

A LEXICO-SEMANTIC STUDY OF A SELECTION OF HYMNS

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ABSTRACT

While previous studies on hymns traditionally concentrate on historical authorship, musical composition, or general theological themes, there is a distinct shortage of rigorous linguistic investigations analyzing how specific word choices, archaisms, metaphorical projections, and semantic patterns work together to produce spiritual and emotional effects on listeners. Hence, this study addresses this gap by conducting a detailed lexico-semantic investigation of a selection of hymns. The paper focuses on five key lexico-semantic features: archaic diction, metaphor, personification, repetition, and collocation. Employing Conceptual Metaphor Theory as a theoretical framework, the paper examines how these linguistic elements are utilised to construct spiritual and emotional meaning while reflecting the devotional traditions and theological framework of Christian worship. The analysis reveals that hymn writers strategically employ archaic diction to establish a solemn and elevated sacred register, metaphor to render abstract theological concepts comprehensible through concrete source domains, personification to grant intentional agency to abstract spiritual states, repetition to facilitate mnemonic retention and entrench doctrine into collective memory, and collocations to emphasize genre-specific lexical habits and shared devotional conventions. These linguistic choices allow the texts to appeal to the devotional sentiments of worshippers while articulating profound theological truths within the Christian tradition. The paper concludes that the selected hymns serve as a rich source of linguistic insights into the composition of sacred verse, reflecting the complex interplay between language, religion, poetry, and culture in Christian devotional discourse.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

KEYWORDS: Lexico-Semantic, Study, Selection, Hymns.

INTRODUCTION

Language functions not only as a means of communication but also as a vehicle for worship, doctrinal teaching and emotional expression in religious communities. In Christian practice, hymns occupy a distinctive position as texts that are sung collectively, combining poetic structure, theological content and affective language. Scholars of religious language have shown that hymn texts make systematic use of metaphor, traditional diction and patterned lexis

to present abstract spiritual ideas in concrete, memorable form (Jäkel, 2002; Shaver, 2010).

Within stylistics, lexico-semantic analysis focuses on how word choice and meaning relations contribute to the overall effect of a text (Cruse, 2011; Saeed, 2015). In hymn language in particular, lexical selection is shaped by tradition, doctrine and the need for congregational singability. Older hymnody often preserves archaic English forms (e.g. “Thou”, “Thee”, “hath”) alongside figurative expressions such as “peace like a river” and “streams of mercy”, which have become conventional in Christian English. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue, metaphors in such texts reflect underlying conceptual structures that guide how believers think about God, sin and salvation.

The hymns “Amazing Grace”, “How Great Thou Art”, “Rock of Ages”, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus”, “Just as I Am”, “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing”, “It Is Well with My Soul” and “Blessed Assurance” are widely used in English-speaking congregations and have been noted for their dense figurative language and traditional diction. Their lyrics construct spiritual experience through systematic lexical choices and semantic patterning. A lexico-semantic study of these texts can therefore reveal not only what they state doctrinally, but how meaning is built up through archaic forms, metaphor, personification, repetition and collocation. This paper examines a selection of classic hymns from a lexico-semantic perspective. It focuses on (i) archaic diction, (ii) metaphor, (iii) personification, (iv) repetition, and (v) collocations, and interprets these features with the aid of Conceptual Metaphor Theory as formulated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). The analysis aims to show how the writers of the hymns interrogate how meaning is constructed in this genre: not merely what the hymns express devotionally, but how word choice, collocation, figurative language and semantic patterning work together to produce spiritual and emotional effect.

Statement of the Problem

Scholarly evaluations of hymns traditionally concentrate on historical authorship, musical composition, or general theological themes. Despite their prominence in Christian worship, the internal linguistic and lexico-semantic properties of hymns frequently remain unexamined. There is a distinct shortage of rigorous linguistic investigations analyzing how specific word choices, archaisms, metaphorical projections, and semantic patterns work together to produce spiritual and emotional effects on listeners. This study addresses this gap by conducting a detailed lexico-semantic investigation of selected traditional hymns.

Objectives of the Study

The study intends to:

- i. Identify and examine the archaic lexical items present in the selected hymns;
- ii. Analyze the metaphorical expressions in the texts using Conceptual Metaphor Theory;
- iii. Investigate the deployment of personification and repetition as stylistic and semantic devices; and
- iv. Evaluate how lexical collocations and word choices construct meaning and evoke emotional responses within the hymns.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the field of religious discourse analysis by providing a detailed examination of lexico-semantic features in a selection of classic Christian hymns. The findings offer insight into how language is strategically employed in devotional communication to construct register, render abstract doctrine comprehensible, and reinforce communal memory. This research is valuable for scholars in linguistics, hymnology, and religious studies, as well as for worship leaders, choir directors, and writers of new devotional texts. Additionally, it contributes to the broader understanding of how language functions in sacred song, particularly within the classic English hymn tradition.

