

Theme and Rheme in Harry Styles' Song "Cherry": A Systemic Functional Linguistics Analysis

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Abstract

This study explores the emotional landscape of Harry Styles' 2019 track "Cherry" through the lens of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). By applying the thematic framework established by Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), the research dissects the song's lyrics to understand how Theme-Rheme organization shapes its narrative. The analysis systematically categorizes the various types of themes, specifically topical and interpersonal and examines their corresponding rhemes across every clause of the song. The findings highlight a strong reliance on unmarked topical themes paired with rhemes centered on mental processes. This linguistic pattern isn't just a technical coincidence; it grounds the song in a deeply personal, introspective space, reflecting Styles' internal struggle and memory. Furthermore, the frequent use of interpersonal themes highlights the speaker's emotional vulnerability and their direct, almost conversational address to the song's subject. By treating these lyrics as sophisticated linguistic artifacts, this study contributes to the growing body of research that applies SFL to contemporary pop music. Ultimately, the results suggest that the specific grammatical choices in "Cherry" are strategically deployed to foreground feelings of longing and relational loss. These choices do more than just tell a story; they provide the textual cohesion and emotional weight that give the song its lasting impact. Through this systematic analysis, "Cherry" is revealed to be a meticulously structured discourse of heartbreak, where the grammar itself works to amplify the intensity of the message (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004).

Keywords: Systemic Functional Linguistics, Theme-Rheme organization, Harry Styles, Lyrical analysis, Textual cohesion

Introduction

Language in popular music is far more than a backdrop for melody; it is a meticulously structured discourse that simultaneously carries ideational, interpersonal, and textual weight. Music functions not only as entertainment but also as a medium of emotional expression and communication. According to Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), language operates through three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual (Simbolon et al., 2025). While many studies have focused on experiential and interpersonal meanings in song lyrics, the textual metafunction remains less explored. This metafunction is realized through Theme and Rheme structures, where Theme introduces the topic and Rheme provides new information

(Riestiyangingtyas & Pratama, 2022). In songwriting, the arrangement of Theme and Rheme helps organize meaning, guide listeners' attention, and shape the narrative's flow.

Songwriting as a linguistic practice has increasingly captivated scholars seeking to understand how meaning is woven into lyrical texts (Nurgiyantoro, 2014). Within this field, Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) stands out as a robust toolkit for examining how language functions as a "social semiotic," reflecting our experiences and relationships (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; Thompson, 2013). Recent scholarship has demonstrated that SFL can unlock the "emotional narrative" within music, showing how linguistic strategies strengthen the bond between artist and listener (Borghi, 2023). For instance, studies on iconic lyrics highlight how the textual metafunction organizes information to achieve global coherence (Eggs, 2004), while research into contemporary ballads reveals that specific choices in the interpersonal metafunction are essential for navigating journeys of regret and longing.

The foundational framework for this study lies in the work of Halliday & Matthiessen (2004), which situates thematic structure within the textual metafunction, distinguishing among topical themes (the first ideational element), interpersonal themes (attitudinal elements), and textual themes (discourse connectors). These categories allow for a precise mapping of how a speaker organizes the starting point of each clause to shape the discourse trajectory. While Eggs (2004) demonstrates how these thematic choices encode social and communicative roles, Thompson (2013) elaborates on thematic progression patterns, such as constant and linear themes that manage information flow. Martin & Rose (2003) further extend this to macro-thematic patterns across larger units of text, which is particularly relevant for song lyrics where patterns repeat across verses and choruses to produce cohesive meaning. The application of SFL to music, though less common than written discourse, has yielded significant insights. Marked themes in pop songs strategically foreground emotionally charged content, while thematic manipulation is central to achieving emotional resonance in Indonesian pop. This is supported by Nurgiyantoro (2014), who argues that song lyrics are legitimate literary discourses deserving of rigorous analysis. The role of relational processes in constructing intimacy is echoed in transitivity studies by Saragih (2006) and Wiratno & Santosa (2014), which show that mental and relational processes predominate in emotionally oriented texts. Despite the increasing number of studies applying Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to song lyrics, recent research within the last five years still tends to focus mainly on transitivity analysis and general metafunctions rather than the interaction between thematic structure and emotional discourse.

