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ANALYSIS OF METAFUNCTION IN ED SHEERAN'S SONG "PHOTOGRAPH"

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Abstract

Language serves not only as a tool of communication but also as a medium for expressing human experience, emotion, and memory. Through the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), language can be examined to reveal how meanings are constructed, particularly through the ideational metafunction, which represents experiences using processes, participants, and circumstances. Ed Sheeran's song "Photograph" provides a meaningful linguistic text that reflects love, memory, and emotional connection, making it suitable for analysis within this framework.This study aims to analyze how ideational metafunction is realized in the lyrics of "Photograph," specifically by identifying the dominant process types and explaining how participants and circumstances contribute to emotional representation. The research employed a qualitative descriptive method, and the data consisted of the song's lyrics. The analysis was conducted using Halliday's transitivity system, which categorizes processes into material, mental, relational, and other types.The findings show that material and mental processes dominate the song. Material processes illustrate tangible actions that represent efforts to preserve love and memory, while mental processes express reflection, longing, and emotional depth. Relational processes also appear, connecting emotions to states of being and creating a sense of timelessness. These results indicate that linguistic choices in the song transform abstract emotions into structured experiential meanings.

***KeyWords**: Systemic Functional Linguistics, ideational metafunction, transitivity, song lyrics, emotion, memory.*

Abstrak

Bahasa tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai alat komunikasi, tetapi juga sebagai medium untuk mengekspresikan pengalaman, emosi, dan memori manusia. Melalui kerangka Linguistik Fungsional Sistemik (Systemic Functional Linguistics/SFL), bahasa dapat dikaji untuk mengungkap bagaimana makna dibangun, khususnya melalui metafungsi ideasional yang merepresentasikan pengalaman melalui proses, partisipan, dan keadaan. Lagu Ed Sheeran "Photograph" memberikan teks linguistik yang bermakna yang mencerminkan cinta, kenangan, dan hubungan emosional, sehingga cocok untuk dianalisis dalam kerangka ini. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana metafungsi ideasional direalisasikan dalam lirik lagu "Photograph", khususnya dengan mengidentifikasi jenis proses yang dominan serta menjelaskan bagaimana partisipan dan keadaan berkontribusi pada representasi emosional. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif, dan datanya berupa lirik lagu tersebut. Analisis dilakukan dengan menggunakan sistem transitivitas Halliday, yang mengategorikan proses menjadi material, mental, relasional, dan jenis lainnya. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa proses material dan mental mendominasi lagu tersebut. Proses material menggambarkan tindakan nyata yang merepresentasikan upaya untuk mempertahankan cinta dan kenangan, sedangkan proses mental mengekspresikan refleksi, kerinduan, dan kedalaman emosi. Proses relasional juga muncul, menghubungkan emosi dengan keadaan dan menciptakan kesan ketidakberwaktuan. Hasil ini menunjukkan bahwa pilihan bahasa dalam lagu tersebut mengubah emosi yang abstrak menjadi makna pengalaman yang terstruktur.

***Kata kunci**: Linguistik Fungsional Sistemik, metafungsi ideasional, transitivitas, lirik lagu, emosi, memori.*

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INTRODUCTION

Language plays a central role in shaping how individuals express emotions, thoughts, and experiences. It is not only a medium for communication but also a system through which people construct and interpret the world around them. As Satpute et al. (2023) explain, language helps articulate human emotion and memory by connecting abstract concepts with embodied experiences.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), developed by Halliday, views language as a social semiotic system, in which meaning is created through networks of choices (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Within this framework, the ideational metafunction is responsible for representing human experience, encompassing actions, thoughts, emotions, and states of being. This metafunction is realized through the transitivity system, which consists of processes, participants, and circumstances. Through these components, language constructs meanings related to both physical activities and inner psychological experiences (Bakuuro, 2017).

Ed Sheeran's "Photograph" (2014) provides a rich and emotive text for analyzing ideational meaning. The song highlights themes of love, memory, and distance, portraying how a photograph functions as a symbolic container of emotional experience. According to Van Dijck (2008), photographs preserve emotional moments by linking past events to present feelings. Thus, analyzing this song through Halliday's transitivity framework enables a deeper understanding of how linguistic choices shape and represent emotional experiences.

