
**THE DENOTATIVE AND CONNOTATIVE MEANING IN TAYLOR
SWIFT’S SONG “MIRRORBALL”**

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Abstract:

This study explores the denotative and connotative meanings in Taylor Swift’s song “mirrorball,” with a particular focus on the expression of self-reflection and performative identity through denotative and connotative layers of meaning. Using a semantic analysis framework grounded in linguistic theory which is the empirical study of language by Nick Reimer. A descriptive qualitative approach is employed to explore the linguistic choices that are used to construct a reflective, emotionally performative identity in the lyrics. The research highlights how literal meanings (denotation) interact with implied or culturally shaped meanings (connotation) to construct a persona that is fragmented, adaptive, and emotionally exposed. The analysis demonstrates that Swift’s lyrical choices reflect a broader commentary on the pressure to perform emotional resilience and perfection in public while concealing self-vulnerability. The study uses a semantic approach to uncover the dual-layered meanings embedded in the text, contributing to the broader understanding of meaning construction in pop culture media. This article aims to show that popular music, when viewed through a linguistic lens, serves not only as entertainment but also as a reflection of identity struggles in modern society.

Keywords: connotation, denotation, lyrics, semantics, Taylor Swift

INTRODUCTION

Language is a powerful tool for shaping and expressing identity. The use of words to express oneself have been vastly recorded in many forms such as prose, poetry, drama and music. Music is a personal expression of one's identity that articulates its message in a harmonious manner (Salam et al., 2024). In the context of song lyrics, words are not only vehicles for storytelling but also instruments for conveying emotion, perspective, and psychological depth. Song lyrics are rich with layered meaning, often functioning as both poetic expression and cultural commentary. As Erlangga, Utomo, and Anisti (2021) point out, lyrics are “far from being a random assembly of words” but are “the fruit of an artist’s creative imagination, skillfully designed to harmonize aesthetic appeal with meaningful content” (p. 14). This suggests that lyric analysis, especially from a semantic perspective, provides valuable insights into how meaning is constructed and communicated in popular culture.

In the realm of contemporary music, Taylor Swift stands as a prominent figure whose lyrical compositions have garnered significant attention from both audiences and academics alike (Fogarty & Arnold, 2021). “*mirrorball*,” a track from Swift’s 2020 folklore album, presents a poetic depiction of the artist’s internal world, shaped by a need to be seen, admired, and accepted. Her songwriting, characterized by its narrative depth and emotional resonance, provides a fertile ground for linguistic analysis, particularly in the exploration of semantic nuances (Max, 2022; Sloan, 2021). The purpose of this study is to analyze the denotative and connotative meanings in Taylor Swift’s “*mirrorball*” and to investigate how these layers of meaning construct a narrative of performative identity and self-reflection. Denotation refers to the literal, dictionary meaning of a word, while connotation encompasses the emotional and cultural associations tied to that word. Together, they provide a deeper understanding of how language operates in artistic contexts, especially in lyrics where ambiguity, metaphor, and symbolism often play a crucial role.

Semantics, the study of meaning in language, offers valuable tools for this exploration. By examining the semantic features of the lyrics, the researchers can uncover how words function on multiple levels, sometimes reinforcing, and at other times contradicting, the apparent emotional tone of the song. The song “*mirrorball*” is an ideal subject for this analysis because it relies heavily on metaphor and imagery. The mirrorball itself, a central image in the song, serves as both a literal object and a symbolic representation of the artist's fractured sense of self and desire to please. According to Nugraheni (2022), metaphorical language in pop songs often carries implicit psychological or emotional depth that resonates with listeners' personal experiences.

This study also draws from the concept of performative identity, which is frequently discussed in gender and cultural studies. Butler (1990) argues that identity is not fixed, but rather a product of ongoing performance. In “*mirrorball*,” the artist performs emotional visibility, despite internal fragility, as a means of survival in a world that demands constant adaptation. Such linguistic expression reflects broader social realities, including the pressure to maintain curated personas in digital and public spaces (Putri & Safitri, 2021). Taylor Swift’s “*mirrorball*” exemplifies how language can be used poetically to explore personal themes such as self-perception, emotional fragility, and the desire to be accepted.

Connotative meanings in song lyrics are often shaped upon the cultural and emotional contexts from people’s own experiences, and this song is expressing the artist’s own feelings. For example, in “*mirrorball*,” the word “mirrorball” has the literal meaning of a large revolving ball covered with small pieces of mirror glass that is usually found in discos. However, in a connotative sense, the artist finds similarities from the object to her social life, in which she has

to constantly change and adapt for others in order to be liked. Reflecting on what they want for her. This layered meaning shows how semantic analysis can be used as a tool for interpreting song lyrics.

