



Schema Conflict in Laufey's "Promise": A Cognitive Stylistic Analysis

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Received: 03 Jan 2026	This study explores the profound psychological tension that arises when rational cognitive patterns, such as a firm commitment to distance oneself after a romantic breakup, clash with sudden emotional impulses. This internal friction often disrupts a person's ability to maintain commitments, leading to a profound struggle between cognitive control and emotional desires. To address this main issue, the objective of this study is to examine Laufey's song "Promise" to investigate how various forms of figurative language interact with cognitive schemas to construct a complex representation of love characterised by ambiguity and emotional depth. Employing a descriptive qualitative method within the framework of cognitive stylistics, this research found 11 total data points that were divided into metaphor (5 data points), paradox (1 data point), irony (1 data point), hyperbole (3 data points), and repetition (1 data point). The findings reveal that figures of speech function far beyond mere aesthetic ornaments; they act as profound cognitive mechanisms that map the trajectory of the speaker's psychological struggle. Specifically, metaphors of spatial distance actively establish a rational 'distance schema' to create a protective cognitive boundary. However, the subsequent use of hyperboles and paradoxes linguistically manifests the intense cognitive strain and dissonance experienced by the speaker. Ultimately, situational irony acts as the definitive catalyst for schema disruption, brilliantly mirroring the inevitable collapse of cognitive control and the onset of a spontaneous emotional relapse. Through this analysis, the research demonstrates that lyrical choices serve as deliberate cognitive reflections of human vulnerability within modern popular music.
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1. Introduction

Language has a crucial role in shaping how people communicate with one another and how they perceive the world (Tukhtaeva, 2021). This role shows by looking at how language enhances personal and community awareness, encourages unity among people, and shares cultural insights. Beyond its function, language also allows individuals to express their thoughts, emotions, and personal experiences (Ben Amer, 2025). Hoemann et al. (2025) argue that through language, humans not only convey their feelings but also show the interpretation of each individual in certain situations. This connection between language and interpretation shows that linguistic expression is related to human cognition.

This cognitive linguistics shows how the relationship between mental processes affects a person in understanding and organising an event or incident in their mind (Evans & Green, 2006). Language here is not just an automatic system but rather how individual perception is expanded to construct the meaning that will be formed later. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). Through linguistic choices, both from the speaker's and listener's perspectives, it will show how the reception and production of meaning and understanding occur for each individual (Langacker, 2008). Thus, in understanding language through a cognitive perspective, it is necessary to test the mental structures that form interpretation and meaning-making.

One of the theories that discusses this concept is schema theory. This theory discusses how mental frameworks are used to organise human memory or cognition to focus attention on something and interpret it into new experiences. Furthermore, Cook (1995) states that a schema is a data structure that represents stereotypical patterns capable of constructing human memory, which is later used to understand a specific event or occurrence. Schemas show that meaning emerges from the connection between the text and the knowledge and experience of the speaker or utterer (Oyebamiji, 2024).

The text certainly contains words, phrases, and sentences (Popova et al., 2017). Literary products such as song lyrics are also considered a text (Dharma, 2023). In this study, the researcher uses the lyrics from the song "Promise" by Laufey. Laufey is a modern American jazz singer known for her songs that incorporate many literary styles in their lyrics (Classic FM, 2024). The song "Promise" itself has a theme of the dilemma of a separation that is considered not yet fully resolved (Songtell, 2024).

Accordingly, the objective of this study is to examine Laufey's song "Promise" to investigate how various forms of figurative language interact with cognitive schemas to construct a complex representation of love characterised by ambiguity and emotional depth.

2. Literature Review

Research using song lyrics like this is not the first time it has been done. Among them, the research by Simanjuntak et al. (2023) explains that in the song "Someone You Loved" by Lewis Capaldi, the use of metaphors is used to express the feeling of loss from someone's absence. The relationship between words builds the meaning of loss and heartbreak that can be identified from the lyrics. Another study conducted by Sianturi et

al. (2024) analysed Ariana Grande's song "Intro (End of the World)". The research found that the lyrics represent reflections on relationships, self-introspection, and the complexities within relationships. Furthermore, another analysis conducted by Elchaira et al. (2025) reveals the themes of obsession and fragility in Maroon 5's work titled "Animal". Using the lens of conceptual metaphor and cognitive schema theory, the researchers explain the relationship between figures of speech and mental processes in the verses of the song's lyrics. As a complement, the research by Arifah et al. (2025) also provides a perspective on cognitive stylistics by analysing the song "Norman F***ing Rockwell!" by Lana Del Rey. In the results, the findings of figures of speech such as metaphor, irony, sarcasm, and repetition are described, along with their relationship to cognitive mental processes leading to critiques of romance and gender norms in the lyrics.

