



UNRAVELLING TAYLOR SWIFT'S FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE: A STYLISTIC STUDY OF SONG LYRICS

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ABSTRACT

This descriptive qualitative research delved into the intricate world of figurative expressions within Taylor Swift's album "The Tortured Poets Department." Focusing on selected songs: "Fortnight," "Clara Bow," "I Can Do It with A Broken Heart," and "The Alchemy," the study examined the lyrical contents. The data of this study was examined by employing Kennedy X.J's theory of figurative language. The analysis uncovers underlying patterns of figurative language within the songs. The data was systematically collected and organized into tables, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of the figurative elements present. Through depth analysis, the study identified a total of 35 occurrences of figurative language, with personification emerging as the predominant type. The findings underscore Taylor Swift's adeptness in leveraging linguistic techniques to convey poignant messages and evoke profound emotional responses. This research sheds light on the intricate artistry and expressive nuances embedded within contemporary music lyrics. By unravelling the layers of figurative language, it provides valuable insights into the depth and complexity of Swift's lyrical compositions, enriching our appreciation of her musical narrative.

Keywords: *Figurative language; Song lyrics; Taylor Swift*

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, music serves as a universal language transcending cultural boundaries and geographical distances. It has shaped cultures and societies around the world for generations and has the power to alter one's mood, change perceptions, and inspire change (Peralta, 2021). Music has the remarkable ability, an analysis suggests three distinct underlying dimensions: people listen to music 1) to *regulate arousal and mood*, 2) to achieve *self-awareness*, and 3) as an expression of *social relatedness* (Schäfer, Sedlmeier, Städtler, & Huron, 2013). Songs play a pivotal role in shaping the listener's experience due to the power to evoke a wide range of emotions in listeners. Whether it is joy, sadness, anger, love, or nostalgia, the themes and sentiments expressed in song lyrics can resonate deeply with listeners, often mirroring their own experiences or feelings. Additionally, many songs also tell stories or convey narratives through their lyrics. Whether it is a personal anecdote, a fictional tale, or a commentary on societal issues, the storytelling aspect of song lyrics can captivate listeners and draw them into the narrative world created by the artist. Ultimately, it is through the power of lyrics that listeners are able to connect with the music on a deeper level, making it a profoundly meaningful and enriching experience.

Griffiee (1992) describes songs as a distinct form that shares similarities with speech and poetry. Song is a short musical work set a poetic text with equal importance given to music and to the words (Grolier, 2016). Song writers work hard to expose the aesthetic sense which produce songs with good quality. Song of good quality, have some criteria, including having exquisite melody and harmony, a well- balanced song theme, and particularly texts (lyrics) (Suharto, 2004). In linguistics study, songs can be analyzed using stylistics, which is a study of language that examines the use and style of language in literary works (Abrams, 1981). Stylistics provides a framework for understanding the linguistic and literary devices employed by songwriters to convey their message, evoke emotions, and create meaning. It is an empowering tool in its intersubjective role since it aids in explaining diverse responses to linguistic patterns (Simpson, 2004).

Song is one of literary work that contains elements of figurative language in it. Many musicians include elements of figurative language in their songs because it is considered as one aspect of what gives texts, in particular poetic texts, a special aesthetic value (Auliani, Kismullah, & Burhansyah, 2023). When musicians incorporate elements of figurative language into their songs, they are adding depth, richness, and layers of meaning to their lyrics. These linguistic tools allow songwriters to convey complex emotions, concepts, and narratives in a way that resonates with listeners on both intellectual and emotional levels. Abram (1981:96) believes that figurative language is a conspicuous departure from what users of a language apprehend as the standard meaning of words, or else the standard order of words, in order to achieve some special meaning or effect. Figurative language is generally used by composers in writing songs to attract listeners. It also enables listeners to develop their imagination while listening to music.

As the realm of music continues to captivate audiences worldwide, the role of lyrical content, especially in popular music, remains a subject of fascination and intrigue. In linguistics, the study of stylistics serves as a powerful tool for unravelling the intricacies of language usage, narrative technique, and artistic expression. Barry (2009) demonstrated that stylistic is a critical approach that applies the methods and conclusions of the study of linguistics in the analysis of a literary text. Verdonk (2002) remarks that stylistic is the study of language styles. It can also be defined as the analysis of distinctive expressions in language and the description of its purposes and effects. The stylistic approach suggests that each author's language style reflects their intended goal through word choice.

