



## Interpersonal meaning analysis of Taylor Swift Song Lyrics in *Fearless (Taylor's Version) Album*

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### ABSTRACT

The study examines the language phenomenon found in an American singer-songwriter's album. Specifically, this study aims to analyze the interpersonal meaning used by Taylor Swift in *Fearless (Taylor's Version) Album*. Regarding data source, three songs which represent a whole album, particularly *Love Story*, *Hey Stephen*, and *White Horse* were selected. Qualitative design was applied in this research to identify mood system and the use of modality in the selected song lyrics. In classifying the type of mood, a theory proposed by Strauss et al. (2018) was used. Meanwhile, the theory given by Halliday (2014) was employed to discover the modality in the song lyrics. It was also supported by some theories from Systemic Functional Language (SFL) scholars, such as Gerot and Wignell (1994) and Eggins (2004). The findings discover that the singer only uses three types of mood: declarative, interrogative, and imperative. Since declarative mood becomes the most dominant type, it can be concluded that the album mostly expresses the singer's ideas. The singer also reveals her certainty by using different degrees of modality in statements that are found in declarative clauses. By determining the dominant mood and the degree of modality, the study result is expected to be useful for the listeners to increase their understanding of the meaning and context consisting of music albums.

**Keywords:** Interpersonal meaning; modality; mood; Taylor Swift.

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### INTRODUCTION

Language as a communication tool in human life which convey information and arguments to others can take different forms, either verbally or textually. Verbally, language can be communicated directly from speaker to hearer or so-called speaking. Meanwhile, in a textual way, language is used by the speaker using the written text to deliver messages. According to Halliday (2014), when a person uses language, there are three possible meanings called metafunctions realised in it. These three meanings, namely ideational, textual and interpersonal, are encoded by the wordings of texts simultaneously (Gerot & Wignell, 1994).

Interpersonal meaning, the strand of meaning that is the focus of this study, concerns how language is used in an interaction including in maintaining social relations, expressing attitudes, and influencing others (Eggins, 2004). It copes with the interaction between speaker and hearer and is realised in wordings through called mood and modality. Besides, this meaning is related to a speaker's

attitudes and judgements whenever they use language. Its function is to enable the role exchange in rhetorical interaction: statements, questions, offers and commands (Setyowati, 2016). Interpersonal meaning also appears in song lyrics because there is an interaction between the songwriter or the singer with the listeners.

Songs can be used to entertain as well as to share messages. Songs are made by a songwriter as a language media to deliver meanings from a singer to the listeners (Sari et al., 2019). Moreover, they create a song to communicate with the listeners by expressing their feelings through the lyrics (Medina & Noorman, 2020). The interpersonal meaning of language can be found through song lyrics since it is often chosen as a medium to tell a story about something or someone's feeling. In other words, the songwriter writes a song lyric using language to achieve a purpose: the listeners understand the meaning that is contained in a song.

The researcher chooses interpersonal meaning analysis for this study because it can express a

speaker's attitudes and judgements. It can also interpret the speaker's intention in concrete form and meaning. Specifically, the study discusses the interpersonal meaning contained in Taylor Swift's song lyrics for several reasons: it is a media (1) where individuals can express thoughts, intentions, and meanings (Hargreaves et al., 2005, as cited in Kamaliah, 2021), and (2) where the listeners can understand the literal and non-literal meaning of the singer (Purwandari et al., 2022).

Studies focusing on the interpersonal meaning of song lyrics have been conducted using several music albums. Susanto & Watik (2017), for example, conducted a study to investigate the interpersonal meaning realised in Christina Perri's *Lovestrong* album and its contribution to teaching modern English grammar using five selected song lyrics. The results showed that the most dominant mood type realised in the album is declarative, while the most dominant speech role is giving information. Besides, it contributes to providing an interesting and effective focused grammar practice. Another study came from Ariska et al. (2019) who identified how songs in Adele's *21* album affects the listeners through interpersonal meaning. It was discovered that Adele uses declarative and obligation to express her love story within the album to the listeners.