Nevertheless, issues such as loss, complicated relationships, obsession, and romantic criticism have often been the subjects of previous research. Research on how cognitive stylistics functions to depict expressions of love that are light yet rich in emotional nuances in modern music is still very limited.

This study is going to examine Laufey's song "Promise" using a cognitive stylistic approach, specifically schema theory, with the goal of investigating how various forms of figurative language interact with cognitive schemas to construct a complex representation of love characterized by pleasure, ambiguity, and emotional depth.

3. Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design situated within the field of cognitive stylistics (Stockwell, 2005). To understand the psychological message of the song, the analysis was guided by schema theory as its primary theoretical framework (Cook, 1995). Schema theory explains that people use pre-existing mental frameworks, or schemas, to process their experiences and reality (Patricia Oyebamiji et al., 2024). In this study, the researchers identified the main schemas found in the song, such as the promise to keep a distance and the temptation to relapse. By utilizing this cognitive stylistic approach, specifically through the lens of schema theory, the researchers examined how the character's logical mindset clashes with their emotional feelings. This specific methodological approach helps to comprehend how Laufey uses specific words and sentences to express internal struggle and cognitive dissonance.

The primary data analyzed in this study were the lyrics of the song "Promise" by Laufey, specifically focusing on words, phrases, and sentences that demonstrate psychological tension. The data were collected through a close reading of the text and repeated listening to the song. During this process, any linguistic expressions indicating a broken promise or an emotional struggle were systematically highlighted and recorded. Subsequently, the collected data were analyzed by applying schema theory to identify the active schemas within the text and to examine how these rational mental frameworks conflicted with the character's emotional responses. The final step involved drawing conclusions based on this analysis, yielding findings that explain how Laufey's linguistic choices successfully depict cognitive dissonance and schema conflict to the listeners.

4. Results and Discussion

Traditionally, literary frameworks define figures of speech primarily as rhetorical devices meant to embellish language and deviate from literal meanings (Abrams, 1999). However, in cognitive stylistics, figurative language is not merely interpreted as an aesthetic or decorative element of a text, but rather as a fundamental cognitive tool used to conceptualize and reflect complex human experiences (Giovanelli & Harrison, 2024).

In cognitive stylistics, figurative language serves not merely as aesthetic decoration, but as a fundamental cognitive tool used to conceptualize complex human experiences, process emotional turbulence, and rationalize abstract decisions (Giovanelli & Harrison, 2024). In Laufey's "Promise," these rhetorical devices act as internal linguistic evidence, mapping how the speaker's mental schemas are activated, challenged, and ultimately disrupted throughout the narrative (Gibbons & Whiteley, 2022). A comprehensive overview of these stylistic choices and their corresponding cognitive functions is systematically summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Figurative Language and Their Cognitive Functions in Laufey's "Promise"

No.	Figure of Speech	Lyric Data	Cognitive Function
1.	Metaphor (Spatial & Journey)	"I made a promise, to distance myself"/"Took a flight, through aurora skies" & "I've done the math, there's no solution."	Schema Activation: Establishing a logical boundary and physical distance to protect mental state.
2.	Hyperbole	"So I didn't call you/For sixteen long days"	Cognitive Strain: Distorted subjective time perception due to the immense effort of maintaining the distance schema.
3.	Paradox	"It hurts to be something/It's worse to be nothing, with you"	Cognitive Dissonance: Internal friction between logical reasoning and overwhelming emotional reality.
4.	Repetition	"It hurts to be something/It's worse to be nothing, with you"	Cognitive Structure Maintenance: A mental loop reflecting the speaker's internal conflict and obsession.
5.	Irony (Situational)	"I shouldn't have, I wouldn't have/If it weren't for the sight of a boy who looked just like you"	Schema Disruption: The complete collapse of the previously built cognitive boundaries, leading to an emotional relapse.

