

A Semantic Analysis of Denotative and Connotative Meanings in the Lyrics of “Who Knows” by Daniel Caesar

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to identify and interpret the literal and implied meanings that existed in the “Who Knows” lyrics by Daniel Caesar. This study uses a qualitative descriptive method using an interpretive semantic approach, focusing on denotative and connotative analysis. The data were collected from the official lyrics and analyzed through stages of identification, classification, and interpretation. The findings reveal that while denotative meanings present straightforward descriptions of thoughts and situations, the connotative meanings uncover deeper emotional layers such as uncertainty, self-doubt, hope, and vulnerability in romantic relationships. The study concludes that the song reflects modern relationship dynamics characterized by ambiguity yet sustained by sincere emotional commitment, demonstrating that meaning in lyrics extends beyond literal interpretation.

Keyword: Semantics, denotation, connotation, song lyrics, romantic relationships

Introduction

Language is how humans communicate (Ningrum & Tazqiyah, 2024). Through language, humans can convey opinions, thoughts, and feelings in the form of words and sentences. However, communication through language is not always limited to verbal speech; it can also be conveyed through music. According to Izen et al. (2023), music is a universal medium of communication and possesses powerful emotional resonance. Every song created by a singer naturally contains a message and meaning for its listeners. This aligns with Derbyshire’s (1977) statement in Neisyiah (2024), which notes that language is the best means of communication as well as a

representation of the development of human ideas. Thus, both language and music allow listeners to interpret the speaker’s or songwriter’s intent. One example of this can be seen in the song ‘Who Knows’ by Daniel Caesar, which demonstrates that music can serve as a medium of expression through its lyrics.

In line with this, songs serve not only as entertainment, but also as a means of expressing deep feelings and stories. In the modern era, music and song lyrics play a vital role as a medium for expressing emotions and ideas (Kalamor & Febrian, 2025). This means that song lyrics contain various meanings that listeners can interpret based on their own experiences. In many cases, song lyrics also

frequently employ figurative language as a means of conveying more complex and emotional messages (Kalamor & Febrian, 2025). One genre of song that tends to use poetic language and richly figurative expressions is the romantic genre. According to Septianti & Astifa. (2025), song lyrics are often regarded as a form of modern poetry due to their ability to encapsulate profound meanings within a dense, rhythmic, and musical arrangement of words. However, as music genres evolve, the boundary between poetry and lyrics has become increasingly blurred. Many songwriters use figurative language such as metaphors, symbolism, and poetic imagery to describe inner experiences or personal stories, which can ultimately evoke both denotative and connotative meanings simultaneously.

Semantics is one of the main branches of linguistics that specifically studies meaning in language (M. Sari & Hosniyeh, 2026). One of the key concepts in semantics is the distinction between denotative and connotative meaning. Nasution & Juanda. (2025) states that denotative meaning is objective and direct, referring to the literal meaning as listed in a dictionary. Meanwhile, connotative meaning refers to additional meanings that are emotional, cultural, or associative in nature, and thus tend to be subjective and context-dependent (Zahra et al., 2024). The study of meaning in song lyrics is also relevant to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 on Quality Education, which emphasizes the importance of improving language comprehension and critical thinking skills. Such understanding can be developed through song lyrics, which serve as an engaging and contextual form of linguistic expression, particularly for the younger

generation. In language learning, song lyrics not only help learners understand the literal meaning of words but also encourage them to grasp the messages, emotions, and nuances of meaning contained within them. This aligns with the study by Pujiati et al. (2024), which shows that the use of song lyrics can be an effective way of improving English vocabulary skills. Furthermore, the use of song lyrics as a learning tool has also been shown to enhance vocabulary acquisition and motivation to learn English (Sitepu et al., 2023).

In the communication process, every word carries a meaning linked to individual experience; consequently, the meaning conveyed is not always unambiguous and often requires further understanding through semantic analysis. As stated by Pires et al. (2025), every communication process requires semantic analysis because the meaning of words is always tied to experience and cannot be fully understood without a comprehensive examination. Indeed, when listening to a song, listeners often perceive diverse meanings, which frequently lead to misunderstandings. What a person understands from a statement is not necessarily the same as the speaker's intention, as there may be an implicit message within it (Nurjanah et al., 2024).

