AN ANALYSIS OF CONNOTATIVE AND DENOTATIVE MEANING IN TAYLOR SWIFT'S RED (TAYLOR'S VERSION) ALBUM: A SEMANTIC APPROACH

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Abstrak: Studi ini menyelidiki makna denotatif dan konotatif dalam album Red (Taylor's Version) milik Taylor Swift melalui teori semantik Geoffrey Leech. Lima lagu—Red, All Too Well, I Knew You Were Trouble, Begin Again, dan The Moment I Knew—dipilih secara purposif berdasarkan bahasa kiasan dan kedalaman tematiknya. Lirik dianalisis pada empat tingkat linguistik: kata, frasa, klausa, dan kalimat. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif, studi ini menemukan bahwa makna denotatif memberikan kejelasan literal, sementara makna konotatif mendominasi, menambah kedalaman emosional dan kultural. Bersama-sama, makna-makna tersebut menciptakan lapisan makna yang kaya yang meningkatkan resonansi emosional dan kekuatan naratif lagu-lagu tersebut. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa penulisan lagu Swift mencontohkan bagaimana analisis semantik mengungkap interaksi bahasa literal dan kiasan dalam musik populer.

Kata Kunci: Semantik, Makna Denotatif, Makna Konotatif, Taylor Swift, Lirik Lagu.

Abstract: *This study investigates the denotative and connotative meanings in Taylor Swift's Red (Taylor's Version) album through Geoffrey Leech's semantic theory. Five songs—Red, All Too Well, I Knew You Were Trouble, Begin Again, and The Moment I Knew—were purposively selected for their figurative language and thematic depth. Lyrics were analyzed at four linguistic levels: word, phrase, clause, and sentence. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the study finds that denotative meanings provide literal clarity, while connotative meanings dominate, adding emotional and cultural depth. Together, they create rich layers of meaning that enhance the songs' emotional resonance and narrative strength. The findings affirm that Swift's songwriting exemplifies how semantic analysis reveals the interaction of literal and figurative language in popular music.*

Keywords: Semantics, Denotative Meaning, Connotative Meaning, Taylor Swift, Song Lyrics.

INTRODUCTION

Language plays a central role in shaping how human beings express thoughts, emotions, and experiences. In literature and music, language is not only a medium of communication but also a tool of aesthetic creation (Halliday, 1978). Music lyrics in particular combine artistic creativity with narrative meaning, enabling audiences to experience emotions that transcend literal definitions of words. As Adorno (1973) points out, music functions both as an artistic

form and as a social commentary, reflecting cultural and personal dimensions simultaneously.

Taylor Swift has become one of the most influential singer-songwriters of the 21st century. Her career is notable not only for commercial success but also for her ability to connect with audiences through storytelling. Swift's songs often serve as autobiographical accounts of personal experiences, which resonate universally. According to Perone (2017), Swift's lyrical genius lies in her ability to turn intimate experiences into collective narratives.

The album Red (Taylor's Version), released in 2021 as a re-recording of the original Red (2012), holds a significant place in her discography. Beyond being a commercial success, the album is culturally symbolic as part of Swift's project to reclaim ownership of her master recordings. This context adds another layer of meaning to the album, positioning it as not only a work of art but also a statement of agency and resistance within the music industry (Smith, 2021). The album is also widely recognized for its thematic exploration of love, heartbreak, and renewal. Songs like Red and All Too Well have become cultural touchstones, frequently analyzed for their poetic depth.

From a linguistic perspective, Red (Taylor's Version) is particularly interesting because its lyrics are rich with metaphors, similes, and symbols. In the song Red, the metaphor "Loving him is like driving a new Maserati down a dead-end street" captures love as thrilling but ultimately doomed. Similarly, All Too Well uses metaphor in "You call me up again just to break me like a promise" to highlight the fragility of trust. These figurative expressions illustrate the dual role of language: conveying literal meaning (denotation) and creating emotional resonance (connotation).

Prior studies on Swift's songs (e.g., Nasution et al., 2025) suggest that affective and connotative meanings dominate her lyrics. However, few studies focus specifically on the interplay between denotative and connotative meanings in a structured semantic framework. This research aims to fill that gap by applying Geoffrey Leech's (1981) theory of semantics to analyze denotative and connotative meanings in selected songs.