As illustrated in Table 1, the identified figures of speech collectively reflect a progression of cognitive processes experienced by the speaker throughout the song. The findings demonstrate that metaphor primarily functions to activate and reinforce a distance schema, while hyperbole and paradox reveal increasing cognitive strain and dissonance. Repetition maintains the speaker's internal conflict, whereas situational irony ultimately triggers schema disruption and emotional relapse. These results suggest that figurative language in "Promise" serves not merely as a stylistic feature but as a cognitive mechanism through which psychological tension and emotional vulnerability are represented. The following sections discuss each cognitive process in greater detail.

4.1 Figure of Speech as Cognitive Representation

In cognitive stylistics, figurative language is not merely interpreted as an aesthetic or decorative element of a text, but rather as a fundamental cognitive tool used to conceptualize and reflect complex human experiences (Giovanelli & Harrison, 2024). In Laufey's "Promise," various figures of speech are strategically employed as internal linguistic evidence to illustrate the speaker's mental state. These rhetorical devices function as active cognitive mechanisms that assist the mind in processing emotional turbulence and rationalizing abstract decisions. Therefore, the figurative expressions found in the lyrics serve as primary indicators to map how the speaker's mental schemas are activated, challenged, and ultimately disrupted throughout the narrative of the song (Gibbons & Whiteley, 2022).

a. Metaphor as an Indicator of Schema Activation

In cognitive stylistics, metaphors function not merely as poetic comparisons, but as fundamental cognitive mechanisms that map abstract emotions onto concrete concepts (Giovanelli & Harrison, 2024). In Laufey's "Promise," the speaker utilizes metaphors to construct a logical foundation for her coping mechanism.

- *"I made a promise, to distance myself"*
- *"Took a flight, through aurora skies"*
- *"I've done the math, there's no solution."*

The analysis reveals three distinct metaphorical mappings employed in the lyrics. In the first datum, a spatial metaphor is used, conceptualizing emotional separation as physical space through the word "distance". The second datum employs a journey metaphor ("took a flight"), representing the physical and emotional detachment from the conflict. Finally, the third datum utilizes a structural metaphor ("done the math" and "no solution"), which frames the complex emotional relationship as an objective mathematical equation.

Cognitively, these metaphors serve to construct and reinforce a rational 'distance schema'. By framing complex, uncontrollable feelings into tangible boundaries, the speaker's mind effectively triggers a protective cognitive mechanism. The spatial and

journey metaphors represent the human mind's extreme effort to build an elaborate physical barrier to secure psychological safety. Furthermore, the mathematical metaphor reflects the speaker's attempt to apply strict logic to an emotional crisis; by objectifying the relationship as an unsolvable problem, the brain rationalizes the necessity of separation to deliberately suppress emotional impulses.

Theoretically, these findings align with Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff, 2008) and schema theory (Cook, 1995), proving that metaphorical expressions act as explicit triggers for schema activation. The metaphors found in the lyrics are not merely descriptive but performative; they set an initial logical rule that the speaker utilizes to maintain cognitive control and prevent emotional relapse.

This finding offers a distinct perspective when compared to previous literature. While Simanjuntak et al. (2023) found that metaphors in Lewis Capaldi's "Someone You Loved" function primarily to express the feeling of loss and heartbreak, and Elchaira et al. (2025) demonstrated how conceptual metaphors in Maroon 5's "Animal" illustrate themes of obsession, this study reveals a different cognitive function. In "Promise," metaphors are actively employed as a calculated, self-imposed defense mechanism to activate a rational schema, showcasing a mental effort to block emotional vulnerability rather than merely expressing it.

b. Paradox as an Expression of Cognitive Dissonance

In cognitive stylistics, a paradox highlights cognitive dissonance, a psychological state where the mind simultaneously holds two conflicting emotional or logical states (Lugea & Walker, 2023). In Laufey's "Promise," paradox reflects the internal friction between the speaker's rationally constructed 'distance schema' and her overwhelming emotional reality.

- *"It hurts to be something / It's worse to be nothing, with you"*

The analysis of this single datum reveals a clear paradoxical structure. Lexically, the speaker contrasts two opposing existential conditions within the relationship: "being something" and "being nothing". The paradox lies in the assertion that both mutually exclusive conditions inevitably result in emotional pain, presenting a situation with no logical or positive outcome.