Although various studies have examined song lyrics as a form of linguistic expression, most of these studies have focused primarily on the use of figurative language without exploring the meaning in greater depth. However, an analysis of figurative language alone is insufficient to understand the overall meaning of a song. Therefore, this study is designed to employ a semantic linguistic analysis, focusing on denotative and

connotative meanings as a theoretical foundation for analyzing song lyrics, so that the overall meaning does not give rise to ambiguity.

This study exists to identify the denotative and connotative meanings in the lyrics of Daniel Caesar's song 'Who Knows', to analyze the message the singer intends to convey, and to determine the patterns of usage of these two types of meaning. The analysis of the song lyrics was conducted to uncover the message the songwriter intended to convey (Putri & Harisma, 2024). In Addition, the analysis of the lyrics also aims to understand the meanings contained within the song text in greater depth (Indah et al., 2023). Thus, this study is expected to help clarify the song's meaning and reduce differences in interpretation among listeners.

Methodology

The method used in this research was qualitative approach using interpretive semantic analysis to examine the denotative and connotative meanings in the lyrics of the song "Who Knows" by Daniel Caesar. Qualitative descriptive research aims to provide an overview and description of existing events or phenomena, whether they are the result of human intervention or natural in nature (Nuryana et al., 2025). This approach is used to understand how meaning is constructed with words and context in song lyrics, without relying solely on the songwriter's intent but also considering the listener's interpretation of that meaning.

The data in this research were lyrics to the song "Who Knows" by Daniel Caesar that can be accessed through official music platforms and reliable online sources, which serve as the primary focus of the analysis. The song lyrics were selected because they

contain various linguistic expressions that can be analysed based on their denotative and connotative meanings. The lyrics were analysed by finding the contextual meaning and then described the interpretations that arise because of the denotative and connotative meaning.

The data collection techniques used in this study include documentation and library research. These techniques involve a systematic process of collecting, evaluating, and synthesizing literature relevant to the research topic (Ardiansyah et al., 2023). In this study, the documentation technique was carried out by collecting and recording important parts of the lyrics of the song "Who Knows" that are relevant to the research focus, particularly those containing denotative and connotative meanings. In addition, the researcher also utilized various sources such as books, journals, and semantic theories to support the analysis of meaning in the song's lyrics, ensuring that the data obtained was not limited to the primary text but also drew from scholarly references that reinforced the interpretation.

The data analysis techniques in this study were carried out in several stages. First, data collection was conducted by identifying and gathering song lyrics relevant to the research focus. Second, the collected data were then selected, focused, and simplified in accordance with the research objectives, particularly those containing denotative and connotative meanings. Third, the data were presented in the form of descriptions or tables to facilitate understanding and analysis. The data analysis technique was carried out through the stages of identification, classification, and interpretation of meaning (I. Sari et al., 2025). Finally, conclusions are drawn by interpreting data based on semantic theory to gain a clear understanding of the meanings contained in the song lyrics.

Through these stages, the analysis is conducted systematically until credible conclusions are reached.

Results

The data used in this analysis were taken from the lyrics of the song “Who Knows” by Daniel Caesar, released in October 2025. The song was chosen as the data source because its lyrics contain various expressions related to emotional experiences, especially the theme of love, which can be analyzed through denotative and connotative meanings.

Table 1. Translation of The Song “Who Knows” by Daniel Caesar

In English	In Indonesian	In English	In Indonesian
I'll probably be a waste of your time, but who knows?	<i>Mungkin aku hanya akan membuang-buang waktumu, tapi siapa tahu?</i>	Lately, I've been thinking 'bout my precarious future	<i>Akhir-akhir ini, aku sering memikirkan masa depanku yang tak menentu.</i>
Chances are I'll step out of line, but who knows?	<i>Kemungkinan besar aku akan melanggar aturan, tapi siapa tahu?</i>	Will you be there with me by my side, my girl, my shooter? Who's to say who calculates? Not me, I'm no computer	<i>Akankah kau ada di sana bersamaku, gadisku, kekasihku? Siapa yang tahu, siapa yang menghitungnya? Bukan aku, aku bukan komputer</i>
Lately, you've set up in my mind	<i>Akhir-akhir ini, kamu terus ada di pikiranku</i>	Is it a crime to be unsure? In time, we'll find if it's sustainable	<i>Apakah ragu-ragu itu suatu kesalahan? Seiring berjalannya waktu, kita akan tahu apakah ini bisa bertahan lama.</i>
Yeah, girl, you, and I'd like that	<i>Iya, kamu, dan aku suka itu</i>	You're pure, you're kind, mature, divine	<i>Kamu murni, baik hati, dewasa, dan luar biasa.</i>
Lately, I've been thinking that perhaps I am a coward	<i>Akhir-akhir ini, aku merasa mungkin aku seorang pengecut</i>	You might be too good for me, unattainable	<i>Mungkin kamu terlalu baik untukku, tak terjangkau.</i>
Hiding in a disguise of an ever-giving flower	<i>Yang bersembunyi di balik topeng bunga</i>		
Incompetent	<i>Pengelola yang tak kompeten atas semua</i>		
steward of all of that sweet, sweet	<i>kekuatan manis itu</i>		

