



## A Semantic Analysis of Figurative Meaning in the Song “Photograph” by Ed Sheeran

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### Abstract

*This study examines figurative meaning in the lyrics of Photograph by Ed Sheeran through a semantic and textual analysis approach. The research employed a non-empirical qualitative design grounded in library-based interpretation using the official song lyrics as the primary data source. The analysis focused on metaphorical, symbolic, hyperbolic, and contextual expressions interpreted through semantic theories proposed by Leech and Lyons. The findings indicate that figurative language in the song functions as an integrated semantic system for representing emotional memory, intimacy, longing, and relational permanence. Denotative and connotative meanings interact dynamically to construct emotional depth while maintaining lexical accessibility. Contextual semantics also strengthens interpretation because emotional meaning emerges through thematic continuity, situational imagination, and symbolic association rather than isolated lexical forms. Expressions related to photographs, frozen time, and emotional return create psychologically resonant imagery that intensifies listener engagement. The study confirms that contemporary song lyrics operate as literary discourse capable of encoding complex emotional experiences through semantically layered yet linguistically simple expressions.*

**Keywords:** Semantic Analysis, Figurative Meaning, Song Lyrics, Connotative Meaning, Emotional Representation.



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## INTRODUCTION

The expansion of interdisciplinary linguistic inquiry in contemporary humanities research has significantly repositioned song lyrics from merely aesthetic artifacts into complex semiotic texts through which emotional cognition, cultural identity, and symbolic communication are negotiated across global audiences. Within this trajectory, semantic studies have increasingly emphasized the instability of literal meaning and the necessity of interpreting language through contextual, associative, and figurative dimensions that exceed lexical denotation alone, particularly in popular music where emotional intensity is frequently encoded through symbolic and metaphorical structures (Leech, 1981; Lyons, 1977). The growing international interest in figurative language analysis reflects a broader epistemological shift in linguistics and literary studies toward understanding how meaning is constructed not only through grammatical arrangement but also through affective resonance and interpretive ambiguity embedded in discourse. Perrine (1992) argues that figurative language functions as a mechanism for intensifying imaginative experience, enabling literary texts to communicate psychological realities that literal expressions cannot adequately convey. This development has become increasingly relevant in digital-era music consumption, where songs circulate transnationally and become sites of emotional identification across linguistic and cultural boundaries. In this context, contemporary English songs, particularly those composed by globally recognized singer-songwriters such as Ed Sheeran, have attracted scholarly attention because their lyrical simplicity often conceals intricate semantic layering that invites multiple interpretive possibilities.

Existing scholarship on Ed Sheeran’s lyrics demonstrates a consistent recognition of figurative and connotative expression as dominant stylistic characteristics in his songwriting, although the analytical depth and theoretical orientation of these studies vary considerably. Research conducted by Kemal and Damayanti (2021) identifies discourse patterns in several of Ed Sheeran’s songs and highlights how emotional narratives are linguistically constructed through figurative devices, yet the study remains primarily descriptive and pays limited attention to semantic interaction between literal and implied meaning. Similar tendencies are visible in the works of Sinaga, Siburian, and Silaban (2021), as well as Heni, Pratiwi, and Santika (2022), which successfully classify figurative expressions such as metaphor, hyperbole, and personification but largely approach lyrics through taxonomic

categorization rather than interpretive semantic analysis. Investigations into connotative meaning by Tanjung and Nasution (2022) and Tanjung (2023) extend the discussion by examining emotional associations embedded in Ed Sheeran's lyrical expressions, although these studies predominantly isolate lexical connotation without sufficiently examining how figurative language generates broader symbolic structures within the text. More recent semantic-oriented scholarship, including Rajagukguk and Damanik (2026), has begun incorporating lexical semantics through the study of polysemy, indicating an emerging movement toward deeper semantic interpretation in popular music studies. Parallel developments can also be observed outside Ed Sheeran scholarship, such as Mamun, Suastini, and Ariyaningsih's (2024) contextual analysis of song lyrics, which demonstrates that musical texts demand interpretive frameworks capable of integrating linguistic meaning with emotional and situational context.

