



Semantic Exploration of Emotional Contrast in “Last Christmas” by Wham!

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to examine emotional contradictions in Wham!'s “Last Christmas” through semantic analysis and conceptual metaphors. Using a qualitative descriptive method, six respondents without formal music education provided emotional perceptions of the song. The lyrics, centered on loss and betrayal, employ metaphors like “I gave you my heart” to convey trust and vulnerability. In contrast, the upbeat melody fosters a positive atmosphere, enhancing the emotional complexity for listeners. Findings highlight how metaphors help conceptualize abstract emotions, while the melody emphasizes emotional contrasts. This interplay between lyrics and melody transforms “Last Christmas” into a reflective artistic piece, offering deeper insights into emotional expression and contributing to the study of music-emotion relationships.

KEYWORDS

Emotion;
Song;
Lyrics;
Metaphor;
Semantics.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis kontradiksi emosional dalam lagu “Last Christmas” oleh Wham! melalui pendekatan analisis semantik dan metafora konseptual. Dengan metode deskriptif kualitatif, enam responden tanpa latar belakang pendidikan formal di bidang musik memberikan persepsi emosional terhadap lagu ini. Lirik yang mengangkat tema kehilangan dan pengkhianatan menggunakan metafora seperti “I gave you my heart” untuk menggambarkan kepercayaan dan kerentanan emosional. Sebaliknya, melodi yang ceria menciptakan suasana positif, memperkuat kompleksitas emosional bagi pendengar. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa metafora membantu memahami emosi abstrak, sementara melodi menekankan kontras emosional. Interaksi antara lirik dan melodi ini menjadikan “Last Christmas” lebih dari sekadar lagu pop, melainkan karya seni reflektif yang memberikan wawasan tentang ekspresi emosional serta berkontribusi pada studi hubungan antara musik dan emosi.

KATAKUNCI

Emosi;
Lagu;
Lirik;
Metafora;
Semantik.

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1. Introduction

Songs are a unique and influential means of communication in everyday life. Communication can occur through various mediums, not just direct conversation. One effective form of communication is through song. Songs allow individuals to express emotions, ideas, and messages in a more profound and artistic way. Through lyrics and melodies, songs are able to convey messages that may be difficult to express directly. Through songs, one can convey feelings, thoughts, and information in a powerful and emotional way. Songs can be a container for various emotions, such as happiness, sadness, anger, and hope, so they can touch the listener deeply (Mawaddah & Rahmat, 2023). Melody and lyrics are two important elements that can build emotional attachment for the listener, soft notes to bring a calm impression or a dynamic rhythm to ignite the spirit.

Meanwhile, lyrics play a role in conveying a deeper meaning, allowing the listener to feel and understand the story or message that the songwriter wants to convey. Lyrics are sentences contained in songs and are able to touch the hearts of listeners through the meaning contained in the words (E. Yuliana, 2023). Not all lyrics and melodies in a song are always in line in conveying an emotional message, as seen in the song "Last Christmas" released by the duo Wham! (1984) according to Official UK Singles Chart (2021) The song has become one of the iconic songs of the holiday season and is often played during Christmas. In the lyric of the song there is a story of someone experiencing heartbreak and disappointment in a relationship. Although the theme is about loss and sadness, the song is wrapped in a cheerful melody that is typical of the Christmas atmosphere. The results of research by Mori and Iwanaga in the journal Barradas & Sakka (2021) state the effect of a combination of sad lyrics and happy-sounding music on the perception of emotions and the experience of pleasure.

Participants (with no background in music understanding) listened to happy-sounding music with sad lyrics in a foreign language, read translations of sad lyrics, or listened to happy music while reading translations of the lyrics. As a result, sad lyrics were still perceived as sad, but when combined with happy music, this combination produced pleasant feelings. This shows that music has the ability to present complex layers of emotions, where the mood created by the melody can be different from the message conveyed by the lyrics. To understand a song we not only know the lyrics but must understand the meaning of the lyrical phrases. In a semantic context, the relationship between lyrics and melody in a song becomes increasingly interesting to analyze. According to the Oxford dictionary semantics is related to the meaning between words and sentences. Semantic content of the lyrics was more influential on mood than the melodic content of the lyrics (Colbert-White et al., 2014).

