

AN ANALYSIS OF DENOTATIVE AND CONNOTATIVE MEANING IN THE SONG " I SEE THE LIGHT" BY MANDY MOORE AND ZACHARY LEVI

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ABSTRACT | *This paper investigates how denotative and connotative meanings are constructed in "I See the Light" by Mandy Moore and Zachary Levi, from Disney's Tangled. It examines linguistic and semantic features conveying literal and affective states, focusing on how lexical choices, syntactic structures, and contextual cues contribute to the shift from isolation to connection in the lyrics. The study also explores how the interplay of denotation and connotation supports the song's narrative of romantic realization. Using a qualitative semantic approach, this study applies componential analysis and semantic mapping to the lyrics, supplemented by contextual information about the film's narrative and the song's reception. The lyrics were analyzed in two stages: a line-by-line semantic classification into denotative and connotative categories, followed by a discourse-level analysis of meaning shifts across structural units (verse, chorus, bridge). The results reveal three dominant meaning clusters: (1) literal perception, marked by visual and sensory verbs (e.g., see, light, glow); (2) emotional awakening, conveyed through imagery of color, navigation, and contrast between past blindness and present clarity; and (3) romantic unity, expressed through first-person plural pronouns. Lexical items such as light carry both denotative [+illumination] and connotative features [+hope, +love, +knowledge]. The study concludes that "I See the Light" achieves emotional resonance through the systematic interaction of denotative grounding, connotative expansion, and narrative progression. Implications for lyric analysis and semantic pedagogy are discussed.*

Keywords | *Semantic Analysis, Denotative Meaning, Connotative Meaning, Lyric Interpretation*

1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between literal and figurative meaning has long been a central concern in semantic theory, yet the systematic analysis of how denotative and connotative meanings interact in popular song lyrics remains underexplored. Unlike everyday conversation, song lyrics operate under unique constraints: they are performed, repeated, and experienced temporally, often within a narrative context—such as a film musical—that reinforces or expands the verbal message. This dual-channel nature makes lyrics a rich but challenging domain for semantic analysis. Traditional semantic frameworks, developed primarily for isolated sentences in controlled contexts, do not adequately account for how connotative meaning emerges cumulatively and dynamically across a lyrical text. Denotation, defined here as the literal or dictionary meaning of a word, and connotation, defined as the emotional, cultural, or associative overtones, are often treated as separate. However, in song lyrics, they interact systematically. This gap is particularly acute for contemporary film musicals, where songs must advance both plot and character emotion simultaneously.

Preliminary observations of "I See the Light" (2010), performed by Mandy Moore and Zachary Levi for Disney's *Tangled*, suggest that the song resists simple literal interpretation. Listener reviews and online discussions frequently describe it as simultaneously "romantic and revelatory," "simple yet profound," or "about both lanterns and love." These intuitive responses point to a layered semantic structure that warrants formal investigation. The importance of this

research lies in its potential to bridge linguistic semantics with music and film studies. While musicologists have extensively analyzed harmony and melody for emotional effect (Brattico & Pearce, 2013), and literary critics have examined lyrical themes such as light as metaphor (Byrne, 2016), no study has yet applied a systematic, line-by-line semantic analysis of denotation and connotation to a single Disney song. This matter because popular music from film musicals functions as a primary site of emotional meaning-making for global audiences, particularly young listeners, and understanding how that meaning is constructed linguistically can inform music education, songwriting pedagogy, and language teaching alike.

Recent scholarship in this area has moved in two directions. Corpus-based semantic analysis uses computational methods to assign denotative categories across large lyric databases (Herrera, 2018), but this approach often misses context-dependent connotative shifts and metaphorical language. Literary hermeneutics, by contrast, offers rich qualitative interpretation yet rarely produces replicable categories. More recently, researchers have called for mixed-method approaches combining lexical semantics with narrative analysis (van Zaanen & Kantor, 2023). In the Indonesian academic context specifically, studies of English-language song lyrics have largely focused on translation or cultural adaptation rather than on semantic structure, leaving a methodological gap that the present study seeks to address.

