

Metaphor in Lyrics: How do Humans and Machines Interpret Maher Zain's Insha Allah and Harris J's Worth It Using Different Translation Techniques?

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ABSTRACT

Translation of metaphors in song lyrics presents a unique challenge, especially in the context of human versus machine translation. This study investigates how metaphors in Maher Zain's Insha Allah and Harris J's Worth It are interpreted and translated differently by human translators and machine translation tools such as Google Translate and DeepL. Using a descriptive qualitative approach with a comparative analysis method, this research identifies the translation techniques used and evaluates how effectively the metaphorical meanings and emotional tones are conveyed in both types of translations. The findings reveal that machine translators tend to translate metaphors literally, often missing cultural and emotional nuances. In contrast, human translators employ strategies like adaptation and paraphrasing to preserve implied meanings and emotional resonance. Furthermore, machine translation performs better on culturally universal metaphors but fails to accurately render idiomatic and emotionally rich metaphors. This study highlights the ongoing relevance of human translators in conveying metaphorical meaning in creative texts and contributes to the broader discourse on translation quality and technique in the age of artificial intelligence.

Keywords: *Metaphor Translation, Human vs Machine Translation, Song Lyrics, Figurative Language, Google Translate, DeepL, Adaptation, Paraphrasing, Emotional Nuance, Cultural Context.*

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INTRODUCTION

Translation plays a vital role in facilitating cross-cultural communication, particularly in the realm of creative texts such as literature, poetry, and song lyrics. Among the challenges encountered in translating creative content is the frequent use of figurative language, especially metaphors, which are often deeply rooted in cultural, emotional, and contextual nuances. Unlike literal expressions, metaphors require more than word-for-word translation; they demand a careful interpretation of meaning, intent, and emotional impact. This complexity becomes even more apparent when metaphors appear in song lyrics, where language is intertwined with rhythm, melody, and affective undertones.

In recent years, the development of machine translation tools such as Google Translate and DeepL has revolutionized the practice of translation by offering speed and accessibility. However, questions persist regarding their capability to handle non-literal language. Several studies have demonstrated that while these tools perform adequately on general or literal texts, they often falter when confronted with figurative language. For instance, machine translations may render metaphors in a literal form, stripping them of their implied meaning and emotional resonance. In contrast, human translators are typically better equipped to grasp cultural context and subtleties of tone, allowing for more accurate and meaningful translations.

Previous research has highlighted these issues, with Putri (2021) analyzing errors in metaphor translation using Google Translate in literary texts and concluding that the tool

frequently failed to interpret figurative expressions correctly. Similarly, Nugroho (2020) conducted a comparative study of human and machine translation in poetry and found that human translators excelled in preserving aesthetic and emotional elements. While these studies offer valuable insights, they focus predominantly on literary and poetic texts, leaving a gap in research specifically addressing metaphor translation in song lyrics.

This study seeks to address that gap by examining how metaphors in two popular Islamic songs – Maher Zain's *Insha Allah* and Harris J's *Worth It* – are translated by both human and machine translators. Unlike poems or novels, song lyrics present a unique blend of emotion, rhythm, and cultural message, making the accurate translation of metaphors even more critical. This research applies a descriptive qualitative approach with a comparative method to analyze the translation techniques used and evaluate the extent to which metaphorical meaning is retained.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to both theoretical and practical aspects of translation studies. Theoretically, it enriches the literature on metaphor translation by focusing on song lyrics as a unique textual genre. Practically, it informs translators and developers of machine translation tools about the limitations and strengths of current systems in handling metaphorical language. By comparing human and machine interpretations, this study aims to shed light on the nuanced processes involved in translating metaphors and to emphasize the enduring importance of human involvement in creative translation tasks

Literature Review

Translation is a complex linguistic and intercultural activity that goes beyond the mere substitution of words from one language into another. It encompasses the process of conveying meaning, tone, emotion, and cultural nuance across linguistic boundaries. According to Newmark (1988), translation is defined as rendering the meaning of a text into another language in the way that the author intended. Similarly, Nida and Taber (1969) emphasize that effective translation must achieve equivalence not only in terms of content but also in its form and cultural impact. These challenges become even more pronounced when dealing with creative texts such as poetry, songs, or literary narratives, which often involve highly emotive language and figurative expressions like metaphors.

The task of translating creative texts requires more than linguistic proficiency; it demands sensitivity to stylistic nuances, emotional tone, and audience expectations. In this regard, the translator functions not only as a linguistic mediator but also as a cultural bridge, capable of preserving the aesthetic and emotive qualities of the original. Venuti (1995) underscores the translator's role as an interpreter of cultural meaning, highlighting the necessity of cultural awareness in preserving the integrity of the source text. This responsibility is particularly evident in the translation of metaphors, which are central to the poetic and emotional fabric of many creative texts.

