Exploring the Use of Metafunctions in Ed Sheeran's "Photograph" Through Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics

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Abstract
Music is one of the most powerful means of emotional expression, allowing people to convey feelings that words alone often cannot capture. This study analyses Ed Sheeran's song "Photograph" using Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework to explore how meaning and emotion are constructed through the three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The ideational metafunction reveals how Sheeran represents love, memory, and emotional experience; the interpersonal metafunction shows how linguistic choices build intimacy and emotional connection with listeners; and the textual metafunction demonstrates how cohesion and coherence organize the song's narrative. By combining these three metafunctions, the study illustrates how Sheeran's lyrical style reflects human emotion in a simple yet profound way. The findings demonstrate that "Photograph" not only portrays personal memories and affection but also represents how language functions as a medium for expressing universal human emotions through music.

Keywords*: Ed Sheeran, Photograph, Systemic Functional Linguistics, Metafunctions, Emotional Expression*

INTRODUCTION

Music has always been one of the most powerful forms of emotional expression. It's allowing people to share feelings that words alone sometimes cannot describe (Fajar et al., 2024). Song lyrics often reflect human emotions and experiences in poetic ways that connect deeply with listeners. Among modern songwriters, Ed Sheeran stands out for his ability to combine emotional honesty with simple yet meaningful language. His song "Photograph" beautifully illustrates this, capturing themes of love, memory, pain, and hope through words that feel both personal and universal.

In linguistic studies, meaning is not only found in words but also in how language functions to represent experience and interaction. Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), developed by Halliday and expanded by Matthiessen, provides a comprehensive framework to explain how language creates meaning in different contexts (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). According to Halliday, language serves three metafunctions: the ideational, which represents human experiences and emotions; the interpersonal, which constructs relationships and expresses attitudes; and the textual, which organizes information into coherent discourse. These metafunctions work together to show how language expresses both content and feeling, making SFL a fitting approach to study the emotional and structural layers of song lyrics (Astuti, 2022; Nurwidya, 2024).

Previous studies have explored Sheeran's songs from different perspectives. Researchers such as Fajar et al. (2024) and Andriasta (2016) analyzed figurative language and found that metaphors, similes, and personifications are central to Sheeran's storytelling. Others, like Astuti (2022) and Nurwidya (2024), used SFL-based approaches to show how grammatical structures reflect emotional states and human relationships. However, there has been limited focus on how all three metafunctions work together in one of Sheeran's most emotional songs, "Photograph."

Therefore, this paper aims to explore how meaning and emotion are created in "Photograph" through Halliday's three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. By analyzing the song through this framework, the study seeks to reveal how Sheeran's linguistic choices represent love and memory, build intimacy with listeners, and maintain coherence in the storytelling. This analysis not only emphasizes the richness of Sheeran's songwriting but also shows how language serves as a tool for expressing human emotion in music.

METHOD

Using Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework, this study analyzes the linguistic elements of Ed Sheeran's song "Photograph" using a qualitative descriptive design. Because it enables a thorough assessment of how language creates meaning and emotion in context, the qualitative approach was used.

Data Source

The lyrics to Ed Sheeran's 2014 official version of the song "Photograph" serve as the study's main source of data. The selection of the lyrics was based on their powerful emotional and experiential expressions, which are in line with the study's goals.

Data Collection

The information was gathered by closely reading and analyzing the song lyrics. Every phrase and clause was recognized as an analytical unit. In accordance with Halliday's three metafunctions, the researcher emphasized linguistic components that stand for textual, interpersonal, and experiential meanings.

Data Analysis

The three SFL metafunctions were used to examine the data:

1. Ideational metafunction: to pinpoint the situations, people, and processes that the songs use to symbolize feelings and experiences.

2. Interpersonal metafunction: analyzing mood, modality, and evaluative language that establishes rapport and conveys attitudes toward the listener is known as interpersonal metafunction.

3. Textual metafunction: to analyze the song's coherence, theme-rheme structures, and textual arrangement that contribute to its meaning and coherence.

