



## Denotative and Connotative Meanings in the Song Lyrics of Cardigan by Taylor Swift

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### Abstract:

This study aims to reveal the denotative and connotative meanings in the song Cardigan by Taylor Swift. This research focuses on the literal meaning and additional meanings conveyed by songwriter through the use of figurative language in the lyrics. The researcher used a qualitative descriptive method with data collection techniques in the form of identification and interpretation of lyrics containing figurative meanings. Researcher used a semantic approach to analyze the denotative and connotative meaning in Taylor Swift's song "Cardigan." The result of the study shows 25 data, with 12 lyrics containing denotative and 13 lyrics containing connotative meanings. Denotative meanings are found in the lyrics "when you are young, they assume you know nothing," "but I knew you," and "dancin' in your levis." Meanwhile, connotative meanings are found in the lyrics "high heels on cobblestones," "old cardigan under someone's bed," and "you drew stars around my scars" to describe the sadness, pain, and process of self-maturation experienced by the main character after going through a complicated romantic relationship. Connotative meaning helps give deeper meaning and convey the main message of the song. The conclusion of this study is that the semantic analysis of the denotative and connotative meanings in the song Cardigan by Taylor Swift helps to reveal the hidden meanings behind the poetic language used in the song's lyrics.

**Keywords:** denotative meaning; connotative meaning; semantic; figurative language; Taylor Swift

### Abstrak:

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengungkap makna denotatif dan konotatif dalam lirik lagu Cardigan karya Taylor Swift. Penelitian ini berfokus pada makna literal dan makna tambahan yang disampaikan penulis melalui penggunaan bahasa kiasan dalam lirik lagu. Peneliti menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif dengan teknik pengumpulan data berupa identifikasi dan interpretasi lirik yang mengandung makna kiasan. Peneliti menggunakan pendekatan semantik untuk menganalisis makna denotatif dan konotatif pada lagu Cardigan karya Taylor Swift. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan 25 data, dengan 12 lirik mengandung makna denotatif dan 13 lirik mengandung makna konotatif. Makna denotatif ditemukan pada lirik "when you are young, they assume you know nothing," "but I knew you," dan "dancin' in your levis." Sementara itu, makna konotatif terdapat pada lirik "high heels on cobblestones," "old cardigan under someone's bed," dan "you drew stars around my scars" untuk menggambarkan perasaan sedih, luka, dan proses pendewasaan diri yang dialami tokoh utama setelah melewati hubungan cinta yang rumit. Makna konotatif membantu memberikan makna yang lebih dalam dan menyampaikan pesan utama dari lagu. Kesimpulan dari penelitian ini adalah analisis semantik makna denotatif dan konotatif pada lagu Cardigan karya Taylor Swift membantu mengungkap makna tersembunyi di balik bahasa puitis yang digunakan dalam lirik lagu.

**Kata kunci:** makna denotatif; makna konotatif; semantik; bahasa kiasan; Taylor Swift



## INTRODUCTION

A song is one of the ways people express themselves through lyrics. Through lyrics and melody, a songwriter can share emotions, ideas, and certain messages (Mawaddah & Rahmat, 2023). However, the choice of words in song lyrics often has double meanings that can lead to different interpretations from each listener. This happens because every songwriter has their own unique writing style that sets them apart from others. Song lyrics are usually inspired by the songwriter's personal life, relationships with family, friends, or even romantic partners (Pasingi et al., 2022). Based on the context of song lyrics, semantic analysis plays a role in interpreting denotative meaning as the literal meaning, and connotative meaning as the additional meaning that comes from emotions or cultural context. By using this approach, the messages and feelings the songwriter wants to express can be understood more deeply. In this study, the researcher chose Cardigan as the main object of analysis because it is one of Taylor Swift's most popular songs, widely listened to by people of different ages. Taylor Swift wrote every line in Cardigan with deep meaning, and many listeners may not realize the hidden messages behind the lyrics.

Cardigan is one of the hit songs from her album Folklore. The album was released in 2020. The song belongs to the indie-folk and soft-rock genres. The four-minute track won several awards, including Favorite Music Video at the 2020 American Music Awards. The lyrics tell a high school love triangle story between Betty, James, and Augustine. The song is told from Betty's point of view. The story shows that first love always has a special place in one's heart, even after pain and betrayal. In the song, James once betrayed Betty, but she still forgave him and continued to love him sincerely because she felt that James had always been there for her. Over time, their relationship grew stronger and eventually led to marriage. Each of them has their own point of view about the same love story, which Taylor expresses through different songs in the Folklore album.

Taylor Swift is known as a singer and songwriter from Pennsylvania, United States. She has been active in the music industry for almost two decades since her debut in 2006. Throughout her career, Taylor has produced many works across different genres, including country, pop, rock, and indie folk. Her ability to compose lyrics with unique and meaningful diction and successfully attracting the attention of listeners around the world.