Within this context, Taylor Swift's songwriting prowess stands out, characterized by rich figurative language that weaves intricate narratives and evokes profound emotions. Taylor Swift, the renowned singer-songwriter, has captivated audiences worldwide with her emotive and evocative lyrics. Her songs are more than just catchy tunes, they serve as a canvas for intricate wordplay, vivid imagery, and layers of meaning. This study embarks on a journey into the intricate world of Taylor Swift's figurative language, seeking to unravel the layers of meaning and emotion embedded within her song lyrics. Through a stylistic lens, this study aims at exploring the nuances of metaphor, simile, personification, and other literary devices that adorn Taylor Swift's musical narratives. By examining the interplay between language and melody, imagery and emotion, this research aims to illuminate the unique stylistic fingerprint that defines Taylor Swift's lyrics.



REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Figurative Language

Warinner (in Tarigan, 1985) defines figurative language as language employed creatively rather than literary. Figurative language such as figures of speech, are not employed to convey false information. Indeed, they frequently state facts that more literal languages cannot convey; they draw attention to such truths. As defined by Mahmood (2014), figurative language is a type of language that used words or phrases that do not have a literal meaning. According to X. J. Kennedy (1979) Figurative Language is language that uses figurative of speech. A figurative of speech is a way of saying something other than the literal meaning of the world. Figure of speech may be said occur whenever a speaker or writer, for the sake of freshness or emphasize, depart from usual denotation of word. According to Kennedy Figurative language is divided into seven types, namely Metaphor, Simile, Personification, Hyperbole, Allusion, Metonymy, Irony and Symbol.

1. Metaphor

Metaphor is a statement that one thing is something else, which in a literal sense, it is not. It does not use connective words such as like or as. It means that metaphor only makes sense when the similarities between the two things become apparent or someone understands the connection (Kennedy, 1979). According to Corbert (1977), metaphor suggests a comparison between two items of different nature yet have something in common. Thus, Metaphor is variety of analogy which compare two things directly, but in short pattern. It means that between subject and object have same attributes, and writer uses it to compares it to another.

2. Simile

Kennedy (1979) affirms that simile is comparison of two things, indicated by some connective, usually like, as, than or verb such as resembles. Furthermore, Crystal (1980) defined a simile as two dissimilar items that are explicitly compared to indicate a similarity, using a term such as like or as. Generally, Simile is defined as a type of figurative language that used to explain the resemblance of two object (in shape, colour, characteristic etc).

3. Personification

Kennedy (1979) defines that “personification is a figure of speech in which a thing, an animal, or an abstract term (truth, nature) is made human. Personification is used to help the authors describe a condition or something more vividly. Through personification, the reader can more easily grasp what the authors want to tell due to the fact that personification expresses the way human perspective works and can figure it out more clearly.

4. Hyperbola

Kennedy (1979) affirms hyperbole is emphasizing a point with statement containing exaggeration. It can be ridiculous or funny. Hyperboles can be added to fiction to add colour and depth to a character. Hyperbole is figure of language that it is intentional exaggeration or overstating, often for emphasis or vivid descriptive. Hyperboles can be added to fiction to add colour and depth to a character.

5. Allusion

Allusion is figurative language that show indirectly forwards a person or even that people have known together. It's a way to add depth and complexity of literary works by drawing on the listener's familiarity with the referenced subject. Allusions can be explicit

or subtle, relying on the listener's knowledge to understand the implied meaning (Kennedy, 1979).

6. Metonymy

Perrine (2003) states metonymy is a figurative language that says something else, using other words that have a relationship, metonymy usually replace the details or important aspects of the experience itself. It is type of figurative of language which the name of one object is replaced by another which is closely associated with it.

7. Symbols

Symbol is an object, action, person, or situation that represents something abstract or beyond its literal meaning. Symbols are often used to convey deeper meanings, themes, or ideas in a text, allowing writers to communicate complex concepts in a more evocative and impactful way (Kennedy, 1979).