Despite these contributions, the existing body of literature remains fragmented in both conceptual orientation and methodological execution, resulting in several unresolved issues concerning the semantic complexity of figurative meaning in contemporary song lyrics. A significant proportion of previous studies treats figurative language as a static stylistic ornament rather than as a dynamic semantic mechanism through which emotional experience is cognitively organized and communicated. This tendency produces analyses that prioritize classification over interpretation, thereby neglecting the interaction between denotative and connotative dimensions that Leech (1981) identifies as central to semantic meaning production. Even when connotative meaning is discussed, the analyses frequently reduce interpretation to generalized emotional labeling without critically examining how figurative expressions construct symbolic permanence, temporal imagination, or emotional memory within lyrical discourse. Theoretical inconsistencies also emerge from the limited integration between classical semantic frameworks proposed by Lyons (1977) and literary understandings of figurative language articulated by Perrine (1992), creating an analytical gap between linguistic meaning and aesthetic representation. Existing studies on Photograph particularly suffer from this limitation because the song is often referenced merely as one example among broader corpora rather than examined as an independent semantic text whose figurative architecture warrants sustained analytical attention. Such tendencies ultimately weaken the explanatory capacity of previous scholarship in accounting for how emotionally charged lyrics generate interpretive depth across diverse listener experiences.

The persistence of these conceptual and methodological limitations becomes increasingly significant when situated within the broader cultural and pedagogical relevance of contemporary music discourse. Songs are no longer consumed exclusively as entertainment products but also function as linguistic resources that shape emotional literacy, intercultural communication, and second-language acquisition in digitally mediated societies. Babayev (2025) demonstrates that music-based language exposure enhances linguistic fluency because songs facilitate emotional engagement and semantic retention simultaneously, suggesting that figurative meaning in lyrics possesses pedagogical value extending beyond literary appreciation. Within this framework, the inability of previous studies to comprehensively explain how figurative expressions operate semantically represents not merely an academic omission but also a missed opportunity to understand how emotional language influences interpretation, memory formation, and communicative competence among global audiences. The urgency of deeper semantic inquiry becomes even more apparent in songs like "Photograph," where themes of memory, longing, intimacy, and emotional permanence are articulated through seemingly simple lexical choices that acquire symbolic intensity through figurative construction. The song's widespread reception across cultural contexts indicates that its emotional resonance cannot be adequately explained through literal interpretation alone, necessitating a semantic approach capable of examining how figurative meaning mediates the relationship between language, affect, and human experience.

Positioned within this scholarly landscape, the present study seeks to move beyond classificatory approaches by conceptualizing figurative language not as an isolated stylistic feature but as an integrated semantic system through which emotional meaning is constructed and sustained in lyrical discourse. Unlike earlier studies that predominantly enumerate figurative devices or isolate connotative vocabulary, this research examines the interaction between denotative and connotative meaning as mutually constitutive dimensions shaping interpretive depth in the lyrics of "Photograph." The study adopts a semantic framework grounded primarily in the theories of Leech (1981) and Lyons (1977), while simultaneously incorporating literary perspectives on figurative expression derived from Perrine

(1992), enabling a more comprehensive interpretation of how symbolic meaning emerges from linguistic structure and emotional context. Such positioning allows the research to address the conceptual fragmentation evident in prior scholarship by integrating semantic analysis with literary interpretation in a manner that foregrounds emotional cognition, symbolic representation, and contextual meaning production simultaneously. Rather than approaching figurative language as merely decorative, this study interprets lyrical expressions as semantic strategies through which experiences of love, nostalgia, attachment, and temporal permanence are encoded and communicated.

This study aims to analyze the figurative meanings embedded in the lyrics of “Photograph” by Ed Sheeran through an integrated semantic approach focusing on the interaction between denotative and connotative meaning in the construction of emotional interpretation. The research contributes theoretically by strengthening the interdisciplinary intersection between semantics and literary discourse analysis, particularly in demonstrating how figurative expressions function as semantic vehicles for emotional representation within contemporary popular music. Methodologically, the study advances previous scholarship by employing a more interpretive and relational mode of semantic analysis that does not merely classify figurative language but critically examines how meaning is produced through contextual interaction, symbolic association, and emotional resonance within the lyrical structure itself.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