Semantics explores how meaning is made, whether through context, sentence structure, or personal or cultural experience. In the context of communication, semantics focuses on the way words and symbols trigger certain responses in the listener or reader, allowing the message to be conveyed effectively. In the lyrics of "Last Christmas" there are several words and phrases that have meanings that can be interpreted differently if analyzed from the point of view of lexical and grammatical semantics. For example, in the sentence "Last Christmas, I gave you my heart," there is a lexical ambiguity in the word "heart." Literally, the word refers to a physical organ, but in the song, "heart" also symbolizes feelings, love, and trust given to another person. Misunderstanding can arise when listeners only take the literal meaning without realizing that the lyrics are talking about emotional sacrifice and heartbreak. Many people misunderstand the song's intentions, thinking of it as a song that simply describes the joy of Christmas, when in fact the lyrics revolve around the theme of loss and regret in relationships.

Previously, there have been several studies that used emotional semantic analysis. First, a research by Mawaddah & Rahmat (2023) entitled "Semantic Analysis Of Meaning In The Lyrics Of The Song 'Life Too Short' By Aespa". They focused on the types of meanings that arise, namely conceptual and idiom meanings, as well as the author's emotions contained in the lyrics of the Aespa song. Second, there was a research entitled "Semantic Analysis in The Lyrics Of Coldplay's Song" conducted by E. P. Yuliana (2023). This research also used semantic analysis theory, but focused on lexical and contextual meanings in analyzing Coldplay's song lyrics. Third, Adika & Budiarsana (2023) discussed about semantic and utilization of figurative language in the song lyrics of "21 Guns" by Green Day. For the semantic analysis, they found that the majority of lyrics within the song "21 Guns" contained implicit and profound meanings related to the physical and psychological impacts of war, including the destruction of homes and the loss of soldiers' lives. In addition, there was a research by Barradas & Sakka (2021) (Barradas & Sakka, 2021) entitled "When Words Matter: A Cross-Cultural Perspective on Lyrics and Their Relationship to Musical Emotions." Although using different theories, this research still had a relationship with the meaning of lyrics in songs. They examined the emotional aspect of the lyrics' influence on listeners' emotions, involving subjects from different backgrounds and using instrumental music sources and original versions. Therefore, this research fulfills the gap that previous researchers have not explored yet; to explore how the contrast between the sad meaning in the lyrics and the cheerful melody affects listeners' perception of the song Last Christmas.

This research aims to provide music enthusiasts with a deeper understanding of the songwriter's intended message, specifically by examining how emotions, including themes of loss, are conveyed through an uplifting melody. By focusing on the contrast

between sorrowful lyrics and cheerful melodies, this research seeks to illustrate how music evokes complex emotional responses that shape listeners’ perceptions and enhance their overall experience. By analyzing these elements, the research aspires to deepen awareness of the nuanced meanings embedded in songs, encourage a greater appreciation for musical culture, and foster opportunities for thoughtful reflection on musical compositions. Such an approach is intended to demonstrate the profound ways in which lyrics and melodies interact to influence and elevate the emotional engagement of listeners with musical works.

2. Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative design to explore the emotional impact of the song “Last Christmas” by Wham! through an in-depth examination of listeners’ experiences. Drawing on Samsu’s perspective as cited in Syahrizal & Jailani (2023), the research seeks to develop a comprehensive understanding of social phenomena by analyzing contextual and individualized emotional responses to musical expression.