8. Irony

Irony is figure of speech in which words are used in such a way that their intended meaning is different from the actual meaning of the word (Keraf, 2009). Irony has a meaning that extends beyond its use merely as a figure of speech. Irony almost arises from a contrast or discrepancy between what happens and what has been expected to happen (Kennedy, 1979).

Song Lyrics

Song lyrics have been increasingly recognized as a rich site for linguistic and literary analysis due to their condensed, emotive, and stylistically creative use of language. Fischer and Janata (2021) argue that lyrics serve not only as artistic expression but also as a linguistic artifact, often combining poetic structure with everyday language to convey meaning in a compact form. They suggest that lyrics engage cognitive and emotional processes through their use of rhythm, rhyme, and figurative language.

According to Perrine and Arp (2018), song lyrics, much like poetry, employ devices such as metaphor, imagery, personification, and symbolism to express abstract ideas and emotions. These features make song lyrics fertile ground for stylistic analysis and literary interpretation. Simpson (2004) also emphasizes that lyrics can be examined through stylistic frameworks to uncover patterns of repetition, deviation, and foregrounding that shape the listener's interpretation.

In applied linguistics, Daskalovska and Dimova (2012) highlight how song lyrics can be effective tools for studying figurative language and lexical creativity, especially in educational settings. Their study found that learners engaged more deeply with metaphorical meaning and semantic nuance when analyzing contemporary song lyrics. Moreover, Kovach (2020) views modern songwriting as a form of micro-narrative construction, wherein lyrics are used to tell stories within strict temporal and structural limits. This makes them unique among literary forms and particularly interesting for discourse and narrative studies.

As a multimodal text, lyrics combine words, melody, and performance—but even in isolation, the verbal component reveals intricate stylistic patterns. Moore (2012) states that analyzing lyrics separately from music allows researchers to focus on how lexical choices, lineation, and rhetorical devices function within the text itself.

Taylor Swift

Taylor Swift has emerged as one of the most widely studied contemporary singer-songwriters due to her distinctive lyrical style, emotional depth, and use of literary and



linguistic devices. Her songwriting is often regarded as poetic and narrative-driven, making it a compelling subject for stylistic and discourse analysis. As Gibbs and Beitel (2022) note, Swift's lyrics exhibit a high frequency of metaphorical language that conveys complex emotional experiences, particularly in themes related to love, heartbreak, and identity.

Several scholars have analyzed Swift's lyrics through the lens of narrative theory and figurative language. Heisel (2019) argues that Swift's lyrical persona evolves across albums, reflecting personal growth through storytelling techniques such as first-person narration, character development, and temporal shifts. This narrative quality is evident in albums like *Folklore* and *Evermore*, which move beyond autobiographical content to explore fictionalized storytelling with literary flair.

From a stylistic perspective, Booth and Elkins (2021) highlight Swift's skillful manipulation of rhyme, rhythm, and repetition, which contributes to the lyrical cohesion and emotional resonance of her songs. These features are particularly prominent in tracks like *All Too Well* and *The Archer*, where poetic devices such as anaphora, alliteration, and metaphor intensify the introspective tone of the lyrics.

In the context of popular music studies, Hawkins (2020) emphasizes Swift's ability to balance mainstream appeal with lyrical sophistication, positioning her work as both commercially successful and academically rich. Her lyrics are accessible yet layered, inviting both casual and critical engagement. Coates (2022) further suggests that Swift's lyrical choices have contributed to redefining the boundaries between pop music and poetry, especially through her introspective and emotionally articulate language.

Additionally, Swift's use of intertextuality and symbolism has drawn scholarly attention. According to Vendler (2021), Swift frequently employs motifs such as seasons, colors, and domestic spaces as metaphors for emotional states, creating a consistent thematic landscape across her discography. In sum, Taylor Swift's song lyrics are a significant site of academic inquiry due to their rich use of figurative language, narrative techniques, poetic structure, and emotional expression. Her work exemplifies how contemporary songwriting can serve as a powerful form of literary and linguistic artistry.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study utilized a qualitative descriptive research design by using content analysis to assess metaphorical language in song. Sugiyono (2013) defines qualitative research as examining the conditions of natural objects using research as a key instrument. Data collection was combined with inductive analysis, and resulted emphasize generalization. Following up on the research, the researchers gathered primary data by listening to all of the songs on the album. The goal was to gain general knowledge by identifying the theme, content, and message. After hearing the song and receiving the lyrics, the researchers read more about the song lyrics. The study sought evidence in the form of content, messaging, and figurative language relevant to the themes under consideration. While gathering the data, the researchers used the Spotify platform to obtain song lyrics. Secondary data were carefully selected to enhance and clarify the primary data used in the process analysis.