Several previous studies have explored the denotative and connotative meanings in songs with various results. Pratiwi et al. (2020) analyzed Ariana Grande's "*God is a Woman*" and found that connotative meanings often dominate song lyrics, conveying abstract emotions and symbolism beyond literal meaning. Similarly, Gee et al. (2022) examined Justin Bieber and Kid Laroi's lyrics from the song "*Stay*", classifying connotations into positive, negative, and neutral, and concluded that emotional tone shapes connotative values significantly. Salam and Sakinah (2023) used Barthes' semiotics to explore Khai Dreams' "*Sandals*", highlighting how cultural myths and love themes emerge from connotative analysis.

In addition, Nawangsari and Budiwati (2022) focused on Keshi's "*Band-aids*", combining semantic and word class analysis to reveal emotional self-expression and healing through lyrics. Finally, Lestari and Nitisari (2022) studied Eminem's "*Mockingbird*" using Palmer's framework, finding that connotative meaning reflected the artist's real-life family struggles. While these studies provide valuable insights into meaning construction in song lyrics, most focus on relationship themes or personal lives. However, few have addressed the theme of self-reflection and performative identity, especially through the lens of semantic meaning (denotation and connotation). This leaves a research gap in exploring how individuals perform and question their identities through emotional language in music.

This study aims to fill that gap by analyzing the denotative and connotative meanings in selected lyrics from Taylor Swift's "*mirrorball*," using a descriptive qualitative approach. Specifically, it investigates how linguistic choices construct a self-reflective narrative centered on emotional fragility and performative identity. Drawing on Riemer's (2010) theory of meaning, the study focuses on how the lyrics shift from literal (denotative) references to symbolic (connotative) meanings that represent the artist's inner struggle to maintain visibility, acceptance, and emotional composure. This study reflects the growing academic interest in treating contemporary media as rich texts worthy of linguistic and literary examination.

Through this study, readers are invited to look beyond the surface of popular music and explore how language, even in mainstream art forms, carries complex meanings that speak to broader human experiences. By examining selected lyrics and dissecting the denotative and connotative dimensions of key words, the research aims to illuminate how Swift employs language to construct a thematic exploration of self-reflection, focusing on the performative aspects of identity and the persistent adaptation of the self in response to external expectations.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative descriptive method to analyze the denotative and connotative meanings found in the lyrics of Taylor Swift's song "*mirrorball*." Qualitative research is suitable for this type of linguistic and literary analysis because it allows the researcher to explore subjective interpretations, thematic elements, and the cultural or emotional significance embedded within the text (Creswell, 2014). Specifically, the study focuses on identifying linguistic expressions within the lyrics that reflect denotation (literal meaning) and connotation (suggestive or cultural meaning) and interpreting how they contribute to the overall theme of performative identity and self-reflection.

The data in this study consist solely of the official lyrics of "*mirrorball*" written by Taylor Swift and Jack Antonoff, released in 2020 as part of the folklore album. The lyrics were retrieved

from the artist's official website and cross-referenced with verified lyric databases to ensure accuracy. The selection of this song is purposive, based on its rich use of metaphor, personal tone, and layered meaning, which make it ideal for semantic analysis.

The data collection technique used is documentation, in which the text of the lyrics serves as the primary source. No interviews or field observations are involved, as the focus remains on textual interpretation. The researcher closely reads the lyrics and highlights words, phrases, and lines that demonstrate either denotative or connotative meaning. These expressions are then categorized based on semantic theory.

The analysis of meaning in this study draws upon the framework proposed by Nick Riemer (2010) in his book *Introducing Semantics*, specifically from the chapter titled "*Meaning in the Empirical Study of Language*." Riemer emphasizes that meaning should be analyzed not only as an abstract concept but as something that is observable in the way words are used in actual language contexts. His approach encourages researchers to examine how words behave empirically in real usage, considering both their referential (denotative) and affective or stylistic (connotative) dimensions. This is especially relevant to song lyrics, where emotional tone and cultural resonance often go beyond the literal meanings of words. Riemer's theory supports a grounded, language-based interpretation that aligns well with both linguistic inquiry and literary close reading.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the semantic analysis conducted on Taylor Swift's song "mirrorball," focusing on the denotative and connotative meanings found in 10 selected lines. The purpose of this analysis is to explore how linguistic choices in the lyrics reflect the theme of performative identity and self-reflection. The results are categorized based on semantic features, beginning with denotative meanings, those grounded in literal, dictionary definitions, followed by connotative meanings, which involve emotional, cultural, and symbolic associations.

