


DENOTATIVE MEANING IN LEXICAL SEMANTICS : A LINGUISTICS ANALYSIS OF THE LYRICS IN “CANCER” BY MY CHEMICAL ROMANCE

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<p>Abstract</p> <p><i>This study investigates the denotative meaning of lexical items in the song "Cancer" by My Chemical Romance through the lens of lexical semantics. Focusing on the literal definitions of key phrases, the analysis reveals how straightforward language use effectively conveys themes of illness, mortality, and emotional suffering. By identifying and interpreting the song's denotative expressions, this research demonstrates how lexical semantics can provide insight into the emotional impact and narrative function of lyrics. The study concludes that even in figurative or poetic texts, the denotative meanings of words play a crucial role in shaping listeners' emotional and interpretive experiences.</i></p> <p>Keywords: Denotative Meaning, Lexical Semantics, Linguistic Analysis, Meaning In Language, My Chemical Romance.</p>	<p>Article History Received: Juni 2025 Reviewed: Juni 2025 Published: Juni 2025</p> <p>Plagiarism Checker No 234 Prefix DOI : Prefix DOI : 10.8734/Sindoro.v1i2.365 Copyright : Author Publish by : Sindoro</p> <div><p>This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License</p></div>
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INTRODUCTION

A. Background

Semantics represents a subfield within linguistics that examines how meaning is constructed and interpreted through language. As language is a primary tool for communication, understanding how meaning is conveyed, interpreted, and constructed is essential in linguistic studies. According to Saeed (2016), semantics investigates both the meanings of words and how these meanings function within complex language systems.

One subfield within semantics that focuses specifically on the meaning of words and their relationships is lexical semantics. This area analyzes how individual words carry

meaning, how they relate to each other in a language system, and how these meanings may change depending on context or usage (Murphy, 2010). Lexical semantics examines concepts such as synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, and polysemy, among others. A central aspect within lexical semantics is the distinction between denotative and connotative meanings.

According to Lyons (1995), Denotative meaning is understood as the literal and widely agreed-upon definition of a word, usually found in standard dictionaries without subjective influence. It is the meaning that does not rely on emotional, cultural, or personal associations. For instance, the word "cancer" in its denotative sense refers to a disease caused by uncontrolled division of abnormal cells. This literal interpretation forms the foundation upon which more subjective meanings can be built.

Examining the literal meanings of words in artistic texts like song lyrics offers valuable insights for modern linguistic research. As popular music increasingly becomes a medium for exploring social, psychological, and existential themes, its language offers valuable insights into how meaning is constructed and received. Studying how literal meanings are employed in emotionally charged lyrics can enhance our understanding of the interplay between language and human experience, especially in themes involving illness, grief, and mortality.

The decision to analyze the lyrics of "Cancer" was based on its potent use of language to describe a personal and universal experience terminal illness through simple yet impactful word choices. My Chemical Romance, an American rock band formed in 2001, is widely recognized for its emotionally intense and concept-driven music. "Cancer", released in 2006 as part of their critically acclaimed album *The Black Parade*, is one of the band's most hauntingly honest portrayals of death and suffering. Despite being released nearly two decades ago, "Cancer" remains widely listened to and emotionally impactful among younger audiences today, demonstrating the song's enduring cultural relevance and the continued resonance of its language and themes. The song's language is direct, emotionally resonant, and largely rooted in denotative meaning, which allows for a clear and focused semantic analysis.

B. Research Questions

This study aims to explore the use of denotative meaning in the lyrics of "Cancer" by My Chemical Romance. The central questions guiding this research are: what are the denotative meanings of the lexical items found in the song's lyrics, how do these literal

meanings contribute to the overall message and emotional impact of the song, and in what ways does the use of literal language reflect the theme of illness and mortality?

C. Research Objectives

The objectives of this research are to identify and analyze the denotative meanings of key lexical items within the lyrics of "Cancer", to examine how these denotative meanings shape the narrative and emotional tone of the song, and to explore the connection between literal language and the song's thematic representation of terminal illness.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach to analyze the denotative meanings of lexical items in the song 'Cancer' by My Chemical Romance. The focus is on a linguistic analysis of the song's lyrics, specifically examining the words used to convey the central themes of illness, suffering, and mortality. The methodology is based on the principles of lexical semantics, which provides the theoretical foundation for understanding how words carry meaning in context.