This study employed a non-empirical qualitative research design grounded in semantic and textual analysis to examine figurative meaning in the lyrics of Photograph performed by Ed Sheeran. The research was categorized as a library-based interpretive study because the primary data consisted exclusively of written lyrical texts rather than participant-generated empirical responses. The principal data source was the official lyrics of the song “Photograph,” selected purposively due to its dense use of figurative expressions associated with emotional memory, intimacy, longing, and symbolic representation. Supplementary data were derived from scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and semantic studies relevant to figurative language, connotative meaning, and lyrical interpretation. The selection criteria for textual data focused on lexical units, phrases, and clauses exhibiting metaphorical, symbolic, hyperbolic, or personified meanings that contributed significantly to the emotional and semantic construction of the song. The analytical framework was primarily informed by semantic theories proposed by Leech and Lyons, particularly concerning denotative and connotative meaning, while literary perspectives on figurative language were incorporated to strengthen interpretive depth and contextual understanding.

The analytical procedure was conducted through several systematic stages, including close textual reading, identification of figurative expressions, semantic categorization, contextual interpretation, and critical examination of the interaction between literal and implied meaning within the lyrical structure. Each lyrical expression was analyzed not only at the lexical level but also within its broader emotional and thematic context in order to reveal how figurative language functioned as a semantic mechanism for constructing emotional resonance and symbolic permanence. To ensure analytical rigor and interpretive consistency, the study employed theoretical triangulation by comparing semantic interpretations across multiple scholarly frameworks and previous studies on figurative language in song lyrics. Repeated reading and cross-referencing procedures were also conducted to minimize subjective bias and strengthen interpretive reliability. Since the research relied exclusively on publicly accessible textual materials and did not involve human participants, ethical concerns related to consent, confidentiality, and participant protection were not applicable; nevertheless, academic integrity was maintained through accurate citation practices, faithful representation of textual evidence, and responsible scholarly interpretation.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Semantic Construction of Figurative Meaning in the Lyrics of “Photograph”**

The semantic structure of Photograph reveals a persistent interaction between literal lexical forms and emotionally intensified figurative expressions that construct intimacy and memory as central thematic domains. Several lyrical units initially appear semantically transparent but gradually develop symbolic resonance when interpreted contextually within the emotional architecture of the song. Leech (1981) explains that figurative meaning frequently emerges through associative extensions that exceed

dictionary-based interpretation, particularly when language is used in poetic discourse. The phrase “We keep this love in a photograph” exemplifies this mechanism because the lexical item “photograph” functions not merely as a physical object but as a symbolic repository of emotional permanence.

The figurative dimensions identified in the lyrics indicate that metaphor operates as the dominant semantic strategy for transforming abstract emotions into concrete imagery. The expression “Loving can heal” semantically reconstructs affection as a curative force capable of restoring emotional stability after psychological suffering. Lyons (1977) argues that semantic interpretation becomes more complex when lexical items acquire relational meaning through contextual dependency rather than isolated lexical reference. Similar semantic processes are evident in contemporary lyrical studies where emotional abstraction is transformed into experiential imagery through metaphorical encoding (Salsabila & Djuharie, 2025).

The analysis also demonstrates that symbolic language in the song is inseparable from the representation of memory and temporal continuity. Expressions related to photographs, frozen time, and returning home collectively establish an emotional narrative grounded in permanence amid separation. Perrine (1992) maintains that figurative language intensifies imaginative engagement because symbolic imagery encourages readers or listeners to reconstruct emotional experience cognitively rather than receive information passively. Comparable symbolic intensification was identified in studies of Ed Sheeran’s lyrical discourse where ordinary lexical forms become emotionally saturated through contextual repetition and thematic coherence (Kemal & Damayanti, 2021).

The semantic interaction between memory and emotional attachment becomes particularly visible through the repeated lexical emphasis on preservation and continuity. The lyric “Time’s forever frozen still” illustrates how temporal abstraction is transformed into a figurative representation of emotional resistance against change and separation. Similar findings were observed by Diko (2024), who notes that contemporary song lyrics frequently destabilize ordinary temporal semantics to create psychological representations of longing and emotional fixation. The semantic force of the expression emerges not from literal plausibility but from its capacity to evoke affective permanence through impossible imagery.

The figurative architecture of the song also reveals the coexistence of connotative and contextual meaning within a single lyrical expression. Tanjung and Nasution (2022) explain that connotative meaning in popular songs frequently depends on emotional experience rather than lexical definition alone. In the lyric “You won’t ever be alone,” companionship is semantically represented not through direct physical presence but through emotional reassurance embedded in relational memory. This interpretive structure transforms a simple declarative clause into a symbolic articulation of emotional security.

