

## Three speakers' perspectives on experience in Taylor Swift's selected lyrics from *Folklore* album

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### Abstract

Pop songs are now an important means of expression for the modern generation. Academicians must consider this phenomenon as the object of language studies. This research attempts to analyze three songs in a Grammy-winning album of 2021, *Folklore*. Song lyrics in *Betty*, *Cardigan*, and *August*, written by Taylor Swift have the quality of narrative poetry (ballads) for having the characteristics of storytelling voiced by a different speaker in each song. The purpose of this research is to show how the varying amounts of transitivity process types in each lyric suggest different perspectives on reality. It uses a stylistic approach to expose the linguistic features that allow the speakers to portray diverse perspectives after going through a difficult relationship. As he apologizes to his partner, the speaker in *Betty* uses material process significantly to reconstruct the outer experiences. In *Cardigan*, the speaker emphasizes mental processes, incorporating her personal experience into her knowledge and memory. However, in *August*, the speaker uses both material and relational processes in equal proportions as she battles with her status in the relationship. Hence, listeners could identify with the various speakers' individual experiences as expressed in the lyrics.

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## INTRODUCTION

With language, a human develops their understanding of the world and express their views on living experiences. Most of the time, those expressions turn into creative and even valuable works of literature. The literariness is not only found in common literary genres such as poetry, prose, or drama. In this case, songs also have this aspect since it is closely related to poetry in terms of lyric-making. In popular music, to have a phatic sign in case of reaching as many as listeners, musicians are very aware to make the lyrics understandable for the audience as they also tell stories. The stories told are frequently created and

layered between public and private worlds, resulting in a perpetual dialogue between them (Plummer, 2019, p. 49). It is also because "different types of music, have different communicative functions" (Helms, 2015, p. 75-76). Therefore, with the development of the linguistic study, this area must be taken into consideration as it is part of human expression that involves language.

Taylor Allison Swift, an American singer who is 3 times Grammy Winner for Album of the Year wrote the songs entitled *Betty*, *Cardigan*, and *August* which became a viral discussion on the internet in 2020 as the singer's eighth studio album, *Folklore*, was surprisingly released on July 24 2020

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in the middle of Covid-19 Pandemic. As the songs narrates a series of events, lyrics in Taylor Swift's songs with titles: *Betty*, *Cardigan*, and *August* are qualified as ballads, a type of narrative poetry.

Miller notes that this kind of poem is about telling stories where it communicates a series of events. It also covers stories inspired by folklore, family stories, and also romantic encounters. The use of dialog, refrain, strong rhythm is also a distinct quality of ballads where it is telling a descriptive detail and the feelings of the character (Miller, 1981, p. 159-162). Thus, as narrative poetry, it means that the song lyrics are worth to be studied as a literary work.

As a matter of storytelling, these songs narrate about Betty who was James's lover while James also had another short fling to the unnamed girl during the summertime of their high school years. James's name is mentioned in a song entitled *Betty* where now it is known that Betty is an important character as a person whom James apologized to in the song. A piece of cloth, a cardigan, is also mentioned in *Betty* song lyric 'Standing in your cardigan' where it connects to the other song entitled *Cardigan* sung by Betty as the speaker. The outro of this song says 'And when I felt like I was an old cardigan'. Meanwhile, the unnamed girl referred to as 'she' in *Betty* lyric 'She said, "James, get in, let's drive"' has a cross-reference to the song entitled *August* in the line that says 'Remember when I pulled up and said, "Get in the car"'. Here, the listeners are supposed to notice how *August* is sung by the unnamed girl sharing her experience with James. This is how the chosen songs are correlated to each other in telling specific events of the teenagers' experience of a romantic relationship.

On the other hand, a prominent poetic element that appears in the three songs is the 'speaker'. Speaker is not always the poet, here the songwriter/singer. It refers to the owner of the point of view in which experience, emotion, or reflection of a series of events or details is presented (Miller, 1981, p. 20). Writing three separate songs that voice different characters' perspective and feeling, Swift employs language feature to create a variance in how each character perceives the

experience. This is in line with Wales's (1992) notion saying that the performer's linguistic creativity is what moving the music critic instead of the utter variety of the recordings (Simpson, 2004, p. 158). The stylistic approach is then applied as it works to explain the realization of artistic function through language use (Leech, 1981, p. 13). The examination of the language is accommodated by Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) where M.A.K Halliday, the main SFL theorist, sees how the diverse kinds of literary writing may highlight a distinct function. Indirectly, he agrees with the pluralist view on the style that relates language features in use to the functions it brings out (Leech, 1981, p. 30-31). Thus, it is essential now to give attention to the language aspect in songs lyric as viewed by stylistic theory.