The study of interpersonal meaning on song lyrics does not only analyse the mood and speech function, but also the message contained behind it. For instance, the study by Purwandari et al. (2022) used the perspective of systemic functional grammar, including interpersonal meaning, to examine the song lyrics in *Energy Asia: Official Album of Asian Games 2018* album. It was found that the song lyrics predominantly used declarative mood and imperative mood. The message in the song lyrics of the album is mostly about the pride of Indonesian in celebrating the Asian Games and motivating the players to be the winner in this event.

As mentioned above, many previous types of studies support the interpersonal meaning analysis. However, it can be observed that their analyses are only limited to song lyrics without exploring what message the singer is trying to convey through interpersonal meaning in the album. This current study, therefore, aims to fill what previous researches have missed by identifying the interpersonal meaning of Taylor Swift's songs in the *Fearless (Taylor's Version)* album through mood and modality using the theories proposed by Wignell & Gerot (1994), Eggins (2004), Halliday (2014), and Strauss et al. (2018).

Taking into account, the study only focuses on three selected songs, which are *Love Story*, *Hey Stephen*, and *White Horse*. What this paper would like to contribute is how mood types and modality degrees can determine interpersonal meaning which is conveyed by the singer through song lyrics.

Furthermore, the result of the study benefits the listeners to increase their understanding of the meaning and context consisting of music albums. The study result is also expected to give an insight to relevant research areas.

### **Theories**

Gerot & Wignell (1994) assert that interpersonal meaning is a meaning which expresses a speaker's attitudes and judgements. It examines language from the viewpoint of its role in social communication. People use this meaning to act upon and with others. When speaking, the speaker takes on a certain speech role and expects the interlocutors to take on a complimentary part that the speaker desires the hearer to play in turn (Daryanto et al., 2022). For example, a singer indirectly asks the listeners to receive a message he or she provides through the song. As stated earlier, interpersonal meaning is realised in wordings through what is called mood and modality. All of the literature below are based on theories by Wignell & Gerot (1994), Eggins (2004), Halliday (2014), and Strauss et al. (2018).

### **Mood (Speech Functions)**

Mood is the main interpersonal system of the clause because it provides interactions with other people for giving or demanding a commodity, either information or goods-&-services. Mood consists of two elements, namely Subject (i.e. nominal group) and Finite (i.e. verbal group). Mood is used to enact speech functions through the grammar of the clause. There are four primary speech functions as follows:

#### *Declarative*

Declarative can be defined as a sentence that makes a statement. Declarative sentence expresses the speaker's angle. Its function is to give information in the order: Subject + Finite. For example, *I borrow a copy of 'The Bostonians' here.*

#### *Interrogative*

Interrogative is a sentence that asks a question or seeks confirmation. In contrast to declarative, interrogative seeks the angle of the listener and is used to demand information. The order is Finite + Subject (e.g., *Would you like to borrow 'The Bostonians'?*) or WH/Subject + Finite (e.g., *Who borrowed this novel?*).

#### *Imperative*

Imperative refers to a sentence that tells someone to do something. The speaker uses imperative for exchanging goods-&-services. It may consist of Subject + Finite, Subject only, Finite only, or no Mood element. Besides, there is no overt subject in this sentence since the main order is predicator. The unexpressed subject here typically takes the second

person, 'you', as the base form. For instance, *Take my copy of 'The Bostonians'*.

#### Exclamative

Exclamative is a sentence that is used to express emotion, such as anger, excitement, and surprise. This sentence has the WH- element: *what* or *how* in a nominal or adverbial group. So, the order of the sentence would be WH/Complement + Subject + Finite as can be seen in *What a good novel 'The Bostonians' is!*

#### Modality

Modality indicates the speaker's judgement of the probabilities or the obligations involved in what he or she is saying. Particular grammatical environments constitute metaphorical realisations of modality. There are two types of modality, which are modalization and modulation. The subjective expression of modality indicates that the arguability will centre around the degree of modality: high (*must, ought to, need, has to, is to*), median (*will, would, shall, should*), and low (*may, might, can, could*).

