

A Deixis Analysis and Narrating Strategies in Taylor Swift's Songs: *Betty, August, and Cardigan*

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Abstract:

As a mode of communication, songs are frequently used not only to express emotions but also tell the stories of the author's experience or observations about life. Despite the abundance of research conducted to analyze the meaning of song lyrics, the way songs are mechanically used to convey interconnected narratives remains under-researched. This descriptive qualitative study aims to examine the narrative link between the selected songs in the *folklore* album (*Betty, August, and Cardigan*) by Taylor Swift through deictic expressions. The three songs were selected based on Swift's statement on her YouTube account that the songs tell a love triangle story. The researchers collected the lyrics of the three songs, compiled the lyrics into TXT files, identified the deictic expressions, categorized the deixis into personal, spatial, and temporal and analyzed their interconnectedness using NVivo 12 software. A mind map visualization was made to demonstrate the connection between the deixis in the songs based on the similarity of the deixis and the referents. This study confirms that the three songs written by Taylor Swift are related, as shown by the similarity of the referents in the personal, spatial, and temporal deixis.

Keywords: deixis; narrating; songs; Taylor Swift

Abstrak:

Sebagai sarana komunikasi, lagu sering digunakan tidak hanya untuk mengekspresikan emosi, tetapi juga menceritakan pengalaman atau pengamatan sang penulis tentang kehidupan. Meskipun sudah banyak penelitian yang dilakukan untuk menganalisis makna lirik lagu, cara lagu digunakan secara mekanis untuk menyampaikan narasi yang saling berhubungan masih belum banyak diteliti. Penelitian kualitatif deskriptif ini bertujuan untuk meneliti hubungan naratif antara lagu-lagu yang dipilih dari album *folklore* (*Betty, August, dan Cardigan*) oleh Taylor Swift melalui ekspresi deiktik. Ketiga lagu tersebut dipilih berdasarkan pernyataan Swift di akun YouTube-nya bahwa ketiga lagu tersebut menceritakan kisah cinta segitiga. Peneliti mengumpulkan lirik dari ketiga lagu tersebut, mengubah lirik menjadi file TXT, mengidentifikasi ekspresi deiktik, mengkategorikan deiksis ke dalam personal, spasial, dan temporal, serta menganalisis keterkaitan antar deiksis tersebut dengan menggunakan perangkat lunak NVivo 12. Visualisasi peta pikiran dibuat untuk menunjukkan hubungan antara deiksis dalam lagu-lagu tersebut berdasarkan kemiripan deiksis dan referennya. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa ketiga lagu yang ditulis oleh Taylor Swift memiliki

keterkaitan, yang ditunjukkan dengan adanya kesamaan referen pada deiksis personal, spasial, dan temporal.

Kata kunci: deiksis; narasi; lagu; Taylor Swift

INTRODUCTION

“These 3 songs explore a love triangle from all 3 people’s perspectives at different times in their lives,” wrote Taylor Swift on her YouTube account replying to a netizen’s comment.

The entertainment industry has been growing fast recently, especially the music industry. According to the official website of International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (2023), the recorded music increased by 9% worldwide in 2022. Moreover, the growth in the music industry is affected by the rise of many new talents, bands, and music events. Therefore, as in the case of many talents in the music industry, many songs are released. Billboard reported that there are more than 100,000 songs uploaded each day to SoundCloud, let alone other streaming applications (Peoples, 2023). In addition, with the growth of the entertainment industry and digital technology, everyone has an equal opportunity to express themselves in various forms of media, including songs. Consequently, there are meanings to be conveyed in each song. Thus, many singers became well-known for storytelling through songs, such as Taylor Swift.