power

Yesterday was feeling so good, now it's gone

Kemarin rasanya begitu menyenangkan, sekarang sudah berlalu.

I'd feel like that always if I could, is that wrong?

Aku ingin selalu merasa seperti itu kalau bisa, apakah itu salah?

Tell me 'bout the city you're from. Is it hot? Does it snow there?

Ceritakan padaku tentang kota asalmu. Apakah di sana panas? Apakah di sana turun salju?

Maybe we get married one day, but who knows?	<i>Mungkin suatu hari nanti kita akan menikah, tapi siapa yang tahu?</i>
Think I'll take that thought to the grave, but who knows?	<i>Sepertinya aku akan membawa pikiran itu sampai ke liang lahat, tapi siapa yang tahu?</i>
I know that I'll love you always	<i>Aku tahu aku akan selalu mencintaimu.</i>
Yeah, girl, you, and I'd like that	<i>Ya, sayang, kamu, dan aku suka itu</i>

Discussion

This section showcases the results of an analysis of the lyrics to Daniel Caesar’s song “Who Knows” using a semantic approach, specifically focusing on denotative and connotative meanings. This song was chosen because it contains expressions that are not only literal in meaning but also rich in emotion and symbolism, reflecting self-doubt, feelings of inadequacy, and concerns about the future of a relationship. Through this approach, the lyrics are understood as a system of signs that convey both literal meaning and deeper cultural significance. Eventually, these meanings form an interpretation of love, togetherness, and personal detachment, yet one that remains shrouded in uncertainty. The results of the analysis indicate that songs, as cultural products, serve not only as entertainment but also represent how modern society views emotional relationships as something intimate, vulnerable, and full of doubt, while

still holding onto hope for the relationship’s continuation.

Representation of Meaning in the Lyrics of *Who Knows*

The First Verse

LYRIC	DENOTATIVE MEANING	CONOTATIVE MEANING
<i>I'll probably be a waste of your time, but who knows?</i>	These lyrics describe someone who feels like they're wasting their partner’s time.	He feels unworthy and lacks the confidence to start a relationship.
<i>Chances are I'll step out of line, but who knows?</i>	He immediately sensed that there was a risk of making a mistake when starting the relationship.	As “ <i>step out of line</i> ” implies crossing a boundary, the meaning of these lyrics reflects the fear of damaging a relationship due to feeling insecure about oneself.
<i>Lately, you've set up in my mind</i>	In a literal meaning, that person is often on his mind.	This lyric indicates that the person frequently appears on the speaker’s mind, suggesting that emotional attraction is beginning to grow stronger.
<i>Yeah, girl, you, and I like that</i>	He likes the situation.	He feels a sense of comfort in his feelings for this person, even though there is still some doubt.

According to semantic theory, the lyrics in this first verse represent the dynamics of a relationship characterized by emotional attraction and self-doubt. The first four lines of Daniel Caesar’s song “Who Knows” suggest that the individual is aware of the possibility of disappointing their partner or making mistakes in the relationship, yet at the same time continues to feel a growing emotional closeness and enjoys that feeling. This reflects how relationships in a modern context are not always built on self-confidence, but also involve feelings of

unworthiness, anxiety, and uncertainty. In popular culture, this condition is part of a representation of love considered honest, because individuals do not merely present an idealized side in accordance with societal standards, but also their vulnerability. These lyrics also show how a relationship can develop without a clear, defined status, yet still hold significant emotional meaning. Thus, this song constructs and reproduces the meaning of love as an intimate, imperfect, and ambiguous yet ongoing experience.

unable to manage the “*power*” they possess. However, on a connotative level, these expressions represent a psychological struggle involving a lack of self-confidence, fear of commitment, and an inability to fully express and sustain love. The phrase “*ever-giving flower*” conveys an image of a self that appears loving and giving, yet serves as a form of protection to cover one’s weaknesses. Meanwhile, the phrase “*sweet power*” can be interpreted as the capacity to love; a capacity that is, in fact, perceived as difficult to manage. From a semantic perspective, these signs possess not only literal (denotative) meanings but are also shaped by social and cultural experiences (connotative), reflecting how individuals in modern relationships often present an idealized facade on the surface while harboring uncertainty and fear within. Thus, this verse emphasizes that love does not always manifest as a stable and certain emotion, but rather as a complex emotional experience, fraught with doubt and marked by internal conflict.