A. Data collection

The primary data for this study consists of the lyrics to the song 'Cancer', which is accessed from publicly available sources such as lyric websites and the official album materials. The lyrics were transcribed and analyzed in their entirety, paying close attention to individual words and phrases that could potentially carry specific denotative meanings. The focus of this analysis is to identify the lexical items (individual words or fixed phrases) that directly convey the literal meaning of the song, particularly in relation to the themes of illness and death.

B. Data analysis

The analysis follows a systematic, step-by-step approach based on lexical semantics theory:

1. **Identifying Lexical Items:** The first step in the analysis involves identifying key lexical items within the song's lyrics. These are words or phrases that are crucial to the song's themes, such as "cancer," "suffer," "pain," and "death."
 2. **Determining Denotative Meanings:** For each identified lexical item, the denotative meaning is established by consulting standard dictionaries and relevant linguistic resources (such as the Oxford English Dictionary and Merriam-Webster). This process ensures an objective understanding of the words' literal definitions, free from connotative or metaphorical interpretations.
- Contextualizing Denotative Meanings:**

3. After establishing the denotative meanings of the lexical items, the next step is to analyze how these meanings function in the context of the song's lyrics. This involves considering how these literal meanings are reinforced or expanded upon within the broader narrative of the song, contributing to the overall thematic structure of illness and mortality.
4. Interpreting Emotional Tone: While the primary focus is on the denotative meanings, the study also considers how these meanings contribute to the song's emotional tone. Although connotative meanings are not the main focus, the study acknowledges how the literal meanings of the words help to convey the somber and poignant atmosphere of the song. This analysis is crucial in understanding how language and meaning intertwine to evoke an emotional response in listeners.

C. Research Paradigm

Employing a descriptive research model, this study aims to interpret the meanings of lexical items based on their linguistic and contextual significance without inferring causal relationships or generalizing beyond the data. The study does not aim to measure or quantify emotional responses, but rather to offer a detailed linguistic analysis of how specific words contribute to the overall message of the song.

D. Justification for Methodology

The qualitative, linguistic approach is appropriate for this study because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the song's lyrics at the level of individual words and their meanings. By focusing on lexical semantics, the study can analyze how words and phrases serve as vehicles for meaning, particularly in a non-literal, artistic context such as song lyrics. This method allows for an organized analysis of how language shapes both meaning and emotional resonance, ensuring that the analysis remains grounded in objective definitions before exploring more subjective interpretations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Lexical Semantics

As a subfield of semantics, lexical semantics examines the interactions between words and their roles in conveying meaning within a language structure. It investigates how words convey meaning, how these meanings interact, and how they are structured within the mental lexicon (Murphy, 2010). In broader linguistic studies, lexical semantics plays a crucial role in understanding not just the meanings of words in isolation, but how they contribute to larger systems of meaning in discourse. This approach is vital in fields

such as syntax, pragmatics, and sociolinguistics, where understanding the precise meaning of words can illuminate how language functions in real-world communication (Saeed, 2016).

A central aspect of lexical semantics is examining the various relationships that words can have with one another. These include synonymy (similar meanings), antonymy (opposite meanings), hyponymy (hierarchical relationships between words), and polysemy (multiple meanings of a single word). By exploring these relationships, linguists can gain insight into how meaning is constructed and how words are understood in context (Cruse, 2000).

While lexical semantics primarily focuses on these relationships, its relevance extends beyond everyday language use to include texts that are more abstract or non-literal, such as poetry and song lyrics. In these types of texts, words often carry additional layers of meaning that go beyond their literal sense. However, even in artistic or figurative uses of language, understanding the denotative meaning of words—their literal, dictionary definition—remains essential. This is because the denotative meaning forms the foundation upon which connotations, metaphors, and symbolic meanings are built. By analyzing denotative meaning first, researchers can clearly establish the basic, universally understood meanings of words before examining their figurative or emotional resonance (Lyons, 1995).

In the case of song lyrics, this approach is particularly valuable. While songwriters often use figurative language, metaphor, and symbolism, the literal meaning of words can still provide powerful insight into the song's emotional and thematic depth. Understanding the denotative meanings of words used in song lyrics helps establish a clear semantic foundation, which can then be expanded to explore the connotative meanings that emerge from the broader emotional and cultural context of the song. This study, therefore, limits itself to analyzing denotative meanings in order to establish an objective understanding of the language before considering how these meanings interact with other interpretive layers.

Additionally, it is important to clarify the concept of a lexical item. A lexical item refers to any single word or set phrase that functions as a meaningful unit within a language. In lexical semantics, analyzing these items is critical because they serve as the basic building blocks of meaning in any text, including song lyrics. By identifying and understanding the denotative meanings of lexical items, this study seeks to provide a

foundation for exploring how meaning is conveyed and interpreted within the song "Cancer" by My Chemical Romance.

