DAMAGE

These aspects help explain why particular source domains are used to conceptualize sadness. A single metaphor may reflect multiple aspects; for instance, a container metaphor may highlight existence, intensity and control simultaneously. For this reason, the aspects are not quantified in this study. Counting them would assume a strict one-to-one relationship between metaphor and aspect, which does not reflect how metaphor functions, and becomes therefore methodologically inappropriate. Instead, the aspects in this study are used qualitatively to support the interpretation of how sadness is conceptualized across the material.

### 3.8 Previous Studies

Researchers have used the application of conceptual metaphor theory on music lyrics before, considering genre differences of emotions, diachronical differences in an artist's career and diachronical differences of a specific language and genre.

Lidström (2017) conducted a comparative study analyzing the use of conceptual metaphors related to *love* and *sadness* in *country* and *rap* song lyrics. Her research was grounded in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and employed the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) to identify metaphorical linguistic expressions. An interesting finding relevant to the present study is the interrelationship between emotion domains. This is relevant because it suggests that even when focusing on a single target emotion, such as sadness, metaphorical expressions may overlap or evoke other emotional concepts. For instance, Lidström discusses the example “startin to feel distant again”, which she interprets as expressing sadness caused by emotional separation from a loved one, which could arguably apply to both the emotion domain *sadness* as well as *love* (Lidström 2017, p.41).

From a diachronic perspective, Gavelin (2016) examined conceptual metaphors on *love* in Mariah Carey's lyrics, tracing changes from the beginning of her career and to later albums. The results showed a higher frequency of metaphors in her earlier work compared to later periods, suggesting that metaphor frequency can change over an artist's career. Although this study focuses on a single artist and a different emotion, it demonstrates that metaphorical expression in music can change over time.

Furthermore, Techacharoenrungrung in a 2022 study analyzed 24 Thai pop songs from August 2019 to September 2021 to show how love is conceptualized in the digital age. The study resulted in 12 source domains for love metaphors. The results showed that certain mappings, such as ownership, were more prominent in contemporary music compared to previous studies. Other domains, such as SUPERSTITIONS remained persistent through time. Although their study is situated in a different cultural and emotional domain, it illustrates that metaphorical conceptualization of emotion can reflect broader cultural changes across time periods.

Adding to the diachronic perspective, although not applying CMT, a large-scale study by Brand et al. (2022) examined over 160,000 English-language song lyrics from 1965 to 2015 by counting negative vs positively evaluated words. The researchers found a clear shift toward more negative emotional expression in later years, while positive emotions like joy decreased in frequency.

## 4 Material and method

This section describes the data collection process and its criteria to arrive at a dataset of ten songs, five from the 1980s and five from the 2020s. It proceeds with explaining the MIPVU and MSDIP methods that were used to identify the metaphors and their source domains.

### 4.1 Data selection and criteria

The data for this study was collected through a multi-step collection process. Initially, songs were identified from Spotify's editorial playlists labeled "Sad 80's songs" and "Sad songs". These playlists are the result of combined human and algorithmic curation. According to Spotify Engineering (2023), many editorial playlists are created through a process in which human editors define a "pool" of suitable tracks that fit a thematic purpose, while Spotify's algorithms tailor the final selections. The playlists can therefore be seen as reflecting a combination of editorial judgement and user-oriented curation, making them relevant as a starting point for identifying songs associated with sadness. The initial screening consisted of examining the lyrics of all the songs in these playlists

However, during the initial screening of the editorial playlists, it became evident that a large proportion of the songs focused primarily on romantic love or heartbreak, without representing sadness as the main emotional state of the song. Therefore, only the lyrics in which sadness was expressed as a central or more general emotional state were considered for inclusion.

To complement the dataset and ensure sufficient material from both decades, additional songs were collected from the user-created playlists “Sad songs” on Spotify and “Sad 80s songs” on Anghami. These were included following the same criteria, namely that sadness had to be the central theme. The songs were then subjected to metaphor analysis.

## 4.2 Data

The data selection resulted in five songs from the 1980s and five songs from the 2020s, which hereby will be indicated by S (song), followed by song number in the list and lastly, (80/20) indicates the decade it belongs to.

