SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF LEXICAL AND CONTEXTUAL MEANINGS IN ONE DIRECTION SONGS

Nurul Anam[1]

Sonya De Fatima Barros Araujo[2]

Widhya Putriana[3]

[1]Universitas Bakti Indonesia, Indonesia

[2]Universitas Bakti Indonesia, Indonesia

[3]Universitas Bakti Indonesia, Indonesia

Corresponding author: nurulanamsyam10@gmail.com

Abstract

Song lyrics are a form of literary language in which words are frequently used beyond their dictionary definitions, so that listeners who rely on lexical meaning alone may misinterpret the message a song conveys. This study examines the relationship between the dictionary (lexical) meaning and the contextual meaning of ten purposively selected words in two songs by the English boy band One Direction, "What Makes You Beautiful" and "One Thing", both from the album Up All Night (2011). Employing a descriptive qualitative design, the study located each word by stanza and line (S for stanza, L for line), recorded its dictionary sense, and classified the relation between that sense and its use in the lyric according to explicit criteria: contextual specification, semantic narrowing, metonymy and metaphorical extension. Seven of the ten words were found to keep their dictionary sense, with the context supplying reference, experiencer, evaluative stance or, in one case, a negated predicate. One word, heartbeat, was interpreted as metonymic, and two, climbing and walls, as metaphorical. No item met the criteria for semantic narrowing, and figurative items occurred only in "One Thing". Because the items were selected purposively, the findings describe the analysed sample and cannot be generalised to song lyrics at large. The study contributes an explicit and replicable procedure for relating lexical to contextual meaning in lyrics, and it discusses implications for vocabulary and figurative-language instruction in EFL settings, which remain to be tested empirically.

Keywords: Contextual Meaning; Lexical Meaning; One Direction; Semantic Analysis; Song Lyrics.

Introduction

Language functions not merely as a system of sounds and structures but as a vehicle through which human beings express experience, emotion and

intention. Among the branches of linguistics that examine this function, semantics occupies a central position because it is concerned specifically with meaning: how words carry sense, how that sense is combined into larger units, and how speakers and hearers arrive at a shared interpretation of what has been said (Saeed, 2016; Yule, 2020). Meaning, however, is not a single or uniform object of study. A word possesses a relatively stable sense that can be recorded in a dictionary, and it simultaneously acquires a situated sense whenever it is actually used. The distinction between these two levels, conventionally described as lexical and contextual meaning, is fundamental to semantic analysis and is particularly consequential when the language under examination is literary rather than ordinary (Leech, 1981; Palmer, 1981).

Songs constitute one of the most widely circulated forms of literary language in contemporary life. A song lyric is in many respects a poem set to music: it is composed in stanzas and lines, it relies on rhythm and repetition, and it frequently employs figurative devices such as metaphor, hyperbole and personification in order to compress emotional content into a small number of words. Because of this compression, the words of a song may carry a meaning that cannot be recovered from the dictionary alone. A listener who understands only the lexical sense of a word may therefore grasp the surface of a lyric while missing part of the message it conveys, which is the kind of interpretive difficulty that semantic analysis can help to describe (Sudar et al., 2023).

Popular songs are also a familiar source of authentic English for language learners. Murphey (1992) examined the discourse of pop songs as a resource for language learning, and Engh (2013) reviewed the reasons commonly given for using songs in the English classroom, including their authenticity, familiarity and motivational appeal. Songs, however, expose learners not only to vocabulary in use but also to figurative and context-dependent language for which a dictionary gloss is insufficient preparation. Nation (2013) emphasises that knowing a word involves more than knowing a single definition, since it includes knowing how the word behaves in use.

Figurative language poses a particular problem: Littlemore and Low (2006) argue that figurative thinking is an important component of communicative competence in a foreign language, and Boers (2000) reported that drawing learners' attention to the source domains of figurative expressions was associated with better retention of those expressions. The educational problem addressed in this study is therefore a specific one: learners who rely on dictionary glosses may misread lyrics, but they may also over-read them, treating literal wording as figurative. Learners need a way of deciding, from textual evidence, when a word keeps its dictionary sense and when it does not.

The object selected for this study is the work of One Direction, an English boy band formed in 2010 and consisting of Harry Styles, Niall Horan, Liam Payne, Louis Tomlinson and Zayn Malik. The group achieved substantial international popularity during the 2010s, and its debut album Up All Night was released in 2011. Two songs from that album were selected for analysis: "What Makes You Beautiful" and "One Thing". Both are romantic in orientation, and both are addressed by a male speaker to a female addressee in a situation in which the attraction is not openly acknowledged between the two. Their thematic proximity makes them suitable for joint analysis, because it allows differences in the semantic strategies of the two lyrics to be compared under similar conditions.

Two considerations in particular justify treating these two songs as a single analytical unit. First, they were released within the same album and within the same period of the group's career, so that the vocabulary and the register of the two texts are comparable. Second, they approach a single relational situation from two directions: one lyric concerns the reassurance of an addressee who doubts her own attractiveness, while the other concerns the frustration of a speaker who cannot reach an addressee who remains unaware of his affection. Analysing them together therefore allows the semantic strategies of the two lyrics to be compared, although it does not permit generalisation to the album as a whole.

Lexical and contextual meaning in song lyrics has been studied extensively. Sudar et al. (2023) analysed lexical and contextual meanings in the Moana soundtrack and discussed the pedagogical implications of the analysis. Athufa and Bustam (2023), analysing a pop song by NIKI, and Ramadani et al. (2025), analysing Olivia Rodrigo's album Sour, report that the emotional and relational context shapes how lexical meaning is interpreted. Suci et al. (2025), analysing a Billie Eilish song, report that metaphor extends lexical meaning, and Baene (2023) and Budiarti et al. (2026) apply the same pair of concepts to an EDM album and to a rap album respectively. Taken together, these studies establish that popular lyrics are legitimate linguistic data and that the lexical–contextual distinction is a workable analytical tool.