Folklore is Taylor Swift's eighth studio album, released during the COVID-19 lockdown in early 2020. The album was created at a time when many people had to stay at home and limit outdoor activities due to the pandemic. As a result of these policies,



Taylor's big concerts and tour schedules were canceled, giving her more time to write and create. She used that time to create *Folklore*, an album inspired by nature, such as spring and summer, and also explores imagination and fictional narratives. In this album, Taylor does not tell her personal stories directly, but rather builds narratives from different characters' perspectives, such as the love triangle between Betty, James, and Augustine in the songs *Cardigan*, *August*, and *Betty*, and a story from the past in *The Last Great American Dynasty*. The album has simple arrangements dominated by piano and acoustic guitar, creating a calm atmosphere that reflects the mood of the lockdown period. The themes of *Folklore* revolve around past conflicts, nostalgia, fear, and sadness, which resonate with people longing for the past and facing uncertainty during the pandemic.

There are several previous studies that have analyzed denotative and connotative meanings in different types of objects, including song lyrics, memes, and advertisements that are relevant to this research topic. In a study by Antika et al. (2020) analyzed the song "Lathi" by Weird Genius using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. Similarly, Nasution et al. (2021) examined the song "Dialog Hati" by Nadzira Shafa and found that its denotative meaning represents sadness and disappointment caused by the loss of a husband, while its connotative meaning conveys a message that life is not always full of sorrow, there is still hope and happiness. In line with this, Rahmawati et al. (2024) studied memes on Twitter and found that denotative meaning refers to the literal aspect of the meme, while connotative meaning relates to cultural values, ideology, and emotions such as social pressure, the contrast between real life and social media, and self-awareness.

Another study by Limesa (2018) analyzed the Wonderfilled advertisement of Oreo using Chandler's (2007) and Saussure's theories. Furthermore, Nabila et al. (2022) conducted a study titled "An Analysis of BTS's Selected Song Lyrics: A Study of Denotative, Connotative, and Myth Meaning." The study found that BTS's lyrics reflect various social and psychological issues commonly experienced by young people, such as mental health struggles and social pressure. Their lyrics use metaphors and symbolic expressions to deliver deeper emotional and meaningful messages.

Based on these previous studies, it can be seen that research on denotative and connotative meanings has been widely conducted on both Indonesian and K-pop songs. However, there has been no specific study that analyzes *Cardigan* by Taylor Swift. Therefore, this study aims to help understand the deeper meaning by analyzing the



denotative and connotative meanings in the lyrics of Cardigan. To analyze this song, the researcher used Semantic theory.

According to Hurford et al. (2007) semantics can be defined as a branch of linguistics that studies meaning (p. 1). This research applies Leech's (1981) semantic theory, which distinguishes between denotative and connotative meanings. Through a semantic approach, the researcher can explore denotative meaning as the basic or literal meaning found in the dictionary, as well as connotative meaning as the additional or figurative meaning influenced by context, culture, and the songwriter's personal experiences. In song lyrics, the difference between denotative and connotative meanings often leads to multiple interpretations, making it difficult for listeners to understand the true message if they only focus on the literal meaning. By using this analysis, the study not only explains the literal meanings of words in the lyrics but also uncovers deeper meanings based on the language context. This makes semantic analysis a relevant tool for revealing the hidden messages behind Taylor Swift's Cardigan lyrics. This phenomenon forms the background of the study with the following research questions focusing on denotative and connotative meanings found in the song Cardigan by Taylor Swift. Therefore, this study is expected to provide an academic contribution to understanding the relationship between language, music, and meaning.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Leech's Theory of Meaning (1981)

This study uses Leech (1981) theory of meaning. As stated by Alek (2018), semantics is a term used by linguists to refer to the field of linguistics that studies meaning. In line with Hurford, semantics is a part of linguistics that focuses on meaning relations within language, alongside other linguistic field such as syntax and phonetics. Semantic study helps researchers understand how meanings are formed and interpreted in various context, including literary works and song lyrics.

### Meaning

Meaning can be defined as the purpose or intention behind the message someone wants to convey (Suhardi, 2015). In linguistic studies, meaning is an essential aspect to understand, because through meaning, a person can grasp the message of an utterance, text, or literary work. According to Palmer (1981), not all words have the same type of meaning; each word can convey different meanings depending on its use in context.



Semantics helps explain how language is used not only to deliver literal information but also to express emotions, symbols, and cultural values hidden behind words.

### **Leech's Theory of Denotative and Connotative Meaning**

Based on Leech (1981), meaning is divided into seven categories, including conceptual (denotative), connotative, social, affective, reflected, collocative, and thematic meanings. However, this research focuses only on two types: denotative and connotative meanings.

