"An Analysis of Emotional Meaning in John Lennon's "*Imagine*" through Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics"

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Abstract

This study used the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approach to analyze the emotional value of John Lennon's song "Imagine," with a priority on the ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions. The goal of this study is to comprehend how Lennon expresses his feelings, ideals, and aspirations for global peace through language. Based from research, Lennon uses both material and mental processes to explain his vision of a world without conflict, and his interpersonal decisions particularly those related to mood and modality show his empathy and emotional attachment to his audience. The melody's literary structure, which is based on theme arrangement and repetition, strengthens the message of equality and harmony.

Keywords: *Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), Metafunctional analysis, Emotional expression, John Lennon's Imagine, Empathy in language.*

INTRODUCTION

According to Mailani et al. (2022), humans need communication to sustain their lives, one of which is by using language as a means of communication. Language is the most effective method of communication for conveying messages, ideas, feelings, and goals to others, as well as enabling cooperation among humans. Thus, language plays a significant role in various human activities. In addition, language serves as the primary means for humans to communicate, enabling them to convey information, express emotions, build relationships, and achieve social goals. The meaning of language in communication is not only determined by vocabulary and sentence structure, but is also influenced by context, intent, and social norms (Armstrong & Ferguson, 2010).

According to Heba (2020), communication involves recognizing that each individual has a different way of thinking, acting, and living their life. Only messages conveyed in a meaningful way can build bridges between them. In this context, communication is also related to emotions as the primary means of expressing, understanding, and sharing feelings. Emotional feelings in speech, writing, and nonverbal cues such as tone of voice and facial expressions can increase empathy and social relationships. Theories such as affective pragmatics explain that both verbal and nonverbal emotional expressions play an important role in communication and social interaction, often in line with the goals achieved through the use of language (Jangabaevna, 2025).

Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) provides a strong theoretical basis for understanding the role of language in different contexts. Developed by Halliday, this theory divides language into three main functions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The ideational function relates to the description of experiences and ideas, while the interpersonal function focuses on social interaction and emotional involvement. On the other hand, the textual function emphasizes how information is organized in a text to achieve coherence and meaning (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004). By applying SFL, we can explain the language strategies used by artists such as John Lennon in expressing emotions through lyrics, so that the emotional narrative within them becomes clearer.

Previous studies have examined emotional expression in music, such as that conducted by Daryanto (2022). His research focused on how mood types and modalities can convey meaning in song lyrics. Using a linguistic approach, this study analyzed how emotions are expressed in lyrics, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of emotional expression in music. Although this

research provides many insights, there is still a lack of research investigating interpersonal meaning in popular song lyrics by specifically applying the SFL framework to music. Therefore, in this study, we will analyze a popular song by an international musician, specifically exploring the depth of emotion and interpersonal meaning contained in John Lennon's song “Imagine.”

This study aims to investigate how the ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions in the context of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) reveal the emotional complexity in John Lennon's song “Imagine.” Specifically, this study focuses on how interpersonal meaning and emotional impact are constructed through Lennon's choice of language. By analyzing the linguistic structure of the lyrics from an SFL perspective, this study reveals how language constructs emotional expression in English-language popular music while strengthening emotional bonds with listeners around the world. Understanding the metafunction in Lennon's lyrics provides insight into the influence of linguistic strategies on emotional themes in music, as well as reflecting larger patterns in the representation of emotions and audience engagement. To achieve this goal, this study answers the main question: How can the ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions in Halliday's SFL framework clarify the emotional depth displayed in the lyrics of “Imagine”?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Expressive emotions are feelings that individuals show through various forms of expression, both with words, intonation, and style of language, as well as with nonverbal expressions such as facial expressions, body movements, body language, tone of voice, and symbols. According to Scarantino (2017), expressing emotions is more than just reflecting internal feelings. Emotional expression is a complex social signal that is very important in human interaction. Expressions in the form of facial expressions, voice, and physical movements play a role in regulating social behavior, conveying intentions, and influencing the reactions of others according to the situation. In addition to being an effective means of communication, emotional expressions not only reveal inner states but also indicate intentions, requests, and social invitations. Emotional expressions can influence others' actions, describe specific conditions, and even link the expresser to subsequent actions similar to spoken language (Scarantino et al., 2021).

