

A SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF AMBIGUITY IN THE SONG LYRICS OF “AUGUST” BY TAYLOR SWIFT

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji ambiguitas dalam lirik lagu “August” karya Taylor Swift. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk mengidentifikasi ungkapan ambigu yang terdapat dalam lirik, mengklasifikasikan jenis ambiguitas, serta menafsirkan kemungkinan maknanya. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif karena data dianalisis dalam bentuk kata, frasa, dan kalimat. Sumber data utama penelitian ini berasal dari lirik lagu “August” yang dipublikasikan di situs Genius. Data dikumpulkan melalui teknik dokumentasi dan pencatatan, kemudian dianalisis dengan mengidentifikasi ungkapan ambigu dan mengelompokkannya ke dalam ambiguitas leksikal dan ambiguitas struktural. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa ambiguitas leksikal lebih dominan dibandingkan ambiguitas struktural dalam lirik lagu tersebut. Beberapa kata dan frasa seperti “August”, “mine”, “it all”, dan “us” memiliki lebih dari satu kemungkinan makna tergantung pada konteksnya. Selain itu, ambiguitas struktural ditemukan pada beberapa baris lirik seperti “Meet me behind the mall” dan “Back when we were still changin’ for the better” yang dapat ditafsirkan dengan cara yang berbeda. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa ambiguitas dalam lagu tidak hanya menjadi ciri kebahasaan, tetapi juga menjadi perangkat stilistika penting yang memperkuat makna emosional dan naratif dalam lirik. Kata kunci: Ambiguitas, Semantik, Lirik Lagu

Abstract

This study examines ambiguity in the song lyrics of “August” by Taylor Swift. The objectives of this study are to identify the ambiguous expressions found in the lyrics, classify the types of ambiguity, and interpret their possible meanings. This study used a qualitative descriptive method because the data were analyzed in the form of words, phrases, and sentences. The primary data source was taken from the lyrics of “August” published on the Genius website. The data were collected through documentation and note-taking techniques, while the analysis was conducted by identifying ambiguous expressions and classifying them into lexical ambiguity and structural ambiguity. The findings show that lexical ambiguity appears more frequently than structural ambiguity in the lyrics. Several words and phrases such as “August”, “mine”, “it all”, and “us” contain more than one possible meaning depending on the context. In addition, structural ambiguity appears in several lines such as “Meet me behind the mall” and “Back when we were still changin’ for the better”, which can be interpreted in different

ways. The study concludes that ambiguity in the song is not only a linguistic feature but also an important stylistic device that strengthens the emotional and narrative meaning of the lyrics. Keywords: Ambiguity, Semantics, Song Lyrics

INTRODUCTION

Language is essentially a system for expressing meaning, and semantics plays a central role in examining how meaning is constructed and interpreted. One important issue in semantic studies is ambiguity, which occurs when a linguistic expression has more than one possible meaning. Ambiguity is not simply a problem in communication, but also a meaningful feature that allows language users to convey complex ideas and emotions. According to Tifani and Damanik (2025), ambiguity arises when words or expressions carry multiple interpretations depending on context, making meaning construction highly dependent on the reader or listener. This phenomenon becomes particularly significant in artistic texts, where meaning is often intentionally left open.

Song lyrics, as a form of creative and expressive language, frequently employ ambiguity to create emotional depth and personal interpretation. Unlike formal texts, song lyrics tend to be indirect, symbolic, and context-dependent, allowing listeners to interpret meanings based on their own experiences. As highlighted by Ulfah and Pujiati (2025), semantic features in song lyrics are often used to express complex emotions and layered meanings, making them suitable objects for semantic analysis. Similarly, Fairuz and Madarina (2021) emphasize that ambiguity in song lyrics can lead to multiple interpretations, which enhances the aesthetic and emotional value of the song.

Recent studies have explored ambiguity in song lyrics from various perspectives. Chin and Gunawan (2024) found that lexical ambiguity is widely used in song lyrics to create deeper emotional engagement and interpretative flexibility. In addition, Pratiwi (2023), in her study on a song by Taylor Swift, demonstrated that ambiguity in lyrics can be classified into lexical and structural types, both of which contribute to the richness of meaning. These findings indicate that ambiguity is not random, but rather a deliberate linguistic strategy used by songwriters. However, despite the growing number of studies on ambiguity in music, there is still limited research focusing on songs that present a strong narrative structure combined with emotionally driven ambiguity.

The song “August” by Taylor Swift provides a compelling example of how ambiguity operates within lyrical storytelling. The lyrics contain several expressions that invite multiple

interpretations, such as “*August slipped away into a moment in time*” and “*you were never mine*”. These expressions may carry both literal and figurative meanings, depending on how they are interpreted. For instance, the word “August” may refer to a specific time period or symbolize a fleeting romantic experience. Likewise, phrases such as “*living for the hope of it all*” reflect meanings that are not explicitly defined, requiring deeper semantic interpretation. Such ambiguity makes the song a rich source for analysis within the framework of semantics.