The interpretive patterns identified during the analysis are summarized in Table 1, which categorizes selected figurative expressions according to their semantic functions and contextual implications. The table demonstrates that metaphor and symbolism dominate the lyrical composition more significantly than hyperbole or personification. Similar tendencies were identified by Sinaga, Siburian, and Silaban (2021), who found that Ed Sheeran consistently employs emotionally grounded figurative language to intensify listener identification with lyrical narratives.

**Table 1. Semantic Classification of Figurative Expressions in the Lyrics of “Photograph” by Ed Sheeran**

| No | Lyrical Expression                  | Figurative Type      | Semantic Interpretation       |
|----|-------------------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1  | “We keep this love in a photograph” | Symbolism            | Love preserved through memory |
| 2  | “Loving can heal”                   | Metaphor             | Love as emotional restoration |
| 3  | “Time’s forever frozen still”       | Hyperbolic metaphor  | Emotional permanence          |
| 4  | “You won’t ever be alone”           | Symbolic reassurance | Psychological companionship   |
| 5  | “Wait for me to come home”          | Symbolic longing     | Desire for emotional reunion  |

The semantic categorization presented in Table 1 indicates that figurative meaning in the song emerges through relational interaction between lexical imagery and emotional context rather than

through isolated rhetorical ornamentation. Studies conducted by Heni, Pratiwi, and Santika (2022) similarly emphasize that figurative language in popular music often functions structurally by shaping thematic continuity across lyrical sequences. The metaphorical patterns in “Photograph” reinforce emotional permanence by repeatedly associating memory with physical preservation and relational continuity. This semantic consistency contributes to the lyrical coherence that characterizes the song’s emotional appeal.

The lyrical discourse also demonstrates how figurative language constructs emotional accessibility without sacrificing semantic complexity. Rajagukguk and Damanik (2026) argue that lexical semantics in contemporary songs frequently relies on polysemous structures that permit multiple interpretive layers simultaneously. The lexical item “home” in the song functions beyond spatial denotation because it symbolically represents emotional safety, relational intimacy, and psychological return. This semantic multiplicity allows listeners to interpret the expression according to personal emotional experience while maintaining thematic cohesion within the lyrical narrative.

Another significant finding concerns the role of figurative language in strengthening emotional immersion through repetitive semantic reinforcement. Yansyah, Arifin, and Setyowati (2022) note that repetition in Ed Sheeran’s lyrics often intensifies emotional symbolism rather than merely serving rhythmic purposes. The recurring references to photographs, memory, and permanence create a semantic network that continuously reconnects listeners to the emotional center of the song. Such repetition transforms figurative expressions into emotionally cumulative structures capable of sustaining interpretive resonance throughout the lyrical progression.

The semantic analysis ultimately reveals that figurative meaning in “Photograph” operates as an integrated emotional system in which metaphor, symbolism, and contextual meaning collaborate to construct relational intimacy and temporal permanence. Travanca, Cruz, and Oliveira (2025) explain that emotionally resonant lyrics often produce stronger listener engagement because figurative expressions activate imaginative and affective interpretation simultaneously. The findings indicate that Ed Sheeran’s lyrical strategy relies less on linguistic obscurity than on semantic layering capable of transforming ordinary vocabulary into emotionally symbolic discourse. This interpretive depth confirms that figurative language within contemporary songs functions not merely as aesthetic embellishment but as a semantic mechanism for encoding emotional experience into linguistically accessible forms.

### **Denotative and Connotative Interaction in Emotional Meaning Construction**

The semantic relationship between denotative and connotative meaning in Photograph demonstrates that emotional interpretation in lyrical discourse emerges through the constant negotiation between literal lexical reference and associative emotional implication. Several expressions within the song preserve their dictionary-based meaning while simultaneously generating symbolic dimensions associated with intimacy, nostalgia, and emotional continuity. Leech (1981) explains that connotative meaning extends lexical interpretation beyond conceptual reference by attaching emotional and experiential associations to linguistic forms. The phrase “We made these memories for ourselves” illustrates this interaction because the lexical meaning of “memories” refers literally to recollected experiences while connotatively symbolizing emotional permanence and relational identity.