In song lyrics, emotional depth is crucial to the meaning of the words being sung, and it is important to understand how each of these elements interacts. Music and lyrics work together to shape the listener’s emotional experience, where linguistic structure and melody complement each other in expressing feelings (Juslin & Västfjäll, 2008). SFL helps explore this by analyzing how artists such as John Lennon convey complex emotions through their lyrics.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is a comprehensive theoretical framework developed by Michael Halliday to examine how language operates as a social semiotic system. However, many scholars have expanded and contextualized Halliday’s theory. For instance, Martin and White (2005) emphasized that SFL provides tools to analyze how emotion, attitude, and evaluation are embedded in language through the Appraisal System, which allows us to see how writers and speakers express feelings and stances. Fontaine (2013) explains that SFL gives researchers a way to see language as a network of choices that build meaning in context, especially in artistic expressions like music and poetry.

First, the ideational function relates to the representation of experiences and thoughts, giving speakers the opportunity to express their views of the world by including processes, actors, and contexts. This function helps in understanding how artists create imagery and describe emotional states through linguistic processes (Matthiessen, 2014). Second, the interpersonal function relates to the creation of social relationships, facilitating communication between speakers and listeners. It includes features such as mood, modality, and evaluation, which allow songwriters to connect emotionally with listeners (Martin & Rose, 2007). Lastly, the textual function serves to construct discourse, ensuring coherence and fluency in communication. It shapes how each idea flows within a text so that meaning is easily understood and emotionally effective (Thompson & Taylor, 2021).

SFL highlights the connections between these functions, enabling a better understanding of how language conveys meaning and feelings through music. In the study of emotional expression, SFL offers a systematic approach to exploring the language choices made by creators, particularly in song lyrics. The application of SFL to John Lennon's song "Imagine" allows for an in-depth examination of how language choices shape emotional expression. By studying the ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions of language, researchers can identify how musicians such as John Lennon convey complex feelings such as love and world peace. This framework not only explains the linguistic features of the song, but also enriches our understanding of the emotional effects it has on listeners (Coffin et al., 2019).

METHODS

The emotional expression of John Lennon's song "Imagine" is analyzed in this study using a qualitative content analysis. Because it emphasizes analyzing words and ideas rather than figures, the qualitative method was used (Krippendorff, 2019). The primary information is the official song lyrics, which have been sourced from trustworthy sources to guarantee authenticity. In order to discover emotional tones and recurring patterns, the researcher played the song many times while reading the lyrics. This method is comparable to what Poyatos et al. (2020) said is useful for determining affective meaning in music.

Observational interpretations was used for evaluating the data, with an emphasis on how language conveys feelings. According to Mayring (2019), content analysis uses methodical reading and interpretation to help discover meaning. In order to understand how Lennon constructs his emotional message, the researcher looked at elements including transitivity, modality, and theme. Anguera et al. (2018) discovered that carefully reviewing texts can reveal their structure and social significance, which lends support to this idea.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Using the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) technique, the researcher observed John Lennon's song "Imagine" and presented the findings. Three metafunctions are the subject of the analysis: textual meaning, interpersonal meaning, and ideational meaning. Every metafunction demonstrates how Lennon's words convey hope, peace, and an idealized world. Based on Eggins (2004), SFL sees language not as a collection of grammatical rules but as a tool for creating meaning. This implies that analyzing lyrics to songs like "Imagine" entails comprehending how language decisions convey social and emotional values.