The Second Verse

LYRIC	DENOTATIVE MEANING	CONOTATIVE MEANING
<i>Lately, I've been thinking that perhaps I am a coward</i>	It is portrayed that he sees himself as a coward.	This doubt causes him to become afraid of commitment .
<i>Hiding in a disguise of an ever-giving flower</i>	Literally, it means that he hides behind acts of kindness, such as often giving flowers.	In fact, he is pretending emotionally ; he appears to act as usual, but inside he is fragile, full of doubt, and lacks self-confidence.
<i>Incompetent steward of all of that sweet, sweet power</i>	In literal meaning, he is unable to manage the power he possesses.	These lyrics reflect his inability to handle his sweet power , or his feelings of love.

The semantic representation in this second verse reveals an inner conflict within an emotional relationship, characterized by self-awareness and an inability to manage one’s feelings. In Daniel Caesar’s song “Who Knows,” the lyrics in this section denotatively depict the confession of someone who feels like a coward, hiding behind a facade of seeming to be fine, and

The Third Verse

LYRIC	DENOTATIVE MEANING	CONOTATIVE MEANING
<i>Yesterday was feeling so good, now it's gone</i>	In literal, it means that yesterday felt good, but now that feeling is gone.	It illustrates that his emotions in the relationship are unstable .
<i>I'd feel like that always if I could, is that wrong?</i>	He wants that feeling to always remain.	It reflects a longing for consistent happiness, while also being overshadowed by doubt.
<i>Tell me 'bout the city you're from</i>	He asks where his partner is from.	The hidden meaning of this verse is his attempt to build personal closeness in the

		relationship, encouraging his partner to exchange thoughts with him.
<i>Is it hot? Does it snow there?</i>	Literally, he is asking about the weather.	This lyric serves as a form of intimacy through light conversation. It suggests that "snow" symbolizes his partner's cold personality.

precarious future		anxiety about the future of the relationship.
Will you be there with me by my side, my girl, my shooter?	He asks whether his partner will stay with him.	It is portrayed that, in going through this relationship, he needs his partner's presence in the form of emotional support.
Who's to say who calculates ? Not me, I'm no computer	He is unable to predict the future.	He sees love as something that cannot be controlled logically .

This verse illustrates the emotional dynamics within an unstable relationship that the couple nevertheless strives to maintain. Denotatively, the lyrics in this section describe a shift in feelings from the happiness previously felt to something that has been lost, accompanied by a desire to hold onto those feelings, as well as simple conversations about the partner's background and environment. However, connotatively, these expressions represent a longing for emotional stability in a relationship that is, in reality, temporary and volatile. The desire to "always feel the same" reflects a hope for consistency in love, while the light-hearted questions about hometowns symbolize an effort to build closeness and maintain a connection amidst the uncertainty of feelings. Thus, this verse illustrates that relationships are not always stable, but are still filled with efforts to maintain closeness through small, meaningful moments.

The Fourth Verse

LYRIC	DENOTATIVE MEANING	CONOTATIVE MEANING
Lately, I've been thinking 'bout my	In literal, it means that he is thinking about an uncertain future.	He is not simply "thinking"; his thoughts are also mixed with

In the fourth verse, the lyrics denotatively depict someone contemplating an uncertain future, wondering whether their partner will remain by their side, and realizing that they cannot predict what will happen. Meanwhile, on a connotative level, these lyrics depict anxiety within a relationship, particularly regarding the uncertainty of its direction and longevity. The question of whether the partner will remain by their side reflects a longing for stability and support, while the statement "I'm no computer" emphasizes that love cannot be logically calculated or guaranteed to yield a certain outcome. From a semantic perspective, such meanings are shaped by social experience, so the lyrics reflect a contemporary view of relationships marked by uncertainty. Thus, this verse shows that love is not always certain, but is still lived with hope and the desire to stay together.