The population consists of adolescents and young adults, with six participants selected through purposive sampling. This strategy intentionally recruits individuals who meet specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. In this study, participants without formal music education were chosen to ensure more natural and unfiltered emotional reactions, minimizing technical bias that might arise from professional musical training, as supported by Lenaini’s (2021) sampling approach.

Data collection integrated three techniques: in-depth interviews, direct observation, and document analysis. Interviews included 10–15 semi-structured questions designed to probe participants’ emotional perceptions. Observations were conducted in natural settings to capture authentic reactions. The analytical framework is grounded in conceptual metaphor theory developed by Lakoff & Johnson (2023), which views metaphors as cognitive structures shaping perception. The study focuses on ontological, structural, and orientational metaphors.

Data analysis followed the model of Miles’s et al. (2018), involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Lyrics and listener responses were analyzed separately using open, axial, and selective coding to identify metaphorical patterns and emotional conceptualizations, producing an interdisciplinary understanding of musical emotion.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Conceptual Metaphor Theory by Lakoff and Johnson in the Context of “Last Christmas

The song “Last Christmas” by Wham! presents deep semantic complexity through the

use of sophisticated conceptual metaphors. The theory of metaphor developed by Lakoff & Johnson (2023) in journal Pleyer et al. (2024), provides a rich analytical framework to explore how lyrical language creates complex constructions of emotional meaning. In the lyrical context of "I gave you my heart", ontological metaphors transform the abstract concept of love into a concrete entity that can be given, betrayed and transferred. Maasen & Weingart (2000) explains that this kind of metaphor allows the listener to understand emotional experiences through representations that can be physically touched and experienced. The heart is not simply understood as a biological organ, but a symbolization of trust, vulnerability, and deep emotional investment.

The narrative structure of the song builds a structural metaphor that positions love as an emotional journey. The phrase "Last Christmas, I gave you my heart, but the very next day, you gave it away" creates a narrative of loss and betrayal. Semino (2008) identifies that structural metaphors like this allow the abstract experience of love to be transformed into a story that has stages, climaxes and resolutions. The orientational metaphor in this song is seen in the emotional displacement between the past and the future. The lyrics "This year, to save me from tears, I'll give it to someone special" illustrate the metaphorical movement from a negative emotional space to a hopeful space. Cameron (2011) explains that orientational metaphors do not simply provide geographical direction, but map an individual's psychological journey.

Respondents revealed that the lyrics "I gave you my heart" were perceived as a complex symbol of love and trust. The majority interpreted "heart" as not just a physical organ, but a metaphorical representation of an overall emotional investment. The concept of "giving my heart" is understood as an act of giving total trust, with the implication of vulnerability and the risk of rejection. The phrase "But the very next day you gave it away" is interpreted as a metaphor for betrayal. Respondents described feelings of being "dumped" and "dumped", indicating how the metaphor frames the emotional experience in terms of transaction and loss. "Once bitten and twice shy" was perceived as a metaphor of self-defense. Respondents associated it with personal experiences of post-rejection caution, showing how the metaphor functions as a psychological mechanism to protect oneself from potential emotional wounds.

The lyrics "A crowded room, friends with tired eyes" present complex spatial and temporal metaphors. Respondents interpreted it as a metaphorical representation of loneliness in a crowd, where physical proximity does not guarantee emotional connection. This in-depth analysis shows how Wham! uses metaphor not just as a linguistic device, but as a cognitive mechanism to bridge abstract and complex emotional experiences. The song "Last Christmas" is thus not just a musical composition, but a linguistic artifact rich in the construction of metaphorical meaning.

Dao (2022) asserts that metaphors in popular music operate on a level far beyond mere language games, but rather become a primary medium for exploring and communicating the most intimate and universal human experiences. In conclusion, "Last Christmas" demonstrates the power of metaphor in transmitting emotional complexity through simple yet profound language. Each metaphor in the song serves as a window to understanding the dynamics of love, betrayal, hope, and recovery.