B. Denotative Meaning

Denotative meaning refers to the literal, dictionary definition of a word—the objective meaning that is agreed upon by members of a linguistic community. It contrasts with connotative meaning, which encompasses the subjective, emotional, or cultural associations that a word may carry beyond its literal sense (Lyons, 1995). While connotation deals with the nuances and figurative aspects of language, denotation focuses solely on the fixed, explicit meaning of words as they are commonly understood in their most straightforward form.

The concept of denotative meaning is essential in lexical semantics because it provides a stable and objective foundation for linguistic analysis. As Cruse (2000) suggests, understanding the denotative meaning of a word is the first step in analyzing how it functions within a larger context. Once the denotative meaning is established, researchers can then examine how that word might take on additional, non-literal meanings through metaphor, synecdoche, or other rhetorical devices. In song lyrics, where emotions and abstract concepts are often conveyed, understanding a song's core message often begins with analyzing the literal meaning of its words, prior to engaging with deeper figurative interpretations.

In the context of song lyrics, particularly those that deal with themes such as illness, death, or personal suffering, denotative meaning can serve as a tool for establishing the stark reality of the situation before exploring the emotional or figurative aspects. For instance, in the song "Cancer" by My Chemical Romance, the word "cancer" carries its denotative meaning of a fatal disease, which anchors the song's theme of mortality and the human experience of facing death. This literal interpretation is critical because it sets the tone for the emotional depth and resonance that follows. Without understanding the denotative meaning, the more subjective and metaphorical interpretations of the lyrics would lack a clear grounding in reality.

Furthermore, the denotative meaning of words used in song lyrics can be analyzed to explore how the language itself contributes to the emotional tone of the song. In the case of "Cancer", the stark, simple language—such as the use of medical terms and direct references to illness—creates an atmosphere of seriousness and inevitability. This literal language helps convey the emotional weight of the subject matter, making it easier for the listener to engage with the song's themes of suffering and loss on a personal level.

Thus, examining denotative meaning in song lyrics offers a clear, methodical way to approach the analysis of language in popular music. It provides a foundation for understanding how words function on a basic level before considering their deeper connotations, making it an essential aspect of linguistic analysis in this study.

C. Analysis of Song Lyrics in Semantic Studies

Song lyrics have long been an object of study in linguistics and semantics, as they serve as a rich form of verbal expression with layered meanings. In semantic studies, song lyrics are often analyzed through approaches that consider both denotative and connotative meanings of the words used, as well as how these aspects interact to create a deeper experience for the listener. Research on semantic analysis of song lyrics reveals that the words used in the lyrics often carry meanings that go beyond the literal (denotative) sense, due to the social, cultural, and emotional context surrounding the song.

Semantic analysis of song lyrics entails examining how lexical denotation the literal, dictionary meanings of words interacts with connotation, or the emotive and cultural associations that listeners infer (Barthes, 1977). In this process, the interpretation of lyrics is not limited to direct semantic content, but is enriched by figurative language and metaphorical constructs as described in conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). This interaction between literal and figurative meaning allows song lyrics to function as semiotic systems, in which language structures evoke emotional and cultural resonance that deepens the listener's experience (Stockwell, 2002).

In the case of "Cancer" by My Chemical Romance, the lyrics convey direct and profound meaning through simple yet emotionally charged language. Focusing on the denotative meaning of these lyrics is crucial for understanding how words like "cancer" and "death" are used to craft a poignant narrative about suffering and despair.

D. Research Related to Illness and Song Lyrics

Song lyrics that focus on themes of illness particularly life-threatening diseases like cancer have attracted attention in various linguistic and cultural studies. Songs addressing illness, especially cancer, are often used to express deep feelings of pain, loss, and helplessness, relying not only on connotative meanings but also on strong, clear denotative meanings.

Song lyrics that address illness frequently employ direct yet affectively rich language to convey the deeply personal and psychologically complex experience of confronting mortality. In tracks like "Cancer" by My Chemical Romance, references to medical terms

and symptoms are not merely descriptive but act as conduits for expressing fear, grief, and emotional vulnerability. This interplay between denotative language such as references to physical symptoms and connotative emotional meaning enables the song to explore both the physiological and psychological dimensions of terminal illness. Such lyrical strategies align with broader narrative practices in illness discourse, where storytelling becomes a tool for processing trauma and articulating human fragility (Frank, 1995).