1980s:

All Cried Out- Lisa Lisa and the cult jam (S180)

Fade To Black- Metallica (S280)

Knife- Rockwell (S380)

Do you really want to hurt me- Culture club (S480)

I Wish it Would Rain Down-Phil Collins (S580)

2020s:

Everything I wanted- Billie Eilish (S120)

How This Ends- Lewis Capaldi (S220)

This Is What Sadness Feels Like- JVKE (S320)

Call Your Mom-Noah Kahan (S420)

Life Goes on- Ed Sheeran (S520)

### **4.3 MIPVU+MSDIP**

To identify metaphor-related words in the song lyrics, the Metaphor Identification Procedure Vrije Universiteit (2019) (MIPVU) was applied. MIPVU provides a systematic method for detecting metaphor use in texts. The method consists of clearly defined steps to ensure reliability and replicability in metaphor analysis.

The procedure begins with a close reading of the text, to understand its overall meaning. Each word is then examined individually. For each lexical unit, two meanings are identified:

1. The contextual meaning, referring to what the word signifies within the given sentence or line of the song
2. The basic meaning, which is typically more concrete, human-centered and historically older.

A lexical unit is marked as metaphorically used when there is a clear contrast between these two meanings. For instance, in the line “I’m drowning in sorrow”, the word

*drowning* does not describe literal submersion in water, but rather an emotional state, showing a contrast between the physical and the abstract domains. Since the contrast is clear, the lexical unit is identified as metaphorically used.

A simplified coding table was used during analysis:

Lyric.	Word.	Basic meaning.	Contextual meaning.	Metaphorical?
“I’m drowning in sorrow”.	Drowning.	To suffocate by submersion in water.	Emotional decline.	Yes.

Once metaphor related words were identified using MIPVU, the Metaphor Source Domain Identification procedure (MSDIP) by Reijnierse & Burgers (2023) was applied to classify them according to conceptual source domains. MSDIP builds on MIPVU and includes three additional steps:

1. Examine all dictionary sense descriptions to determine which senses can function as basic meanings.
2. The potential source domains are labeled by summarizing each relevant basic meaning into a general conceptual domain.
3. Justify the selection of the final source domain by referring to the contextual evidence.

MSDIP recommends generating multiple possible source domains rather than relying on predefined source domains. At the same time, MSDIP acknowledges that some metaphors

may remain ambiguous, and ambiguous classification is acceptable if justified (Reijnierse & Burgers, 2023). In this present study, this meant that multiple potential source domains were initially considered for several metaphorical expressions. In cases where one domain was strongly supported by contextual evidence, a single domain was selected. However, in instances where no single interpretation could be prioritized, the metaphor was treated as ambiguous. Such cases were discussed as overlapping or ambiguous metaphors.

While MIPVU and MSDIP methods offer systematic procedures, the analysis cannot be entirely objective. Metaphor identification, especially in song lyrics, necessarily involves interpretation. Lyrics combine figurative language, narrative voice and poetic imagery which can make it difficult to distinguish between literal and metaphorical meanings. As a result, identifying whether a lexical unit is used metaphorically is not always straightforward and may depend on interpretative judgement. It is therefore acknowledged that the analysis is partly influenced by the researcher's interpretation. An overview of all identified metaphorical expressions, including lyric excerpts and assigned source domains is provided in Appendix 1.

## 5 Results and analysis

The following section presents the results of the metaphor analysis of the 1980s and 2020s lyrics. The identified metaphors are grouped according to their source domains. The analysis begins with the most frequent domains and concludes with more ambiguous or overlapping cases.

### 5.1 Quantitative overview

In total, 28 metaphorical lines were identified; 16 from the 1980s and 12 from the 2020s, including the metaphors with more than one source domain/ambiguous.

The source domains identified comprised PHYSICAL DEATH/INJURY, CONTAINER, PHYSICAL FORCE, NATURAL FORCE, DARKNESS, DOWN, ENCLOSURE, OPPONENT, FIRE and PERFORMANCE. The most frequent domains were SADNESS IS PHYSICAL INJURY/DEATH and SADNESS IS A SUBSTANCE IN A CONTAINER, which together stands for over half of all occurrences. (See table 1).

