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LINGUISTIC THREADS IN 'CARDIGAN' SONG LYRICS: A STUDY OF BOUND AND FREE MORPHEMES

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Abstract: This study examines the use of bound and free morphemes in Taylor Swift's *Cardigan* to explore how morphological structure contributes to meaning in contemporary song lyrics. The purpose of this research is to investigate how morphological elements contribute to linguistic artistry, thematic cohesion, and emotional intensity in popular music. Employing a qualitative descriptive research design, the study analyzes words and phrases containing free and bound morphemes drawn from the officially published lyrics of *Cardigan*. Data were collected through documentation techniques and analyzed using qualitative content analysis by categorizing morphemes into free and bound types and interpreting their grammatical and semantic functions. The findings reveal that free morphemes, especially lexical items such as nouns, verbs, and adjectives, serve as primary carriers of semantic content and imagery, while bound morphemes—particularly inflectional suffixes such as *-s*, *-ed*, *-ing*, and *-est*—refine meaning by encoding tense, aspect, number, and degree. These morphological choices contribute significantly to thematic cohesion and emotional continuity within the song. Overall, the study demonstrates that morphology functions not only as a grammatical system but also as a vital expressive resource that enhances artistic creativity and emotional resonance in song lyrics.

Keywords: linguistic, morphemes, morphology, song lyrics

INTRODUCTION

Language is a multifaceted system composed of interconnected levels that work together to create meaning. Among these levels, morphology plays a crucial role by examining how words are formed from their smallest meaningful components. These components, known as morphemes, contribute significant semantic value to linguistic expressions. Understanding how morphemes function allows researchers to uncover subtle messages within word structure. For this reason, the study of morphology is essential for exploring how meaning is constructed and interpreted in human communication. Moreover, morphology, as emphasized by Khanetnok et al. (2023), is a

vital branch of linguistics that focuses on the structure and formation of words. It provides insight into how words are built from smaller units and how these units interact to create meaning. In morphological analysis, the distinction between bound and free morphemes becomes particularly important. Bound morphemes, such as prefixes and suffixes, cannot stand alone and must attach to other forms to contribute meaning. In contrast, free morphemes are independent words that are capable of conveying meaning on their own. This distinction allows researchers to analyze how different types of morphemes function within various linguistic contexts.

Furthermore, the study has increasingly highlighted song lyrics as valuable linguistic data for morphological study. Lyrics draw on everyday language while simultaneously incorporating creative expressions that enhance emotional impact. Because of their artistic nature, song lyrics offer rich opportunities for examining how language is manipulated for aesthetic purposes. Analyzing lyrics from a morphological perspective allows scholars to observe how artists strategically choose structures to convey messages. This approach bridges the gap between linguistic analysis and the study of cultural or literary expression.

In addition, Taylor Swift's "Cardigan" serves as an illustrative example for exploring morphological elements in contemporary music. The song features carefully crafted wording that reflects both emotional depth and stylistic precision. By examining the bound and free morphemes within its lyrics, researchers can better understand how Swift constructs meaning through linguistic choices. This focus offers insight into how morphology contributes to the song's themes and artistic resonance. Consequently, "Cardigan" provides an ideal case study for analyzing the relationship between linguistic structure and creative expression.

Previous studies have demonstrated growing academic interest in applying morphological analysis to song lyrics, particularly through the examination of free and bound morphemes. Dewi and Hermawan (2024) analysed free and bound morphemes in Maher Zain's *Forgive Me* album, focusing on identifying morpheme types and their frequencies across multiple religious-themed English songs. Their findings reveal that both free and bound morphemes are systematically employed to support grammatical structure, with bound morphemes, especially inflectional suffixes – playing a dominant role in expressing tense and number. Similarly, Ulfayanti et al., (2024) investigated the use of free and bound morphemes in the song *Best Part* by Daniel Caesar and H.E.R., emphasizing the classification of lexical and functional morphemes. The study concludes that free morphemes, particularly lexical items, are essential in conveying emotional meaning, while bound morphemes mainly serve grammatical functions. Although these studies successfully establish song lyrics as valid data for morphological research, their analyses largely remain descriptive, concentrating on morpheme identification and classification rather than exploring how morphological choices contribute to broader expressive or thematic dimensions of the songs.

