

Analysis of the Meaning of Love in Ed Sheeran's Song "Perfect" Based on the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) Approach

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Abstract

In this study, it aims to explore the meaning of love in Ed Sheeran's song "Perfect" through the lens of the most recent version of the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approach. This view of language (the construction of meaning by others in a social system) has support in several recent studies in popular music and media (Zhang & Zhang, 2023; Alshehri, 2024). The analysis examined the three meta functions of language (ideational, interpersonal, and textual) to show how linguistic means may convey or construct the experience of romantic love. The findings in our analysis suggest "Perfect," represents a balance of any representation of personal experience (ideational), intimacy in relationships (interpersonal), and thematic cohesion (textual). In conclusion, it should be noted that these analyses reinforce an early modern SFL position that language in popular text serves as a means to construct social emotions and represents cultural values.

Keywords: Systemic Functional Linguistics, Ed Sheeran, meaning of love, text analysis, applied linguistics.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the field of functional linguistics has grown and developed rapidly, as more researchers have begun to apply Halliday's theory in a wide range of contexts, both academic and popular (Zhang & Zhang, 2023; Mustafa et al., 2023). This shows that language is not only studied for its grammatical form but also for how it functions in real communication. Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), as introduced by Halliday, has now become one of the main approaches used to explore how meaning is created through language in everyday life. Today, SFL is applied not only to analyze academic texts such as essays or research papers but also to explore popular forms of language use, including song lyrics, films, advertisements, and even social media interactions. These applications are based on the idea that each form of language carries unique social and emotional values that reflect the speaker's or writer's purpose (Alshehri, 2024).

One interesting example of how language carries emotional meaning can be found in Ed Sheeran's song "Perfect." The song combines soft, emotional language with simple expressions of love, making it easy for listeners to connect with. It tells a story of sincere and gentle love inspired by the singer's personal experience. Through this song, we can see how language in music serves as a medium for expressing emotions, building connections, and sharing human experiences. This perspective is supported by previous studies that analyzed interpersonal and ideational meanings in song lyrics, showing that songs often express both personal emotions and social relationships (Medina & Noorman, 2020; Maulida & Imperiani, 2022; Silalahi & Purba, 2024). Using the SFL framework, the present study aims to examine how the lyrics of "Perfect," through its three metafunctions ideational, interpersonal, and textual create and shape the meaning of love represented in the song.

This study also supports Baron & Schulze's (2023) findings that the SFL approach helps reveal the relationship between linguistic structure and the social function of a text. In this sense, language is not only a system of words and grammar but also a reflection of human emotions,

relationships, and social roles. As a result, "Perfect" is not only viewed as a musical composition but also as a social text that expresses human feelings and helps shape the emotional identity of its listeners. Through its simple yet meaningful lyrics, the song allows people to understand love not only as a feeling but also as a shared social experience that connects individuals through language.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

Several researchers have conducted studies related to the analysis of song lyrics, particularly those written by Ed Sheeran, including his famous song "Perfect." Each of these studies provides valuable insights from various linguistic and literary perspectives.

Mawaddah and Djauhari(2023) examined Perfect from a psycholinguistic perspective, focusing on how word choice and sentence structure influence emotional responses among listeners. Their findings revealed that the use of simple diction, repetition, and familiar sentence patterns evokes feelings of nostalgia, love, and intimacy. This study highlights the emotional power of language in shaping listener engagement.

Aulia (2022) analyzed Perfect through a pragmatic lens, identifying various forms of deixis such as personal, spatial, and temporal references. The results indicated that Ed Sheeran's use of personal deixis (e.g., I, you, we) strengthens the intimacy between the singer and the listener, while temporal deixis (e.g., tonight, this time) situates the song's narrative within a specific emotional moment.

Setyawati and Nuraini (2023) explored Perfect using speech act theory, focusing on commissive utterances. Their analysis revealed that the most dominant speech act in the song is the act of promising, showing how the singer expresses commitment and emotional assurance toward his partner. This indicates that Perfect is not only a romantic expression but also a linguistic representation of fidelity and devotion.

Riadi (2019) examined translation techniques used when rendering Perfect into Indonesian. The study identified literal, adaptation, and rhymed translation techniques, emphasizing the importance of maintaining both semantic accuracy and the song's emotional essence. This research contributes to the understanding of how emotional nuance can be preserved across languages.

