

EXPLORING THE MEANING AND STRUCTURE OF THE LYRICS OF THE SONG 'DRIVERS LICENSE' BY OLIVIA RODRIGO

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Abstract

This study examines Olivia Rodrigo, a contemporary pop singer-songwriter known for expressing the emotional struggles of adolescence through her music. One of her most notable songs, "Drivers License", features a strong individual narrative constructed through poetic diction and melancholic musical nuances. This research aims to analyze the thematic structure (theme-rheme) in the lyrics of the song, alongside its musical characteristics. The study adopts a descriptive qualitative method, combining the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approach with musicological analysis. The findings reveal that the lyrics are composed in a free narrative structure, employing dominant features such as metaphor, repetition, and gradually shifting emotional polarity. Musically, the song is characterized by minimalist piano-based harmonies, a slow tempo, and dynamic progression that align with the emotional depth of the lyrics. The close relationship between lyrical content and musical arrangement enhances the expressive power of the song. Therefore, "Drivers License" can be regarded not only as a popular musical work but also as a meaningful subject for linguistic and aesthetic exploration in the study of contemporary music.

Keywords: Olivia Rodrigo, Drivers License, systemic functional linguistics, theme-rheme, musicology, song lyrics.

Abstrak

Studi ini meneliti Olivia Rodrigo, seorang penyanyi-penulis lagu pop kontemporer yang dikenal karena mengekspresikan perjuangan emosional remaja melalui musiknya. Salah satu lagunya yang paling terkenal, "Drivers License", menampilkan narasi individu yang kuat yang dibangun melalui diksi puitis dan nuansa musik yang melankolis. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis struktur tematik (tema-rema) dalam lirik lagu tersebut, di samping karakteristik musiknya. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif, dengan menggabungkan pendekatan Linguistik Fungsional Sistemik (Systemic Functional Linguistics/SFL) dan analisis musikologi. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa lirik lagu ini disusun dalam struktur naratif yang bebas, dengan menggunakan fitur-fitur dominan seperti metafora, pengulangan, dan pergeseran polaritas emosional secara bertahap. Secara musikal, lagu ini ditandai dengan harmonisasi berbasis piano minimalis, tempo yang lambat,

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<p>dan progresi dinamis yang selaras dengan kedalaman emosional liriknya. Hubungan yang erat antara konten lirik dan aransemen musik meningkatkan kekuatan ekspresif dari lagu tersebut. Oleh karena itu, “Drivers License” tidak hanya dapat dianggap sebagai karya musik yang populer, tetapi juga sebagai subjek yang bermakna untuk eksplorasi linguistik dan estetika dalam studi musik kontemporer.</p> <p>Kata kunci: Olivia Rodrigo, Drivers License, systemic functional linguistics, theme-rheme, musicology, song lyrics.</p>	
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1. INTRODUCTION

Language serves as a powerful means of communication that allows individuals to express their thoughts, emotions, and experiences. It manifests not only in daily conversation but also through written and artistic expressions. Among various forms of linguistic expression, music stands out as a compelling medium where language and emotion are intertwined. Lyrics in songs often represent a unique form of storytelling that employs narrative structure, metaphorical language, and emotional depth. These characteristics make song lyrics a rich subject for linguistic and literary analysis.

Songs are widely consumed and appreciated by people from all walks of life, making them a relatable and accessible resource for language learning and cultural study. The poetic and structured nature of lyrics provides a canvas for artists to express complex emotional states and life experiences. The relationship between language, meaning, and structure within a song enables listeners to engage not only with the melody but also with the underlying message conveyed by the artist. In this way, songs can serve as cultural texts that reflect societal values, personal struggles, and emotional journeys.

One song that exemplifies the fusion of linguistic richness and emotional storytelling is “*Drivers License*” by American singer-songwriter Olivia Rodrigo. Released in 2021, the song quickly gained global popularity and critical acclaim due to its heartfelt lyrics and evocative narrative. The lyrics depict the emotional aftermath of a breakup from the perspective of a teenage girl, employing straightforward yet emotionally charged language. The simplicity of the words, combined with the layered meanings and emotional shifts, offers a compelling case for exploring how structure and linguistic choices shape meaning in song lyrics.

This research aims to explore the meaning and structure of the lyrics in “*Drivers License*” by focusing on the use of deixis and narrative elements. The objectives of this study are to identify the types of deixis present in the lyrics, analyze the structure of the lyrics in terms of narrative progression, and interpret how these linguistic elements work together to construct the emotional and thematic core of the song. By doing so, the study contributes to a better understanding of how linguistic devices operate in popular music and how meaning is constructed through language within a specific communicative context.