**Table 1.**

*Distribution of source domains for sadness metaphor source domains in the 1980s and 2020s excluding ambiguous and overlapping cases.*

Source domain	1980s	2020s	Total
Sadness is physical injury/death	4	2	6
Sadness is a substance in a container	5	0	5

Sadness is a physical force	1	2	3
Sadness is darkness	1	2	3
Sadness is down	0	2	2
Sadness is an enclosure	1	1	2
Sadness is a natural force	0	1	1
Sadness is an opponent	1	0	1
Performance	1	0	1
Performance	1	0	1

## 5.2 SADNESS IS PHYSICAL INJURY/DEATH

In both 1980s and 2020s songs, sadness is portrayed through metaphors of bodily harm, weakness, or decay and are thereby making it more concrete and visible.

In the 1980s dataset, “Inside I’m slowly dying” (S180), illustrates the metaphor SADNESS IS PHYSICAL DEATH, where dying refers to not literal mortality but to emotional deterioration and highlights a consuming nature of sadness. Similarly, the expressions “I’m so deeply wounded” (S380) and “Cuts like a knife” (S380) conceptualize sadness as physical damage and highlights a sharp penetrating nature of emotional pain while also mapping emotional pain onto visible bodily damage. “To the point of agony” (S280)

further reinforces the connection between physical and emotional pain through an extreme physical sensation.

The same pattern appears in the 2020s lyrics, where sadness also appears as a form of a physical injury, more precisely as a wound in the lyric “How we bled” (S420), which does not refer to the literal loosing of blood, but to an emotional weakening of the self. Similarly, “Broken with no way to mend” (S420) portrays sadness as a permanent damage to the self that cannot be repaired.

Together, these metaphors depict sadness as harmful, weakening and tangible. In all these examples, the speakers are not attempting to take control over what is consuming them but is rather highlighting a passive aspect of the emotion.

### **5.3 SADNESS IS A SUBSTANCE IN A CONTAINER**

A source domain found exclusively in the 80s dataset is the conceptualization of sadness as a substance contained within the self.

In the lyric “Emptiness is filling myself” (S280) a paradox is highlighted, *emptiness*, which lacks substance, becomes something that fills the self. This mirrors the notion that emotions, including sadness, are understood as physical substances occupying internal space. It also mirrors the existence aspect, highlighting that emotion is present within the self, as well as the intensity aspect, since “filling” implies an increase in quantity.

In “I’ve tried and tried blocking out the pain I feel inside” (S380), sadness is conceptualized in a similar manner but highlights the control aspect and the management of emotional boundaries. It illustrates how a person attempts to control the boundaries of the self, showing that emotion is viewed as something that can be contained or shut out, mirroring the aspect ATTEMPT AT CONTROL IS SUPPRESSING A FLUID IN A CONTAINER. Lakoff and Johnson (2003, p. 29) describe this as reflective of one of our basic instincts, which is territoriality. In essence, this signifies that the self is a bounded space, and emotional pain threatens to cross that boundary.

The line “Getting lost within myself” (S280) extends the container metaphor by showing that the person becomes both the container and simultaneously the entity that moves within it, suggesting movement within one’s inner emotional world and highlighting emotional disorientation.

Another example which exhibits the self as a container is “Come inside and catch my tears” (S480). In this example, tears function metonymically for sadness, but the act of catching them extends into a metaphor where emotion is a material substance which can be managed or transferred. This again highlights the intensity aspect, since *my tears* imply an amount of a substance aligning with the aligns with the general metaphor INTENSITY IS QUANTITY (2000, p. 41). By asking someone to “catch the tears”, the speaker is metaphorically delegating control. This relates to control aspect, more specifically attempt at control, because the speaker is trying to manage the substance.

Adding to the CONTAINER schema we find, “Though your hurt is gone mine’s hanging on inside” (S580). Here, the “hurt” is mapped onto something that remains because its quantity has not yet reduced which highlights an intensity aspect. It also mirrors the aspect of control or more specifically, the difficulty of emotional control. If the hurt “hangs on” it implies that the speaker is unable to remove or suppress it. This aligns with the broader metaphor LACK OF CONTROL OVER EMOTION IS LACK OF CONTROL OVER PHYSICAL SUBSTANCE.