The topic is therefore well established, and the fact that two particular songs have not been analysed is not in itself a research gap. The gap addressed here lies in how the relation between the two levels of meaning is determined. In the studies reviewed, contextual meaning is typically explained by naming the kind of context involved, such as situation, mood, purpose or emotion, or by narrating the interpretation of each item. The reports available to the author do not generally state criteria for deciding whether the contextual sense of a word is the dictionary sense applied to a particular referent, a more specific sense, a metonymic sense or a metaphorical one. Without such criteria, any difference between a dictionary gloss and an interpretation can be reported as "contextual meaning" without testing whether the sense of the word has in fact been modified. Two related limitations follow. The principles by which words are selected for analysis, and the extent to which they were chosen because they were expected to differ, are not always made explicit, so that a finding of divergence may be partly built into the design. And the educational relevance of the findings is often asserted rather than argued with reference to research on vocabulary and figurative language. This assessment rests on the studies reviewed here and not on an exhaustive survey of the literature.

The contribution of this study is accordingly a modest and specific one. First, it proposes and applies an explicit decision procedure that separates

contextual specification, semantic narrowing, metonymy and metaphorical extension, so that a lexical item can be found to keep its dictionary sense. Second, it reports the selection principles, their limits and the resulting risk of selection bias openly. Third, it relates the description to the educational problem of distinguishing literal from figurative use, and presents this as an implication for instruction rather than as a demonstrated learning outcome. The study does not claim to be the first analysis of lyrics in these terms, and its findings concern the two songs and ten words analysed.

Based on the problem outlined above, this study is guided by two research questions: (1) What are the lexical meanings of the selected words in the lyrics of "What Makes You Beautiful" and "One Thing" by One Direction? (2) What are the contextual meanings of those words within the lyrics, and how do they relate to their lexical meanings? In line with these questions, the study aims to explain for readers the lexical meanings found in the two lyrics, to explain the contextual meanings that those words acquire in use, and to classify the relation between the two according to explicit criteria.

The scope of the study is delimited in three respects. It examines two songs only, both from the album Up All Night (2011), and does not claim to describe the whole of the group's output. It analyses ten selected words rather than every lexical item in the lyrics, the selection being governed by semantic significance to the message of each song. And it is confined to lexical and contextual meaning, and does not extend to other semantic categories such as connotative, affective or collocative meaning, nor to phonological or syntactic analysis of the texts. Within these limits, the study offers a transparent classification procedure for analysing the relation between the two levels of meaning in lyrics, and implications for students, teachers and readers who work with English song lyrics.

Literature Review

This study draws on the theory of semantics as the linguistic study of meaning, and more specifically on the distinction between lexical and contextual meaning, supported by an understanding of song lyrics as a form

of literary text. The frameworks are presented below in the order in which they are applied in the analysis.

Semantics and the Study of Meaning

Semantics is the branch of linguistics concerned with meaning in language. Kempson (1977) defines semantic theory as an account of how speakers relate linguistic forms to the things and situations those forms are used to talk about, while Kreidler (1998) describes semantics as the systematic study of meaning as it is encoded in the language system rather than as it is inferred from individual acts of communication. Palmer (1981) similarly situates semantics as the component of linguistic description that deals with sense, alongside phonology, morphology and syntax. In the Indonesian tradition, Chaer (2002) defines semantics as the field of linguistics that studies the meaning of signs, particularly of words and of the larger units they compose.

Contemporary accounts emphasise that meaning is layered rather than singular. Saeed (2016) distinguishes between the meaning a word carries as part of the vocabulary of a language and the meaning it conveys on a particular occasion of use, and observes that the second cannot be predicted from the first without information about the situation. Cruse (2011) makes the same point in terms of the contribution of context, arguing that a word supplies a potential for meaning which the context then narrows, extends or redirects. Yule (2020) describes this as the difference between what words mean and what speakers mean by them. These accounts converge on a principle that governs the present analysis: a full description of meaning requires both levels, and neither is sufficient alone.

Lexical Meaning

Lexical meaning refers to the meaning that a word possesses independently of any particular context of use, and that is therefore recorded in dictionaries. Chaer (2002) characterises lexical meaning as the meaning a lexeme carries by itself, without any syntactic or situational attachment, and describes it as the meaning that corresponds to our observation of the referent. Leech (1981) refers to this level as conceptual or denotative meaning and

treats it as the central component of a word's semantic content, the stable core on which other kinds of meaning are built.

The practical value of lexical meaning lies in its relative stability. Because it is shared across contexts, it provides a common starting point for interpretation and a reference against which situated uses can be compared. In the present study, lexical meanings were established through standard English dictionaries and supported by bilingual reference (Echols & Shadily, 1996), and they serve as the baseline from which the contextual reading of each word is measured. Dictionary entries for a word are often polysemous. Where a word has more than one sense, the sense closest to its use in the lyric was taken as the baseline, so that any divergence reported is divergence from that sense and not from the full range of the word's entries.

Contextual Meaning

Contextual meaning refers to the meaning a word acquires when it is used in a specific situation, and it is determined by the linguistic environment of the word, the participants involved and the circumstances of use. Halliday and Hasan (1989) describe this as the context of situation, arguing that a text cannot be interpreted apart from the social and communicative setting in which it occurs. Griffiths (2006) emphasises that hearers routinely enrich the lexical content of a word with information drawn from the context, and that this enrichment is not optional but constitutive of understanding.