Data 1

"I'm a mirrorball"

The opening lyric, "*I'm a mirrorball*", establishes the linguistic choice the artist chose by comparing herself to a mirror-covered disco ball, an object designed to reflect light and entertain others. Denotatively, The word "*mirrorball*" means a decoration consisting of a large ball covered with small mirrors that hangs from the ceiling and turns to produce a lighting effect. This refers to objects commonly used in discos and parties to create sparkling visual effects. Connotatively, the artist is assigning human traits to an object, which is by turning a party decoration into a symbol of herself. The emotional associations comes from: cultural knowledge, where we associate mirrorballs with parties, glamor, and performance; personal projection, with how we can see the artist feels like a mirrorball, not just looking like one; and lastly the context in the song where this particular word gives an emotional significance to the artist's self-reflection in the song.

Data 2

"And when I break it's in a million pieces"

In the lyric "*And when I break, it's in a million pieces*", it expands the meaning to show the emotional toll of constant performativity. Denotatively, the line "*When I break, it's in a million pieces*" refers to when the mirrorball, what the artist resonates herself with, shattered literally.

But connotatively, “*break*” here doesn’t mean she is broken physically, but emotionally. Where her “*pieces*” are scattered but no one cares. The artist is aware of her emotional limits, and that when those limits are crossed, she loses any sense of stability or unity. It also highlights how her identity has become scattered, she’s made of fragments of others, and when she breaks, she can’t easily return to herself since her own views are determined by how others want her to be.

Data 3

“*You’ll find me on my tallest tiptoes*”

In “*You’ll find me on my tallest tiptoes*,” she expresses the physical and emotional strain of constantly pushing herself to remain graceful and acceptable. From a denotative perspective, “*tiptoes*” is presenting oneself as being taller, better, at the centre of attention. But it also suggests a position that’s not stable, a moment of poise under pressure, and physically difficult to maintain. Connotatively, the lyric shows that the artist is putting maximum effort to be seen, appreciated, or accepted. The line reflects self-awareness of the constant emotional labor involved in being “*on display*”.

Data 4

“*I can change everything about me to fit in*”

In the lyric “*I can change everything about me to fit in*”, the line reflects self-awareness, the artist recognizes that her identity is not fixed, but instead, constantly reshaped to meet the expectations of others. Denotatively, “*fit in*” means to live, work, etc. in an easy and natural way with somebody or something. Connotatively, “*to fit in*” has an implication that acceptance is not freely given, it must be earned by conforming or erasing authenticity. That she is willing to “*change everything about her*” to meet the expectations of others, whether it’s her personality, behaviour, even values. This ties back to the mirrorball image, she is reflective because she has no solid self left. She mirrors others by being who they want, but doesn’t feel truly like herself.

Data 5

“*Drunk as they watch my shattered edges glisten*”

The lyric “*Drunk as they watch my shattered edges glisten*” presents a portrayal of emotional exposure and performative pain. Denotatively, “*drunk*” means unable to behave correctly or as usual because of drinking too much alcohol. But from a connotative standpoint, “*drunk*” here can be interpreted as the people watching are careless, numbed, or emotionally distant. This goes on line with the artist’s depiction of being a show to others, despite being in pain herself. She is broken, but even her suffering becomes a show, something people watch, maybe even entertained by it. Although she’s breaking, no one reaches out, they just watch. This conveys isolation in the midst of attention.

Data 6

“*Burned the disco down*”

In the lyrics “*Burned the disco down*” this line illustrates the act of freeing oneself from the pressure to constantly appear perfect. Denotatively, the phrase means burning down a disco, a place identical with music, lights, and euphoria. However, connotatively, “*disco*” here symbolizes the space where the artist continually displays happiness, energy, and charm that others expect from her. Burning the disco means destroying the symbolic place where she keeps pretending that everything is fine. It is a form of rejection of external expectations and an

assertion that she can no longer maintain a facade that doesn't reflect her true feelings. This act reflects emotional exhaustion and a desire to escape a role that was never hers, because behind the glittering lights and music there is hidden pain. By burning down the disco, she chooses emotional honesty over the exhausting performance of perfection.

Data 7

“I’m still on that tightrope”

In *“I’m still on that tightrope,”* she conveys the emotional tension of her efforts to remain balanced under pressure. Denotatively, *“tightrope”* refers to a stretched wire or rope fixed above the ground that skilled people walk across, especially in a circus performance. However, this phrase also implies a risky situation, where even a small mistake could cause her to fall. Connotatively, *“I’m still on that tightrope”* shows that she's still trying to maintain her appearance, even though she's constantly under emotional pressure. The lyrics reflect that the artist is in a very vulnerable state, constantly trying to balance being herself and meeting others' expectations. She feels that the pressure to always appear perfect is emotionally exhausting. However, she continues to persevere in order to be accepted by society and to avoid disappointing others.

