

## An Analysis of Meaning in Taylor Swift's *All Too Well* Based on Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics Theory and Its Implementation in Daily Life

Azmi Nabilah \*<sup>1</sup>  
Nurus Tsaniatussalamah <sup>2</sup>  
Nisrina Yumna Azida <sup>3</sup>  
Adisty Naila Izzati <sup>4</sup>  
Muhammad Alvin Ramadhani <sup>5</sup>

<sup>1,2,3,4,5</sup> UIN K.H Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan

\*e-mail : [azmi.nabilah@mhs.uingusdur.ac.id](mailto:azmi.nabilah@mhs.uingusdur.ac.id)

### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to analyze the meaning in Taylor Swift's song "*All Too Well*" using Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) theory, focusing on the three metafunctions namely ideational, interpersonal, and textual to reveal how language expresses emotions, experiences, and relationships within the song and in everyday communication. This study used a qualitative content analysis approach. The song lyrics were taken from Taylor Swift's official website and analyzed using Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics framework (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Data were coded into ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions to identify how linguistic elements create meaning. The findings show that the ideational metafunction represents real experiences of love and loss, the interpersonal metafunction builds emotional connections between the singer and listeners, and the textual metafunction organizes the lyrics cohesively through repetition and narrative flow. Together, they create a unified message of emotional memory and human connection. This study can be applied in the fields of linguistics, literature, education, and media studies. It helps readers understand how language functions in music, social communication, and teaching contexts, particularly in analyzing emotional expressions, narrative construction, and meaning-making in both songs and daily discourse. This study uniquely connects Halliday's SFL theory with real-life communication by demonstrating how linguistic metafunctions used in song lyrics reflect how people express emotions and identity in everyday life, including digital communication. It contributes to expanding the application of SFL beyond academic contexts into modern social interaction.

**Keywords:** Systemic Functional Linguistics, metafunction, Taylor Swift, *All Too Well*, language meaning, daily communication

### INTRODUCTION

Language is the primary tool humans use to communicate and construct meaning in social life. Through language, individuals not only convey messages, but also express emotions and experiences, and shape social identities. As Halliday (1978) argues, language is a social semiotic system whose meaning is shaped by the context in which it is used.

According to Banks (2024), the linguistic theory developed by Halliday rejects the structural view that focuses only on the form of language, but rather sees language as a means of building social relations and human reality. In addition, Martin (2014) asserts that language in the view of SFL (Systemic Functional Linguistics) has developed into a model capable of explaining the relationship between text and social context in various areas of communication. The theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) emphasizes that every form of language has a specific function determined by the context in which it is used. Halliday divides language into three main metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. These three are interrelated in forming a complete meaning.

Halliday & Matthiessen (2014) explain that the ideational function represents human experiences and reality, the interpersonal function shows social relationships and the speaker's

attitude towards the interlocutor, while the textual function regulates the message to make it cohesive and coherent. Almurashi (2016) adds that SFL theory focuses on the relationship between language and the social situations in which language is used, while Banks (2024) emphasizes that the strength of this theory lies in its ability to explain the meaning of language in the real context of human life. Taylor Swift's song "All Too Well" is a work rich in emotional and narrative meaning, making it a relevant object for analysis using the SFL approach. Through her lyrics, Swift describes experiences of love and loss filled with deep memories.

Analysis based on Halliday's three metafunctions can reveal how personal experiences (ideational), emotions and social relations (interpersonal), and narrative structures (textual) work together to form a touching message. As stated by Martin (2014), the functional approach allows researchers to understand how language creates emotions and identities through conscious semantic and grammatical choices.

This research is expected to contribute to applied linguistics studies and the appreciation of popular music. The SFL approach provides insight into how language in songs can be used to build shared emotional experiences between singers and listeners. In line with the views of Halliday (2008) and Banks (2024), functional linguistics is not only theoretical but also applicable, that is, it can be applied to understand social, cultural, and emotional realities through in-depth language analysis. Therefore, this study seeks to uncover the meaning behind the linguistic structure of the song "All Too Well" as a representation of human experiences of love, loss, and memory.

### Literature Review

The Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) theory by M.A.K. Halliday claims that language is not only for communication. It is also a system that shows social meaning. This theory explains that every form of language has a special function, and the function depends on the social situation where people use it (Halliday, 1985; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Halliday distinguished three main metafunctions of language: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The ideational function explains human experience and the world around us, the textual function regulates the structure of messages to ensure coherence and readability, and the interpersonal function shows social relationships and the speaker's attitude toward the listener (Van, 2021).