In song lyrics, the relevant context includes the lines surrounding the word, the identity of the speaker and addressee, the narrative situation the lyric constructs, and the overall theme of the song. Because lyrics often rely on figurative language, the contextual meaning of a word may depart from its lexical meaning. It does not always do so. A word may equally be used in its dictionary sense, with the context supplying only its referent, its experiencer or the speaker's stance towards it. Describing the relation between the two levels therefore requires analytical categories that can distinguish these cases from one another.

Analytical Categories for Relating Lexical and Contextual Meaning

Four categories are used to describe the relation between the dictionary sense of a word and its use in a lyric. They describe how a word is used in the text as interpreted by the researcher. They do not describe the songwriter's intention, and they do not claim that the word has undergone historical semantic change.

Contextual specification. The word is used in its dictionary sense, and the context supplies information that the dictionary entry cannot, such as the referent, the participants, the experiencer or the evaluative stance (Cruse, 2011; Griffiths, 2006; Saeed, 2016). The sense of the word is unchanged. Linguistic evidence required: the dictionary sense applies to the word in the lyric without remainder, and the contextual information can be identified in the surrounding lines. Pragmatic inferences that a hearer draws from the wording, and effects of the grammatical environment such as negation, are likewise treated as cases of specification because they leave the sense of the word itself intact.

Semantic narrowing. The contextual sense is a more specific subset of the dictionary sense, and the co-text itself restricts the sense, so that the dictionary sense taken alone would be too general to yield the meaning conveyed (Cruse, 2011; Recanati, 2004). The term is used here in a synchronic and text-bound way. In discussions of language change, narrowing denotes a historical shift in which a word's range of reference contracts over time (Yule, 2020), and no claim of that kind is made. Narrowing is distinguished from specification by the fact that assigning a referent or a valence to a word whose sense is unchanged is not narrowing. Linguistic evidence required: the lyric restricts the scope of the sense by lexical material in the immediate co-text.

Metaphorical extension. The contextual sense contrasts with a more basic, usually more concrete, sense of the word, belongs to a different conceptual domain, and can be understood by comparison with the basic sense (Pragglejaz Group, 2007; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Linguistic evidence required: the basic sense, the contextual sense and the cross-domain

correspondence are all identified, and the co-text indicates that the basic sense is not the one asserted.

Metonymy. One entity is used to give access to another entity within the same conceptual domain, for example a bodily response used to evoke the emotion that produces it (Radden & Kövecses, 1999). Metonymy differs from metaphor in that it relies on contiguity within a single frame and not on a comparison across domains. Linguistic evidence required: the literal sense and the entity it evokes are connected within one frame, and no cross-domain comparison is needed to interpret the word.

These criteria are applied in order. If the dictionary sense applies without remainder, the item is classified as contextual specification. Only if it does not apply is the item considered for narrowing, metaphor or metonymy. Where the evidence does not decide between two categories, the item is assigned to the better supported one and the alternative reading is reported.

Song Lyrics as Semantic Data

A song may be regarded as a literary work in which poetic language is combined with a musical component. Lyrics share with poetry an organisation into stanzas and lines, a reliance on rhythm and repetition, and a preference for figurative rather than literal expression, but they differ in that they are designed to be heard rather than read and are therefore constrained by melody and by the need for immediate intelligibility. These constraints make lyrics an economical form: a small number of words must carry a substantial emotional load, and figurative language is one of the principal means by which that economy is achieved. From a semantic point of view this makes lyrics useful data, since the gap between lexical and contextual meaning that semantics seeks to describe is frequently found in this genre (Sudar et al., 2023).

Previous Studies and Conceptual Framework

Previous studies have applied the lexical–contextual distinction to a range of lyrics. Sudar et al. (2023) analysed the Moana soundtrack and discussed the pedagogical implications of the analysis. Athufa and Bustam

(2023) and Ramadani et al. (2025) report that emotional and relational context shapes the interpretation of lexical meaning in pop lyrics, Suci et al. (2025) report that metaphor extends lexical meaning in a Billie Eilish song, and Baene (2023) and Budiarti et al. (2026) extend the approach to EDM and rap lyrics. These studies confirm the applicability of the distinction to contemporary lyrics. What they do not provide, as far as the reports reviewed show, is an explicit decision procedure for classifying the relation between the lexical and the contextual sense of each item.

The conceptual framework of the present study addresses this in three linked stages. First, selected words are described at the lexical level, using dictionary and reference sources. Second, the same words are described at the contextual level, using the surrounding lines, the narrative situation and the theme of the song. Third, the relationship between the two descriptions is classified as contextual specification, semantic narrowing, metonymy or metaphorical extension, using the criteria set out above, and the distribution of these categories across the two songs is compared. The three stages converge on a single question: whether the meaning of a word in these lyrics can be recovered from the dictionary sense together with the information the context supplies, and, where it cannot, by what process the situated meaning is produced.

Methods

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design. A qualitative approach was selected because the object of investigation is meaning, which is interpretive and contextual in character and is therefore not reducible to numerical measurement. As Aspers and Corte (2019) argue, qualitative research is distinguished by its concern with improving understanding of a phenomenon through close engagement with its particulars rather than through the quantification of variables. Lambert and Lambert (2012) further describe qualitative descriptive research as an appropriate design where the aim is a comprehensive and low-inference summary of the phenomenon in the language of the data themselves, which corresponds to the aim of the present study. The design is descriptive because the findings are presented as

verbal description and explanation rather than as statistical result, and qualitative because the data consist of words analysed for their meaning.

The data of this study are words taken from the lyrics of two songs by One Direction, “What Makes You Beautiful” and “One Thing”, both released in the album Up All Night in 2011. The data source is the written text of the lyrics as published on a lyrics database (AZLyrics, n.d.-a, n.d.-b), verified against the recorded performance of each song. The two songs were selected from the album because they share a romantic orientation, a male speaker and a female addressee, and a situation of attraction that is not openly acknowledged, and because they were released as singles from the same album, so that their vocabulary and register are comparable. This rationale concerns comparability. The songs were not sampled to represent the album or the group.