#### **5.4 SADNESS IS A PHYSICAL FORCE**

Other examples shown in the material conceptualize sadness as a force capable of moving or pulling the individual. Contrary to the CONTAINER source domain, emotion is not something located within the self, but something that influences it.

In the example “Drifting further every day” (S280), sadness is a force that pushes the individual away from emotional stability. It reflects the passive aspect; the individual is acted upon rather than acting. Although drifting may evoke associations with water and could therefore be interpreted as a natural force, the emphasis here lies in the absence of agency, suggesting that the individual is being carried by an unspecified force.

In the 2020s example "Oh, you're spiralin' again" (S420) downward or spiraling movement suggests instability and loss of control. Although not identical to drifting, it similarly maps sadness onto an involuntary movement away from emotional balance. Another metaphor from the later decade, “It hit like a train” (S520) frames sadness not as

movement of the self, but as a movement from an outside force with sudden and overwhelming intensity.

## 5.5 SADNESS IS DARKNESS

Metaphors of darkness appear across both decades, linking emotional suffering to the absence of light and clarity. These expressions frame sadness as something that obscures perception and limits understanding, making the individual's experience of the world less clear and less meaningful.

In "Life it seems will fade away" (S280), the verb *fade* suggests a gradual loss of visibility, as if light is diminishing over time. This creates an image of life becoming less distinct, which metaphorically reflects loss of meaning. The gradual nature of *fading* is significant, as it highlights intensity, that is, sadness is not presented as an abrupt shift, but as a slow transition into a darker state.

A similar metaphor that highlights intensity is "A constant gray in the clouds" (S520). Unlike complete darkness, gray represents an intermediate state between light and dark. The word constant suggests a prolonged emotional condition rather than a temporary feeling. The image of clouds reinforces this by implying a covering or blocking of light which could represent an ongoing lack of clarity or hope.

A different aspect of darkness is shown in "Dont let this darkness fool you" (S420), where darkness is framed as something capable of deception. The metaphor suggests that

sadness can distort perception, leading the individual to misinterpreting their surroundings.

Across these examples, sadness is conceptualized not simply as darkness, but as a condition that varies in intensity, duration and affects perception.

## 5.6 SADNESS IS DOWN

The embodied basis of the oriental metaphor sadness is down appears in two expressions in the material: “I’m hanging my head”(S220) and “I’ve been down so bad” (S320). These metaphors rely on a physical correlation between downward movement or posture and negative emotional states.

In “I’m hanging my head”(S220), sadness is expressed through a physically observable posture. The act of “hanging” the head suggests a loss of energy and lowered physical orientation, which metaphorically corresponds to emotional defeat. The metaphor highlights the embodied nature of sadness, where emotional experience is expressed through bodily positioning.

A similar vertical schema is extended in the line “I’ve been down so bad” (S320), where the metaphor applies not only to a part of the body but to the individual as a whole. The intensifier *so bad* reinforces the depth of the downward state, suggesting not only negativity but also intensity, suggesting that the speaker is not simply in a negative state but at a particularly low point on this scale.

## 5.7 SADNESS IS A PHYSICAL ENCLOSURE

A source domain absent from Barcelona (1986) and Kövecses's (2002) taxonomies but found in both decades is SADNESS IS A PHYSICAL ENCLOSURE. In contrast to container metaphors, where the self functions as the container holding the emotion, enclosure metaphors reverse this relationship, that is, the emotion is what surrounds the self.

This is found in the lyric “Wrapped in sorrow” (S480). Since sorrow is not tangible, this is metaphorical, sadness functions as a physical substance or material surrounding the self. In a similar way, in the 2020s lyrics, enclosure is illustrated as being submerged by water in “I tried to scream but my head was underwater” (S120). The image of being underwater emphasizes lack of control, as the individual is trapped in an environment that limits movement and expression.

The SADNESS IS A PHYSICAL ENCLOSURE and SADNESS IS A SUBSTANCE IN A CONTAINER seem to both reflect the territoriality instinct, what distinguishes them is that the enclosure metaphor does not threaten to *enter* the body.

Both lyrics mirror the passive aspect of emotion, which means that emotions are being acted upon us, this generates the general metaphor PASSIVE EXPERIENCES ARE THE PHYSICAL EFFECTS OF FORCES.

