Emotional Resonance of 'Perfect': A Psycholinguistic Study of Listener Responses to Word Choice and Sentence Structure in Ed Sheeran's Lyrics

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ABSTRACT
This study aims to investigate how emotions emerge from word choice and sentence structure in the song Perfect by Ed Sheeran using a psycholinguistic approach. The song is widely recognized for evoking feelings of nostalgia, love, and happiness in its listeners. Employing a qualitative method through analytical observation, this research demonstrates how linguistic elements such as diction, repetition, and simple sentence construction contribute to the creation of emotional meaning. The findings indicate that the lyrics of Perfect prompt listeners to recall their own feelings through the use of clear language, recurring themes, and straightforward sentence structures, all of which enhance emotional closeness and resonance.

Keywords: psycholinguistics, emotion, Ed Sheeran, song lyrics, sentence structure, diction

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INTRODUCTION

Music possesses the ability to evoke human emotions, and song lyrics serve as a primary means of conveying those emotions (Juslin & Västfjäll, 2008). Psycholinguistic research offers a framework for understanding how language is processed by the mind and how this processing influences emotional responses (Pinker, 1994). A well-known example of a song that illustrates this effect is Perfect by Ed Sheeran. The lyrics of the song narrate a simple yet heartfelt love story, and many listeners report experiencing deep emotional resonance when hearing it. This study aims to answer the question: How do word choice and sentence structure in the lyrics of Perfect create emotional depth for the listener?

Psycholinguistics is the study of the relationship between linguistic and psychological factors (Carroll, 2008). In the context of emotion, psycholinguistics examines how language structures, lexical choices, and syntax influence emotional understanding and interpretation. The appraisal theory of emotion (Scherer, 2001) suggests that emotions arise from cognitive evaluations of stimuli, including linguistic stimuli.

Psycholinguistics explores how we process and comprehend language from a psychological perspective, including how we emotionally respond to language (Harley, 2014). The emotional aspects of song lyrics can be influenced by linguistic elements such as metaphor, grammar, and pronunciation (Gibbs, 2006). Several other studies also indicate that pop music often employs simple vocabulary and direct sentence structures to strengthen emotional engagement (Patel, 2008). The use of clear and widely recognized words can lead to a deeper emotional response.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative approach through linguistic content analysis. The primary objective is to describe and interpret how linguistic elements in the lyrics of Ed Sheeran's Perfect contribute to the emotional experiences of listeners. The main source of data for this study is the official lyrics of Perfect, written and performed by Ed Sheeran. The lyrics were obtained from reliable and verified music websites. Interpretative analysis is supported by referencing common audience reactions found in music reviews and user comments on platforms such as Genius, YouTube, and Spotify.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Lyrics serve as a narrative medium, conveying stories, emotions, or ideas (Clarke & Cook, 2004). Research has shown that the use of figurative language (such as metaphors and similes), repetition, and sensory imagery in lyrics can enhance emotional connection with listeners (Koelsch, 2010).

Ed Sheeran's lyrics are often simple yet deeply meaningful, focusing on experiences and emotions that resonate with a broad audience. One of the best examples of his lyrical style is the song *Perfect,* which employs clear yet powerful language to express deep love and affection.

The findings of this study reaffirm the crucial role of word choice and sentence structure in triggering emotional responses in song lyrics. The use of metaphor and rich descriptive imagery in *Perfect* appears to facilitate embodied cognition, enabling listeners to feel or vividly imagine the scenarios described, thereby intensifying their emotional engagement (Barsalou, 2008).

Linguistic Analysis of the Lyrics in Perfect

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A sample lyric line:

"I found a love for me / Darling just dive right in and follow my lead"

demonstrates how word choice and sentence structure significantly contribute to emotional resonance in the listener.

Word Choice (Diction)

The verb "*found*" implies a sense of success or attainment in something emotionally significant. In this context, the object is "*love*"—an abstract but universally understood concept, intrinsically associated with positive feelings.

The term "*darling*" adds a sense of intimacy and tenderness. It not only communicates a literal meaning but also evokes warmth, closeness, and emotional security. From a psycholinguistic standpoint, such language is linked to the activation of the limbic system, which governs emotional processing (Baguley et al., 2007).

