



Dehumanization Metaphors in Heavy Metal Lyrics: Their Impact on L2 Learners' Vocabulary and Critical Discourse Skills

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Abstract

This study investigates how dehumanization metaphors in heavy metal lyrics specifically Slipknot's *Iowa* (2001) influence L2 learners' vocabulary acquisition and critical discourse skills. Although extreme metal lyrics are often perceived as violent or non-academic, they offer rich linguistic input containing complex metaphors, emotional intensity, and identity-based discourse. Using a qualitative descriptive design, fifteen intermediate EFL learners analyzed three Slipknot songs ("People = Shit," "The Heretic Anthem," and "Disasterpiece") through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Data were obtained through pre-post vocabulary tests, CDA worksheets, reflective journals, and semi-structured interviews. The findings indicate a significant improvement in learners' mastery of advanced vocabulary, particularly metaphorical and emotionally laden lexical items. The analysis of extreme metaphors encouraged deep processing, fostering greater retention and contextual understanding. Moreover, students demonstrated enhanced critical discourse awareness, including the ability to identify ideological meanings, decode violent metaphors symbolically, and interpret identity construction within the lyrics. Emotional engagement with the material also contributed positively to motivation and learning outcomes. Overall, the study concludes that heavy metal lyrics when approached critically serve as effective authentic materials for developing higher-order linguistic and analytical competencies in SLA. Such texts not only expand vocabulary and discourse skills but also support learners' identity development by enabling them to explore themes of alienation, resistance, and self-expression through language.

Key words: Slipknot; dehumanization metaphors; vocabulary acquisition; Second Language Acquisition; critical discourse skills; authentic materials; identity construction; heavy metal lyrics.

Introduction

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) learning in the digital era shows significant changes in the way learners access, interact, and interpret language input (Hemasri & Sumathi, 2020). One of the important developments in the study of SLA is the increasing use of authentic materials in the learning process, including movies, podcasts, songs, and popular cultural content such as metal music. Music, as a form of linguistic and cultural expression, not only provides rich language input, but also opens up space for the analysis of meaning, identity, and discourse construction (Akhmad et al., 2023). One genre that is rarely discussed in the context of SLA is heavy metal, specifically the extreme metal subgenre characterized by aggressive lyrics, violent metaphors, and complex representations of identity. Slipknot, especially through the album *Iowa* (2001), offers an extreme, intense, and metaphorically dense form of language (Kettle, 2005). Although on the surface the lyrics appear vulgar or violent, discourse research shows that the language used has symbolic value that reflects trauma, resistance, social alienation, and the search for identity. In the context of second language learning, texts like these can be used to understand how L2 learners process unconventional language input, how they interpret metaphors, and the extent to which highly emotionally intense material can affect vocabulary acquisition as well as critical thinking skills (Kühn et al., 2021). The use of emotionally charged texts has been discussed in Krashen's theory of affective filters, which states that emotional engagement can increase motivation and vocabulary retention as long as it does not cause excessive anxiety. Metal music, although extreme, has shown a positive effect in increasing engagement, especially for the younger generation who are familiar with digital culture. On the other hand, the theory of Depth of Processing (Craik & Lockhart) (Kettle, 2005) states that the deeper learners process the meaning of a word, the stronger their retention in long-term memory. Heavy metal lyrics with complex metaphors like "People = Shit," "I'm a heretic," or "Disasterpiece" invite deep interpretation, context analysis, and reinterpretation of all cognitive processes that support vocabulary learning. In addition to vocabulary, extreme lyrics provide a golden opportunity to practice critical discourse skills, including identifying ideologies, interpreting the metaphor of violence, understanding the construction of "outsider" identity, and assessing how language can be used as a resistance to power structures. Identity theory in SLA (Norton, 2013) emphasizes that language learning cannot be separated from the process of building identity. Many students experience a phase of "struggle for voice," and the themes of alienation and resistance in metal lyrics can help them

reflect on their socio-linguistic positions. Slipknot, for example, uses the metaphor of dehumanization as a form of symbolic criticism of society