One of the story-telling genius singers is Taylor Swift, the 14 Grammy Awards winner. She is well-known for captivating the audience’s heart not only with her love stories but also with self-worth and family (Lee, 2023). Since then, she has elicited many record in the music industry, such as her re-recorded version of All Too Well became the all-time longest No. 1 hit (Kaufman, 2021). Her popularity grew as her long-awaited tour, The Eras Tour 2023, and the documentation entitled Taylor Swift: The Eras Tour were released in theatres worldwide. Furthermore, the existence of social media, such as TikTok and Instagram, helps promote her songs and Swift’s tours.

Numerous studies have been conducted to analyze meaning in literary works using the linguistics approach. Researchers have analyzed non-literal meaning in novel Nugroho (2020) and songs Putri et al. (2022). The researchers note that writers often use certain language choices to hide literal meaning, give aesthetic impressions and emphasize the character's point of view. Moreover, researchers analyze implicature in poems (Natsir et al., 2021; Nikade, 2024) and novels (Kurniati et al., 2024; Nanda Sofia, 2015). The researchers argue that writing skill can be seen in the way the writers maintain the relevance of the story to the message that

they want to convey without ambiguity using non-literal meaning. In addition, studies of semiotic analysis have been conducted in songs (Ardimansyah et al., 2024; Simorangkir et al., 2022), novel Sari and Atikurrahman (2022), and poems (Padmasari et al., 2024). The studies confirm that writers often use figurative words to portray the characters and emphasize the communicative elements of their work to the readers. Hence, the studies above reflect that songwriters, poets, and authors frequently use metaphoric language to symbolize the character's viewpoint in their works.

Moreover, many studies have analyzed the use of deixis to reveal and meaning in literary works, especially songs. Inayah et al. (2023) analyze deixis in *Kopi Gayo* album and found that the first and second pronouns are dominantly used in the songs to express the emotional connection between the singer and the audience. Ondang and Putra (2023) explore the deixis in worship songs and found that deictical expression are used to show the God's greatness and to praise the Lord. Hamdani (2023) analyze the deixis in *For The Rest of My Life* song and demonstrate that deictic expression was used to emphasized the singer's commitment and relationship to his god. Rohaili and Syaputri (2024) examined 12 songs in *Nicole* album and found that personal deixis is dominantly used because the album tells the personal life of the singer. Moreover, a study by Arvellita (2023) identified the deictic expression in Taylor Swift's album *folklore* to determine the meaning of five songs (*Invisible String, Exile, August, Seven, and This is Me Trying*). The research showed that all deictic expressions were used and are associated with clarity of the song's meaning interpretation as well as strengthening the song's themes. Clearly, the researchers point to how deixis has been used by singers and songwriters to convey meaning in songs and create emotional bonds with listeners.

Many research has been conducted to analyze meaning in literary works, however, previous research in this field failed to establish a narrative link between various works to form stories through deictic expression. Deixis is often used by authors to narrate characters' experiences and actions in literary works (Dancygier, 2019; Ibnu, 2018). Suliman (2022) claims that authors use deixis to reflect their point of view in the narration and mark their style in writing. However, the audience's cognitive ability is also important to understand the use of deixis that form narratives (Amaniyah & Rumilah, 2023; Reybrouck, 2015; Zhang, 2022).

This research is aimed at analyzing how deixis can be applied to form narratives in different songs. This study aims to examine the link between the three songs in the *folklore* album (*Betty, August, and Cardigan*) through deictic expressions. The study seeks to answer the questions of: (1) What are the deictic expressions that occur in the selected songs of Taylor

Swift’s *folklore* album? (2) How are the deictic expressions in the selected songs interconnected in constructing narration?

RESEARCH METHODS

The researchers utilized a descriptive qualitative method as the research design. The objects of this study were three selected songs from Taylor Swift’s album *folklore*, entitled *Betty*, *August*, and *Cardigan*. Despite many songs in the *folklore* album, the researchers particularly chose the selected songs based on Taylor Swift’s statement on her YouTube account that the three songs explore the story of a love triangle.