To see how far the academic field takes song lyrics as the object of language study, a review of the previous studies is made here. A study in 2019 written by Sari, et.al. entitled, *Interpersonal Meaning Analysis of Adele's Song Lyric in 21 Album* explores the selected songs using SFL. The writers analyzed the a song entitled *Don't You Remember* by classifying the Mood-Residue elements. It concludes that the song is saturated by interpersonal meaning by 85.7% but it does not imply further significance. The second reviewed study is written by Siahaan in 2021 entitled, *Transitivity Processes in Bon Jovi's Selected Song Lyrics*. By analyzing 775 transitivity processes in the songs, he shows how diverse are the lyrics in using 6 types of processes to dynamically present the experiences to the listeners. The third study entitled '*Hey, Jude! I Wanna Hold Your Hand*': *Transitivity Process Analysis on Popular Songs by The Beatles* written in 2019 by Harbi et. al. explores also the transitivity process. The result states that The Beatles uses different transitivity processes in the song lyrics to communicate their experiences of the world.

Similar to the three previous studies, the aspect of SFL taken in this writing is limited to the transitivity process where it looks at how a clause develops an experiential meaning given by semantics for its core meanings. But to reach the

aim of this study, the researcher would explore how the transitivity process types used in three different but related songs implies different way someone perceives reality. It should be emphasized that core meanings are not about reality but the perspectives on reality (Gee, 2018, p. 22). In realizing the semantic meaning, transitivity deals with six types of process which are material, mental, relational, behavioural, verbal, and existential process (Halliday, 2004, p. 171). In SFL, these processes are understood in two senses. The first “is to refer to what is going on in the whole clause” and the second is to call “the proportion encoded in the verbal group” (Bloor and Bloor, 2004, p. 109). Therefore, as the title of this analysis suggests, the writer is about to inspect how transitivity processes work to represent the love triangle experience expressed by three different characters through the songs *Betty*, *Cardigan*, and *August*.

## METHODS

This study is done under the theory of systemic functional linguistic to bridge between linguistic analysis and literary critics known as stylistic. The systemic-functional paradigm developed by Halliday is a potential alternative to the transformational model being popular at the time in much stylistic work. (Simpson, p. 2005, 102). So, the stylistic approach applied in this research is needed since it leads to “an objective measurement of style” to prove one’s point on the feature that is prominent in the text. It also enables the researcher to check the statement in explaining the language used in certain texts (Leech, 1981, p. 47-48). Therefore, as a method, this research applied the quantitative method for its useful concept of a variable that is “a measurable feature of a particular case” (Rasinger, 2008, p. 18). This method is characterized by the use of the number to count from the data the priori categorization which then reveals the variables as it quests for generalization (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 32-34).

The data source of this research is lyrics of Taylor Swift’s songs *Betty*, *Cardigan*, and *August* as read in folklore album CD cover. In detail, the data

collection is firstly done by thoroughly extracting the verbal groups that appear in each song lyric. Second, the verbs are categorized into the types of transitivity process they semantically fit in. What is counted is the appearing process even it repeats the same lexical item. Third, the data are presented in the table showing the distribution of the transitivity process in each song. In addition, excerpts from the lyrics are coded into A (1), B (1), C (1). A is for the excerpt from *August*, B for *Betty*, and C for *Cardigan*. The number followed the letter code is to label the sequence of data that occurs in the lyric.

The analysis then starts with describing the main idea of each song to grasp the narration being told. Then, it continues to see how the 6 transitivity processes are distributed in the number of occurrences in each song title. Therefore, the dominant use of process types is linked to the speaker’s perspective in the lyrics so that the function of such processes can be explained according to each speaker’s representation of experience. The goal is to see how different proportions of transitivity could signify different ways the character perceives the reality out of a specific situation.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Main Ideas in *Betty*, *Cardigan*, and *August*

As mentioned in the introductory part, the songs are correlated to each other creating an indirect reciprocal effect in talking about a specific experience undergone by the speaker of the lyrics. The speaker in the song entitled *Betty* is known to be James. In this song, he mainly expresses his guilty feeling to Betty as shown in lines: “Betty, I won’t make assumptions about / why you switched your homeroom / but I think it’s cause of me” and “The worst thing that I ever did / Was what I did to you”. He is also about to make things up between them saying that he would show up at her party and say, “In the garden would you trust me / If I told you, it was just a summer thing? / I’m only seventeen / I don’t know anything / But I know I miss you”. However, he is defensive when he explains “I was nowhere to be found / I hate the crowds, you know that / Plus, I saw you dance

with him.” Therefore, he is kind of making a bad decision to go with another girl and soon regret it as shown by saying “I was walking home on broken cobblestones / Just thinking of you / when she pulled up / like a figment of my worst intentions / She said “James, get in, let’s drive” / Those days turned into nights / Slept next to her but / I dreamt of you all summer long.” At the end of the lyric, he seems to wish that the situation would be as it was saying “Will it be just like I dreamed it? / Will it patch your broken wings?” and “Standing in your cardigan / Kissin’ in my car again / Stopped at a streetlight / You know I miss you”.