The research questions are formulated as follows:

1. How are denotative and connotative meanings expressed in the selected songs from Red (Taylor's Version)?

2. How are these meanings distributed across linguistic levels: word, phrase, clause, and sentence?

The objectives of this study are:

To identify and analyze denotative meanings in the lyrics of selected songs.

To identify and analyze connotative meanings in the same lyrics.

To interpret how denotative and connotative meanings interact to create emotional and cultural depth.

This study contributes to the field of semantics by showing how contemporary popular music can be analyzed as a serious linguistic and literary text. It also offers pedagogical implications for language teaching, where song lyrics can serve as engaging material to explain complex semantic concepts.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research employs a qualitative descriptive design, which is appropriate for analyzing the meanings embedded in texts without statistical measurement (Creswell, 2013). The qualitative approach allows the researcher to interpret meanings in their cultural and emotional context.

1.   Data Source

The primary data consist of lyrics from five songs in Red (Taylor's Version): Red, All Too Well, I Knew You Were Trouble, Begin Again, and The Moment I Knew. These songs were selected because they exemplify the album's thematic richness and linguistic creativity. They also represent different emotional tones, ranging from passion to despair to renewal.

2.   Data Collection

The data were collected through documentation. Official lyrics from Taylor Swift's website and streaming platforms served as the primary source. Secondary data, including reviews, interviews, and scholarly articles on Swift's works, were used to provide additional context.

3.   Data Analysis

The analysis followed four steps:

   1.   Identification of key words, phrases, clauses, and sentences in the lyrics.

   2.   Determination of denotative meanings using dictionary definitions.

   3.   Interpretation of connotative meanings based on cultural, emotional, and

situational contexts.

4. Relating denotative and connotative meanings to broader themes of love, heartbreak, and renewal.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Song Red

Linguistic Level	Lyric Excerpt	Denotative Meaning	Connotative Meaning	Interpretation (Narrative/Emotion)
Word	Red	A primary color	Passion, love, anger, heartbreak	Melambangkan intensitas emosi dalam hubungan asmara.
Phrase	Dead-end street	A road with no exit	Relationship with no future	Hubungan yang terlihat indah tapi pasti berakhir.
Clause	Driving a new Maserati down a dead-end street	Driving a luxury car into a road with no exit	Thrilling but doomed relationship	Cinta yang cepat, indah, penuh gairah, tetapi sia-sia.
Sentence	Loving him is like driving a new Maserati down a dead-end street	Loving compared to driving Maserati	Exciting yet destructive love	Menggambarkan cinta yang mewah dan mendebarkan tetapi akhirnya menyakitkan.

In "Red," Taylor Swift expresses the emotional extremes of a passionate relationship through vivid metaphors and color symbolism. According to Leech's (1981) theory of meaning, the denotative (conceptual) meaning of the word "red" refers simply to a color. However, its connotative meaning evokes powerful emotional associations such as love, desire, anger, and heartbreak.

The sentence "Loving him is like driving a new Maserati down a dead-end street" combines symbols of speed and luxury (a Maserati) with a sense of futility (a dead-end street).

Denotatively, it refers to driving a car into a road that leads nowhere. Connotatively, it represents a relationship that feels exhilarating and beautiful but is ultimately destructive

This interpretation reflects Leech's idea of connotative meaning as the communicative potential that goes beyond literal definitions. Swift's use of emotionally charged imagery exemplifies how language can be layered with both literal and symbolic meanings, which enhances the emotional impact of the lyrics.

Through this lens, the song becomes more than a personal story—it becomes a semantic expression of how love can feel thrilling, overwhelming, and inevitably painful. The blending of denotative clarity with connotative depth aligns with the semantic structure outlined in the methodology of this study.

Song All Too Well

Linguistic Level	Lyric Excerpt	Denotative Meaning	Connotative Meaning	Interpretation (Narrative/Emotion)
Word	Promise	A commitment	Trust, sacred bond	Menggambarkan kepercayaan yang rapuh dalam hubungan.
Phrase	Break me like a promise	Breaking someone and breaking a promise	Betrayal, emotional devastation	Kehancuran emosional akibat pengkhianatan.
Clause	You call me up again just to break me like a promise	Someone calls then breaks a promise	Recurrent betrayal	Hubungan yang penuh siklus luka emosional.
Sentence	You call me up again just to break me like a promise	A repeated phone call leads to hurt	Broken trust and emotional cycles	Menunjukkan pola toksik hubungan yang menyakitkan.