The data are in the form of song lyrics collected by listening to the songs on Spotify and using lyrics from Google. To ensure the data are valid, the researchers matched the lyrics from Google with the official lyric videos of *Betty*, *August*, and *Cardigan* on YouTube. Furthermore, the researchers used the Notepad application to convert the lyrics into TXT files. The TXT files were then uploaded to an application called NVivo 12 to facilitate the researchers’ observation and analysis of the data. The researchers made three codes in NVivo 12: personal, spatial, and temporal. To guide the analysis, this study applied Yule (1996) deixis theory. The data were then presented using tables showing each deixis type. To answer the first research question, the researcher analyzed deixis in each song showing the referents based on the lyrics in each song. To answer the second research question, the researcher utilized the context of the selected songs to see the connection between the songs and visualize it based on the similarity of the deixis types and the referents.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Deixis found in Taylor Swift’s selected songs, *Betty*, *August*, and *Cardigan*.

Table 1. Personal Deixis

SONG TITLE		
Betty	August	Cardigan
I	I	You
You	You	I
Me	Us	They
Your	Mine	Your
Myself	Your	Me
Him	Me	We
She	We	
Her		

The Personal Deixis used in *Betty*, the pronoun I/me/myself refers to a character associated with James. Moreover, the songwriter used the second personal pronoun you/your, which in the analysis refers to Betty. Meanwhile, ‘she’ refers to several characters. In addition,

'him' refers to a third-person singular. Hence, there are three characters in this song, I refer to James, you refer to Betty, and she refers to somebody else, named Ms. X.

Data 1: "Betty, I won't make assumptions"

Data 2: "When she pulled up like a figment of my worst intentions. She said "James, get in, let's drive"

Data 1 shows the personal pronoun I is talking to a character named Betty. While data 1 does not give any information of the character's name, data 2 verifies that I is associated with James since a she character calls him.

Data 3: "Betty, I'm here on your doorstep".

From the lyric above, your is a reference to Betty, it can be concluded that the pronoun you is used in this song to refer to Betty.

Data 4: "You heard the rumors from Inez. You can't believe a word she says,"

The deictic expression she in the lyric is a reference to Inez. While the lyric does not mention further about Inez, it can be concluded that Inez is James and Betty's acquaintance.

Data 5: "Just thinking of you when she pulled up like a figment of my worst intentions. She said "James, get in, let's drive"

Data 6: "Slept next to her, but I dreamt of you all summer long."

In data 5 and 6, the deictic expression she/her refers to an unknown woman who plays a role in the unveiling event. However, it is safe to suggest the name to Ms. X

In *August*, I/me/mine refers to a first-person singular. Whereas you/your refers to the partner. Moreover, we/us refers to both of them as in the lyric. Hence, the personal deixis in *August* narrates the story of I and you.

Data 7: "I never needed anything more."

I in the lyric refer to a first-person singular. However, the lyric does not give any context for the person's name or gender.

Data 8: "I remember thinkin' I had you."

From the lyric above, the songwriter picture you as the first-person singular's partner. Similarly, here the lyric does not provide any context of the partner's name or gender.

Data 9: "I can see us twisted in bedsheets."

Data 10: "Back when we were still changin' for the better"

Data 3 and data 4 show that the deictic expression we/us refers to both the first person singular and the partner since the lyric implies intimate narration.

Cardigan tells a story from the first person's point of view and her partner. I/me refers to a first-person singular. You/your refers to the partner. Moreover, 'we' refers to both of them. In addition, 'they' refers to third person plural. Thus, it is save to say that there are two character in this song, I and you.

Data 11: "I knew you. Hand under my sweatshirt. Baby, kiss it better."

Similar to *August*, in *Cardigan*, I refer to a first-person singular. However, the song lyric does not give any context for the person's name or gender.