Data 8

“I’m still a believer, but I don't know why”

The lyrics *“I’m still a believer, but I don't know why”* explore the conflict between hope and emotional exhaustion. Denotatively, *“believer”* means to continue to believe in something (even after time or difficulty). Connotatively, *“still a believer”* implies that she's still holding on to hope, even when things no longer make sense. The phrase *“but I don't know why”* expresses emotional exhaustion and confusion. She continues to believe, because she's used to it and hasn't given up yet. This lyric shows steadfastness in the face of inner emptiness.

Data 9

“I’ve never been a natural”

In the lyrics *“I’ve never been a natural,”* she expresses a deep sense of insecurity and emotional vulnerability. Denotatively, *“natural”* refers to a natural ability or characteristic that you were born with. However, connotatively, the phrase suggests that in order to achieve something, she has to work hard, learn, adapt, pretend to be confident, and adjust herself just to be accepted. Because she believes that nothing comes easily or instantly, everything takes process and hard work. It expresses insecurity, effort, and possibly impostor syndrome. Like a mirrorball, she doesn't shine from within, but only reflects the hopes and expectations of others.

Data 10

“I’m still on that trapeze”

The lyrics *“I’m still on that trapeze”* express how she tries to meet others' expectations, even though she's emotionally fragile. Denotatively, a *“trapeze”* is a short bar hanging high in the air from two ropes that acrobats use to perform special movements. However, connotatively, a *“trapeze”* symbolizes inner pressure, emotional risk, and the struggle to appear strong in front of others. This lyric shows that the artist is still trying to live up to social expectations, even though she's in a vulnerable and emotionally unstable state. She tries to keep up appearances, even while dealing with internal struggles.

The study concluded that the analysis of Taylor Swift's "*mirrorball*" reveals that denotative and connotative meanings function together to construct a complex portrayal of identity shaped by emotional labor and performative visibility. Denotative expressions such as "*mirrorball*," "*tiptoes*," and "*break*" provide accessible, literal grounding, while their connotative extensions convey deeper emotional and cultural significance, aligning with Riemer's (2010) view that meaning is shaped by both empirical use and context. Through metaphors of fragility and reflection, the lyrics illustrate an artist who adapts, performs, and ultimately fragments under the pressure of external expectations. This is supported by Butler's (1990) theory of performativity, which sees identity as a process of continuous reconstruction. Moreover, the lyrics highlight the emotional toll of constant visibility in public, echoing Putri and Safitri's (2021) findings on how pop music lyrics reflect social pressures. The *mirrorball* becomes more than a decorative object, it symbolizes a self that is never whole, always changing to please others. Altogether, the interplay between denotation and connotation in "*mirrorball*" reflects a nuanced narrative of self-reflection, performance, and emotional vulnerability in a world that demands constant visibility.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the denotative and connotative meanings in Taylor Swift's song "*mirrorball*" as a reflection of performative identity and emotional self-awareness. Through the application of Nick Riemer's empirical approach to meaning, the research has shown how linguistic elements in the song operate not only on a literal level but also carry rich symbolic and affective dimensions. The denotative meanings in the lyrics ground the listener in tangible imagery, while the connotative meanings reveal deeper emotional and cultural associations related to visibility, fragility, and the need to adapt one's identity in response to external expectations.

The use of metaphors such as the "*mirrorball*" and lyrics such as "*I can change everything about me to fit in*" embody the tension between authenticity and performance, suggesting that identity is not fixed but continually reshaped by emotional and social demands. These findings support Judith Butler's theory of performativity, while also aligning with Riemer's view that meaning emerges from how words behave in real linguistic contexts. Swift's "*mirrorball*" exemplifies how mainstream songwriting can engage with complex issues of identity, emotional labor, and self-representation through nuanced use of language. The semantic analysis not only uncovers the layered meanings in the lyrics but also highlights the broader psychological and cultural experiences they reflect.

In conclusion, "*mirrorball*" serves as both a poetic self-portrait and a social commentary. Through its interplay of denotation and connotation, the song illustrates the challenges of maintaining a coherent self in a world that demands constant flawless performance. As such, it offers a compelling case for the study of meaning in artistic texts, affirming that even the most popular forms of media deserve close, critical, and linguistic attention.

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