

REASSESSING FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE IN DISNEY'S ALADDIN (2019): A CONTEXT-SENSITIVE ANALYSIS OF DIALOGUE

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ABSTRACT

This study reassesses the classification and communicative functions of figurative language in the English dialogue of Disney's live-action film *Aladdin* (2019). Rather than treating every expression containing like, as, or an indirect meaning as figurative, the study applies a context-sensitive qualitative content analysis to 26 candidate utterances compiled in the original dataset. Each utterance was examined by comparing its lexical composition with its scene-based meaning, speaker intention, discourse function, and – where relevant – auditory and visual cues. The audit substantially refines the initial taxonomy. Eleven items are best described as idiomatic or conventional figurative formulae, while only one of seven comparison constructions is a clear figurative simile; the remaining six are literal comparisons, degree constructions, or contextual analogies. Three items previously classified as metaphors are superlative power claims and may function as intensification, but they do not establish cross-domain metaphorical mappings. Two items previously labeled ambiguity are more accurately analyzed as a direct directive and an indirect request. The remaining items comprise a context-dependent temporal symbol, a potential instance of verbal irony, and a literal evaluative address to a monkey rather than personification. Across the defensible cases, figurative language supports characterization, humor, interpersonal positioning, intensification, and narrative economy. The findings demonstrate that surface markers alone are insufficient for identifying figurative language and that multimodal context is essential in film dialogue. The study offers a more transparent coding framework for film-based figurative-language research and cautions against deriving broad moral themes from frequency counts without a separate thematic analysis. It also identifies methodological priorities for transcript verification, independent coding, and future multimodal comparison.

Keywords: *figurative language; film dialogue; contextual meaning; pragmatic function; Aladdin*

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INTRODUCTION

Figurative language is often described as language that departs from literal meaning, yet this definition is less straightforward than it appears. Speakers use idioms, metaphors, similes, irony, and related forms not merely to decorate an utterance but to demonstrate attitudes, evaluations, and experiences that literal paraphrases may express less efficiently. Colston and Gibbs (2021) therefore argue that figurative language can communicate

meaning directly, whereas Gibbs (2023) emphasizes what figurative expressions accomplish in discourse rather than treating them as a fixed inventory of ornamental devices. This functional view requires analysts to consider what an utterance means in context and what it enables a speaker to do.

Category boundaries are especially important when metaphor and simile are identified. A simile typically makes a comparison overt, whereas a metaphor invites a mapping or categorization without an explicit comparison marker. However, the mere presence of like or as does not make a sentence figurative: these forms can introduce literal resemblance, degree, exemplification, or a clausal complement. Experimental work also shows that similes and metaphors share some processing resources while remaining sensitive to familiarity, form, and discourse extension (Pambuccian & Raney, 2021; Mathisen et al., 2025). A defensible analysis must therefore identify the compared domains and explain why the comparison is nonliteral.

Similar caution is needed for idiom and irony. Idioms are conventionalized sequences whose discourse meaning is not fully predictable from the meanings of their individual words. Irony, by contrast, depends strongly on a discrepancy between the overt proposition and an attitude made recoverable by context. Research on irony comprehension consistently demonstrates that readers integrate linguistic information with discourse context, expectations, and individual differences (Olkonien & Kaakinen, 2021; Olkonien et al., 2024). Consequently, a line that appears contradictory in isolation cannot automatically be classified as ironic, and an indirect request should not be mislabeled as lexical ambiguity.

Film adds another analytical layer because meaning emerges through language, intonation, gesture, facial expression, editing, music, and image. Studies of filmic metaphor accordingly stress the need for explicit identification criteria and attention to interactions among modes (Bort-Mir & Bolognesi, 2022). Forceville (2024) further cautions that procedures developed for verbal metaphor cannot be transferred mechanically to moving images. Even when the present study focuses on dialogue, the immediate scene remains relevant for resolving reference, tone, and pragmatic force.

Disney's *Aladdin* (2019) offers a useful case because its dialogue combines fantasy, comedy, status negotiation, and interpersonal conflict. Earlier work on the song "A Whole New World" identified several figurative forms and interpreted their contextual meanings (Nursolihat & Kareviati, 2020). A film-wide dialogue analysis can extend that focus, but it must avoid assuming that an expression is figurative simply because it sounds imaginative or contains a familiar marker. It must also distinguish the linguistic pattern from the narrative or moral theme that a researcher may associate with the scene.

The manuscript on which this study is based initially reported 26 items across seven categories: idiom, simile, metaphor, ambiguity, symbol, irony, and personification. A preliminary review showed that several assignments relied on surface form rather than semantic relation or contextual function. For example, three superlative claims about power were labeled metaphors even though no source-target mapping was specified, and the phrase "You cunning little monkey" was labeled personification despite being addressed to Abu, who is literally a monkey. Such cases make the dataset suitable for a transparent classification audit.

