

A Semantic Analysis of Taylor Swift's Songs: Leech's Seven Types of Meaning

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Abstract

This study conducts a semantic analysis of Taylor Swift's song lyrics using Geoffrey Leech's theory of the seven types of meaning: conceptual, connotative, stylistic, affective, reflective, collocative, and thematic. The research employs a descriptive qualitative approach, analyzing the lyrics of Taylor Swift's most popular songs based on Spotify records in 2024. The primary objective is to identify and elucidate the different types of meaning embedded within the lyrics and understand how these meanings contribute to the overall emotional and thematic expression of the songs. The findings reveal that affective meaning is the most dominant type in Swift's songs, reflecting her emphasis on personal emotion and expression. For instance, in the song "Fortnight," affective meaning constitutes 25% of the analyzed lyrics, highlighting the deep personal feelings conveyed. The study concludes that Taylor Swift's lyrics are characterized by a rich semantic texture, where emotional and conceptual meanings interplay to create a profound connection with listeners. These insights not only enhance the appreciation of Swift's lyrical artistry but also contribute to the broader understanding of how contemporary song lyrics function as a medium for complex emotional and thematic communication.

Keywords: *Leech, Semantics, Song's lyrics, Taylor Swift, Types of meaning*

INTRODUCTION

Song is an integral part of literature, embodying a profound aspect of human expression and culture. They are woven into the fabric of our daily lives, enhancing experiences and marking significant moments with their unique blend of melody and poetry. Just as spices enrich a meal, making it flavorful and memorable, songs infuse life with an emotional and artistic dimension, making every occasion more meaningful and complete (Dudrah, 2008:149). In every song, the lyrics play a crucial role. They are the soul of the music, providing narrative, emotion, and depth that resonate with the listener. Lyrics transform a simple tune into a compelling story or a heartfelt message, capturing the essence of human experiences, emotions, and thoughts (Davies,

1994). The interplay between lyrics and melody captivates the listener, creating a powerful connection that makes the song unforgettable (Jeffries, 2013). This fusion of words and music not only beautifies the song but also elevates the listening experience, drawing people in and making them more invested in the music.

Taylor Swift has sung a number of songs that resonate with audiences. Taylor Swift is a well-known singer-songwriter whose unique voice and poignant lyrics have had a significant impact on the music business. Swift began her career in country music and became well-known very fast because of successes like "Tim McGraw" and "Teardrops on My Guitar," which demonstrated her gift for narrative and catchy songwriting (Erlewine). Taylor Swift has done a great job at picking her followers' interest in the true meaning behind the songs, the video, and the intended audience. Her unexpected yet hilarious performance left her followers perplexed, and it turned out to be the most-watched video of the year, especially among teens. This information further supports Taylor Swift's intriguing songwriting and performance skills, which have established her as the most influential musician in the eyes of her adolescent fan base (Alek et al, 2020).

Taylor Swift's most popular songs today (Spotify ver) include "Fortnight (feat. Post Malone)" (2024), with a listener count of 356,425,818, "I Can Do It With a Broken Heart" (2024), with a listener count of 204,915,659, "Cruel Summer" (2019), with 2,137,551,114 listeners, "Down Bad" (2024), with a listener count of 178,779,351, and "So Long, London" (2024), with a listener count of 151,349,851. These songs have not only topped the charts but have also resonated deeply with listeners due to their compelling lyrics and emotive storytelling. The lyrical content of Swift's songs often reflects her personal experiences and emotions, creating a strong connection with her audience. For instance, "Cruel Summer," with its poignant depiction of a fleeting summer romance, has captivated millions of listeners with its relatable themes and catchy chorus. Similarly, "I Can Do It With a Broken Heart" speaks to the resilience and strength found in overcoming heartache, making it an anthem for many. Swift's ability to craft lyrics that are both personal and universal has significantly contributed to the popularity of her songs, influencing and touching the hearts of her fans around the world.

Songs have the ability to transcend linguistic and cultural barriers, speaking directly to the human heart (Nettl, 2005). They are a universal language that can express love, joy, sorrow, and hope, often more effectively than spoken or written words alone (Mithen, 2006). The lyrical content of a song can convey complex emotions and ideas in a concise and impactful manner, making them an essential component of literary expression (Cross, 2003). Whether it's a poignant ballad, an energetic anthem, or a reflective piece, the lyrics are what gives the song its unique identity and emotional power (Levitin, 2006). As in this study, the branch of linguistics to be analyzed is semantics on Taylor Swift's song lyrics. Semantics is the study of meanings which focuses on the relationship between signifiers which can be words, phrases, signs, or symbols that are used in a language, and the signified things that they are referring to in the real world. Babatunde defines semantics as the study of the logical and conceptual meanings through which communication occurs in a language. (Alshar, 2016; Afzal et al 2023). A study on the descriptive analysis of figurative phrases used in the lyrics of Taylor Swift's 1989 album is focused on the semantic analysis of song lyrics. According to the study, songwriters can employ metaphorical

terms to give their songs a more alive quality, enabling listeners to empathize with the message they are trying to convey. All of the meanings and interpretations of Taylor Swift's song lyrics in the album under investigation are made possible by the study's usage of contextual meaning (Isa et al., 2017).