Scope and Methodology

This study focuses exclusively on eight widely sung Christian hymns, namely "Amazing Grace", "How Great Thou Art", "Rock of Ages", "What a Friend We Have in Jesus", "Just as I Am", "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing", "It Is Well with My Soul", and "Blessed Assurance", analysing the texts for five specific lexico-semantic features: archaic diction, metaphor, personification, repetition, and collocation. This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive approach to examine these features across the selected hymns. The primary data for the study were obtained from the printed lyrics of the hymns as commonly reproduced in Christian hymnals for congregational use. The steps taken by the researcher in carrying out the research procedure, therefore, are: (1) reading each hymn (2) identifying lexico-semantic features in the hymns (3) presenting and discussing the data in tabular and discursive form.

2. Literature/Theoretical Review

Conceptual Metaphor Theory is adopted as a theoretical framework for this study. This theory was propounded by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in 1980 in their book *Metaphors We Live By*, and later extended by scholars working in cognitive linguistics. The theory emphasises that metaphor is not a peripheral literary ornament but a fundamental structure of human thought, making it particularly relevant for the analysis of religious discourse such as hymns, where abstract theological concepts must be rendered comprehensible to the ordinary worshipper. Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p.3) state that metaphor is "pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action", a claim that underlies the theory's central assertion that the human conceptual system is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) further elaborate on this theory by proposing that a conceptual metaphor consists of three interrelated components, namely the source domain, the target domain, and the mapping between them.

The source domain refers to the concrete, physically grounded area of experience from which the metaphor draws its vocabulary. In the case of the selected hymns, this encompasses domains such as water, journey, burden, and light, all of which are directly accessible through bodily experience. Analysing the source domain can provide insight into how the hymn writers ground abstract theology in familiar embodied experience (Cruse, 2011). The target domain relates to the abstract concept being explained by the metaphor. For the selected hymns, this typically involves theological concepts such as grace, sin, salvation, and divine comfort. Examining the target domain can reveal how lexico-semantic choices structure the worshipper's understanding of doctrine (Saeed, 2015).

The mapping refers to the systematic correspondence established between the source and target domains, such that reasoning appropriate to the source domain is transferred to the target domain. This aspect of the theory can influence the choice of linguistic expression, such

as the use of verbs of flowing for grace or verbs of carrying for sin (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). These three components of Conceptual Metaphor Theory are interrelated and collectively shape the figurative choices made in a text. By studying the selected hymns through this theoretical lens, we can gain a deeper understanding of how the lexico-semantic features, namely archaic diction, metaphor, personification, repetition, and collocation, are influenced by, and contribute to, the construction of spiritual and emotional meaning in the hymn genre, hence its adoption for the study.

3.1 Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussions\

3.1.1 Archaic Diction

Archaic diction refers to the retention of forms that have fallen out of everyday usage but persist within a specialised register, in this case the register of devotional hymnody inherited from Early Modern English biblical translation (Wales, 2014). Table 1 presents selected instances of archaic diction extracted from the eight texts, together with their modern equivalents and textual source.

Table 1: Data Showing Achaic Diction

Hymn Title	Archaic Lexical Item	Modern Equivalent / Meaning	Stylistic and Semantic Function
Amazing Grace	'Twas	It was	Creates poetic rhythm and historical solemnity
Amazing Grace	hath	has	Conveys divine authority and enduring action
How Great Thou Art	Thou / Thee / Thy	You / Your	Establishes direct, reverent address to the divine
Rock of Ages	cleft	split or opened	Evokes physical refuge and shelter from harm
Just as I Am	bidd'st	biddest / command	Expresses divine invitation and sovereign will

The selection of archaic diction in the analysed hymn texts represents a deliberate linguistic strategy designed to separate devotional language from everyday secular speech. As detailed in Table 1, lexical items such as 'Twas, hath, Thou, Thee, Thy, cleft, and bidd'st function as specialised markers of an elevated religious register. From a cognitive linguistic standpoint, these archaic forms participate in conceptual mapping by shifting the believer from mundane temporal spaces into a timeless, sacred domain. When a hymn writer incorporates the second person pronoun Thou instead of the modern you, the linguistic choice establishes an intimate yet strictly hierarchical relationship between the human petitioner and the divine recipient. This lexical choice resists the egalitarian levelling of modern pronouns, preserving a distinct linguistic boundary that denotes absolute holiness and majesty.