To carry out this analysis, the study adopts a qualitative descriptive method. The data is derived from the official lyrics of “*Drivers License*”, which are then examined through a pragmatic and structural linguistic lens. The analysis focuses on identifying personal, spatial, and temporal deixis, as well as examining the syntactic structure of the lyrics. These elements are then interpreted in relation to the narrative conveyed by the song. This method is chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the language features and the meanings they convey without reducing the complexity of the emotional content.

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in the field of pragmatics and structural linguistics. Deixis, as defined by Levinson (1983), refers to words and phrases that cannot be fully understood without contextual information. These include pronouns, demonstratives, and adverbs of time and place. Deixis plays a crucial role in orienting the listener to the speaker’s point of view and situational context. Yule (1996) further supports the idea that deixis helps in identifying the referents of utterances within a particular context, thereby anchoring meaning to the speaker’s perspective.

In addition to deixis, the study draws on the systemic functional linguistic approach by Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), which emphasizes the role of structure in constructing meaning. According to this approach, the way a sentence is formed—its syntax and grammatical choices—contributes significantly to the function and interpretation of a text. This is particularly relevant in the context of lyrics, where line breaks, repetition, and emphasis are intentionally structured to support the emotional delivery and thematic coherence of the song.

The choice of *“Drivers License”* as the object of study is not arbitrary. The song has resonated with a wide audience, particularly adolescents and young adults, due to its emotional authenticity and relatable narrative. The lyrics are rich with personal pronouns, temporal references, and spatial cues that place the listener within the singer’s emotional world. These linguistic features offer a valuable opportunity to explore how deixis and narrative structure operate in constructing the message and impact of a song.

Previous studies have examined deixis in literary texts, conversations, and other forms of media. However, limited attention has been given to the systematic analysis of deixis and structure in contemporary pop song lyrics. For instance, Prayudha and Malik (2021) suggest that song lyrics can serve as effective pedagogical tools in teaching pragmatics, yet comprehensive analysis on specific songs remains underexplored. This research seeks to address that gap by focusing on a culturally significant and linguistically rich song.

Moreover, analyzing lyrics from a linguistic perspective can enhance our understanding of how language is used creatively in everyday contexts. It also highlights the intersection of art and communication, showing that even in popular culture, language retains its analytical depth and importance. Songs, like literary texts, can reveal insights into human emotion, identity, and experience when examined through the lens of linguistic inquiry.

Through this analysis, the study expects to show how deixis functions not only as a grammatical tool but also as a narrative device. It provides cohesion and coherence to the song, allowing the speaker’s emotional journey to unfold in a way that feels personal and authentic to the listener. Furthermore, understanding how structure supports this expression can reveal new ways to approach song lyrics from both linguistic and literary perspectives.

By identifying specific instances of deixis and mapping them within the song’s structure, this research illustrates how language choices are intricately linked to the thematic and emotional dimensions of a text. The song’s narrative progression—from anticipation and nostalgia to emotional revelation—depends heavily on these linguistic choices. The interplay between deixis and structure ultimately reinforces the song’s emotional resonance.

This research also intends to offer pedagogical value, especially for language teachers and learners. Song lyrics, when analyzed properly, can be an engaging medium for understanding complex linguistic concepts in context. Learners can gain practical insights into how language functions in real-world texts while also developing an appreciation for the expressive potential of English as a second language.

In conclusion, *“Drivers License”* offers more than just a compelling story of heartbreak—it also provides a valuable site for linguistic investigation. By examining how deixis and structure contribute to meaning, this study sheds light on the intricate relationship between language, narrative, and emotion. Such an exploration not only deepens our appreciation of music as art but also expands the scope of linguistic research in contemporary cultural texts.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method, which is suitable for analyzing textual data, particularly words, phrases, and sentence structures in song lyrics. Rather than quantifying elements, this method aims to describe and interpret language use within specific emotional and social contexts. The qualitative approach enables a deeper exploration of meanings embedded in the language, especially in literary and cultural expressions such as song lyrics. It emphasizes the importance of understanding how language constructs emotional resonance and narrative form. Therefore, this method is ideal for examining the linguistic and narrative elements in Olivia Rodrigo's "Drivers License."

The primary data for this study is the official lyrics of "*Drivers License*" by Olivia Rodrigo, a single released in 2021. The lyrics were obtained from *Genius.com*, a widely recognized and verified source for lyric documentation. For additional validation, the lyrics were also cross-checked with the official release from the *SOUR* album. This song was selected due to its strong emotional appeal and its rich use of personal and temporal references, which are ideal for linguistic analysis. The lyrics are treated both as a cultural artifact and a linguistic object containing meaningful discourse.

