



The Application of Literal Meaning in Semantics to Enhance Vocabulary and Sentence Structure in Children's Speaking Skills

Yuni Enjelina Napitupulu,*¹ Bernieke Anggita Ristia Damanik²

¹²Universitas HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar

Email: yunienjelinanapitupulu@gmail.com, bernieke.damanik@uhn.ac.id

Abstract

This study aims to examine how the application of literal meaning, as conceptualized in semantic theory, can support the development of children's speaking skills—specifically in enhancing vocabulary acquisition and sentence structure. Recognizing that early language learners often face challenges in selecting appropriate words and constructing grammatically accurate sentences, this research investigates the pedagogical potential of introducing literal meanings in language instruction. Employing a qualitative research design, data were collected through classroom observations and in-depth interviews with primary school teachers. The findings reveal that instructional strategies emphasizing the use of literal meanings help children comprehend vocabulary more clearly and construct more coherent sentences. These results highlight the significant role of semantic-based teaching approaches in improving clarity and linguistic accuracy in early language education.

Keywords: *Literal Meaning; Speaking Skills; Vocabulary Development*

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk meneliti bagaimana penerapan makna literal, seperti yang dikonseptualisasikan dalam teori semantik, dapat mendukung pengembangan keterampilan berbicara anak-anak-khususnya dalam meningkatkan penguasaan kosakata dan struktur kalimat. Menyadari bahwa pembelajar bahasa asing tingkat awal sering kali menghadapi tantangan dalam memilih kata yang tepat dan menyusun kalimat yang akurat secara tata bahasa, penelitian ini menyelidiki potensi pedagogis dari pengenalan makna literal dalam pengajaran bahasa. Dengan menggunakan desain penelitian kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui observasi kelas dan wawancara mendalam dengan guru sekolah dasar. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa strategi pengajaran yang menekankan penggunaan makna literal membantu anak-anak memahami kosakata dengan lebih jelas dan menyusun kalimat yang lebih koheren. Hasil penelitian ini menyoroti peran penting dari pendekatan pengajaran berbasis semantik dalam meningkatkan kejelasan dan keakuratan linguistik dalam pendidikan bahasa awal.

Kata Kunci: *Makna Literal; Keterampilan Berbicara; Pengembangan Kosakata*

INTRODUCTION

Language plays a central role in human life—not only as a means of communication but also as a reflection of thought, identity, and cultural development. Chomsky (1972) argues that language is a uniquely human faculty that allows us to grasp the essence of being human. In social interactions, learning, and creative expression, language connects individuals and communities, shaping how meaning is formed and shared. It operates through a structured system of symbols, signs, and gestures, allowing people to engage with one another. Language, however, is not always literal or straightforward. It often contains nonliteral expressions known as figurative language, which enhances emotional expression and aesthetic richness in communication.

Figurative language is widely used in literature, song lyrics, poetry, and theatrical works to convey complex emotions and ideas in a stylistic and imaginative manner. As Jakobson (1980) noted, language without meaning holds no significance, and figurative forms allow for deeper interpretation beyond surface-level meanings. In musical films, this type of language not only enriches the narrative but also gives voice to the inner feelings of characters. In *The Phantom of the Opera*, figurative expressions are embedded in both lyrics and dramatic dialogue, shaping the film's emotional tone and narrative depth. Understanding these elements requires a semantic approach—analyzing how meaning operates through metaphor, hyperbole, personification, and other figures of speech.

Despite the significance of figurative language in creative works, many viewers and listeners tend to focus more on visual or melodic aspects, often overlooking the linguistic choices that give substance to the narrative. This results in a limited understanding of the emotional and thematic depth intended by the creators. In educational settings, such oversight also reflects a gap in semantic awareness, particularly when analyzing multimedia texts. The central issue addressed in this study is the lack of attention given to figurative meaning in musical drama scripts, particularly regarding how such language functions semantically within character development and storytelling.