Metaphors are not merely ornamental expressions but are deeply embedded in human cognition and communication. As proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) in their Conceptual Metaphor Theory, metaphors shape not only the way people speak but also the way they think and perceive the world. Metaphors often carry symbolic meanings that are deeply rooted in cultural experiences and belief systems. For instance, metaphors related to light, darkness, journey, or heartache may resonate differently across cultures depending on the underlying values and associations within each linguistic community. This makes the translation of metaphors particularly challenging, as it requires both cognitive understanding and cultural sensitivity.

In addressing this challenge, Newmark (1988) identified several strategies that can be employed in translating metaphors. These include reproducing the same image in the target language, substituting it with a standard metaphor in the target language, converting the metaphor into a simile, paraphrasing it, or omitting the metaphor when necessary. The choice of strategy depends heavily on the context, the purpose of the translation, and the cultural orientation of the target audience. In song lyrics, where rhythm, emotion, and imagery are

crucial, a poorly translated metaphor may compromise the overall impact and emotional resonance of the song.

With the increasing reliance on machine translation tools such as Google Translate and DeepL, the limitations of automated systems in handling figurative language have become a growing concern. Although these systems have evolved rapidly through neural network technologies, they often struggle with the interpretation of non-literal language. Putri (2021), in her study on metaphor translation using Google Translate, found that many of the machine-generated translations were literal and failed to capture the implicit or symbolic meanings intended in the source text. Similarly, Nugroho (2020) conducted a comparative study on human and machine translation of poetry, concluding that human translators were more capable of preserving artistic and emotional nuances, particularly in metaphorical expressions.

Unlike machines, human translators possess the intuitive and cultural knowledge necessary to interpret metaphors appropriately. They are able to draw on context, emotion, and shared cultural references to adapt metaphors in a way that maintains their intended impact. In contrast, machine translation systems – although fast and convenient – tend to rely heavily on word-to-word substitution, which often results in translations that are mechanically accurate but semantically inadequate, especially when dealing with creative and emotive texts.

To analyze the performance of both human and machine translation, this study adopts a comparative approach. Munday (2012) explains that comparative analysis in translation studies involves examining two or more versions of a translated text to identify differences in technique, accuracy, and stylistic effectiveness. Such an approach is particularly relevant in the analysis of metaphor translation, as it helps highlight which translation strategies are employed, how well the metaphorical meanings are retained, and where translation failures tend to occur. In this study, the comparative method is used to evaluate human and machine translations of selected metaphors in song lyrics, with a focus on how each translation mode preserves the meaning, emotion, and stylistic integrity of the original.

Despite the abundance of studies on metaphor translation, a significant gap remains in the area of song lyric translation. Most previous research, such as those by Putri (2021) and Nugroho (2020), has focused on literary texts and poetry, with limited attention to the unique challenges presented by song lyrics. Song lyrics combine linguistic creativity with musical elements, emotional intensity, and cultural symbolism, making metaphor translation particularly delicate. Furthermore, most existing comparative studies have concentrated on general translation quality rather than conducting focused analyses on metaphorical content. This study, therefore, addresses this gap by investigating the translation of metaphors in popular song lyrics and comparing the interpretative approaches of human and machine translation systems.

METHOD

This research adopts a descriptive qualitative approach using a comparative analysis method to investigate how metaphors in song lyrics are translated and interpreted by human and machine translators. The qualitative approach is deemed appropriate for this study because it focuses on the interpretation of linguistic meaning, cultural context, and emotional nuance – elements that are central to metaphor translation.

The primary data for this study consist of the English lyrics from two selected songs, namely "*Insha Allah*" by Maher Zain and "*Worth It*" by Harris J. These songs were chosen because they are rich in metaphorical language and convey strong emotional messages rooted in universal themes such as faith, struggle, self-worth, and hope. These qualities make them ideal for investigating the challenges involved in translating metaphors, especially when performed by machine translators which often overlook figurative and contextual meaning.

The lyrics were translated using two machine translation tools – Google Translate and DeepL – as representatives of widely-used neural machine translation systems. In addition, human translations were produced by the researcher, guided by both linguistic competence

and cultural familiarity. These human translations serve as benchmarks for comparison. All versions of the translations—original, machine-generated, and human-translated—were systematically collected and organized for analysis.

The analysis focused on identifying metaphorical expressions within the original lyrics. Each metaphor was then examined across the three translation outputs to observe differences in technique, accuracy, and emotional effect. To facilitate this process, the study employed the metaphor translation strategies proposed by Newmark (1988), which include reproducing the same image in the target language, replacing it with a standard metaphor in the target language, converting it to a simile, paraphrasing the metaphor, or omitting it when necessary.