Despite these contributions, a notable research gap remains. Previous studies, including those by Dewi and Hermawan (2024) and Ulfayanti et al., (2024), tend to focus on counting and categorizing free and bound morphemes without deeply examining how inflectional morphology interacts with narrative structure, emotional progression, or thematic cohesion. Moreover, there is limited research that connects morphological patterns, particularly inflectional suffixes such as *-s*, *-ed*, and *-ing* – to artistic expression in contemporary popular music by globally influential artists. This study addresses that gap by providing a qualitative morphological analysis of Taylor Swift's *Cardigan*,

emphasizing not only the identification of bound and free morphemes but also their grammatical and semantic roles in shaping meaning, emotional nuance, and narrative flow. In doing so, the research extends previous morphological studies of song lyrics by demonstrating that morphology functions not merely as a grammatical system but as an integral component of lyrical artistry and meaning-making.

Hence, the present study aims to investigate how bound and free morphemes contribute to the expressive and communicative dimensions of Taylor Swift's "Cardigan." Through this analysis, the research seeks to reveal the linguistic artistry embedded in the song's lyrical construction. Understanding these morphological choices may offer broader implications for studying language use in popular culture. This study also highlights how linguistic structure contributes to thematic cohesion and emotional intensity in music. Ultimately, it is expected that the findings will deepen our understanding of how language functions as both a structural system and a medium of artistic creativity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Linguistic

Linguistics is generally defined as the scientific study of language and its structural components. It aims to describe, analyze, and explain how language is systematically organized and how it functions as a primary means of human communication. Through a scientific approach, linguistics examines language patterns rather than relying on intuition or prescriptive rules. This discipline seeks to uncover the underlying principles that govern language use in both spoken and written forms. By doing so, linguistics provides a theoretical framework for understanding how meaning is constructed and communicated through language.

As a field of study, linguistics encompasses several interrelated subfields, including phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. Each subfield focuses on a distinct level of language analysis, ranging from speech sounds and word formation to sentence structure and meaning in context. Phonetics and phonology investigate how sounds are produced and patterned, while morphology and syntax examine word structure and sentence organization. Semantics and pragmatics, on the other hand, explore meaning at the lexical, sentence, and contextual levels. According to Azatkhanovna (2025), the integration of these subfields allows linguists to conduct comprehensive and systematic analyses of language.

Furthermore, Xapizovich (2025) emphasizes that linguistics plays a crucial role in explaining how language users produce and interpret utterances across diverse communicative contexts. Linguistic analysis helps clarify how speakers select appropriate forms to convey intentions and how listeners infer meaning from linguistic input. In addition, linguistics investigates language variation across social groups, highlighting the influence of factors such as age, gender, region, and social status. The field also examines language change over time, revealing how languages evolve in response to social and historical forces. Moreover, linguistics explores how language is acquired by children and learned as a second or foreign language.

In addition, Ejebli (2024) notes that by exploring language patterns across different communities and cultures, linguistics reveals both universal characteristics of human language and its diverse manifestations. This cross-cultural perspective allows researchers to identify similarities that reflect shared cognitive capacities as well as differences shaped by cultural practices. Through such investigations, linguistics

contributes to a deeper understanding of human cognition and social interaction. Language is shown not merely as a mechanical system but as a tool deeply embedded in cultural and social life. As a result, linguistics serves as a vital discipline for understanding language both as a structured system and as a fundamental aspect of human society.

Morphology

Morphology occupies a central position within linguistics because it explains how meaning and grammatical relations are expressed through the internal structure of words. At the core of morphological analysis is the distinction between free morphemes, which function independently as lexical items, and bound morphemes, which attach to other forms to encode grammatical or semantic information. This distinction is fundamental for understanding how speakers convey content and nuance efficiently within a linguistic system. Aronoff and Fudeman (2022) explain that morphology accounts for the systematic processes through which words are formed, inflected, and derived, highlighting the close relationship between form and meaning. Through the interaction of free and bound morphemes, language enables precise expression at the word level.

The study of free and bound morphemes also sheds light on how language users construct and interpret meaning in communication. Free morphemes typically carry core lexical meaning, serving as the primary vehicles of semantic content, while bound morphemes modify or refine that meaning by marking grammatical categories such as tense, number, aspect, and comparison. This interaction allows speakers to adapt expressions to different communicative contexts without altering the core message. Morphological patterns help listeners decode meaning by recognizing familiar morphemic structures in both spoken and written discourse. As a result, free and bound morphemes play a crucial role in ensuring clarity, efficiency, and expressiveness in communication.