Previous studies on transitivity in song lyrics (Rahmawati, 2021; Gunawan, 2022) have shown that love songs often employ material and mental processes to represent emotional struggle and affection. However, limited research has explored how these processes interact with participants and circumstances to transform emotion into structured linguistic experiences. This study therefore aims to fill that gap by examining how the ideational metafunction operates in "Photograph," focusing on how grammatical structures encode memory, affection, and the passage of time.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses the qualitative descriptive design, which allows the researcher to interpret meanings that emerge from language rather than measure them numerically. The focus of this study is to understand how words in Ed Sheeran's song *"Photograph"* represent experiences of love and memory through the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). As Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) explain, language functions as a social semiotic system, a means through which people express and shape their understanding of the world around them.

The qualitative approach was chosen because the meaning behind a text, especially in song lyrics, cannot be separated from context and emotion. Every line in the song carries fragments of experience that deserve to be explored deeply. Through this approach, the researcher aimed to uncover how linguistic elements processes, participants, and circumstances, how that elements build an experiential world in the lyrics.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

In this part, we will analyze transitivity in the lyrics of Ed Sheeran's song "Photograph", which shows that material processes are the most dominant (actions e.g., keep, hold), followed by mental processes (feelings/remembering), while relational and other types of processes appear less frequently. Circumstances (especially time and place) are often found to "connect" memories to specific contexts (e.g., in a photograph, inside your ripped jeans). These findings are in line with

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the results of SFL studies on popular lyrics, which reveal a tendency to balance real actions in our reality and inner conditions as a way of representing past experiences.

Dominant Process Types

The transitivity analysis identified 28 clauses in the song. Table 1 presents the distribution of process types.

Tabel 1. Distribution of process types

Process type	**Frequency**	**Percentage**	**Brief Description**
Material Process	10	35.7%	Represents tangible actions and efforts, such as keeping, holding, and making. These verbs express how love is preserved through physical and emotional gestures.
Mental Process	7	25.0%	Reveals personal perception and emotional reflection, showing the act of remembering, feeling, and longing that dominates the song's tone.
Relational Process	6	21.4%	Describes states of being and relationships, linking love, time, and memory through descriptive qualities such as *alive*, *frozen*, or *forever*
Verbal Process	2	7.1%	Depicts spoken communication or emotional assurance, such as words exchanged that convey comfort or connection.
Behavioral Process	2	7.1%	Portrays visible actions reflecting internal emotions, such as smiling or crying, gestures that reveal human warmth.
Existential Process	1	3.6%	Shows existence or presence of something meaningful, a photograph, a memory that anchors love in tangible form.
Total	**28**	**100** %	

The transitivity analysis identified 28 clauses throughout the song. The results revealed that material processes were the most dominant, followed by mental and relational processes. Other types such as verbal, behavioral, and existential appeared less frequently. This distribution aligns with previous studies that examined emotional and love-themed lyrics using the SFL framework (Rahmawati, 2021; Gunawan, 2022; Silalahi et al., 2024).

The predominance of material processes (e.g., keep, hold, make) demonstrates that love in the song is represented through tangible actions that signify preservation and affection. According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), material processes reflect the experiential world of doing and

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happening how individuals act to construct meaning. In "Photograph," such actions portray how emotions can be physically embodied through acts of keeping or holding, transforming abstract love into a visible form. Chandler (2017) supports this interpretation by arguing that semiotic patterns can turn abstract emotions into concrete "thing-like" representations.

The mental processes (remember, feel, love) occupy the second-largest proportion, representing the inner world of emotion and cognition. These verbs enable reflection and nostalgia, emphasizing how memory and longing shape emotional experience. Dancygier (2018) describes such verbs as forming "affective syntax," linguistic constructions that externalize emotional and cognitive states. The alternation between material and mental processes reflects what Simpson (2014) calls the dynamic interplay between outer and inner experience in stylistic expression. This balance mirrors Halliday's (2002) notion that human experience is realized linguistically through both external action and internal reflection.

The relational processes (is frozen, is alive) also play a significant role by attributing permanence or timelessness to memory and love. As Butt et al. (2000) and Thompson (2014) explain, relational clauses identify or describe entities, linking them through qualities or states of being. In this song, phrases like "time's forever frozen" linguistically capture emotional stillness a metaphor for how memories can transcend time.

