

A Semantic Analysis of Denotative and Connotative Meanings in the Song “Firework” by Katy Perry

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Abstract. *This study investigates the denotative and connotative meanings in the lyrics of Katy Perry’s Firework to reveal how language constructs motivational and symbolic messages. Using a descriptive qualitative method, selected lexical items, phrases, and clauses were analyzed to identify literal meanings and their associative expansions. The results show a semantic trajectory from vulnerability, fragility, and emotional pressure toward self-empowerment, inner potential, and confident self-expression. Words such as plastic bag, paper thin, and house of cards denote fragility but symbolize emotional weakness, while spark, ignite, shine, and firework convey empowerment and individuality. These findings highlight the role of lyrics as a meaningful medium for emotional engagement and personal reflection, emphasizing the significance of semantic analysis in understanding how language shapes listeners’ psychological and symbolic experiences.*

Keywords: *denotative meaning, connotative meaning, semantic analysis, Firework, motivation*

Abstrak. *Penelitian ini mengkaji makna denotatif dan konotatif dalam lirik lagu “Firework” karya Katy Perry untuk mengungkap bagaimana bahasa membangun pesan-pesan motivasional dan simbolis. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif, kata-kata, frasa, dan klausa terpilih dianalisis untuk mengidentifikasi makna harfiah serta perluasan asosiatifnya. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan lintasan semantik dari kerentanan, kerapuhan, dan tekanan emosional menuju pemberdayaan diri, potensi batin, dan ekspresi diri yang percaya diri. Kata-kata seperti kantong plastik, tipis seperti kertas, dan rumah kartu menunjukkan kerapuhan tetapi melambangkan kelemahan emosional, sementara percikan, menyala, bersinar, dan kembang api menyampaikan pemberdayaan dan individualitas. Temuan ini menyoroti peran lirik sebagai media yang bermakna untuk keterlibatan emosional dan refleksi pribadi, serta menekankan pentingnya analisis semantik dalam memahami bagaimana bahasa membentuk pengalaman psikologis dan simbolis pendengar.*

Kata kunci: *makna denotatif, makna konotatif, analisis semantik, Firework, motivasi*

INTRODUCTION

Semantics is a central branch of linguistics because it examines how meaning is encoded, interpreted, and expanded through language. In semantic inquiry, meaning is not confined to dictionary definition, but also includes the associative, evaluative, and contextual dimensions that emerge when language is used in discourse. This distinction is especially important in song lyrics, where words often operate simultaneously at the literal and the associative levels. (Pratiwi et al., 2020) show that song lyrics can be studied through denotative and connotative meaning, while (Gee et al., 2023) define denotative meaning as the original or literal meaning of a lexeme and connotation as the value-laden sense attached to it by language users.

At the level of phenomenon, popular songs are often received mainly as emotional or motivational texts, whereas the semantic process that constructs those effects is rarely made explicit. Katy Perry’s *Firework* is a clear example. Publicly, the song is widely understood as a message of encouragement and self-confidence, yet the effect of that message depends on how ordinary lexical items shift into symbolic meanings within the lyrics. In the present draft, expressions such as *plastic bag*, *drifting*, *paper thin*, *house of cards*, and *buried deep* are interpreted as signs of fragility, instability, and emotional pressure, whereas *spark*, *ignite*, *shine*, *firework*, *colors*, and *moon* are interpreted as signs of inner potential, visibility, and empowerment. This pattern shows that the song does not simply “contain motivation”; rather, it semantically constructs motivation through a progression from vulnerability to self-affirmation. That emphasis matters because recent research also shows that lyrics can be meaningful for emotional interpretation and self-regulation, not merely decorative additions to music.

(Pratiwi et al., 2020) analyzed denotative and connotative meaning in Ariana Grande’s *God Is a Woman*; (Gee et al., 2023) examined denotative and connotative meanings in selected Justin Bieber and Kid Laroï lyrics; focused on connotative meaning in Ben Howard’s songs; and (Laili Dwi Rohmah & Rani Jayanti, 2026) studied denotative and connotative meaning in Nadin Amizah’s *Sorai*. Meanwhile, (Talohanas & Yuwana, 2023) discussed Katy Perry’s songs, including *Firework*, but their focus was lexical relations across several songs rather than a systematic denotative–connotative analysis of *Firework* itself. Thus, the specific semantic mapping of denotative and connotative meanings in *Firework* remains insufficiently developed in recent scholarship.

