

Inflectional and Derivational Affixation in “While My Guitar Gently Weeps” by The Beatles: A Morphological Study

Nur Mohammad Maulana Ibrahim¹, I Made Juliarta²
English Language Department Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Bali Dwipa University
Email: maulana1.ibrahim7@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines inflectional and derivational affixation in the lyrics of “While My Guitar Gently Weeps” by The Beatles from a morphological perspective. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, the song lyrics were analyzed by identifying and classifying words that undergo affixation based on established morphological theory. The findings reveal that inflectional affixes occur more frequently than derivational affixes, indicating that the lyrics rely primarily on grammatical variation rather than lexical expansion. Inflectional suffixes such as -s, -ed, and -ing are used to express grammatical features without changing word class, while derivational affixes such as -ly and un- contribute to lexical and functional changes. The analysis also shows that the suffix -ing can function both inflectionally and derivationally, depending on its syntactic context. Overall, the study demonstrates that song lyrics can serve as a meaningful source of data for morphological analysis and highlights the importance of contextual interpretation in distinguishing between inflectional and derivational affixation.

Keywords: morphology, affixation, inflectional affixes, derivational affixes, song lyrics

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I. Introduction

Morphology is a branch of linguistics concerned with the internal structure of words and the processes by which words are formed (Katamba, 1993). One of the central topics in morphological studies is affixation, a process in which bound morphemes are attached to a base or root to modify its grammatical function or lexical meaning. In English, affixation plays a crucial role in shaping word forms, particularly through inflectional affixes, which express grammatical information such as tense or number, and derivational affixes, which create new words or alter word classes (Bauer, 1983). Understanding these processes is essential for analyzing how meaning and grammatical relationships are constructed within texts.

Previous linguistic studies have shown that song lyrics can serve as a valuable source of linguistic data, as they reflect authentic language use while maintaining relatively simple and repetitive structures (Plag, 2003). Numerous studies have explored morphological processes, including inflectional and derivational morphemes, in various song lyrics to examine patterns of word formation and grammatical usage. However, many of these studies focus on different musical works or examine morphology in a broader sense without a clear distinction between inflectional and derivational affixation. As a result, there remains room for more focused analyses that apply established morphological theory to specific song lyrics in a systematic way.

This study focuses on the lyrics of “While My Guitar Gently Weeps” by The Beatles. The song was selected because its lyrics contain a variety of affixed word forms that allow for a clear examination of morphological processes, particularly affixation. Rather than interpreting the song from a literary or emotional perspective, this research treats the lyrics as a linguistic text and examines how words are morphologically constructed. The analysis is limited to words that undergo affixation, ensuring that the discussion remains within the scope of morphological study.

Accordingly, this study aims to identify, classify, and explain the functions of inflectional and derivational affixes found in the lyrics of “While My Guitar Gently Weeps” by The Beatles for academic purposes. By applying morphological theory to the selected data, this research seeks to contribute to a clearer understanding of how affixation operates within song lyrics as a form of written language.

II. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Morphology

Morphology is a branch of linguistics that deals with the internal structure of words and the processes involved in word formation. It examines how words are constructed from smaller meaningful units called morphemes. According to Katamba (1993), morphology focuses on the relationship between word forms and their meanings, as well as the grammatical functions they express. Morphological analysis is essential for understanding how language encodes meaning and grammatical information through word structure.

2.2. Affixation

Affixation is one of the most common word-formation processes in English morphology. It involves the attachment of bound morphemes, known as affixes, to a base or root. Bauer (1983) explains that affixes cannot stand alone and must be attached to other morphemes to form complete words. In English, affixes are typically classified into prefixes, which are attached to the beginning of a word, and suffixes, which are attached to the end of a word. Affixation plays a crucial role in both grammatical marking and lexical development.

2.3. Inflectional and Derivational Affixes

Affixes in English are generally divided into inflectional and derivational categories based on their functions. Inflectional affixes serve grammatical purposes, such as indicating tense, number, or aspect, without changing the word class or core meaning of the base word (Katamba, 1993). Examples of inflectional affixes in English include -s, -ed, and -ing.

In contrast, derivational affixes are used to form new words or to change the grammatical category or meaning of a base word. According to Bauer (1983), derivational affixes may alter the lexical meaning of a word or shift it from one word class to another, such as from adjective to adverb through the suffix -ly. Plag (2003) further emphasizes that the distinction between inflectional and derivational affixes depends not only on form but also on function and syntactic context, as certain affixes may perform different roles in different environments.

III. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method. The analysis is based on morphological criteria proposed by Bauer (1983) and Katamba (1993). This approach is considered appropriate because the research focuses on describing and analyzing linguistic phenomena rather than measuring numerical data or testing hypotheses. Specifically, the study aims to examine morphological processes, particularly inflectional and derivational affixation, as they occur in song lyrics.

3.2. Source of Data

The data consist of affixed words found in the lyrics of the song “While My Guitar Gently Weeps” by The Beatles. The lyrics were obtained from a publicly accessible and reliable online source to ensure data accuracy.

Data were collected through documentation, by carefully reading the lyrics and identifying words that contain affixes. The identified data were then analyzed by determining the base forms, classifying the affixes into inflectional or derivational categories, and explaining their morphological functions based on established criteria (Bauer, 1983; Katamba, 1993). The results of the analysis are presented in the form of tables and descriptive explanations.

IV. Findings

This study identified a total of twenty words in the lyrics of “While My Guitar Gently Weeps” by The Beatles that undergo morphological affixation. The identified affixes were classified into inflectional and derivational categories based on their morphological functions. The identified data are presented in Table 1 below.