Previous studies on Theme and Rheme analysis within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) have extensively examined various forms of discourse, particularly song lyrics and narrative texts. Raynaldi & Nirwana (2023) analyzed Theme and Rheme in the songs *Galahad* and *Scientific Witchery* by Mili and found that topical themes, especially unmarked themes, dominated the lyrics and contributed significantly to the construction of meaning. However, the study primarily focused on identifying theme types rather than exploring how thematic structures contribute to emotional discourse or psychological representation in the song's narrative. Similarly, Yuwana & Pertiwi (2022) investigated Theme and Rheme structures in the Indonesian national song *Bagimu Negeri*. Their findings emphasized the dominance of unmarked topical themes and their role in expressing cultural values and nationalism. Nevertheless, the study focused more on language-culture perspectives and ideological meaning than on interpersonal emotional expression or thematic progression in contemporary popular

music. Karlina, Rismiyanto, and Suryani (2026) examined Theme and Rheme structures in children's online stories written by English native and Indonesian authors. Their research compared thematic progression patterns and cultural narrative strategies in children's literature. Although the study contributed to cross-cultural discourse analysis, it focused on narrative prose rather than lyrical discourse and did not address how Theme–Rheme organization functions in emotionally driven song lyrics. Meanwhile, Nurhayati & Nurkholis (2025) analyzed thematic progression patterns in Taylor Swift's popular songs. The research identified reiteration, zigzag, and split thematic progression patterns as cohesive devices in song lyrics. However, the study emphasized quantitative thematic progression and did not examine in depth the interactions among theme types, rheme processes, and emotional meaning construction. Therefore, despite the growing number of SFL studies on songs and narrative texts, there remains limited research that specifically investigates how Theme–Rheme organization, thematic progression, and rheme process types simultaneously contribute to the construction of emotional discourse in contemporary pop songs.

Harry Styles' song "Cherry" is chosen as the material object because it strongly presents personal emotions through simple, intimate, and conversational lyrics. The song explores the speaker's feelings after a romantic separation, particularly jealousy, longing, regret, and emotional vulnerability. These emotions are not only shown through the meaning of the words, but also through the way each clause is organized. The repeated use of personal pronouns, questions, and direct expressions makes *Cherry* suitable for analysis through Theme and Rheme, as these structures reveal how the speaker places emotional emphasis and develops meaning throughout the lyrics. Therefore, *Cherry* is a relevant object of study, particularly because it allows the researcher to examine how thematic structures and rheme constructions work together to shape the song's emotional narrative. However, Harry Styles' song *Cherry* has not been analyzed through this integrated SFL perspective. This study seeks to fill that gap by examining how thematic structures and rheme constructions function together to represent emotional vulnerability, longing, and relational loss in *Cherry's* lyrics.

Harry Styles (2019) song "Cherry" was selected as the material object of this study because it contains diverse linguistic features that are suitable for Theme–Rheme analysis within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). The lyrics consist of various clause structures, including declarative, interrogative, and imperative clauses, which provide rich data for examining thematic organization and information flow. In addition, the song demonstrates frequent use of personal pronouns and recurring thematic patterns that enable the analysis of how Themes are maintained, shifted, and developed throughout the discourse. These characteristics make *Cherry* an appropriate text for investigating the relationship between thematic structure, thematic progression, and meaning construction in song lyrics. Furthermore, as a contemporary popular song that centers on interpersonal experiences and emotional expression, *Cherry* offers a relevant context for exploring how linguistic resources are organized to create coherence and convey meaning within a musical text. Linguistically, the song features a high density of interrogative and imperative clauses (such as "*Don't you call him 'baby'*"), which inherently force interpersonal elements into the Theme position, offering an objective look at how grammar encodes emotional states like jealousy and desperation. Furthermore, the track's fragmented, non-linear narrative of post-breakup grief provides a rich terrain for mapping thematic progression, allowing researchers to evaluate whether the text relies on cohesive, linear development or stagnant, repetitive thematic loops. Finally, the song presents a fascinating structural anomaly in