#### Modalization

Modalization is a proposition which is congruently realised as indicative. If the clause is an 'information' clause, it means either (i) 'either yes or no', i.e. 'maybe'; or (ii) 'both yes and no', i.e. 'sometimes'. In other words, it has some degree of probability or usuality.

#### Modulation

Modulation refers to a proposal with no real congruent form in the grammar, but it can be characterised as imperative. If the clause is a 'goods-&-services' clause, this means either (i) 'is wanted to', related to a command, or (ii) 'wants to', related to an offer. In other words, it has some degree of obligation or inclination.

#### Previous Studies

In this case, interpersonal meaning analysis has been applied to various music genres: R&B/Soul (Medina & Noorman, 2020; Daryanto et al., 2022), alternative indie (Pranoto et al., 2020), hip-hop/rap (Ananda & Purbasari, 2022), and pop (Lubis et al., 2017; Yuningsih, 2018; Sari et al., 2019). Reviewing the findings of these studies, one obvious similarity is they use interpersonal meaning in analysing song lyrics to know what the most dominant mood type realised in the album. Medina & Noorman (2020) also confirm that it can be used to generate the pattern of interpersonal relationships from the singer's perspective which is keen to tell the conveyed meanings.

On the other hand, there are two different notions implied in analysing song lyrics using

interpersonal meaning: (1) concerns with mood and residue (Sari et al., 2019; Lubis et al., 2017) or (2) concerns with mood and modality (Pranoto et al., 2020; Medina & Noorman, 2020; Purwandari et al., 2022; Ananda & Purbasari, 2022). Fauziah & Ramlan (2020), nevertheless, claim that mood and modality are described across a wide range of language types. For that reason, this paper applies mood and modality to explore the interpersonal meaning in Taylor Swift's selected songs.

While the study of interpersonal meaning has often been raised using music albums, much of the focus has been given to song lyrics; however, only few studies raise what message the singer is trying to convey. In view of this, it is essential to investigate it more to increase the listeners' understanding of the songs. Despite the notions that were chosen to be implied, the researcher hopes that they will include how the analysis can reveal the singer's conveyed meaning in the album. Thus, this study is expected to fill that gap and contribute to the literature using previous studies for critical analysis.

#### METHOD

##### Research design

The study employed a qualitative design to identify speech functions (mood) and modality used by Taylor Swift in selected song lyrics. In qualitative research, the researchers explore what they know, search for patterns, and create an understanding of the research context (Heigham & Croker, 2009). In addition, another purpose of qualitative research is to investigate and comprehend the meaning of groups or individuals who are significant to human or social problems (Cresswell & Poth, 2016). This design is considered suitable for this present study since it helps the researcher to have a better and deeper understanding of the language phenomenon, specifically the interpersonal meaning in Taylor Swift's *Fearless (Taylor's Version)* album.

##### Data Collection

The data collection in this study was conducted in several steps. Firstly, the researcher attempted to find an album by Taylor Swift which has not been analysed in terms of interpersonal meaning. *Fearless (Taylor's Version)* was then preferred to *Fearless (Platinum Edition)* since it is a newer version of the album. Secondly, the researcher selected three songs that may represent a whole album, particularly *Love Story*, *Hey Stephen*, and *White Horse* taken from a music platform namely *Apple Music*. Exploring various websites, the researcher found that these three song lyrics contain some similar clauses and continuous stories about the singer. Therefore, it helped the researcher easily to generate the meaning that the singer trying to convey through the song lyrics.