1. Data Source

The data source of this study revolves around the lyrics within a selection of Taylor Swift's songs, specifically those featured on her album titled "The Tortured Poets Department, namely "Fortnight," "Clara Bow," "I Can Do It with My Broken Heart," and

"The Alchemy." These specific tracks were selected as they represent a diverse range of themes and lyrical styles within the album, providing material for exploring various forms of figurative expression.

2. Research Instruments

The researchers employed observation and transcription as research instruments in this study, as suggested by Auliani, Kismullah, and Burhansyah (2023). Since observation is how the data are collected, it plays a crucial role in the investigation. In this method, the researchers observed the songs using a music player namely Spotify and listen to each song as a whole to find out the lyrics that contain figurative language. After that, transcription is utilized to obtain the song's lyrics (which are then verified via the AZLyrics website).

3. Technique of Analyzing the Data

To analyze the data, the researcher followed certain processes:

1. The researcher listened to the entire album and verified the lyrics for validity. The validity for lyrics is obtained from a website namely AZLyrics.com.
2. Then, the researchers analyzed song lyrics to uncover figurative language patterns using the framework of Kennedy X.J's theory.
3. The researcher entered the data into the tables to find out the distribution of figurative language and to find out the most dominant types among others.
4. Finally, the researchers tried to discover the meanings and ideas within each figurative language.

4. Trustworthiness of the Data

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, inter-rater reliability was applied through collaborative coding and analysis by both authors. In addition, it was conducted to validate the findings and interpretations, thereby enhancing the credibility and dependability of the research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Results

In this section, the researchers discuss the sorts of figurative language employed in selected songs from Taylor Swift's The Tortured Poets Department album that released in 2024 namely, Fortnight, Clara Bow, I Can Do It With A Broken Heart, and The Alchemy. The researchers studied the figurative language proposed by Kennedy X.J. (1979) in song lyrics. According to Kennedy, figurative language is divided into seven types, they are: Metaphor, Simile, Personification, Hyperbole, Allusion, Metonymy, Irony and Symbol. The findings from this investigation are presented in the table 1:

Table 1. Findings

No	Types of Figurative Language	Occurence
1.	Metaphor	6
2.	Simile	7
3	Personification	12
4	Hyperbola	7
5	Allusion	-
6	Metonymy	-
7	Symbols	-
8	Irony	3
	Total	35



Table 1 reveals that the researchers discovered just five types of figurative language in selected song lyrics. This includes metaphor, simile, personification, and hyperbola. The number of metaphor is 6, simile is 7, personification is 14, hyperbola is 7, and irony is 3, for a total the researchers found 35 types of figurative language in the song lyrics.

Table 2. Types of Figurative Language found in the Lyrics “Fortnight” song

No.	Types of Figurative Language	Occurence	Lyrics
1	Metaphor	1	I took the miracle move-on drug, the effects were temporary
2	Hyperbola	2	I was a functioning alcoholic 'til nobody noticed my new aesthetic" All my mornings are Mondays stuck in an endless February"
3	Irony	1	Now you're in my backyard, turned into good neighbours"

Table 3. Types of Figurative Language found in the Lyrics “Clara Bow” song

No.	Types of Figurative Language	Occurence	Lyrics
1	Metaphor	1	"Flesh and blood amongst war machines"
2	Simile	4	"You look like Clara Bow" "You'd be picked like a rose" "You look like Stevie Nicks" "You look like Taylor Swift"
3	Personification	3	"Breath of fresh air through smoke rings" "Promise to be dazzling" "The crown is stained, but you're the real queen" "You're the new god we're worshipping" "Beauty is a beast that roars down on all fours"
4	Hyperbola	2	"The future's bright, dazzling" "I think I might die if it happened" "I think I might die if I made it"

Table 4. Types of Figurative Language found in the Lyrics “I can do it with a broken heart” song