Almurashi (2016) explains that one good thing about SFL theory is that it focuses on the relation between language and social situation. He clarifies that people use different words and grammar depending on the situation when they talk or write. They do this to reach their goal. SFL helps students and teachers understand how people make meaning in texts, including songs. It has three parts: field (what the text is about), tenor (who is talking and who is listening), and mode (how the message is shared). When we look at the song "All Too Well," we can see how Taylor Swift uses her words to show her feelings and her story to the listeners.

Van (2021) also states that Halliday's three metafunctions are not just about how people use language, but they are the main parts that make language what it is. In the paper, he demonstrates how metafunctional analysis can help us grasp the meaning of texts in social contexts because all language forms are employed to narrate experiences, develop social ties, and logically order messages. This theory is useful for studying the song "All Too Well" because the song has an interesting story, emotional feelings, and relationships between people. All of these can be explained by the three metafunctions of Halliday's theory.

Dorri (2020) also studies the textual metafunction, which is about how the theme (the main idea) and rheme (the extra information) make the flow of meaning in a text clear and connected. Each clause, he explains, has a theme (the first part that acts as the primary focus of the message) and rhyme (additional or explanatory information). In songs, this arrangement of themes is crucial because it influences how listeners perceive the emotions and messages of the lyrics. For example, in her song, Taylor Swift says the line "I remember it all too well" many times.

This repetition becomes the main theme that shows her strong memories and deep feelings. It also helps make the song's meaning clear and connected from the beginning to the end.

In addition, Sulistyawati et al. (2022) used Halliday's theory to study the language processes in BTS's song "ON." They found that most of the sentences show power and hard work. These are called material processes, which mean actions that really happen. In the same way, a study about "All Too Well" can focus more on mental processes, because the song talks about strong feelings and memories from the past. This shows that the SFL theory can be used for many kinds of songs and cultures.

Past studies show that the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) theory is a strong way to study the meaning of songs and other texts. By using the three metafunctions of language, researchers can see how Taylor Swift shows her experiences (ideational), expresses her feelings and relationships (interpersonal), and tells her story in a clear and touching way (textual). So, using Halliday's theory to study the song "All Too Well" can help to find not only the language structure but also the emotional and social meaning inside the song.

## METHOD

This study uses qualitative content analysis to explore the meaning behind Taylor Swift's song "All Too Well." Rather than focusing on numbers or statistics, this study carefully examines the language in the song's lyrics and how that language creates meaning. The song lyrics were taken from Taylor Swift's official website to ensure accuracy and authenticity. The main tool for analysis was the song text itself, which was analyzed using Halliday's Systematic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research focuses on understanding people's experiences and the meaning they give to those experiences through language. This approach is in line with the method used here, which focuses on interpreting linguistic features rather than measuring data. Halliday (1994), the founder of SFL, emphasizes that language is a source for creating meaning in a social context. His theory divides language into three metafunctions: ideational (representing experience), interpersonal (establishing social relationships), and textual (organizing information).

To collect data, the researcher first obtained the official lyrics and listened to the song repeatedly while following the text to understand the emotional tone and use of language. The lyrics were then divided into clauses, allowing for detailed analysis based on the three metafunctions: looking at how actions and participants create ideas (ideational), how mood and modality express attitudes and interactions (interpersonal), and how themes and rhemes organize the message (textual). The analysis involved identifying key linguistic features, coding them according to metafunction, and examining how these features work together to convey the emotional depth and narrative of the song. Halliday's framework was used as a guide to ensure consistent and reliable interpretation. To strengthen the validity of the study, the researcher refers to existing literature on qualitative research methods and Systematic Functional Linguistics, particularly works that discuss meaning in song lyrics. These interpretations are matched with the linguistic structure of the text, a process known as triangulation, which helps to increase the reliability of the findings. Finally, the research results are presented descriptively, showing how Taylor Swift's language choices in "All Too Well" construct layers of meaning related to memory, loss, and emotional reflection.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### A. Analysis metafunction of the lyrics of the song "All Too Well" by Taylor Swift

The following are the results of a metafunction analysis of the lyrics of the song "All Too Well" by Taylor Swift:

#### 1. Ideational Metafunction

*"I walked through the door with you, the air was cold"*

The meaning describes a concrete experience the initial moment of togetherness in the cold air that feels like “home.” This reflects a real event (material process) between ‘I’ and “you.” Taylor Swift builds a warm atmosphere at the beginning of the relationship despite the cold physical conditions showing a representation of a nostalgic past experience.

*“Autumn leaves falling down like pieces into place”*

The meaning describes seasonal changes that parallel changes in the relationship. Falling leaves symbolize the passage of time and a relationship that is beginning to change. The use of the visual image of “autumn leaves” shows a natural experience that reflects human emotions, namely change and loss.