#### **Denotative**

Denotative is the actual or literal meaning of a word, according to its original meaning (Suhardi, 2015, p. 59). According to Leech (1981), denotative meaning is also referred to as conceptual meaning. Denotative meaning is essentially the basic meaning of a word, combination of words, or sentence structure, which can be found directly in a dictionary. Thus, denotative meaning relates to what is factual and objective.

#### **Connotative**

Connotative meaning is an additional meaning that is not denotative. Leech (1981) stated that connotative meaning is the figurative meaning that a word has beyond its conceptual or denotative meaning. So, while denotative meaning is more about the literal meaning that can be checked for correctness in a sentence, connotative meaning is broader, and can be a feeling, symbol, or other association attached to the word (Pei, 2021). Connotation can also be understood as a positive or negative assessment given by a language community to a word.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

In this study, the researcher used a descriptive qualitative approach. This approach was chosen because it helped the researcher understand things that are more subjective, such as people's attitudes, opinions, and feelings (Kusumastuti & Khoiron, 2019). The primary data of this research were taken from the song lyrics *Cardigan* by Taylor Swift. The researcher downloaded the lyrics from the official website through Google. The secondary data consisted of books and journal articles that supported the study. The research data took the form of words, phrases, clauses, and sentences found in the *Cardigan* lyrics. The lyrics were then analyzed based on semantic theory, specifically on denotative and connotative meanings according to (Leech, 1981). Researcher used to read and note-taking techniques in the data collection process. The researcher downloaded the lyrics from

Google, then read and listened to the song repeatedly to understand its meaning more deeply. After that, the researcher noted the parts of the lyrics that had literal meanings and contained figurative language, which were later interpreted to find the denotative and connotative meanings. After all the data had been collected, the researcher identified the denotative and connotative meanings in the lyrics of the song Cardigan. Then, the researcher analyzed the actual meaning contained in the song from the words and phrases. Also, interpreted the connotative meanings based on Leech's theory, while also paying attention to the context of each part in the lyrics.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this part, the researcher shows the denotative and connotative meanings found in the song lyrics Cardigan by Taylor Swift. The researcher found 25 data from this song's lyrics, consisting of 12 denotative meanings and 13 connotative meanings.

### Data 1

"High heels on cobblestones"

The denotative meaning of this lyric describes a girl wearing high heels while walking on a rocky path. If you imagine, walking in heels on such a surface would definitely feel uncomfortable. Meanwhile, the connotative meaning represents the challenges of teenage life. High heels often symbolize elegance and maturity, but when paired with cobblestones, the image turns into a symbol of struggle and pain. Taylor seems to show that a first love is not only beautiful but also uncertain and difficult, just like walking in high heels on a rough and uneven road.

### Data 2

"When I felt like I was an old cardigan / under someone's bed"

The lyrics above describe an old cardigan that is kept under the bed and is no longer worn. A cardigan is a type of warm clothing made from knitted fabric. However, in the context of this song, the cardigan is portrayed as something old and forgotten. While the connotative meaning, the songwriter wants to express Betty's feelings of being worthless, like something old that is no longer needed. This part can also be seen as a symbol of love that once felt warm but now only remains as a memory.

### Data 3

"You put me on and said I was your favorite"

This line literally describes someone wearing a cardigan and calling it her favorite piece of clothing. The phrase "put me on" means the act of putting something on the body,

while “said I was your favorite” expresses someone saying that the cardigan is the item they like the most. From the lyrics above, Taylor wanted to show the feeling of being accepted again by someone she loves after being apart. The phrase “put me on” doesn’t literally mean putting on clothes, but rather describes how Betty opens her heart again for someone she once left behind. In this part of the song, James assures Betty that he has always loved her, even when Betty couldn’t love herself. The line “said I was your favorite” shows that Betty becomes someone special to James once again. Through this lyric, Taylor portrays how love can forgive and bring people back together.

#### **Data 4**

“You drew stars around my scars”

From the data above, the literal meaning of this lyric shows that James drew stars round the scars on Betty’s body. In the dictionary, “stars” are shining objects in the sky that can be seen at night, while “scars” means marks left on the skin after a wound has healed. However, behind the literal meaning, this part of the song contains a much deeper message. Taylor wants to show that there is someone who can accept her completely, including her painful past. The word “star” symbolizes hope and beauty, while “scar” represents the wounds are bitter experiences of the past. When these two words combined, it shows that James is there to help Betty heal her old wounds and turn them into something beautiful. This line also shows that true love is an attitude of acceptance, including accepting your partner’s past, because someone who truly loves you will stay no matter what happens and will never leave you.