Ten words were selected in total, five from each song. The selection was purposive and was governed by three criteria: the word had to be semantically central to the message of the song; it had to be a word whose dictionary sense might differ from its use in the lyric; and it had to be locatable precisely within the structure of the text. Function words were excluded. These are criteria for identifying candidate words. They are not criteria for classifying them, which follow the procedure described below. The second criterion means that the words were chosen because a difference between dictionary sense and use was considered possible, and this is a limitation: the sample is biased towards words likely to show such a difference, and it cannot show how common such words are in the lyrics as a whole. The criterion states a possibility and not an outcome, and the words were therefore not excluded when their use proved to coincide with their dictionary sense. Candidate words were identified during repeated reading, before the dictionary sense and the contextual use of each word were formally compared. Even so, the identification rested on the researcher’s preliminary expectation of divergence, and the selection cannot be treated as independent of that expectation.

In accordance with qualitative convention, the researcher acted as the primary instrument of the study, since the identification and interpretation of meaning depend on analytical judgement rather than on a mechanical procedure (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Three supporting instruments were used. Standard English dictionaries, supported by an English-Indonesian dictionary (Echols & Shadily, 1996), supplied the lexical meanings [AUTHOR TO INSERT: titles, editions or URLs, and access dates of the English dictionaries consulted]. Semantic references (Kempson, 1977; Kreidler, 1998; Palmer, 1981; Chaer, 2002; Leech, 1981; Saeed, 2016; Cruse, 2011; Pragglejaz Group, 2007; Radden & Kövecses, 1999) supplied the analytical categories. An analysis table, organised by word, position, lexical meaning and contextual meaning, was used to record and compare the data systematically.

Data collection proceeded in five stages. First, the researcher read and listened to the complete lyrics of both songs repeatedly in order to establish the narrative situation, the speaker, the addressee and the overall theme of each text. Second, the two songs were selected from the album according to the criteria of thematic relatedness described above. Third, candidate words were identified and then reduced to the ten items analysed, applying the selection criteria. Fourth, the position of each word was recorded using a coding convention in which the letter S denotes the stanza and the letter L the line, so that the notation S3 & L6 indicates the sixth line of the third stanza. This convention is used consistently throughout the analysis so that any item may be located in the text and verified by the reader. Fifth, the data were arranged in tabular form according to the research questions, with the lexical meaning entered first and the contextual meaning second.

Data analysis was conducted in five steps. In the first step, the dictionary sense of each word nearest to its use in the lyric was recorded as the baseline. In the second step, the line containing the word and the surrounding lines were read to establish who the experiencer or referent is, what is asserted, and what the co-text signals about the word’s sense. In the third step, the baseline sense was compared with the sense required by the co-text. If the dictionary sense applied without remainder, the item was classified

as contextual specification, and the information supplied by the context was recorded. In the fourth step, only items for which the dictionary sense did not apply were considered for semantic narrowing, metaphorical extension or metonymy, and the linguistic evidence required for each category (see Literature Review) was checked. In the fifth step, the classification was compared with alternative readings, which were recorded where the evidence did not exclude them, and the distribution of the categories was compared across the two songs.

Classifications rest on the wording of the lyric and its co-text, not on assumptions about what the songwriters intended. An item was assigned to a figurative category only when the co-text supported it, and not because a figurative reading seemed more interesting.

To support the credibility of the analysis, three measures were taken. Each lexical gloss was checked against more than one dictionary source so that no reading rested on a single entry. Each contextual interpretation was required to be traceable to identifiable material in the lyric, and the stanza-and-line notation was retained precisely so that this traceability would be available to the reader. The coding and interpretation were also discussed with the supervising lecturers, whose comments were used to revise readings that could not be sufficiently supported from the text. This discussion was a form of peer debriefing. It was not independent double coding, and no inter-coder reliability coefficient was calculated. The classifications are therefore interpretations by the researcher, which readers can check against the lyric through the position notation. Since the material analysed consists of commercially published songs, its use falls within the conventions of academic analysis and citation, and no ethical approval involving human participants was required. Because of copyright, the lyric lines are not reproduced. They are located by stanza and line and described in paraphrase.

Findings and Discussions

Findings

The analysis produced findings in three parts. The first concerns the five selected words from “What Makes You Beautiful”, the second the five

selected words from "One Thing", and the third the classification of the semantic relationships identified across the two songs. Throughout, the position of each word is indicated using the stanza-and-line convention described in the methods, in which S denotes the stanza and L the line, so that S1 & L3 refers to the third line of the first stanza. This convention is adopted so that readers are able to locate each item in the lyric and are not obliged to rely on the analysis alone. Because the lyrics are protected by copyright, the surrounding lines are paraphrased and not quoted.

Lexical and Contextual Meanings in "What Makes You Beautiful"

"What Makes You Beautiful" was released on 11 September 2011 as the lead single of the album Up All Night. The lyric is addressed by a male speaker to a female addressee and turns on a single situation: the addressee does not recognise her own attractiveness, and the speaker presents this lack of recognition as part of what makes her appealing to him. Five words were selected as semantically central to this situation. Table 1 presents the lexical and contextual meanings identified.

