

A Semantic and Pedagogical Analysis of Counterfactual and Factive Presuppositions in 'If I Were a Boy' by Beyoncé

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Abstract

This study investigates the use of counterfactual and factive presuppositions in the song "If I Were a Boy" by Beyoncé from both semantic and pedagogical perspectives. Presupposition, as a fundamental concept in semantic analysis, plays a crucial role in interpreting implied meaning in language; however, it remains insufficiently emphasized in English language teaching practices. This study therefore aims to identify the types of presuppositions employed in the song and to examine how they are linguistically realized. A qualitative descriptive method was adopted, with data derived from the official song lyrics and analyzed using presupposition theory. The findings reveal that counterfactual presuppositions are the dominant type, accounting for 75% of the total data, and are primarily realized through conditional constructions and modal expressions that signal unreal or hypothetical situations. In contrast, factive presuppositions constitute 25% of the data and are expressed through verbs that presuppose the truth of a proposition. These findings indicate that the interaction between hypothetical and factual elements contributes significantly to the depth of meaning conveyed in the song. From a pedagogical perspective, the study demonstrates that song lyrics can serve as effective instructional materials to enhance students' understanding of implied meaning and to develop their semantic awareness. In conclusion, integrating presupposition analysis into song-based learning can foster student engagement and promote deeper comprehension of implicit meaning in English.

Keywords: *counterfactual presupposition; factive presupposition; semantics; song analysis; english language teaching*

INTRODUCTION

Language does not only convey explicit meaning but also carries implicit assumptions that require interpretation. In semantic studies, one of the key concepts related to implicit meaning is presupposition, which refers to information assumed to be true by the speaker before an utterance is produced. Understanding presupposition is essential for language learners because it helps them interpret meaning beyond what is directly stated. In addition, (Wael et al.

2025) stated lecturers and students who interact and communicate in the classroom need effective communication strategies to ensure the success of the English teaching process. However, in English language teaching, greater emphasis is often placed on grammar and vocabulary, while the ability to interpret implied meaning tends to receive less attention. Among the various types of presupposition, counterfactual and factive presuppositions are particularly significant. Counterfactual presuppositions are associated with unreal or hypothetical situations, often expressed through conditional constructions. In contrast, factive presuppositions arise from the use of verbs that signal the truth of a proposition. As noted by Yule (2020), presupposition plays an important role in linking linguistic forms with underlying meaning. Similarly, Levinson (2021) argues that presupposition contributes to a deeper understanding of how meaning is constructed in communication.

Recent studies have explored presupposition in different forms of authentic texts, including literary works and media discourse. Songs, in particular, have been recognized as valuable linguistic data because they present natural language use in meaningful contexts (Rahmawati, 2022; Sari & Putra, 2023). In addition, the use of songs in language learning has been shown to increase learners' engagement and motivation (Hidayat, 2021). Despite these developments, limited attention has been given to the analysis of counterfactual and factive presuppositions in song lyrics, especially from a pedagogical perspective.

The song "If I Were a Boy" by Beyoncé provides a relevant context for this study, as it contains various conditional expressions that reflect unreal situations, as well as linguistic elements that may trigger factive presuppositions. The lyrics are also accessible and relatable, making them suitable for language learning purposes. Based on these considerations, this study aims to identify counterfactual and factive presuppositions in the song lyrics and analyze how they are linguistically realized. Furthermore, this study seeks to explore the pedagogical implications of using song-based materials to enhance learners' understanding of implied meaning in English.

METHOD

This study applied a qualitative descriptive approach to examine counterfactual and factive presuppositions in the song "If I Were a Boy" by Beyoncé. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study focuses on interpreting meaning embedded in language rather than dealing with numerical data (Creswell, 2021). The main data consisted of the song lyrics, which were taken from the official version available on verified lyric platforms to ensure accuracy. The data collection process was carried out in several stages. First, the lyrics were read repeatedly to gain a clear understanding of the overall context and meaning. After that, specific lines that potentially contain presupposition triggers were identified and marked. Only expressions relevant to counterfactual and factive presuppositions were selected for further analysis.

The analysis was conducted using a semantic framework of presupposition theory as proposed by Yule (2020) and further discussed by Levinson (2021). In the first stage, the selected data were classified based on the type of presupposition. In the second stage, each expression was examined to identify the linguistic forms that signal the presupposition, such as conditional structures or factive verbs. In the next stage, the implied meanings were interpreted by considering the context of the song. Finally, the results of the analysis were connected to their possible application in English language teaching, particularly in helping learners understand implied meaning. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the analysis was conducted systematically and supported by relevant theoretical references. The findings are presented descriptively to provide a clear explanation of how presuppositions are used in the song and how they may contribute to language learning.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The findings of this study are presented based on the classification of presupposition types identified in the song lyrics. The data were systematically analyzed to determine the frequency and distribution of counterfactual and factive presuppositions. The overall distribution of these presupposition types is presented in Table 1. Table 1 shows the frequency and percentage of each type of presupposition found in the data. This quantitative overview provides a clear picture of which type is more dominant before moving to a deeper qualitative analysis of their linguistic realization and meaning in the song.

Table 1. Distribution of Presupposition Types

No	Type of Presupposition	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Counterfactual	9	75%
2.	Factive	3	25%
	Total	12	100%

(Source: Author's analysis of the song lyrics, 2026)

As shown in Table 1, counterfactual presuppositions constitute the majority of the data, accounting for 75% of all identified instances. This dominance suggests that the song is largely constructed around hypothetical and unreal situations, which serve as a framework for expressing personal reflection and evaluation. In contrast, factive presuppositions appear less frequently but function as key elements that ground the message in emotional reality.