Furthermore, morphology functions as an interface between phonology and syntax by regulating how morphemes combine into phonologically realizable and syntactically functional word forms. Processes such as inflection and derivation illustrate how bound morphemes extend the communicative potential of free morphemes, either by signaling grammatical relations or by creating new lexical items. These processes enable languages to maintain structural coherence while supporting linguistic productivity. Morphological organization ensures that word forms align with sentence-level requirements, contributing to fluent and interpretable discourse. In this way, morphology directly supports communicative effectiveness across linguistic levels.

Moreover, cross-linguistic variation in the use of free and bound morphemes provides insight into how different languages encode meaning and grammatical relations. Comparative morphological research demonstrates that while languages vary in their reliance on affixation, compounding, or other strategies, they share underlying principles of morphemic organization. Aronoff and Fudeman (2022) note that such variation reflects both universal constraints and language-specific solutions to expressive needs. Examining these patterns deepens understanding of how human languages balance economy, clarity, and expressiveness. Consequently, morphology is essential for explaining how language functions as a system of structured yet flexible communication.

Morpheme

A morpheme is widely recognized as the smallest meaningful unit within a language and constitutes the core analytical focus of morphological study. While morphology examines how words are structured and formed, morphemes represent the minimal elements through which meaning and grammatical information are encoded. Liu et al., (2024) argue that morphemes establish systematic and rule-governed relationships between linguistic form and meaning, enabling speakers to construct complex expressions efficiently. Through morphemic analysis, linguists can explain how meaning is distributed across components within a word rather than being treated as an indivisible whole. This perspective reinforces the role of morphology in revealing how language achieves precision and economy in expression.

Furthermore, morphemes play a crucial role in demonstrating how words simultaneously convey lexical and grammatical meaning. Lexical meaning refers to the core conceptual content carried by a word, whereas grammatical meaning signals relationships such as tense, number, comparison, and possession. Morphological analysis enables researchers to identify how individual morphemes contribute to these different layers of meaning within a single word form. This distinction helps explain why words can vary in form while retaining related meanings across different contexts. Consequently, the study of morphemes provides a foundation for understanding meaning construction in communication.

In addition, morphemes are commonly classified into free morphemes and bound morphemes based on their ability to occur independently. According to Liu et al., (2024), free morphemes can stand alone as complete words and typically function as the primary carriers of lexical meaning. Bound morphemes, by contrast, cannot occur independently and must attach to free morphemes to modify or refine meaning. This classification highlights how expression in language relies on the interaction between independent lexical items and dependent grammatical markers. Through this interaction, speakers are able to convey nuanced meanings within compact word forms.

Bound morphemes are further divided into inflectional and derivational morphemes, each serving distinct communicative functions. Inflectional morphemes encode grammatical categories such as tense, plurality, aspect, comparison, and possession without altering the word's lexical category or core meaning. Derivational morphemes, on the other hand, contribute to lexical expansion by forming new words or changing word classes, often introducing new semantic interpretations. This distinction allows linguists to analyze how languages balance grammatical accuracy with expressive flexibility. As a result, morphological systems support both structural coherence and semantic diversity.

Moreover, Audring (2022) emphasizes that understanding the functional roles of inflectional and derivational morphemes is essential for explaining how language operates as a system of communication. Inflectional morphemes ensure syntactic compatibility by signaling relationships between words within a sentence. Derivational morphemes enable speakers to expand their expressive resources by creating new lexical forms suited to specific communicative needs. Recognizing these morphemic patterns enhances theoretical linguistic analysis and has practical implications for language learning and literacy development. Thus, the study of morphemes strengthens our understanding of how morphology facilitates effective expression and meaningful communication across languages.

Song lyrics

Song lyrics have increasingly been acknowledged as valuable linguistic resources within academic research due to their unique position at the intersection of everyday language and artistic expression. Unlike more formal written texts, lyrics draw heavily on common vocabulary and conversational structures while simultaneously manipulating language for aesthetic and emotional impact. This combination allows researchers to observe how linguistic elements are creatively reshaped to convey complex emotions, personal narratives, and thematic depth. As a result, song lyrics provide a rich and accessible corpus for analyzing how language functions beyond purely informational purposes.

From a stylistic and literary perspective, Simbolon et al., (2025) argue that the analysis of song lyrics reveals how linguistic features contribute to artistic and expressive effects. Songwriters frequently employ figurative language, sound patterns such as rhyme and rhythm, and variations in word choice to enhance musicality and emotional resonance. These features demonstrate the flexibility of language and illustrate how linguistic form can be strategically manipulated to achieve aesthetic goals. Consequently, lyrics serve as an ideal site for exploring linguistic creativity, as they showcase how structural elements of language are adapted within artistic constraints.

