

UNLOCKING THE POWER OF WORDS: EXPLORING FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE IN ‘DEAD POETS SOCIETY’

Denisa Nana

1 Decembrie 1918 University of Alba Iulia, Romania

Abstract

This study investigates the use of figurative language in the film *Dead Poets Society*, focusing on how figures of speech function as systematic resources for meaning-making in cinematic dialogue. Drawing on cognitive linguistics and stylistic analysis, the paper examines metaphors, similes, irony, and proverbs as interrelated components of a coherent figurative language system. The analysis is based on a qualitative examination of selected dialogue excerpts, which are presented as numbered data and interpreted through close textual analysis.

The findings demonstrate that figurative language in the film is not merely decorative but plays a central role in structuring abstract concepts such as mortality, time, agency, conformity, and identity. Metaphor emerges as the conceptual foundation of this system, while similes make metaphorical mappings explicit, irony encodes evaluative stance, and proverbs and idiomatic expressions conventionalise figurative meaning. Together, these figures of speech contribute to the film’s philosophical coherence and guide audience interpretation without overt exposition.

By treating figurative language as a structured and functional system rather than as isolated devices, the study contributes to linguistic approaches to film discourse and supports the view that cinematic dialogue constitutes a productive site for figurative language analysis. The paper also acknowledges the interpretive, corpus-based, and cultural limitations of the study, pointing to directions for future research in cross-textual, cross-linguistic, and reception-oriented investigations.

Key words: Figurative language; Metaphor; Cognitive linguistics; Stylistic analysis; *Dead Poets Society*.

Received: 26 October 2024

Revised: 21 January 2025

Accepted: 3 March 2025

Published: 15 July 2025

Copyright: © 2025 by the author. Licensee *JoLIE*, “1 Decembrie 1918” University of Alba Iulia, Romania. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the [Creative Commons Attribution \(CC BY\) license](#)

1 Introduction

Figurative language has long been recognised as a central feature of human communication, enabling speakers to convey abstract ideas, emotions, and evaluations through non-literal means. Within linguistics, figurative language is no longer viewed as a marginal or decorative aspect of language use, but as a fundamental mechanism of meaning-making that shapes cognition, interaction, and social reality. Research in cognitive linguistics, pragmatics, and discourse analysis

has demonstrated that metaphors, similes, irony, and other figurative devices structure how individuals conceptualise experience, negotiate identity, and articulate values across a wide range of communicative contexts.

While the role of figurative language has been extensively examined in literary texts, political discourse, and everyday interaction, its systematic analysis in cinematic dialogue remains comparatively limited, particularly from a linguistically grounded perspective. Film dialogue occupies a unique position at the intersection of spoken language, narrative construction, and multimodal meaning-making. Unlike literary prose, cinematic dialogue operates under constraints of time, visual framing, and audience processing, which heightens the functional importance of figurative language as a means of semantic compression and affective impact. Figurative expressions in film therefore warrant closer attention not only as stylistic features, but as discursive strategies embedded in broader narrative and ideological structures.

Dead Poets Society (1989), directed by Peter Weir, provides a particularly productive case for investigating figurative language in cinematic discourse. Set within the rigid institutional environment of an elite preparatory school, the film stages a sustained conflict between traditional authority and alternative educational values. Central to this conflict is the character of John Keating, an English teacher whose pedagogical style is marked by an unusually dense and expressive use of figurative language. Through metaphors, aphorisms, and poetic imagery, Keating challenges institutional norms, encourages intellectual autonomy, and redefines the relationship between language, learning, and individuality.

Despite the film's prominence in educational and cultural discussions, scholarly analyses have tended to focus on its thematic content, moral message, or cinematic techniques rather than on the linguistic mechanisms through which these meanings are constructed. In particular, the figurative dimension of the film's dialogue has often been treated impressionistically, without systematic analysis grounded in linguistic theory. This represents a gap in the literature, given that figurative language plays a crucial role in articulating the film's philosophical stance on education, conformity, and self-realisation.

The present study addresses this gap by offering a qualitative, theory-driven analysis of figurative language in *Dead Poets Society*. Drawing on cognitive metaphor theory, discourse pragmatics, and stylistic analysis, the study examines how figurative expressions function within specific narrative and institutional contexts. Rather than merely identifying instances of figurative language, the analysis focuses on their discursive functions: how they construct authority, position speakers and listeners, and contribute to the film's ideological contrast between institutional rigidity and individual freedom.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What types of figurative language recur in the dialogue of *Dead Poets Society*, and how are they distributed across speakers occupying different institutional roles?