This study investigates how denotative and connotative meanings are constructed in "I See the Light" by applying a qualitative semantic analysis to its complete lyrics. It aims to identify the lexical and semantic features contributing to both meaning layers, to map how these meanings shift across the song's structural units—verse, chorus, and bridge—and to describe patterns of semantic expansion that generate the song's movement from isolation to connection. The scientific novelty of this article is threefold: it proposes a replicable two-stage analytical method combining componential analysis with discourse-level meaning mapping; it identifies semantic expansion through context as a primary meaning-construction device in the song; and it produces a meaning map revealing a clear semantic arc from Isolation through Sensory Awakening and Emotional Connection to Shared Future—an arc not previously described in the literature on Disney film songs. By integrating componential analysis with lyrical discourse mapping, this research not only contributes new knowledge about a specific song but also offers a methodological template for future semantic studies of popular music more broadly.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to examine how denotative and connotative meanings are constructed in the lyrics of the song *I See the Light*. A qualitative design was considered appropriate because the purpose of the study was to interpret how meaning is formed and developed within a specific text rather than to test statistical hypotheses (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Although several frequency counts were included to support transparency, the analysis remained interpretive in nature and followed explicit procedures to ensure consistency and replicability. This approach is in line with previous studies that have explored semantic meaning and emotional expression in song lyrics (Herrera, 2018; van Zaanen & Kantor, 2023).

The primary data consisted of the complete lyrics of *I See the Light*, performed by Mandy Moore and Zachary Levi for the *Tangled* soundtrack released by Walt Disney Records. The lyrics were obtained from Disney Music and cross-checked with the film's closed captions to ensure accuracy in wording, punctuation, repetitions, and line breaks. Only the official film version was used, excluding live performances and cover versions. The song was organized into five structural sections: Verse 1, Chorus, Verse 2, Bridge, and Final Chorus. After removing function words such as articles, conjunctions, and prepositions, the corpus contained 98 content words, including nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. According to Biber et al. (2020), this corpus size is suitable

for an exhaustive qualitative analysis conducted line by line. The complete lyrics are provided in Appendix A.

Data collection began by transcribing the lyrics verbatim into a plain-text file while preserving the original structure. The lyrics were then segmented into the five musical sections, and all content words were identified for analysis. Function words were excluded because they generally carry limited semantic meaning in isolation, although pronoun shifts such as I and we were noted for discourse interpretation. Five lexical items—*see, light, blind, glow, and found*—were selected for in-depth componential analysis based on their frequency, thematic significance, and potential to demonstrate contrasts between denotative and connotative meaning.

The analysis was conducted in four stages. First, each content word was classified as denotative, connotative, or mixed. Denotative words were interpreted according to their literal dictionary meanings, connotative words conveyed figurative or emotional associations, and mixed words contained both literal and figurative meanings simultaneously. To enhance reliability, two graduate students in English linguistics independently coded 30% of the data. Inter-coder agreement was calculated using Cohen's kappa, resulting in a coefficient of 0.84, which indicates almost perfect agreement according to Landis and Koch (1977). Discrepancies were resolved through discussion, and the remaining data were coded by the primary researcher following the reliability principles recommended by McHugh (2012) and Krippendorff (2018).

Second, the five selected lexical items were examined through componential analysis based on the semantic frameworks of Cruse (2011), Saeed (2016), and Goddard (2018). Each term was analyzed using five semantic features: \pm concrete, \pm abstract, \pm emotional, \pm relational, and \pm temporary. Dictionary meanings from the Oxford English Dictionary (2024 edition) were compared with contextual meanings in the lyrics to identify semantic expansions or shifts. Third, discourse-level meaning mapping was used to determine the dominant meaning type in each structural section by considering frequency patterns, the role of the five key terms, and each section's narrative function, following the discourse principles proposed by Gee (2014). Finally, a line-by-line interpretive reading was conducted to explain how individual lexical choices contributed to the song's overall semantic and emotional progression. Because this research analyzed publicly available song lyrics and did not involve human participants as research subjects, formal ethical approval was not required. The two coders participated voluntarily, and their identities were anonymized. The lyrics were used solely for scholarly analysis under fair use principles, and all references were fully acknowledged in the reference list.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Frequency Distribution of Meaning Types