No.	Types of Figurative Language	Occurence	Lyrics
1	Metaphor	2	I'm so depressed, I act like it's my birthday every day" I can show you lies
2	Hyperbola	3	"I can hold my breath, I've been doin' it since he left" "I cry a lot, but I am so productive, it's an art" -
3	Irony	1	"Lights, camera, bitch, smile

Table 5. Types of Figurative Language found in the Lyrics “The Alchemy” song

No	Types of Figurative Language	Occurence	Lyrics
1	Metaphor	2	"The sign on your heart/Said it's still reserved for me"
2	Simile	1	"Who are we to fight the alchemy?" "These chemicals hit me like white wine"
3	Personification	2	"Ditch the clowns, get the crown" "Baby, I'm the one to beat"
4	Irony	2	"He jokes that it's heroin, but this time with an 'E'"

Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4 explain the classification of figurative language used in four songs.

4.1 Metaphor

“I took the miracle move-on drug, the effects were temporary” (verse 2-line 2, Fortnight)
 In this lyric, the singer uses the metaphor *"miracle move-on drug"* to indicate anything that swiftly allows someone to move forward or forget a painful situation. However, the effects are only temporary, similar to those of a medication. The use of this metaphor makes the text more expressive and accurately reflects the scenario than if it is written literally.

“Flesh and blood amongst war machines” (chorus 2, line 6, Clara Bow)

This line has another example of a metaphor. Here, the singer refers "flesh and blood" to human beings, highlighting their sensitivity, emotions, and physicality. By comparing it with "war machines," which represent cold, mechanical, and destructive forces, the metaphor emphasizes humanity's vulnerability versus the brutality of war and violence.

“Honestly, who are we to fight the alchemy?” (chorus2, line 7, The Alchemy)

In this line, the phrase "the alchemy" refers to a tremendous and transformational energy that goes beyond chemistry and physical reactions. By asking "who are we to fight," the singer admits that battling something higher than themselves is useless. The metaphor implies that some relationships or processes are beyond rational understanding and should be accepted or embraced rather than rejected.



4.2 Personification

"Beauty is a beast that roars down on all fours" (bridge-2, Line 1, Clara bow)

In this line, the singer attributes animal-like characteristics (a "beast" that "roars" and moves "down on all fours") to the abstract concept of "beauty". By comparing beauty to a wild, uncontrolled animal, the singer creates a vivid and strong image through personification.

The personification in the lyrics contributes to conveying a sense of beauty as initial, fierce, and uncontrollable, rather than just a passive aesthetic quality. The use of personification increases the expressive capacity and creates a distinct visual metaphor to describe beauty.

"Ditch the clowns, get the crown" (chorus 2, line, 3 The Alchemy)

In this line, the word "clowns" is not employed metaphorically rather, the clowns actually are personified. By ordering to "ditch the clowns," the clowns get human like agency and the power to act or be disposed of. Similarly, the "crown" is personified as an object that may be got or obtained as opposed to simply wearing or owning a crown.

4.3 Hyperbola

"All my mornings are Mondays stuck in an endless February" (verse 2, line 1, Fortnight)

In this context, the singer exaggerates by portraying his mornings as "Mondays stuck in an endless February." This is obviously an overstated remark, because it is not possible for every morning to feel like a Monday trapped in a never-ending February. It's an exaggerated representation designed to express the singer's experience of being imprisoned in a never-ending cycle of gloom and boredom. The singer uses hyperbole in comparing their mornings to a "endless February" to underline how dark, dreary, and never-ending their emotional condition and daily experience has become. It's an overdone metaphor that conveys the singer's sadness and lack of hope. The use of hyperbole in this phrase increases the emotional effect and helps the singer visually convey the depth of their misery and the almost never-ending nature of their troubles. It's an effective use of figurative language to portray a deep sense of melancholy and helplessness.

"but I think I might die if it happened" (pre-chorus 1, line 2, Clara Bow)

This line is definitely a hyperbolic remark, that the singer would die as a direct result of whatever "it" was she become a Clara Bow. It is an exaggerated technique of expressing the singer's seriousness or intensity about the impending issue.

The singer uses hyperbole in "I Might Die" to emphasize how significant, upsetting, or disturbing the imagined tragedy would be for her. It's an exaggerated, dramatic technique to highlight the intensity of her emotional reaction and the apparent gravity of the consequences.