TABLE 1. LEXICAL AND CONTEXTUAL MEANINGS IN "WHAT MAKES YOU BEAUTIFUL"

No.	Word	Stanza & Line	Lexical Meaning	Contextual Meaning
1	Beautiful	S3 & L6	According to the dictionary, beautiful means pleasing the senses or the mind aesthetically, particularly in terms of appearance.	Used in its dictionary sense and applied to the addressee. The surrounding lines state that she does not realise she is beautiful. That proposition belongs to the lyric as a whole and does not change the sense of the word.
2	Smile	S6 & L3	Smile means a facial expression in which the corners of the mouth are turned up, typically indicating happiness, pleasure or friendliness.	Used literally for the addressee's facial expression. The co-text presents her smiling downwards, which the speaker reads as a sign that she is unaware of her own attractiveness. This is an inference from the co-text, not a different sense of the word.
3	Insecure	S1 & L1	Insecure means lacking confidence or assurance, often relating to doubting one's own abilities or appearance.	Used in its dictionary sense and attributed to the addressee. The clause that follows indicates that the speaker regards her self-doubt as unfounded. This evaluative stance is carried by the clause and not by the word.

No.	Word	Stanza & Line	Lexical Meaning	Contextual Meaning
4	Overwhelmed	S3 & L2	Overwhelmed means experiencing an emotion so intense that it is difficult to manage or respond to.	Used in its dictionary sense. The co-text identifies the speaker as the experiencer and a mannerism of the addressee as the stimulus, and the positive valence follows from the surrounding lines.
5	Door	S1 & L3	Door means a movable structure used to open and close an entrance to a building, room or vehicle.	Used literally, as part of a description of the addressee entering a room and attracting attention. No cross-domain correspondence is needed to interpret the word.

Source: Researcher's analysis of the lyrics (AZLyrics, n.d.-b).

The word beautiful (S3 & L6) names the quality the song is concerned with, and it is used in its dictionary sense of aesthetic pleasingness, applied to a single person, the addressee. What the lyric adds is a proposition about her: she does not know that she is beautiful. That proposition is expressed by the surrounding clauses and by the title, and the word itself is not modified by it. Whether the lyric is also making an evaluative claim, namely that her unawareness is part of her appeal, is a matter of interpretation of the whole lyric, and it is not evidence of a shift in the meaning of the word. The item is classified as contextual specification.

The words smile (S6 & L3) and insecure (S1 & L1) are both used in their dictionary senses. Smile denotes a facial expression, and it is the addressee's expression in a particular posture which the speaker treats as a visible cue to her lack of self-awareness. The step from the expression to the speaker's conclusion is a pragmatic inference and does not alter what the word means. Insecure is the opening characterisation of the addressee. The clause that follows it signals that the speaker regards her insecurity as unfounded, and this stance is what gives the line its reassuring force. The evaluative stance is located in the following clause and not in the word. Both items are classified as contextual specification.

The word overwhelmed (S3 & L2) is also used in its dictionary sense. In the interpretation adopted here, the co-text identifies the speaker as the person who is overwhelmed, with a mannerism of the addressee as the stimulus. The dictionary entry does not say who the experiencer is or whether

the emotion is positive, and the surrounding lines supply both. Supplying an experiencer and a valence to a word whose sense is unchanged is specification, and it is not narrowing.

The word door (S1 & L3) might be read as a metaphor for the moment at which the addressee draws attention, but the evidence does not support a metaphorical reading. The word occurs in a description of the addressee entering a place, and the physical sense of door applies to it fully. The social effect, that she attracts attention, is asserted by other words in the line and is not carried by door. A metaphorical reading would require a cross-domain correspondence in which the door stands for something other than a door, and the co-text provides none. The item is therefore classified as contextual specification, with the lyric using a literal and conventional scene.

Lexical and Contextual Meanings in "One Thing"

"One Thing" was released as a single from the same album, Up All Night, and shares its romantic orientation, but the situation it constructs differs. Here the speaker is unable to identify precisely what attracts him to the addressee, and is equally unable to make his feelings known to her. The lyric is therefore organised around effort and obstruction rather than around reassurance. Five words were selected as central to this situation, and Table 2 presents the results.

TABLE 2. LEXICAL AND CONTEXTUAL MEANINGS IN "ONE THING"

No.	Word	Stanza & Line	Lexical Meaning	Contextual Meaning
1	Thing	S3 & L4	According to the dictionary, thing refers to an object or entity that is not specifically named, or to something that exists physically or abstractly.	Used in its general sense of an unspecified entity. The co-text leaves the referent unnamed. It is the unidentified quality of the addressee that attracts the speaker, and the indefiniteness is part of the content of the lyric.
2	Heartbeat	S2 & L4	Heartbeat refers to the pulsation of the heart, or the regular rhythm of the heart as it pumps blood through the body.	The dictionary sense is the bodily pulse. In the co-text the bodily response stands for the speaker's emotional arousal in the presence of the addressee. Interpreted as metonymy (bodily response for emotion).

No.	Word	Stanza & Line	Lexical Meaning	Contextual Meaning
3	Climbing	S5 & L1	Climbing means ascending or moving upward, typically with effort and often by using the hands and feet.	The basic sense is physical upward movement. In the line, together with walls, it represents the speaker's effort to overcome emotional distance. Interpreted as metaphorical extension.
4	Walls	S5 & L1	Walls are vertical structures that define, enclose and sometimes protect a space.	The basic sense is a physical enclosing structure. Together with climbing it represents the emotional distance between speaker and addressee. Interpreted as metaphorical extension.
5	Brave	S1 & L4	Brave means showing courage, or being ready to face danger or difficulty without being deterred by fear.	Used in its dictionary sense. The line negates it, as the speaker states that he cannot be brave when he looks at the addressee. The sense of the word is unchanged, and the effect arises from the negation.

Source: Researcher's analysis of the lyrics (AZLyrics, n.d.-a).

The word thing (S3 & L4) is semantically the most general item in the entire dataset, since lexically it can refer to almost any entity, concrete or abstract. In the lyric it keeps this general sense: the speaker is unable to say what it is about the addressee that attracts him, so the word names an unidentified quality without identifying it. The context specifies the role of the referent in the situation, and it does not supply a definite referent. The indefiniteness is not a failure of the lyric but its point. The item is classified as contextual specification.