This study therefore asks two questions: (1) Which of the 26 candidate utterances withstand context-sensitive classification as figurative language? and (2) What pragmatic and narrative functions do the supported and contested examples serve in their scenes? By prioritizing semantic contrast, conventionality, speaker intention, and multimodal context, the study aims to produce a replicable account and to show why critical reclassification strengthens, rather than weakens, a qualitative film analysis.

METHOD

Research Design and Data Source

The study employed qualitative, context-sensitive content analysis. Qualitative content analysis is appropriate when the objective is to organize textual data systematically while preserving the relationship between a linguistic unit and its surrounding context (Bengtsson, 2016). The primary source was the English-language dialogue of the live-action film *Aladdin*, directed by Guy Ritchie and released in 2019 (Ritchie, 2019). The working corpus consisted of 26 candidate utterances retained from the original manuscript. These items were treated as candidates rather than confirmed instances so that the audit would not predetermine the outcome.

The unit of analysis was one complete utterance or a locally meaningful phrase within an utterance. The working transcript was checked against the corresponding scene when its wording, reference, or tone affected interpretation. The analysis focused on spoken language; visual and auditory information was used as contextual evidence rather than coded as a separate multimodal corpus. This distinction prevents claims about visual metaphor that the dataset was not designed to support.

Operational Criteria

An item was retained as clearly figurative only when its contextual interpretation could not be adequately explained by default literal composition alone or when it established a recognizable rhetorical comparison. The coding criteria were informed by contemporary functional and processing research (Colston & Gibbs, 2021; Gibbs, 2023; Mathisen et al., 2025) and by work on metaphor identification in film (Bort-Mir & Bolognesi, 2022; Forceville, 2024). Table 1 summarizes the operational distinctions used in the audit.

Table 1. Operational criteria for the classification audit

Category	Operational criterion	Typical evidence
Idiomatic/conventional figurative formula	The established discourse meaning is not fully compositional or involves a conventional figurative mapping.	A plausible literal reading differs from the conventional contextual meaning.
Figurative simile	An overt comparison links conceptually distinct domains to foreground a shared quality.	A comparison marker plus a nonliteral source–target relation.
Metaphor	One domain is understood or evaluated through another without an overt literal comparison.	An identifiable source domain, target domain, and contextual mapping.
Hyperbole/intensification	The utterance exceeds a contextually plausible scale to heighten evaluation.	Deliberate extremity that is not intended as precise measurement.
Irony	The speaker’s recoverable attitude	Contextual incongruity

Category	Operational criterion	Typical evidence
	conflicts with the overt proposition or expected evaluation.	supported by tone, common ground, or subsequent response.
Symbolic cue	An expression evokes a broader culturally or narratively salient meaning beyond reference.	Repeated or contextually motivated association, not reference alone.
Boundary case	Literal composition, conventional speech-act force, or insufficient contextual evidence explains the item.	A nonfigurative analysis is simpler and better supported.

Analytical Procedure

1. First, each candidate was read literally and then reinterpreted within its local dialogue and scene. The analysis recorded the speaker's apparent intention, addressee, discourse action, and relevant visual or prosodic cues.
2. Second, the original category was tested against the operational criteria. For metaphor and simile, the analysis specified the two compared domains; for irony, it identified the contextual incongruity; and for idioms, it distinguished a conventional phrasal meaning from word-by-word composition.
3. Third, items that did not satisfy a figurative criterion were retained as boundary cases and given a more economical grammatical, semantic, or pragmatic account. This negative-case step was important because transparent disagreement with an initial label is more informative than forcing every candidate into the original taxonomy.
4. Finally, supported and contested items were compared to identify recurring pragmatic and narrative functions. Frequencies were used descriptively and were not treated as evidence of psychological importance or thematic dominance.

Trustworthiness and Scope

Analytical transparency was supported by retaining the complete candidate set, stating explicit inclusion criteria, documenting reclassifications, and presenting representative lines with reasons. These practices respond to continuing concerns about reliability in figurative-language identification (Bort-Mir & Bolognesi, 2022; Ferguson, 2024). Nevertheless, the audit was not independently coded by a second analyst; agreement statistics are therefore not reported. The findings should be understood as a reasoned reanalysis of one bounded dataset, not as an exhaustive inventory of every figurative expression in the film.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Classification Audit

The audit shows that the original total of 26 candidate utterances should not be equated with 26 confirmed instances of figurative language. Twelve items meet a relatively strict threshold: 11 idiomatic or conventional figurative formulae and one clear figurative simile. Two additional items—a temporal image and a possible ironic contrast—remain context-dependent. The other 12 are better explained as literal comparison constructions,

superlative power claims, conventional speech acts, or literal evaluative address. Table 2 reports the revised analysis without discarding any item from the original dataset.