its outro by embedding an authentic, spontaneous French voicemail within a stylized English pop ballad. This cross-linguistic and cross-genre shift offers a rare opportunity to analyze how Theme and Rheme configurations manage information packaging and maintain textual cohesion across languages within a single musical text. However, the underlying problem remains; it is unclear how Styles uses seemingly simple clause structures to organize such complex emotional states. Following Paltridge's (2012) principle of treating non-conventional texts as purposeful discursive artifacts, this study adopts a qualitative descriptive design to identify and classify thematic elements and analyze how the rhematic content expands these ideas. The research is driven by the hypothesis that "Cherry" relies heavily on unmarked topical themes and mental-process rhemes to create its signature introspective feel. Ultimately, this research aims to bridge linguistics and musicology, demonstrating that the "casual" grammar of pop music is a powerful engine for human connection (Fairclough, 2003).

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative descriptive method to analyze the Theme–Rheme organization in the lyrics of Harry Styles's "Cherry". A qualitative descriptive approach was chosen because the study aimed to interpret linguistic features and explain how meaning is constructed through thematic structures in the song lyrics. Qualitative descriptive research focuses on providing a detailed, systematic description of a phenomenon based on the data under study rather than testing hypotheses or establishing causal relationships (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This approach is considered appropriate for linguistic studies because it enables researchers to examine language use in its natural context and to interpret patterns of meaning embedded in texts.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, several validation procedures were applied throughout the study. First, the identification and classification of Theme–Rheme structures were conducted based on the thematic framework proposed by Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), which served as the primary analytical guideline. The classifications of topical, interpersonal, and textual themes were consistently compared with the theoretical descriptions provided in the framework to ensure accuracy and consistency. Second, repeated checks were employed during the analysis. Each clause was reviewed several times to verify clause segmentation, the identification of Theme and Rheme elements, and the categorization of process types within the rhemes. This procedure helped minimize potential errors and maintain consistency in interpreting the data. Third, theoretical triangulation was applied by interpreting the findings through several complementary perspectives in Systemic Functional Linguistics, including Halliday and Matthiessen's (2004) theory of thematic structure, Thompson's (2013) explanation of thematic progression, and Martin and Rose's (2003) discourse analysis framework. The use of multiple theoretical perspectives strengthened the validity of the analysis and provided a more comprehensive understanding of how thematic organization contributes to meaning construction in the song lyrics.

Finally, all analytical procedures, including lyric transcription, clause segmentation, theme classification, thematic progression identification, and rheme process categorization, were documented systematically to ensure transparency and dependability. Through these procedures, the study sought to maintain the credibility, consistency, and confirmability of the research findings.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

The analysis of “Cherry” focused on identifying Theme-Rheme structures, theme types, thematic progression patterns, and process types within the song lyrics. A total of forty-two clauses were identified and analyzed in order to examine how thematic organization contributes to the representation of emotion and interpersonal meaning in the song. The findings are presented through four summary tables consisting of: (1) the distribution of theme types, (2) Theme-Rheme analysis of selected clauses, (3) thematic progression patterns, and (4) the distribution of rheme process types. The analysis demonstrates that the song predominantly employs topical themes and mental processes, indicating that the lyrics are strongly centered on personal feelings, reflection, and emotional experience. These findings support Halliday & Matthiessen's (2004) view that thematic choices function as the point of departure of the message and play an important role in organizing meaning within discourse. In addition, the thematic progression patterns found in the song align with Thompson's (2013) explanation that repeated thematic structures can maintain coherence and emphasize the speaker’s psychological focus throughout a text.