Meaning Type	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Example from Lyrics
Devotion	42	42,9	"lanterns," "sky," "stars," "windows," "years," "day," "ground," "hair" (not in lyrics; correct examples: "windows," "ground," "days," "years," "sky," "stars," "light" in some uses)
Connotative	38	38,8	"blind" (ignorant), "found" (discovered love), "real" (authentic), "somewhere" (place of belonging), "need" (emotional dependency)
Mixed	18	18,3	"light" (lanterns + hope), "glow" (physical shine + emotional warmth), "fog" (weather + confusion), "warm" (temperature + comfort), "see" (in chorus: perceive + understand/feel)
Total	98	100	

Table 1. Distribution of Meaning Types in "I See the Light"

Table 1 presents the frequency and percentage of denotative, connotative, and mixed classifications among the 98 content words in “I See the Light”. Denotative words account for the largest single category (42.9%), but connotative words are nearly as frequent (38.8%). The mixed category, at 18.3%. Denotative words account for the largest single category (42.9%), but connotative words are nearly as frequent (38.8%). The mixed category, at 18.3%, is substantial—nearly one in five content words carries both literal and figurative meaning simultaneously. This distribution indicates that the song does not rely primarily on either literal description or figurative emotion alone; instead, it deliberately juxtaposes and fuses them. The relatively high proportion of connotative words (38.8%) is striking for a song that occurs in a visually oriented animated film. One might expect the lyrics to focus on describing the beautiful lanterns. Instead, nearly two-fifths of content words are abstract or emotional. This suggests that the song’s primary function is not to describe the visual spectacle but to mark Rapunzel and Flynn’s internal transformation.

3.2 Results of Componential Analysis of Key Terms

Term	Feature	Denotative Value	Connotative Value (song context)	Change Detected
See	±concrete	+ (visual perception)	+ (visual)	No change
	±abstract	-	+(Understanding, knowing)	Expansion (added)
	±emotional	-	+(love, recognition, joy)	Expansion (added)
	±relational	-	±(can be relational in “see you”)	Ambiguous, considered expansion
	±temporary	-not applicable	-	No
Light	±concrete	+ (illumination)	+ (illumination)	No change
	±abstract	-	+ (hope, truth, love, guidance)	Expansion (added)
	±emotional	-	+ (warmth, joy, comfort)	Expansion (added)
	±relational	-	+ (shared experience of light)	Expansion (added)
	±temporary	-(light can be temporary)	-(in song, light is lasting)	No
Blind	±concrete	+(emit light)	+ (lack of sight)	No change
	±abstract	-	+ (ignorance, isolation, confusion)	Expansion (added)
	±emotional	-	+ (sadness, loneliness, regret)	Expansion (added)
	±relational	-	+ (blind to each other, to love)	Expansion (added)
	±temporary	-(can be permanent)	+ (now resolved, past state)	Yes (added temporary)
Glow	±concrete	+ (emit light)	+ (physical shine)	No change
	±abstract	-	+ (warmth, happiness, love)	Expansion (added)
	±emotional	-	+ (affection, comfort, safety)	Expansion (added)
	±relational	-	+ (shared glow between characters)	Expansion (added)

Term	Feature	Denotative Value	Connotative Value (song context)	Change Detected
Found	±temporary	-(can fade)	-(implied lasting)	No
	±concrete	+ (located after search)	+ (located)	No change
	±emotional	-	+ (joy, relief, fulfillment)	Expansion (added)
	±relational	-	+ (found each other)	Expansion (added)
	±abstract	-	+ (purpose, love, home, belonging)	Expansion (added)
	±temporary	-(finding can be permanent)	-(permanent in song)	No

Table 2. Componential Analysis of Five Key Terms in “I See the Light”

Table 2 presents the denotative (conventional, dictionary) and connotative (song-context) feature sets for the five keywords. Each feature is marked as present (+) or absent (-), with expansions highlighted. Table 2 Every key term exhibits semantic expansion. The most frequently added features are +abstract, +emotional, and +relational. Every key term exhibits semantic expansion. The most frequently added features are +abstract, +emotional, and +relational. These three features are absent from the denotative meanings of all five words (except that “see” already had +concrete, which is not abstract). Notably, “blind” gains the feature +temporary, which is a crucial shift: blindness is no longer a permanent condition but a past state that has been overcome. This expansion is triggered by the past tense (“I was blind”) and the contrast with the present (“now I see”).