## 5.8 SADNESS IS A NATURAL FORCE

Nature based metaphors depict sadness as an ongoing uncontrollable force. Only one clear example occurs in the data:

“The waves came tumbling down” (S520)

Here, sadness is associated with collapsing waves, evoking a sense of being overtaken by external natural forces. The verb *tumbling* suggests a sudden and forceful downward movement creating a sense of instability and loss of control. Rather than representing a static state, the metaphor emphasizes motion and impact, framing something that actively overwhelms the individual.

The metaphor also highlights intensity, as waves can vary in size and strength, suggesting that emotional experience may vary in magnitude. Large or forceful waves evoke a more overwhelming emotional state, while smaller waves may imply a less intense experience.

At the same time, the metaphor reflects passivity, since waves are external forces that cannot be controlled. The person is being affected by the movement rather than influencing it. This mirrors the intensity aspect by reflecting waves that gain or lose strength. It also highlights passivity since the individual cannot prevent the waves from falling. This example is thus emphasizing a sense of emotional collapse or being overtaken by external forces.

## 5.9 SADNESS IS AN OPPONENT

In the lyric “It’s eating me through” (S580) sadness an entity actively attacking or consuming the self. This aligns with the source domain SADNESS IS AN OPPONENT, in

which emotion becomes an adversary. as Kövecses (2000, p. 42) states: “The main use of this metaphor is in situations where there is an entity that is conceptualized as being affected by another”.

The verb *eating* is particularly significant, as it suggests a continuous process of consumption rather than a sudden attack, that is, sadness is not experienced as a single event but as something that gradually wears the individual down. This reinforces the passivity aspect, as the individual is positioned as being affected rather than acting. At the same time, the metaphor also suggests lack of control, since the consuming process cannot easily be reversed or interrupted.

## **5.10 A PERFORMANCE**

In “Day and night I go through my charades” (S380), sadness, or the act of concealing it, is expressed through a performative metaphor. The self becomes an actor who maintains a façade, masking true emotion. The term *charades* indicate that what the individual displays does not reflect its internal emotional state. This can be seen as an extension of sadness conceptualization: performing happiness stands for hiding pain. In this sense, the metaphor mirrors the control aspect of emotion, as the individual actively manages how emotion is presented to others. Unlike metaphors where emotion overwhelms the individual, this example shows that sadness is something that can be controlled.

## **5.11 SADNESS IS FIRE**

The source domain SADNESS IS FIRE appears in one example “My tears will burn the pillow” (S180). Because tears cannot literally burn, *burn* functions metaphorically. The

metaphor links emotional suffering to physical burning, which aligns with the source domain SADNESS IS FIRE. Interestingly, this domain does not appear in Kövecses's (2000) taxonomy of sadness metaphors, suggesting a creative or poetic extension within song lyrics. However (Kövecses 2010, p. 38) does note that the domain of fire is closely related to that of heat, observing that fire is associated not only with warmth but also with processes of destruction. In this sense, the metaphor emphasizes the intense and potentially destructive quality of sadness.

## 5.12 OVERLAPPING METAPHORS

Some metaphors in the data display multiple or unclear source domains.

MSDIP encourages researchers to justify single domain choices, but it also accepts that some metaphors are ambiguous. The ambiguity becomes particularly clear in song lyrics, where narrative framing and poetic effects interact.

- **“These demons, they fight me” (S220)**

This example contains at least three conceptual layers:

1. SADNESS IS AN OPPONENT

Sadness is personified as something that attacks or fights the self

2. SADNESS IS HELL/DEMONIC FORCE

The term demons evokes imagery associated with hell and evil forces.

3. SADNESS IS DOWN

Hell is culturally imagined as “below”, linking the expression metaphorically to the down orientation of negative states.

Because the line mirrors spiritual, physical and oriental metaphors simultaneously, classifying it under one single domain would oversimplify its conceptual richness.

- **“My heart never knew such pain” (S180)**

Unlike the previous example, this line functions primarily as a metonymy rather than a metaphor, where the heart stands for the emotional self and draws on the BODY AS A CONTAINER-schema . This conceptualization reflects a broader folk model described by Niemeyer (2003), in which the heart is understood as the site of emotions (p. 195). Within this model, the heart is one of the most salient body parts in emotional conceptualization and can therefore stand metonymically for the whole person or their emotional experience (p. 199). Furthermore, the pain referenced adds an additional layer which aligns with SADNESS IS PHYSICAL PAIN.