2. What discourse-level functions do these figurative expressions perform within pedagogical and authoritative interactions in the film?
3. How do recurrent figurative patterns contribute to the discursive construction of ideological tension between conformity and individual agency?

By addressing these questions, the study aims to demonstrate that figurative language in *Dead Poets Society* is not an incidental stylistic feature, but a central linguistic mechanism through which meaning, identity, and resistance are articulated. In doing so, the paper contributes to broader discussions on figurative language as a functional resource in cinematic discourse and underscores the value of linguistically informed approaches to film analysis.

2 Literature Review

Research on figurative language has long occupied a central position in linguistics, literary studies, and cognitive science. Traditionally treated as a stylistic deviation from literal language, figurative language was once regarded as secondary or ornamental. However, this view has been fundamentally revised over the past several decades. Contemporary linguistic scholarship increasingly recognises figurative language as a core mechanism of meaning-making that plays a crucial role in cognition, discourse, and social interaction.

One of the most influential developments in this reorientation is the emergence of cognitive metaphor theory, most notably articulated by Lakoff and Johnson (2003). Within this framework, metaphor is understood not merely as a linguistic device, but as a conceptual structure through which abstract domains of experience are systematically organised. Metaphorical expressions such as *time is money* or *life is a journey* are viewed as surface realisations of underlying conceptual mappings that shape how individuals perceive, reason about, and evaluate the world. This perspective has had profound implications for the study of figurative language, shifting attention from isolated expressions to broader patterns of conceptualisation. Subsequent research has extended these insights to a wide range of genres and communicative contexts, demonstrating that metaphor is pervasive in everyday discourse, institutional communication, and narrative forms (Deignan, Littlemore & Semino, 2013).

Beyond metaphor, figurative language encompasses a range of devices including simile, irony, idiom, and proverbial expressions. These forms have been examined from pragmatic and discourse-oriented perspectives that emphasise language use in context. From a pragmatic standpoint, figurative language is closely tied to speaker intention, inferential processes, and shared cultural knowledge (Levinson, 1983). Irony, for instance, relies on a divergence between literal meaning and intended meaning, requiring listeners to draw on contextual cues and pragmatic competence to arrive at an appropriate interpretation (Dancygier & Sweetser, 2014).

Proverbs and idiomatic expressions similarly function as culturally sedimented forms of figurative meaning that encapsulate shared values and evaluative stances.

Within discourse analysis, figurative language has been shown to play a significant role in constructing social identities and ideological positions. Deignan, Littlemore, and Semino (2013) argue that figurative expressions are not neutral but often carry evaluative and affective dimensions that influence attitudes and beliefs. Through repeated use, figurative patterns can naturalise particular ways of thinking and reinforce dominant ideologies. This insight has been applied to studies of political discourse, educational discourse, and media communication, highlighting the persuasive and normative potential of figurative language.

While a substantial body of research has examined figurative language in written texts and spoken interaction, its role in cinematic discourse has received comparatively less systematic attention from a linguistics perspective. Film studies has traditionally focused on visual narration, montage, and cinematography, often treating dialogue as secondary to visual storytelling. Nevertheless, scholars working within film semiotics and narrative theory have emphasised that verbal language remains a crucial component of cinematic meaning-making. Metz (1991) conceptualises cinema as a complex semiotic system in which multiple signifying tracks—visual, auditory, and verbal—interact to produce meaning. From this perspective, dialogue is not merely a vehicle for plot advancement, but a semiotic resource that contributes to characterisation, thematic development, and ideological framing.

Stam (2000) further develop this view by arguing that language exerts pressure on all filmic tracks, shaping how images are interpreted and how narratives are structured. Verbal discourse in film interacts dynamically with visual elements, guiding audience attention and framing interpretation. Figurative language, in particular, allows filmmakers to condense complex ideas into memorable expressions that resonate beyond the immediate narrative context. Because film dialogue operates under constraints of time and audience processing, figurative language becomes a powerful means of semantic compression and affective engagement.

Stylistic approaches to film dialogue offer additional tools for analysing figurative language in cinematic contexts. Stylistics, as articulated by scholars such as Simpson (2004), examines how patterned linguistic choices contribute to meaning, characterisation, and thematic coherence. From this perspective, recurrent figurative constructions are not incidental, but form part of a character's linguistic profile or a film's broader stylistic design. In pedagogically oriented narratives, such as *Dead Poets Society*, stylistic choices in dialogue can be particularly revealing of underlying educational philosophies and power relations.