The song "Imagine" is not just a piece of music, but also a kind of philosophical invitation for listeners to reflect on a life without boundaries, without differences, and without conflict. The lyrics are very interesting to analyze functionally. Gerot and Wignell (1994) state that language is a means of social interaction and reflection of human experience, which is in line with John Lennon's message of equality and peace.

The ideational metafunction analyzes how situations, people, and processes are used to represent ideas and experiences. This viewpoint has been confirmed by Sinaga et al. (2024), who used SFL to evaluate Westlife's "Better Man" and discovered that songwriters frequently shared their emotions and ideas through relational and mental processes. The interpersonal metafunction focuses on how Lennon employs his styles and mood choices to establish rapport with listeners, demonstrating his persuasive and inclusive tone. The Textual metafunction looks at how the song's structure efficiently arranges meaning. Uswar and Harahap (2024) discovered that theme and rheme patterns are essential to ensuring that messages flow naturally and emotionally in their analysis of the Minangkabau song "Taragak Pulang."

1. Ideational Meaning

Ideational meaning in this function defined the way in which ideas and emotions were expressed through language. John Lennon often used mental processes in the song "Imagine" to demonstrate the act of seeing a world without boundaries and with peace. The verb "Imagine" became the main

focus since it asked listeners to picture a perfect world in which everyone lived together peacefully. Instead of only describing details, songwriters were able to express their deepest thoughts and observations by using language to describe perception, cognition, and emotion, as Thompson (2014) clarified.

Mulyati (2021) provided evidence for this theory when she analyzed Alan Walker's songs and discovered that mental and interpersonal behaviors dominated because they allowed songwriters to convey their thoughts and feelings through the lyrics. The ideational meaning in pop song lyrics, according to Afifah et al. (2024), frequently reflected the artist's inner world, allowing listeners to emotionally relate to the song's message.

According to Siahaan et al. (2024), ideational meaning in musical discourse reflected people's conceptions of social balance and peace of mind, which helped to form cultural identity in the process of creating experience. This idea connected a chord with John Lennon's "Imagine," in which a utopian vision of equality and solidarity was constructed via social and emotional structures. The phrase "Imagine" served as a mental process when Lennon sang "Imagine there's no heaven," expressing thoughts and pushing listeners to question conventional wisdom. Lennon gave his audience a strong emotional experience by transforming imagination into a symbolic act of empathy and peace through this language pattern.

In many ways, this message feels even more urgent in today's global context. Wars and divisions are still happening, though they now appear not only on battlefields but also across digital platforms and social media. The language of conflict has evolved from guns and walls to tweets and misinformation that separate people's hearts and minds (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Just as Lennon invited his audience to "imagine all the people living life in peace," modern society is challenged to imagine peace in a world filled with digital noise, online anger, and political manipulation. His words now echo in classrooms, online discussions, and even climate movements, reminding us that peace is not silence, but an active form of awareness and empathy.

As we can see from the beginning of John Lennon's song lyrics, where he used a persuasive language patterns to the audiences.

"Imagine there's no heaven." / "It's easy if you try."
"No hell below us." / "Above us only sky."
"Imagine all the people living life in peace."

The opening line, "Imagine there's no heaven," used the term "Imagine" to convey a mental process that mirrored John Lennon's own vision and aspirations. In this lyric, he asked listeners to picture a world free from division and boundaries. He encouraged people to think about creating harmony in the present instead of focusing on life after death. The word "imagine" not only described an act of thinking but also carried emotions and self-reflection. It made listeners feel a sense of involvement and responsibility in shaping that ideal world.

This idea was connected to the Conceptual Metaphor Theory proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), which stated that language reflected how individuals made sense of their experiences. The repeated use of "imagine" in the song showed how people used imagination as a way to understand and reshape reality. Lennon's simple yet meaningful choice of words allowed people to see new possibilities and perspectives. Martin et al. (1997) explained that ideational meaning enabled individuals to use language to express both their inner thoughts and real-life experiences. In this sense, Lennon's lyrics revealed not only his emotions but also his way of viewing the world and humanity.