**Data Analysis**

To conduct the data analysis, the researcher started with a close reading of the song lyrics to generate a fuller understanding of the whole meaning and content. The lyrics were then classified into several types of mood and degree of modality that arise from the clauses by applying the theory given by Wignell & Gerot (1994), Eggins (2004), Halliday (2014), and Strauss et al. (2018). The clauses were also categorised into the most and less dominant mood types. To make the readers easy to understand, the data were analysed in the form of a table. Finally, the researcher generated the meaning from the analysis and drew conclusions based on the research findings.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The findings discovered the interpersonal meaning realise in Taylor Swift’s *Fearless (Taylor’s Version)* album. Specifically, the researcher identifies three selected songs in the album, namely *Love Story*, *Hey Stephen*, and *White Horse* which focuses on mood

systems and the use of modality. The discussions are based on several Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) scholars’ theories (Wignell & Gerot (1994), Eggins (2004), Halliday (2014), Strauss et al. (2018)) and previous studies related to interpersonal meaning.

**Mood (Speech Functions)**

Interpersonal meanings of *Fearless (Taylor’s Version)* album are realised in the lexicogrammar through selections from the system of mood. The mood system in this album describes the types of clauses being carried by the singer through song lyrics. The clauses in the selected song lyrics are classified by identifying mood structure which consists of Subject and Finite. Among four types of mood proposed by Strauss et al. (2018), the researcher only found three types appear in this album. They are declarative, interrogative, and imperative (as can be seen in Table 1).

**Table 1**

Mood realised in *Fearless (Taylor’s Version)* album

Types of Mood	Love Story		Hey Stephen	
	F	P	F	P
1 Declarative	47	79.7%	33	78.6%
2 Interrogative	1	1.7%	3	7.1%
3 Imperative	11	18.6%	6	14.3%
4 Exclamative	0	0%	0	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>100%</b>

Types of Mood	White Horse		Total of Clauses
	F	P	
1 Declarative	34	94.5%	114
2 Interrogative	0	0%	4
3 Imperative	2	5.5%	19
4 Exclamative	0	0%	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>137</b>

Based on Table 1, there are 137 clauses taken from three selected song lyrics in Taylor Swift’s album entitled *Fearless (Taylor’s Version)*. The researcher found that declarative mood, with a total of 114 clauses, becomes the most dominant among any other type of mood. It means that this album mostly expresses the singer’s ideas since she positions herself as an information giver to the listener. This is in line with a theory approached by Eggins (2004) that the speaker (in this case, the singer) typically uses declarative mood as one kind of grammatical structure for giving information. In other words, the mood system in this album is structured to give information.

Then, the imperative mood is fewer than the declarative mood with a total of 19 clauses. The singer uses this mood usually to give a direct command and to make a request. It is also stated by Wignell & Gerot (1994): the clause consisting of imperative mood is directed toward future action by a second person. Meanwhile, the least dominant type of mood is interrogative with a total of four clauses. In accordance with Halliday (2014), the characteristic expression of a question is the interrogative. Therefore, its function in this album is either to ask something or to seek information from a person

whom she writes a song about. Unfortunately, there is no exclamative mood found in all song lyrics. The mood systems realised in each selected song is explained below.

**Mood realised in Love Story song lyrics**

As shown in Table 1, the *Love Story* song lyrics consist of 47 declarative clauses (79.7%) which becomes the dominant mood type. Many possibilities can be drawn from the declarative mood through this song lyrics which tells about an uncomfortable love yet it is something the singer has to fight for. The fact is supported by the realised statement: *This love is difficult, but it’s real*. In contrast, the least mood type found in this song is interrogative (1.7%) that is realised in the question: *Is this in my head?* This question shows that she demands the answer for the confusion of her love story.

Other examples of declarative mood taken from *Love Story* song lyrics can be seen in Table 2. Each of the clauses below follows the order of Subject and Finite as mentioned earlier. The word “I” acts as the Subject, while the word “close” is the Finite of the present tense. In the rest of the first clause, the word “my eyes”, signifies Complement. The word “and” between two clauses signifies



Conjunctive Adjunct. The declarative mood in the selected song lyrics is used by Taylor Swift, the singer and the songwriter of the album, to relay information about her experience to the listeners.