The word heartbeat (S2 & L4) has a strictly physiological lexical sense, denoting the pulsation of the heart. In the lyric it does not report a medical fact. It stands for the excitement the speaker experiences in the presence of the addressee, so that a bodily response is used to evoke the feeling that produces it. Because the bodily response and the emotion belong to the same experiential frame and no comparison across domains is required, the item is classified as metonymy and not as metaphor. The reading is available to any English-speaking listener because the association between the heart and emotion is conventional, which illustrates that contextual interpretation draws not only on the immediate lines but also on shared cultural knowledge.

The words climbing and walls occur together in the same line (S5 & L1) and form a single image, and they are therefore best interpreted as a pair. Both have basic senses in the domain of physical space: one denotes an upward movement requiring effort, the other a vertical structure that encloses or obstructs. Neither is asserted literally in the lyric. The walls correspond to the emotional distance between the speaker and the addressee, and the climbing corresponds to the effort he makes to overcome it. The image maps a relational difficulty on to a spatial one, which satisfies the criteria for metaphorical extension. Another reading is possible: if the line is read through the conventional English idiom for being restless or agitated, the pair would not map a barrier at all. The barrier reading is adopted because the pair joins a movement to a structure, but the idiomatic reading cannot be excluded from the evidence available.

The word brave (S1 & L4) is lexically a straightforward term denoting courage, and it is used in that sense. The lyric negates it, so that the line asserts the absence of courage in the presence of the addressee. The negation changes what the sentence asserts, not what the word means. No restriction of its sense occurs, so brave cannot be treated as a narrowed item. Under the criteria used throughout, brave is classified as contextual specification, with the grammatical environment (negation) noted as the source of the effect. It remains useful as an example because it shows that the way a word is used in a lyric can differ from a word-by-word dictionary reading without any change in the word's sense.

Classification of the Semantic Relationships

Applying the criteria set out in the Literature Review to the ten items shows that the relation between lexical and contextual meaning is not uniform. Seven items are cases of contextual specification, in which the dictionary sense applies and the context supplies reference, experiencer, stance, valence or, for brave, a negated predicate. One item, heartbeat, is a case of metonymy. Two items, climbing and walls, are cases of metaphorical extension. No item met the criteria for semantic narrowing. Table 3 sets out the classification.

TABLE 3. CLASSIFICATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LEXICAL AND CONTEXTUAL MEANING

No.	Word	Song	Type of Relationship	Basis of Classification
1	Beautiful	What Makes You Beautiful	Contextual specification	Dictionary sense applies; context supplies the referent (the addressee) and the proposition that she is unaware of it.
2	Smile	What Makes You Beautiful	Contextual specification	Literal expression; the inference about her self-awareness is drawn from the co-text.
3	Insecure	What Makes You Beautiful	Contextual specification	Dictionary sense applies; the speaker's stance towards it is carried by the following clause.
4	Overwhelmed	What Makes You Beautiful	Contextual specification	Dictionary sense applies; context supplies the experiencer, the stimulus and the positive valence.
5	Door	What Makes You Beautiful	Contextual specification	Literal use in a description of entering a room; no cross-domain correspondence is present.
6	Thing	One Thing	Contextual specification	General sense retained; the referent is deliberately left unnamed.
7	Heartbeat	One Thing	Metonymy	A bodily response stands for the emotion that produces it, within one frame.
8	Climbing	One Thing	Metaphorical extension	Physical movement corresponds to sustained emotional effort (cross-domain).
9	Walls	One Thing	Metaphorical extension	Physical structure corresponds to emotional distance and obstruction (cross-domain).
10	Brave	One Thing	Contextual specification	Dictionary sense applies; the effect arises from negation, which is a grammatical environment and not a change of sense.

Source: Researcher's analysis of the lyrics (AZLyrics, n.d.-a, n.d.-b).

The distribution is uneven across the two songs. In "What Makes You Beautiful" all five items are cases of contextual specification, and none involves a figurative transfer. In "One Thing" two items are cases of specification, one of metonymy and two of metaphor, so that all the figurative items in the dataset occur in this song. Because the items were selected purposively, this contrast describes the ten words analysed and must not be read as a measure of how figurative the two lyrics are as wholes.

Discussion

This study set out to describe the lexical and contextual meanings of ten selected words and the relation between them. The principal finding is that the relation is not uniform. For seven of the ten words the dictionary sense applied, and what the context contributed was information that a dictionary entry cannot hold: who or what is referred to, who experiences an emotion, what stance the speaker takes, and, in the case of brave, what is asserted under negation. For three words the lyric required a sense other than the dictionary sense, by metonymy in one case and by metaphor in two. The discussion considers what these results mean for the research questions, how they relate to theory and earlier studies, and what limits their interpretation.

Lexical and Contextual Meaning: Specification and Figurative Transfer

In answer to the first research question, the lexical meanings of the ten words are general in reference, covering aesthetic pleasingness, a facial expression, lack of confidence, emotional intensity, a physical entrance, an unspecified entity, a bodily process, a physical movement, an enclosing structure and courage. In answer to the second, the contextual meanings are for the most part the same senses used of particular persons and situations. This is consistent with Cruse's (2011) account in which a word supplies a potential for meaning that the context completes, and with Saeed's (2016) observation that the meaning of a word on an occasion of use cannot be predicted from the dictionary without information about the situation. The present data add a qualification. Completion by context does not always change the sense. In most of the items analysed here, context filled in the participants and the stance and left the sense intact.