Table.1 Inflectional and Derivational Affixes in the Lyrics

NO	Lyric	Word	Affix	Base Word	Morphological Process	Function
1	See the love there that's sleeping	Sleeping	-ing	Sleep	Inflectional	Present participle (shows ongoing action)

2	While my guitar gently weeps	Gently	-ly	Gentle	Derivational	Changes adjective into adverb (modifies the verb “weeps”)
3	While my guitar gently weeps	Weeps	-s	Weep	Inflectional	3rd person singular present tense
4	And I see it needs sweeping	Needs	-s	Need	Inflectional	3rd person singular present tense
5	And I see it needs sweeping	Sweeping	-ing	Sweep	Inflectional	Gerund (verb used as a noun; object of “needs”)
6	How to unfold your love	Unfold	un-	Fold	Derivational	Adds negative meaning to the verb “fold”
7	...how someone controlled you	Controlled	-ed	Control	Inflectional	Past tense verb
8	And I notice, it's turning	Turning	-ing	Turn	Inflectional	Present participle (ongoing action)
9	We must surely be learning	Surely	-ly	Sure	Derivational	Changes adjective into adverb (modifies “be learning”)
10	We must surely be learning	Learning	-ing	Learn	Inflectional	Present participle/progressive aspect
11	...how you were diverted	Diverted	-ed	Divert	Inflectional	Past tense/past participle
12	You were perverted too	Perverted	-ed	Pervert	Inflectional	Past tense/past participle

13	...how you were inverted	Inverted	-ed	Invert	Inflectional	Past tense/past participle
14	No one alerted you	Alerted	-ed	Alert	Inflectional	Past tense/past participle
15	I look from the wings	Wings	-s	Wing	Inflectional	Plural form of noun
16	At the play you are staging	Staging	-ing	Stage	Inflectional	Present participle (modifies “the play”)
17	'Cause I'm sitting here	Sitting	-ing	Sit	Inflectional	Present participle/progressive aspect
18	Doing nothing but aging	Doing	-ing	Do	Inflectional	Present participle (part of “I’m doing”)
19	Doing nothing but aging	Aging	-ing	Age	Derivational	Noun (converted from verb; process of getting older)
20	You know, those old pianos	Pianos	-s	Piano	Inflectional	Plural form of noun

Source: <https://genius.com/The-beatles-while-my-guitar-gently-weeps-lyrics>

The findings show that inflectional affixation occurs more frequently than derivational affixation in the song lyrics. Inflectional affixes found in the data include the suffixes -s, -ed, and -ing. These affixes function primarily to indicate grammatical information such as tense, number, and aspect, without changing the lexical category of the base words. Examples include weeps, needs, controlled, turning, and sitting.

In contrast, derivational affixation appears less frequently. The derivational affixes identified in the lyrics include the suffix -ly, the prefix un-, and the suffix -ing when it

functions to form a noun. These affixes contribute to changes in word class or lexical meaning, as seen in words such as gently, surely, unfold, and aging.

V. Discussion

The dominance of inflectional affixation in the lyrics indicates that the song relies heavily on grammatical variation rather than lexical expansion. The frequent use of inflectional suffixes, particularly -ing and -ed, reflects the song's emphasis on ongoing actions, states, and past experiences. This finding aligns with morphological theory, which states that inflectional affixes serve to express grammatical relationships while maintaining the core meaning and word class of the base form (Bauer, 1983; Katamba, 1993).

Derivational affixation, although less frequent, plays an important role in shaping meaning and syntactic function within the lyrics. The suffix -ly in words such as gently and surely changes adjectives into adverbs, enabling them to modify verbs and clauses. This demonstrates how derivational affixes expand the functional range of words within sentences. Similarly, the prefix un- in unfold creates a new lexical meaning by reversing or altering the sense of the base word (Plag, 2003), which is a key characteristic of derivational morphology.

An important finding of this study is the dual function of the suffix -ing. In most cases, -ing functions as an inflectional suffix forming present participles, as seen in sleeping, learning, and doing. However, in the word aging, the suffix -ing functions derivationally by forming a noun that denotes a process rather than marking a grammatical tense. This distinction highlights the importance of considering syntactic context and function when classifying affixes, as the same morphological form may serve different roles depending on its usage (Bauer, 1983; Plag, 2003).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that morphological analysis of song lyrics requires careful attention to both form and function. The results support established morphological theories that emphasize the functional distinction between inflectional and derivational affixation and show that song lyrics can provide clear and meaningful data for linguistic analysis.

VI. Conclusion

This study has examined the use of inflectional and derivational affixation in the lyrics of “While My Guitar Gently Weeps” by The Beatles through a morphological perspective. The findings reveal that inflectional affixes are more frequently used than derivational affixes in the song lyrics. Inflectional forms such as -s, -ed, and -ing primarily function to express grammatical information related to tense, number, and aspect, without altering the lexical identity or word class of the base forms.

In contrast, derivational affixation appears less frequently but plays an important role in shaping lexical meaning and syntactic function. Affixes such as -ly and un- contribute to the formation of new word classes or meanings, while the suffix -ing demonstrates a dual function when used to form event nouns, as seen in the word aging. This distinction highlights the importance of contextual and functional analysis in determining whether an affix operates inflectionally or derivationally.

Overall, the results indicate that the lyrics of the song rely more on grammatical variation than on lexical expansion, reflecting a linguistic style that emphasizes ongoing actions and states rather than the creation of new vocabulary. This study demonstrates that morphological analysis, particularly of affixation, can provide valuable insights into the structure of language in song lyrics and can serve as a useful reference for further linguistic research on similar texts.

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