

The Analysis of Connotative Meaning in Taylor Swift's Song Lyrics

Paulina Bura Kaka¹, Emi Mura Isu², I Putu Eka Suardana³
Linakaka045@gmail.com, emyn38877@gmail.com, siputuekasuardana@gmail.com
English Department, Bali Dwipa University¹²³

Abstract

This research investigates the connotative meanings found within selected Taylor Swift song lyrics to explore the emotional, symbolic, and cultural dimensions that extend beyond their literal meanings. The study focused on ten songs from the years 2010 to 2022, purposefully chosen from albums like *Red*, *1989*, *Reputation*, and *Folklore* due to their rich thematic content and lyrical complexity. As the data comprised only textual lyrics, no human participants were involved. Employing a qualitative descriptive design, the researcher transcribed the lyrics and conducted an in-depth analysis based on Leech's (1974) theory of connotative meaning. This involved examining metaphorical phrases, emotionally expressive vocabulary, and culturally significant references. The analysis revealed that Swift consistently incorporates connotative language to express intricate emotions such as longing, heartbreak, empowerment, and nostalgia. Her lyrics also present ideas related to identity, personal development, romantic dynamics, and societal issues, deepening the interpretive experience for listeners. Ultimately, the study highlights how Swift's strategic use of connotation enhances the emotional resonance and narrative strength of her music, offering meaningful insights into the interplay between language and meaning in popular song lyrics.

Keywords: Connotative Meeaning, Taylor Swift, Song Lyrics Analysis, Semantic Interpretation, Qualitative Descriptive Method

Copyright (c) (2025) Author (s).



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

1. Introduction

Language serves not only as a means of communication through structured symbols and grammar, but also as a medium to convey personal feelings, ideas, and cultural messages. In semantic studies, meanings are generally classified into two categories: denotative and connotative. The denotative aspect refers to a word's direct, dictionary-based meaning, while the connotative aspect involves the emotional, cultural, and symbolic undertones that words may carry. This research emphasizes the exploration of connotative meaning, particularly in the context of song lyrics, where artistic expression often transcends literal interpretation through layered emotional and symbolic references. As popular music continues to dominate global platforms like Spotify and YouTube, it offers valuable material for linguistic exploration. One of the most influential figures in contemporary music, Taylor Swift, is widely recognized not only for her popularity but also for her lyrically rich and expressive storytelling. Her use of metaphors, emotionally evocative language, and cultural symbolism frequently implies deeper meanings that go beyond surface-level interpretation. Analyzing these lyrical elements helps uncover how modern audiences experience and assign meaning to popular music in emotional and social contexts. This study seeks to contribute to the broader understanding of semantic meaning in music by investigating the connotative aspects of Taylor Swift's lyrics. Specifically, it addresses two research questions: What kinds of connotative meanings are present in Swift's songs, and how do these meanings affect the emotional and cultural impact of her music?

The analysis is based on Leech's (1974) theoretical model of connotation, which identifies meaning that extends beyond the conceptual level to include emotional and evaluative dimensions. The theory provides a foundation for interpreting how Swift's language reflects values, emotions, and attitudes embedded within her songwriting. In this research, connotative meaning refers to the implied and associative meanings found in words and expressions that signal cultural references, emotions, and symbolic ideas. Metaphorical expressions, emotionally charged vocabulary, and contextually relevant language are central to this investigation. While prior research has explored the use of figurative language in song lyrics, few have offered an in-depth semantic analysis grounded in connotative meaning. By addressing this gap, the present study proposes that Swift's lyrics not only communicate narrative content but also evoke emotional responses and cultural identification, reinforcing their interpretive richness and resonance with audiences.