Beyond their aesthetic function, song lyrics also reflect broader cultural and social dimensions of communication. Simbolon et al., (2025) emphasize that lyrics often express shared experiences, emotions, and ideological perspectives that resonate with specific communities or generations. Through their themes and language choices, songs can mirror social values, cultural identities, and emotional realities, making them a meaningful object of linguistic and cultural inquiry. Analyzing lyrics therefore enables researchers to examine how language operates as a medium for social expression and cultural representation.

Furthermore, approaching song lyrics from a morphological perspective allows scholars to investigate how structural linguistic choices reinforce meaning and emotional tone. Lyrics provide authentic data for examining natural language use, including informal expressions, metaphorical constructions, and innovative word formations that may not frequently appear in formal texts. Morphological analysis reveals how word-level structures contribute to thematic cohesion and emotional nuance. Thus, the study of song lyrics not only deepens understanding of linguistic structure but also enhances insight into how language functions within artistic and cultural contexts.

Linguistic Artistry and the role of linguistic structure in music

Linguistic artistry refers to the creative and meaningful manipulation of linguistic elements to produce aesthetic, expressive, and communicative effects. In song lyrics, linguistic artistry is not limited to figurative language or poetic devices but is also realized through structural choices at the morphological level. The selection and arrangement of free and bound morphemes contribute to how meanings are shaped, nuanced, and intensified within a lyrical text. According to Aronoff and Fudeman (2022), morphology plays a crucial role in expressing subtle semantic distinctions that enrich textual interpretation. Thus, linguistic artistry in music emerges from the deliberate interaction between form and meaning embedded in word construction.

From a morphological perspective, free morphemes function as carriers of core semantic content, while bound morphemes refine and contextualize that meaning through grammatical modification. Inflectional morphemes such as tense or aspect

markers allow songwriters to position experiences temporally, often evoking reflection, nostalgia, or emotional continuity. Derivational morphemes, meanwhile, contribute to expressive variation by enabling shifts in word class or evaluative meaning. As noted by Audring (2022), these morphological processes expand expressive potential without compromising grammatical coherence. Consequently, linguistic artistry in song lyrics is achieved through systematic, rule-governed morphological choices rather than random stylistic variation.

Linguistic structure also plays a central role in establishing thematic cohesion in music. Thematic cohesion refers to the consistency and continuity of meaning across lines and verses, which allows a song to convey a unified message or emotional narrative. Recurrent morphological patterns—such as repeated tense forms or consistent derivational structures—help maintain semantic alignment throughout the lyrics. Halliday and Hasan's concept of cohesion, later expanded in discourse-based studies, emphasizes that grammatical patterning contributes significantly to textual unity (Halliday & Hasan, 2014; Biber et al., 2021). In song lyrics, this cohesion enables listeners to perceive the song as an integrated linguistic and emotional whole.

In addition to cohesion, linguistic structure significantly contributes to emotional intensity in music. Emotional intensity arises when linguistic forms reinforce affective meaning, allowing emotions to be gradually built or sustained across the text. Morphological choices such as progressive forms, repetition of inflectional markers, or shifts in derivational patterns can signal emotional persistence, vulnerability, or change. Biber et al., (2021) argue that grammatical structures are closely linked to stance and affect in discourse, including artistic texts. Through these structures, emotions in music are linguistically encoded and made accessible to listeners.

Overall, linguistic artistry and emotional expression in music are deeply rooted in linguistic structure, particularly at the morphological level. Free and bound morphemes work together to construct meaning, maintain thematic cohesion, and intensify emotional expression in song lyrics. This interaction demonstrates that music lyrics are not only artistic creations but also structured linguistic texts governed by systematic rules. Understanding these mechanisms provides valuable insight into how language functions as both a communicative system and a medium of artistic creativity. Therefore, analyzing morphological structures in song lyrics offers a meaningful approach to studying language use in popular culture.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to analyze the morphological elements found in Taylor Swift's "Cardigan" lyrics, as this approach allowed for an in-depth interpretation of linguistic features without relying on numerical measurement. The data consisted of words and phrases containing bound and free morphemes taken from the officially published lyrics, ensuring accuracy and consistency throughout the analysis. Data were collected through documentation techniques, beginning with reading and examining the lyrics, followed by identifying and listing lexical items that contained morphemic structures. The analysis was conducted using qualitative content analysis, where the identified words were categorized into bound and free morphemes and interpreted based on their roles in shaping meaning within the song. Through this analytical process, the study sought to reveal how morphological choices contribute to the expressive and thematic dimensions of the lyrics.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Inflectional Morphemes found in the Song Lyrics of Cardigan by Taylor

