

Exploring Metafunction in Imagine Dragons' Song "Bad Liar": A Systematic Functional Linguistic Approach

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Abstract

This study explored the three metafunctions (ideational, interpersonal, and textual) found in Imagine Dragons' song "Bad Liar" by applying the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) proposed by M.A.K. Halliday. The purpose of this study was to identify how language choices in the lyrics construct meaning related to emotion, honesty, and self-conflict. A qualitative descriptive method was used to analyze each clause based on its process type, mood, modality, and thematic structure. The findings reveal that the ideational metafunction represented the singer's emotional struggles through mental and relational processes, expressing pain, regret, and self-awareness. The interpersonal metafunction showed the singer's attempt to build intimacy with the listener using personal pronouns, low modality, and a confessional tone. Meanwhile, the textual metafunction organizes the song cohesively through repetition, consistent themes, and parallel structures that emphasize the contrast between truth and deception.

Keywords: metafunctions, Systemic Functional Linguistics, song "Bad Liar", Imagine Dragons, qualitative descriptive

INTRODUCTION

Language functioned not only as a meant of communication, but also as a medium for expressing emotions, ideas, and personal experiences (Rabiah, 2018). One linguistic theory that focused on how meaning was formed through language in a social context was Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), developed by M.A.K. Halliday. According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2013), language functioned at the same time in three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. These metafunctions represent how people express their experiences, build social relationships with one another, and organize information into cohesive and coherent texts.

Song lyrics can be an interesting medium for SFL analysis because they often reflect human emotions and social realities through linguistic choices. According to Carpi (2021) and Hiller (2019), songwriters can construct meanings that go beyond literal interpretations through the use of process types, mood structures, modalities, and text organization. Therefore, analyzing songs through the SFL framework was essential for explaining how language encodes feelings, attitudes, and values in specific social or emotional contexts.

The song "Bad Liar" by Imagine Dragons, released in 2018, represent deep emotional struggle, honesty, and inner conflict. The lyrics describe the persona's efforts as a professional to appear strong while hiding pain and regret, ultimately acknowledging personal weakness. This emotional complexity makes the song "Bad Liar" an appropriate vehicle for analyzing and exploring how linguistic choices can create meaning at different metafunctional levels.

Based on this background, this study aimed to explore the realization of three metafunctions, namely ideational, interpersonal, and textual, in the lyrics of the song "Bad Liar." By applying Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics framework, this study sought to reveal how the language choices in the song express emotions, honesty, and inner conflict, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of how linguistic meaning was used in popular music.

Literature Review

Lyric analysis through the lens of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) had attracted significant attention among linguists and researchers in the last decade. SFL, developed by Castro & Halliday (1995), provided a comprehensive framework for understanding how language can construct meaning through three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. This theoretical approach allowed researchers to explore how linguistic choices reflect emotions, identity, and social interactions in song lyrics.

Several studies had applied SFL to analyze various genres of song lyrics. Herdiyanti (2020) analyzed Adele's song "Someone Like You" and found that the ideational metafunction was dominant, reflecting emotional pain and personal loss conveyed through mental and relational processes. Similarly, Flanigan's (2024) study discussed Taylor Swift's song "All Too Well" and found that interpersonal metafunction was often used to create closeness with listeners, especially through the use of first-person pronouns and declarative mood. Another study by Rajagukguk & Siahaan (2024) analyzed Moses Hogan's song "Elijah Rock" and found that textual metafunctions such as thematic development and repetition contribute to the cohesion and emotional flow of the song.

In addition to pop and rock songs, several studies had analyzed local and religious songs using the same framework. Ondang & Putra (2023) studied Indonesian pop ballads and found that a combination of ideational and interpersonal metafunctions can help express the personal reflections and moral messages of songwriters. Pieri & Grosholz (2021) also analyzed SFL in Islamic nasheed lyrics, showing that text metafunctions play an important role in maintaining thematic consistency and emotional rhythm.

Although a number of studies had discussed SFL in the context of song lyrics, most focus on expressions of love, heartbreak, or religious devotion. However, there was still little research exploring songs that convey internal conflict, honesty, and self-deception—powerful psychological themes present in Imagine Dragons' song "Bad Liar." Therefore, this study aimed to fill this gap by analyzing the metafunction of "Bad Liar" to reveal how linguistic features represent emotions, truth, and self-struggle in the lyrics.