- **“Flowers are dead like the hearts in our chest” (S220)**

This example overlaps two conceptual layers:

1. SADNESS IS DEATH

The comparison to dead flowers frames emotion metaphorically as lifelessness.

2. BODY AS A CONTAINER

“Hearts in our chest” conceptualizes the body as a container that holds emotions.

Because the line uses simile rather than direct metaphor, it is ambiguous whether it should be included as a metaphor as it operates on the boundary between figurative language and metaphor, but it illustrates the challenges with analyzing song lyrics.

- **“The house is on fire and I can't find the door” (S220)**

This is the most complex and ambiguous example in the dataset. It is ambiguous for several reasons:

1. SADNESS IS FIRE

If the “house” is metaphorically the body or the self, then fire represents emotional overwhelm or destructive intensity.

2. THE SELF AS A BUILDING (container-schema)

The house may symbolize the person's internal emotional world and not finding the door may represent a lack of escape from a mental state.

3. SPATIAL DISORIENTATION

The inability to find the door evokes entrapment and confusion.

4. Potential literal meaning

In narrative songwriting, the line could also be interpreted literally.

This metaphor shows that some metaphors may exceed the limits of MSDIP and MIPVU because of their complex and poetic nature.

## 6 Discussion

The findings show that several of the identified source domains correspond to those proposed in previous research. The present study aligns with six of Kövecses and Barcelona's fourteen source domains for the target domain sadness/depression. However, this study also identifies three additional source domains: ENCLOSURE, FIRE and PERFORMANCE. The relative absence of PERFORMANCE metaphors in previous studies is unsurprising, since masking sadness an *effect* of emotion rather than a conceptualization of the emotion itself. The domains FIRE and ENCLOSURE, however, are more notable. Their presence suggests that creative discourse, such as song lyrics, may extend conventional sadness metaphors.

A central pattern emerging from the results is the distinction between internal and external conceptualizations of sadness. Container metaphors, which appear exclusively in the 1980s dataset (excluding ambiguous cases), frame sadness as something located within the individual, suggesting an internalized emotional experience. In contrast, PHYSICAL FORCE and NATURAL FORCE metaphors conceptualize sadness as something acting upon the individual, emphasizing passivity and lack of control. This distinction reflects two different ways of conceptualizing emotion: as something one has versus something that happens to the individual.

This difference may also relate to broader generational tendencies. The presence of CONTAINER metaphors in the 1980s data suggests a tendency to conceptualize sadness as an internal burden, something carried, stored and trapped within the self. This tendency resonates with the King's college study (2024), where older generations (Baby Boomers

and Gen X) described themselves as more emotionally resilient than younger generations and that mental health problems among young people today are caused by a lack of resilience. Contrary to younger generations that feel more affected by external pressures than older generations. If this broader cultural pattern is reflected in metaphor use, it may help explain why sadness in the 1980s material appears more internalized. Based on the observed tendency for 1980s lyrics to conceptualize sadness as an internal experience, as a SUBSTANCE IN A CONTAINER, it could be expected that 2020s lyrics would display a complementary pattern, with a higher frequency of metaphors emphasizing external forces acting upon the individual. However, this did not appear strongly, the differences were subtle and insufficient to form firm conclusions.

In addition to this internal-external distinction, the data suggests that emotional experience is not only structured through binary oppositions, such as up/down or light/dark but also through spatial movement. Expressions such as “drifting further every day” and spiralin’ again” indicate a conceptualization of sadness as a movement away from a stable state. Rather than fitting into polar oppositions, these metaphors frame sadness as a process of displacement, indicating that emotional experience may also be structured through increasing distance from a perceived center or stable self.

Considering the aspects of emotions allowed for a deeper analysis by revealing that individual source domains contain internal variation. Several domains in the data reflect more than one aspect simultaneously. This reinforces Kövecses’s statement that source domains are not what distinguishes emotions from each other, but the aspects that must be highlighted to conceptualize the emotion.