The analysis reveals that connotative meaning in the song is not arbitrarily constructed but systematically reinforced through thematic repetition and contextual framing. The lexical item “photograph” retains its denotative function as a visual representation captured through a camera, yet its emotional positioning within the lyrics transforms it into a symbolic medium of preserving affection and resisting emotional loss. Lyons (1977) emphasizes that semantic interpretation frequently depends on contextual relations that shape how lexical meaning is cognitively activated within discourse. Similar semantic transformations were identified in studies examining figurative representation in contemporary song lyrics where ordinary lexical forms acquire affective density through contextual association (Simarmata, Herman, & Silalahi, 2021).

The interaction between literal and implied meaning also produces emotional ambiguity that intensifies listener engagement with the lyrical narrative. The expression “Loving can hurt” semantically combines a direct experiential statement with a broader connotative representation of emotional vulnerability and relational sacrifice. Tanjung (2023) notes that connotative meaning in Ed Sheeran’s songs often emerges from emotionally familiar lexical structures that remain linguistically

simple yet psychologically expansive. The lyric therefore functions simultaneously as an accessible statement and a symbolic articulation of romantic suffering.

The semantic layering identified throughout the song indicates that emotional resonance depends heavily on the coexistence of concrete imagery and abstract emotional implication. Putri (2022) found that lexical cohesion in “Photograph” contributes significantly to semantic continuity because recurring lexical patterns strengthen thematic unity across lyrical sequences. Expressions related to photographs, home, and frozen time repeatedly reconnect listeners to emotional motifs associated with attachment and memory preservation. Such semantic recurrence enables the lyrics to sustain emotional coherence without requiring explicit narrative exposition.

Another notable pattern concerns the use of emotionally neutral lexical items that gradually acquire symbolic significance through contextual accumulation. The lexical term “home” initially appears spatially denotative because it conventionally refers to a physical place of residence. Contextual interpretation, however, transforms the expression “Wait for me to come home” into a connotative representation of emotional return, loyalty, and relational reassurance. Mamun, Suastini, and Ariyaningsih (2024) argue that contextual meaning in song lyrics frequently emerges through cumulative emotional framing rather than through isolated lexical interpretation.

The semantic distinctions identified during the analysis are presented in Table 2, which illustrates the interaction between denotative and connotative meaning across selected lyrical expressions. The table demonstrates that lexical meaning remains semantically stable at the literal level while simultaneously generating emotional expansion through figurative association. Comparable interpretive patterns were identified by Chanty Suci and Nurhapitudin (2025), who observed that metaphorical song lyrics often maintain lexical clarity while encouraging symbolic reinterpretation through emotional context.

**Table 2. Interaction Between Denotative and Connotative Meanings in Selected Lyrics of “Photograph” by Ed Sheeran**

| No | Lyrical Expression        | Denotative Meaning           | Connotative Meaning                         |
|----|---------------------------|------------------------------|---|
| 1  | “Photograph”              | A printed or digital picture | Preservation of emotional memory            |
| 2  | “Home”                    | Place of residence           | Emotional safety and reunion                |
| 3  | “Frozen still”            | Motionless condition         | Permanence of emotional attachment          |
| 4  | “Loving can heal”         | Emotional recovery           | Psychological restoration through affection |
| 5  | “You won’t ever be alone” | Presence of companionship    | Emotional reassurance and intimacy          |

The semantic interaction illustrated in Table 2 confirms that emotional interpretation within the song relies heavily on the coexistence of lexical precision and symbolic expansion. Perrine (1992) explains that figurative language achieves aesthetic power when ordinary expressions generate imaginative and emotional associations beyond literal expectation. The connotative dimensions identified in the lyrics transform otherwise simple lexical constructions into emotionally layered discourse capable of sustaining interpretive complexity. Such findings reinforce the argument that semantic depth in contemporary songs frequently emerges from relational context rather than lexical obscurity.

The analysis also indicates that emotional connotation in the song is intensified through the strategic juxtaposition of permanence and vulnerability. Expressions associated with memory preservation coexist with references to emotional pain and physical separation, creating semantic tension within the lyrical structure. Aziz, Amelia, and Thahara (2025) observed similar tensions in figurative song analysis where emotional contradiction strengthens lyrical authenticity and listener immersion. In “Photograph,” emotional reassurance becomes more meaningful because it emerges alongside symbolic representations of distance, longing, and uncertainty.