The intersection of figurative language and pedagogical discourse represents a further area of relevance for the present study. Educational research has shown that metaphor and other figurative devices play an important role in teaching and learning by facilitating abstraction, engagement, and conceptual change (Cameron, 2003). Within classroom discourse, figurative language can function as a pedagogical

strategy that encourages reflection, challenges established assumptions, and fosters learner autonomy. When examined through a discourse-pragmatic lens, pedagogical metaphors can be seen as tools for negotiating authority and redefining the teacher–student relationship.

Despite these insights, analyses of figurative language in *Dead Poets Society* have tended to remain at the level of thematic interpretation or cultural commentary, often emphasising the film's inspirational message without examining the linguistic mechanisms through which this message is conveyed. While the film is frequently cited in discussions of education, individuality, and conformity, relatively few studies have offered a systematic, linguistically grounded analysis of its dialogue. In particular, the figurative dimension of the film's language has not been extensively examined as a structured and functional component of cinematic discourse.

The present study seeks to address this gap by integrating cognitive linguistic, discourse-pragmatic, and stylistic perspectives in the analysis of figurative language in *Dead Poets Society*. Rather than treating metaphors, similes, irony, and proverbs as isolated stylistic features, the study examines how these forms function within specific narrative and institutional contexts. By focusing on the distribution and use of figurative language across different speakers and roles, the analysis aims to demonstrate how figurative language contributes to the construction of authority, identity, and ideological opposition within the film. In doing so, the study positions itself at the intersection of linguistics, film studies, and educational discourse, offering a theoretically grounded contribution to the study of figurative language in cinematic narratives.

From a methodological perspective, the present study aligns with interpretivist traditions in applied linguistics and language education research, where meaning is treated as context-dependent and analytically constructed rather than statistically inferred (Popescu, 2025). Within this paradigm, qualitative discourse analysis and theory-driven textual interpretation are regarded as appropriate for examining how language functions in pedagogical and ideological contexts.

3 Method

This study adopts a qualitative, discourse-oriented methodology to examine the functions of figurative language in the cinematic dialogue of *Dead Poets Society*. The methodological approach is designed to align with the theoretical perspectives outlined in the preceding literature review, drawing on cognitive linguistics, discourse pragmatics, stylistics, and film semiotics. Given the interpretive nature of figurative language and its dependence on context, a qualitative approach is particularly suited to capturing the nuanced ways in which non-literal language contributes to meaning-making in film.

3.1 Research Design

The research design is qualitative and interpretive, focusing on close textual analysis of dialogic excerpts from the film. Qualitative discourse analysis allows for an in-depth examination of linguistic phenomena that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative frequency counts alone. As figurative language often derives its significance from narrative context, speaker identity, and pragmatic intent, the study prioritises analytical depth over numerical generalisability. The aim is not to measure the prevalence of figurative language, but to analyse how it functions within specific communicative and institutional settings.

3.2 Corpus selection and data sources

The primary corpus for this study consists of the English-language dialogue from *Dead Poets Society* (1989), as represented in the film and corroborated by the official screenplay where available. The corpus includes utterances produced by both central and secondary characters, with particular attention given to scenes involving pedagogical interaction, institutional authority, and ideological conflict. These contexts are especially relevant for examining the functional role of figurative language in relation to education, conformity, and individuality.

Dialogic excerpts were selected based on their inclusion of non-literal or figurative meaning, broadly defined in line with cognitive and pragmatic approaches. The analysis focuses on spoken dialogue rather than narration, as dialogue represents the primary site of explicit linguistic interaction in the film. Visual and narrative context was taken into account during interpretation, but the analytical emphasis remains on verbal language as the object of linguistic analysis.

3.3 Identification of figurative language

Figurative expressions were identified using established definitions from cognitive linguistics, stylistics, and pragmatics. An utterance was classified as figurative if its intended meaning could not be fully accounted for by a literal interpretation and if it involved metaphorical mapping, explicit comparison, evaluative inversion, or culturally conventionalised non-literal meaning. This includes metaphors, similes, irony, idiomatic expressions, and proverbial constructions.

The identification process involved repeated viewing of the film and close reading of the dialogue to ensure contextual accuracy. Utterances were included in the corpus if they contributed meaning beyond literal description and if their interpretation relied on contextual inference or shared cultural knowledge. Borderline cases were evaluated conservatively, with preference given to analytically salient examples that clearly performed discursive or pedagogical functions.