The phrase "The world will be as one" illustrated a relational process because it described a condition rather than an action. Lennon imagined a future society where people lived without barriers of nationality, race, or religion. This vision aligned with Langacker's (1987) theory in Cognitive Grammar, which suggested that grammatical structures represented how humans organized concepts in their minds. The lyric was not only poetic but also meaningful, as it created

an image of unity and togetherness. It demonstrated how language could shape the way people understood the world and their relationship with others.

The phrase "Living life in peace," on the other side, reflects a material process as it describes behaviors that are noticeable, imaginable, and achievable in actual life. In this section, Lennon highlights the need of practicing peace in daily life rather than letting it remain a fantasy. His remarks encourage people to live in harmony by practicing basic human values like respect, tolerance, and compassion. As Fairclough (1992) says in Critical Discourse Analysis, language is seen as a social practice that not only shows reality but also makes it. This message fits with that view. Lennon's words demonstrate that genuine social activity and human interactions may bring about peace, which is not only an unrealistic goal or a passive concept. By doing this, Lennon serves as a reminder to his audience that inner peace begins with people and develops via their relationships with others.

This perspective was strengthened by Machin and Mayr (2012), who noted that language in art and media frequently conveys ideological meanings that shape people's perceptions of social issues. This is seen in Lennon's "Imagine," where his words serve as a vehicle for social change in addition to being an artistic statement. Songs can serve as a potent discourse to convey societal ideals like equality, justice, and peace, according to Tahir et al. (2020). Lennon's message becomes both transforming and emotive in this way, inspiring listeners to put their imaginations into action.

In today's world, where global conflicts, inequality, and climate crises continue to challenge humanity, the message of "Imagine" still holds strong relevance. Lennon's call for peace, equality, and unity resonates deeply in an era where social media often divides people rather than unites them. The song reminds listeners of the power of language and imagination in shaping a more compassionate society. As argued by Bloor and Bloor (2013) and Janks (2010), discourse plays a central role in constructing social reality, Lennon's lyrics continue to act as a linguistic tool for reflection and transformation, urging new generations to rethink what peace and togetherness mean in a modern, globalized context.

More than fifty years after *Imagine* was written, the world still struggles with the same issues Lennon sang about. Wars are still being fought, not only with weapons but also through misinformation, hate speech, and political manipulation (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). The internet has connected billions of people, yet loneliness and intolerance grow faster than understanding (Turkle, 2017). Environmental damage and climate anxiety remind us how disconnected humans have become from the very world they live in (Clayton, 2020). In this complex reality, Lennon's vision feels like both a dream and a warning a call to rebuild empathy before technology and power erase it (Zaki, 2019). His words "living life in peace" sound simple, but in a world of endless competition and distraction, they have become revolutionary. The ideational meaning of *Imagine* therefore continues to challenge people today: to turn imagination into action, to turn words into empathy, and to turn the idea of peace into a daily practice.

1. Interpersonal Meaning

The meaning that comes from John Lennon's relationship-building with his audience is known as personal significance. It's interesting that John Lennon avoided using a tone that was insulting or controlling. In order to properly communicate the song's content, he instead spoke in a soft, convincing tone, as though he were speaking with empathy. According to Martin and White (2005), language is not only a vehicle for information, but also a tool for negotiating attitudes and relationships. Lennon negotiated intimacy and feelings with his audience through language.. Lennon used language to negotiate emotions and closeness with his listeners.

We can see from the next John Lennon's song lyrics where he used the declarative, interogative, and imperative language patterns to the audiences.

"Imagine all the people / Living life in peace"

"You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one."