Furthermore, research by Baudrillard (1995) on the representation of illness in popular culture provides deeper insight into how diseases like cancer are used in songs to communicate certain social and psychological conditions. Illness in songs often serves as a metaphor for life struggles, death, and deeper human relationships. "Cancer" by My Chemical Romance, by addressing this illness theme, offers a portrayal of the emotional toll a terminal disease takes on individuals and their families, engaging listeners in a larger emotional dialogue about existence and human frailty.

Through these studies, it becomes clear that song lyrics about illness function as media of expression for depicting broader social and emotional realities, which can influence how listeners perceive themes like death, loss, and hope.

E. Previous Studies on Linguistic Analysis of Song Lyrics

The linguistic analysis of song lyrics has been a growing area of interest in both linguistics and literary studies. Researchers have explored various aspects of language use in songs, ranging from syntax and phonology to semantics and pragmatics, to uncover the layers of meaning conveyed through lyrics. Studies on song lyrics have often focused on their ability to reflect cultural, emotional, and social contexts, showing how songs function as a bridge between language and emotion.

Fabb (2002) explored the relationship between rhythm, rhyme, and language in song lyrics, emphasizing that the linguistic structure of songs plays a vital role in conveying meaning. He argued that the combination of rhythm and rhyme creates a distinctive linguistic pattern that enhances the emotional impact of the lyrics. Similarly, Murphey (1992) focused on how context affects the interpretation of song lyrics, particularly in second language learning, where songs provide an opportunity for learners to understand both the literal and figurative meanings of words.

Recent studies have highlighted the significant role of semantic ambiguity in song lyrics, emphasizing how it fosters emotional engagement and interpretive openness. The blending of denotative (literal) and connotative (cultural or emotional) meanings enables

listeners to experience songs in varied and personal ways, shaped by their unique contexts and memories. This aligns with Barthes' (1977) concept of the writerly text, wherein meaning is not passively received but actively constructed by the listener through interpretive participation (Barthes, 1977). Likewise, Stockwell (2002) explains that such semantic richness, as viewed through cognitive poetics, amplifies the emotional depth of lyrics and encourages a broader range of interpretations (Stockwell, 2002).

These studies highlight the importance of understanding the linguistic features of song lyrics as a means to unlock the emotional depth and layered meanings within songs. The intersection of linguistics and music demonstrates how song lyrics are more than just poetic expressions they are a powerful form of linguistic communication.

F. Approaches Used in Semantic Analysis

In semantic analysis, different theoretical approaches help uncover the various layers of meaning embedded in language. Specifically, lexical semantics, pragmatics, and sociolinguistics play significant roles in analyzing the meaning of words in song lyrics.

G. Lexical Semantics

Lexical semantics focuses on the meaning of words, their relationships, and their contextual usage. It is essential in analyzing the denotative meaning of song lyrics, as it allows for a systematic examination of how words and phrases are used literally within the song. Cruse (2000) explains that lexical semantics deals with word meanings in isolation and in combination with other words, providing insight into how individual words in song lyrics contribute to the overall meaning of the song. For example, in the song "Cancer", words like "death" and "suffer" are carefully chosen for their denotative meanings, which are critical to the song's emotional tone and direct message.

In summary, the review of literature highlights the significance of lexical semantics and denotative meaning in analyzing the linguistic structure of song lyrics. While lexical semantics provides the theoretical framework for understanding how words convey meaning, the focus on denotative meaning allows this study to objectively explore the literal content of the lyrics in "Cancer" by My Chemical Romance. Previous studies on song lyrics, especially those dealing with illness, support the relevance of this approach by demonstrating how literal meanings can evoke strong emotional responses and convey complex themes such as death and suffering. By situating this study within the broader context of semantic analysis and prior research, the present work aims to contribute to

the understanding of how language in music functions as a medium for expressing human experiences with clarity and emotional resonance.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Findings

Table 1. Denotative Meaning Analysis of Selected Lyrics from "Cancer"

Lyric Excerpt	Lexical Item(s)	Denotative Meaning	Emotional/ Narrative Effect
"Turn away, if you could get me a drink"	Get me a drink	A request for water or beverage	Illustrates physical weakness and dependance on others
"My lips are chapped and faded"	Chapped, faded	Lips that are dry and discolored due to illness	Signals visible physical deterioration; evokes sympathy
"I'll try to keep my life"	keep my life	An effort to stay alive	Reflects struggle and desire to survive
"Cause the hardest part of this is leaving you"	Leaving you	Going away; departing (due to death)	Introduces emotional weight of impending separation
"These notes and flowers"	notes, flowers	Physical items often given during illness or after death	Connnotes mourning and expressions of care or remembrance
"Cause the hospital smells are not so pleasant"	hospital smells	Sterile or clinical odors typical of a hospital setting	Creates an authentic, sensory connection to illness; reinforces realism
"And I will never marry"	never marry	Not experiencing marriage in one's lifetime	Suggests lost future, emphasizes youth and tragedy