"All Too Well" is a reflective narrative of emotional loss, filled with vivid memories of a broken relationship. The lyric "You call me up again just to break me like a promise" serves as one of the most emotionally intense lines in the song.

Denotatively, the phrase refers to someone calling and breaking a promise. However, through the lens of Leech's (1981) theory, its connotative meaning extends to deep betrayal

and emotional devastation. The word "promise", while literal in its definition, carries symbolic emotional weight—representing trust, vulnerability, and emotional connection.

The phrase "break me like a promise" uses simile to equate the emotional collapse of the speaker with the shattering of something sacred. This reflects affective meaning, one of Leech's categories, where the language directly conveys the emotional state of the speaker.

By applying connotative and affective meaning, this interpretation shows how Swift's language is not only descriptive but also emotionally communicative. Her lyrical choice allows the listener to feel the intensity of heartbreak and emotional trauma. This is consistent with the semantic approach used in this study, where meaning is understood not only from what is said, but how it is emotionally and culturally interpreted.

Song I Knew You Were Trouble

Linguistic Level	Lyric Excerpt	Denotative Meaning	Connotative Meaning	Interpretation (Narrative/Emotion)
Word	Ground	Surface of the earth	Emotional rock bottom	Simbol keterpurukan emosional setelah patah hati.
Phrase	Cold hard ground	Cold, unyielding surface	Isolation, despair	Menggambarkan kehancuran batin pasca dikhianati.
Clause	I'm lying on the cold hard ground	Someone physically lying on ground	Vulnerability, surrender	Menunjukkan keputusasaan emosional.
Sentence	Now I'm lying on the cold hard ground	Statement of present condition	Emotional defeat, abandonment	Gambaran puncak penderitaan akibat cinta yang salah.

This section addresses the research problems by showing how denotative and connotative meanings emerge across linguistic levels. According to Leech (1981), connotative meaning arises from cultural and emotional associations especially relevant in music.

The word "ground", denotatively neutral, becomes a metaphor for despair. It is not merely a physical place but a symbolic representation of emotional failure.

The phrase "cold hard ground" adds sensory and emotional layers. The coldness and

hardness emphasize emptiness and harsh emotional reality.

ers to feel the exhaustion of being emotionally betrayed.

This interpretation is consistent with the qualitative descriptive met The clause "I'm lying on the cold hard ground" conveys involuntary surrender as if the speaker can no longer stand emotionally.

The sentence "Now I'm lying on the cold hard ground" is a complete expression of emotional collapse. Swift's diction shows how semantic meaning can be shaped by narrative and emotion. Through connotation, she allows listen hod described in Chapter III, focusing on semantic depth and emotional relevance.

This song transforms a simple physical image into a powerful emotional metaphor for regret and collapse. Through the cold hard ground, Swift illustrates the final emotional impact of ignoring one's instincts and trusting the wrong person. Denotative meanings provide structure, but the connotative interpretations give the lyric emotional weight perfectly aligning with Leech's theory of connotative meaning in emotional expression.

Song Begin Again

Linguistic Level	Lyric Excerpt	Denotative Meaning	Connotative Meaning	Interpretation (Narrative/Emotion)
Word	Break	To damage or shatter	Heartbreak	Trauma akibat kegagalan cinta.
Phrase	Break and burn and end	Sequence of destructive actions	Emotional devastation, repeated suffering	Menunjukkan siklus kehancuran emosional.
Clause	All love does is break and burn and end	Love only causes damage and stops	Bitterness, disillusionment	Cinta selalu dianggap menyakitkan.
Sentence	I've been spending the last eight months thinking all love ever does is break and burn and end	Reflection on past relationships	Emotional exhaustion, fear of love	Ungkapan trauma emosional sekaligus harapan untuk memulai kembali.

This lyric showcases connotative meaning as a vehicle for emotional storytelling. According to Leech (1981), connotation includes affective meaning how words evoke feelings.

Swift uses visual imagery not just descriptively, but to evoke vulnerability and abandonment.

The word "red lipstick" connotes both femininity and fragility. It symbolizes how the speaker tried to present herself confidently, but was emotionally left exposed when the person she waited for never arrived.

The phrase and clause intensify this by situating her physically alone, dressed for someone who never came. There's a contrast between outward beauty and inward devastation.

The sentence "It was like slow motion…" evokes a universal experience of trauma when emotional pain makes time feel slower. This aligns with connotative meaning as personal and affective, illustrating Leech's distinction between literal and emotional interpretation.