A theoretical gap also appears in the literature. Most denotative–connotative studies of song lyrics emphasize identifying and classifying literal and associative meanings in words, phrases, or lines. By contrast, broader semantic work on emotion tends to explain how abstract inner states are conceptualized through metaphorical frames and experiential domains. (Neumair et al., 2025), for example, show that emotions are conceptualized metaphorically through structured semantic frames. However, what is still less clearly elaborated in lyric studies is how literal lexical meaning becomes the basis for connotative expansion and how these layered meanings interact to build a coherent semantic movement across an entire song. In other words, classification is often present, and metaphorical explanation is often present, but the connection between lexical

denotation, connotative development, and overall semantic trajectory remains underarticulated.

This study aims to analyze the denotative and connotative meanings in the lyrics of *Firework* by Katy Perry by focusing on how words, phrases, and lyric lines generate literal and associative meanings within their textual context. The novelty of this study lies in two points. First, it offers a focused and systematic denotative–connotative mapping of *Firework* as a single song text rather than treating the song only as one item in a broader corpus or analyzing it through a different semantic category such as lexical relations alone. Second, it identifies a semantic trajectory in the lyrics, namely the movement from images of weakness, instability, and entrapment toward images of awakening, self-worth, visibility, and empowerment. In this sense, the contribution of the study is not merely to list literal and implied meanings, but to show how those meanings are organized into a coherent semantic progression.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

1. Semantics

Semantics is a branch of linguistics concerned with meaning in language. In recent studies, semantics is not only understood as the study of dictionary meaning, but also as the study of how words, phrases, and sentences generate meaning through context, association, and interpretation. (Pratiwi et al., 2020) state that semantics is the study of meaning and is highly relevant for examining song lyrics because lyrics often contain meanings that go beyond direct expression. In the same direction, (Fauziyah et al., 2024) explain that semantics examines how meaning is expressed through language at the level of words, phrases, and sentences, while cognitive-semantic work on song lyrics also shows that meaning in lyrics frequently develops through figurative and symbolic expression rather than through literal wording alone.

The relevance of semantics to song lyrics has become increasingly clear in recent scholarship. Research has shown that lyrics are not merely decorative components of songs, but meaningful linguistic material that contributes to emotional interpretation, symbolic communication, and conceptual understanding. A recent study in *Frontiers in Psychology* notes that the semantic interplay between lyrics and music in songs remains relatively underexplored, even though songs combine linguistic and musical meaning in

a unique way. (Karbanova & Cui, 2026) study also argues that song lyrics, despite their brevity and apparent simplicity, can be meaningful for listeners and deserve greater scholarly attention. These findings support the view that semantic analysis is an appropriate and necessary approach for examining how meaning is constructed in popular song texts.

In relation to the present study, semantics provides the main framework for explaining how the lyrics of *Firework* encode meaning through lexical choice and contextual interpretation. The data in the draft show that the analysis works at the level of selected lexical items and lyric segments, making semantics the most relevant theoretical basis for interpreting both literal and implied meaning in the song.

2. Types of Meaning in Semantics

Recent semantic studies commonly acknowledge that meaning is not monolithic. Instead, meaning can be classified into several categories depending on whether it is literal, associative, emotional, social, or structurally organized. Contemporary studies that apply semantic theory in language analysis still rely on the classification of meaning into several types, especially conceptual meaning, connotative meaning, social meaning, affective meaning, reflected meaning, collocative meaning, and thematic meaning. A 2025 semantic review based on Leech’s framework reaffirms that these types remain useful for distinguishing between direct meaning and the broader layers of meaning that arise in actual language use. Similar classifications also appear in recent studies of song lyrics and other discourse data.

Among these types, conceptual meaning and connotative meaning are especially central in lyric analysis. A (Syahla Fatia Zahra & Otong Setiawan Djuharie, 2025) study on semantic meaning in songs explains that conceptual meaning refers to the straightforward or dictionary-like meaning of lexical items, whereas connotative meaning captures the additional associations that make lyrical language emotionally and aesthetically powerful. Another recent study on semantic expression in song lyrics likewise focuses on conceptual, connotative, and affective meaning as the most relevant categories for understanding how songs communicate emotional and symbolic content. This suggests that although semantics recognizes many types of meaning, not all of them need to be used equally in every study; rather, the researcher may select the types most relevant to the research objective.