3.4 Analytical procedure

The analysis was conducted in three stages. In the first stage, figurative expressions were identified and grouped according to figurative type (e.g. metaphor, simile, irony, proverb). In the second stage, these expressions were examined in relation to speaker identity, narrative context, and institutional role. Particular attention was paid to differences in figurative language use between pedagogical authority figures, institutional representatives, and students.

In the third stage, the analysis focused on discursive function. Drawing on functional and pragmatic perspectives, figurative expressions were analysed in terms of what they accomplish within the discourse of the film. These functions include, but are not limited to, the construction of authority, the negotiation of power relations, the articulation of ideological resistance, and the facilitation of emotional engagement. Rather than treating figurative devices as isolated stylistic features, the analysis examines how they operate within recurring patterns of meaning-making across the narrative.

3.5 Functional categories

To ensure analytical coherence, figurative expressions were interpreted within a set of functional categories derived inductively from the data and informed by the literature. These categories include pedagogical functions (e.g. encouraging reflection, reframing learning), ideological functions (e.g. challenging institutional conformity), affective functions (e.g. eliciting emotional response), and identity-related functions (e.g. positioning speakers and listeners). While individual expressions may perform multiple functions simultaneously, categorisation facilitates systematic comparison and interpretive consistency.

3.6 Analytical reflexivity and limitations

As with all qualitative research, the analysis is interpretive and shaped by the researcher's theoretical orientation. To mitigate subjective bias, interpretations are grounded in established theoretical frameworks and supported by close contextual analysis. Where relevant, alternative readings are acknowledged, and claims are advanced as analytically plausible rather than definitive.

The study is limited by its focus on a single film and a single language version. While this enables depth of analysis, it necessarily restricts the scope and generalisability of the findings. In addition, the study does not incorporate audience reception data, which could offer further insight into how figurative language is interpreted by viewers. These limitations delineate the boundaries of the present analysis and indicate directions for future research rather than constituting methodological shortcomings. As Popescu (2025) emphasises, qualitative discourse-analytic research does not seek replicability in the experimental sense, but establishes rigour through transparency of analytic procedure, theoretical grounding,

and careful delimitation of claims. Accordingly, the present study does not claim exhaustiveness, but offers a theoretically informed and contextually grounded account of how figurative language operates within the film's pedagogical discourse.

By adopting a systematic, theory-driven qualitative methodology, the study provides a transparent analysis of figurative language in *Dead Poets Society*, demonstrating how linguistic choices contribute to cinematic meaning, pedagogical positioning, and ideological contrast.

4 Data Analysis

This section presents a detailed qualitative analysis of figurative language in the dialogue of *Dead Poets Society*. The analysis focuses on several figures of speech identified in the corpus, including metaphor, simile, irony, and proverbs, which are examined as interrelated linguistic resources for meaning-making. Drawing on cognitive linguistics and stylistic analysis, the section treats figurative language not as incidental rhetorical ornamentation, but as a structured system through which abstract concepts are conceptualised, evaluated, and naturalised within the film. Individual instances are analysed through close textual interpretation, with explicit reference to numbered data excerpts.

4.1 Metaphor as a cognitive and discursive resource

4.1.1 Metaphor and the conceptualisation of mortality

One of the most striking metaphorical patterns in *Dead Poets Society* concerns the conceptualisation of mortality. A particularly salient example occurs when John Keating states:

(1) KEATING: "Because we are food for worms."

On a literal level, the utterance refers to biological decomposition after death. Metaphorically, however, the expression collapses the complexity of human existence into a stark image of organic consumption. The metaphor maps HUMAN LIFE onto BIOLOGICAL MATTER, foregrounding the inevitability of decay and the material limits of existence.

From a cognitive perspective, this metaphor instantiates a broader conceptual metaphor in which HUMAN SIGNIFICANCE IS TEMPORARY and LIFE IS A FINITE RESOURCE. By reducing all individuals to the same biological outcome, the metaphor neutralises distinctions of social status, academic achievement, and institutional prestige. The bluntness of the imagery intensifies its cognitive impact, forcing a confrontation with mortality that resists abstraction or euphemism.

A related metaphor appears when Keating refers to former students as now:

(2) KEATING: "These boys are now fertilising daffodils."