"I'm just soggy from the chemo"	chemo	Chemotherapy, a medical treatment for cancer	Introduces the literal medical context; emphasizes physical side effects
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B. Discussion

The song "Cancer" employs stark, literal language to convey a deeply emotional narrative surrounding illness, mortality, and impending loss. The denotative meanings of the lyrics chosen above reveal a series of lexical items that, while straightforward, evoke profound emotional responses due to their context.

For instance, in the line "Turn away, if you could get me a drink," the phrase "get me a drink" literally refers to a simple act of caregiving. Yet within the song's context, this request establishes the speaker's frailty and dependency an image consistent with someone in the late stages of a terminal illness. The use of "chapped and faded lips" further builds on this image, as these words denote physical symptoms commonly associated with dehydration or the side effects of medication, such as chemotherapy.

By focusing on denotative meanings, we see how each lexical item functions as a building block in constructing the song's emotional gravity. The line "I'll try to keep my life" contains the lexical item "keep my life", a literal attempt to survive, underscoring the speaker's awareness of their condition. This literal meaning sets the foundation for deeper interpretations of despair and helplessness, but it also maintains an objective semantic anchor.

The phrase "These notes and flowers" refers to common artifacts associated with hospitalization or memorialization. Here, the denotative meaning functions not just to describe physical objects, but to signify the cultural practices surrounding illness and mourning. These lines remain emotionally potent because the words are not metaphorically abstract they are clear and universally understood.

Another notable example is "I'm just soggy from the chemo". The use of the medical term "chemo", short for chemotherapy, brings a clinical and literal realism to the song. Its denotative meaning anchors the lyrics in a specific medical reality, reminding listeners of the physical toll of cancer treatment, enhancing the credibility and gravity of the narrative.

In sum, this analysis demonstrates that the power of "Cancer" lies in its minimalist, literal diction. By deliberately employing denotative meanings through carefully chosen lexical items, the lyrics manage to communicate an intense emotional experience

without relying heavily on figurative language. The starkness of the literal meanings amplifies the song's impact, making the listener confront the raw and often unspoken realities of terminal illness.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

A. Conclusion

This study has explored the denotative meanings of lexical items found in the song "Cancer" by My Chemical Romance within the framework of lexical semantics. Through an analysis of literal word meanings, this research explores how linguistic choices within the song enhance its emotional impact and narrative structure. The findings reveal that despite the poetic and emotional weight typically associated with song lyrics, the power of "Cancer" lies significantly in its straightforward, denotative language. The inclusion of clinical vocabulary and explicit references to disease, mortality, and grief offers an authentic depiction of terminal conditions that invites empathy from the listener. This supports the notion that literal meaning in song lyrics is not only foundational for interpretation but also deeply effective in communicating emotional and human experiences.

Furthermore, the study reinforces the value of lexical semantics in the linguistic analysis of artistic texts such as song lyrics. Focusing on denotative meaning provides a clear analytical path that avoids subjective overinterpretation, while still allowing space for emotional engagement. The approach taken here can be extended to other texts and genres, opening new possibilities for further linguistic research that bridges emotion, narrative, and meaning.

B. Suggestion

Based on the findings of this study, several suggestions can be offered for future research and pedagogical applications:

1. For Future Researchers:

Further studies may explore the interplay between denotative and connotative meanings in song lyrics to understand how literal and figurative language work together to shape listener interpretation. Researchers could also apply this lexical semantic approach to other songs dealing with different themes such as mental health, love, or social issues, to compare how literal language functions across contexts.

2. For Educators and Linguists:

Song lyrics like “Cancer” can be used as valuable materials in language teaching, particularly in teaching semantics, vocabulary, and emotional literacy. Educators might incorporate such lyrical texts into classroom activities to help students analyze language meaning in real-world, emotionally relevant contexts.

3. For Songwriters and Artists:

The study highlights the power of denotative language in creating emotional resonance. Artists might consider how using literal expressions can enhance clarity and authenticity in storytelling, especially when addressing sensitive topics such as illness and grief.

4. For Students of Linguistics:

Analyzing song lyrics through a semantic lens provides a meaningful and engaging way to apply theoretical knowledge. Students are encouraged to conduct similar analyses to deepen their understanding of how language conveys meaning in both artistic and everyday contexts.

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