Table 2. Reassessment of the original 26 candidate utterances

Original label	Context-sensitive reassessment	Status	n
Idiom	Idiomatic or conventional figurative formula	Retained	11
Simile	One clear figurative simile; six literal comparisons, degree constructions, or contextual analogies	Partly retained	7
Metaphor	Superlative power claims; potentially intensifying but without a cross-domain mapping	Relabeled/boundary	3
Ambiguity	One direct directive and one conventional indirect request	Not retained	2
Symbol	Temporal imagery that may acquire symbolic force in context	Context-dependent	1
Irony	Potential evaluative irony based on contextual incongruity	Context-dependent	1
Personification	Literal evaluative address to a character who is a monkey	Not retained	1
Total	All candidate utterances	Audited	26

Note. Frequencies describe the inherited candidate set. They do not imply that every candidate is a confirmed figure of speech.

Idiomatic and Conventional Figurative Formulae

The strongest part of the original classification is the idiom group. Expressions such as “keep your little street rat nose out of it,” “keep an eye on,” “pull yourself together,” and “on the table” have conventional discourse meanings that cannot be derived by interpreting nose, eye, pull, or table literally. In “keep your little street rat nose out of it,” the construction keep one’s nose out of something performs exclusion and is intensified by the insulting noun phrase street rat. The figurative formula therefore does interpersonal work: it marks territorial control and lowers the addressee’s status.

Several of the remaining idiomatic items rely on conventional metaphoricity. “There is a lot of gray area in ‘make me a prince’” frames underspecification as an indeterminate color space; “the Genie’s on fire” maps exceptional performance onto heat or flame; and “the crowd goes wild” exaggerates collective excitement. “Package deal” presents the Genie and the lamp as inseparable components, while “cherry on top” humorously presents the topknot as a finishing flourish. These forms are efficient because their conventional meanings are rapidly accessible, but their wording still creates imagery and evaluation. This supports the view that figurative language can demonstrate a speaker’s stance rather than merely encode a detachable secondary meaning (Colston & Gibbs, 2021; Gibbs, 2023).

Simile and Comparison: Why Like and As Are Insufficient

Only “Treat your women like a queen” clearly establishes a figurative comparison between respectful treatment and the culturally idealized treatment of royalty. The source domain QUEEN supplies qualities such as esteem, care, and dignity to the target of interpersonal treatment. The line is therefore more than a statement that two people resemble one another; it uses a culturally salient role to frame a behavioral norm.

The other six items contain comparison-related forms but do not automatically function as figurative similes. “A man as great as you” is a degree construction; “a bracelet

like that” uses like deictically to identify a type of bracelet; and “you look like you should be my master” introduces an evidential judgment rather than a source–target comparison. “A man of great ambition like myself” compares two people literally, while “I feared losing you like I lost your mother” draws a situational analogy. “We would only ever be as happy as your least happy subject” is rhetorically forceful, but it calibrates degrees of happiness rather than mapping one conceptual domain onto another. These distinctions align with evidence that simile and metaphor interpretation depends on conceptual relation, familiarity, and discourse form, not on a marker alone (Pambuccian & Raney, 2021; Mathisen et al., 2025).

Contested Metaphor, Ambiguity, Symbol, Irony, and Personification

The three alleged metaphors—claims about being “all-powerful,” “the most powerful sorcerer,” or “the most powerful being in the universe”—do not explicitly compare one domain with another. They are superlative assertions. Depending on the fictional world and speaker commitment, they may be literal claims or hyperbolic intensifiers, but the label metaphor requires a mapping that the wording does not provide. Their main narrative function is to foreground ambition and escalating power, not to construct a figurative conceptual analogy.

Likewise, “Clear the way” is a direct imperative whose referential and pragmatic meaning is clear in context. “May I have a word?” is a conventional indirect request for a brief private conversation. Although its literal interrogative form differs from its request function, this is pragmatic indirectness rather than semantic ambiguity. Classifying it as ambiguity would conflate a routine speech act with a word or structure that supports multiple unresolved meanings.

“When the moon is above the minaret” provides vivid temporal imagery and identifies a nighttime condition. It can contribute symbolic atmosphere, but moon does not become a symbol merely by referring to night; a symbolic reading requires a broader narrative association. “They’re beautiful. She will hate them” may create irony through the clash between positive evaluation and predicted rejection. Yet the classification depends on tone and shared knowledge: if beautiful is sincere, the line is humorous incongruity rather than verbal irony. This context dependence is consistent with research showing that ironic interpretation emerges from integrated discourse cues rather than lexical form alone (Olkoniemi & Kaakinen, 2021; Olkoniemi et al., 2024).