3.2. The Emotional Contrast Between the Melancholic Lyrics and the Cheerful Melody of Last Christmas Shape the Listeners' Perception and Emotional Experience

The song "Last Christmas" by Wham! is a musical complexity that shows the depth of emotional expression through the intrinsic interaction between melody and lyrics. The interdisciplinary approach in studying this musical work allows in-depth exploration of how semantic construction and musical structure are able to shape the listener's emotional experience. Musical metaphors are key in unraveling the emotional complexity of the song. According to Schiavio et al. (2022) in "Music Matters: A Philosophy of Music Education", metaphors in music are not just linguistic representations, but cognitive mechanisms that allow listeners to transform abstract experiences into personal meaning constructions (Edwards, 2019). The phrase "I gave you my heart" in the song "Last Christmas" is not just a literal expression, but a complex symbolization of the gift of trust, emotional vulnerability, and the risks of love.

Contemporary musicological studies, as described by Thomas (2022) in "Listening for Emotions: Musical Interpretation and Affective Sciences", shows that the contrast between upbeat melodies and melancholic lyrics creates an intersectional space for emotional experience. This presents a psychological mechanism where the listener does not simply receive the musical narrative, but actively interprets and interprets the emotional experience represented (Thomas, 2022). The transcripts of the interviews conducted reveal the depth of musical interpretation. Respondents explored the meaning of the lyrics "I gave you my heart" as a complex representation of love, trust and emotional experience. They understood the phrase to be not just a simple metaphorical expression, but a deep narrative of vulnerability and betrayal. The concept of "soul of ice" in the song presents a visual metaphor of the coldness of human relationships after betrayal. According to Bogunovic et al. (2014) research in the journal "Emotion in Music", this kind of metaphor creates a cognitive bridge between abstract emotional experiences and concrete representations that listeners can understand (Bogunovic et al., 2014). Interestingly, the phrase "Once bitten and twice shy" presents a universal psychological defense mechanism. Thompson et al. (2019) in "Resilience and Emotional Processing" explain that this is a natural human

coping strategy in the face of traumatic experiences in interpersonal relationships. The temporal context of the song, set during the Christmas season, adds to the emotional complexity. Christmas as a reflective and nostalgic moment provides an additional dimension to the musical narrative. According to Setjiawan et al. (2022) research in "Music and Emotional Regulation", such reflective moments facilitate the process of reinterpreting personal experiences through the musical medium (Setjiawan et al., 2022).

Fundamentally, "Last Christmas" represents the human emotional journey in processing experiences of loss, betrayal, and recovery. The song does not simply present a personal narrative, but provides a space for listeners to reflect on their own experiences. The musical construction that combines cheerful melodies with melancholic lyrics creates a unique aesthetic experience. This is in line with Schiavio et al. (2022) view in "Musical Emotions Revisited" that the musical experience goes beyond a mere combination of sounds, but is a complex process in which emotions are formed, experienced, and interpreted. In conclusion, "Last Christmas" is not just a simple pop song, but a complex musical work that challenges the conventional boundaries of emotional expression. Through metaphor, emotional contrast, and sophisticated musical construction, the song presents an aesthetic space where personal experiences can be reinterpreted, reflected upon, and understood.

4. Conclusion

This research reveals the emotional complexity in the song "Last Christmas" by Wham! through semantic analysis and conceptual metaphor. The lyrics of emotional loss and betrayal contrast with the cheerful melody typical of the Christmas atmosphere, creating a complex emotional experience for the listener. Conceptual metaphors such as "I gave you my heart" and "Once bitten and twice shy" symbolize trust, vulnerability, and psychological defense mechanisms after trauma. This study highlights how music can be a medium for conveying layered emotional messages, combining linguistic, psychological and musical elements to create deep and reflective meanings. The song is not only a musical composition, but also a linguistic artifact that expands the understanding of the relationship between lyrics, melody and emotional experience.

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