The Fifth Verse

LYRIC	DENOTATIVE MEANING	CONOTATIVE MEANING
<i>Is it a crime to be unsure?</i>	Literally, it means that he is	It portrays that every feeling is valid, including

	asking whether doubt is wrong.	doubt , and that such feelings are part of being human .
<i>In time we'll find</i>	Time will provide the answer.	That answer is hoped to become part of the process and hope within the relationship.
<i>If it's sustainable</i>	He wonders whether the relationship can last.	It reflects doubt about the continuity of the relationship .
<i>You're pure, you're kind</i>	Literally, he is complimenting his partner.	He sincerely admires his partner, expressing it through praise.
<i>Mature, divine</i>	He describes his partner as perfect.	He idealizes his partner as a form of admiration.
<i>You might be too good for me, unattainable</i>	He feels unworthy, as though his partner is too good for him.	These further fuel the feeling of being unworthy of love.

conveys that love does not always present itself as something certain and equal, but rather as a complex emotional experience filled with admiration, doubt, and feelings of unworthiness.

Based on a semantic theoretical framework, the lyrics of this song represent self-doubt and self-assessment. As studied in semantics, the meaning of a sign is shaped through cultural construction. In this section, the lyrics present a narrative about an individual who questions whether it is normal to feel doubtful, while also acknowledging the possibility that the relationship will not last. Expressions of praise such as “*you're pure*” and “*you're kind*” connotatively suggest sincere admiration, but are also accompanied by a sense of unworthiness, particularly through the statement that their partner might be “*too good for me*” in the lyric “*You might be too good for me, unattainable*” making them seem out of reach. This suggests that relationships are not built solely on emotional closeness but are also influenced by feelings of inferiority and self-doubt. In the context of popular culture, these lyrics reflect that modern relationships often involve ambivalent feelings—a mix of admiration, love, and self-doubt. Therefore, this verse



The Sixth Verse

LYRIC	DENOTATIVE MEANING	CONOTATIVE MEANING
<i>Maybe we get married one day, but who knows?</i>	He imagines the possibility of marriage.	He has great hopes, though they are overshadowed by uncertainty.
<i>Think I'll take that thought to the grave, but who knows?</i>	He keeps those thoughts to himself and buries them.	In fact, his feelings cannot be fully expressed.
<i>I know that I'll love you always</i>	He always loves his partner.	He continues to love sincerely, even though his feelings are still wrapped in doubt.
<i>Yeah, girl you, and I'd like that</i>	In literal meaning, he likes the idea.	He still holds on to his desire to stay together, even though the future remains uncertain.

In this final verse, in accordance with the semantic theory framework, the lyrics represent a popular cultural view of relationships characterized by both hope and uncertainty. Denotatively, the lyrics depict the possibility that the future, such as marriage, is uncertain, yet love remains a constant presence. Meanwhile, connotatively, this section shows how individuals envision a shared future but choose not to rely too heavily on that certainty. The phrase “*but who knows*” serves as an affirmation that the future is not entirely within one’s control, so love is lived by embracing all possibilities. On the other hand, the statement “*I know that I’ll love you always*” presents a contrast in the form of steadfast feelings amidst the uncertainty of the relationship’s direction. From a semantic perspective, this meaning stems from social experiences that view modern relationships as something not always certain, yet still meaningful. This song conveys the understanding that a relationship does not necessarily need certainty about the future to be meaningful, because the value of love lies precisely in the sincerity of feelings and the

willingness to continue loving even though the final outcome is unknown.

Conclusion

Based on the research that has been conducted on denotative and connotative meanings in the lyrics of the song “*Who Knows*” sung by Daniel Caesar, it can be concluded that the lyrics contain connotative meanings because they are written in figurative language. As for the denotative meanings, the researcher used a dictionary to understand them. Six verses of the song were selected as the analysis sample.

It is found that connotative meaning has a deep connection to emotional, cultural, or associative feelings, and is therefore inherently subjective and context-dependent. After analyzing the whole data, it is concluded that Daniel Caesar mostly uses connotative meanings, for example, love is lived by embracing all possibilities, and love cannot be logically calculated. The songs also convey a message in which we have to understand that a relationship does not necessarily need certainty about the future to be meaningful, because the value of love lies precisely in the sincerity of feelings and the willingness to continue loving even though the future is unknown. In fact, Daniel Caesar’s song “*Who Knows*” best illustrates that a relationship should be accepted as an imperfect and uncertain experience, where vulnerability, self-doubt, and emotional risk are natural parts of loving someone.

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