**Table 2**  
Declarative Mood realised in *Love Story* song lyrics

I	close	my eyes	and	the	starts.
				flashback	
<b>S</b>	<b>F</b>	Comple ment	Conj. Adjunct	<b>S</b>	<b>F</b>
<b>Mood</b>			<b>Mood</b>		
<b>Clause 1</b>			<b>Clause 2</b>		

**Mood realise in *Hey Stephen* song lyrics**

The same applies to *Hey Stephen* song lyrics with 33 declarative clauses (78.6%) that become the dominant mood type. Through the song lyrics, the singer conveys the messages to a man whom she loves, but she never tells him. She writes everything that she thinks in the song instead of telling him. It proved on the realised statement: *I've been holding back this feeling*. On the other hand, the frequency of the imperative mood (14.3%) doubles the number of interrogative ones (7.1%). It implies that the singer gives a command (e.g., *So, come feel this magic*) more than asking the question (e.g., *but would they write a song for you?*).

The clause below in Table 3 is identified as another example of interrogative mood in *Hey Stephen* song lyrics. The mood in this clause consists of WH/Subject indicated by the word “why” and Finite indicated by “aren’t”. Then, the word “you” refers to Complement. Both “here” and “tonight” are Circumstances Adjunct. The way the singer uses an interrogative mood in song lyrics shows that she demands information from a man she has a feeling for. That is why the interrogative mood in this album usually requires an answer to the question the singer proposes.

**Table 3**  
Interrogative Mood realised in *Hey Stephen* song lyrics

Why	aren't	you	here	tonight?
<b>WH/ Subject</b>	<b>Finite</b>	Comple ment	Circumstances Adjunct	
<b>Mood</b>				

**Mood realised in *White Horse* song lyrics**

In *White Horse* song lyrics, the declarative mood (94.5%) and the imperative mood (5.5%) are the only mood types that appear. This song's lyrics present a story of a relationship that seems like a fairytale, but it eventually falls apart as the singer becomes more aware. She is disillusioned because she recognises that all the things she imagines will not happen. It is stated by the statements *I'm not a princess* and *this*

*ain't a fairytale*. However, the imperative clauses realised, *try and catch me now*, show that the singer makes a request to her man. To be more precise, the imperative clauses can be analysed as shown in Table 4.

**Table 4**  
Imperative Mood realised in *White Horse* song lyrics

Try	and	catch	me	now.
<b>Finite</b>	Conjunctive Adjunct	<b>Finite</b>	Comple ment	Circums tances Adjunct
<b>Mood</b>		<b>Mood</b>		

The above example taken from *White Horse* song lyrics is classified as an imperative mood because the order of this mood consists of Finite only. The finite realised here are “try” and “catch” to signify the positive polarity of the present tense. It can be observed that there is no overt subject since the unmarked subject is usually ‘you’. The singer uses an imperative mood in this album because she wants someone to do something for her. In this case, she begs the man to try catching her because he let her go through the song lyrics.

**Modality**

The use of modality can be found in *Fearless (Taylor's Version)* album to convey different kinds of certainty through the interpersonal relationship between the singer and the listeners. As can be seen in Table 5, different degrees of modality are realised from the clauses in three selected songs. These degrees are proposed by Halliday (2014): high, median, and low. It means that the album asserts the singer's attitude concerning the song lyrics by taking a position of high, median, or low. The singer also has different opinions about something that expresses using modality.