In *Cardigan’s* lyric, the speaker is Betty who is reminiscing the past relationship. When she says, “Vintage tee, brand new phone / High heels on cobblestones / When you are young, they assume you know nothing / Sequin smile, black lipstick / Sensual politics”, she points out how teenage life are underestimated by the society based on their appearance and indifference on politics. But she who has passed that stage is sure that she is fully aware of what happens as she says “But I knew you / Dancing in your Levi’s / Drunk under a streetlight / - / Hand under my sweatshirt / Baby kiss it better.” She remembers the details of such an experience. Betty, then, describes a heart-breaking situation in the lines “A friend to all is a friend to none / Chase two girls, lose the one” and “You drew stars around my scars / But now I’m bleeding”. She is also being contradictive when explaining what James does and what she believes about him by saying “Cause I knew you / Stepping on the last train / Marked me like a bloodstain / - / Tried to change the ending / Peter losing Wendy / - / Leaving like a father, Running like water” while she is also desiring him as she says “But I knew you’d linger like a tattoo kiss / I knew you’d haunt all of my what-ifs / The smell of smoke would hang around this long / Cause I knew everything when I was young.” Betty shows how she is convinced about James’s acceptance of her by saying “I knew you’d miss me once the thrill expired / And you’d be standing in my front porch light / And I knew you’d come back to me” because of one thing that he does which is reflected

in the lines “And when I felt like I was an old cardigan / Under someone’s bed / You put me on and said I was your favorite.”

Meanwhile, another song, *August*, has an unnamed girl as the speaker. She is the third person in Betty and James’s relationship referred to as ‘she’ in Betty lyric. She is also pondering her experience with James knowing that the relationship was not genuine as she says “Whispers of ‘Are you sure?’ / ‘Never have I ever before’ / But I can see us lost in the memory / August slipped away into a moment in time / Cause it was never mine.” She is keeping some hope that it would be a committed relationship when she says “Will you call when you’re back at school? / I remember thinking I had you.” And when she says “Back when we were still changing for the better / Wanting was enough / For me, it was enough”, she is submitted to the fact that what she had was worth the time. Still, she is always willing to see him for the sake of the feeling she has had expressed by saying “Cancel plans just in case you’d call / And say, ‘Meet me behind the mall’ / So much for summer love and saying ‘us’ / Cause you weren’t mine to lose.” She is also about to remind James at the moment it started when she asks “But do you remember? / Remember when I pulled up and said, ‘Get in the car’ / And then cancelled my plans just in case you’d call?”. She admits that she is all about him back then as shown in line, “Back when I was living for the hope of it all.”

So, the main idea in *Betty* is someone who is expressing guilty feeling with a defense of himself and by regret wanting a relationship can be fixed. In *Cardigan*, the main idea is about someone who is being aware of the contradiction of someone else’s actions and what she has acknowledged about it but is simply convinced by the acceptance performed by the significant other. Whereas, *August* shows the idea of someone who is submitted to an unfaithful relationship.

### Transitivity Processes in *Betty*, *Cardigan*, and *August*

The variety of linguistic choice gives colors to literary work as well as in songwriting. It is because the efficiency of literary communication is based on the absence of a clearly established linguistic code, rather than on the presence of such a code (Simpson, 2003, p.8). Experience in song lyrics must receive a special attention and it is systematized in language by the transitivity process. Here, numbers counted for the transitivity process distributed throughout each song are discussed in several parts. The first is to look at the occurrence of each process type in percentage as to look at the most used type in each song. The second is to examine the significance of such distribution toward the experiential meaning developed by the speakers' perspectives.

The data in this part is obtained by taking the occurrences of the verbal group and also the possibly omitted verb which is meant to be part of

the lyrical writing style. Sometimes, the verbal group is clearly stated like this,

C (2) (3) (4) When you **are**<sup>2</sup> young, they **assume**<sup>3</sup> **you** know<sup>4</sup>  
nothing

where there are three process types in three verb clauses. It is clarified by the auxiliary are and the verbs as assume and know counted as three occurrences process types which in this case are one relational process and two mental processes. There are also phrases written as

A (1) Salt air, and the rust on your door<sup>1</sup>

where the process is then implied as the mentioning of the noun phrases entails the existence of the references. This is counted too as one occurrence of process type. In this case, the existential process. Applying this standard, the result of examining the songs for the use of six transitivity processes is presented in the table below.