The lyrical discourse further demonstrates how semantic interpretation is influenced by emotional universality and experiential accessibility. Babayev (2025) argues that songs facilitate

linguistic and emotional comprehension because emotionally charged expressions allow listeners to internalize meaning through affective identification rather than purely analytical decoding. The figurative and connotative structures in “Photograph” encourage listeners to reconstruct personal experiences of attachment and memory through semantically familiar imagery. This interpretive openness strengthens the communicative effectiveness of the lyrics across diverse cultural and emotional contexts.

The findings ultimately suggest that denotative and connotative meanings in “Photograph” function interdependently rather than hierarchically within the semantic organization of the song. Godina et al. (2025) emphasize that emotional meaning in lyrical discourse often emerges through layered semantic interaction in which literal language supports symbolic interpretation rather than competing with it. The song constructs emotional intensity precisely because literal lexical clarity remains connected to broader emotional implication throughout the lyrical progression. Such semantic integration confirms that figurative meaning in contemporary music is best understood as a relational process where denotation and connotation continuously reinforce one another within emotionally charged discourse.

### **Contextual Semantics and Emotional Representation in Lyrical Discourse**

The contextual semantic structure of Photograph demonstrates that emotional meaning within lyrical discourse is constructed not solely through isolated figurative expressions but through the interaction between language, situational imagination, and affective interpretation. The song repeatedly situates emotional attachment within contexts of distance, temporal separation, and memory preservation, allowing listeners to interpret relational experience through emotionally familiar scenarios. Lyons (1977) explains that meaning is inseparable from contextual conditions because linguistic expressions acquire interpretive force through their relational environment within discourse. The emotional significance of the lyrics therefore emerges through contextual continuity rather than lexical independence alone.

The analysis reveals that contextual meaning in the song consistently reinforces emotional permanence despite the recurring presence of physical absence and uncertainty. Expressions such as “Wait for me to come home” derive semantic intensity from the implied narrative context of separation rather than from the literal structure of the sentence itself. Mamun, Suastini, and Ariyaningsih (2024) argue that contextual semantics in song lyrics often depends on emotional background knowledge shared between songwriter and listener. The lyrical discourse in “Photograph” activates this interpretive mechanism by presenting emotionally recognizable situations that encourage affective participation from listeners.

Another significant finding concerns the role of temporal context in shaping semantic interpretation throughout the song. References to frozen time, preserved memories, and enduring affection construct a psychological perception of temporality where emotional attachment resists chronological change. Diko (2024) notes that contemporary lyrical discourse frequently manipulates temporal semantics to create emotional immersion and symbolic permanence within musical narratives. The phrase “Time’s forever frozen still” therefore functions contextually as an emotional suspension of loss rather than a literal impossibility related to physical time.

The contextual organization of the lyrics also strengthens emotional intimacy through the repeated use of relational deixis and inclusive perspective. Pronouns such as “we” and “you” create interpersonal immediacy that positions listeners within the emotional framework of the song. Nainggolan, Siahaan, Sinurat, and Herman (2021) explain that figurative and contextual language often intensify persuasive and emotional impact because they construct psychological proximity between discourse producer and audience. In “Photograph,” contextual intimacy emerges through conversational simplicity combined with emotionally loaded semantic implication.

The emotional register identified throughout the song further demonstrates how contextual semantics shapes listener interpretation beyond lexical meaning alone. The recurring references to memory, companionship, and emotional continuity establish a coherent affective atmosphere grounded in nostalgia and reassurance. Travanca, Cruz, and Oliveira (2025) found that emotionally resonant lyrics influence musical experience more strongly when semantic interpretation aligns with psychologically relatable emotional contexts. The contextual consistency of “Photograph” allows listeners to interpret figurative expressions as emotionally authentic rather than merely stylistic constructions.

The relationship between contextual setting and emotional interpretation identified in the analysis is summarized in Table 3, which presents selected lyrical contexts alongside their dominant emotional representations and semantic implications. The table indicates that emotional meaning is consistently reinforced through contextual framing rather than through isolated figurative devices alone. Similar contextual patterns were identified by Yansyah, Arifin, and Setyowati (2022), who observed that emotional coherence in Ed Sheeran's lyrics frequently depends on thematic continuity and contextual repetition.