*“Photo album on the counter, your cheeks were turning red”*

The meaning shows a simple but intimate domestic scene. There are physical descriptions (“photo album,” “cheeks turning red”) that bring back real memories. This displays an ideational function because it describes events that can be “seen” and “felt,” not just emotions, but real experiences from the past.

## 2. Interpersonal Metafunction

*“And you call me up again just to break me like a promise”*

The meaning shows feelings of disappointment and betrayal in a relationship. The phrase “break me like a promise” is an emotional metaphor for the pain of a broken promise. The interpersonal function is seen in how the singer expresses her sadness and disappointment towards someone directly and personally.

*“So casually cruel in the name of being honest”*

The meaning describes honesty that is conveyed in a hurtful way. The singer highlights the emotionally insensitive attitude of others. Here, the mood and tone of the lyrics reveal a strong attitude and emotion indicating a deeply wounded interpersonal relationship.

*“Maybe we got lost in translation, maybe I asked for too much”*

The meaning shows doubt and self-reflection in the relationship. The singer wonders whether misunderstanding or overly high expectations destroyed their love. These lyrics are interpersonal because they involve an emotional inner dialogue between “I” and “you,” and show vulnerability and introspection.

## 3. Textual Metafunction

*“Cause there we are again on that little town street”*

The meaning connects the present story with past memories through the conjunction “Cause.” This marks a narrative transition in the song. The textual function is evident in the use of conjunctions that make the text flow logically between parts of the story.

*“Wind in my hair, I was there, I remember it all too well”*

The meaning affirms that the singer truly experienced and still remembers all the details of the relationship. The repetition of the phrases “I was there” and “I remember it all too well” creates cohesion and a recurring central theme.

*“Down the stairs, I was there, I remember it all too well”*

The meaning reinforces the memory through the same repetition in a different context. This is an example of strategic repetition to build a cohesive and emotional narrative structure, helping listeners understand the song's main message.

The ideational function in Taylor Swift's song "All Too Well" illustrates how language is used to shape and depict human experiences. In this song, Taylor Swift describes a past story through small details that can create a strong emotional atmosphere in the listener's mind. Each description, such as the weather, place, and changing seasons, becomes a symbol of a real life experience. This is in line with Halliday's view that the ideational function is the way language reflects human experience and the surrounding world through

interconnected processes, participants, and circumstances (Almurashi, 2016). Taylor Swift uses vivid descriptions to convey feelings of nostalgia, loss, and past love, so that the listener not only understands the story but also feels the atmosphere. Zhou (2024) adds that the ideational function also includes conveying deeply meaningful and emotionally connected through metaphors that describe life experiences. In this way, Taylor Swift not only recounts memories but also reconstructs the emotional reality she once experienced, making this song a meaningful representation of human experience.

The interpersonal function in this song is very visible through the way Taylor Swift expresses feelings and builds an emotional connection with her listeners. The song "All Too Well" is not just a narrative about the past, but also a form of intense emotional communication between the singer and the audience. Through honest words and deep metaphors, Taylor Swift positions herself as an individual opening wounds and invites listeners to share in the pain and warmth of past love. According to Halliday, the interpersonal function shows how language is used to establish social relationships and convey one's attitudes or emotions towards experiences (Van, 2021). Furthermore, according to Cheng's research (2023), interpersonal meaning involves the appraisal system namely, how the speaker assesses, expresses feelings, and influences others through language choices. In this context, Taylor Swift successfully uses empathetic and honest language to create emotional closeness. The combination of soft tones and profound words makes this song a means for listeners to interact emotionally, as if they are experiencing the same story of love and loss (Juslin & Sloboda, 2013).

The textual function in the song "All Too Well" is evident in how Taylor Swift structures her lyrics coherently and cohesively, creating a unified meaning that is easy to follow. The song is structured like a story with an opening, climax, and closing, allowing the listener to experience an emotional journey from beginning to end. The use of repetition, conjunctions, and rhythmic changes create strong cohesion between the song's sections. In line with Halliday's view, textual function plays a crucial role in organizing the way information is conveyed so that the message is logistically and coherently structured. Dorri (2020) explains that cohesion and repetition are key elements of textual function, helping to build structured meaning within the text. In this song, the phrase "I remember it all too well" emphasizes that these memories will never be lost. Through the combination of ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions, as described by Gebhard and Accurso (2020), Taylor Swift is able to emotionally portray memories, build closeness with the listener, and convey her story with an orderly flow. , the song "All Too Well" represents the universal experience of love and loss, showing how language is not only a tool to convey messages, but also a means to feel, connect, and relive memories that once existed.