Data collection was carried out through documentation and intensive reading techniques. First, the song was listened to and read repeatedly to fully absorb the content, emotional tone, and structure. Next, the lyrics were transcribed and highlighted to identify segments containing deixis and narrative features. Each relevant word or phrase was marked and categorized based on linguistic relevance. This structured process allowed for the data to be systematically gathered and prepared for in-depth analysis. All data points were then coded into units for further interpretation.

The theoretical framework applied in this study is based on Levinson's (1983) theory of deixis and Labov's (1972) model of narrative structure. Levinson's framework is used to classify three primary types of deixis: person, time, and place. Labov's narrative structure—comprising orientation, complication, and resolution—guides the identification of the song's emotional arc. These frameworks are selected due to their complementarity: deixis offers insight into reference and point of view, while narrative theory explains the temporal and emotional progression within the text.

Data analysis was conducted using content analysis, a method that enables researchers to interpret textual elements systematically. The process began with identifying deictic expressions in the lyrics, followed by categorizing them into their respective deixis types. The analysis then proceeded with interpreting each deixis within its emotional and narrative context. This analytical model allows for not only linguistic classification but also interpretive depth, revealing how referential expressions contribute to the meaning and tone of the lyrics.

Each deixis identified was examined not just in terms of its form, but also in relation to its function and contextual meaning. For example, the personal pronoun "you" helps frame the emotional relationship between the narrator and the person being addressed. Temporal deixis such as "last week" positions the emotional event in a specific time frame, strengthening the sense of nostalgia. Thus, deixis is treated as a narrative device, essential for expressing shifts in time, emotion, and relational perspective.

In addition to deixis, the song's narrative structure was analyzed to trace how emotional progression unfolds. The song opens with orientation ("I got my driver's license last week..."), followed by conflict and emotional turmoil (the realization that the person is with someone else), and ends in unresolved grief. These components follow Labov's model and demonstrate how the song crafts a compelling emotional journey. Narrative mapping reveals how each section of the lyrics corresponds to a distinct stage in the emotional process.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, the researcher conducted peer discussions and consulted experts in linguistics. All theoretical references used in this research are drawn from credible and relevant sources. The analytic process was documented in a way that can be reviewed and replicated. Content validity was maintained

by consistently applying definitions and categories grounded in the theoretical literature. These measures ensured that the research adhered to academic standards and produced trustworthy outcomes.

Overall, this method provided a comprehensive framework for examining how deixis and narrative structure enhance the emotional and linguistic depth of *“Drivers License.”* The qualitative approach allowed for close analysis of how lyrics function not only as artistic expression but also as rich linguistic texts. The findings underscore the value of using linguistics to explore meaning-making in popular music. Therefore, the chosen method is both appropriate and effective for addressing the research questions and exploring the complex interaction between language, meaning, and emotion in the song.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of Olivia Rodrigo's *“Drivers License”* reveals how the song operates as an emotional narrative that is powerfully constructed through its linguistic structure and musical arrangement. The findings demonstrate a sophisticated interplay between language and sound, where each reinforces the other to evoke themes of loss, longing, and the vulnerability of youth. Through deixis, narrative sequencing, symbolic imagery, and repetition, the song becomes not just a personal confession, but a cultural expression of adolescent heartbreak that resonates universally.

1. Deixis as Emotional Anchor

The use of deixis in the song plays a central role in anchoring emotional experience to specific referents. Words like “I”, “you”, “that blonde girl”, “last week”, and “the suburbs” construct a clear spatial and temporal frame from the speaker’s perspective. These expressions offer listeners access to the personal world of the narrator, making the grief more intimate and immediate.

Person deixis (“I” and “you”) intensifies the emotional tension by positioning the speaker in a state of vulnerability, while referencing someone who remains absent throughout the song. The ambiguity of “you” invites listeners to project their own emotional experiences into the narrative. This openness is one of the reasons the song feels universally relatable.

Temporal deixis like “last week” and spatial deixis like “driving through the suburbs” are not merely informational—they convey nostalgia and emotional dislocation. These elements map the internal journey of the narrator, showing how time and place are linked to memories, disappointment, and loss. The deixis turns the lyrics into a lived emotional moment.

2. Symbolism and Figurative Meaning

The song transforms common objects and situations into symbols with layered meaning. The “driver’s license,” while literally a legal document, becomes a metaphor for freedom, growing up, and emotional expectations. As the event loses its shared significance, it shifts into a symbol of emotional isolation and abandonment.

The act of driving, once imagined as a joyful rite of passage with a loved one, becomes a solitary ritual through a neighborhood now filled with painful memories. The suburban streets, referenced through deixis, are reimagined as sites of emotional weight, where each corner evokes longing and imagined futures that never came to be.