Previous studies have emphasized the role of figurative language in enriching literary texts. Kennedy (1979, as cited in Listiani, 2015) outlines various types of figurative language—such as metaphor, simile, personification, idioms, and allusion—which serve to elevate the expressive quality of language. Simatupang & Adzani (2019) analyzed semantic features in airline slogans, while Sari (2022) focused on meaning interpretation in commercial product packaging. However, fewer studies have examined the semantic functions of figurative expressions in musical film scripts, particularly those as lyrically and theatrically rich as *The Phantom of the Opera*. This gap in scholarly attention presents an opportunity to further

investigate how figurative language operates within the interplay of dialogue, lyrics, and visual narrative.

This paper aims to analyze the types and functions of figurative language in the film *The Phantom of the Opera*, applying semantic theory as the analytical framework. Using a descriptive qualitative approach and data sourced from selected dialogues and song lyrics, the study seeks to identify and interpret various forms of figurative expression—such as metaphor, personification, and hyperbole—and examine their contribution to the film’s emotional and narrative depth. Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how figurative language enhances artistic storytelling and encourages greater attention to nonliteral meaning in musical drama analysis.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to analyze figurative language in *The Phantom of the Opera* film. As Creswell and Poth (2017) state, qualitative research is suitable for exploring textual or artistic phenomena that require interpretation of meaning within a natural context. The aim of this study was not to quantify data but to understand how nonliteral expressions contribute to the emotional and symbolic elements of the film.

The researcher began by watching the film multiple times to understand the plot, characters, and emotional atmosphere. This step was crucial to ensure accurate interpretation of the context in which figurative language was used. After gaining a comprehensive understanding of the film, the researcher transcribed relevant dialogues and lyrics that appeared to contain figurative elements. These data were then examined closely to identify expressions categorized as metaphor, personification, hyperbole, symbol, or metonymy. Each figurative expression was classified based on its type and analyzed using a semantic approach to uncover its deeper meaning and contribution to the narrative.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, the researcher engaged in repeated review and careful comparison between different versions of the lyrics and script. The interpretations were also cross-referenced with existing literature on figurative language and semantics to maintain academic credibility and avoid subjective bias. Through this methodological approach, the research aimed to present an accurate and meaningful analysis of how figurative language is used in the film to express complex themes such as love, fear, identity, and psychological tension.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Semantics and Literal Meaning

Semantics is one of the core branches of linguistics that deals with meaning. According to Palmer (1981), semantics explores how language conveys meaning and how individuals interpret that meaning based on context. Within semantics, literal meaning refers to the direct or surface-level interpretation of a word or sentence, without considering figurative, implied, or metaphorical elements.

Literal meaning is particularly essential in early language acquisition because children rely heavily on what is concrete and observable. As Clark (2003) explains, children begin their understanding of language by connecting words to tangible objects or familiar experiences. For instance, when a child hears the word "apple" and sees or tastes the fruit, they are engaging with its literal meaning. This type of comprehension lays the groundwork for more abstract forms of language understanding later on.

Moreover, literal meaning helps avoid ambiguity for early learners. Figurative language, such as metaphors or idioms, can confuse children because such expressions require a level of abstract thinking that often develops later. Therefore, introducing children to vocabulary through literal meanings enables more effective and accessible language learning during their formative years.

Vocabulary Development in Children

Vocabulary acquisition is a central part of language development. Nation (2001) states that knowing a word means understanding its form (spelling and pronunciation), its meaning (both denotative and connotative), and its use (how and when to use it appropriately in context). For children, acquiring vocabulary begins with repeated exposure to words in meaningful and relevant contexts.

According to Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002), vocabulary instruction is most effective when it starts with concrete and familiar terms before moving on to more complex or abstract vocabulary. Teaching literal meanings allows children to form strong, memorable associations with words, which improves retention and recall. When a child hears "dog" and sees a real dog, the connection becomes clearer and stronger than when they are taught a word without any context or imagery.

Furthermore, vocabulary acquisition directly influences children's ability to speak fluently and express their thoughts clearly. A limited vocabulary restricts communication, while a growing vocabulary gives children the tools they need to describe their world and interact socially. Therefore, literal meaning plays a pivotal role in helping children build a strong vocabulary base that supports spoken language development.