In this study, the discussion is limited to the types of meaning most directly related to the research problem, namely denotative and connotative meaning. This limitation is methodologically appropriate because the draft data are organized by identifying lyric units and then interpreting their literal and associative meanings, rather than analyzing stylistic, collocative, or thematic meaning in a broader semantic framework.

3. Denotative vs. Connotative Meaning

Denotative meaning refers to the direct, basic, or literal meaning of a word or expression. In recent lyric studies, denotative meaning is consistently described as the original meaning of a lexeme or the meaning that can be understood without additional emotional or symbolic interpretation. (Gee et al., 2023) define denotative meaning as the original or true meaning possessed by a lexeme. Similarly, recent studies on song lyrics in 2024 and 2026 describe denotative meaning as the literal meaning of words or phrases, usually close to dictionary definition. In lyric analysis, denotation is important because it serves as the semantic starting point before a word is interpreted more deeply in context.

Connotative meaning, by contrast, refers to the associative, emotional, symbolic, or evaluative meaning attached to a word beyond its literal sense. Recent studies emphasize that connotation gives words emotional depth and resonance, especially in literary and lyrical discourse. (Fauziyah et al., 2024) argue that connotative meaning is highly significant in song lyrics because songs often depend on emotional suggestion rather than direct statement. (Laili Dwi Rohmah & Rani Jayanti, 2026) study on the song Sorai also found that connotative meaning tends to dominate in song lyrics because it allows language to express deep feeling, symbolism, and aesthetic nuance. This indicates that connotation is not secondary to denotation; rather, it is the layer through which lyrical language acquires expressive force.

The distinction between denotation and connotation is particularly important in the present study because the lyrics of *Firework* repeatedly show a movement from literal reference to symbolic interpretation. Lexical items such as *plastic bag*, *paper thin*, and *house of cards* have clear denotative meanings as concrete objects or conditions, yet in the draft analysis they are interpreted connotatively as symbols of fragility, instability, and emotional vulnerability. On the other hand, words such as *spark*, *ignite*, *shine*, *firework*, and *colors* begin with literal meanings related to light, explosion, or visual appearance, but develop connotative meanings associated with inner strength, self-

expression, and empowerment. This confirms that denotative and connotative meaning in song lyrics should not be treated as isolated categories, but as interconnected layers through which the lyrics build a coherent semantic progression.

Based on that distinction, this study uses denotative meaning to identify the literal sense of selected lexical items in the lyrics and uses connotative meaning to explain how those items gain symbolic, emotional, and contextual significance in the song. This theoretical focus is fully aligned with the objective of the study, which is to explain how meaning in *Firework* is semantically constructed through the relationship between literal meaning and associative interpretation.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive qualitative method because the objective was to identify, interpret, and describe meanings embedded in the lyrics rather than to measure them statistically. Recent studies on semantic analysis in song lyrics have similarly used qualitative-descriptive designs to examine denotative and connotative meanings in words, phrases, and lyric lines.

The object of this study was the song “Firework” by Katy Perry. The data consisted of selected lexical items, phrases, and clauses in the song lyrics that contain denotative and connotative meanings. In the current draft, these data are organized in a table that connects each lyric excerpt with a chosen linguistic unit and its literal and associative interpretation.

The data were collected through a documentation technique. The researcher obtained the lyric text, read the lyrics carefully, listened to the song repeatedly to understand the contextual use of each expression, and then selected words, phrases, or clauses that potentially carried semantic significance. After that, the identified data were noted and classified into denotative and connotative categories. This procedure is in line with recent lyric studies that treat song lyrics as textual documents and collect data by identifying linguistic units that express literal and implied meaning.

The data were analyzed through four main steps. First, the researcher identified the linguistic units in the lyrics that were relevant to semantic analysis. Second, each unit was classified based on whether it showed denotative meaning, connotative meaning, or the relation between both. Third, the denotative meaning was interpreted based on the

literal meaning of the word or phrase, while the connotative meaning was interpreted based on contextual use, associative sense, and the thematic construction of the lyrics. Fourth, the results were presented descriptively in tabular and explanatory form. This analytical orientation follows recent semantic studies showing that the meaning of song lyrics is constructed through the interaction between literal meaning, associative meaning, and lyrical context.