And also, Situmeang (2023) applied a semiotic approach to uncover the connotative meanings behind Perfect. The study revealed that the song conveys symbolic meanings of happiness, purity, and everlasting love through its lyrical imagery and metaphors. Similarly, Kusumaningrum (2018) and Kemal et al. (2021) discussed connotative meanings in Ed Sheeran's lyrics more broadly, finding that the artist often employs emotionally charged words and figurative language to construct relatable and heartfelt messages.

A study by Dewi and Utami (2022) supported these findings by focusing on figurative language across Ed Sheeran's songs. Their analysis demonstrated that metaphors, similes, and personifications are frequently used to express deep affection and personal connection, elements that are clearly reflected in Perfect.

RESEARCH GAP

Although several previous studies have analyzed Ed Sheeran's "Perfect" from various linguistic perspectives such as psycholinguistics, pragmatics, semiotics, and translation most of them focus only on the structural and descriptive aspects of language. These studies tend to explain what language features appear, but not how language functions to create meaning.

No research has yet examined "Perfect" through the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to reveal how the song constructs the meaning of love through the three metafunctions: ideational (experiential meaning), interpersonal (social relationship), and textual (cohesive organization).

METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative descriptive method to explore the meanings of language and the experiences of listeners through the analysis of English song lyrics within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). This approach enables the researcher to examine how linguistic choices in the song convey meaning and how listeners interpret those meanings emotionally and socially. The data consist of words, phrases, and narratives, which are analyzed thematically to identify emerging patterns of meaning. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative research focuses on deeply exploring social phenomena and interpreting the meanings individuals attribute to their experiences. Similarly, Lambert and Lambert (2019) emphasize that qualitative methods help researchers understand human phenomena holistically through detailed narrative and reflective descriptions.

The semi-structured interview method is used to gather data from selected song listeners through purposive sampling. This type of interview allows participants to express their perspectives freely while maintaining focus on the research topic. Open-ended questions are designed to explore the participants' understanding, emotions, and interpretations of the song's lyrics. The interview data are recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to identify thematic patterns that align with the SFL analysis of the song text. As stated by Alsa (2021), semi-structured interviews are effective for obtaining in-depth information from participants because they allow for dynamic interaction between the researcher and the respondent. Likewise, Kim (2016) notes that qualitative interviews offer high flexibility in exploring individual perspectives in a contextual and reflective manner.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. RESULT

No.	Song Lyrics	Type of Metafunction	Brief Explanation
1.	"I found a love for me"	Ideational (Experiential)	Based on personal opinion, this clause represents the singer's personal experience of finding love, which describes a mental process (individual feelings and awareness).
2.	"we were just kids when we fell in love"	Ideational (Experiential)	According to personal interpretation, this clause contains the meaning of emotional past experiences, emphasizing the material process that tells the story of concrete events (falling in love at a young age).
3.	"I never knew you were the someone waiting for me"	Interpersonal	Based on the results of the interview with Participant 1, "These lyrics show a personal relationship between two individuals, where the speaker expresses their feelings in a gentle and honest tone." This statement confirms the existence of emotional interaction, which is a characteristic of interpersonal metafunction.
4.	"I see my future in your eyes"	Interpersonal	According to Participant 2, "This sentence describes a form of commitment and belief in one's partner, so that its interpersonal

			function is seen in expressions of love and hope.” This shows the use of language as a means of negotiating emotional meaning between two parties.
5.	“baby, I’m dancing in the dark, with you between my arms”	Textual	Participant 3 stated that “This section forms a poetic and cohesive picture because each word flows with a consistent rhythm.” This demonstrates the textual function that maintains cohesion and unity of meaning between lines of lyrics.

DISCUSSION

In the clause “I found a love for me” from Ed Sheeran’s song Perfect, the ideational (experiential) meaning can be understood as a representation of a personal experience that illustrates a mental process, specifically the feelings and awareness of someone when discovering their true love. The verb “found” indicates an emotional realization rather than a mere physical action, reflecting the connection between the individual’s thoughts and emotions toward the emotional object, “a love.” Within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), the subject “I” functions as the *Senser* (the experiencer of perception or emotion), while “a love” serves as the *Phenomenon* (the entity being felt or experienced). Thus, the clause portrays an introspective moment that symbolizes an individual’s inner journey in discovering the profound meaning of love. This aligns with Thompson’s (2014) view in the *Journal of Pragmatics*, which explains that mental processes in texts are often used to express personal experiences and emotional relationships between individuals and the surrounding world.