Sentence Structure and Speaking Skills

Speaking is a productive skill that involves not only vocabulary but also grammar and sentence construction. Brown (2000) points out that children begin by producing simple sentences that follow basic grammatical patterns, such as subject-verb or subject-verb-object constructions. For instance, sentences like "I eat," "She runs," or "They play ball" are early examples of how children form structure.

When children understand the literal meaning of each word in a sentence, they can more easily figure out how those words fit together logically. For example, knowing the literal meanings of "I," "drink," and "milk" helps a child construct a sentence like "I drink milk." This simple but meaningful sentence reflects both vocabulary knowledge and an understanding of sentence structure.

Understanding how to build grammatically correct sentences also improves communication clarity. As stated by Cameron (2001), the ability to organize words into coherent sentences is essential for effective speaking. Therefore, literal meaning serves as a cognitive anchor that allows children to arrange words in a way that makes sense and communicates ideas clearly.

The research identified several key findings from the implementation of literal meaning in language instruction:

1. Children exhibited better vocabulary retention when words were taught with direct and literal explanations.
2. Sentence construction skills improved as children understood the roles of individual words (e.g., noun, verb).
3. Students were more engaged and participative during lessons that included literal and tangible examples.
4. Teachers observed fewer grammatical mistakes and better sentence coherence among students.

Table 1. Vocabulary Enhancement Through Literal Meaning

Word	Literal Meaning	Sentence Example
Apple	A round fruit that is red or green and edible	I ate a red apple at lunch.
Table	A piece of furniture with a flat top and legs	The book is on the table.
Run	To move quickly by foot	He runs every morning in the park.
Dog	A domesticated animal often kept as a pet	The dog barked loudly.

The findings suggest that literal meaning plays a critical role in helping children understand and use language more effectively. Literal meanings offer clear, unambiguous definitions that children can easily relate to everyday experiences.

This makes it easier for them to form mental associations and retrieve vocabulary during speech.

Furthermore, when children grasp the literal meanings of words, they begin to construct grammatically correct sentences more naturally. For instance, knowing that 'cat' is a noun and 'jumps' is a verb allows them to build sentences such as 'The cat jumps on the bed.' This understanding also supports syntactic development, enabling learners to form more complex sentences over time.

The discussion also highlights that literal teaching methods support inclusive learning. Visual and physical representations of words help children with different learning styles (visual, auditory, kinesthetic) to understand language.

Table 2. Sentence Construction Based on Literal Meaning

Word Components	Constructed Sentence
Noun: Cat, Verb: jumps	The cat jumps on the sofa.
Noun: Bird, Verb: sings	The bird sings in the morning.
Noun: Boy, Verb: eats	The boy eats a banana.
Noun: Girl, Verb: reads	The girl reads a book.

In summary, the application of literal meaning in semantics provides a practical and effective approach to developing children's vocabulary and sentence structure. It enhances their ability to speak clearly and accurately, fosters better language comprehension, and promotes active participation in learning activities. These outcomes confirm the significance of semantic instruction in early childhood education.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the analysis and findings presented in the previous chapter, this study concludes that the application of literal meaning in semantic instruction significantly enhances vocabulary acquisition and sentence construction in children's speaking skills. The direct and concrete interpretation of words allows children to comprehend language in a clear and unambiguous manner. By linking words to real-life objects, actions, and experiences, children become more confident in using new vocabulary and more capable of forming grammatically accurate sentences.

Classroom observations and teacher interviews further revealed that students responded positively to instructional strategies grounded in literal meaning. The integration of visual aids and tangible examples effectively supported learners in grasping word meanings and applying them in spoken language. Consequently, notable improvements were observed in vocabulary retention, syntactic accuracy, and oral fluency. In conclusion, teaching literal meaning as part of semantic instruction provides a solid foundation for developing children's speaking competence. This approach equips young learners with the tools to communicate more effectively, accurately, and confidently in daily interactions.

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