To maintain the focus of the study, the analysis was limited to the semantic aspect of the lyrics, especially denotative and connotative meaning, and did not examine musical structure, melody, rhythm, or visual performance. Thus, the methodology was designed to reveal how the lyrics of *Firework* construct meaning through lexical choice and contextual interpretation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. The denotative meaning and connotative of the lyrics of the KATY PERRY song " Firework"

Lyrics	Word	Denotative Meaning	Connotative Meaning
Do you ever feel like a plastic bag	plastic bag	A bag made of thin plastic material used to carry things	Symbolizes a person who feels useless, weak, or without value
Drifting through the wind, wanting to start again?	drifting	Moving slowly without control, usually carried by air or water	Describes a life without direction, control, or purpose
	start again	To begin something once more	Suggests a desire to change life and get a new beginning
Do you ever feel, feel so paper thin	paper thin	Very thin, like a sheet of paper	Symbolizes emotional fragility, vulnerability, and insecurity
Like a house of cards, one blow from cavin' in?	house of cards	A structure made by stacking playing cards	Represents an unstable condition that can easily collapse
Do you ever feel already buried deep?	buried deep	Put under the ground or covered far below the surface	Represents feeling trapped, depressed, or overwhelmed by problems
Six feet under screams, but no one seems to hear a thing	six feet under	A depth associated with burial underground	Refers to a small problem or pressure that can destroy someone emotionally
Do you know that there's still a chance for you?	chance	An opportunity or possibility	It symbolizes hope and the possibility of change. In this lyric, it

			shows that even after pain and loneliness, there is still room for a better future.
'Cause there's a spark in you	spark	A small flash of fire or light	Represents inner potential, strength, talent, and self-worth
You just gotta ignite the light	ignite	to set something on fire or cause it to begin burning	It symbolizes starting inner change, awakening confidence, and activating hidden strength. In this lyric, the word suggests that a person must begin to bring out the power that has already existed inside them.
And let it shine	shine	to give off light brightly	It symbolizes self-expression, confidence, and the courage to show one's true self. In this lyric, it means allowing inner potential and uniqueness to be seen by others.
Just own the night	night	the dark period of time between evening and morning	It symbolizes fear, darkness, and uncertainty, but also courage and control. In this lyric, it suggests being brave enough to face difficult moments and still shine with confidence.
Like the Fourth of July	July	the seventh month of the year	It symbolizes celebration, brightness, excitement, and a spectacular display of energy. In this lyric, it strengthens the idea of shining boldly and making a powerful impression, just like fireworks on a special night.
'Cause baby, you're a firework	firework	an object that explodes in the sky with light and color	a person who has great potential, beauty, and inner power

Come on, show 'em what you're worth	worth	the value or importance of something or someone	It refers to self-worth, dignity, and confidence. In this lyric, it encourages a person to recognize their own importance and prove that they are valuable, meaningful, and deserving of respect.
Make 'em go, "Oh, oh, oh"			
As you shoot across the sky	sky	the space above the earth where clouds, birds, and stars appear	It symbolizes freedom, possibility, and unlimited opportunity. The word gives the idea that a person is not meant to stay small or hidden, but can rise high and be seen by everyone.
Baby, you're a firework	-	-	-
Come on, let your colors burst	colors	different shades or hues that can be seen	It represents individuality, personality, talent, and inner beauty. The lyric suggests showing one's true self openly and confidently, without fear of judgment.
Make 'em go, "Oh, oh, oh"	-	-	-
You're gonna leave 'em all in awe, awe, awe	awe	a feeling of wonder, surprise, and admiration	It symbolizes the strong impact a person can have on others when they finally express their true strength. The word shows admiration that comes from seeing someone shine in an extraordinary way.
You don't have to feel like a waste of space	waste	something useless or without value	It represents feelings of worthlessness, rejection, and self-doubt. In this lyric, the word suggests that a person may feel unimportant, but the

song rejects that idea and reminds them that they still have value and purpose.

You're original, cannot be replaced	original	something unique and not copied from anything else	It symbolizes individuality and personal identity. The word emphasizes that every person is special in their own way and cannot simply be substituted by someone else.
If you only knew what the future holds	future	the time that is yet to come	It symbolizes hope, possibility, and unseen opportunities. In this lyric, the word suggests that life may improve in ways a person cannot yet imagine, so they should not lose hope too soon.
After a hurricane comes a rainbow	hurricane	a violent storm with very strong wind	It symbolizes pain, struggle, chaos, or difficult times in life. The word suggests that hardship may feel overwhelming, but it is only one stage before something better appears.
	rainbow	an arc of colors seen in the sky after rain	It symbolizes hope, beauty, peace, and positive change after suffering. In this lyric, it gives the idea that good things can come after painful experiences.
Maybe a reason why all the doors are closed	doors	movable barriers used to open or close an entrance	It symbolizes opportunities, chances, or life paths. Closed doors suggest disappointment or rejection, but they also imply that another better