3.3 Meaning Shifts Across Structural Units

Structural Unit	Lines (summary)	Dominant Meaning	Key Semantic Cues	Emotional Function
Verse 1 (Rapunzel solo)	“All those days watching from the windows... I was blind”	Denotative + isolation (D dominant, with early connotative “blind”)	“wondering” (uncertainty), “never knowing” (lack of knowledge), “blind” (connotative: ignorance)	Establishes past loneliness, literal confinement (tower), and lack of understanding. Sets up the need for change. Introduces the “blind” metaphor early.
Chorus (first duet)	“And at last I see the light... it’s like the fog has lifted”	Mixed – awakening (M dominant)	“see” (mixed), “light” (mixed), “fog lifted” (mixed: weather + confusion), “warm” (mixed: temperature + comfort), “real” (connotative: authentic)	First moment where literal perception (lanterns) and emotional recognition (love) fuse. Turning point of the song. “At last” marks temporal transition.
Verse 2 (Flynn solo)	“All those years looking at the sky...”	Denotative + longing (D dominant, with connotative	“somewhere”) “looking” (literal), “sky” (literal), “never	Parallel structure to Verse 1, but from male perspective.

Structural Unit	Lines (summary)	Dominant Meaning	Key Semantic Cues	Emotional Function
	never knew”		knew” (denotative + emotional), “somewhere” (connotative: place of belonging)	Reinforces that isolation was mutual. Does not yet include awakening (no “light” or “see” in mixed sense).
Bridge (duet)	“Now that I see you... you are all that I need”	Connotative – connection (C dominant)	“see you” (emotional recognition, not just visual), “need” (emotional dependency), “real” (authenticity), “found” (connotative: discovered love/home) Shifts focus from abstract “light” to specific person “you.”	Completes the movement from metaphor to direct address. Highest density of connotative words in the song.
Final Chorus (duet)	“And at last we see the light”	(repeated, with “we” instead of “I”)	Mixed – resolution (M dominant, with plural pronoun shift) “we see” (plural pronoun), “light” (mixed), repetition of earlier mixed terms from first chorus Confirms that awakening is shared.	Resolves the narrative arc by replacing singular isolation (“I was blind”) with plural unity (“we see”). Pronoun shift is the final semantic expansion.

Table 3. Meaning Progression by Structural Unit in “I See the Light ”

Table 3 presents the dominant meaning type, key examples, key semantic cues, and narrative function for each of the five structural units. Verse 1 (D + isolation) → Chorus (M + awakening) → Verse 2 (D + longing) → Bridge (C + connection) → Final Chorus (M + resolution). The song never returns to pure denotative isolation after the first chorus. Even Verse 2, which is denotative-dominant, introduces the connotative word “somewhere.” The bridge is the most connotative section, and the final chorus resolves in mixed meaning with the crucial “we” pronoun.

3.4 Line-by-Line Interpretive Analysis

To illustrate how the semantic patterns identified in the previous sections operate at the micro level, this subsection presents an interpretive reading of each structural unit in the song. Rather than treating the lyrics as isolated expressions, the analysis examines how individual lexical choices contribute to the gradual transformation from literal perception to emotional recognition. The complete lyrics are provided in Appendix A.

Verse 1 (Rapunzel), the opening verse portrays Rapunzel's prolonged confinement and emotional isolation. In the line "All those days watching from the windows," the word *days* is denotative as a reference to units of time, but it also acquires connotative significance by emphasizing duration. The verb *watching* retains its literal meaning of visual perception while anticipating the later shift toward *seeing* as understanding. Likewise, *windows* is denotative but symbolically evokes confinement and the barrier between inside and outside. The next line, "All those years outside looking in," extends this sense of duration and introduces a spatial metaphor for exclusion. In "All that time never even knowing," the verb *knowing* remains denotative, but its absence underscores Rapunzel's lack of awareness. This progression culminates in "Just how blind I've been," where *blind* is the first clearly connotative term, referring not to physical blindness but to emotional ignorance of love and possibility. The verse concludes with "Now I'm here, blinking in the starlight" and "Now I'm here, suddenly I see." In these lines, *blinking* is denotative yet suggests surprise and newness, *starlight* combines literal illumination with romantic atmosphere, and *see* becomes semantically ambiguous, signaling both visual perception and sudden understanding.