**Table 5**  
Modality realised in *Fearless (Taylor's Version)* album

	Title of Song Lyrics	Degree of Modality		
		High	Median	Low
1	<i>Love Story</i>	will never have to	will	never
2	<i>Hey, Stephen</i>	have to	will, would, should	can, can't, could, might, never
3	<i>White Horse</i>	had to, always	will, should, going to	might, never

According to Table 5, the use of expressions related to a high modality indicates a feeling of the singer being certain about what she is saying. The

modal auxiliaries 'have to' in the clause *I don't always have to be alone* taken from *Hey Stephen*; and 'had to' in the clause *You had to fight* taken from *White Horse* specifically belong to modulation which consists of obligation. Meanwhile, the modal adverbs 'will never have to' in *You'll never have to be alone* from *Love Story* and 'always' in *Just like I always wanted* from *White Horse* are identified as modalization consisting of usability.

Then, the use of expressions related to a median modality signifies the singer tends to relate her certainty to the meanings conveyed in the song lyrics. For instance, the modal auxiliaries: (1) 'will' in the clause *I'll be waiting* from *Love Story*, (2) 'would' in the clause *would they write a song for you?* from *Hey Stephen*, and (3) 'going to' in the clause *I'm gonna find someone someday* from *White Horse* are classified as modulation, specifically inclination. The same goes with 'should' in the clause *I should've known* taken from *White Horse* is classified as modulation. However, this modal auxiliary is specified as an obligation.

Last, the use of expressions related to low modality illustrates the singer is uncertain about her statement about the particular topic. Several examples can be seen in *Hey Stephen* song lyrics: (1) 'can' in *looks can be deceiving*, (2) 'can't' in *I can't help myself*, (3) 'could' in *I could give you fifty reasons*. These modal auxiliaries are determined as modulation, particularly inclination. On the other hand, taken from *White Horse* song lyrics, the modal adverb 'never' in *never really had a chance* and the modal auxiliary 'might' in *someone who might actually treat me well* are both modalization. Nevertheless, 'never' is identified as usability and 'might' is probability.

Based upon the result of the data analysis above, interpersonal meaning realises in *Fearless (Taylor's Version)* album can be observed from the way Taylor Swift uses mood and modality. It assists the singer to build a pattern of communication with the listeners through song lyrics. It also eases the listeners to understand the meaning and context consisting of music albums. Furthermore, the findings of this study are similar to several relevant previous studies (Susanto & Watik, 2017; Ariska et al., 2019; Purwandari et al., 2022). It is found that a lot of song lyrics predominantly consist of declarative mood and the modal auxiliaries 'will'.

## CONCLUSION

From the findings, it was revealed that Taylor Swift, the singer-songwriter of *Fearless (Taylor's Version)* album, only uses three types of mood proposed by SFL scholars: declarative, interrogative, and imperative. The declarative mood is found dominantly with a total of 114 clauses from the three selected song lyrics which contains 137 clauses. It

means that the singer uses a mood system to reveal her attitude or judgement, specifically declarative mood as the source of information to relay statements to the listeners. Besides, this album mostly expresses the singer's ideas since she positions herself as an information giver to the listener.

By analysing the dominant mood in the album, the generated meaning can be taken from three selected song lyrics. First, the declarative mood realised in *Love Story* tells the listener about an uncomfortable love yet it is something the singer has to fight for. Second, in *Hey Stephen* song lyrics, the singer conveys the messages using a declarative mood to a man whom she secretly loves. Last, *White Horse* presents a story of a relationship that seems like a fairytale through the declarative mood. However, it eventually falls apart as the singer becomes more aware. Reviewing the generated meaning taken from these song lyrics, it can be concluded that this album generally portrays Taylor Swift's romantic relationships.

The different degrees of modality is also realised in the album which belong to high, median, and low. It is identified by the clauses in song lyrics that use several modal operators, such as 'have to', 'had to', 'will', 'would', 'should', 'can', 'could', and 'might'. The use of modality in this album usually appears in a declarative mood. It implies that the singer reveals her certainty towards something by taking a position of high, median, or low in statements that are found in declarative clauses. Discussing two types of modality, the modalization in this album shows usability and probability. Meanwhile, modulation indicates obligation and inclination.

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