**Table 1.** Distribution of Transitivity Process Types

Song Titles	Transitivity Process Types						TOTAL
	Material	Mental	Relational	Behavioural	Verbal	Existential	
<b>(B) Betty</b>	37	24	20	6	5	0	92
%	<b>40,2%</b>	26,1%	21,7%	6,5%	5,5%	0%	100%
<b>(C) Cardigan</b>	21	28	10	7	4	4	74
%	28,4%	<b>37,8%</b>	13,5%	9,5%	5,4%	5,4%	100%
<b>(A) August</b>	19	15	19	3	10	2	68
%	<b>28%</b>	22%	<b>28%</b>	4%	15%	3%	100%

In *Betty* lyric, 40,2% of processed are dominated by the material process. Following in the second dominant is 26,1% of mental process. To make it 100% for the 92 total of types occurrence, there are 21,7% of the relational process, 6,5% behavioural process, 5,5% verbal process, and 0% for the existential process. In *Cardigan*, the most used process type is the mental process showing up 28 times filling 37,8% of the whole types' occurrences followed by material process in the second position for 28,4% and the third position is the relational process for 13,5%. There is also the behavioural process for 9,5%, verbal process 5,4%, and existential process 5,4%, making it 100% for 74 occurrences of all process

types in this song lyric. For *August*, the distribution of material and relational process is both 28% for each appears 19 times among 68 process types. The mental process appears 15 times filling 22%, behavioral process 4%, verbal process 15%, and existential process 3%.

The highest use of the material process is found in *Betty* and the mental process is highly used in *Cardigan* lyric. Meanwhile, the relational process is featured the most in the *August* lyric. The behavioural and existential process appears the most in *Cardigan*, verbal process in *August*, and there is no existential process in *Betty* lyric. The data, so far, generally shows that different speaker is attributed to the different process in expressing

their experience on the mentioned event. Speaker in the *Cardigan* perceives the experience mostly in the mental related activity which means she focuses on the mental aspects such of perception, cognition, volition, and emotive. However, the speaker in *Betty* does it in the material-related activity which means he focuses on the action or event. In *August*, the speaker uses the most of material and relational meaning which means she also focuses on the events and somehow tries to relate the experience to a certain state. A deeper analysis of how these main ideas are realized in the text is presented in the next part.

### Significance of Transitivity Process Distribution

As SFL is applied to serve the stylistic approach in seeing the creative use of language to create meaning, the significance of transitivity process distribution for each song is about to be discussed here. This process explores how the process types function to deliver the different experiential meanings of each speaker of the songs *Betty*, *Cardigan*, and *August* based on the most prominent transitivity process used in the lyric text.

### Speaker 'James' focuses on the Doing and Happening

The data shown in the previous part tells that material processes are the most used in *Betty* song. "Material clauses construe figures of doing-&-happening", (Halliday, 2004, p. 181). Take a look at these excerpts below.

- B (2) why you **switched** your homeroom
- B (6) Betty, one time I **was riding** on my skateboard
- B (7) when I **passed** your house
- B (29) Betty, I **know** where it all went wrong
- B (30) Your favorite song **was playing** from the far ...
- B (56) I **was walking** home on broken cobblestones
- B (58) when she **pulled** up
- B (62) Those days **turned** into nights
- B (66) And I **planned** it **out** for weeks now
- B (67) but it's finally **sinking in**
- B (72) The only thing I wanna **do**
- B (76) So, I **showed** up at your party
- B (85) Will it **patch** your broken wings?
- B (92) **Stopped** at a streetlight

The verbs such as switch, ride, pass, go, pull up, plan, do, and patch have the sense of doing while walk, play, turn, sink, show up, and stop

have the sense of happening. For the 'doing' sense, the actor in this process is mainly the speaker himself. Whereas for the 'happening' sense the actor can be nouns like 'song' and 'nights' or pronoun 'it' referring to something he plans out. So, as the speaker is expressing his guilty feeling, he tends to reconstruct the outer experiences in the past to narrate how the relationship goes wrong caused by his actions and some happenings.

### Speaker 'Betty' focuses on the Consciousness

In *Cardigan* lyric, the songwriter dominantly uses the mental process for the speaker to express his perspective on the relationship between him, James, and the unnamed girl. Halliday emphasizes that "mental clauses are concerned with our experiences of the world of our own consciousness" (2004, p. 197). Betty's recognition of her experience is presented in the excerpts below.