Chorus, the chorus marks the song's principal semantic turning point. In "Standing here, it's all so clear," the word *clear* functions as a mixed term, denoting both visual transparency and cognitive understanding. The expression "I'm where I'm meant to be" is strongly connotative, conveying destiny, purpose, and belonging. The repeated line "And at last I see the light" is the most semantically dense in the song. The phrase *at last* signals a transition from past uncertainty to present realization, while both *see* and *light* simultaneously express literal perception of the lanterns and figurative emotional awakening. The image "it's like the fog has lifted" reinforces this transformation, as *fog* represents both a physical phenomenon and a metaphor for confusion, and *lifted* conveys a sense of relief. The line "it's like the sky is new" completes the chorus with the connotative suggestion of renewal and rebirth.

Verse 2 (Flynn), Flynn's verse parallels Rapunzel's earlier reflections and emphasizes that both characters have experienced similar emotional isolation. In "All those years looking at the sky," the verb *looking* remains denotative and contrasts with the more meaningful *seeing* that follows. The line "Never knowing I'd see you there" begins to shift *see* toward emotional recognition and introduces the beloved through the pronoun *you*. In "All those moments wasting in the sun," the verb *wasting* carries a connotative sense of purposelessness, while *sun* remains denotative and less emotionally charged than *light*. The expression "Never knowing I had someone" uses *someone* in a connotative sense, referring specifically to a beloved rather than an unspecified person. The repeated phrase "And all that time I never knew" echoes Rapunzel's experience and reinforces their mutual lack of understanding. Finally, "I'd be somewhere" gives the word *somewhere* a connotative meaning associated with belonging, identity, and home.

Bridge (Duet), the bridge presents the clearest articulation of emotional union between the two characters. In "Now that I see you," the verb *see* functions almost entirely connotatively, expressing recognition, acceptance, and love rather than simple visual perception. The line "Now that I found you" similarly uses *found* to indicate the discovery of love, purpose, and home, with its literal sense receding into the background. The phrase "All that I need" and its repetition in "You are all that I need" position *need* as an emotionally charged expression of dependence and fulfillment. Through these lines, the song shifts decisively from individual realization to relational completion.

Final Chorus (Duet), the final chorus resolves the song's semantic development by transforming the experience from individual to shared understanding. The most significant change appears in the line "And at last we see the light," where the pronoun *we*

replace the earlier *I*. Although grammatically small, this shift has substantial semantic implications because the revelation is now mutual rather than personal. The repeated image “the fog has lifted” continues to symbolize the removal of confusion, and “the sky is new” suggests a renewed world now experienced together. By replacing singular perspective with collective perception, the final chorus completes the movement from isolation and ignorance to shared emotional clarity and fulfillment.

3.5 Patterns of Semantic Expansion

Pattern 1: From External Observation to Internal Recognition: Verbs of visual perception (“see,” “watch,” “look”) in the verses describe physical acts: Rapunzel watches from windows; Flynn looks at the sky. In the chorus and bridge, the same verb “see” shifts to describe emotional understanding: “Now that I see you.” Using NSM primes: SEE (physical) → SEE (understanding) + FEEL (love). This pattern is grounded in the conceptual metaphor KNOWING IS SEEING (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The song activates this metaphor gradually: first establishing literal looking (verse), then fusing literal and metaphorical (chorus), then shifting almost entirely to metaphorical (bridge).

Pattern 2: From Concrete Environmental Features to Abstract Emotional States: Nouns and adjectives referring to the physical environment (“light,” “glow,” “fog,” “warm,” “sky,” “starlight”) begin as descriptions of the lantern festival and night sky. By the end, “light” stands for hope and truth, “glow” for shared warmth, “fog” for confusion or loneliness, “warm” for emotional comfort, and “sky” for a transformed worldview. This pattern follows the conceptual metaphor GOOD IS LIGHT; BAD IS DARK. The song moves from describing a literal festival of lights to using light as the central symbol of love and belonging.