The goal of the research was to show how Sheeran's word choices express themes of love, memory, suffering, and hope, and how these components combine to evoke strong feelings in listeners.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of a study on Ed Sheeran's song "Photograph," analyzed through Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework. The analysis explores how Sheeran expresses emotions through three metafunctions; ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The song encapsulates various emotional dimensions such as love, nostalgia, pain, and hope, expressed through Sheeran's linguistic choices that evoke both intimacy and universality. The lyrics demonstrate how language serves as a powerful tool for communicating human experiences, particularly in the context of affection and memory.

Table 1. Emotional Expression in "Photograph" by Ed Sheeran

Metafunction	Lyric Excerpt	Emotional Expression	Explanation
Ideational	"We keep this love in a photograph / We made these memories for ourselves"	Expressing love and memories.	The photo means love and memories that stay forever.
	"Where our eyes are never closing, hearts are never broken"	Symbolizes ideal affection.	The line shows love that never ends or breaks.
	"Loving can hurt, loving can hurt sometimes"	Conveying pain and vulnerability.	The words show that love can make people happy and sad.

The ideational metafunction in *"Photograph"* reflects how Ed Sheeran linguistically constructs his emotional experience through imagery and metaphor. The lyric *"We keep this love in a photograph"* depicts the photograph as a symbolic container for memory, a representation of the preservation of emotion. This metaphor allows Sheeran to transform intangible emotions into something tangible and lasting, signifying that love, though ephemeral, can live on in memory. Additionally, in *"Where our eyes are never closed, hearts are never broken,"* Sheeran idealizes the purity of affection, suggesting a world untouched by pain or separation. The exaggerated imagery here demonstrates not only the depth of longing but also the human tendency to immortalize happiness through memory. However, Sheeran balances this idealism with vulnerability in *"Loving can hurt, loving can hurt Sometimes."* Through this refrain, he acknowledges the duality of love, its beauty intertwined with pain, emphasizing the authentic emotional complexity of human relationships. These lyrics demonstrate how the ideational metafunction allows Sheeran to convey contrasting emotions, reflecting the real human experience in which love can bring both joy and sorrow. His use of sensory and emotive language enhances the listener's ability to visualize and emotionally engage with his personal reflections.

Table 2. Emotional Expression in "Photograph" by Ed Sheeran

Metafunction	Lyric Excerpt	Emotional Expression	Explanation
Interpersonal	"So you can keep me inside the pocket of your ripped jeans"	Shows intimacy and closeness.	The line means the singer wants to stay close to someone he loves.
	"Wait for me to come home"	Reflecting longing and certainty.	The singer asks the person he loves to wait with hope.
	"When I'm away, I will remember how you kissed me"	Evokes tenderness and nostalgia.	The singer remembers love even when he is far away.

The interpersonal metafunction emphasizes how Sheeran's language choices build intimacy and connection with the listener. In *"So you can keep me inside the pocket of your ripped*

jeans," Sheeran uses a straightforward and affectionate address that bridges emotional distance. The metaphor of being "kept" inside a pocket symbolizes closeness, security, and belonging, suggesting that love can be carried anywhere, even when it's absent. Similarly, the phrase *"Wait for me to come home"* uses the imperative mood to convey longing and reassurance. Rather than commanding, the tone is gentle and hopeful, reinforcing his commitment to emotional connection despite separation. The repetition of this line also reinforces the sense of promise, emphasizing the resilience and fidelity of love. On the other hand, the phrase *"When I'm away, I will remember how you kiss me"* conveys emotional vulnerability through a reflective tone. By using first-person narrative, Sheeran invites the listener to share his intimate memories, transforming the song into a personal dialogue rather than a distant narrative. This function underscores Sheeran's ability to evoke empathy and shared emotional resonance. Through these linguistic elements, the interpersonal metafunction in *"Photograph"* successfully draws the listener into a collective space of memory and affection, allowing for an emotional engagement that transcends the boundaries between singer and audience.

Table 3. Emotional Expression in "Photograph" by Ed Sheeran

Metafunction	Lyric Excerpt	Emotional Expression	Explanation
Textual	"You won't ever be alone / Wait for me to come home"	Creating structural cohesion through repetition.	Repeating the line makes the meaning stronger.
	"Holding me closer till our eyes meet"	Enhances narrative progression and emotional climax.	The line shows love and a moment of meeting again.
	"When it gets hard, you know it can get hard sometimes"	Building rhythm and emphasis.	The line tells that love is not always easy but still real.