Tabel 1. Distribution of Theme Types in “Cherry” by Harry Styles

No.	Theme Type	Count	%	Example
1.	Topical Theme (Unmarked)	24	57.1%	“I”/ ”You”
2.	Topical Theme (Marked)	7	16.7%	“Don’t you call him ‘baby”
3.	Interpersonal Theme	7	16.7%	“Does he take you.....”
4.	Textual Theme	4	9.5%	“And,” “But”
Total		42	100%	

Table 1 shows that topical themes dominate the song, accounting for 73.8% of all clauses. Unmarked topical themes are the most frequent, particularly the pronouns “I” and “you.” Marked topical themes and interpersonal themes each appear in 16.7% of the clauses, while textual themes occur least frequently at 9.5%.

Tabel 2. Theme-Rheme Analysis of Selected Clauses in “Cherry”

No.	Section	Theme	Rheme	Theme Type	Process
1.	Verse 1	I	don’t want to know her name	Topical (Unmarked)	Mental
2.	Verse 1	I	don’t want to know that she means everything to you	Topical (Unmarked)	Mental

3.	Verse 1	I	wonder if she's got the same laugh as you	Topical (Unmarked)	Mental
4.	Verse 1	I	wonder if she's got eyes	Topical (Unmarked)	Mental
5.	Verse 1	Don't you call him 'baby'	We're not talking simple	Interpersonal	Relational
6.	Verse 1	We	are something different	Topical (Unmarked)	Relational
7.	Verse 1	And I	don't want to know if it's not mine	Textual	Mental
8.	Chorus	Does he	Take you for a walk around his parents' gallery?	Interpersonal	Material
9.	Chorus	Does he	call you when he's feeling sad?	Interpersonal	Mental
10.	Chorus	Does he	hang your picture on his wall?	Interpersonal	Material
11.	Chorus	I	remember the smell of your perfume	Topical (Unmarked)	Mental
12.	Chorus	I	still feel it somehow	Topical (Unmarked)	Mental
13.	Chorus	I	miss you, I'm sorry	Topical (Unmarked)	Mental
14.	Verse 2	I	Hope she keeps you warm	Topical (Unmarked)	Mental
15.	Verse 2	She	Looks so good in that dress	Topical (Unmarked)	Relational
16.	Verse 2	You	still looks like my cherry	Topical (Unmarked)	Relational
17.	Bridge	I	don't want to know her name	Topical (Unmarked)	Mental
18.	Bridge	She	doesn't need to know mine	Topical (Unmarked)	Mental

Table 2 presents the Theme-Rheme structure of eighteen representative clauses from different sections of the song. Most clauses begin with the topical theme "I," especially in the verses and bridge. Interpersonal themes are mainly found in the chorus through interrogative

structures beginning with “Does he.” The table also indicates that mental processes are the most common type of process in the clauses.

Tabel 3. Thematic Progression Patterns in “Cherry”

Progression Type	Frequency	Song Section	Example/Notes
Constant Theme	19 clauses (45.2%)	Verse 1, Verse 2	“I wonder...” / “I hope...”
Linear/Derived Theme	14 clauses (33.3%)	Chorus	“Does he...” comparison pattern
Split Theme	5 clauses (11.9%)	Bridge	One theme develops into multiple rhemes
Multiple Theme	4 clauses (9.5%)	Textual transitions	Textual + Topical theme combined

Table 3 indicates that the constant theme pattern is the most dominant progression type in the song, occurring in 45.2% of the clauses. Linear or derived themes appear frequently in the chorus, whereas split rheme and multiple-theme patterns occur less often.

Tabel 4. Distribution of Rheme Process Types in “Cherry”

No.	Process Type	Count	%	Example
1.	Mental Process	21	50.0%	“I miss you,” “I wonder”
2.	Relational Process	12	28.6%	“You still look like my cherry”
3.	Material Process	7	16.7%	“Does he take you walking”
4.	Verbal Process	2	4.8%	“Don’t you call him ‘baby’”
Total		42	100%	

Table 4 demonstrates that mental processes are the most dominant process type, accounting for half of all clauses. Relational processes appear in 28.6% of the clauses, followed by material processes and verbal processes.