Data 12: "I knew you, leavin' like a father"

From the data 11, it can be hypothesized that you refer to the first-person singular partner. Moreover, the researchers identified the lyric suggests the first-person singular partner is male. This is evident from the lyric "like father". Thereby, it can be inferred that the first-person singular refers to a female subject

Data 13: "To kiss in cars and downtown bars was all we needed."

The lyric implies intimate narration, thus deictic expression we might refer to both the first person singular and the partner.

Data 14: "When you are young, they assume you know nothing."

Here the lyric picture the narrator speaks to herself, and the pronoun they refer to the third person plural without any context of who it refers to.

Table 2. Spatial Deixis

SONG TITLE		
Betty	August	Cardigan
Your homeroom	Your door	On cobblestones
Your house	Us twisted in bedsheets	A streetlight
The far side of the gym	At school	Under someone's bed
Nowhere	Behind the mall	In cars
Your party	The car	Downtown bars
The garden		Last train
Broken cobblestone		Grocery line
Get in		My front porch light
Slept next to her		
Your doorstep		
The porch		
A streetlight		
My car		

In *Betty*, the spatial deixis refers to places related to James and Betty. Your homeroom, house, party, garden, doorsteps, and porch refer to Betty's as explained in the personal deixis that *you* in *Betty* refer to Betty.

Data 15: “Your favorite song was playing from the far side of the gym. I was nowhere to be found. I hate the crowds, you know that.”

The lyric indicates that the word ‘nowhere’ refers to James place as explained in the personal deixis that I refer to a character named James.

Data 16: “I was walking home on broken cobblestones.”

‘Broken cobblestone’ in the lyric picture the cobblestone on the way to James’s home.

Data 17: “She said, “James, get in, let's drive,””

‘Get in’ refers to Ms. X’s car, in concordance with the spatial deixis that she relates to Inez and Ms. X. However, the lyric highlights that she in this context is Ms. X because she is a third person in James and Betty’s relationship.

Data 18: “Kissin' in my car again. Stopped at a streetlight. You know I miss you.”

Data 4 shows that ‘My car’ refers to James’s car as explained in the personal deixis that my/I refer to James. In addition, the lyric points out that ‘a streetlight’ refers to a place where James and Betty used to spend time together.

Data 19: “Slept next to her, but I dreamt of you all summer long”

‘Slept next to her’ refers to where James slept with Ms. X in concordance with personal deixis that pronoun she relates to Ms. X.

In *August*, the spatial deixis refers to secret clandestine or places rather intimate. The secluded area, for instance, is behind the mall. Meanwhile, the intimate place is bedsheets.

Data 20: “Salt air, and the rust on your door.”

Your door refers to the partner’s place as explained in the personal deixis that you/your refers to the partner.

Data 21: “I can see us twisted in bedsheets.”

Bedsheets symbolize a bed where the first person singular and the lover have intercourse since the personal deixis us refer to the first person singular and the partner.

Data 22: “Will you call when you're back at school?”

From the lyric, it can be inferred that school refers to the partner’s school. However, the lyric does not give any context as to whether the first person singular attend the same school.

Data 23: “Meet me behind the mall”

Behind the mall refers to a desolate location that might suggest secrecy or a clandestine meeting from the lyric context.

Data 24: “I pulled up and said, “Get in the car.””

The lyric above shows that the character I is asking someone to get in the car. Thus, it can be concluded that the car refers to the first-person singular car.

In *Cardigan*, the spatial deixis refers to places related to the first person singular and her partner.

Data 25: “High heels on cobblestones.”

The lyric above picture the character is walking on cobblestones.

Data 26: “I knew you dancin' in your Levi's, drunk under a streetlight.”

From the lyric, the audience can imagine the character I and her partner having a memorable time under a streetlight.

Data 27: “When I felt like I was an old cardigan under someone's bed.”

While the songwriter used figurative language in this lyric, it postulates that the phrase “an old cardigan under someone’s bed” refers to when the central character feels unwanted. Thus, it is not merely spatial deixis, but also temporal deixis.