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This study uses a descriptive qualitative method with a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach combined with the theory of acquisition of L2 vocabulary. This approach was chosen to analyze how students interpret the metaphor of dehumanization and how the process contributes to the acquisition of vocabulary and discourse skills. Participants are 15 students of the English Language Education study program (semesters 3–5) who have intermediate English proficiency,

used to using English music, Never done an extreme metal lyric analysis before. The Research Instruments used include pre- and post-vocabulary tests (20 items), CDA-based discourse analysis sheet, semi-structured interviews, A Student Reflective Journal After Lyrical Analysis. The Procedure are Pre-test vocabulary: Measure understanding of metaphors and complex lexicons. Presentation: Students read and discuss three lyrics from Slipknot's Iowa: "People = Shit" "The Heretic Anthem" "Disasterpiece" CDA Analysis: Students are asked to identify: metaphor dehumanisasi, identity construction, Extreme language strategies. Group discussions & presentations: Discuss interpretation and meaning. Post-test vocabulary: Measure the progress of word acquisition. Interview & reflection: Exploring students' perceptions of the learning process. the Data Analysis used was analyzed with Fairclough's 3D CDA framework, pre- and post-test comparative analysis, thematic coding for interviews and reflection journals.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a multidisciplinary approach that examines how language functions within social structures, power relations, and ideological formations. Originating from the works of scholars such as Norman Fairclough, Teun A. van Dijk, and Ruth Wodak, (Rogers et al., 2005) argues that discourse is never neutral; rather, it shapes and is shaped by social realities, identities, and institutional power. In the context of English language learning, CDA provides a valuable lens for understanding how learners interpret authentic texts especially those characterized by emotional intensity, identity negotiation, and unconventional metaphorical expressions.

(Hemasri & Sumathi, 2020) conceptualizes CDA as an analytical framework consisting of three interrelated dimensions:

1. **Textual Analysis (Description)**

This dimension focuses on the linguistic features of the text, including vocabulary, grammar, metaphors, rhetorical devices, and stylistic choices. In analyzing Slipknot's heavy metal lyrics, textual analysis helps uncover how dehumanization metaphors, aggressive expressions, and symbolic violence are constructed linguistically. Through this process, learners engage in deep processing of new vocabulary and complex semantic patterns activities that significantly support L2 vocabulary acquisition(Long, 1996).

2. **Discursive Practice (Interpretation)**

Discursive practice examines how texts are produced, distributed, and consumed. For Slipknot's *Iowa*, understanding discursive practice involves exploring how the band's identity, musical culture, and social context influence the creation and interpretation of their lyrics. Learners must interpret how extreme metaphors function symbolically rather than literally, promoting advanced comprehension and critical thinking(Esen, 2021). This dimension also emphasizes the interplay between the text's meaning and the audience's background knowledge, emotional responses, and interpretive frameworks.

3. **Social Practice (Explanation)**

The final dimension situates the text within broader social, cultural, and ideological structures. Slipknot's lyrics often express themes of alienation, marginalization, resistance, and identity conflict reflecting real social experiences of many young people. By analyzing these themes, learners recognize how language can articulate power struggles and social critique. This awareness is crucial in SLA, as it nurtures learners' ability to interpret texts beyond surface-level meaning and engage with English as a tool for social understanding and identity construction. Within CDA, language is viewed as a social practice, meaning that linguistic choices are shaped by and contribute to the formation of social identities, power relations, and cultural ideologies (Esen, 2021). This perspective aligns closely with current theories in SLA, particularly those emphasizing the sociocultural dimensions of language learning (Norton, 2013). When learners analyze texts with strong identity expressions such as heavy metal lyrics they actively negotiate their own

identities as English users. They also develop critical discourse skills by evaluating how metaphors construct and challenge dominant social narratives. In the context of this study, CDA supports the examination of how dehumanization metaphors operate as symbolic expressions of resistance rather than literal representations of violence. L2 learners engage with these metaphors by decoding meaning, interpreting social implications, and connecting linguistic forms with socio cultural contexts. Such analysis strengthens their ability to process authentic input at a deeper cognitive level, fostering vocabulary acquisition and discourse awareness(Breeze, 2011).