Discussion

The findings reveal that topical themes dominate the song, especially the unmarked topical themes represented by the pronouns “I” and “you.” This dominance reflects the intimate, personal nature of the lyrics, in which the speaker consistently positions himself as the central participant in the discourse. Such thematic choices in contemporary pop lyrics commonly construct intimacy through the use of personal pronouns. In addition, the presence of marked topical themes highlights emotionally significant moments in the song, consistent with the fact that marked themes often emphasize emotional intensity in song lyrics.

The Theme-Rheme analysis further demonstrates that the song heavily relies on repetitive thematic structures. The repeated use of “I” as the topical theme creates a constant theme progression that reflects the speaker’s emotional fixation and personal reflection. According to Thompson (2013), constant theme progression maintains focus on a single participant throughout a text. In “Cherry,” this pattern reinforces the speaker’s lingering emotional attachment to the former relationship. A significant shift occurs in the chorus through the use of interpersonal themes beginning with “Does he.” These interrogative structures redirect attention from the speaker to the rival figure, creating a sense of comparison and emotional tension. Martin & Rose (2003) explain that thematic organization across clauses contributes to larger discourse meanings, and in this song, the repeated interrogatives intensify feelings of jealousy and insecurity. The thematic progression patterns also contribute to the song's emotional flow. The constant theme pattern dominates the verses, while the linear or derived theme pattern appears more prominently in the chorus. This variation creates movement within the discourse and prevents monotony. The chorus gradually develops emotional comparison through successive interrogative clauses, supporting Martin & Rose (2003) view that linear progression can build emotional and argumentative momentum.

The process type analysis shows that mental processes are the most dominant, including verbs such as “wonder,” “miss,” “remember,” and “hope.” This dominance indicates that the song primarily focuses on inner feelings, thoughts, and emotional experiences rather than external actions. Saragih (2006) states that mental processes frequently dominate emotionally expressive lyrical texts, and the findings of this study support that perspective. Relational processes contribute to descriptions of identity and comparison, while material processes mainly appear in the chorus to describe the imagined actions of the rival figure. Verbal processes appear least frequently, occurring only in emotionally direct commands such as “Don’t you call him ‘baby’”.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the Theme–Rheme organization in Cherry significantly contributes to the construction of emotional meaning and interpersonal intimacy within the song lyrics. From the analysis of 42 clauses, the findings reveal that topical themes dominate the song, accounting for 73.8% overall, comprising 57.1% unmarked and 16.7% marked. The frequent use of the pronouns “I” and “you” positions the speaker as the central participant in the discourse and creates a highly personal, introspective narrative that reflects longing, jealousy, and emotional vulnerability.

The study also finds that interpersonal themes appear in 16.7% of the clauses, particularly through interrogative structures such as “Does he...,” which strengthen emotional tension and comparison within the song. Meanwhile, textual themes occur least frequently, at 9.5%, and

function mainly as transitions that maintain cohesion between clauses. In terms of thematic progression, the constant theme pattern is the most dominant, with 45.2% of the clauses, indicating that the song consistently maintains focus on the speaker's emotional experiences. Linear or derived themes appear in 33.3% of the clauses, especially in the chorus, contributing to the development of emotional movement and discourse coherence.

Furthermore, the rheme analysis demonstrates that mental processes dominate the song, accounting for 50% of all clauses, including expressions such as "wonder," "remember," "miss," and "hope." This finding indicates that the lyrics primarily emphasize internal feelings, thoughts, and memories rather than physical actions. Relational processes account for 28.6%, material processes 16.7%, and verbal processes only 4.8%. These results confirm that the grammatical structures in "Cherry" are intentionally organized to support the emotional depth, conversational style, and introspective character of the song. Overall, this research demonstrates that Systemic Functional Linguistics is an effective approach to analyzing contemporary song lyrics because it reveals how thematic choices, thematic progression, and process types work together to create emotional resonance, textual cohesion, and interpersonal meaning in popular music.

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