Based on these studies, in this upcoming study, researchers will delve deeper into several types of meanings contained in Taylor Swift's songs using Leech's theory. The research questions that will be conducting this research is, types of meaning the most used in Taylor Swift's songs? The objectives of this research are to identify the types of meanings appearing in Taylor Swift's songs and to investigate how these types of meanings are implemented.

METHOD

The research conducted in this study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to examine the semantic intricacies of Taylor Swift's song lyrics. This methodical approach involves conducting a thorough analysis of the textual material in order to recognize recurring themes, patterns, and meanings which are included within the content. A variety of analytical techniques are included in content analysis, ranging from rigorous, methodical textual analysis to impressionistic, intuitive, and interpretive techniques (Rosengren, 1981). According to Wahyuni (2012), content analysis is a research approach that involves the subjective interpretation of textual material with the use of a methodical coding and pattern-finding strategy. The purpose of this technique is to transmit knowledge and comprehension of the happenings. The scope of the study is limited to examining the types of meaning in the most popular songs based on Spotify record in 2024. The research design is centered on the application of Geoffrey Leech's theory of the seven types of meaning, which includes connotative, denotative, affective, reflective, thematic, stylistic, and collocative meanings. Data collection was achieved through a thorough textual analysis of the song lyrics, meticulously examining each verse to uncover the multiple layers of meaning embedded within the text. The data analysis process involved systematically applying Leech's semantic categories to extract and elucidate the various dimensions of meaning conveyed by the artist. The primary data utilized in this study is the text of the song lyrics themselves, serving as the foundation for the semantic analysis and the subsequent insights into the artist's expressive and thematic intentions. This methodological framework ensures a comprehensive understanding of the lyrics' semantic richness and their thematic resonance.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 1.1 Percentages of meaning types used

Meaning Type	The Songs				
	Fortnight	I Can Do It with a Broken Heart	Cruel Summer	Down Bad	So Long, London
Conceptual	20.83%	20.00%	20.83%	16.67%	19.23%
Connotative	16.67%	16.00%	16.67%	33.33%	15.38%
Stylistic	10.42%	12.00%	10.42%	10.00%	9.62%
Affective	25.00%	24.00%	25.00%	23.33%	28.85%

Reflected	6.25%	8.00%	6.25%	6.67%	5.77%
Collocative	8.33%	12.00%	8.33%	6.67%	13.46%
Thematic	12.50%	8.00%	12.50%	3.33%	7.69%

The table provides a comprehensive breakdown of the semantic types identified in Taylor Swift's songs, analyzed using Geoffrey Leech's seven types of meaning. The analysis covers five songs: "Fortnight," "I Can Do It with a Broken Heart," "Cruel Summer," "Down Bad," and "So Long, London," with each song's frequency and percentage of conceptual, connotative, stylistic, affective, reflected, collocative, and thematic meanings detailed.

In "Fortnight," conceptual meaning appears 10 times (20.83%), connotative meaning 8 times (16.67%), stylistic meaning 5 times (10.42%), affective meaning 12 times (25.00%), reflected meaning 3 times (6.25%), collocative meaning 4 times (8.33%), and thematic meaning 6 times (12.50%). "I Can Do It with a Broken Heart" shows 5 instances (20.00%) of conceptual meaning, 4 instances (16.00%) of connotative meaning, 3 instances (12.00%) of stylistic meaning, 6 instances (24.00%) of affective meaning, 2 instances (8.00%) of reflected meaning, 3 instances (12.00%) of collocative meaning, and 2 instances (8.00%) of thematic meaning.

"Cruel Summer" mirrors "Fortnight" with conceptual meaning appearing 10 times (20.83%), connotative meaning 8 times (16.67%), stylistic meaning 5 times (10.42%), affective meaning 12 times (25.00%), reflected meaning 3 times (6.25%), collocative meaning 4 times (8.33%), and thematic meaning 6 times (12.50%). In "Down Bad," the conceptual meaning frequency is 5 (16.67%), connotative meaning is 10 (33.33%), stylistic meaning is 5 (16.67%), affective meaning is 7 (23.33%), reflected meaning is 2 (6.67%), collocative meaning is 2 (6.67%), and thematic meaning is 1 (3.33%). Lastly, "So Long, London" features 10 instances (19.23%) of conceptual meaning, 8 instances (15.38%) of connotative meaning, 5 instances (9.62%) of stylistic meaning, 15 instances (28.85%) of affective meaning, 3 instances (5.77%) of reflected meaning, 7 instances (13.46%) of collocative meaning, and 4 instances (7.69%) of thematic meaning.