Counterfactual Presupposition

Counterfactual presupposition refers to an assumption that is contrary to fact, meaning that the situation described does not hold true in the real world. Linguistically, this type of presupposition is typically realized through conditional constructions, especially those involving “if” clauses and modal verbs such as “would.” These structures allow speakers to construct imagined scenarios in order to evaluate or reinterpret reality. The line “If I were a boy” represents the central counterfactual construction in the song. The use of the subjunctive form “were” instead of “was” signals that the condition is unreal and hypothetical. From a semantic perspective, this expression presupposes that the speaker is not a boy, thereby establishing a contrast between reality and imagination. This contrast becomes the foundation for the subsequent lines, which expand the imagined scenario. For instance, expressions such as “I’d listen to her,” “I would turn off my phone,” and “I would put myself first” are structurally dependent on the initial conditional clause. These utterances describe actions that are projected into the hypothetical situation rather than actual behavior. In this sense, they do not merely describe imagined actions but also implicitly critique real-life behavior. The speaker constructs an alternative version of reality in which certain actions are performed differently, thereby highlighting perceived shortcomings in actual relationships. Moreover, the line “I’d be a better man” introduces an evaluative dimension to the counterfactual framework. It implies a comparison between the imagined self and the implied real counterpart. Semantically, this reflects not only a hypothetical condition but also a judgment about behavior and responsibility. Therefore, counterfactual presupposition in this song functions as a tool for both imagination and evaluation, allowing the speaker to express dissatisfaction, expectation, and emotional reflection simultaneously.

Factive Presupposition

In contrast to counterfactual presupposition, factive presupposition refers to an assumption that is taken to be true. This type is commonly triggered by specific verbs, such as “know,” “realize,” or “regret,” which presuppose the truth of the proposition they introduce. Unlike counterfactual constructions, factive expressions do not create imagined scenarios but instead affirm the reality of certain experiences. An example can be found in the line “I know how it hurts.” The verb “know” serves as a factive trigger, indicating that the speaker has genuinely experienced the emotion being described. This presupposition establishes the truth of the embedded proposition, namely that the feeling of hurt is real. As a result, the statement carries a sense of certainty and emotional authenticity. From a semantic standpoint, factive presuppositions function to anchor the discourse in reality. While counterfactual expressions allow the speaker to explore hypothetical possibilities, factive expressions reinforce the emotional core of the message by presenting certain experiences as undeniable facts. This interplay between imagined and real elements contributes to the depth and complexity of meaning in the song.

Discussion

The findings of this study offer valuable insights for English language teaching, particularly in developing learners' understanding of implied meaning. Counterfactual presuppositions provide a practical context for teaching unreal conditional sentences, as students can directly observe how grammatical structures are used to express hypothetical situations. At the same time, factive presuppositions introduce learners to verbs that encode assumptions of truth, helping them recognize how meaning is constructed beyond explicit statements. In addition, the use of songs as instructional material can enhance student engagement and motivation. Songs present language in a natural and meaningful context, making it easier for learners to connect form and meaning. By analyzing presuppositions in song lyrics, students are encouraged to think critically about language use and develop deeper interpretative skills. Therefore, integrating semantic analysis with song-based learning can support both linguistic competence and critical awareness in language learning.

CONCLUSION

This study has provided a comprehensive analysis of counterfactual and factive presuppositions in the song "If I Were a Boy" by Beyoncé, with a particular focus on their semantic realization and pedagogical significance. The findings indicate that counterfactual presuppositions are the most dominant type, mainly realized through conditional constructions and modal expressions such as "if" and "would," which signal unreal or hypothetical situations. These linguistic forms allow the speaker to construct imagined scenarios that contrast with reality, thereby serving not only as a means of expressing possibility but also as a strategy for evaluating behavior, expressing dissatisfaction, and reflecting on personal experiences. In contrast, factive presuppositions, although less frequent in occurrence, play a crucial role in grounding the discourse in reality. Triggered by verbs that presuppose the truth of a proposition, such as "know," these expressions convey certainty and emotional authenticity. The presence of factive presuppositions ensures that the message of the song is not entirely hypothetical but is anchored in genuine emotional experience. As a result, the interaction between counterfactual and factive presuppositions creates a meaningful balance between imagined conditions and factual reality, contributing to a deeper and more nuanced interpretation of the song.

From a semantic perspective, the study demonstrates that presupposition functions as an essential mechanism for conveying implied meaning. The use of counterfactual forms highlights the gap between reality and expectation, while factive constructions reinforce the truth of emotional experiences. Together, these elements enhance the interpretative richness of the text and show how meaning can be constructed beyond explicit linguistic forms. From a pedagogical perspective, the findings suggest that song lyrics can be effectively utilized as authentic teaching materials in English language classrooms. Counterfactual presuppositions provide a practical context for teaching unreal conditional sentences, enabling students to understand how grammatical structures express hypothetical meaning. Meanwhile, factive presuppositions help learners recognize how certain verbs encode assumptions of truth, thereby improving their ability

to interpret implicit meaning. In addition, the integration of song-based analysis can increase student engagement, as songs offer familiar and meaningful language input that encourages active participation.

In terms of future research, it is recommended that further studies explore a wider range of songs, genres, or discourse types in order to identify additional patterns of presupposition and their communicative functions. Future research may also examine the effectiveness of incorporating presupposition analysis into classroom practice, particularly in relation to students' comprehension, critical thinking, and pragmatic competence. Such investigations would contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of semantics in language learning and teaching.

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