The sentence “We were just kids when we fell in love” from Ed Sheeran’s song Perfect can be understood through the ideational (experiential) metafunction in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) theory, which highlights how language represents real human experiences. In this clause, “we” acts as the *Actor*, while “fell in love” indicates the material process, which is the concrete action that describes the event of falling in love. The expression “just kids” becomes the circumstance that provides the context of time and emotional condition indicating that the event took place in a youthful, innocent, and sincere period. In terms of meaning, this sentence not only conveys feelings of love but also describes a real and emotional past experience, where love is present as part of a life journey full of memories. This is in line with Sinaga’s (2023) opinion in the journal “Conveying the Meaning through Experiential Metafunction on Song Lyrics: A Case on Ideational Metafunction,” which explains that experiential metafunction in song lyrics is used to display human experiences through the identification of participants, processes, and circumstances that mutually shape meaning. The journal supports this analysis because it shows that song lyrics, such as in Ed Sheeran’s work, not only serve an aesthetic function but also represent concrete and emotional experiences through simple yet meaningful word choices and sentence structures.

In the lyric “I never knew you were the someone waiting for me”, the interpersonal meaning can be clearly seen through the way the speaker expresses admiration and emotional warmth toward someone they love. Based on the interview with Participant 1, this lyric shows a close personal relationship where the speaker communicates with a gentle and sincere tone. From the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), this line demonstrates the interpersonal metafunction, which focuses on how language is used to express feelings, attitudes, and relationships between speakers and listeners. The choice of words such as “never knew” and “waiting for me” reveals both surprise and happiness upon realizing a love that has always been present but unnoticed. According to Halliday’s theory in SFL, language functions not only to

represent experiences but also to build interaction, and this lyric reflects how emotional exchange can strengthen that interaction. This finding is consistent with Yuningsih's (2018) study, which explains that song lyrics often carry interpersonal meanings because they reflect the songwriter's emotions and personal relationships through distinctive linguistic expression.

The interpersonal meaning within this lyric can also be felt by listeners because it creates a warm and sincere atmosphere. Listeners are invited to share the same emotional experience, creating a deeper emotional connection between the singer and the audience. This result is also supported by the study of Mawaddah and Djauhari (2025), which found that the emotional power in Perfect arises from the sincerity of word choice and tone, allowing listeners to sense the honesty and tenderness of the singer's feelings. Therefore, through the lens of SFL, this lyric shows that the interpersonal metafunction plays a crucial role in conveying genuine emotion and strengthening the connection between the songwriter, the singer, and the audience.

In Ed Sheeran's song "Perfect," the phrase "I see my future in your eyes," signifies a very personal and emotional sentiment. This phrase can express a form of affection from a person who falls in love and can picture their future in the person they love. Referring to the exam from a SFL perspective, this clause can convey an interpersonal relationship between the two people the singer, and the person who has become the focus of his emotion. The verb "see" expresses a physical action but has a deeper emotional expression of faith, warmth, and hope for a joint shared future. The language choice creates a romantic atmosphere and an intimate scene as if the speaker is actually seeing the future in the person they love through their eyes. Furthermore, the lyric also conveys the innocence of youth and an emotional richness of sincerity and idealism. The lyric relays a material process that is rooted in a reality that is abundant in deep emotion.

The relation of this assessment to shave Cheng (2023), "A Review of Interpersonal Metafunction Studies in Systemic Functional Linguistics (2012-2022)," is because of the notion that language has an interpersonal function to build social relationships, and represent emotional attitudes. The lyrics in Perfect show how word choice and sentence structure help foster emotional intimacy between the speaker and the listener. The journal explains that the interpersonal metafunction demonstrates how emotional meanings are conveyed through language. So, this song clearly demonstrates an example of using a SFLbased theory in a performing arts context, like music, where emotional depth and relationships between people are involved in the meaning of what is being conveyed.

From a textual metafunction perspective in the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), the clause "Baby, I'm dancing in the dark with you between my arms" stands out as a carefully organized message that shapes both the flow and emotional impact of the lyric. The clause begins with a vocative "Baby," which immediately engages the listener and sets the dancer or lover as the central theme of the message, followed by the finite-operator sequence "I'm dancing," which emphasizes the actor (I) and the action (dancing) as the starting point of new information. The adjunct "in the dark" and the prepositional phrase "with you between my arms" serve as rheme elements that enrich the scene and guide the listener toward a vivid, emotionally charged image. This arrangement theme (Baby / I) to rheme (dancing in the dark with you...) creates narrative cohesion that carries the listener from the initial address through to the intimate moment of closeness. In my interpretation, the lyric conveys a past emotional experience of love through its textual structure, using the placement of "I" and "you" and the setting "in the dark" to evoke a feeling that is both private and universally understood. The related study by Formosa Publisher (2024) titled Textual Metafunction in The Choir Traditional Spiritual Song "Elijah Rock" by Moses Hogan supports this view, explaining how textual metafunction in song lyrics organizes meaning and emotion through theme arrangement and information flow. Similar to Ed Sheeran's line, the study highlights that word placement and repetition can build emotional depth and coherence, showing that textual structure itself transforms a simple expression of love into something vivid, memorable, and deeply resonant.