This qualification bears on how earlier studies are read. Studies of lexical and contextual meaning in lyrics, for example Athufa and Bustam (2023) and Ramadani et al. (2025), report that context shapes the interpretation of lexical meaning, and Suci et al. (2025) report that metaphor expands lexical meaning. The results here are compatible with both statements. They suggest, however, that a difference between a dictionary gloss and an interpretation should not be taken as evidence that the sense of a

word has been modified, since a gloss cannot state the referent or the stance that a lyric supplies. Distinguishing specification from figurative transfer makes it possible to report that a word keeps its sense, which an analysis that only lists lexical and contextual meanings in parallel cannot do.

The three figurative items illustrate the other pole. Climbing and walls satisfy the conditions for metaphorical extension in the sense of Pragglejaz Group (2007) and Lakoff and Johnson (1980): a basic physical sense contrasts with a contextual relational sense that is understood by comparison with it. Heartbeat is different in kind. The bodily response and the feeling are parts of one experiential frame, so that interpretation does not require a comparison across domains, and the item is better described as metonymy (Radden & Kövecses, 1999). Separating the two types matters because they make different demands on an interpreter. A metonymic reading draws on a conventional association, whereas a metaphorical reading requires the correspondence between the two domains to be recognised.

The Treatment of Door and Brave

Two items are of methodological interest because they show how a category can be over-applied. Door has a concrete sense, and it would have been tempting to read it as a metaphor. The evidence supports only a literal reading, because the surrounding description is of a person entering a room. A figurative interpretation that is not demanded by the co-text is speculation about the songwriter's intention, and it was therefore not retained. Brave, for its part, shows that a gap between a word-by-word dictionary reading and the meaning of a line can be produced by grammar. The word is negated, and the line asserts the lack of the quality the word names. This supports the argument of Halliday and Hasan (1989) that meaning must be interpreted at the level of the text and not of the isolated item, and it shows that an analysis confined to isolated words may attribute to a word an effect that belongs to its construction.

Alternative Interpretations

Several readings remain open. Climbing and walls could be read through a conventional idiom for restlessness and not as a barrier image, and

the choice depends on the exact wording of the line. Heartbeat could be analysed as metaphorical by those who treat the bodily response as a source domain for emotion, although the same-frame criterion used here favours metonymy. The positive valence of overwhelmed is inferred from the surrounding lines, and a reader who gave weight to the dictionary's neutral sense might find the line less determinate. The evaluative claim made by the lyric about the addressee's unawareness could also be read as part of the meaning of beautiful by those who allow the title proposition to colour the word. These alternatives have not been excluded. They are reported so that the classifications are read as interpretations supported by stated evidence and not as established facts.

Comparison of the Two Songs

In the ten words analysed, the figurative items occur only in "One Thing". A possible explanation is that this lyric concerns inner states and obstacles, namely the inability to name an attraction and to act on it, which have no observable form and may therefore be rendered through bodily and spatial images, whereas "What Makes You Beautiful" reports observable behaviour and the speaker's view of it. This is an interpretation of two texts. It cannot be generalised, because the words were selected purposively and because the dataset consists of two songs. The contrast also may partly reflect the selection of words, since the sampling criteria were applied separately to each song.

Implications for English Language Learning

The study did not collect any evidence of learners' performance, and the points below are proposals that follow from the analysis and from the literature cited. They are not demonstrated outcomes. First, the analysis suggests a habit that learners could be taught: to treat the dictionary sense as a hypothesis that is tested against the surrounding text, and to decide whether the text requires a different sense. This is consistent with Nation's (2013) view that knowing a word includes knowing how it behaves in use. Second, because most items analysed here are literal, the classification can be used to discourage over-reading. Learners who have been taught to look for figurative

meaning may treat door as a metaphor, and an exercise that asks them to find textual evidence for or against a figurative reading would address this. Third, the metaphorical and metonymic items offer material for raising awareness of figurative language. Littlemore and Low (2006) argue that figurative thinking is part of communicative competence in a foreign language, and Boers (2000) reported that drawing attention to the source domains of figurative expressions was associated with improved retention. Whether such activities improve the interpretation of lyrics is a question for classroom-based research. Fourth, lyrics are short and familiar, which has been given as a reason for using songs in the classroom (Engh, 2013; Murphey, 1992), and the ambiguous cases reported above could serve as occasions to discuss alternative interpretations. The classification of items as specification, metonymy or metaphor could itself be used as a task, since it requires learners to state the reasoning behind an interpretation and not only to report a gloss.

Limitations

The study has limitations that qualify every finding above. Only two songs by one group from one album were analysed, and ten words were selected purposively using a criterion that anticipated a difference between dictionary sense and use. The sample is therefore not representative, and the proportions reported (seven, one, two and none) describe these ten words and must not be generalised. The classification rests on the researcher's judgement, supported by discussion with the supervising lecturers but not by independent double coding or a reliability coefficient. The analysis concerns lexical and contextual meaning only. It does not address connotative, affective or collocative meaning, and it does not consider the music. The classifications describe the use of words in the lyric text, and the study provides no evidence of historical semantic change.

Conclusion

This study examined the lexical and contextual meanings of ten selected words in two songs by One Direction, "What Makes You Beautiful" and "One Thing", both from the album Up All Night (2011). In answer to the first research question, the lexical meanings of the selected words were established

from dictionary sources and found to be general in reference, denoting aesthetic pleasingness, facial expression, lack of confidence, intensity of emotion, physical objects such as a door and a wall, bodily processes such as a heartbeat, physical movement, indefinite entities and courage. In answer to the second research question, the contextual meanings of the same words were found to be, in seven cases, the dictionary sense applied to a particular referent, experiencer or situation (contextual specification), in one case a metonymic use of a bodily term for an emotion, and in two cases a metaphorical use of a physical sense for an emotional or relational one. No item met the criteria for semantic narrowing.