Moreover, the presence of older verb inflections such as hath and bidd'st activates deep-seated cultural schemas connected to historical scriptural translations, thereby lending

doctrinal weight and authority to the devotional act. Conceptual Metaphor Theory aids in understanding how language structures invisible spiritual realities; similarly, archaic lexis structures temporal experience by wrapping present worship in the mantle of historical continuity. Singers and readers process these lexical deviations with heightened attention, because the unfamiliar morphology demands a deliberate cognitive adjustment. This slowing of cognitive processing prevents mindless recitation, ensuring that every word carries its full theological weight. Consequently, archaic diction operates not merely as an ornamental relic of past centuries, but as an active semantic engine that generates awe, solemnity, and emotional reverence within the participating congregation. Through these lexical choices, hymn writers successfully construct an alternative linguistic reality where human mortality communes directly with the eternal.

3.1.2 Metaphor

Metaphor constitutes the richest lexico-semantic resource across the eight texts, and Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) offers a systematic means of accounting for it. Rather than treating each figurative expression as an isolated ornament, the theory allows the identification of recurring conceptual mappings between a concrete source domain and an abstract theological target domain. Table 2 presents the principal conceptual metaphors identified across the texts.

Table 2: Data Showing Metaphoric Expressions

Hymn Title	Metaphorical Expression	Source Domain	Target Domain
Amazing Grace	"Was blind, but now I see"	Physical vision / sight	Spiritual awareness / enlightenment
Rock of Ages	"Rock of Ages, cleft for me"	Physical stone / shelter	Divine protection / Christ as saviour
Come, Thou Fount	"Come, Thou Fount of every blessing"	Water spring / fountain	Source of continuous divine grace
It Is Well	"When peace like a river attendeth my way"	Flowing water / river	Abundant, continuous psychological peace
Blessed Assurance	"Heir of salvation, purchase of God"	Legal inheritance / financial purchase	Spiritual redemption / divine ownership

The metaphorical architecture of the sampled hymns, presented in Table 2, reveals that abstract theology is rarely stated outright but is instead assembled through a small set of recurring conceptual mappings. From a cognitive linguistic standpoint, Conceptual Metaphor Theory holds that human beings reason about intangible domains by projecting the structure of a concrete, bodily grounded source domain onto an abstract target domain. When a hymn writer speaks of grace as a fount from which streams of mercy flow, the abstract theological category of grace is not merely illustrated but cognitively structured by the physical schema of a continuously replenishing liquid source, a schema every congregant has internalised long before ever encountering formal doctrine.

A comparable process governs the mapping of sin as a burden, whereby guilt is conceptualised as a physical load pressing upon the body. This mapping is not arbitrary poetic decoration; it exploits an image schema of weight and release that is embedded in ordinary embodied experience, so that the promise of relief from sin is felt, quite literally, as the lifting of a weight rather than merely understood as an abstract doctrinal claim. Elsewhere, the mapping of life as a journey performs analogous cognitive work, converting the believer's entire biography into a navigable path beset by dangers, toils, and snares, while the companion mapping of spiritual conversion as the restoration of sight structures salvation as the sudden recovery of a bodily faculty, one whose loss and return every hearer can imagine viscerally even without personal experience of blindness.

The mapping of suffering as a violent sea draws its unusual force from lived, rather than merely imagined, tragedy, intensifying the experiential grounding that Conceptual Metaphor Theory identifies as the basis of metaphorical comprehension. Elsewhere still, the mapping of salvation as a sheltering rock exploits the schema of an immovable, protective object, converting an abstract soteriological claim into something the body already knows how to seek out instinctively when threatened. Taken together, these conceptual mappings confirm that metaphor in the sampled hymns functions not as ornamental figuration but as the primary cognitive mechanism by which transcendent theology is rendered thinkable, felt, and rehearsed within the believing body.

3.1.3 Personification

Personification, the attribution of human agency to abstract or non-human entities, recurs across the sampled texts and works alongside metaphor to intensify the believer's sense of relationship with abstract theological states. Table 3 presents selected instances.