Three limitations must be considered when interpreting these findings. Firstly, with only ten songs included, it is not possible to draw general conclusions about metaphor across decades. At the same time, a close qualitative analysis allows for a detailed examination of how sadness is expressed in context, capturing nuances that may be overlooked in larger quantitative studies.

Second, metaphor identification and classification involve interpretative decisions. As noted by both Gavelin (2015) and Lindström (2017). They emphasize the difficulty of categorizing the concepts into source domains and further state that when conducting similar studies, it is beneficial to involve more analysts to get a more accurate source domain classification.

Additionally, this study did not control for musical genres such as rock, metal, indie or pop, which could have affected the material. Although few differences for sadness were accounted for in Lindström's (2017) study about differences of metaphors in rap and country lyrics, it is important to consider the possibility that some differences in metaphor types reflect genre rather than decade.

Future studies should expand on the present findings in several ways: A larger corpus would allow for more reliable comparison across decades and help determine whether the patterns observed here reflect generational shifts. It would also be beneficial to control

for genre and to include multiple analysts in the classification process to improve reliability.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, the purpose of this study was to investigate sadness metaphors used in song lyrics in a set of songs from the 1980s and the 2020s. The first research question regarded how sadness is expressed, which resulted in a variety of source domains as well as a discussion of the aspects they highlight. The second and third question directed their attention to whether there is a difference in the types of metaphors between the two decades and if the differences could reflect cultural understandings of sadness. Although tentative, some differences were revealed, such as the container metaphors only appearing in the 1980s data, which may be indicating a stronger tendency to conceptualize sadness as something internal and enclosed within the self.

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## 7 Appendix 1

This appendix provides a complete overview of all metaphorical expressions identified in the dataset. The table includes lyric excerpts, song identifiers and the source domains assigned through the MSDIP procedure.

1	Decade	Song (code)	Lyric excerpt	Source domain(s)
2	1980	S180	“Inside I'm slowly dying”	PHYSICAL DEATH
3	1980	S380	“I'm so deeply wounded”	PHYSICAL DAMAGE
4	1980	S380	“Cuts like a knife”	PHYSICAL DAMAGE
5	1980	S280	“To the point of agony”	PHYSICAL DAMAGE
6	1980	S280	“Drifting further every day”	PHYSICAL FORCE
7	1980	S280	“Emptiness is filling myself”	SUBSTANCE IN A CONTAINER
8	1980	S380	“I've tried and tried blocking out the pain I feel inside”	SUBSTANCE IN A CONTAINER
9	1980	S280	“Getting lost within myself”	SUBSTANCE IN A CONTAINER
10	1980	S480	“Come inside and catch my tears”	SUBSTANCE IN A CONTAINER
11	1980	S580	“Though your hurt is gone mine's hanging on inside”	SUBSTANCE IN A CONTAINER
12	1980	S280	“Life it seems will fade away”	DARKNESS
13	1980	S180	”My tears will burn the pillow”	FIRE
14	1980	S580	”It's eating me through”	OPPONENT

15	1980	S380	“Day and night I go through my charades”	PERFORMANCE
16	1980	S480	“Wrapped in sorrow”	ENCLOSURE
17	1980	S180	“My heart never knew such pain”	SUBSTANCE IN A CONTAINER, PHYSICAL PAIN

1	2020	S420	“How we bled”	PHYSICAL DAMAGE
2	2020	S420	“Broken with no way to mend”	PHYSICAL DAMAGE
3	2020	S220	“Oh you’re spiralin’ again”	PHYSICAL FORCE
4	2020	S520	“It hit like a train”	PHYSICAL FORCE
5	2020	S520	“The waves came tumbling down”	NATURAL FORCE
6	2020	S220	“I’m hanging my head”	DOWN
7	2020	S320	“I’ve been down so bad”	DOWN
8	2020	S420	“Dont let this darkness fool you”	DARKNESS
9	2020	S520	“A constant gray in the clouds”	DARKNESS
10	2020	S120	“I tried to scream but my head was underwater”	ENCLOSURE
11	2020	S220	“Flowers are dead like the hearts in our chest”	DEATH, CONTAINER

12	2020	S220	“The house is on fire and I can't find the door”	FIRE, CONTAINER, DISORIENTATION
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