The distribution differs between the two songs. All five items from "What Makes You Beautiful" were classified as contextual specification, and all the figurative items occurred in "One Thing". Because the items were selected purposively, these patterns describe the sample analysed. The risk of misinterpretation for a reader relying on the dictionary is concentrated, in this sample, in the figurative items, for which the dictionary sense does not give the meaning conveyed. For the remaining items the risk lies in over-reading, that is, in attributing a figurative meaning that the text does not require.

The study concludes that the relation between lexical and contextual meaning in lyrics is not uniform and can be described by explicit criteria, and that a difference between a dictionary gloss and an interpretation does not by itself show that the sense of a word has been changed by its context. Its contribution lies in the classification procedure, in the transparent report of the selection and its limits, and in the educational implications drawn from the findings, which are put forward as proposals for instruction and have not been tested.

The study is limited in three respects. It analyses two songs only, drawn from one album by one group, so that the patterns identified describe this material rather than popular song lyrics in general. It examines ten selected words rather than the complete vocabulary of the two texts, and the selection, while governed by stated criteria, reflects the researcher's judgement and a criterion that anticipated a difference between dictionary sense and use. And

it is confined to lexical and contextual meaning, leaving other semantic categories unexamined. Future researchers are accordingly encouraged to extend the analysis to a larger corpus of songs, to select items by a procedure that does not anticipate their meaning, for example by analysing every content word in a sample of lines, to employ independent coders, to include further types of meaning such as connotative, affective and collocative meaning, to examine the interaction between lyrics and musical setting in the construction of meaning, and to test the pedagogical implications proposed here through classroom-based research with EFL learners.

References

Aspers, P., & Corte, U. (2019). What is qualitative in qualitative research. *Qualitative Sociology, 42*(2), 139–160. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-019-9413-7

Athufa, R. M. H., & Bustam, M. R. (2023). Analysis of lexical and contextual meaning in Niki's song Ocean & Engines. *International Journal of Computer in Humanities, 3*, 21–29. https://doi.org/10.34010/injuchum.v3i.16144

AZLyrics. (n.d.-a). *One Direction "One Thing" lyrics*. https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/onedirection/onething.html

AZLyrics. (n.d.-b). *One Direction "What Makes You Beautiful" lyrics*. https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/onedirection/whatmakesyoubeautiful.html

Baene, S. H. (2023). Lexical and contextual meaning in Alan Walker song lyric at World of Walker album. *Research on English Language Education, 5*(2), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.57094/relation.v5i2.1144

Boers, F. (2000). Metaphor awareness and vocabulary retention. *Applied Linguistics, 21*(4), 553–571.

Budiarti, M. A., Setyowati, R., & Maskuri, S. K. D. S. (2026). An analysis of lexical and contextual meaning in NF's "The Search" song lyrics. *ELITERATE: Journal of English Linguistics and Literature Studies, 5*(3), 325–338.

Cambridge University Press & Assessment. (n.d.). *Cambridge Dictionary*. https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/

Chaer, A. (2002). *Pengantar semantik bahasa Indonesia*. PT Rineka Cipta.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage.

Cruse, A. (2011). *Meaning in language: An introduction to semantics and pragmatics* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.

Echols, J. M., & Shadily, H. (1996). *Kamus Inggris Indonesia*. Gramedia.

Engh, D. (2013). Why use music in English language learning? A survey of the literature. *English Language Teaching, 6*(2), 113–127.

Griffiths, P. (2006). *An introduction to English semantics and pragmatics*. Edinburgh University Press.

Halliday, M. A. K., & Hasan, R. (1989). *Language, context, and text: Aspects of language in a social-semiotic perspective*. Oxford University Press.

Kempson, R. M. (1977). *Semantic theory*. Cambridge University Press.

Kreidler, C. W. (1998). *Introducing English semantics*. Routledge.

Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. University of Chicago Press.

Lambert, V. A., & Lambert, C. E. (2012). Qualitative descriptive research: An acceptable design. *Pacific Rim International Journal of Nursing Research, 16*(4), 255–256.

Leech, G. (1981). *Semantics: The study of meaning* (2nd ed.). Penguin Books.

Littlemore, J., & Low, G. (2006). *Figurative thinking and foreign language learning*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Murphey, T. (1992). The discourse of pop songs. *TESOL Quarterly, 26*(4), 770–774.

Nation, I. S. P. (2013). *Learning vocabulary in another language* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Oxford University Press. (n.d.). *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/

Palmer, F. R. (1981). *Semantics* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Pragglejaz Group. (2007). MIP: A method for identifying metaphorically used words in discourse. *Metaphor and Symbol, 22*(1), 1–39.

Radden, G., & Kövecses, Z. (1999). Towards a theory of metonymy. In K.-U. Panther & G. Radden (Eds.), *Metonymy in language and thought* (pp. 17–59). John Benjamins.

Ramadani, T., Anwar, S., & Wardoyo, C. (2025). Exploring lexical and contextual meaning in Olivia Rodrigo's song lyrics in Sour album. *LITERA: Jurnal Bahasa dan Sastra, 11*(2), 63–72. https://doi.org/10.36002/litera.v11i2.3727

Recanati, F. (2004). *Literal meaning*. Cambridge University Press.

Saeed, J. I. (2016). *Semantics* (4th ed.). Wiley Blackwell.

Suci H. N., C., Nurhapitudin, I., & Huznatul A., F. (2025). Billie Eilish's "Wildflower": A study of lexical meaning and metaphor. *Journal of English Language and Education, 10*(2), 220–230. https://doi.org/10.31004/jele.v10i2.732

Sudar, S., Tusino, T., & Dewi, B. R. C. (2023). Lexical and contextual meanings in song lyrics "Moana Original Soundtrack": Pedagogical implication.

English Review: Journal of English Education, 11(2), 413–422. https://doi.org/10.25134/erjee.v11i2.6919

Yule, G. (2020). *The study of language* (7th ed.). Cambridge University Press.