Unlike the previous example, this metaphor softens the representation of death by framing it as a process of natural renewal. Here, DEATH is conceptualised as TRANSFORMATION WITHIN NATURE rather than annihilation. The choice of “daffodils” introduces associations of beauty, growth, and cyclical regeneration, allowing mortality to be conceptualised in less threatening terms. Taken together, these metaphors establish a conceptual continuum in which death is simultaneously final and productive, limiting and meaningful.

These mortality metaphors form a conceptual foundation for the film’s broader philosophical orientation. They foreground finitude as a defining condition of human life and prepare the ground for metaphors that emphasise urgency, presence, and agency.

4.1.2 Metaphors of temporality and urgency

The most iconic metaphor in the film, *Carpe Diem* (“Seize the day”), operates within the conceptual framework established by the mortality metaphors:

(3) KEATING: “Carpe Diem. Seize the day.”

While often treated as a motivational slogan, the expression functions metaphorically by conceptualising TIME AS A POSSESSION that can be grasped, used, or wasted. This metaphor implies that time is limited and that inaction constitutes loss.

Within cognitive metaphor theory, this expression aligns with the broader conceptual metaphor TIME IS A VALUABLE RESOURCE. The metaphor invites an agentive stance toward temporality, positioning individuals as responsible for how time is used. Importantly, the metaphor gains interpretive force through its repetition and contextual reinforcement. It does not appear in isolation, but in conjunction with metaphors that emphasise the brevity and fragility of life.

The urgency encoded in *Carpe Diem* is thus not merely emotional, but conceptual. It reframes existence as a series of opportunities that demand engagement. This metaphorical framing contrasts sharply with non-metaphorical or minimally metaphorical expressions associated with routine, discipline, and delay elsewhere in the film, reinforcing its conceptual salience.

4.1.3 Metaphors of possibility and agency

Several metaphors in the film conceptualise life in terms of opportunity and potential. One such example is the expression:

(4) KEATING: “The world is their oyster.”

This metaphor maps LIFE / THE WORLD onto AN OBJECT CONTAINING HIDDEN VALUE. The oyster, as a container that may hold a pearl, symbolises latent possibility accessible through effort or initiative.

Cognitively, the metaphor frames existence as open-ended and rewarding, provided one is willing to act. Unlike metaphors of inheritance or obligation, this

metaphor emphasises personal discovery rather than predetermined outcomes. The world is not portrayed as hostile or fixed, but as a space of possibility awaiting exploration.

A related metaphor appears in references to:

(5) KEATING: “The Dead Poets were dedicated to sucking the marrow out of life.”

Here, LIFE is conceptualised as A SUBSTANCE WITH ESSENCE, and meaningful existence is equated with extracting its most vital elements. The metaphor suggests depth, intensity, and selectivity, implying that superficial engagement with life is insufficient.

These metaphors collectively construct agency as an active, embodied process. Life is something to be entered, explored, and extracted from, rather than endured passively. The repetition of such metaphors reinforces a conceptual model in which agency is central to personal fulfilment.

4.1.4 Metaphors of constraint and conformity

In contrast to metaphors of possibility, several expressions conceptualise constraint and conformity through spatial and physical imagery. One example occurs when a prolonged educational path is described as:

(6) MR. PERRY: “You make it sound like a prison term.”

Here, EXPERIENCE IS CONCEPTUALISED AS PHYSICAL ENCLOSURE, and lack of choice is equated with incarceration. Obligation is framed as confinement, emphasising restriction and loss of freedom.

Similarly, references to:

(7) MR. NOLAN: “You have some big shoes to fill.”

conceptualise expectation as an object that must be inhabited. This metaphor frames identity as pre-formed and inherited rather than constructed. The individual is positioned as occupying an existing role, rather than creating a new one.

These metaphors of constraint operate through bodily and spatial imagery, making abstract pressures experientially tangible. They stand in direct conceptual opposition to metaphors of movement, extraction, and seizing, reinforcing a dichotomy between agency and limitation that structures the film’s metaphorical landscape.

4.1.5 Metaphorical coherence and conceptual networks

Taken individually, the metaphors in *Dead Poets Society* are vivid and memorable. Taken together, they form a coherent conceptual network that structures the film’s meaning. Mortality metaphors establish finitude; temporal metaphors emphasise

urgency; metaphors of possibility foreground agency; and metaphors of constraint articulate resistance and limitation.