Thus, the first research question is answered: Material processes dominate, illustrating how the song encodes affection as concrete actions, while mental and relational processes contribute to emotional depth and symbolic meaning.

Participants and Circumstances as Carriers of Emotion

In addressing the second research question, this section explores how participants and circumstances collaborate with processes to convey emotional experience. As Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) assert, participants represent the entities involved in the process, while circumstances provide contextual details such as place, time, or manner.

In "Photograph," the major participants include personal pronouns (I, you, we) and symbolic objects (love, photograph, time). These participants create intimacy and continuity across the song's narrative. The pronouns "I" and "you" construct an interpersonal bond, inviting the listener into a shared emotional world. According to Thompson (2014), such pronoun use enacts interpersonal realization by representing social closeness within grammatical structure. Similarly, Wignell (2007) emphasizes that participants in the ideational metafunction also represent identity and relational stance. Hence, the recurring "we" embodies a collective emotional experience that transcends individual memory.

Non-human participants like photograph and time serve as metaphorical extensions of emotion. Through transitivity, they are anthropomorphized performing human-like actions such as holding or freezing illustrating what Martin and Rose (2003) describe as semiotic elasticity, where objects gain human attributes through grammar. The "photograph," for instance, operates simultaneously as a physical object and as a symbolic carrier of affection and memory. It becomes what Van Dijck (2008) calls an emotional conduit, connecting the past with the present.

Circumstances, particularly of place and time, provide spatial and temporal grounding for emotional meaning. Phrases like "in a photograph," "in your ripped jeans," and "when I'm far away" evoke vivid imagery that situates feelings within recognizable contexts. Fontaine (2013) notes that circumstances function as the experiential backdrop that turns abstract emotions into tangible experiences. Likewise, Eggins and Slade (1997) observe that spatial expressions in creative texts often carry metaphorical value turning inner emotion into visible imagery.

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Temporal phrases such as "when I'm far away" amplify the sense of distance and longing, revealing how affection persists despite physical separation. Butt et al. (2000) explain that temporal circumstances can express emotional endurance feelings that defy time. In this song, time is personified ("time's forever frozen"), reinforcing the emotional paradox between permanence and change.

Collectively, participants and circumstances work as emotional carriers that sustain the song's experiential meaning. The interplay between actors (we, I, you) and circumstances (in time, in place) forms a cohesive emotional landscape where love is not only spoken but spatially and temporally experienced. As Martin (1992) asserts, meaning resides not merely in words but in the system of choices surrounding them choices that Ed Sheeran uses to linguistically immortalize love and memory.

Analysis of Key Clauses

In Ed Sheeran's song "Photograph" each clause works like a small scene in a feature film, containing elements of a story, from the characters and actions or feelings to the setting that makes it feel so real. The following analysis reads each scene, not just looking at the words, but "listening" to how the language brings memories to life.

To illustrate how process, participant, and circumstance interact to convey meaning, several representative clauses are examined below.

Tabel 2.

Lyric (short or paraphrased)	**Process**	**Participants**	**Circumstances**	**Experiential Meaning**
"We keep this love in a photograph."	Material	Actor: *we*; Goal: *this love*	*in a photograph* (place/metaphor)	Love is preserved through tangible action; emotion becomes memory.
"I remember how it felt."	Mental	Senser: *I*; Phenomenon: *how it felt*		Internal reflection on past emotion; evokes nostalgia.
"Time's forever frozen still."	Relational	Carrier: *time*; Attribute: *frozen*		Establishes timelessness of memory; a static emotional state.
"Inside the pocket of your ripped jeans."	Material + Circumstance	Actor: *you*; Goal: *me/photo*	*inside the pocket* (place)	Spatial closeness symbolizes intimacy and emotional connection.
"We made these memories for ourselves."	Material	Actor: *we*; Goal: *memories*	*for ourselves* (beneficiary)	Memory as collective creation; emphasizes shared human experience.

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Each clause embodies the interplay between language and lived experience. The material processes ("keep," "made") translate affection into tangible acts, preserving love as something visible and holdable. The mental processes ("remember," "love") invite introspection, revealing the inward experience of longing. The relational processes ("is frozen," "is alive") depict emotional permanence, portraying time and love as states that endure even when physical presence fades.