**Table 3. Contextual and Emotional Semantic Representations in the Lyrics of "Photograph" by Ed Sheeran**

| No | Contextual Expression               | Emotional Context      | Semantic Representation            |
|----|-------------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1  | "Wait for me to come home"          | Separation and reunion | Loyalty and emotional return       |
| 2  | "Time's forever frozen still"       | Memory preservation    | Emotional permanence               |
| 3  | "You won't ever be alone"           | Emotional reassurance  | Psychological companionship        |
| 4  | "We keep this love in a photograph" | Nostalgic remembrance  | Symbolic preservation of affection |
| 5  | "Loving can hurt"                   | Romantic vulnerability | Emotional suffering and attachment |

The contextual relations presented in Table 3 indicate that emotional interpretation in the song emerges through cumulative semantic interaction between thematic setting and figurative representation. Leech (1981) explains that contextual meaning frequently transforms ordinary lexical constructions into emotionally charged expressions because interpretation is shaped by associative and situational factors surrounding discourse production. The emotional coherence found in "Photograph" demonstrates that contextual semantics contributes significantly to the durability of listener engagement with the lyrics. Such findings strengthen the argument that semantic interpretation in songs cannot be reduced to lexical analysis alone.

The study also identified that contextual semantics in the song operates through emotional accessibility rather than linguistic complexity. Kemal and Damayanti (2021) argue that Ed Sheeran's lyrical discourse frequently combines lexical simplicity with emotionally layered interpretation, allowing broad audiences to engage with the songs intuitively. The lyrics of "Photograph" employ common vocabulary and uncomplicated sentence structures while simultaneously generating profound emotional symbolism through contextual arrangement. This semantic accessibility contributes to the song's transnational popularity because emotional meaning remains understandable across diverse interpretive backgrounds.

Another important dimension concerns the relationship between contextual meaning and emotional memory in shaping lyrical interpretation. Babayev (2025) emphasizes that songs strengthen emotional comprehension because music enables linguistic meaning to be internalized through memory-based emotional association. In "Photograph," contextual references to preserved moments and enduring attachment encourage listeners to reconstruct personal emotional experiences while engaging with the lyrics. The song therefore functions not merely as artistic expression but also as an affective semantic framework through which listeners negotiate memory, intimacy, and emotional continuity.

The findings ultimately indicate that contextual semantics in "Photograph" functions as a central mechanism for transforming figurative language into emotionally immersive discourse. Studies by Fajar, Netra, and Beratha (2024) and Simarmata, Herman, and Silalahi (2021) similarly demonstrate that figurative language achieves interpretive depth when contextual framing aligns symbolic expression with emotionally recognizable experience. The lyrical discourse of the song constructs meaning through the integration of metaphor, symbolism, emotional memory, and contextual continuity rather than through isolated rhetorical ornamentation. This interpretive structure confirms that semantic analysis of contemporary song lyrics requires attention not only to lexical meaning but also to the contextual and emotional environments through which figurative language acquires communicative power.

## CONCLUSION

The semantic analysis of Photograph performed by Ed Sheeran demonstrates that figurative language functions as a complex semantic mechanism through which emotional memory, intimacy, longing, and relational permanence are linguistically constructed within contemporary lyrical discourse. The findings reveal that metaphor, symbolism, hyperbolic imagery, and contextual semantic structures interact systematically to transform ordinary lexical expressions into emotionally resonant representations that exceed literal interpretation. The study identifies that denotative and connotative meanings operate interdependently rather than separately, allowing lexical clarity to coexist with symbolic depth and affective complexity throughout the lyrical progression. Contextual semantics also plays a decisive role in shaping interpretation because emotional meaning emerges through situational framing, thematic continuity, and associative experience rather than through isolated figurative devices alone. The recurring semantic emphasis on photographs, frozen time, companionship, and emotional return constructs a coherent symbolic narrative centered on preserving human connection despite temporal and physical separation. These findings reinforce semantic theories proposed by Leech and Lyons regarding the relational nature of meaning while simultaneously confirming that contemporary song lyrics constitute legitimate literary discourse capable of encoding complex psychological and emotional realities through accessible linguistic forms.

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