- C (2) When you are young, they assume you **know** nothing
- C (9) But I **knew** you, dancing in your Levi's
- C (13) I **knew** you, hand under my sweatshirt, Baby kiss it better
- C (15) And when I **felt** like I was an old cardigan..
- C (38) To kiss in cars and downtown bars was all we **needed**
- C (41) Cause I **knew** you, stepping on the last train, ...
- C (44) I **knew** you tried to change the ending,..
- C (47) I **knew** you leaving like a father, running like water
- C (53) But I **knew** you'd linger like a tattoo kiss
- C (56) I **knew** you'd haunt all of my what-ifs
- C (59) Cause I **knew** everything when I was young
- C (60) I **knew** I'd curse you for the longest time
- C (63) I **knew** you'd miss me once the thrill expired
- C (67) And I **knew** you'd come back to me

The verbs like know, need, and feel realized the mental process. Here, it is shown that the three categories of mental process present as cognition in the word know, volition in need, and perception in feel. There is no affection found in this song lyric neither for the positive nor negative sense of this category which usually appears in words such as love, hate, admire, fear. Betty as the speaker in this lyric acts also as the senser of the mental processes of all three categories but mostly as the senser for the cognition category. This implies that she, by repeating the word know(/knew), is stating how aware she was of the situation around the troubled relationship with James. The phenomena in the

cognition category are most likely expressed as events like in C (9), C (13), or C (47) indicating that the speaker has collected the experience as part of her consciousness. The other type of phenomenon in the cognition category which is labeled as fact appears in C (56), C (60), or C (63) signifying that she has faith in what she perceives as fact. Thus, by expressing the experience in this manner, the speaker refuses to be assumed as the young who knows nothing as she says repeatedly throughout the song line “When you are young, they assume you know nothing”.

***Speaker of August focuses on the Happenings, Having, and Being***

In the song entitled August, the speaker uses the most of material and relational types of transitivity process. Halliday states that the relational processes ‘serve to characterize and to identify’ (Halliday, 2004, p. 210). Let’s take a look at the excerpts below to see how the speaker characterizes the experience from her point of view.

- C (7) But I can see us **lost** in the memory
- C (8) August **slipped away** into a moment in time
- C (9) 'Cause it **was** never mine
- C (11) And I can see us **twisted** in bedsheets
- C (12) August **sipped away** like a bottle of wine
- C (13) 'Cause you **were** never mine
- C (30) Back when we **were** still **changing** for the better
- C (31) Wanting **was** enough
- C (32) For me, it **was** enough
- C (61.) Remember when I **pulled up** and said, "Get in the car"
- C (65) And then **canceled** my plans just in case you'd call?
- C (67) Back when I **was livin'** for the hope of it all

The data above shows that the speaker tends to relate the happenings to a certain state that she finds suitable for herself. Words like slip away, sip away, and change belongs to the material process with which she reflects on the happenings. While the words pull up, cancel, and live are used when she reflects on the action. The uses of ‘be’ varying in was and were are categorized in the relational process. For example, the line ‘August slipped

away into a moment in time’ is made as the result for the reason she identifies in the line “Cause it was never mine’. August is also sipped away as the person she has when spending that specific month of summertime does not belong to her. The sense of something does not belong to her is then realized by the use of the relational process of possessive attributive clauses as expressed by “Cause you were never mine”. Here, the speaker has no name but is referred to as ‘she’ in the other song’s entitled, *Betty*. Somehow, it is to foreground the point that in this affair, she also suffers about making the meaning out of her experience being the third person. So, as she mentions that “wanting was enough”, being enough is all she can be.

**CONCLUSION**

To summarize, the writer must first restate that the song lyrics of *Betty*, *Cardigan*, and *August* are considered having the quality of narrative poetry, ballads, for how it contains a storytelling element, and making use of different speakers for each lyric. Different speakers have resulted in a different manner in expressing its point of view on a specific affair. Using a stylistic approach, this study scrutinized the language features that make such differentiation possible in meaning-making. Transitivity analysis was done to reveal the processes taken to deliver the speakers’ perspectives.

The result shows that in *Betty* song, where the material process is used prominently, the speaker reconstructs the outer experiences in the past to provide a reason to apologize. On the other hand, in *Cardigan* lyric, the speaker uses mental process dominantly to bring the experience into her consciousness to be part of her knowledge. Meanwhile, in *August*, the speaker is struggling with her significance in the relationship as she uses equally both material and relational process. Thus, this research has achieved its goal to explain the distinct proportions of the transitivity process signify different ways of perceiving reality.

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