The textual metafunction in Sheeran's lyrics contributes to the coherence and emotional flow of *"Photograph."* The repeated line *"You won't ever be alone / Wait for me to come home"* serves as a refrain that unites the song's sections, both structurally and emotionally. This repetition reinforces the central theme of hope and emotional presence, even across physical distance. Also, the line *"Holding me closer till our eyes meet"* serves as a narrative climax, transitioning the listener from memory to reunion. The linear progression of Sheeran's lyrics, which move from pain in "loving can hurt" to comfort in "you won't ever be alone," illustrates how the song's structure reflects the stages of emotional healing. Besides, lines like *"When it gets hard, you know it can get hard Sometimes"* demonstrate rhythmic balance and parallel structure, contributing to the song's lyrical symmetry. This repetition and rhythm not only create musical harmony but also echo Sheeran's acceptance of the challenges of love. Thus, the song's textual structure ensures emotional cohesion and continuity, guiding the listener through a journey of love, separation, and eventual reassurance. Sheeran's careful sequencing of ideas intensifies the emotional narrative, allowing each verse to unfold like layers of memory.

An analysis of "Photograph" through Halliday's three metafunctions of SFL reveals the intricate ways language conveys emotion and meaning. The ideational metafunction showcases Sheeran's deep reflection on the nature of love, using metaphorical imagery and vivid descriptions to express its enduring quality. His depiction of love as something that can be "stored" or "preserved" in a photograph reflects the human desire to immortalize emotional experiences. The interpersonal metafunction focuses on connection, intimacy, and vulnerability. By addressing the listener directly and using emotionally charged first-person expressions, Sheeran blurs the boundary between artist and audience, cultivating a sense of shared emotion and empathy. At the

same time, the textual metafunction emphasizes the song's narrative cohesion. The repetition and progression of themes ensure emotional and structural unity, reflecting the cyclical nature of love and memory. Together, these metafunctions demonstrate how "Photograph" embodies the relationship between language and emotion, where words not only describe feelings but also construct and sustain them.

These findings show that Sheeran's lyrics show deep emotional memories, close feelings in communication, the mix of pain and comfort, and a story that flows well with emotions. The way he uses words helps listeners see love not as a fixed thing, but as a changing feeling that includes longing and hope. This mix makes the song "Photograph" connect with people all over the world, even across different languages and cultures. Looking at it through the idea of Systemic Functional Linguistics, it's clear that Sheeran's talent is not just in his music, but also in how he uses language. Every sentence, repeated part, and metaphor he uses helps build a picture of love that feels real and lasting. So, the song shows how powerful words can be in making emotional experiences, and it proves that popular music is a key way to express the deepest parts of what it means to be human.

CONCLUSION

An analysis of the use of metafunctions (ideational, interpersonal, and textual) in Ed Sheeran's lyrics shows that these metafunctions work together to convey meaning, emotional nuance, and a cohesive structure in the song's text. First, the ideational metafunction enables the conveyance of stories, ideas, and experiences through elements such as processes (actions), entities (characters), and states. In Ed Sheeran's lyrics, this metafunction is used to describe emotional states, interactions between characters, and narrative settings. The interpersonal metafunction helps build a relationship between the singer and the listener through word choice, mood (e.g., interrogative or declarative), and modality (degree of certainty). Thus, the lyrics not only convey a story, but also invite emotional resonance and inner dialogue from the listener. The textual metafunction serves to organize the text, connecting parts of the lyrics so that they are coherent and easy to follow. Devices such as repetition, pronouns, conjunctions, and thematic progression help maintain focus and guide the listener through the message of the song. Together, these three metafunctions work together to make Ed Sheeran's lyrics meaningful on both literal and emotional levels. This study confirms that analyzing song lyrics using a metafunctional approach can reveal deeper layers of meaning and show how language in musical works becomes a complex medium of expression.

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