The following table presents the distribution of inflectional morphemes found in the lyrics of *Cardigan*. The analysis focuses on identifying words that contain inflectional suffixes, which modify grammatical features such as tense, aspect, plurality, and comparison without changing the basic meaning or class of the root word. This overview helps illustrate how the songwriter employs grammatical markers to convey actions, descriptions, and narrative progression throughout the song. Here is the table of Inflectional Morphemes found in the Song Lyrics of Cardigan by Taylor Swift :

Table 1. Inflectional morphemes found in the song lyrics of Cardigan by Taylor Swift

No	The Words	Free Morphemes	Bound Morphemes	Type Inflectional Morphemes
1	Heels	Heel	S	Noun - Suffix
2	Politics	Politic	S	Adj - Suffix
3	Dancing	Dance	-Ing	Verb - Suffix
4	Playing	Play	-Ing	Verb - Suffix
5	Giving	Give	-Ing	Verb - Suffix
6	Weekends	Week	S/ed	Noun - Suffix
7	Lifetimes	Life & Time	S	Noun - Suffix
8	Bleeding	Bleed (Blood)	-Ing	Verb - Suffix
9	Stepping	Step	-Ing	Verb - Suffix
10	Bloodstains	Blood & Stains	S	Verb - Suffix
11	Cars	Car	S	Noun - Suffix
12	Bars	Bar	S	Noun - Suffix
13	Needed	Need	Ed	Verb - Suffix
14	Stars	Star	S	Noun - Suffix
15	Scars	Scar	S	Noun - Suffix
16	Marked	Mark	Ed	Noun - Suffix
17	Tried	Try	Ed	Verb - Suffix
18	Ending	End	-Ing	Noun - Suffix
19	Losing	Lose	-Ing	Verb - Suffix
20	Living	Live	-Ing	Verb - Suffix
21	Running	Run	-Ing	Verb - Suffix
22	Longest	Long	-Est	Adj - Suffix
23	Chasing	Chase	-Ing	Verb - Suffix
24	Shadows	Shadow	S	Noun - Suffix
25	Expires	Expire	S	Verb - Suffix
26	Standing	Stand	-Ing	Verb - Suffix

The analysis presented in Table 1.1 demonstrates the systematic use of inflectional morphemes in the song lyrics, a pattern that is consistent with established morphological theory. According to Haspelmath (2024), inflectional morphemes function to encode grammatical information such as number, tense, aspect, and comparison without changing a word's lexical category or core meaning. This theoretical principle is clearly reflected in the use of the plural suffix *-s* in nouns such as *heels* and *politics*, where the free morphemes *heel* and *politic* remain nouns after inflection. The suffix *-s* simply signals plurality, reinforcing its role as a grammatical marker rather than a meaning-

altering element. A similar pattern is observed in *weekends*, which further supports the notion that plural marking in English operates consistently across lexical items, as also noted by Alexiadou (2024). The frequent appearance of plural forms in the lyrics enhances the descriptive and narrative texture of the song by emphasizing collective or repeated experiences, a function that aligns with previous findings by Dewi and Hermawan (2024), who reported the dominance of plural inflection in English song lyrics.

Moreover, the prominence of the progressive suffix *-ing* in forms such as *dancing*, *playing*, and *giving* can be explained through aspectual theory in morphology. As stated by Ferré, G. (2025), progressive aspect expresses ongoing or unfolding actions, a function that is linguistically realized in English through the *-ing* inflection. In the context of *Cardigan*, the repeated use of *-ing* forms contributes to a sense of continuity and emotional movement, allowing listeners to experience actions as dynamic and temporally extended. This finding supports Ulfayanti et al., (2024) study, which also highlights the role of verbal inflection in maintaining emotional flow in song lyrics. Additionally, the past tense suffix *-ed* in verbs such as *tried* and *marked* reflects what Aronoff and Fudeman (2022) describe as the temporal anchoring function of inflection, marking actions as completed and situating them within past experience. The superlative suffix *-est* in *longest* further exemplifies inflectional morphology applied to adjectives to indicate the highest degree of comparison, reinforcing evaluative intensity in the lyrics. Together, these inflectional forms illustrate how grammatical morphology contributes not only to structural accuracy but also to thematic and emotional expression.