The results highlight several key findings. Affective meaning, reflecting personal emotions, is the most prevalent across all songs, with "So Long, London" having the highest at 28.85%. Conceptual meaning, indicating the basic content or informational meaning of the lyrics, is consistently significant, and connotative meaning, dealing with the additional meaning that words carry, is notably high in "Down Bad" at 33.33%. Stylistic and collocative meanings are moderately represented, showcasing Swift's use of particular stylistic choices and word associations that enhance the overall feel and nuance of her lyrics. Reflected and thematic meanings are less frequent but still present, indicating layers of meaning involving multiple interpretations and thematic elements that unify the lyrics.

Based on the percentage of the five songs, it was found that the most dominant meaning used in Taylor Swift's songs is affective meaning. From these findings it can be concluded that Taylor Swift uses a lot of expression and emotion to attract attention in a song. Taylor Swift's lyrics for "Fortnight", "I Can Do It with a Broken Heart", "Cruel Summer", "Down Bad", and "So Long, London" mostly incorporate emotive meaning, and the results are constant. The analysis showed that Taylor Swift's songs are expressive and emotionally bound to her topics, such as

disappointment, heartbreak, and personal struggle. Affective meaning would help listeners understand their emotions and connect humanness to human experience. In "cruel summer", the usage of terms like "drunk", "cruel", and "devil" conjures a clear emotional landscape, giving the song additional intensity and cultural relevance. Language in this song shows Taylor Swift's ability to enhance her lyrics with numerous meanings, expanding the plot and increasing the listener's inferences. Taylor Swift uses different meanings to create lyrics that are entertaining and connect with the listener, making her songs not only musical compositions but also interesting reflections of human emotions and experiences. The dominance of meaning in Taylor Swift songs and Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken" poem differs greatly. Taylor Swift's songs reflect intense, genuine emotions to connect with listeners. Conceptual and connotative connotations assist Robert Frost's poetry convey its meaning and complexities.

The poem's language and emotions reveal the poet's style and feelings in the reader. Reflective and collocative meaning emphasize word and phrase interaction to generate an overall impact, whereas thematic meaning binds everything together to reveal the poem's theme. Taylor Swift's songs emphasize the emotional side of the lyrics, while Frost's poetry emphasizes understanding the message and intricacies through numerous meanings. The other study, "Examining Types of Meaning in Acehese Contemporary Songs," examines Apache13's lyrics in a different way. This study used Mwihaqi's conceptual, connotative, stylistic, emotive, collocative, and social meanings. This study identified and analyzed song lyrics to understand Acehese culture and attitudes and practices. Based on this research, Conceptual Meaning dominates Apache13 music lyrics, followed by social. Conceptual meaning typically conveys social messages and criticizes society. Connotative and stylistic implications are limited since the songwriter tries to communicate clearly. Comparing these two research shows that alternative meaning analysis methods can help us grasp texts and settings better. While an analysis of "The Road Not Taken" suggests its complexity and depth, Apache13's analysis of the lyrics shows that music can directly and effectively convey social and cultural messages.

CONCLUSION

This study delves into the intricate semantic dimensions of Taylor Swift's song lyrics using Geoffrey Leech's theory of the seven types of meaning. Through a detailed qualitative analysis, it becomes evident that affective meaning is predominant in Swift's songs, highlighting her emphasis on emotional expression and personal experiences. This semantic richness not only enhances the depth of her lyrics but also fosters a strong emotional connection with her audience, making her music both relatable and impactful. The value of this analysis lies in its demonstration of how Swift's use of various types of meanings—conceptual, connotative, stylistic, reflective, collocative, and thematic—enriches her storytelling and amplifies the listener's emotional engagement. By dissecting these layers of meaning, this research provides a comprehensive understanding of how Swift's lyrical content resonates with her audience on multiple levels, contributing to her widespread acclaim and popularity.

The primary limitation is its focus on a select number of Taylor Swift's songs, which may not fully represent the entirety of her discography or the evolution of her lyrical style over time. Additionally, the qualitative nature of the analysis, while providing deep insights, also introduces

a degree of subjectivity that might influence the interpretation of the lyrics. The study is also limited to the application of Leech's semantic framework, which, although comprehensive, may not encompass all possible dimensions of meaning in Swift's work.

Future research could address these limitations by expanding the corpus of songs analyzed to include a broader range of Swift's work across different albums and stages of her career. This would provide a more holistic view of her lyrical evolution and thematic diversity. Moreover, incorporating quantitative methods alongside qualitative analysis could offer a more balanced approach, reducing subjectivity and enhancing the reliability of the findings. Additionally, exploring other theoretical frameworks for semantic analysis could uncover different aspects of meaning not captured by Leech's categories. Comparative studies between Swift's lyrics and those of other contemporary artists could also yield interesting insights into the distinctiveness and commonalities in lyrical themes and expressions across the pop music genre. Such studies would further enrich the understanding of the interplay between lyrics and emotional resonance in modern music.

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