Based on this background, the present study seeks to analyze ambiguity in the song lyrics of “August.” The research problem of this study is how ambiguity is realized in the lyrics and what types of ambiguity are present. Therefore, the objectives of this study are to identify ambiguous expressions in the lyrics, to classify the types of ambiguity, and to interpret their possible meanings. Through this analysis, the study aims to contribute to a better understanding of how ambiguity functions in contemporary song lyrics and how meaning is constructed through linguistic choices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Semantics

Semantics is a branch of linguistics that focuses on the study of meaning in language, including how words, phrases, and sentences convey meaning in different contexts. According to Yule (2016), semantics is concerned with the relationship between linguistic forms and what they represent in the real world. In this sense, meaning is not only derived from the literal definition of words but also influenced by context, interpretation, and the interaction between language users. This perspective is essential in analyzing song lyrics, where meaning is often implicit and requires interpretation beyond the surface level.

2. Ambiguity in Language

Ambiguity is a central concept in semantics, referring to the presence of two or more possible meanings within a single linguistic expression. Tifani and Damanik (2025) state that ambiguity occurs when a word or sentence can be interpreted in different ways depending on context. This phenomenon is not always problematic; instead, it can enrich communication by allowing flexibility in interpretation.

a. Types of Ambiguity

Ambiguity is generally classified into two main types, namely lexical ambiguity and structural ambiguity. Lexical ambiguity occurs when a single word has multiple meanings, such

as homonyms or polysemous words. Structural ambiguity, on the other hand, arises when a sentence can be interpreted in more than one way due to its grammatical structure (Rodd, Gaskell, & Marslen-Wilson, 2002). In song lyrics, lexical ambiguity is more commonly found because songwriters tend to use words with rich and flexible meanings.

b. Ambiguity in Context

The interpretation of ambiguous expressions depends heavily on context. As argued by Lumbantobing and Ristia (2024), context plays a crucial role in determining which meaning is intended by the speaker or writer. In the absence of clear context, ambiguity allows listeners or readers to construct their own interpretations, making language more dynamic and engaging.

1. Ambiguity in Song Lyrics

Song lyrics represent a unique form of discourse that combines linguistic creativity with emotional expression. Unlike formal texts, song lyrics often rely on figurative language, symbolism, and ambiguity to convey meaning. Ulfah and Pujiati (2025) explain that semantic features in song lyrics are used to express complex emotions, which are often difficult to communicate directly. As a result, ambiguity becomes a common stylistic device in music.

a. Function of Ambiguity in Lyrics

Ambiguity in song lyrics serves several functions. It allows songwriters to express emotions in a subtle and indirect manner, and it enables listeners to relate the lyrics to their own personal experiences. Fairuz and Madarina (2021) found that ambiguity enhances the aesthetic value of songs by creating multiple layers of meaning. This multiplicity of meaning makes songs more engaging and memorable.

b. Previous Studies on Ambiguity in Song Lyrics

Several studies have investigated ambiguity in song lyrics. Chin and Gunawan (2024) analyzed lexical ambiguity in an album and found that ambiguous expressions contribute to deeper emotional engagement. Similarly, Pratiwi (2023), in her study on a song by Taylor Swift, identified both lexical and structural ambiguity as important elements in meaning construction. These studies demonstrate that ambiguity is a significant aspect of lyrical analysis and can provide insights into how meaning is conveyed in music.

Theoretical Framework of the Study

Based on the theories discussed above, this study adopts a semantic approach to analyze ambiguity in song lyrics. The analysis focuses on identifying ambiguous expressions,

classifying them into lexical and structural ambiguity, and interpreting their meanings based on context. The framework is supported by the concept that meaning is not fixed but constructed through interpretation, particularly in creative texts such as songs. Therefore, ambiguity is viewed not as a limitation of language but as a resource that enriches meaning and interpretation.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative descriptive method because the purpose of the research was to identify, classify, and interpret ambiguous expressions found in the song lyrics of “August” by Taylor Swift. Qualitative research is suitable for semantic analysis because it focuses on describing language phenomena in depth and interpreting meaning based on context. According to Creswell and Creswell (2014), qualitative research is appropriate when researchers seek to understand and interpret textual data in its natural setting. In this study, the textual data consisted of words, phrases, and sentences in the lyrics that contain more than one possible meaning.

The primary data source of this research was the song lyrics of “August,” taken from the official lyric transcription published on the Genius website. The song was selected because it contains several expressions that potentially reflect lexical and structural ambiguity. The data of this study were limited to words, phrases, and clauses that indicate multiple meanings or unclear interpretations.