Data 28: “To kiss in cars and downtown bars.”

The data shows the audience a picture of the intimacy of the central character and her partner.

Data 29: “I knew you steppin' on the last train.”

Data 5 shows that I character imagines her partner riding the last train in the schedule.

Data 30: “I'd curse you for the longest time, chasin' shadows in the grocery line.”

Here the character imagines herself haunting her partner as if “chasin' shadows in the grocery line.”

Data 31: “You'd be standin' in my front porch light.”

The lyric above shows the partner coming to the central character’s house.

Table 3. Temporal Deixis

SONG TITLE		
Betty	August	Cardigan
One time	August	Once in twenty lifetimes
Most times	A moment in time	When you are young
This time	Was	When I was young
Summer	Summer	Once the thrill expired
Seventeen		When I felt like I was an old cardigan
Those days		
Weeks now		
Right now		
The last time		

In *Betty*, the temporal deixis shows the time that James apologized to Betty and an event that happened before that.

Data 32: “Betty, one time I was riding on my skateboard when I passed your house.”

The lyric demonstrates the time that James passed Betty’s house.

Data 33: “You heard the rumors from Inez. You can't believe a word she says, most times, but this time it was true.”

From the lyric above, the audience can define Inez as a gossip as she is pictured to spread many rumors.

Data 34: “Would you trust me if I told you it was just a summer thing?”

The data above shows summer as the period of an event that makes Betty distance herself from James. Thus, the lyric frame James as if he is talking to Betty.

Data 35: “I'm only 17, I don't know anything.”

The lyric note that James was seventeen when the event happened.

Data 36 : “Betty, right now is the last time I can dream about what happens when you see my face again.”

The lyric indicates James’s desperation for the last time when he hoped to see Betty again.

In *August*, the temporal deixis indicates the time when the central character and the partner were together. The lyric pictured a romantic period of the central character’s point of view.

Data 37: “I can see us lost in the memory, August slipped away into a moment in time.”

Here August refers to a specific month when the central character and the partner were together. Further, the lyric pictures the central character’s feeling as time flies fast.

Data 38: “So much for summer love.”

The lyric suggests summer as a romantic period for the central character and the partner.

In *Betty*, the temporal deixis suggests the first-person singular in the future timeline remembering the past. Moreover, it is proven by the use of past tense in the lyrics.

Data 39: “I knew everything when I was young.”

The data above demonstrate the character talking to herself as if she is remembering her younger self from the lexical choice ‘was’.

Data 40: “I knew you'd miss me once the thrill expired.”

Here the lyric pictured the central character as if she was talking to her partner about a time when her partner had lost the thrill of something he did.

Data 41: “When I felt like I was an old cardigan under someone's bed.”

The use of the figurative word “an old cardigan” associated with something old, unwanted, or forgotten. Hence, the lyric might indicate the time when the central character felt unwanted.