Finally, “You cunning little monkey” does not personify Abu because monkey denotes his literal species. The adjective cunning is an evaluation of behavior, not the attribution of a uniquely human capacity. The line still has pragmatic value as an affectionate or mildly critical form of address, but its effect should not be used as evidence of personification. This example illustrates why referent identification must precede rhetorical classification.

Pragmatic and Narrative Functions

Table 3 consolidates representative cases and shows that the most productive analytical question is not only what type an expression belongs to, but what it does in the scene. The supported expressions manage relationships, intensify evaluation, produce

humor, compress explanation, and reinforce characterization.

Table 3. Representative utterances, interpretations, and functions

Utterance	Revised interpretation	Primary function
"Keep your little street rat nose out of it."	Conventional idiom plus social insult.	Exclusion and status positioning.
"Kind of a package deal."	Idiomatic expression of inseparability.	Concise explanation.
"That's my little cherry on top."	Idiomatic metaphor with a visual joke.	Humor and self-presentation.
"There is a lot of gray area in 'make me a prince.'"	Conventional metaphor for underspecification.	Clarifies risk and wish mechanics.
"The Genie's on fire."	Conventional metaphorical intensification.	Comic self-praise.
"Treat your women like a queen."	Clear figurative simile.	Normative interpersonal framing.
"May I have a word?"	Conventional indirect request, not ambiguity.	Polite conversational management.
"They're beautiful. She will hate them."	Potential irony or humorous incongruity.	Comic evaluation.
"You cunning little monkey."	Literal referent with an evaluative adjective.	Affectionate or critical address.

First, figurative formulae contribute to characterization. The Genie's energetic idioms and hyperbolic performance language support a playful, improvisational persona. Jafar's superlative power claims, although not metaphors, index ambition and a desire for hierarchical dominance. Market and palace directives position speakers relative to social authority. Figurative and nonfigurative forms thus work together to construct relationships and motives.

Second, conventional expressions increase narrative economy. A phrase such as package deal conveys a complex constraint without extended exposition, while gray area efficiently signals the interpretive danger of an underspecified wish. Such effects accord with recent accounts that emphasize embodied, pragmatic, and discourse-level contributions to figurative meaning (Gibbs, 2023; Ferguson, 2024). In a film, timing, gesture, and image can reinforce these functions, which is why dialogue should not be interpreted as an isolated printed list (Forceville, 2024).

Third, the audit changes the interpretation of frequency. Idiomatic formulae are indeed prominent in the candidate set, but the original seven-category distribution overstates the number of confirmed similes, metaphors, ambiguities, and personifications. Frequencies are only meaningful after categories are operationalized consistently. Recent metaphor research similarly treats identification and coding reliability as substantive methodological issues rather than administrative details (Bort-Mir & Bolognesi, 2022; Zeng & Ahrens, 2023).

Finally, the revised evidence does not independently establish broad messages about leadership, teamwork, honesty, identity, or self-reliance. Those themes may be present in the film, but demonstrating them would require a separate thematic analysis of plot development, characterization, and recurring audiovisual patterns. The present dataset supports narrower claims about how selected utterances perform evaluation, humor, intensification, and interpersonal management. Keeping these levels of inference separate

makes the discussion more academically defensible.

CONCLUSION

A context-sensitive reassessment of 26 candidate utterances from Aladdin (2019) shows that formal appearance alone is not a sufficient basis for classifying figurative language. Eleven items are defensible idiomatic or conventional figurative formulae, and one comparison is a clear figurative simile. Two items remain plausible but context-dependent cases of symbolism and irony. The remaining items are more accurately explained as literal comparisons, degree constructions, superlative power claims, conventional speech acts, or literal evaluative address. This revised account replaces an inflated seven-category frequency claim with a transparent distinction between supported and contested cases.

The defensible expressions contribute to characterization, comic timing, interpersonal positioning, evaluative intensity, and concise exposition. These functions demonstrate the value of analyzing what a figure accomplishes within discourse rather than simply matching words to a checklist. For teaching, the film may be used as material for comparing literal and contextual meanings, especially when students are asked to justify classifications with scene evidence. The study does not, however, test learning outcomes.

The conclusions are limited by the use of one film, an inherited set of candidate utterances, a single primary coding process, and the absence of systematic coding for gesture, image, music, and prosody. Future research should verify dialogue against a stable transcript, record timestamps and speakers, use at least two independent coders, report agreement, and distinguish verbal from multimodal figuration. Comparative studies across films or genres could then examine whether the functions identified here recur beyond this dataset.

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