The use of hyperbole in this remark allows the singer to emphasize her feelings and portray the urgency or importance of the issue in a more impactful, unforgettable manner. It expands on a simple literal phrase to provide a more vivid, emotionally charged message.

4.4 Simile

"You look like Clara Bow" (verse: 1, line:2, Clara Bow)

In this line, the singer compares the mentioned person's appearance to Clara Bow. The writer's statement "You look like Clara Bow" suggests a physical connection or similarity between the two. The use of the word "like" distinguishes this as a simile rather than a metaphor, which would allow for a more indirect comparison. Simile enables the singer to create a vivid, evocative contrast in a concise manner. By comparing the individual to the legendary 1920s cinema star Clara Bow, the listener has a strong visual reference point to visualize how the person.

4.5 Irony

"He jokes that it's heroin, but this time with an 'E'" (chorus 1, line 10, The Alchemy)

In this line, the irony comes from the juxtaposition of the word "heroin" with the letter "E".

Heroin is an illegal and extremely addictive narcotic. The sentence implies that the singer is making a joke about using a heroin, but then specifies that it has a "E" after it, suggesting that the singer is referring to the drug ecstasy. This is ironic because, while ecstasy is an illegal recreational drug, it differs significantly from heroin in terms of chemical composition and effects. The combination of these two unique medications, along with the humorous phrase "this time with a 'E'", provides an ironic contrast. The irony is that the singer appears to be mocking or trivializing the use of strong narcotics such as heroin by joking about it. However, the clarification concerning the "E" negates the supposed gravity of the heroin metaphor, adding an ironic edge.

2. Discussion

The results of this study reveal that personification is the most dominant type of figurative language found in the selected songs from Taylor Swift's *The Tortured Poets Department* album. This finding stands in contrast to those of previous studies that also investigated songs from the same album specifically, the *Midnights* album. For instance, the study conducted by Santika and Syafryadin (2023), which analyzed all the songs in *Midnights*, identified metaphor as the most frequently used figurative language. Similarly, Nanda, Khairita, and Revina (2023), who also examined multiple tracks from the *Midnights* album, found that hyperbole was the most prevalent type.

The difference in results can be attributed to the scope and song selection of the current study. While previous studies such as Santika and Syafryadin (2023) analyzed the entire album, this research only focused on a limited selection of four songs—"Fortnight," "Clara Bow," "I Can Do It with a Broken Heart," and "The Alchemy." Because figurative language use can vary greatly across different songs depending on their themes and lyrical content, the choice to analyze only selected songs rather than the full album may have led to different findings regarding the dominant figurative language.

Thus, while previous studies offer a broader, album-wide perspective, the present research provides a more focused and in-depth analysis of specific tracks, uncovering personification as a key linguistic device in these particular songs. This suggests that Taylor Swift may strategically vary her use of figurative language across her compositions, depending on the message and emotional tone she wishes to convey in each song.



CONCLUSION

This study serves as a comprehensive exploration of Taylor Swift's song lyrics through the lens of figurative language analysis. Drawing upon Kennedy X.Jr's theoretical framework (1979) of figurative languages, this study focused on analyzing Taylor Swift songs: "Fortnight," "Clara Bow," "I Can Do It with A Broken Heart," and "The Alchemy". The study identified a total of 35 metaphorical languages dispersed throughout the selected songs. This diverse range of metaphors highlights Taylor Swift's adeptness in employing figurative language to convey nuanced meanings and evoke emotional resonance. The findings suggest that notably, the dominant type of figurative language observed was personification, suggesting Taylor Swift's inclination towards imbuing inanimate objects or abstract concepts with human characteristics to enrich her storytelling. However, the study also notes the absence of certain types of figurative language, such as allusions, symbolism, and metonymy, within her song lyrics. This difference occurs because those literary techniques don't quite align with Taylor Swift's intended message or the way she writes her songs. In essence, this study provides deeper insights into the artistry of Taylor Swift's music, reaffirming her status as a prominent figure in the realm of songwriting. By unravelling the intricacies of figurative language within her lyrics, the study sheds light on the creative processes and narrative techniques employed by Taylor Swift.

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