Overall, CDA provides the theoretical foundation that enables learners not only to understand the linguistic complexity of Slipknot's lyrics but also to interpret how language reflects emotional, ideological, and identity driven processes. By integrating CDA into SLA pedagogy, this study highlights how unconventional texts can be powerful tools for developing advanced linguistic, analytical, and critical competencies.

Textual Analysis and Discussion

The textual analysis in this study focuses on identifying how dehumanization metaphors, aggressive linguistic structures, and symbolic expressions in Slipknot's *Iowa* construct meaning, and how L2 learners process these meanings during the learning activity. Using Fairclough's CDA framework, the analysis centers on the linguistic features of three songs "People = Shit," "The Heretic Anthem," and "Disasterpiece" and examines how learners interpret these features, what vocabulary gains they achieve, and how their discourse awareness develops.

Overall, the analyses reveal that extreme metal lyrics, despite their aggressive stylistic forms, provide rich and complex linguistic input that stimulates deep semantic processing and encourages learners to critically interpret language within its social and emotional context.

1. "People = Shit": Linguistic Brutality and Lexical Intensification

The phrase "People = Shit" represents one of the most striking metaphorical reductions in modern metal music. At the textual level, this metaphor is constructed through:

- equational structure ($X = Y$),
- semantic downgrading of "people" to an object of disgust,
- usage of taboo vocabulary functioning symbolically rather than literally.

Learners initially interpreted the metaphor literally; however, through guided CDA activities, they recognized that:

- it indexes social frustration rather than misanthropy,
- it functions as a symbolic rejection of systems perceived as oppressive,
- taboo language serves as an intensifier, reinforcing emotional truth.

From an SLA perspective, students demonstrated improvement in their understanding of:

- evaluative adjectives (worthless, corrupt, degraded),
- metaphorical verbs (to degrade, to strip away, to reduce),
- affective vocabulary associated with alienation and resistance.

The intense lexical items triggered deep processing, allowing learners to examine connotative meanings. This aligns with the Depth of Processing Hypothesis: the more deeply learners analyze a text, the better the retention of vocabulary.

2. "The Heretic Anthem": Identity Inversion and Symbolic Reclamation

The line "If you're 555, then I'm 666" represents a discursive inversion using religious numerology. Textually, the song employs:

- symbolic numbering,
- identity-labeling metaphors ("heretic," "outsider"),
- pronoun contrasts (you vs I) to mark social boundaries.

Learners identified that "666" is not used literally but metaphorically to:

- signify rejection of conformity,
- assert self-defined identity,
- challenge dominant cultural norms.

This understanding required advanced inferencing, helping learners:

- expand vocabulary related to identity politics (heretic, conformist, deviant),
- understand symbolic meaning in English discourse,
- differentiate between literal and figurative uses of culturally loaded terms.

During class discussion, students reported that the metaphor encouraged them to think about how identity in language is negotiated, strengthening their awareness of discourse-pragmatic functions of words (Fairclough, 2013).

In SLA, such critical engagement is powerful because it:

- increases semantic depth,
- enhances cultural literacy,
- supports identity development as L2 users (Long, 1996)

3. "Disasterpiece": Internal Fragmentation and Hyperbolic imagery

"Disasterpiece" contains some of the harshest imagery in the album, such as the hyperbolic line "I want to slit your throat and fuck the wound." Textually, this is an example of:

- hyperbolic metaphor,
- violent imagery,
- symbolic representation of inner turmoil,
- linguistic extremity used for psychological expression.