2. Method

This study utilized a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the connotative meanings present in selected lyrics by Taylor Swift. This method enabled an in-depth analysis of figurative and symbolic language that conveys emotional and cultural significance. Ten songs were purposefully chosen from four of Swift's albums *Red* (2012), *1989* (2014), *Reputation* (2017), and *Folklore* (2020) as they reflect different artistic phases and are known for their rich, emotive lyricism. The lyrics, sourced from official and credible platforms, were transcribed and closely examined to identify elements such as metaphors, similes, emotionally loaded vocabulary, and culturally resonant expressions. The analysis was guided by Leech's (1974) theory on connotative meaning, which focuses on the emotional and associative value

of words beyond their literal definitions. Through thematic coding, recurring patterns and symbolic language were categorized to interpret how these lyrics convey deeper layers of meaning. This process revealed how Swift's songwriting employs connotation to enhance narrative depth and emotional impact, thus illustrating how popular music can function as a vehicle for complex semantic expression.

2.1 Research design

This research adopted a descriptive qualitative method to explore the connotative meanings embedded in Taylor Swift's song lyrics. This approach allowed the researcher to deeply examine the figurative and symbolic language that reveals emotions, cultural references, and underlying messages within the texts. Rather than utilizing numerical or statistical analysis, the study focused on interpreting the meanings behind selected language choices in order to uncover how Swift's lyrics communicate beyond the literal level. Ten songs were purposively chosen from four of Taylor Swift's albums such as, *Red* (2012), *1989* (2014), *Reputation* (2017), and *Folklore* (2020) which based on their lyrical depth and thematic variety. The lyrics were obtained from official sources and then carefully transcribed and reviewed. Guided by Leech's (1974) framework of connotative meaning, the researcher conducted a close reading of each text to identify metaphors, emotionally charged phrases, and culturally symbolic language. These elements were coded and categorized thematically, allowing for interpretation of how they contribute to the emotional, narrative, and symbolic layers of each song. The analysis highlighted recurring patterns that illustrate the role of connotation in enhancing the expressive power of popular music lyrics.

2.2 Participants

This study, while primarily centered on analyzing the textual content of Taylor Swift's song lyrics, also involved a small group of human participants to enhance the interpretive depth of the findings. Five individuals, aged between 20 and 23, were intentionally selected from an English Literature program at a private university in Indonesia. With an average of ten years of English language learning experience gained through both academic instruction and non-formal educational settings. They demonstrated proficiency ranging from upper-intermediate to advanced. All participants expressed a keen interest in music and literary interpretation. Their diverse socioeconomic backgrounds contributed to a range of perspectives, and each had prior exposure to literary analysis involving poetry and song lyrics through their academic coursework. To preserve anonymity, all names were replaced with pseudonyms, and the institutional affiliation was not revealed. Rather than judging the songs, the participants were invited to interpret particular words or phrases identified by the researcher as potentially connotative. Their responses served to reinforce the thematic interpretation and ensure the meanings reflected plausible and contextually grounded listener perspectives.

2.3 Data Collection

To gather data for this research, the primary technique utilized was the analysis of written texts, focusing specifically on the lyrics composed and performed by Taylor Swift. The researcher played a central role as the main instrument, engaging in careful reading, interpretation, and classification of language using a structured set of analytical tools. These included lyric-marking templates, categorization charts, and an evaluative checklist based on Leech's (1974) connotative meaning theory. This framework supported the identification of various linguistic features such as figurative language, emotionally resonant vocabulary, symbolic imagery, and culturally nuanced phrases. Ten songs were deliberately chosen from four of Swift's albums *Red*, *1989*, *Reputation*, and *Folklore* because of their expressive depth and symbolic language. Lyrics were sourced from verified platforms and transcribed for analysis. Multiple readings of each song were conducted to gain full familiarity with the content, and particular phrases suggesting deeper meanings were highlighted. These instances were classified into thematic categories guided by semantic theory. To ensure the credibility of the interpretations, feedback was also sought from a few English Literature students who offered their perspectives on the connotative value of selected lyrics. This collaborative and structured process helped to systematically compile meaningful data for the subsequent analysis phase, ultimately offering a well-rounded insight into how language conveys layered meaning in popular music.