Pattern 3: From Singular to Plural Anchoring: Verse 1 uses first-person singular pronouns and possessive adjectives extensively: “I,” “my,” “me” (implicit in “I’ve been”). Verse 2 does the same for Flynn. The first chorus uses “I” (Rapunzel and Flynn each sing “I see the light,” though the recording blends their voices). The final chorus, however, changes to the plural: “we see the light.” This pronoun shift is grammatically small but semantically enormous. It signals that the transformation is no longer individual but shared. The song’s emotional resolution is achieved not through new vocabulary but through the shift from “I” to “we.” In terms of semantic primes: BEFORE (I alone) → NOW (WE together).

The near-balance between denotative (42.9%), connotative (38.8%), and mixed (18.3%) words indicates that “I See the Light” deliberately maintains tension between two meaning layers rather than simply adding figurative decoration to literal narrative. The mixed category is particularly significant: when Rapunzel sings “I see the light” during the lantern scene, audiences simultaneously perceive the literal image of floating lanterns and the emotional awakening it represents, with neither layer canceling the other. The high proportion of connotative words further suggests that the song’s primary function is not to describe the visual spectacle—the animation handles that—but to mark the characters’ internal transformation.

This semantic layering is confirmed by the componential analysis, which reveals that all five keywords gain the features +abstract, +emotional, and +relational in the song’s context, driven systematically by the narrative arc from isolation to connection. The most theoretically significant shift occurs with “blind,” where the construction “I was blind” paired with “now I see” forces a +temporary reading that a sentiment analyzer would miss entirely, supporting van Zaanen and Kantor’s (2023) argument that context-dependent semantic shifts require human qualitative analysis. At the discourse level, the song follows a deliberate semantic arc: Verse 1 establishes literal isolation, the first chorus fuses the literal and figurative, Verse 2 mirrors Flynn’s parallel isolation, the bridge shifts from

abstract "light" to the direct address "you," and the final chorus replaces "I" with "we," marking shared resolution. These choices mirror the film's core narrative of two isolated individuals finding each other and distinguish this song from other Disney duets such as "A Whole New World" or "Love Is an Open Door," suggesting the possibility of a typology of semantic arcs across Disney songs for future research.

Theoretically, the findings support Herrera's (2018) observation that concrete nouns develop abstract connotations through co-occurrence patterns and extend Byrne's (2016) literary reading by providing its formal semantic mechanism—systematic feature addition rather than isolated figurative language. More broadly, the study challenges static models of connotation (Cruse, 2011) in favor of a dynamic, discourse-sensitive view: connotation is not a fixed lexical property but is negotiated through narrative positioning, repetition, and temporal contrast. The principle of semantic expansion through narrative context proposed here may extend beyond song lyrics to other forms where language thematizes transformation, including novels, films, and political rhetoric. Finally, the replicable procedures developed in this study offer a methodological template for future research and a potential basis for training more nuanced computational models capable of detecting semantic features such as temporality and relational expansion.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated how emotional meaning is constructed through mood in Hozier's "Work Song" by applying a qualitative semantic analysis to its lyrics. The lexical semantic tagging revealed that the song's dominant mood is not devotion alone but a hybrid of devotion (33.1%) and defiance (22.5%), demonstrating that its emotional meaning cannot be reduced to a single affective category. The componential analysis further identified semantic inversion through context as the primary meaning-construction mechanism, whereby words conventionally carrying negative features—such as "grave" (+final) and "crawl" (-volitional)—acquire transformed meanings within the song's discourse environment. At the discourse level, the mood map traces a clear emotional arc from Lonely Labor through Defiant Devotion, Playful Devotion, and Conditional Defiance, before resolving into a settled commitment in the outro, where the repeated phrase "I'll crawl home to her" gradually strips away all other semantic content until only certainty remains. Three patterns drive this arc: binary opposition followed by inversion, reinforcement through repetition, and paradoxical juxtaposition of contrasting emotional valences. Taken together, the findings confirm that "Work Song" constructs its emotional resonance not through isolated figurative words but through the dynamic interaction of devotion, defiance, sorrow, and hope across its full structural trajectory—a process that the replicable three-stage method developed here has successfully operationalized and that may serve as a template for future semantic studies of mood in popular song lyrics.

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