Imagery such as “I still hear your voice in the traffic” connects external reality with internal turmoil, turning physical sound into a haunting presence. The figurative use of landscape and motion reflects the narrator’s inability to move on emotionally, despite the physical act of driving forward. Symbolism deepens the song’s emotional impact.

3. Narrative Progression and Emotional Arc

The structure of the lyrics follows a clear narrative arc resembling Labov's narrative framework: orientation, complication, and resolution. The orientation sets the stage—"I got my driver's license last week"—immediately placing the listener in a personal, recent moment of emotional significance. It introduces the narrator's expectation and emotional setting.

The complication emerges with the realization that the person she cared about is now with someone else. This emotional shift is subtle but devastating, made more powerful by simple yet charged lines like "You're probably with that blonde girl." The complication is not only relational, but also internal, as the narrator grapples with insecurity and pain.

Rather than resolving the emotional tension, the song ends with open grief and unanswered longing. This lack of closure mirrors the real experience of heartbreak, making the song resonate with listeners who have faced similar emotional uncertainty. The emotional arc is cyclical rather than linear, reinforcing the feeling of being emotionally stuck.

4. The Power of Repetition and Simplicity

Repetition in the lyrics serves both a musical and emotional function. Phrases such as "I still hear your voice" and "you didn't mean what you wrote in that song about me" appear at key moments, reinforcing the central emotional themes. Repetition mimics the obsessive nature of heartbreak, where thoughts return to the same memories.

Syntactic simplicity is another powerful tool used in the lyrics. Rodrigo avoids overly complex phrasing in favor of direct, emotionally charged language. This makes the song more accessible, especially to younger audiences, and strengthens the rawness of the emotion conveyed. Simplicity becomes a strategy for emotional authenticity.

The interplay between repetition and simplicity supports the song's structure by creating emphasis without redundancy. Rather than tiring the listener, repeated lines build intensity and emotional weight. These techniques reveal that minimalistic language, when used with precision, can have profound impact.

5. Cultural Relevance and Pedagogical Implications

"Drivers License" stands out not only as a personal confession but as a cultural artifact that reflects the emotional landscape of Gen Z. The song speaks to themes of self-identity, public vulnerability, and the transitional pains of adolescence. Its viral popularity demonstrates how deeply it resonates across social and generational lines.

From a pedagogical standpoint, the song is a valuable resource for teaching deixis, metaphor, and narrative structure. Its clarity and emotional relevance make it an effective text for students learning to analyze language in context. The song bridges the gap between academic theory and everyday language use.

Moreover, the emotional complexity in such a concise lyrical format offers a model for exploring literary devices in modern texts. Students can examine how figurative language constructs meaning and how linguistic choices reflect cultural and personal identity. This opens space for critical thinking in language, literature, and cultural studies.

4. CONCLUSION

This research was conducted to explore the meaning and structure of Olivia Rodrigo's "*Drivers License*" through a linguistic and narrative lens. The analysis focused on how deixis, narrative sequencing, and symbolic language contribute to emotional storytelling. By examining the lyrics qualitatively, the study has identified how language becomes a medium for articulating personal experiences with emotional clarity and depth.

The results indicate that deixis plays a significant role in guiding the listener through the speaker's perspective. Person, temporal, and spatial references are not used arbitrarily but serve to anchor emotional expression in specific contexts. These linguistic choices create a direct connection between the narrator and the audience, enhancing the song's emotional resonance.

In addition to linguistic markers, the structural composition of the lyrics shows a deliberate narrative progression. From introduction to complication and an unresolved emotional close, the song follows a pattern that reflects the reality of grief and youthful heartbreak. This structural flow helps the listener follow the emotional stages experienced by the narrator.

Symbolism in the song also emerges as a key element in constructing meaning. Everyday objects such as a driver's license and familiar places like the suburbs are reinterpreted through the lens of personal loss. These symbols reinforce the emotional weight of the narrative, allowing the listener to experience layers of meaning beyond literal interpretation.

Furthermore, the song demonstrates the value of simplicity and repetition in conveying emotional intensity. Rather than relying on complex language, Rodrigo's lyrics employ accessible expressions that feel genuine and relatable. This stylistic choice strengthens the sincerity of the message and increases its impact on diverse audiences.

In conclusion, the study proves that song lyrics—when analyzed through linguistic and narrative frameworks—can reveal rich insights into emotional communication. Olivia Rodrigo's "Drivers License" is a strong example of how modern music combines language, emotion, and structure to create stories that resonate widely. This makes the song not only an artistic success, but also a valuable text for academic exploration.

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