METHOD

This research used a qualitative descriptive method because it aimed to understand meaning rather than calculate numerical data. As Creswell and Poth (2018) explain, qualitative research focused on exploring human experiences and interpreting how meaning was created through language. This approach was appropriate for song lyric analysis since lyrics often convey emotional and social messages that reflect the songwriter's perspective. The object of this study was Imagine Dragons' song "Bad Liar", released in 2018 as part of the *Origins* album. The song was chosen because its lyrics portray honesty, guilt, and internal conflict—elements that strongly relate to the three metafunctions within the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework.

The main data source of this research was the complete lyrics of "Bad Liar", which were taken from the official Imagine Dragons website and verified through reliable music platforms to ensure textual accuracy. The data were collected through documentation techniques, where the lyrics were transcribed and divided into clauses as the units of analysis. Each clause was analyzed using the SFL framework developed by Halliday and Matthiessen (2013), which consists of three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. To strengthen the theoretical foundation, this study also refers to discussions of SFL from later linguistic works, such as Thompson (2014) and Fontaine (2012), who further elaborate how linguistic choices construct different layers of meaning.

The analysis followed several steps. First, the researcher identified and classified each clause in the lyrics. Second, the ideational metafunction was analyzed through process types (material, mental, relational, behavioral, and existential) that represent experiences and actions. Third, the interpersonal metafunction was explored through mood and modality, showing how the singer expressed attitudes and relationships with the listener. Lastly, the textual metafunction

was examined by analyzing thematic structures, cohesion, and repetition to understand how the song created coherence and emphasis. The findings were then described and interpreted qualitatively to show how all three metafunctions work together to express emotion, honesty, and inner conflict in the song. To maintain objectivity, the interpretation relied on linguistic evidence and theoretical principles rather than personal opinion.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Metafunction	Lyric Excerpt	Type of Process / Feature	Description
Ideational	It's been a difficult year	Relational Process	Describes a state of emotional hardship and personal struggle.
	I'm a man of three fears	Mental Process	Shows self-awareness and recognition of emotional weakness. It represents the singer's reflection on his moral and emotional state.
	I wage my war on the world inside	Material Process	This lyric represent an internal battle between idealism and reality.
Interpersonal	Trust me, darling	Imperative Mood	Indicates a gentle plea rather than a command, showing emotional vulnerability and desire for trust.
	Wish I could escape it	Modality ('could')	It conveys honesty and the wish to overcome emotional pain.
	You're free to go	Declarative Mood	Expresses acceptance and emotional release, symbolizing maturity and sincerity rather than rejection.
Textual	Oh, hush, my dear	Thematic Structure	Functions as a thematic opening that sets the emotional tone and prepares the listener for the confessional theme.
	Wish I could erase it	Lexical Cohesion (Repetition)	Creates rhythm and cohesion through repetition with "Wish I could escape it." Reinforces emotional tension and regret.
	I'm a bad liar, bad liar / Now you know	Structural Cohesion (Repetition & Closure)	Repetition of "bad liar" provides unity and emphasis on truth and confession. "Now you know" signals revelation and resolution.

The analysis of Imagine Dragons' song "Bad Liar" showed how the song's meaning was constructed through a combination of three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. Referring to the concept of Systemic Functional Linguistics proposed by Halliday (in Rahayu et al., 2025), language not only functioned as a means of communication but also as a system for expressing experiences, building social relationships, and organizing meaning for listeners. The findings of this study indicated that the song "Bad Liar" used structured and creative language choices to reflect emotional depth, inner conflict, and personal honesty. These meanings were not only present in the song but also reflected the real-life emotional struggles that many people faced when dealing with personal problems, broken relationships, or self-doubt. In everyday life, people often tried to appear fine even though they were actually struggling inside, showing how language and expression were used to hide or reveal true feelings, as in the lyrics of this song.

From the ideational metafunction perspective, “Bad Liar” presented an introspective narrative depicting the singer’s emotional and psychological experiences. The lyrics “It’s been a difficult year” demonstrated how relational processes depicted a time of hardship and self-reflection. These linguistic choices represented the human tendency to describe emotional struggles through realistic language. In real life, many individuals also expressed their pain through simple statements like “I’ve had a hard year,” which conveyed deep emotional exhaustion without needing many words. Furthermore, “I’m a man of three fears” show mental processes that indicated self-awareness and emotional vulnerability. According to Sinaga et al. (2023), mental processes in song lyrics were often used to describe inner thoughts and emotional instability. This was relevant to daily experiences, as people often became aware of their weaknesses only during moments of stress or emotional pain. Meanwhile, the lyrics “I wage my war on the world inside” demonstrated material processes that metaphorically depicted internal conflict. This aligned with Uswar and Harahap’s (2023) argument that material processes in songs were often used to translate emotional tension into concrete linguistic forms. Similarly, in real life, people usually felt as though they were “fighting a war within themselves” when dealing with anxiety, guilt, or emotional pressure. Thus, the ideational metafunction in “Bad Liar” represented not only the complexity of self-reflection in the song but also the universal human experience of struggling between honesty and pretense in real life.