The song "Perfect" by Ed Sheeran portrays a person who discovers their true love and enjoys all of their moments together. The lyrics, linguistically, express genuine affection and an emotional bond that existed between two people. Within the systemic functional linguistics (SFL) framework, meanings in this song can be derived in ideational, interpersonal, or textual meanings.

1. Ideational Meaning (Love as an Experience)

From an ideational orientation, the song depicts love as something real and heartfelt. The phrase "I found a love for me" indicates the singer has found someone undeniably special. The phrase "We were just kids when we fell in love" shows that the initial stage of love began in youth and continued to develop deeper.

The verbs that are key to finding and falling in love represent an action and/or emotion that make love feel alive and authentic. The coupling of verbs communicates that love in this song is not just a feeling, but a process in developing a deeper understanding of one another. In "I found a girl, beautiful and sweet," Sheeran uses soft and loving words to describe his partner. The use of language highlights admiration, respect for, and appreciation of, and in turn, creates love as being pure and genuine.

2. Interpersonal Meaning (Relationship and Emotion)

From an interpersonal standpoint, the song conveys a sense of intimacy and equality (closeness) between the singer and his lover when staying abstract from pinpointing them to an individual or group (the pronoun forms I, you, and we are employed throughout the lyrics). When the singer uses the phrase "Darling, you look perfect tonight," he is making a declarative sentence one that expresses a feeling not making a commanding statement or a question, such as "You look perfect tonight." The declarative statement shows tenderness, honesty (pure intentions of speaking), and secure attachment (as from a secure relationship in psychology). There are no demanding or strong verbs or adjectives that can taint the word of the singer in the song (especially if asking a question). Therefore, the relationship in the song "Perfect" is predicated on care, without judgment, which signals mutual feeling of equality in the moment.

Dougherty and Schulze explore the gentility and honesty of languages choice with emotional closeness between people (Dougherty, Schulze, 2023). Sheeran uses a calm, loving tone, to illustrate that true love is predicated in or by mutual respect, trust, and emotional warmth in a loving relationship (like the chord performance).

3. Textual meaning (Structure and cohesion)

From a structural perspective, "Perfect" has a well-organized writing style that flows naturally. Many phrases begin with I or we, such as, "I found a love" and "we were just kids". This pattern keeps the reader or listener focused on an individual's experience and makes the story feel continuous and easy to follow.

Repetition also plays an important role. Words such as love, perfect, and girl appear multiple times in the song. The repetitions create a sense of coherence and direct the listener's attention to the main message that love is enduring, intense, and beautiful. Repetition and related meanings can help develop affective engagement and the ability to build through time with the text, as Hu (2024) points out, through emotional connection and retention/familiarity which also relates to 'feeling'.

4. Interpersonal Metafunction Attitudinal Meaning

In Ed Sheeran's song "Perfect," the phrase "I see my future in your eyes," signifies a very personal and emotional sentiment. This phrase can express a form of affection from a person who falls in love and can picture their future in the person they love. Referring to the exam from a SFL perspective, this clause can convey an interpersonal relationship between the two people the singer, and the person who has become the focus of his emotion. The verb "see" expresses a physical action but has a deeper emotional expression of faith, warmth, and hope for a joint shared future. The language choice creates a romantic atmosphere and an intimate scene as if the speaker is actually seeing the future in the person they love through their eyes. Furthermore, the

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CONCLUSION

Analysis through a contemporary Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) perspective demonstrates that "Perfect" signifies love by means of three interconnected signification: Ideational: Represents real and feeling experience of true love. Interpersonal: Establishes an equal, shared relationship of love. Textual: Organises meaning in a harmonious cohesive manner. The study underlines that people use language in song lyrics not only for aesthetic purposes but also, it exists in the process of creating social and emotional reality. As with previous findings, Ed Sheeran can be treated as a piece of linguistic text that expresses universal values of love, through functional and humanistic language.

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