"Imagine there's no countries / It isn't hard to do"

"Imagine no possessions / I wonder if you can"

In the interpersonal example from this song, John Lennon used the imperative phrase "imagine" from "Imagine all the people / Living life in peace." In this way, he addresses his listeners not as a leader or preacher, but as a friend who shares a dream, inviting them to live together in peace as fellow human beings without the slightest conflict. This is in line with the opinion of Silalahi et al. (2024), who state that the interpersonal metafunction shows how mood selections in lyrics, such as declarative, interrogative, or imperative mood, affect how the speaker positions themselves toward the listener. In other words, the sentence structure used in the lyrics can indicate the songwriter's attitude and position toward the listener, and Lennon chose a position full of empathy.

This interpersonal meaning from John Lennon' song lyrics have the same context in nowadays era. It can be seen from those human's conflict such as civil war, religious war, inter-tribal war, and interracial war which is almost happened around the world. From here, John Lennon's song "imagine" from the lyrics "Imagine all the people / Living live in peace" has deeply persuade people or audiences to think about the better life without any war conflict. He also provides the audiences about an overview when all of the people living live in peace. As he mentions from the lyrics "Imagine all the people / Living life in peace" is not only about an imagination at all, but in other side he provides a hope that can be reached by human race.

In the song's second lyric, "You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one," John Lennon expresses the common desire that people will live in harmony with one another. Regardless of their differences, he creates emotional connections amongst people all over the world. This fosters a sense of fraternity and unity among people. According to Medina (2020), "the interpersonal meaning in song lyrics reveals the songwriter's emotions and attitudes through the use of mood and modality systems that express personal feelings and social relationships." This statement shows that the sentence structure and choice of mood used in song lyrics can reflect the songwriter's emotions and social closeness to the listener. By using gentle and reflective sentences, Lennon successfully expressed the feelings of peace and togetherness that he wanted to instill in all of humanity through this song.

This interpersonal meaning from John Lennon's song lyrics related to the real world situation. It can be seen from the lyrics "You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one." that shows his statement about those people who has also the same hope and dreams. As we can see, in this era there are many people with various perspective about the way we see the world. In this era, many people also want to fight against the war and unity in diversity. It shows that people with the same perspective as John Lennon are exist and truly have the same dreams to make the better world without the war and full of peace from any diversity. Therefore, the statement from John Lennon's lyrics also true and related to nowadays era where people want to change the world in a better form.

The third verse then includes John Lennon's line, "Imagine there's no countries / It isn't hard to do." Lennon is not criticizing identity in these words; rather, he is urging his audience to think more widely and envision a society free from artificial boundaries. According to Maslow (1943) "If both the physiological and the safety needs are fairly well gratified, then there will emerge the love and affection and belongingness needs.". Lennon wishes to underline that people must cease using differences as an excuse to keep apart from one another in order for there to be true peace. In this instance, Lennon is speaking with an open and tranquil soul in addition to singing. This demonstrates how nations are representations of human-drawn borders. To break down these barriers, he wants to extend an invitation to everyone. Nationalism, religion, and social status are frequently the causes of war worldwide, and with good reason.

According to Purwandari et al. (2022), "interpersonal meaning in song lyrics is constructed through mood and modality choices that convey emotional closeness and social awareness between the songwriter and the listeners." This quotation demonstrates how Lennon cultivated social consciousness and empathy in his audience by using straightforward yet profound linguistic choices, which inspired them to view the world with greater love and openness.

2. Textual Meaning

The textual meaning here highlighted how John Lennon structured his message so that it could be conveyed clearly and coherently from the beginning to the end of the song. If we pay attention, almost all the verses in "Imagine" began with the word "Imagine." This word was not just an opening but the main theme that tied the entire song together. The following parts, such as "there's no countries" or "all the people live in peace," served as the remathe additional information that developed and clarified the central idea. This kind of thematic progression made the message flow naturally, helping listeners follow Lennon's ideas step by step (Fries, 1995).