			opportunity may exist elsewhere.
So you could open one that leads you to the perfect road	road	a path used for traveling from one place to another	It symbolizes direction, life journey, and destiny. Here, the word suggests that every person has a meaningful path, and setbacks may actually guide them toward something better.
Like a lightning bolt, your heart will glow	lightning	a sudden flash of electricity in the sky during a storm	It symbolizes sudden power, energy, and awakening. In this lyric, it suggests a moment of realization when a person's inner strength and confidence appear strongly and unexpectedly.
And when it's time, you'll know	ignite	to cause something to start burning or to light it	It symbolizes awakening inner power, passion, and confidence. In this lyric, the word suggests that a person must begin to activate the strength and potential that already exist inside them.
	light	brightness that makes things visible	It symbolizes hope, talent, positivity, and inner strength. The word suggests the special quality within a person that can guide them and make them stand out.
And let it shine	shine	to give off bright light	It symbolizes expressing one's true self openly and confidently. In this lyric, it means allowing inner beauty, talent, and potential to be seen by others without fear.

Just own the night	night	the dark period between evening and morning	It symbolizes fear, uncertainty, or difficult moments. However, in this lyric, it also suggests courage and control, meaning a person should be brave enough to face darkness and still stand out.
Like the Fourth of July	-	-	-
Boom, boom, boom	-	-	-
Even brighter than the moon, moon, moon	moon	the natural object that shines in the sky at night	It symbolizes beauty, brightness, and something extraordinary that stands out in the darkness. In this lyric, the word suggests that a person can shine even more powerfully than something already admired and beautiful.
It's always been inside of you, you, you	inside	the inner part of something	It symbolizes hidden strength, potential, and the special qualities that already exist within a person. The lyric shows that confidence and greatness do not come from outside, but have been within the person all along.
And now it's time to let it through	through	passing from one side to another	It symbolizes releasing inner power, expressing true feelings, and allowing one's real potential to come out. In this lyric, the word suggests that it is the right moment for a person to stop hiding and finally show their true self.

The analysis of denotative and connotative meanings in Katy Perry's *Firework* demonstrates a clear semantic trajectory from vulnerability and instability toward self-

empowerment and the expression of personal potential. Lyrics such as *plastic bag*, *paper thin*, and *house of cards* denote physically fragile objects or structures, yet connotatively they symbolize helplessness, emotional fragility, and life instability. This aligns with prior research indicating that song lyrics often develop connotative meanings to convey psychological or emotional states of listeners.

The transition from symbols of fragility to symbols of internal strength is evident in lyrics such as *spark*, *ignite*, *shine*, and *firework*. While these words literally relate to light or fire, their connotative meanings emphasize inner potential, courage, and the ability to express a unique identity. This progression reflects a systematic semantic construction, where literal meanings serve as a foundation for connotative expansion, creating a motivational and empowering narrative.

Furthermore, these findings reinforce the notion that the meaning of lyrics extends beyond denotation and interacts dynamically with emotional and symbolic contexts to produce complex motivational effects. For instance, metaphors such as *hurricane* and *rainbow* go beyond natural phenomena to represent transitions from hardship to hope, strengthening the song’s positive message. The interaction between denotative and connotative meanings forms a coherent semantic trajectory, moving from feelings of helplessness toward confident self-expression, consistent with contemporary semantic frameworks emphasizing the interplay between literal meaning, emotional association, and contextual.

Overall, this analysis demonstrates that *Firework* is not merely a motivational song; its lyrics construct meaning gradually through the interaction of denotative and connotative layers. This allows listeners to experience an emotional journey mediated by language. These results highlight the significance of semantic analysis in lyric studies, as it enables researchers to understand how language conveys psychological, symbolic, and social experiences while reinforcing the relevance of lyrics in communication, literature, and music psychology research.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that *Firework* by Katy Perry constructs meaning through a layered interaction between denotative and connotative elements. The song demonstrates a clear semantic trajectory from emotional vulnerability to self-empowerment,

highlighting how lyrics can convey complex motivational and symbolic messages. By mapping literal and associative meanings, this research shows that song lyrics serve not only as artistic expressions but also as instruments for emotional engagement and self-reflection. The findings contribute to lyric studies by illustrating the importance of examining both literal and figurative dimensions to understand how language shapes listeners’ psychological and social experiences

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