#### **Data 5**

“Marked me like a bloodstain”

The lyric has a literal meaning of someone leaving a mark on another person’s body or clothing. The phrase “marked me” here means giving a sign or leaving a trace, while “like a bloodstain” refers to a blood mark or stain that usually appears from a wound. So, in this part of the lyric, it shows that James once hurt Betty and left a scar on her heart, which is compared to a bloodstain, something hard to remove or erase. The connotative meaning, Taylor uses the word “bloodstain” to express Betty’s pain after being left by James. The bloodstain does not literally mean blood, but rather symbolizes emotional pain that remains and is hard to forget. The lyric also shows that James’s departure left a deep wound in Betty’s heart, one that may never truly heal. Besides that, the phrase “marked me” represents a bitter experience for Betty. Through this part, Taylor gives a picture of

memories and pain that stay within her feelings that are difficult to fade even though they happened long ago. In short, this lyric tells about a separation that left a lasting memory and a painful scar that Betty can't completely forget, no matter how hard she tries.

### Data 6

“I knew you'd linger like a tattoo kiss”

The data above shows that the literal meaning of this lyric is a kiss that leaves a mark like a tattoo. This means that the mark remains on the skin and cannot be removed, just like a permanent tattoo. Meanwhile, the connotative meaning is that Taylor uses the phrase “tattoo kiss” to describe unforgettable memories of love. The word “tattoo” means something that is permanent and long-lasting. While “kiss” symbolizes warmth and affection. When these two words are combined, it means that memories of someone who was once loved will remain in the heart, even though the relationship has ended. According to Betty, James' presence is like a tattoo, sweet at first and its mark never truly fades. Every time she recalls her past with James, those feelings resurface, just like a tattoo that remains visible even as time passes. The phrase “tattoo kiss” describes something that was once sweet but has now turned into a lasting memory that never really fades. It can also be seen as a symbol a love that once existed, which still has a special place in the heart and cannot be erased, even though that person is no longer with us.

Based on the findings, the lyrics of Cardigan by Taylor Swift, researcher found 25 data including 13 connotative meanings and 12 denotative meanings. Through semantic theory, researchers were able to identify that each part of the lyrics of the song Cardigan contains denotative meaning, which is literal interpretation, and connotative meaning, which is a deeper message influenced by context, emotion, and cultural understanding. This analysis shows that the denotative meaning in the lyrics describes everyday actions or objects, such as high heels, cardigan, stars, scars, and tattoo. When interpreted through a semantic approach, the lyrics convey a deeper emotional experience related to love, pain, memories, and self-esteem.

For example, lyrics such as “High heels on cobblestones” describe someone walking in high heels on an uneven surface. However, the connotative meaning reveals that Taylor Swift uses this image to describe the instability and struggles faced during young love. Similarly, the lyrics “When I felt like I was an old cardigan / under someone's bed” have a literal meaning as unused clothing, but symbolically express Betty's feeling of being neglected and forgotten.

The lyric “You drew stars around my scars” shows someone can help transform past wounds into something meaningful. On the other hand, lyrics such as “Marked me like a bloodstain” describe emotional wounds that remain even as time passes, symbolizing the lasting impact of heartbreak on person’s life. Additionally, the lyric “I knew you’d linger like a tattoo kiss” describes how certain memories and emotions remain permanent, like a tattoo that cannot fade. This metaphor emphasizes the presence of Betty’s past love in her heart, even after the relationship has ended.

These finding differs from previous studies. According to Nabila et al., (2022), this research identified more than 30 denotative and connotative meanings in several BTS songs. This study used three songs in one album, while the researcher only used one song in one album. This makes the study different from the previous one because the research objects used are not the same, resulting in different focuses and results. In a study by Antika et al. (2020), they found denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings in the song Lathi by Weird Genius. Mythical meaning was found in Javanese sentences derived from the proverb “ajining diri ana ing lathi,” while in this study researcher focused only on denotative and connotative meanings.

Overall, the denotative and connotative meanings in the song Cardigan by Taylor Swift describe a love story in the past. She wrote the lyrics in a poetic and symbolic way, allowing listeners to be carried away by the emotions experienced by Betty, the main character in this song. By analyzing the denotative and connotative meanings in the song, readers can uncover the hidden messages behind the lyrics, recognize the use of figurative language, and understand the emotional message conveyed by the songwriter.

## CONCLUSION(S)

Based on the result of the analysis, the researcher used Leech’s semantic approach in denotative and connotative meanings. The researcher found 25 data containing 12 denotative meanings and 13 connotative meanings in the song Cardigan by Taylor Swift. The denotative meaning in the lyric of Taylor Swift’s song “Cardigan” is that the song describes the feelings of someone who is reminiscing about the past and flashbacks of moments they once experienced together. The lyrics contain the story of someone who misses their youth when they felt love. Meanwhile, the connotative meaning in the lyrics of Cardigan by Taylor Swift is that it describes the sadness and pain of being left by a boyfriend. In addition, the songwriter uses figurative language such as metaphors and symbolism to tell a complicated love story.



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