Lennon's use of repetition also helped maintain textual unity, making the song memorable and emotionally persuasive. Each line built upon the previous one, reinforcing the same hope for peace and equality. According to Danes (1974) and Paltridge (2006), such cohesive devices and thematic structures enable a text to achieve communicative purpose effectively, since they connect meaning logically across sentences. Similarly, research by Alaei and Ahangari (2016) and Widiatmoko et al. (2020) found that repetition and theme–rheme structure play a crucial role in ensuring that a message is both cohesive and impactful.

This structure creates a very strong parallel pattern, making the lyrics easy to remember and meaningful. The repetition of words such as imagine, people, world, and peace forms lexical cohesion that reinforces the main message or invitation to imagine a more peaceful, simple, and humane world. According to Eggins (2004), "cohesion and thematic structure contribute to the unity and flow of a text." This statement illustrates that the continuity and flow of meaning in a text greatly depends on how the writer organizes the theme and the relationships between the parts of the sentence. This is clearly evident in the lyrics of "Imagine," where each verse is interconnected and reinforces the main message of peace and equality. Words like *imagine*, *people*, *world*, dan *peace* appeared several times in the song.

This repetition creates lexical cohesion, which is the connection between the meanings of elements in the text that makes the song feel entire continuous. In line with Thompson's (2014) view that thematic development helps readers or listeners follow the flow of ideas more easily, the repetition of words and thematic structures in this song helps listeners understand and feel the message that Lennon wants to convey more deeply.

In today's world, the textual organization of "Imagine" resonates even more powerfully. Lennon's repetition of "Imagine" serves as a timeless linguistic call to action, inviting people to envision an alternative world one defined by inclusion, equality, and compassion. This invitation gains renewed significance in the 21st century, a time marked by political division, war, social injustice, and environmental crises. From the ongoing conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine to the rise of discrimination, nationalism, and economic inequality, humanity continues to face challenges that test the ideals Lennon expressed more than fifty years ago.

Moreover, in an era dominated by digital media and algorithmic communication, Lennon's textual simplicity offers a striking contrast to the fragmented and polarizing discourse that often circulates online. The song's cohesive structure built upon lexical repetition and thematic harmony models how language can unify rather than divide. In this sense, "Imagine" transcends its musical boundaries and functions as a discursive template for peaceful communication. It reminds us, that words when used with empathy and clarity, can reconstruct social narratives and inspire collective consciousness across linguistic and cultural borders.

This message also carries strong relevance for younger generations, who now express activism and identity through digital platforms. On social media, phrases from "Imagine" such as "You may say I'm a dreamer" and "Living life in peace" frequently reappear in hashtags, art, and online movements advocating for peace, equality, and environmental justice. Lennon's textual strategy, characterized by simplicity and repetition, becomes an accessible rhetorical model for new generations seeking to communicate hope in the face of global uncertainty.

In linguistic terms, the repetition of words such as imagine, world, people, peace, and together forms a network of lexical cohesion that sustains the ideological unity of the song. This pattern

mirrors what Eggins (2004) describes as "thematic continuity," where cohesion reinforces both semantic meaning and emotional force. Through this structural design, Lennon's lyrics evolve beyond artistic expression into a universal discourse of moral reflection and collective empathy values that are urgently needed in today's polarized and crisis-driven world.

Thus, the textual meaning of "Imagine" extends beyond its lyrical surface. It functions as a linguistic architecture of hope, illustrating how cohesive language can construct shared imagination and social transformation. In an age where language is often weaponized for misinformation or hostility, Lennon's textual coherence reminds us of the enduring power of words to heal, connect, and inspire across generations and borders.

CONCLUSIONS

John Lennon's "Imagine" shares a deeply emotional message about equality, peace, and hope for a better society. Lennon encourages listeners to create and experience ideals with him rather than just singing about them. He builds a personal connection with his audience and inspires them to look above social and cultural barriers by using straightforward yet powerful language. Lennon's empathy and sincerity in expressing his desire for solidarity are evident in the lyrics' use of interpersonal meaning. The song conveys a timeless message of love and peace for all people in addition to being an artistic work.

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