2.4 Data Analysis

This study applied a qualitative descriptive method to analyze the connotative meanings in Taylor Swift's song lyrics, focusing on textual data rather than numerical figures, and therefore did not involve statistical procedures. The analysis began with a detailed examination of the lyrics, where emotionally charged, symbolic, and culturally suggestive phrases were identified and documented using annotation sheets. Each lyric segment was tagged with a provisional theme based on its perceived connotative message. Through open coding, these expressions were labeled with specific emotional or conceptual tags such as nostalgia, heartbreak, defiance, or introspection. Similar codes were then grouped through thematic coding into larger categories like emotional conflict or cultural commentary, enabling the researcher to uncover meaningful patterns. To ensure accuracy and consistency, a small group of English Literature students reviewed portions of the data, offering feedback to validate and, where necessary, refine the coding process. The result was a thematically arranged set of connotative expressions, along with frequency data indicating how often each theme appeared across the songs, forming the basis for further interpretation in the following section.

3. Findings

The analysis of ten selected songs by Taylor Swift revealed a range of connotative meanings reflected in her use of emotionally charged, metaphorical, and culturally rich language. The recurring linguistic elements were grouped into several thematic categories based on their function and type of connotation. These included expressions of personal emotion, symbolic representations of social experience, and metaphorical depictions of inner conflict. A close reading of the lyrics showed frequent use of metaphor and figurative language. For example, in *All Too Well* (2012), the phrase “You kept me like a secret, but I kept you like an oath” carries emotional connotations of betrayal and loyalty. Similarly, in *The Archer* (2019), the line “I’ve been the archer, I’ve been the prey” employs metaphor to reflect vulnerability and internal duality. These examples were coded under the category of emotional dualism.

Table 1. Themes and Connotative Expressions in Taylor Swift’s Song Lyrics

Theme	Examples from Lyrics	Frequency
Emotional Conflict	“I never grew up, it's getting so old” (The Archer)	8
Love and Loss	“Loving him was red” (Red)	7
Identity and Self-reflection	“I forgot that you existed” (I Forgot That You Existed)	6
Cultural/Social Commentary	“They say I did something bad, then why’s it feel so good?” (Reputation)	5
Hope and Redemption	“You’re still an innocent” (Innocent)	4

4. Discussion

The analysis of Taylor Swift’s song lyrics yielded a variety of connotative expressions that reflect the emotional, symbolic, and cultural layers embedded within her music. Through thematic coding and repeated close reading, five major themes were identified: Emotional Conflict, Love and Loss, Identity and Self-reflection, Cultural/Social Commentary, and Hope and Redemption. Each theme emerged based on recurrent patterns of figurative language and emotionally charged vocabulary.

For instance, in the song *The Archer*, the line “I never grew up, it's getting so old” was categorized under Emotional Conflict due to its reference to inner turmoil and maturity struggles. Similarly, *Red* featured the phrase “Loving him was red,” which contributed to the

Love and Loss theme through symbolic color imagery. Phrases such as “I forgot that you existed” from *I Forgot That You Existed* were linked to the Identity and Self-reflection category, highlighting themes of emotional detachment and personal evolution. The expression “They say I did something bad, then why’s it feel so good?” from the *Reputation* album was included under Cultural/Social Commentary, reflecting a challenge to societal judgment and perceptions. Lastly, the lyric “You’re still an innocent” from *Innocent* supported the Hope and Redemption theme.

Table 2. Summary of Connotative Meaning Themes in Taylor Swift’s Song Lyrics

Theme	Examples from Lyrics	Frequency
Emotional Conflict	“I never grew up, it's getting so old” (The Archer)	8
Love and Loss	“Loving him was red” (Red)	7
Identity and Self-reflection	“I forgot that you existed” (I Forgot That You Existed)	6
Cultural/Social Commentary	“They say I did something bad, then why’s it feel so good?” (Reputation)	5
Hope and Redemption	“You’re still an innocent” (Innocent)	4