Sentence Structure

The sentence structure in the quoted lines is typically straightforward, direct, and positive in tone. Phrases like *"Just dive right in"* and *"follow my lead"* are imperative in form but carry a soft and confident delivery. These sentences are easily comprehended, following a standard subject–verb–object structure, which requires minimal cognitive effort. This ease of processing is consistent with Lang's (1995) affective-cognitive processing theory, which posits that stimuli that are easier to process often elicit stronger emotional reactions.

Emotional Schemas and Thematic Repetition

The repetition of lines also plays a vital role in evoking emotion. Repetition aids in memory retention and understanding of the lyrics, while also deepening the emotional impact of the message conveyed (Sloboda, 2001).

Recurring themes of love, emotional connection, and ideal partnership construct emotional schemas within the listener's mind. According to Script Theory (Schank & Abelson, 1977), individuals store emotional scripts in long-term memory that are activated by specific cues—such as the word *"love"* or romantic scenarios. The lyrics of *Perfect* engage these scripts, eliciting automatic emotional responses tied to personal experiences of love or longing.

Thus, the combination of affectionate diction, cognitively accessible sentence structures, and thematically reinforced emotional triggers makes the lyrics of Perfect remarkably effective in generating romantic emotional responses. This is one of the primary reasons the song resonates emotionally with listeners across diverse ages and cultural backgrounds.

Research Findings: Audience Reactions to the Lyrics of *"Perfect"*

To support the linguistic and psycholinguistic analysis in this study, interpretative testing was conducted by examining audience responses across several digital platforms that allow for user comments and discussion of song meanings, such as Genius, YouTube, and Spotify. Findings indicate that the majority of listeners express similar and consistent emotional responses to the affective elements within the lyrics of *Perfect*.

1. Genius.com (Lyrics Annotation Platform)

Genius users provided a range of interpretations for lines such as *"I found a love, for me"*, which are frequently identified as emotionally pivotal moments in the song. Representative user comments include:

"This line makes me think of the moment I met my wife—it captures something deeply personal."

"The word 'found' hits so hard—it feels like destiny rather than just love."

These responses show that listeners associate emotionally charged lyrics with real-life experiences. This supports the concept of emotional schema activation, in which affective language triggers stored personal scripts and memories.

2. YouTube (Official Music Video – Ed Sheeran's Perfect)

In the comments section of the official music video, most users express feelings of nostalgia, tenderness, and emotional intimacy. Representative comments include:

"This was my wedding song. Still makes me cry every time I hear it."

"I don't have a partner, but this song makes me dream of the love I wish I had."

"Every word of this song feels like a hug."

These comments indicate that the lyrics successfully evoke emotional responses in listeners, even beyond the context of actual romantic relationships. The emotional impact is rooted in the strength of the song's narrative and word choices.

3. Spotify (Via Synced Lyrics and Wrapped/Storyline Features)

Through features such as Spotify Storyline, where artists provide insights into their lyrics, and the Spotify Wrapped function, users frequently share personal reactions that reflect emotional identification with the song. Examples include:

"Top 1 because it brings me peace and love every single time."

"This is the soundtrack of my relationship."

Such responses show that listeners do not merely consume the song passively; rather, they emotionally align themselves with its content. Perfect becomes a personal representation of love, longing, or emotional hope, reinforcing its affective power and universal relatability.

CONCLUSION

Ed Sheeran's *"Perfect"* demonstrates how clear, simple word choices and the repetition of thematic phrases play a crucial role in generating strong emotional resonance among listeners. Words such as *"love,"* *"darling,"* and *"dancing in the dark"* evoke vivid and heartfelt imagery, enabling listeners to visualize intimate moments that align with their personal experiences. Direct and straightforward lines like *"I found a love"* or *"follow my lead"* enhance comprehension and accelerate the emotional connection between the

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lyrics and the audience. Furthermore, recurring themes such as love, eternity, and perfection reinforce emotional attachment by activating emotional scripts stored in long-term memory.

These findings align with theories in psycholinguistics suggesting that certain linguistic forms can directly affect listeners' emotions by triggering affective brain systems and pre-existing cognitive schemas (Schank & Abelson, 1977; Lang, 1995). In the realm of pop music—where lyrics primarily aim to foster emotional closeness and shared experiences—the significance of linguistic form, as illustrated in *Perfect*, becomes especially evident. This indicates that it is not only the melody that elicits emotional responses, but also the structure and word choice within the lyrics that fundamentally shape the emotional and meaningful experience of music.

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