The data collection process was conducted through documentation and note-taking techniques. First, the researcher read the lyrics repeatedly to understand the overall context and storyline of the song. Second, the researcher identified words, phrases, and lines that appeared to have more than one interpretation. Third, the researcher highlighted and listed the ambiguous expressions found in the lyrics. Finally, the researcher grouped the identified data into categories based on the type of ambiguity.

The data were analyzed using the semantic theory of ambiguity proposed by Saeed (2016) and supported by the classification of lexical and structural ambiguity discussed by Rodd, Gaskell, and Marslen-Wilson (2002). The analysis was carried out in several steps. First, each ambiguous expression was identified in the lyrics. Second, the researcher classified the expression into lexical ambiguity or structural ambiguity. Lexical ambiguity refers to a word with multiple meanings, while structural ambiguity refers to a sentence or phrase that can be

interpreted in more than one way due to its grammatical structure. Third, the researcher interpreted the possible meanings of each expression based on the context of the song. Finally, the findings were described and explained in detail to show how ambiguity contributes to the emotional and narrative meaning of the song.

To ensure the validity of the data, the researcher used theoretical triangulation by comparing several semantic theories and previous studies related to ambiguity in song lyrics. This process helped strengthen the interpretation of the data and reduce subjectivity in the analysis. In addition, the findings were supported by previous studies on ambiguity in song lyrics to ensure consistency between the present study and earlier research.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Findings

The analysis of the song lyrics of “August” by Taylor Swift shows that ambiguity appears in several forms throughout the lyrics. The ambiguous expressions found in the song can be classified into two main types, namely lexical ambiguity and structural ambiguity. Lexical ambiguity was found more frequently because many words and phrases in the song carry more than one possible meaning. Structural ambiguity appeared in several lines where the grammatical arrangement allowed more than one interpretation.

Table 1. Lexical Ambiguity Found in the Lyrics of “August”

No	Lyrics Excerpt	Possible Meanings	Explanation
1	“August” in “August slipped away into a moment in time”	“August” may refer to the month or symbolize a temporary relationship and memory	The word “August” does not only refer to a specific month, but also represents a short-lived romance that passed quickly.
2	“August” in “August sipped away like a bottle of wine”	“August” may represent time, romance, or emotional experience	The line compares August to wine that slowly disappears, suggesting that both the month and the relationship faded gradually.

3	<p>“<i>Mine</i>” in “Mine” may mean possession, “Cause it was love, or emotional belonging never mine”</p>	<p>The speaker does not mean physical ownership, but rather that the relationship never truly belonged to her emotionally.</p>
4	<p>“<i>Mine</i>” in “Mine” may refer to romantic ownership or emotional attachment were never mine”</p>	<p>The line shows that the speaker realizes the other person was never fully committed to her.</p>
5	<p>“<i>Write my name on it</i>” in “Wishin’ I could write my name on it”</p>	<p>The phrase may mean possession, emotional attachment, or desire for permanance</p> <p>The speaker wishes she could make the relationship official or permanent.</p>
6	<p>“<i>Had you</i>” in “I remember thinkin’ I had you”</p>	<p>The phrase may refer to being in a relationship or feeling emotionally connected</p> <p>The speaker once believed that she had the other person’s love and attention.</p>
7	<p>“<i>It all</i>” in “To live for the hope of it all”</p>	<p>“It all” may refer to love, a relationship, or the possibility of being together</p> <p>The phrase is vague because it does not clearly explain what the speaker hopes for.</p>
8	<p>“<i>Us</i>” in “So much for summer love and saying ‘us’”</p>	<p>“Us” may refer to a real relationship or the dream of being together</p> <p>The speaker may refer either to an actual relationship or only to an imagined future together.</p>
9	<p>“<i>Mine to lose</i>” in “Cause you</p>	<p>The phrase may suggest that the speaker never truly had the person in the relationship</p> <p>The speaker feels heartbreak because she realizes she cannot lose someone who was never really hers.</p>

weren't mine to
lose"

Table 2. Structural Ambiguity Found in the Lyrics of "August"

No	<i>Lyrics Excerpt</i>	Possible Meanings	Explanation
1	"But I can see us lost in the memory"	The line may refer to both people remembering the relationship or only the speaker remembering it	The sentence does not clearly show whether both people share the memory or whether only the speaker is trapped in it.
2	"And I can see us twisted in bedsheets"	The line may describe physical intimacy or emotional entanglement	The phrase can be interpreted literally as being physically close or figuratively as being emotionally involved in a complicated relationship.
3	"And I can see us twisted in bedsheets"	The line may describe physical intimacy or emotional entanglement	The phrase can be interpreted literally as being physically close or figuratively as being emotionally involved in a complicated relationship.
4	"Back when we were still changin' for the better"	The phrase may refer to personal growth or improvement in the relationship	It is unclear whether the change refers to the individuals themselves or to the relationship between them.
5	"Cancel plans just in case you'd call"	The line may describe waiting for a call or emotional dependence on the person	The speaker may simply be waiting for a phone call, but it also suggests emotional attachment and hope.
6	"Meet me behind the mall"	The phrase may suggest a secret meeting place or symbolize hidden love	The line can refer to a real place, but it also symbolizes a relationship that must remain hidden.