Regarding free morphemes, their classification into lexical and functional categories aligns with the distinction that Talmy (2021) argues that lexical morphemes carry core semantic content while functional morphemes primarily serve grammatical and relational purposes. Lexical free morphemes in *Cardigan*, include nouns, verbs, and adjectives, function as meaning-bearing units that construct imagery and emotional depth. In contrast, functional morphemes such as pronouns, conjunctions, prepositions, and determiners ensure syntactic cohesion and logical relations between ideas. This interaction between lexical and functional free morphemes supports Schleppegrell and Oteíza (2023) systemic functional view of language, which emphasizes that meaning emerges from the interplay between content and structure. Consistent with Dewi and Hermawan (2024) and Ulfayanti et al., (2024), the findings confirm that while free lexical morphemes convey emotional and thematic substance, functional morphemes organize these meanings into coherent lyrical discourse. Overall, the discussion demonstrates that both bound and free morphemes operate together as grammatical and stylistic resources, reinforcing the view that morphology plays an essential role in shaping meaning and artistic expression in contemporary song lyrics.

Free Morphemes Identified in Cardigan Song Lyrics: Lexical and Functional Categories

Next, a classification of all free morphemes found within the lyrics of Taylor Swift's *Cardigan*. Each word is categorized according to its part of speech and further identified as either a lexical or functional morpheme. Lexical morphemes include content words such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, which carry substantial meaning within the text. In contrast, functional morphemes consist of grammatical elements such as pronouns, conjunctions, prepositions, determiners, and articles, which serve structural

or relational functions in the sentences. This categorization allows for a clearer understanding of how different types of free morphemes contribute to the semantic and syntactic organization of the song lyrics.

**Table 2. Free morphemes identified in Cardigan song lyrics:
Lexical and functional categories**

No.	The Words	Part of Speech	Type of FreeMorphemes
1.	When	Conjunction	Functional
2.	You	Pronoun	Functional
3.	Are	Verb	Lexical
4.	Young	Adjective	Lexical
5.	They	Pronoun	Functional
6.	Assume	Verb	Lexical
7.	Know	Verb	Lexical
8.	Sequin	Noun	Lexical
9.	Smile	Noun	Lexical
10.	Sensual	Adjective	Lexical
11.	But	Conjunction	Functional
12.	I	Pronoun	Functional
13.	Hand	Noun	Lexical
14.	Under	Preposition	Functional
15.	Drunk	Verb	Lexical
16.	Baby	Noun	Lexical
17.	Kiss	Verb	Lexical
18.	It	Preposition	Functional
19.	Better	Adjective	Lexical
20.	And	Conjunction	Functional
21.	Felt (Feel)	Verb	Lexical
22.	Light	Verb	Lexical
23.	Was	Aux Verb	Functional
24.	An	Article	Functional
25.	Old	Adjective	Lexical
26.	Cardigan	Noun	Lexical
27.	Bed	Noun	Lexical
28.	Me	Pronoun	Functional
29.	On	Preposition	Functional
30.	Said (Say)	Verb	Lexical
31.	Knew (Know)	Verb	Lexical
32.	Favourite	Adjective	Lexical
33.	A	Article	Functional
34.	Friend	Noun	Lexical
35.	To	Verb	Lexical
36.	All	Determiner	Functional
37.	Is	Verb	Lexical
38.	None	Pronoun	Functional
39.	Chase	Verb	Lexical
40.	Hide-and-Seek	Noun	Lexical
41.	High	Adjective	Lexical

42.	Line	Noun	Lexical
43.	We	Pronoun	Functional

The analysis presented in Table 2 highlights the presence of both functional and lexical free morphemes in the lyrics, a distinction that is well established in morphological theory. Luardini (2024) and Yulianti et al., (2024) argue that functional morphemes primarily serve grammatical purposes, organizing sentence structure rather than contributing substantial lexical meaning. This theoretical view is reflected in functional items such as *but* (conjunction), *you* (pronoun), and *around* (preposition), which function to connect clauses, refer to participants, and indicate spatial or relational meaning. Similarly, the determiner *all* operates as a functional morpheme by providing quantification without adding new semantic content. These findings support Liu et al., (2025) systemic functional linguistics framework, which emphasizes that grammatical elements are essential for creating cohesion and coherence in discourse. Consistent with previous studies by Ulfayanti et al., (2024), functional morphemes in song lyrics play a crucial role in maintaining syntactic flow, enabling listeners to follow the narrative smoothly.