Semantically, this lyric exemplifies emotional depth through subtle imagery. It also fits the qualitative semantic method in Chapter III, showing how analysis at each linguistic level adds depth to interpretation.

The lyric evokes a silent heartbreak, where effort and expectation are met with absence. The connotative meaning adds layers of humiliation, sadness, and realization, showing that language especially in song can freeze time and feeling into a single line.

Song The Moment I knew

Linguistic Level	Lyric Excerpt	Denotative Meaning	Connotative Meaning	Interpretation (Narrative/Emotion)
Word	Red lipstick	A cosmetic product	Confidence, femininity, vulnerability	Simbol usaha tampil percaya diri namun tetap rapuh.
Phrase	In my party dress, in red lipstick, with no one to impress	Dressed up for an event	Loneliness, rejection	Persiapan yang berakhir dengan kekecewaan.
Clause	Standing there in my party dress, in red lipstick, with no one to impress	Physically standing, dressed nicely	Public humiliation, internal pain	Menunjukkan kesedihan yang tidak tertutupi meski berpenampilan sempurna.
Sentence	And it was like slow motion, standing there in my party dress, in red lipstick, with	Comparison to slow motion	Emotional shock, frozen grief	Momen puncak kesedihan saat harapan dikhianati.

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From the Analysis of the Denotative and Connotative Meaning of the five song the researcher found out that

Based on the analysis of the five selected songs in Red (Taylor's Version), it was found that denotative and connotative meanings appear consistently and complement each other across various linguistic levels—word, phrase, clause, and sentence. This directly addresses the two research problems: (1) how denotative and connotative meanings are expressed, and (2) how these meanings are distributed at different linguistic levels.

The denotative meaning in Taylor Swift's lyrics functions as a literal framework, providing concrete references to objects, actions, or states, such as the color red, physical entities like a Maserati, or places such as a dead-end street. This literal meaning serves as the initial point of reference that allows listeners to visualize the scenes or situations described.

However, the lyrical depth primarily lies in the connotative meaning. Almost every denotative element is paired with emotional or symbolic associations that expand beyond its literal sense. For instance, the word red not only refers to a physical color but also connotes passion, love, anger, and heartbreak. The image of a cold hard ground does not merely describe a physical surface but symbolizes an emotional low point in a relationship. Similarly, the expression break me like a promise transforms the literal act of breaking a promise into a metaphor for betrayal and emotional devastation.

At the word level, connotations often emerge through symbols, objects, or actions that carry emotional weight. At the phrase level, connotative meaning is intensified through combinations of words that create specific emotional imagery, such as break and burn and end, which conveys the recurring destruction of relationships. At the clause level, denotative and connotative meanings merge in metaphors and comparisons, for example, Loving him is like driving a new Maserati down a dead-end street, which juxtaposes luxury and excitement with futility. At the sentence level, complete syntactic structures enable the full delivery of an emotional narrative, as in "It was like slow motion, standing there in my party dress, in red lipstick, with no one to impress," which combines physical description with the emotional shock of abandonment.

The interpretation indicates that denotative and connotative meanings are not separate entities but operate in a synergistic relationship. Denotation provides referential clarity, while connotation adds emotional depth, builds atmosphere, and guides the listener toward experiencing the feelings conveyed in the song. Through this interplay, Taylor Swift successfully communicates narratives that are not only informative but also affective and universally relatable.

Thus, this study affirms that a complete understanding of meaning in the lyrics of Red (Taylor's Version) requires examining both layers of meaning simultaneously at each linguistic level. This approach not only reveals the artistic quality of the language but also explains how such language creates a strong emotional connection between the work and its audience.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that denotative and connotative meanings operate together in Taylor Swift's Red (Taylor's Version) to create emotional depth and narrative power.

Denotative meanings provide literal clarity, while connotative meanings dominate by evoking cultural, symbolic, and emotional associations. Across all levels—word, phrase, clause, and sentence—the interplay of denotation and connotation illustrates Leech's (1981) theory that connotative meaning often enriches and expands literal interpretation in artistic texts.

The findings confirm that Swift's songwriting exemplifies the richness of semantic layering in popular music. The study also contributes to pedagogical practice, showing that lyrics can be used as teaching material for semantics and figurative language. Future research could extend this analysis to other albums or compare Swift's lyrical style with that of other contemporary artists.

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