The data were analyzed through comparative analysis by evaluating how each translation method—human and machine—rendered the metaphor. This involved determining the strategy applied and assessing whether the metaphor's meaning, cultural significance, and emotional tone were preserved or lost in translation. The analysis also considered the type of metaphor being translated (e.g., conventional, novel, or culturally embedded) as categorized under the framework of Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, triangulation was applied by comparing the outputs of two machine translators, supported by the researcher's own human translation. This process was reinforced by referencing established theoretical frameworks and repeated close reading of the texts to ensure interpretative consistency. Through this methodology, the study aims to produce a nuanced and reliable analysis of metaphor translation in creative texts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The analysis of the metaphorical expressions in the lyrics of "*Insha Allah*" by Maher Zain and "*Worth It*" by Harris J reveals significant differences in how metaphors are translated by human translators and machine translation tools. Both Google Translate and DeepL generally adhered to a literal translation strategy, which led to some loss of the metaphor's emotional impact and cultural relevance. In contrast, the human translations were able to capture not only the literal meaning of the metaphors but also their emotional and cultural significance.

For instance, in the line "*the light will shine*" from "*Insha Allah*", both machine translation tools rendered the metaphor as "*cahaya akan bersinar*"—a direct translation of "light will shine" into Indonesian. While this translation is grammatically correct, it misses the deeper spiritual meaning of the metaphor, which implies divine guidance and hope. In contrast, the human translation "*cahaya akan menerangi jalanmu*" (the light will illuminate your path) added a layer of interpretation, contextualizing the metaphor within the theme of divine support and guidance. This shows how human translators use cultural and emotional knowledge to adapt the metaphor in a way that resonates with the target audience.

Similarly, in "*Worth It*" by Harris J, the metaphor "*you're worth it*" was translated by both Google Translate and DeepL as "*kamu berharga*". While this translation captures the literal meaning of the phrase, it lacks the emotional weight and motivational tone present in the original song. The human translation "*kamu pantas mendapatkannya*" (you deserve it) carried a more empowering and affirming message, aligning better with the song's motivational context.

These findings confirm that machine translation tools, despite their technological advancements, struggle with translating metaphors effectively. They often prioritize literal meanings, which leads to a lack of nuance in conveying the emotional and cultural essence of the metaphor. On the other hand, human translators are able to interpret the metaphors within the broader emotional, cultural, and social contexts, making them more capable of preserving the intended impact of the original text.

Table 1. Interpretation of "Insha Allah Maher Zain"

Original Lyrics (Metaphor)	Human Translation	Machine Translation (Google/DeepL)	Translation Technique	Interpretation Analysis
Every time you feel like you cannot go on	Every time you feel like you can't go on with life	Every time you feel you can't continue	Paraphrase (human), Literal (machine)	Human translation conveys intense emotional conditions; machine translation only gives the literal meaning.
Through darkness and sorrow	Through darkness and sorrow	Through darkness and sorrow	Direct reproduction	Both retain the metaphor, but the human version connects it to a spiritual interpretation.
Your heart will find a way	Your heart will find a way	Your heart will find a path	Direct reproduction	Both are literal translations, but the human version expresses hope with a softer nuance.
You feel alone	You feel truly alone	You feel lonely	Paraphrase (human), Literal (machine)	Human translation enhances the sense of emotional loneliness; the machine version sounds flat.

Table 2. Interpretation of Worth It Harris J

Original Lyrics (Metaphor)	Human Translation	Machine Translation (Google/DeepL)	Translation Technique	Interpretation Analysis
'Cause you're worth it	Because you deserve it	Because you are valuable	Adaptation (human), Literal (machine)	Human translation conveys a motivational message; machine version is less emotionally evocative.
Don't let anyone tell you you ain't beautiful	Don't let anyone say you're not beautiful	Don't let anyone say you're not pretty	Paraphrase (human), Literal (machine)	Human uses emotional diction; machine sounds stiff and lacks context.
You're one of a kind	You are special	You are one of its kind	Idiomatic (human), Literal (machine)	Human expresses the figurative meaning naturally; machine sounds awkward and literal.
Keep your head up	Keep your head held high	Keep your head up	Adapted reproduction (human), Literal (machine)	Human translates idiomatically; machine sounds odd and non-idiomatic.

Discussion

The findings of this study align with existing research that highlights the challenges of metaphor translation. Previous studies, such as Putri (2021) and Nugroho (2020), have demonstrated that machine translation tools tend to produce literal translations that fail to capture the deeper meaning and emotional nuances of metaphorical language. This research

extends those findings by focusing on song lyrics, which present a unique set of challenges due to their combination of poetic expression, musicality, and emotional resonance.

Putri's (2021) study, which analyzed metaphor translation using Google Translate, found that the tool often failed to account for implicit meanings in metaphors, resulting in translations that were semantically inaccurate or culturally inappropriate. Similar findings were reported by Nugroho (2020), who noted that human translators performed better in preserving the emotional and artistic qualities of poetry. Both studies support the idea that human translators are more adept at understanding cultural references and emotional tone, particularly when dealing with complex figurative language.