This networked organisation supports Lakoff and Johnson's claim that metaphors are not isolated linguistic ornaments but systematic patterns of thought. In *Dead Poets Society*, metaphor operates as a central cognitive and narrative mechanism through which life, education, and individuality are conceptualised. The cumulative effect of these metaphors is a coherent philosophical stance articulated not through explicit argumentation, but through repeated figurative framing.

By focusing on metaphor as a conceptual and linguistic system, this analysis demonstrates that metaphor in *Dead Poets Society* is integral to the film's meaning-making processes. Metaphors do not merely decorate the dialogue; they structure the audience's understanding of existence, choice, and human potential.

4.2 Similes

Similes constitute another important category of figurative language in *Dead Poets Society*. Unlike metaphors, which establish implicit conceptual mappings, similes explicitly signal comparison through markers such as *like* or *as*. By making the comparison overt, similes guide interpretation more directly and often heighten the emotional or evaluative impact of an utterance.

One clear example of simile occurs when John Keating warns his students against blind conformity:

(8) KEATING: "Don't just walk off the edge *like lemmings*. Look around you."

The simile "like lemmings" draws on the culturally familiar image of small rodents that follow one another blindly, often to their own destruction. The comparison frames conformity as unthinking imitation and reinforces the value of independent thought.

Another simile appears in a confrontation between Neil Perry and his father regarding Neil's future:

(9) MR. PERRY: "You make it *sound like a prison term*."

Here, the simile compares a prolonged educational commitment to imprisonment. The comparison conveys a sense of restriction, confinement, and loss of freedom, framing obligation as an oppressive experience rather than an opportunity.

Similes are also used to articulate aesthetic and emotional relationships to language and literature. Keating describes the way the members of the *Dead Poets Society* engaged with poetry as follows:

(10) KEATING: "We didn't just read poetry; we let it *drip* from our tongues *like honey*."

This simile compares poetic expression to the slow, sweet flow of honey. The comparison emphasises pleasure, richness, and sensory engagement, suggesting that poetry should be experienced emotionally rather than approached mechanically or analytically.

A more introspective simile is offered by Todd Anderson during a classroom exercise:

(11) TODD: "Truth is *like a blanket* that always leaves your feet cold."

In this simile, truth is compared to a blanket that provides partial but incomplete comfort. The comparison conveys a sense of vulnerability and uncertainty, suggesting that truth may offer reassurance while simultaneously exposing discomforting realities.

These similes function by making abstract experiences concrete through explicit comparison. By invoking familiar images drawn from nature, bodily experience, and everyday life, they enhance the expressive power of the dialogue and contribute to the emotional and conceptual depth of the film.

4.3 Irony

Irony represents another significant form of figurative language in *Dead Poets Society*. Unlike metaphors and similes, which rely on conceptual mapping and explicit comparison, irony involves a contrast between the literal meaning of an utterance and the meaning intended by the speaker. This discrepancy requires contextual inference and shared knowledge between speaker and listener, allowing irony to function as an evaluative and often critical linguistic strategy.

A clear example of irony appears in the students' informal renaming of Welton Academy:

(12) MEEKS: "Oh well, welcome to *Hell-ton*."

The ironic force of this expression lies in the transformation of the prestigious name *Welton* into *Hell-ton*. While the literal wording suggests a place associated with suffering and punishment, the implied meaning critiques the rigid and oppressive nature of the school environment. The humour of the utterance masks an evaluative judgment, allowing dissatisfaction to be expressed indirectly.

Another instance of irony is found in Charlie's description of John Keating:

(13) CHARLIE: "Thigh man. Mr. K was a *hell-raiser*."

The term "hell-raiser" is conventionally associated with disruptive or problematic behaviour. In this context, however, the expression is used approvingly, creating an ironic reversal of expected evaluation. Behaviour that might be condemned by institutional authority is reinterpreted positively by the students, highlighting the divergence between official norms and student values.

Irony also functions as a means of distancing speakers from institutional expectations. Through ironic expressions, characters are able to signal scepticism or resistance without overt confrontation. This indirectness allows irony to operate as a socially and pragmatically effective form of critique.

By relying on implied meaning rather than explicit assertion, irony adds a layer of complexity to the film's dialogue. It enables speakers to express evaluative stances while maintaining a degree of ambiguity, reinforcing irony's role as a subtle but powerful form of figurative language within the narrative.