Furthermore, the interpersonal metafunction reflected how the singer interacted with the listener and expressed emotions, attitudes, and personal closeness. The lyrics “Trust me, darling” used the imperative form, but not as a command—it was more of an emotional plea. The gentle address “darling” reinforced warmth and vulnerability, signifying a desire to be understood, not to dominate. In daily life, people often used similar language when they wanted to regain someone’s trust or expressed regret, showing that emotional communication depended on tone, context, and choice of words. The lyrics “Wish I could escape it” used the modal “could” to express helplessness and the wish to escape sadness. Rahayu et al. (2025) noted that modality in lyrics was often used to convey uncertainty and inner conflict. This idea was reflected in real-life communication, where people often used phrases like “I wish I could change it” or “I wish things were different” to express regret or emotional struggle. The lyrics “You’re free to go” used a declarative form to show acceptance and sincerity rather than rejection. In real relationships, letting someone go often required emotional maturity, showing that true love or care sometimes meant allowing others to find their own happiness. Therefore, the interpersonal metafunction in this song reflected real-life emotional interactions, where people communicated not just through words but also through tone, emotion, and intention.

Meanwhile, the textual metafunction was evident in how the song maintained cohesion and coherence through thematic structure and repetition. The phrase “Oh, hush, my dear” demonstrated how the textual theme opened the song’s emotional atmosphere. According to Sinaga et al. (2023), thematic structure in lyrics played a crucial role in directing the listener’s emotional focus. In everyday contexts, this was similar to how people structured their speech to control the mood of a conversation—starting gently when comforting someone or repeating key words to show sincerity. The chorus lyrics such as “Wish I could erase it” and “Wish I could escape it” demonstrated lexical cohesion through repetition, strengthening the song’s emotional and rhythmic unity. In real life, people often repeated certain words or phrases when expressing strong emotions such as guilt, longing, or regret. For example, saying “I’m sorry” multiple times was not just about apology but also about reinforcing emotional sincerity. Furthermore, the refrain “I’m a bad liar, bad liar / Now you know” created structural cohesion and concluded the meaning by emphasizing the main themes of honesty and confession. This finding supported Uswar and Harahap’s (2023) view that repetition in lyrics not only functioned as a marker of cohesion but also as a tool to emphasize the core message. Similarly, in real life, people often repeated phrases when they finally admitted the truth after hiding it for so long—showing the relief and vulnerability that came with honesty.

CONCLUSION

An analysis of Imagine Dragons' song "Bad Liar" through the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) highlights that the meaning of the song's lyrics was systematically created through the interaction of three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. Each metafunction contributes uniquely to expressing the songwriter's emotional struggles, honesty, and inner conflict.

From the perspective of the ideational metafunction, the song represented how the singer's emotional experience and psychological disorder unfold through mental, relational, and material processes. These processes allow listeners to sense the honesty and weakness of the song's persona, as well as their efforts to resolve their external appearance with their inner reality.

Meanwhile, the interpersonal metafunction demonstrates how language was used to build engagement and empathy between the singer and listener. Through the use of mood, modality, and pronouns, the songwriter expressed both hope and despair, making the lyrics a form of honest confession from the singer, rather than a mere narrative.

Meanwhile, the textual metafunction played a role in maintaining the song's emotional coherence and rhythm. Thematic structure and repetition help emphasize key ideas conveyed in song lyrics, such as truth, deception, and acceptance, so that the message was conveyed naturally and convincingly to listeners.

Implications and Recommendations for Further Research

This study provided insight into how Systemic Functional Linguistics can be applied to analyze emotional and psychological themes in modern music. The results imply that Systemic Functional Linguistics was not limited to academic or literary texts but can also reveal the depth of meaning in popular culture.

Future researchers were encouraged to apply metafunctional analysis to other musical genres, such as traditional, religious, or indie songs, to explore how different social and cultural contexts influence the formation of linguistic meaning. Furthermore, incorporating multimodal analysis, which considers musical, visual, and linguistic elements simultaneously, can enhance understanding of how songs convey emotions and ideologies through various media.

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