Through these linguistic choices, Sheeran does not merely describe emotion, he *enacts* it through language. The result is a text where grammar itself becomes expressive, turning everyday clauses into emotional gestures. As Halliday (1971) suggested, the true beauty of meaning lies not only in what is said but *how* it is structured within language.

Clause

Each clause in *Ed Sheeran's "**Photograph**"* reflects a unique way of expressing experience through the ideational metafunction. The interaction between process types, participants, and circumstances transforms emotion and memory into structured linguistic meaning. The following discussion explains how selected clauses represent the experiential world constructed in the song.

The clause "**We keep this love in a photograph**" represents a material process. The verb *keep* indicates a physical action performed by the Actor (*we*) upon the Goal (*this love*), while the phrase *in a photograph* functions as a circumstance of place. This line shows how abstract affection is transformed into something tangible and enduring. Through this material process, love becomes something that can be held, stored, and preserved echoing Halliday's (2014) idea that material clauses construe the world of "doing" and "happening."

In the clause "**I remember how it felt**," the process type is mental (cognitive). The Senser (*I*) experiences the act of remembering, directed toward the Phenomenon (*how it felt*). This mental process encodes reflection and nostalgia, showing how memory and emotion coexist within language. As Eggins (2004) notes, mental clauses create a world of consciousness, giving voice to human feeling through linguistic form.

The expression "**Time's forever frozen**" exemplifies a relational attributive process. The verb *is* (contracted as 's) functions as the process, linking the Carrier (*time*) to its Attribute (*forever frozen*). This construction assigns an enduring quality to time, portraying it as static and eternal. The relational process in this line encapsulates the emotional stillness of memory, where affection seems to resist the passage of time.

Meanwhile, the clause "**You can keep me inside the pocket of your ripped jeans**" also realizes a material process, with *you* as the Actor, *me* as the Goal, and *inside the pocket of your ripped jeans* as the circumstance of place. This imagery conveys intimacy and comfort, suggesting that physical closeness parallels emotional connection. Through this clause, affection is represented as something spatially and sensorially experienced.

Lastly, the clause "**We made these memories for ourselves**" also embodies a material process. The verb *made* denotes creation, performed by the Actor (*we*) upon the Goal (*these memories*), with *for ourselves* functioning as a circumstance of beneficiary. The line highlights how love and memory are jointly constructed experiences. It represents the idea that affection is not passive but actively built through shared moments and actions.

Overall, these clauses demonstrate how *Photograph* constructs an emotional narrative through grammar. Material processes dominate the text, representing love as concrete action and effort. Mental and relational processes, meanwhile, add reflective and timeless qualities that deepen the emotional resonance of the song. Through these linguistic choices, Ed Sheeran's lyrics transform emotion into a structured experience a vivid example of how language serves as a bridge between feeling and form.

Synthesis and Link to Research Questions.

In response to the first research question, the findings confirm that material processes dominate, representing love and memory through concrete, physical actions. Mental and relational processes complement this by expressing introspection and permanence.

For the second research question, participants (I, you, we, photograph, time) and circumstances (in a photograph, when I'm far away) collaboratively construct emotional depth. They transform linguistic form into affective experience, proving that grammatical structure itself can evoke empathy and remembrance (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Eggins, 2004).

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of the ideational metafunction in Ed Sheeran's "Photograph," this study demonstrates that emotional experiences in song lyrics can be effectively represented through linguistic structures. The findings reveal that material and mental processes are the most dominant, indicating that love in the song is expressed through both concrete actions and inner reflections such as remembering, feeling, and preserving memories. Relational processes further highlight the portrayal of time and memory as stable and enduring, allowing emotions to remain vivid even within the realm of recollection. The strength of this study lies in its ability to connect grammatical choices with affective meaning, showing how language plays a crucial role in shaping emotional expression. However, the study is limited by its focus on a single song, which constrains the exploration of diverse emotional representations across different musical texts. Therefore, future research may expand the scope by analyzing multiple songs, various genres, or incorporating additional metafunctions to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how language in music constructs complex emotional experiences.

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