Cognitively, this paradox traps the speaker in a state of extreme cognitive dissonance. It reflects the internal friction between the mind's logical decision to detach (becoming "nothing") and its lingering emotional dependency (wanting to be "something"). By consciously admitting that the total absence of the relationship is actually worse than the pain of maintaining it, the speaker exposes a critical flaw in her rationally constructed 'distance schema'. This linguistic device signals the mind's inability to maintain logical detachment, marking the gradual but definitive breakdown of her cognitive control.

Theoretically, the use of this paradox supports the concept that figurative language acts as a mirror for mental entrapment (Lugea & Walker, 2023). It illustrates how

cognitive dissonance occurs when an active schema (the rational need to distance oneself) directly collides with an unyielding emotional reality, creating a mental deadlock that words can only express through contradiction.

When compared to previous literature, this finding provides a deeper psychological layer. For instance, Sianturi et al. (2024) found that figurative language in Ariana Grande's song represents reflections and complexities within a relationship. However, the analysis of the paradox in "Promise" goes beyond mere reflection; it acts as precise linguistic evidence of a "system failure" within the speaker's cognition. Unlike general romantic complexities, this paradox specifically highlights the exact moment the speaker's rational coping mechanism begins to collapse under the weight of cognitive dissonance.

c. Irony as the Trigger of Schema Disruption

A statement that is contextually inappropriate yet remains relevant, and this incongruity is deliberately created by the speaker to be understood by the audience, is called irony (Fayzulloyeva, 2025). Here is the data that shows irony in Laufey's Promise:

- *"I made a promise / To distance myself" → "So I broke my promise / I called you last night"*

Through these lyrics, it is found that the irony present is situational irony wherein in the lyrics the speaker has made a promise, which is a form of commitment to convince himself in the song to distance himself from the person he loves, but the next lyrics show the opposite, that the promise he made he broke himself.

The action taken shows that the speaker is not fully committed to distancing themselves from the person they love. This can happen due to the emotional ties still binding the speaker to the person they love, creating feelings that are not yet fully resolved, and the speaker here feels the need to complete it. Thus, readers or listeners who initially formed a belief schema about the commitment experience a new schema change when that commitment is violated.

According to Cook (1995), a deviation from actions that a person has previously experienced is called schema disruption. Schema disruption occurs when a literary text challenges the schema previously held by the reader, thereby encouraging the formation of a new interpretation of the existing text (Kateb, 2024). Where the word 'made' contrasts with the word 'broke', it signifies a significant emotional shift by the speaker to illustrate a new schema from commitment to the violation of a promise that has been made.

In a previous study conducted by Arifah et al. (2025), schema disruption was demonstrated through the contrast between irony and sarcasm, which reshaped the listeners' interpretation of ideal love with adult masculinity. In this study, it shows a difference where the schema disruption changes from a commitment to a promise that turns out to be broken due to the emotional ties still bound to the loved one.

d. Hyperbole as an Indicator of Cognitive Strain

According to Tuzzahrah, (2016), hyperbole is a figurative language that provides an obvious exaggeration but cannot be examined literally. Here are the data that found in the lyrics:

- *“So I didn’t call you/For 16 long days”*
- *And I should get a cigarette / For so much restraint*
- *No matter how long I resist temptation / I will always lose”*

The first data that reads ‘So I didn’t call you for 16 long days’ shows the use of the word ‘long’ to exaggerate the duration, even though in reality it was just 16 days. Then the sentence “And I should get a cigarette for so much restraint” appears after the previous sentence. The speaker makes their act of waiting seem like a huge effort that should be rewarded with a cigarette. Finally, in the third datum, the speaker uses the word ‘long’, which collocates with the phrase ‘I resist temptation’ and is followed by the sentence ‘I will always lose’, expressing certainty that he will always be unable to control his emotions to wait for the long separation in the end.

The feeling of not accepting the situation conveyed by the speaker leads to overthinking, which causes an increase in emotional intensity over time. When the speaker feels that this has exceeded normal limits, they feel the need to find a way to cope with it. Where, in the speaker’s era, they rewarded themselves, but in the end, they realised that the problem would never be resolved and they were drowning in their own emotions.

Therefore, in these lyrics, there is manipulation of the initial schema and also the formation of a new schema that distorts the existing one. Based on schema theory (Cook, 1995), this schema is referred to as a ‘refreshment schema’ thru discourse deviation, where the speaker uses a ‘struggle schema’ that ultimately leads to the destruction of their own schema.