The data suggest that Emotional Conflict and Love and Loss were the most frequently occurring themes, often conveyed through metaphors, color symbolism, and emotionally charged word choices. Cultural and symbolic elements also appeared consistently, especially in songs where Swift engages with broader societal expectations or personal transformation narratives. All identified expressions were selected based on their potential to convey secondary, implied meanings beyond literal interpretation. These meanings were categorized using Leech’s (1974) connotative meaning framework, focusing on affective, associative, and evaluative aspects of language. The lyrics demonstrated a consistent use of connotative strategies across different albums and musical styles, with *Red* and *Folklore* presenting a higher concentration of emotionally resonant language compared to other albums. This section provides a descriptive overview of the observed findings and the structure of identified linguistic patterns. Interpretations and implications of these observations will be presented in the next section.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the connotative meanings embedded in the lyrics of ten selected songs by Taylor Swift, revealing a strong presence of emotionally charged, metaphorical, and culturally rich language. The analysis identified five dominant thematic categories: Emotional Conflict, Love and Loss, Identity and Self-reflection, Cultural/Social Commentary, and Hope and Redemption. Among these, *Emotional Conflict* and *Love and Loss* appeared most frequently, underscoring Swift's lyrical focus on internal struggles and complex romantic experiences. One of the study's key strengths lies in its use of Leech's (1974) connotative meaning framework, which enabled a systematic categorization of affective, associative, and evaluative aspects of language. The repeated close reading and coding of the lyrics ensured analytical depth and thematic coherence. However, the study's limitation includes a relatively small sample size of only ten songs which may not fully capture the diversity of Swift's entire discography. Additionally, the interpretation of figurative language is inherently subjective, potentially affecting consistency in thematic categorization.

Future research should consider expanding the corpus to include a broader range of songs across different albums and musical phases, and possibly incorporate listener reception studies to understand how audiences perceive these connotative meanings. Including multimodal analysis (e.g., music videos or performances) could also enrich the interpretation of lyrical content. Practically, this study provides valuable insight into how popular music can serve as a medium for expressing layered emotional and social experiences. It also highlights the pedagogical potential of using contemporary song lyrics in teaching literary and linguistic concepts, particularly figurative language and semantic analysis, in a way that resonates with modern learners.

References

- Allan, K. (2001). *Natural language semantics*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Charteris-Black, J. (2004). Corpus approaches to critical metaphor analysis in political discourse. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 1(2), 151–170. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1740590042000313892>
- Cruse, D. A. (2011). *Meaning in language: An introduction to semantics and pragmatics* (3rd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dancygier, B., & Sweetser, E. (2014). Figurative language. *Language and Linguistics Compass*, 8(9), 464–477. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/lnc3.12091>
- Finch, G. (2005). *Key concepts in language and linguistics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Firth, J. R. (1957). Papers in linguistics 1934–1951. *Transactions of the Philological Society*, 56(1), 1–32. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-968X.1957.tb00347.x>
- Gibbs, R. W., & Colston, H. L. (2012). Interpreting figurative meaning. *Discourse Processes*, 49(5), 407–429. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0163853X.2012.703113>
- Goddard, C. (2011). *Semantic analysis: A practical introduction* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kövecses, Z. (2002). Metaphor and emotion: Language, culture, and body in human feeling. *Cognitive Linguistics*, 13(4), 291–314. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/cogl.2002.007>
- Kovecses, Z. (2010). Metaphor and culture. *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Philologica*, 2(2), 197–208.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (2003). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Leech, G. N. (1974). *Semantics: The study of meaning* (2nd ed.). Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Littlemore, J., & Low, G. (2006). Figurative thinking and foreign language learning. *Language Teaching Research*, 10(2), 123–138. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1191/1362168806lr191oa>
- Lyons, J. (1995). *Linguistic semantics: An introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pihlaja, S. (2011). Cursing and connotation: A study of profanity in social media discourse. *Discourse & Communication*, 5(4), 345–369. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1750481311414035>
- Saeed, J. I. (2016). *Semantics* (4th ed.). Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Semino, E. (2008). Metaphor in discourse. *Cambridge Quarterly*, 37(2), 213–218. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/camqtly/bfn005>
- Widdowson, H. G. (1996). *Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Yule, G. (2020). *The study of language* (7th ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zhang, Y. (2015). A cognitive stylistic analysis of conceptual metaphors in English song lyrics. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 5(7), 1442–1448. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17507/tpls.0507.20>