

Textual Meaning in Song Lyrics

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ABSTRACT: *The study, entitled “Textual Meaning in Song Lyrics” is aimed to find out the most frequent Topical Theme in the song lyrics. The study used Systemic Functional Grammar to answer the research questions. The data were taken from dreamtheater.net involving three Dream Theater lyrics. Data were analyzed by Halliday Theme and Rheme analytical framework. The research shows that Topical Theme is the most frequent Theme which appears 70 times (68.63%) followed by Textual Theme which appears 28 times (27.45%) and Interpersonal Theme which appears 4 times (3.92%). The messages in the lyrics are mostly about love which is divided into three different points of view, i.e. the issue of love to an opposite sex, the issue of love to a son, the issue of love to life.*

Key-words: Theme, Topical, song lyrics, message.

INTRODUCTION

Generally, music consists of two elements, sounds as the primary and lyrics as the secondary (Dallin 1994). Lyrics have significant contributions to the music itself although it contributes as the second element of the music. Lyrics give the audience deep understanding about the message contained in the song; in other words, lyrics clarify the message contained in the song. According to Dallin (1994),

“Lyrics are written as a form of interaction between the writer and the listeners. Most of the times, they carry a message (whatever that might be) with the purpose of motivating the listeners, at least, to think about it. Such a purpose and form of interaction are embedded in the cultural context of these people, according to their musical preferences, time, etc.”

Every song has its message. The appeal and effectiveness of the song to the listener is dependent on the lyrics. The message contained in a song lyric can be delivered depending on how the writer put the words in the lyrics (Bertoli-Dutra and Bissaco, 2006: 1053). This study

seeks to examine Topical Themes used in the song lyrics. This study can be used as a tool to analyze songs that will be used as a media in teaching English. Qualitative approach is used in this study. Fraenkel and Wallen (1990: 10) state that “qualitative approach is employed when a researcher wants to acquire a holistic depiction of what actually happens in particularly circumstances or situation.

Further this study also employed descriptive method. According to Arikunto (1996:234), it has no intention to prove any hypothesis, but to examine and describe the representation of social events that are found in the data sources. Descriptive quantification is also employed in this study. As Alwasilah (2008) stated, descriptive quantification is used to support the quality of descriptions and to make better understanding of the study. The data for this study are in the form of song lyrics of Dream Theater’s Scene From A Memory album (1999). There are three lyrics for this study downloaded from *dreamtheater.net* on 16th of June

2012. The data are analyzed in terms of their Theme and Rheme using Halliday Theme and Rheme analytical framework (2004) which was then developed among others by Eggins (2004).

For Halliday and Matthiessen (2004:37), “systemic functional grammar is concerned primarily with the choices that the grammar makes available to speakers and writers. These choices relate speakers’ and writer’s intentions to the concrete forms of a language. Traditionally the ‘choices’ are viewed in terms of either the content or the structure of the language used”. According to Eggins, (2004:20) “systemic functional grammar is a functional-semantic approach to language which explores both how people use language in different context and

how language is structured for use as a semiotic system”. Theme is defined by Halliday and Matthiessen (2004:6) as “the element which serves as the starting-point for the message of point of departure: it is what the clause is going to be about”.

For Halliday (1994:37), the Theme is a “clause-initial element, for it appears first creating relevance to the context, which then combines with the remainder (Rheme) of the clause so that the two parts together constitute a message”. According to Eggins (2004:4), the speakers’ lexical-grammatical choices don’t occur randomly but they depend on the context they occur. This is a probabilistic view of language which we associated to the concept of interdependency between context and language.

Table 1 Distribution of Theme in the song lyrics

No.	Themes	Songs			Total	%
		1	2	3		
1.	Topical Theme	5	30	39	74	69.81%
2.	Textual Theme	-	11	17	28	26.42%
3.	Interpersonal Theme	-	-	4	4	3.77%
Total		5	41	59	106	100%

It is found that there are three types of Themes in the lyrics. They are Topical Theme, Textual Theme, and Interpersonal Theme. The table shows that the most frequent Theme is Topical Theme, which appears 74 times (69.81%), followed by Textual Theme which appears 28 times (26.42%) and Interpersonal Theme which appears 4 times (3.77%). The messages in the lyrics are mostly about love which is divided into three different points of view, i.e. the issue of love to an opposite sex (Through My Words Lyric), the issue of love to a son (Through Her Eyes Lyric), the issue of love to life (The Spirit Carries On Lyric).

It is found that Topical Theme is mostly appears in all song lyrics. It can be said as the common

phenomenon if the Topical Theme as the most frequent one because as Gerot and Wignell (1994) said that the Topical Theme is usually but not always appear in the clause. Mostly, song lyrics always contain Topical Theme. Textual Theme appears as the second order with 28 emergences (26.42%). Potentially the existence of Textual Themes in the lyrics has intention to make the listeners enjoy the songs without having interpret the meaning or relationship between clauses their self. The last one is Interpersonal Theme. Interpersonal Themes only appear 4 times in all song lyrics and only appear in the third lyrics 'The Spirit Carries On'. Potentially, the writers tend to slightly impersonalize a personal matter in order to make the lyric more 'grand' although the lyrics told

about loves, desperations, sadness and death.

There are several conclusions that have been reached in this research. First, Topical Theme is the most frequent Theme in the three song lyrics which appears 74 times (69.81%) and mostly in the form of pronoun, followed by Textual Theme which appears 28 times (26.42%) and mostly in the form of conjunction and Interpersonal Theme which appears 4 times (3.77%). It is found that Topical Theme is mostly appears in all song lyrics. It can be said as the common phenomenon if the Topical Theme as the most frequent one because as Gerot and Wignell (1994) said that the Topical Theme usually but not always appears in the clause. Textual Theme appears as the second order with 28 occurrences (26.42%). Potentially the existence of Textual Themes in the lyrics has intention to make the listeners enjoy the songs without having interpret the meaning or relationship between clauses their self. The last one is Interpersonal Theme. Interpersonal Themes only

appear 4 times in all song lyrics and only appear in the third lyrics 'The Spirit Carries On'. Potentially, the writers tend to slightly impersonalize a personal matter in order to make the lyric more 'grand'. In the end, after drawing some conclusions, there are several suggestions that may be useful for teachers and further studies. For teachers, this study can be used as a tool to analyze songs that will be used as a media in teaching English. It is possible that if this study had made the Thematic Analysis not exclusively on the clause level, but on the text level, this study would have gotten different results. This study could also have gotten different results if this study had considered the Theme+Rheme equation or even if this study had analyzed the other two meta-functions, but this was not the intention of this study. Further studies are recommended to analyze song lyrics consisting different issues. It is beneficial to find the differences of music groups, songs and meaning in each issue, for instance the humanity issue and socio-political issue. Hopefully, the

present study will give a contribution
for the listeners of the music to read
and listen carefully and critically.

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