7	<p>“Remember when I pulled up and said ‘Get in the car’”</p>	<p>The line may describe a literal event or symbolize escape and intimacy</p>	<p>The phrase may simply describe a memory, but it can also represent freedom, adventure, or emotional closeness.</p>
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a. Lexical Ambiguity

Lexical ambiguity occurs when a word or phrase has more than one possible meaning. The most dominant example in the song is the repeated use of the word “*August*”. In the line “*August slipped away into a moment in time,*” the word “*August*” does not only refer to the eighth month of the year. It also symbolizes a temporary romantic experience that disappeared quickly. The expression “*slipped away*” strengthens the idea that August represents something fleeting and difficult to hold onto.

Another example can be found in the line “*Cause it was never mine*”. The word “*mine*” can literally mean possession, but in the context of the song, it refers more to emotional belonging or romantic attachment. The singer does not mean ownership in a physical sense, but rather the feeling that the relationship was never truly hers.

The phrase “*living for the hope of it all*” also contains lexical ambiguity. The phrase “*it all*” is not clearly explained in the lyrics. It may refer to love, the relationship, or even the dream of a future together. Because the referent is unclear, listeners are invited to interpret the meaning based on their own emotional understanding.

b. Structural Ambiguity

Structural ambiguity occurs when a phrase or sentence can be interpreted in more than one way because of its grammatical arrangement. One example appears in the line “*Meet me behind the mall*”. Literally, the line refers to a meeting place. However, the phrase may also symbolize secrecy, hidden affection, or a relationship that cannot be shown publicly. The ambiguity does not only come from the words themselves but also from the context in which the phrase is used.

Another example is the line “*Back when we were still changin’ for the better*” This line can be interpreted in two ways. First, it may refer to the personal growth of the individuals in the relationship. Second, it may refer to the improvement of the relationship itself. Because the sentence does not clearly specify what is changing, the meaning remains open to interpretation.

Discussion

The findings indicate that lexical ambiguity is more dominant than structural ambiguity in the lyrics of “August.” This result is similar to the findings of Chin and Gunawan (2024), who found that lexical ambiguity frequently appears in song lyrics because it creates emotional richness and interpretative flexibility. In “August”, ambiguous words such as “August”, “mine”, and “it” are not used randomly. Instead, they function as important devices that allow listeners to connect the song to their own experiences of love, memory, and loss.

The repeated use of the word “August” is particularly important because it serves both as a literal reference to time and as a symbol of a short-lived relationship. This reflects the idea proposed by Fairuz and Madarina (2021) that ambiguity in song lyrics enhances emotional depth and allows multiple layers of meaning to coexist. Listeners may interpret August as a month, a memory, a person, or a romantic period that eventually ended.

The findings also support the argument of Pratiwi (2023), who stated that ambiguity in songs by Taylor Swift often appears through emotionally loaded expressions that are not directly explained. Taylor Swift tends to leave certain meanings open, which encourages listeners to engage actively with the lyrics. In this song, expressions such as “*you were never mine*” and “*living for the hope of it all*” are emotionally powerful because they are not fully specific. This openness allows different listeners to interpret the song differently based on their personal experiences.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that ambiguity contributes not only to meaning but also to the storytelling aspect of the song. “August” tells the story of a temporary relationship that is remembered with nostalgia and regret. The use of ambiguous language helps create a sense of uncertainty, which matches the emotional theme of the song. In this way, ambiguity is not simply a linguistic phenomenon but also an artistic strategy used to strengthen the emotional impact of the lyrics.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that ambiguity plays an important role in the song lyrics of “August” by Taylor Swift because it helps create deeper emotional and narrative meaning. The findings show that there are two types of ambiguity in the song, namely lexical ambiguity and structural ambiguity, with lexical ambiguity appearing more frequently. Words and phrases such as “August”, “mine”, “it all”, and “us” contain multiple meanings that allow listeners to interpret

the song differently based on their own experiences. In addition, structural ambiguity in expressions such as “*Meet me behind the mall*” and “*Back when we were still changin’ for the better*” strengthens the themes of secrecy, nostalgia, and temporary love. Therefore, the use of ambiguity in the song is not accidental, but functions as an important stylistic device that enriches the meaning of the lyrics and makes the song more emotionally powerful.

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