(Rogers et al., 2005) During analysis, learners struggled initially to process the language due to its emotional intensity. However, guided CDA allowed them to interpret the line as:

- a metaphor for deep psychological rupture,
- symbolic violence reflecting internalized rage,
- an exaggerated linguistic performance meant to express identity crisis.

Learners' vocabulary growth was notable in categories such as:

- emotion-related adjectives (fractured, tormented, suppressed),
- verbs expressing psychological intensity (to erupt, to implode, to lash out),
- figurative language terms (hyperbole, symbolic violence, emotional intensifier).

From a discourse perspective, students recognized how linguistic extremity reflects:

- internal conflict,
- suppressed trauma,
- fractured identity construction.

This demonstrates advanced analytic skills, showing how CDA-based reading helps develop critical discourse competence alongside vocabulary expansion.

4. Learners' Interpretive Strategies and Discourse Awareness

Across the three songs, several interpretive patterns emerged:

a. Recognition of Metaphor as Non-Literal

Learners shifted from literal decoding to more sophisticated figurative interpretation, a key indicator of advanced SLA proficiency.

b. Emotional Engagement and Cognitive Investment

The extremity of the lyrics created a strong emotional response, which enhanced:

- attention,
- curiosity-driven learning,
- memory consolidation.

This aligns with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, highlighting how emotional engagement supports learning when it does not create anxiety.

c. Increased Awareness of Identity Construction

Students linked the lyrics' identity struggles with their own experiences as language learners, demonstrating reflective and critical self-positioning.

d. Discursive Competence Development

Learners improved their ability to:

- identify ideological messages,
- critique power relations,
- evaluate symbolic meaning in linguistic expressions.

This reflects a transition from surface-level comprehension to critical reading, which is often a challenge in L2 learning.

5. Implications for SLA

The textual analysis reveals that extreme metal lyrics are not only linguistically dense but pedagogically valuable. They:

- stimulate higher-order thinking,
- encourage deep vocabulary processing,

- strengthen critical discourse awareness,
- facilitate identity exploration through language,
- provide authentic exposure to figurative and emotive English.

This suggests that unconventional texts, when mediated through CDA, can be effective for teaching advanced vocabulary, metaphor interpretation, and critical literacy in L2 contexts (Darwin et al., 2024).

Dehumanization and Identity Crisis as Social Practices

The lyrical landscapes painted by Slipknot are not isolated fantasies they are rooted in collective experience. The themes of dehumanization and identity fragmentation explored in *Iowa* reflect broader socio-cultural anxieties, particularly among youth navigating a world marked by disconnection, judgment, and hyper-industrialized conformity. Through Critical Discourse Analysis, we understand that these lyrics are not simply textual they are part of a social practice. The language of *Iowa* both arises from and contributes to a wider discourse in which marginalized individuals use aggressive self-expression as a way to reclaim agency. The repetition of phrases like "I don't belong" or "People = Shit" reflects a shared sentiment among those who feel alienated by institutional power be it family, religion, school, or media.

In this sense, Slipknot becomes more than a band they become a conduit for collective emotion. Their words articulate what many cannot express themselves: the pain of being unseen, the rage of being mislabeled, and the confusion of building identity in a world that demands uniformity. Moreover, the aesthetic of extremity mask-wearing, screaming, violent metaphors is not simply theatrical. It is a symbolic resistance against the sanitization of suffering. It reminds us that to be dehumanized is not only to be oppressed, but to be stripped of one's narrative. Slipknot reclaims that narrative with brutal honesty. As (Fairclough, 2013) argues, discourse is "a form of social practice, which constitutes situations, identities, and relationships." In Slipknot's case, their discourse reconstructs identity in the face of annihilation, using language not to pacify, but to provoke, to confront, and ultimately, to liberate.

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