Table 4: Data Showing Personification

Hymn Title	Personified Expression	Attribution of Human Quality	Semantic and Emotional Effect
Amazing Grace	"'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear"	Grace acting as a teacher	Conveys grace as an active moral guide
Come, Thou Fount	"Bind my wandering heart to Thee"	Heart possessing physical agency to wander	Dramatises human moral frailty and desire
It Is Well	"When sorrows like sea billows roll"	Sorrows moving as aggressive physical waves	Externalises internal grief into tangible threat
Blessed Assurance	"Angels descending, bring from above / Echoes of mercy, whispers of love"	Mercy and love whispering	Creates an intimate, auditory sacred atmosphere

Personification within the sampled hymns, catalogued in Table 3, extends the cognitive work of metaphor by furnishing abstract theological categories with intentional agency, thereby converting doctrine into relationship. When a hymn writer declares that grace taught the heart

to fear and that grace will lead the believer home, grace ceases to function as an inert doctrinal noun and is instead cognitively processed as an animate guide, a linguistic manoeuvre that recruits the same interpretive faculties a listener would deploy to understand the actions of a companion or parent. This personifying strategy is not incidental; it exploits the human tendency to seek agency behind significant events, redirecting that instinct toward an abstract spiritual force rather than a human actor.

A parallel operation occurs where peace is granted the capacity to attend the believer along a way and assurance is entrusted with the power to control the heart, both instances lending volitional capacity to internal states that are, strictly speaking, incapable of independent action. The personification of mercy as a ceaseless flowing stream works in close conjunction with the conceptual metaphor of grace as liquid discussed in section 1.3.2, demonstrating that personification rarely operates as an isolated trope within this corpus but is instead fused with metaphorical structuring to produce a single, reinforced conceptualisation of divine attributes as living, ever-present companions. In cognitive terms, this fusion lowers the psychological distance between the worshipper and the abstract object of faith, since an entity capable of teaching, leading, attending, or controlling is far more readily related to than a static theological proposition, and it is this collapsing of distance that accounts for the enduring emotional potency of the hymns under study.

3.1.4 Repetition

Repetition, whether of a single word, a refrain, or a syntactic structure, is a defining structural feature of the sampled texts and serves both a mnemonic and an emphatic function, an important consideration given that hymns are composed for oral, communal performance (Marini, 2003). Table 4 presents selected instances of repetition.

Table 4: Data Showing the Use of Repetitions

Hymn Title	Repeated Element / Structure	Frequency / Pattern	Stylistic and Rhetorical Function
Amazing Grace	"I come, I come" (Just as I Am) / "grace"	Iteration within stanzas	Emphasises surrender and divine mercy
How Great Thou Art	"How great Thou art, how great Thou art!"	Chorus repetition	Reinforces adoration and emotional climax
What a Friend	"Take it to the Lord in prayer"	Refrain conclusion	Instils a practical directive and comfort
It Is Well	"It is well, it is well with my soul"	Chorus affirmation	Reassures the believer amidst trial
Blessed Assurance	"This is my story, this is my song"	Chorus repetition	Personalises testimony and communal identity

Repetition across the sampled hymns, summarised in Table 4, functions as considerably more than a mnemonic convenience; it constitutes a rehearsal mechanism through which doctrinal content is entrained into the collective memory of a singing congregation. A refrain that closes every verse regardless of the specific spiritual condition confessed in that verse,

whether doubt, blindness, or conflict, converts a sequence of otherwise distinct confessions into a single repeated act of approach, so that the formal structure of the hymn itself performs the very submission its words describe. Each fresh repetition does not merely restate prior content but reactivates it, deepening its cognitive entrenchment with every congregational utterance.

A similar rehearsal function governs an anaphoric refrain that recurs at the close of nearly every stanza until the exhortation is absorbed less as an instruction to be recalled than as a reflex to be enacted. The unusually dense recurrence of a single key term across every verse of one hymn operates as a lexical anchor around which the entire text is organised, so that the term accumulates semantic and emotional weight with each repetition rather than becoming worn or diminished through overuse, a phenomenon inconsistent with ordinary lexical fatigue but characteristic of ritual language. Doubled choruses, in which the central declaration is stated twice within a single chorus, exploit the reduced processing demand of a repeated line to intensify affective conviction precisely at the moment the congregation is least burdened by new information, allowing emotional resonance rather than semantic novelty to dominate the moment of communal utterance. Repetition, therefore, operates in these hymns as an active structuring device that binds doctrine to memory and memory to feeling, rather than as a passive stylistic habit of the genre.