#### B. Implementation of the song All Too Well by Taylor Swift in everyday life

In today's society, the meaning analyzed in Taylor Swift's song "All Too Well" can be related to real communication, where language is used to express emotions, identity, and personal experiences through digital platforms such as social media. Taylor Swift's emotional honesty and narrative depth resonate with many listeners who use language in similar ways through personal posts, storytelling, and online expressions of feelings. This shows how the interpersonal metafunction in her lyrics reflects the way people build emotional connections in the digital age. Peters et al (2018) states that listening to and performing music facilitates emotion regulation by helping individuals express, understand, and transform their emotional experiences.

The ideational function in describing experiences, as seen in Taylor Swift's songs, can also be observed in the way individuals narrate their daily lives in digital media. Eggins (2021) explains that through the ideational metafunction, language enables speakers to construct mental images of reality, organizing their experiences and observations into

shared meaning. Although, the metafunctional framework remains highly relevant in analyzing how people use language to express emotions, build relationships, and share experiences in both private and public contexts. Supporting this, Barton and Lee (2015) argue that in social media communication, people express identity and emotions through language, transforming personal experiences into publicly shared narratives. As a result, language functions as a bridge between individuals and the social world, connecting personal and collective experiences through the formation of meaning.

Taylor Swift's use of repetition and cohesive structures reflects how contemporary users craft emotional and meaningful narratives on digital platforms such as Instagram captions or online diaries. Thompson (2014) also highlights that text cohesion and coherence are essential for maintaining clarity and emotional flow in modern narratives, including online storytelling. Therefore, the application of metafunctional analysis in "All Too Well" not only explains the linguistic aspects of the song but also provides insights into how language continues to function as a powerful tool for emotional and social expression in modern life.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis using Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics theory, Taylor Swift's "All Too Well" represents a complete example of how language constructs emotional, social, and narrative meanings. The ideational function depicts real experiences and memories of love and loss, the interpersonal function builds empathy and emotional closeness between the singer and the audience, and the textual function ensures the story flows coherently through cohesive language structures. Beyond its literary and musical value, the song also reflects how people use language in everyday life to express feelings and identity whether in face-to-face communication or through digital platforms. The findings confirm that SFL theory is not limited to academic study but can also be applied to understand how individuals construct meaning, share emotions, and build relationships in real-world contexts. Thus, this research demonstrates the continuing relevance of Halliday's metafunctions in analyzing both artistic texts and daily human communication.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Almurashi, W. A. (2016). An introduction to Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics. *Journal for the Study of English Linguistics*, 4(1), 70–80. <https://doi.org/10.5296/jsel.v4i1.9423>
- Banks, D. (2024). Systemic functional linguistics: Advances and applications. *Journal of World Languages*, 10(1), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jwl-2023-0083>
- Cheng, S. (2023). A review of interpersonal metafunction studies in Systemic Functional Linguistics (2012–2022). *Journal of World Languages*, 10(3), 623–667. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jwl-2023-0026>
- Clarence-Fincham, J. (n.d.). Using systemic functional grammar in the media classroom: Increasing students' ability to produce and analyse media texts. *Per Linguam: A Journal of Language Learning*, 23(1), 1–17. <https://perlinguam.journals.ac.za/pub/article/view/3>
- Dorri, E. R. (2020). Textual metafunction and translation: A Systemic Functional Linguistic perspective. *Applied Linguistics Research Journal*, 4(4), 30–40. <https://doi.org/10.14744/alrj.2020.72692>
- Gebhard, M., & Accurso, K. (2020). Systemic functional linguistics. In *The encyclopedia of applied linguistics* (2nd ed.). Wiley-Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405198431.wbeal1137.pub2>
- Halliday, M. A. K., & Matthiessen, C. M. I. M. (2014). *Halliday's introduction to functional grammar* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Harahap, R. S., Angrayani, T., Putra, R. F., & Suprayetno, E. (2024). A Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) analysis on short story Cindelaras by cerita rakyat from East Java.

- Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 3(2), 34–43.  
<https://journal.eltaorganization.org/index.php/joal/article/view/187>
- Martin, J. R. (2014). Evolving systemic functional linguistics: Beyond the clause. *Functional Linguistics*, 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/2196-419x-1-3>
- Purnama, A. (2019). Students' application of systemic functional linguistics on mass media and social media. *Social and Humaniora: Jurnal Ilmiah Ilmu Sosial dan Humaniora*, 3(1), 55–68. <https://journals.itb.ac.id/index.php/sostek/article/view/9336>
- Van, H. V. (2021). Metafunctions of language in Systemic Functional Linguistics: A framework for the interpretation of meaning of text in social context. *VNU Journal of Foreign Studies*, 37(4), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.25073/2525-2445/vnufs.4750>
- Zhou, J. (2024). Functions of ideational metaphor in English. *SAGE Open*, 14(4), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440241292871>