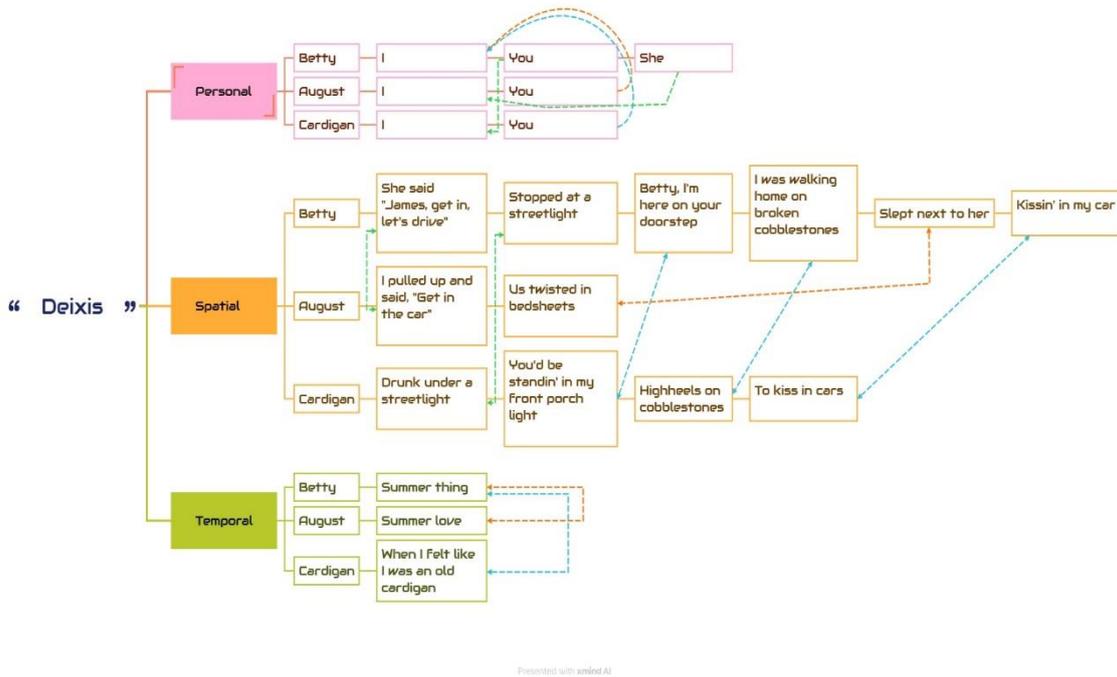


Figure 1: Connection between the deixis of the selected songs

Personal deixis shows that the three songs relate to three people as demonstrated by the deictic expression ‘I’, ‘you’ and ‘she’. In *Betty*, the story is told from James's perspective. The personal deixis suggests that there are two other characters in *Betty*, that are Betty “Betty, I won't make assumptions,” and Ms. X who is associated with the personal pronoun *she*, “when she pulled up like a figment of my worst intentions. She said “James, get in, let's drive.”. In *August*, the personal deixis aligns with *Betty*, indicating that the story is told from Ms. X point of view about her relationship with James. Meanwhile, the deictic expressions in *Cardigan* are interconnected with *Betty*, hinting that the story is told from Betty’s perspective about her relationship with James.

Spatial deixis points out recurrent settings that emphasize the intimacy between the three characters in each song. The personal deixis in *Betty* is shown to be in concordance with *August* and *Cardigan* indicates that James spends his time with both Betty and Ms. X. However, the relationship of spatial deixis in *Betty* and *August* shows that the places James spends with Ms. X are rather intimate. For instance, in *Betty*, “Slept next to her,” and in *August*, “I can see us twisted in bedsheets.” In contrast, the relationship of spatial deixis between *Betty* and *Cardigan* shows public areas. For instance, in *Betty*, “Kissin' in my car again, stopped at a

streetlight. You know I miss you,” and in *Cardigan*, “I knew you, dancin' in your Levi's, drunk under a streetlight.”

Temporal deixis from the selected songs indicate that the event happens during summer. In *Betty*, the songwriter mentions summer as a summer thing “it was just a summer thing,” whereas in *August*, it is mentioned as summer love, “So much for summer love and saying “us””. It suggests that the temporal deixis share a similar context that alludes to an event that happened during the season. In *Cardigan*, the songwriter does not mention summer. However, there is a phrase that is associated with summer, that is an old cardigan, “when I felt like I was an old cardigan.” The word ‘cardigan’ pictures the summer season as cardigan is a trend fashion during the summer. Furthermore, both temporal deixis in *August* and *Cardigan* are associated with the temporal deixis in *Betty*.

From the analysis above, the researchers confirm that *Betty*, *August*, and *Cardigan* are linked narratives due to the occurrence of personal deixis that refers to the same character, spatial deixis that indicates similar places, and temporal deixis that suggests the same period.