3.1.5 Collocations

Collocation, the tendency of certain words to co-occur habitually within a register, offers evidence that the sampled texts draw upon a shared, genre-specific lexical repertoire rather than combining words freely (Sinclair, 1991). Table 5 presents selected recurrent collocations.

Table 5: Data Showing Collocations

Hymn Title	Lexical Collocation	Word Pairing Relationship	Semantic Effect
Amazing Grace	"dangers, toils, and snares"	Triadic nominal coordination	Summarises earthly trials comprehensively
Rock of Ages	"water and the blood"	Biblical and sacramental pairing	Evokes baptismal and eucharistic cleansing
What a Friend	"sins and griefs"	Moral failure paired with emotional pain	Unites spiritual fault with psychological burden
Come, Thou Fount	"streams of mercy"	Liquid source paired with abstract benevolence	Suggests flowing, inexhaustible grace
Blessed Assurance	"washed in his blood"	Purification paired with sacrificial medium	Connects cleanliness with atonement doctrine

The collocational patterning identified in Table 5 offers evidence that the sampled hymns draw upon a habitual, genre-internal lexical repertoire rather than assembling their vocabulary freely on each occasion of composition. The recurrent pairing of blood with verbs of shedding and washing indicates that this lexical item has become entrenched within a

narrow band of sacrificial and cleansing collocates, such that a congregant encountering blood within this register anticipates, almost reflexively, an accompanying verb of atonement rather than one of ordinary physical description. This entrenchment is evidence of what might be termed a semantic prosody specific to hymnic discourse, whereby a word's habitual company shapes the expectation and interpretation brought to every fresh occurrence of that word.

A recurring exhortation to bring every difficulty to the Lord in prayer has similarly calcified into a semi-fixed collocational unit rather than a phrase freshly assembled from its constituent words on each occasion, functioning cognitively closer to a single retrievable formula than to an open syntactic construction. The adjective precious attaches itself with comparable regularity to sacred nouns such as blood and Saviour, while the noun grace draws a narrow, recurring set of verbs, namely appear, relieve, and teach, rather than combining freely with neutral verbs of production. That these collocational hubs, grace and blood chief among them, recur across texts composed by different authors in different centuries suggests that the patterning documented here belongs to the hymnic register as an inherited linguistic convention, and not merely to the idiosyncratic style of any single hymn writer. Collocation, in this light, functions as the lexical residue of a shared devotional tradition, silently instructing each new hymn writer in which words are permitted to keep company with which others.

4.1 Conclusion

This research has focused on a lexico-semantic study of a selection of eight Christian hymns, examining the linguistic features and figurative devices employed to construct spiritual and emotional meaning. The study utilised Conceptual Metaphor Theory as a theoretical framework, analysing the texts through the lens of source domain, target domain, and mapping to understand how abstract theological concepts are rendered comprehensible within this specific devotional register. The research methodology involved a close reading of each hymn, identifying and categorising instances of archaic diction, metaphor, personification, repetition, and collocation, and tracing every example to its specific textual source.

The findings of this study reveal that the writers of the sampled hymns strategically employed a diverse array of lexico-semantic devices to construct doctrinal meaning and connect with the worshipping congregation. Archaic diction, evident across Text 1, Text 2, Text 3, Text 5, and Text 6, established a register of reverence distinct from ordinary speech. Metaphor, interpreted through Conceptual Metaphor Theory, rendered abstract concepts such as grace, sin, and salvation comprehensible through concrete, embodied source domains across Text 1, Text 2, Text 3, Text 4, Text 6, and Text 7. Personification, evident in Text 1, Text 6, and Text 7, extended this process by granting abstract spiritual states the agency of a companion or guide. Repetition, both lexical and structural, reinforced doctrinal emphasis while easing communal memorisation across Text 1, Text 4, Text 5, Text 7, and Text 8, a function essential to a genre performed orally and collectively. Collocation, finally, revealed that grace and blood function as recurring lexical hubs binding Text 1, Text 4, Text 5, Text 6, Text 7, and Text 8 into a coherent register, regardless of the individual biographical circumstances that produced each hymn.

Overall, the lexico-semantic features of the selected hymns work together to portray each writer as one who combines spiritual conviction with careful linguistic craft, aiming to render transcendent theological experience accessible, memorable, and emotionally resonant for the worshipping community. The study therefore contributes a linguistically grounded account of hymnic meaning-making that complements existing theological and musicological

scholarship, and it suggests that further research might usefully extend this framework to a larger corpus of hymns drawn from a wider range of historical periods and denominational traditions.

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