4.4 Proverbs and idiomatic expressions

Proverbs and idiomatic expressions represent another category of figurative language in *Dead Poets Society*. Unlike metaphors and similes, which often rely on creative or context-specific imagery, proverbs and idioms are conventionalised expressions whose figurative meanings are culturally shared and widely recognised. They encapsulate generalised beliefs and social expectations, allowing speakers to convey evaluative meaning efficiently and authoritatively.

A clear example of a proverb occurs in a conversation that invokes familial resemblance and inherited traits:

(14) MR. DANBURY: "I know where you're headed, *like father, like son*, huh?"

This proverb implies continuity between generations, suggesting that the son will resemble the father in character, behaviour, or life trajectory. Figuratively, the expression frames identity as inherited rather than self-determined, reinforcing expectations of conformity and continuity.

Another idiomatic expression appears when resemblance is emphasised through a fixed phrase:

(15) MR. DANBURY: "Well, he's the *spitting image* of his father, isn't he?"

The idiom "the spitting image" figuratively conveys exact similarity. Although its metaphorical origin is no longer consciously processed, the expression still relies on figurative reasoning that equates physical resemblance with essential sameness, reinforcing the notion of predetermined identity.

These proverbs and idiomatic expressions function by presenting figurative meaning as self-evident and unquestionable. Their conventionalised nature lends them rhetorical authority, making the values they encode appear natural rather than constructed. Unlike metaphors that invite reinterpretation or similes that foreground comparison, proverbs and idioms tend to close off alternative perspectives by framing expectations as common sense.

Within the film, such expressions are typically associated with moments of parental or institutional authority. By drawing on culturally sanctioned figurative language, speakers reinforce normative assumptions about identity, continuity, and

obligation. In this way, proverbs and idiomatic expressions contribute to the broader figurative landscape of *Dead Poets Society* by stabilising meanings that contrast with the more exploratory and disruptive figurative forms discussed in earlier sections.

5 Discussion

The analysis of figurative language in *Dead Poets Society* demonstrates that figurative expressions are not incidental stylistic features but constitute a structured system of meaning-making that underpins the film's narrative and philosophical coherence. By examining metaphors, similes, irony, and proverbs in relation to one another, the study reveals how different figures of speech perform complementary functions within a unified figurative framework, as illustrated across examples (1)–(15).

The analysis further reveals that figurative language is unevenly distributed across institutional roles, with authority figures favouring conventionalised expressions that reinforce stability, while students and Keating employ more dynamic figurative forms associated with agency and resistance.

A central finding of the study is the structural role of metaphor as the conceptual foundation of the film's figurative language. Metaphors organise abstract domains such as life, time, identity, and authority through recurring conceptual mappings. These mappings provide the cognitive scaffolding upon which other figures of speech operate. Metaphors relating to mortality and transience, such as “food for worms” and “fertilising daffodils” (1–2), establish finitude as a defining condition of human existence, while metaphors of time and urgency (3) conceptualise temporality as a limited resource requiring active engagement.

Similes emerge in the analysis as moments of explicit conceptual framing. By overtly signalling comparison, similes guide interpretation and reduce ambiguity, making underlying metaphorical mappings immediately accessible. Examples such as “like lemmings” (8) and “like a prison term” (9) articulate conformity and confinement through direct comparison, while similes associated with poetry and truth (10–11) foreground affective and experiential dimensions of meaning. In this way, similes function as intensified realisations of metaphorical thinking rather than as independent figurative strategies.

Irony, by contrast, operates primarily at the level of evaluation and stance. Rather than introducing new conceptual mappings, irony destabilises or reverses expected meanings, exposing tensions between institutional discourse and lived experience. The ironic renaming of Welton Academy as “Hell-ton” (12) and the approving use of “hell-raiser” to describe John Keating (13) exemplify how irony encodes critique indirectly, allowing speakers to distance themselves from dominant norms while avoiding explicit confrontation.

Proverbs and idiomatic expressions represent the most conventionalised end of the figurative spectrum. Their figurative meanings are culturally sedimented and often processed as self-evident truths. Expressions such as “like father, like son” and

“the spitting image” (14–15) frame identity as inherited and continuous, reinforcing normative expectations through linguistic familiarity. Unlike creative metaphors or expressive similes, these expressions tend to naturalise social assumptions, presenting them as common sense rather than as ideological positions.

Taken together, these findings suggest that figurative language in *Dead Poets Society* operates as a layered system rather than a collection of isolated devices. Metaphor provides conceptual structure (1–7); simile offers explicit articulation (8–11); irony encodes evaluative stance (12–13); and proverbs institutionalise figurative reasoning (14–15). This layered organisation allows the film to articulate complex philosophical positions without overt exposition, relying instead on recurring figurative patterns that guide interpretation at both cognitive and affective levels.