The calculation of days in waiting done by the speaker illustrates that excessive emotions can affect a person’s cognition. This is also found in the previous study by Sianturi et al. (2024), where in different songs there are also hyperboles related to time and their influence on the speaker’s cognition.

e. Repetition as Cognitive Structure Maintenance

Usarov I. K., (2022) states that repetition is a rhetorical device that underscores the logical focus required to capture a reader’s attention on a particular word or phrase within the text.

- *“It hurts to be something / It’s worse to be nothing, with you”*

These lyrics are repeated four times in the song. Not only does it repeat, but it also serves as the refrain of the song. This also indicates the main theme of the song, which is the feeling of being unfinished and the dilemma in the relationship. The words ‘hurts’ and

‘worse’ describe a feeling of pain that deepens over time and serve as a comparison not to determine which is better but to state that neither is better. This part is also a combination of World Schema (World/Content Schema) and Text Schema (Text/Formal Schema). Repeated words form chains in the cognitive realm to reinforce existing schemas. The difference between “something” and “nothing” represents a binary opposition between existence vs non-existence, showing how meaning is cognitively constructed thru conceptual contrast (Attardo et al., 2008). This is further related to the conceptual metaphor that existence is value, where being “something” implies value and being “nothing” signifies the loss of identity. This repetition maintains the cognitive structure by highlighting the speaker’s internal conflict and self-evaluation (Stockwell, 2005).

Schema reinforcement activated by the repetition figure of speech also emphasizes the existing irony. This was obtained from the research by Arifah et al. (2025) who studied Lana Del Rey’s work where the discovery of the Repetition figure of speech was used to highlight irony and sarcasm in the song.

With the activation of distance and self-control schemes at the beginning of the song and ending with a disruption scheme, it shows a very clear transformation to illustrate the speaker’s conflicting cognition using figures of speech consisting of irony, hyperbole, and repetition, which indicate the speaker’s inner conflict that keeps spinning. The speaker in Ajat is drowning in his own emotions and changing the scheme he formed himself. The effect on the reader or listener is that the speaker, who initially shows strong commitment, drops expectations when there is a disruption in the scheme, thus also feeling the conflict between the speaker’s cognition and emotion.

5. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Laufey’s “Promise” serves as a rich textual space for observing the internal friction between logical reasoning and emotional impulses through the lens of cognitive stylistics. The findings reveal that figures of speech within the lyrics function far beyond mere aesthetic ornaments; rather, they act as profound cognitive mechanisms that map the trajectory of the speaker’s psychological struggle. Specifically, metaphors of spatial distance and journey actively establish a rational ‘distance schema,’ creating a protective cognitive boundary. However, the subsequent use of hyperboles and paradoxes linguistically manifests the intense cognitive strain and dissonance experienced by the speaker as they attempt to uphold these self-imposed rules. Ultimately, the presence of situational irony acts as the definitive catalyst for schema disruption, brilliantly mirroring the inevitable collapse of cognitive control and the onset of a spontaneous emotional relapse.

These findings carry significant implications for both the academic domain of literary linguistics and the general audience. Within the realm of cognitive stylistics, this research reinforces the efficacy of schema theory in decoding the mental architectures embedded within modern popular music, proving that lyrical choices are deliberate cognitive reflections of human vulnerability. For the general audience, this analysis validates the

complex psychological reality of romantic coping mechanisms. It illustrates that the painful oscillation between maintaining personal commitments and surrendering to emotional relapse is a structurally profound cognitive phenomenon, rather than a simple sign of irrationality. To further enrich this domain, future studies should expand upon these findings by investigating the representation of schema disruption across a broader corpus of modern artists or distinct musical genres. Additionally, employing complementary cognitive frameworks, such as Text World Theory or Conceptual Blending, is highly recommended to uncover new, multidimensional insights into how listeners actively co-create meaning and mentally simulate these emotional tensions when engaging with contemporary lyrical texts.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Authors' Contributions

All authors contributed substantially to the conception and design of the study, data collection and analysis, interpretation of the findings, and manuscript preparation. The authors collaboratively developed the theoretical framework, critically reviewed and revised the manuscript, and approved the final version for publication.

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