In contrast, lexical free morphemes function as content-bearing elements that enrich imagery and thematic meaning. Words such as *now* (adverb), *kiss* (verb), *sensual* (adjective), and *father* (noun) align with Aronoff and Fudeman's (2022) assertion that lexical morphemes carry core semantic information and can stand independently. Verb forms such as *said* and *knew*, despite being inflected for tense, remain lexical morphemes because they retain strong semantic content, a point also emphasized by Audring (2022). These lexical choices contribute directly to emotional intensity and narrative depth, supporting Dewi and Hermawan's (2024) findings that lexical free morphemes dominate the meaning-making process in English song lyrics. The interaction between lexical and functional morphemes thus illustrates how grammatical structure and semantic richness operate together to produce expressive lyrical discourse.

Furthermore, the distribution of inflectional morphemes in *Cardigan* reflects core principles of inflectional morphology. As noted by Aronoff and Fudeman (2022), inflectional morphemes encode grammatical categories such as tense, aspect, number, and degree without altering a word's lexical category. The exclusive use of inflectional suffixes in the song aligns with the typological tendency of English to favor suffixation over prefixation in inflectional processes (Audring, 2022). The frequent occurrence of *-s*, *-ed*, and *-ing* supports this claim and mirrors patterns identified by Dewi and Hermawan (2024), who also observed the dominance of inflectional suffixes in song lyrics.

In addition, the plural suffix *-s* in nouns such as *heels*, *cars*, *bars*, *stars*, *scars*, and *shadows* signals multiplicity, thereby expanding the narrative scope through repeated or layered experiences. This use of pluralization can be interpreted through a discourse-oriented perspective, where grammatical choices contribute to meaning construction beyond the sentence level. Recent functional approaches to grammar emphasize that grammatical markers such as number play a role in construing lived experience and collective memory within discourse (Rebrina et al., 2022). In this sense, plural forms help construct a world of accumulated memories and recurring emotions in the lyrics.

Therefore, the progressive suffix *-ing* encodes ongoing or continuous actions, which aligns with contemporary discussions of aspect in morphology that view progressive

forms as markers of dynamic, unfolding processes (Audring, 2022; Aronoff & Fudeman, 2022). In *Cardigan*, the frequent use of *-ing* contributes to a reflective and nostalgic tone by presenting emotions and experiences as persistently active in the speaker's consciousness. In contrast, the past tense suffix *-ed* anchors events in completed time, situating them firmly within remembered experience. The alternation between *-ing* and *-ed* forms creates a temporal contrast between continuity and completion, reinforcing the thematic oscillation between past experiences and present reflection. This pattern supports recent findings in lyric-based morphological studies (Dewi & Hermawan, 2024; Ulfayanti et al., 2024), which note that tense and aspectual inflections are central to shaping emotional progression in songs. Additionally, the superlative suffix *-est* in *longest* intensifies evaluative meaning, supporting Aronoff and Fudeman's (2022) view that inflectional morphology, while grammatical in nature, can also serve expressive and stylistic functions. Overall, these findings confirm that morphological choices in *Cardigan* operate not merely as grammatical necessities but as stylistic resources that integrate linguistic structure with emotional depth and narrative expression in contemporary song lyrics.

Linguistic Artistry Embedded in the Song's Lyrical Construction

The linguistic artistry in Taylor Swift's *Cardigan* is manifested through the deliberate and systematic use of free and bound morphemes that shape nuanced meaning at the word level. The analysis reveals that lexical free morphemes; particularly nouns, verbs, and adjectives which function as the primary carriers of imagery and emotional content, constructing a vivid narrative world grounded in memory, intimacy, and reflection. Words such as *cardigan*, *kiss*, *scars*, and *friend* operate as semantically rich units that evoke personal experience and emotional vulnerability. These lexical choices demonstrate that artistic expression in the song is rooted not only in metaphor or symbolism, but also in the careful selection of meaning-bearing morphemes that stand independently as expressive units.