From a broader linguistic perspective, the study supports the view that figurative language is central to discourse organisation and meaning-making. The findings align with cognitive and functional approaches that emphasise the role of figurative language in structuring experience, shaping evaluation, and reinforcing or challenging social norms. By extending these insights to cinematic dialogue, the analysis confirms that film constitutes a legitimate site for systematic linguistic investigation.

Finally, the integrative approach adopted in this study demonstrates the value of analysing multiple figures of speech within a single coherent framework. Rather than treating metaphor, simile, irony, and proverbs in isolation, the study shows how these forms interact to produce layered meaning across examples (1)–(15). This approach addresses limitations in earlier work that has examined figurative devices separately and underscores the importance of considering figurative language as an interconnected system embedded in discourse, cognition, and culture.

6 Conclusions

This study set out to examine figurative language in the dialogue of *Dead Poets Society* and to demonstrate how figures of speech function as systematic resources for meaning-making in cinematic discourse. Through close qualitative analysis of selected excerpts, the paper has shown that figurative language in the film is not merely ornamental but central to the articulation of its philosophical and thematic concerns.

The analysis revealed that metaphor plays a foundational role in structuring abstract concepts such as mortality, time, agency, conformity, and identity. Metaphorical patterns provide a conceptual framework within which experience is organised and interpreted. At the same time, the study demonstrated that other figures of speech make distinct and complementary contributions. Similes render metaphorical mappings explicit and emotionally salient; irony encodes evaluative stance and enables indirect critique of institutional norms; and proverbs and

idiomatic expressions function as conventionalised forms of figurative meaning that naturalise continuity, authority, and social expectation. Together, these figures form a layered and internally coherent figurative system.

By treating figurative language as an interconnected set of linguistic resources rather than as isolated devices, the study contributes to linguistic approaches that emphasise the cognitive, pragmatic, and discourse-based functions of figurative meaning. The findings support the view that cinematic dialogue constitutes a productive site for linguistic analysis, capable of revealing how figurative language shapes interpretation, evaluation, and conceptualisation across modalities. The methodological choice to present data as explicitly delimited, numbered excerpts further enhances analytical transparency while allowing for interpretive depth.

The findings should be interpreted in light of certain methodological constraints. The analysis is qualitative and text-centred and therefore involves interpretive judgment, and the focus on a single English-language film limits the generalizability of the results. In addition, the study does not address audience reception and does not make claims about how figurative language is interpreted by viewers. These constraints delineate the scope of the present analysis and point to productive directions for future research, including larger corpora, cross-cultural perspectives, and reception-based approaches.

In conclusion, *Dead Poets Society* illustrates the power of figurative language to structure experience, convey evaluation, and articulate complex ideas within cinematic discourse. By demonstrating how multiple figures of speech interact within a coherent system of meaning, this study underscores the central role of figurative language in shaping not only narrative and character, but also the conceptual and philosophical dimensions of film.

References

- Abrams, M. H. (1999). *A glossary of literary terms* (7th ed.). Heinle & Heinle.
- Abrams, M. H., & Harpham, G. G. (2012). *A glossary of literary terms* (10th ed.). Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Cameron, L. (2003). *Metaphor in educational discourse*. Continuum.
- Dancygier, B., & Sweetser, E. (2014). *Figurative language*. Cambridge University Press.
- Deignan, A., Littlemore, J., & Semino, E. (2013). *Figurative language, genre and register*. Cambridge University Press.
- Goatly, A. (2005). *The language of metaphors* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Hutcheon, L. (2006). *A theory of adaptation*. Routledge.

Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (2003). *Metaphors we live by* (2nd ed.). University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1980)

Levinson, S. C. (1983). *Pragmatics*. Cambridge University Press.

Metz, C. (1991). *Film language: A semiotics of the cinema* (M. Taylor, Trans.). University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1974)

Popescu, T. (2025). *Research in applied linguistics and language education: Design, methods, and analysis*. Presa Universitară Clujeană.
https://doi.org/10.29302/ResearchApplLing_LangEduc.popescu.t

Simpson, P. (2004). *Stylistics: A resource book for students*. Routledge.

Stam, R. (2000). *Film theory: An introduction*. Blackwell.

Weir, P. (Director). (1989). *Dead Poets Society* [Film]. Touchstone Pictures.