The result showed the connection of the personal, spatial, and temporal deixis in the three selected songs. The personal deixis puts the listener in a dynamic relationship between the three characters, James, Betty, and Ms. X, and their emotional connection. The spatial deixis, on the other hand, does not merely indicate the physical locations, but also reflects the emotional states of the three characters. In *Betty*, the spatial deixis indicates the redemption of the conflict between James and Betty. *August* points to intimate places suggesting secrecy. Meanwhile, *Betty* shows public areas signifying youth love and freedom. In addition, the temporal deixis demonstrates the different times between each character. While *Betty* pictures James after the breakup with Betty, *August* shows the illicit affair between James and Ms. X during the summer, and *Cardigan* signals Betty’s yearning for the past, like in the lyric “when I felt like I was an old cardigan.”

This research offers a deeper insight into how songwriters use deixis as a device to construct multiple narratives. Moreover, it offers a more profound comprehension of how songwriters utilize deixis to enhance the emotional value of their narratives. This study confirms (Arvellita, 2023; Inayah et al., 2023) findings which indicate that deixis plays a pivotal role in articulating the song's themes and resonating with the audience. Moreover, the combination of personal, spatial, and temporal deixis enhances the storytelling, enabling the audience to engage with the narratives from diverse perspectives and periods. This finding is consistent with Suliman (2022), that writers often use deixis to mark the characters’ point of

view, thereby establishing a delightful experience for the audience. Similarly, this finding is in line with (Dancygier, 2019; Ibnu, 2018), indicating the use of deixis as an essential tool to signify the characters' experiences and actions, which as a result adds the narrative structure layer.

Remarkably, the use of figurative temporal deixis in *Cardigan*, "When I felt like I was an old cardigan" which the term cardigan implies summer season, suggests that the songwriter gives aesthetic value to the song as well as distinguishing the timeline from the other two selected songs (Nugroho, 2020; Putri et al., 2022). However, the sophisticated use of figurative deixis in *Cardigan* demonstrates the songwriter's ability to create a varied and cohesive narrative that appeals to listeners. This thorough examination of deixis in song lyrics strengthens previous studies' theoretical frameworks and demonstrates the thoughtful interconnectedness of deixis with narrative construction, providing new insight into the complex relationship between language and storytelling in music.

CONCLUSION(S)

Personal, spatial, and temporal deixis are found in the three selected songs. The personal deixis denotes that there are three central characters, James in *Betty*, Betty in *Cardigan*, and Ms. X in *August*. The spatial deixis reveals that James and Ms. X often meet in secluded areas suggesting secrecy, whereas James and Betty meet in public areas suggesting freedom. Meanwhile, the temporal deixis framed different time of each song. While in *Betty* the songwriter signals a moment after the summer, in *August* picturing the present summer season, in *Cardigan* the songwriter hints that the story is told from a later time in Betty's life.

The songwriter employs deixis to construct narration by shifting perspectives in each song, enabling the listeners to assemble the different point of view. In *Betty*, the songwriter narrates James's regret and desire to fix his relationship with Betty as he cheated on her. In *August*, the narrative shifts to Ms. X, reflecting the forbidden love and her emotional attachment for James. Moreover, in *Cardigan* the narratives shift to Betty, picturing her longing for the past and the loss of love. Hence, the multi-perspective highlights the relationship complexity in the narration.

The researchers only analyzed deixis in three songs from Taylor Swift's *Folklore* album. However, to narrate a story, researchers can also use content analysis. Through content analysis, researchers can find similar word characteristics between one work and another. Hence, content analysis enables researchers to analyze the relationship between several works more thoroughly. Perhaps it is not only these three songs that have similar themes within

Folklore album but also the other songs. In other words, other lyrics may be associated with the same theme, and content analysis can help find links between other songs on the same album, making it possible to analyze the narrative of an album as a whole. Therefore, future research might consider using content analysis.

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