Bound morphemes, especially inflectional suffixes such as *-s*, *-ed*, *-ing*, and *-est*, further enhance linguistic artistry by refining meaning without altering lexical identity. The frequent use of the progressive suffix *-ing* (e.g., *dancing*, *playing*, *bleeding*, *running*) creates a sense of emotional continuity, portraying experiences as ongoing rather than fixed. This aligns with Aronoff and Fudeman's (2022) view that inflectional morphology can subtly encode semantic nuance while maintaining grammatical integrity. In contrast, the past tense suffix *-ed* (e.g., *tried*, *marked*, *needed*) anchors certain events in completed time, reinforcing the reflective tone of the lyrics. The artistic effect emerges from the contrast between continuity and completion, showing how morphological choices contribute directly to expressive depth.

Derivational processes, although less frequent than inflectional ones, also contribute to linguistic artistry by enabling evaluative and descriptive precision. The presence of the superlative suffix *-est* in *longest* intensifies emotional evaluation, signaling extremity and significance within the narrative. This supports Audring's (2022) argument that even grammatically motivated morphemes can perform stylistic and expressive functions in discourse. Overall, the findings demonstrate that linguistic artistry in *Cardigan* is achieved through rule-governed morphological choices that transform ordinary linguistic forms into vehicles of emotional and aesthetic meaning.

Linguistic Structure and Its Contribution to Thematic Cohesion and Emotional Intensity

Linguistic structure in *Cardigan* plays a crucial role in maintaining thematic cohesion by ensuring consistency in temporal perspective, grammatical patterning, and semantic alignment across the lyrics. The repeated use of inflectional morphemes, particularly tense and aspect markers, establishes a coherent narrative framework that allows the song to unfold as a unified emotional reflection rather than a series of disconnected statements. The dominance of past tense forms situates the narrative firmly in remembered experience, while progressive forms sustain emotional presence, allowing past feelings to remain active in the speaker's consciousness. This interaction supports Halliday and Hasan's (2014) notion that grammatical cohesion contributes to textual unity at the discourse level.

Thematic cohesion is further reinforced through plural inflection (-s) in nouns such as *heels*, *scars*, *stars*, and *shadows*, which broadens individual experiences into recurring or collective ones. Rather than referring to isolated events, these pluralized forms construct a layered emotional landscape shaped by repetition and accumulation. From a discourse-functional perspective, such grammatical choices help create continuity of theme by linking personal memory to shared emotional patterns (Rebrina et al., 2022). Thus, morphological structure operates beyond sentence-level grammar, supporting coherence across the entire lyrical text.

In terms of emotional intensity, the findings indicate that morphological structure serves as a key mechanism for amplifying affective meaning. The frequent use of *-ing* forms contributes to a sense of emotional persistence, suggesting that feelings such as longing, vulnerability, and attachment are ongoing rather than resolved. Conversely, *-ed* forms introduce moments of closure or distance, creating emotional contrast within the song. This alternation between progressive and past forms generates rhythmic emotional movement, aligning with Biber et al.'s (2021) claim that grammatical structures are closely tied to stance and affect in discourse.

Additionally, the interaction between lexical and functional free morphemes supports both cohesion and emotional flow. Lexical morphemes provide emotional substance, while functional morphemes such as conjunctions, pronouns, and prepositions—organize these meanings into a coherent narrative structure. This balance ensures that emotional expression remains intelligible and thematically unified rather than fragmented. Consequently, the linguistic structure of *Cardigan* demonstrates that emotional intensity in music is not produced solely by melody or imagery, but also by systematic grammatical and morphological organization.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that morphology, particularly the interaction between free and bound morphemes, plays a crucial role in shaping meaning, expression, and emotional depth in song lyrics. Through a qualitative morphological analysis of Taylor Swift's *Cardigan*, the findings reveal that free morphemes function as primary carriers of semantic content and imagery, while bound morphemes—especially inflectional suffixes such as *-s*, *-ed*, *-ing*, and *-est*—systematically refine meaning by encoding grammatical categories related to time, continuity, plurality, and evaluation. These morphological choices contribute not only to grammatical accuracy but also to linguistic artistry by enabling nuanced emotional expression and stylistic precision. Furthermore, the consistent use of tense, aspect, and number markers establishes thematic cohesion across

the lyrics, allowing the song to unfold as a unified emotional narrative rather than a series of isolated statements. The alternation between progressive and past forms intensifies emotional movement by contrasting continuity and completion, while the interaction between lexical and functional morphemes ensures coherence and narrative flow. Overall, the study confirms that morphology functions not merely as a structural linguistic system but as an integral expressive resource in popular music, highlighting how linguistic structure contributes directly to artistic creativity, thematic unity, and emotional intensity in contemporary song lyrics.

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