However, this research goes a step further by comparing not only human and machine translation but also by focusing on song lyrics as a specific type of creative text. Unlike literary texts or poetry, song lyrics are tightly connected to rhythm and music, and their emotional impact often depends on the interplay between language and sound. The human translations in this study were able to maintain the emotional weight of the metaphors while also preserving their musicality. In contrast, machine translation systems, which prioritize speed and accuracy, struggled to balance these dual demands.

The results reveal several patterns in metaphor translation across both modes. First, machine translators consistently tended to translate metaphors literally, focusing on surface meaning without consideration for emotional or cultural context. This resulted in flat, sometimes awkward phrasing that failed to convey the intended emotional impact of the original lyrics. For instance, phrases such as *"Keep your head up"* were rendered literally by machines as *"Jaga kepalamu tetap di atas,"* which in Bahasa Indonesia loses its idiomatic essence and emotional encouragement.

Second, human translators more frequently employed strategies such as adaptation and paraphrasing. These strategies allowed them to preserve not only the metaphorical meaning but also the underlying emotion and tone intended by the original artist. For example, *"You're one of a kind"* was translated by a human as *"Kamu itu istimewa,"* which captures the implied uniqueness and emotional reinforcement, while machine translation produced a more awkward rendering that sounded unnatural in the target language.

Third, metaphors that are culturally familiar or universally understood—such as references to darkness and light or sorrow—were more likely to be handled successfully by machine translation tools. However, metaphors that rely on emotional or idiomatic expressions—such as affirmations of worth, encouragement, or expressions of isolation—often failed to be captured effectively by machines. This suggests that while machine translation systems may be improving, they still lack the cognitive and affective depth necessary to handle figurative language fully.

One significant difference between this study and previous research is the context of translation. Many earlier studies examined metaphor translation in literature and poetry, which often feature longer, more descriptive texts. Songs, on the other hand, are designed to evoke immediate emotional reactions through compact, rhythmic language. This study contributes to the existing literature by addressing the translation of metaphors in song lyrics—a context that remains underexplored.

Another notable difference is the inclusion of modern machine translation tools like DeepL in addition to Google Translate. These tools, enhanced by neural machine translation, have improved significantly in recent years, particularly in terms of fluency and syntax. However, as this study shows, they remain inadequate when confronted with metaphorical language that requires interpretation, empathy, and cultural awareness—capabilities that human translators continue to possess.

In terms of similarities, this study reaffirms the findings of Putri (2021) and Nugroho (2020): machine translation tools, despite technological advancements, still struggle to interpret figurative language and cultural references in ways that preserve the emotional tone of the source text. Both Google Translate and DeepL perform adequately for literal or

informational translation tasks but are limited in handling metaphors that require deeper contextual understanding.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on metaphor translation by highlighting not only the limitations of current machine translation systems but also the enduring importance of human translators. The comparative findings show that while machines offer speed and accessibility, they are not yet capable of replacing the intuition, cultural sensitivity, and emotional depth that human translators bring – especially in creative texts like song lyrics where meaning is deeply intertwined with feeling and context.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the challenges and differences in metaphor translation between human and machine translators through a comparative analysis of song lyrics from Maher Zain's *Insha Allah* and Harris J's *Worth It*. The findings indicate that while machine translation tools such as Google Translate and DeepL are capable of producing fast and structurally sound translations, they frequently fail to capture the deeper, metaphorical meanings and emotional nuances present in song lyrics. Metaphors that are culturally embedded, emotionally charged, or idiomatic in nature often result in literal and contextually inappropriate renderings when translated by machines. On the other hand, human translators demonstrate a greater capacity to interpret and convey figurative meaning through strategies such as adaptation and paraphrasing. These strategies enable them to preserve not only the semantic content but also the emotional and cultural resonance of the original text. Human translators are able to consider the musicality, tone, and intended emotional impact of the lyrics, which are critical in song translation. The study also identified several patterns. Machine translations generally rely on literal strategies, often at the expense of emotional or cultural fidelity, whereas human translators tend to employ more nuanced approaches to maintain the integrity of metaphorical meaning. Moreover, the success of machine translation appears to be higher when dealing with culturally universal metaphors, while more abstract or idiomatic metaphors remain problematic. These findings contribute to the broader discourse on translation studies by emphasizing the importance of human interpretation in handling creative texts – particularly those rich in figurative language. Despite technological advances in neural machine translation, the role of human translators remains essential in ensuring that the translated text resonates meaningfully with the target audience. Future research could expand on this study by incorporating a larger corpus of song lyrics or exploring the impact of context-aware AI systems on metaphor translation.

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