

Semantic Study of Idiomatic Expressions in Taylor Swift's "Dancing with Our Hands Tied" Lyrics

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Abstract: Idiomatic expressions are an essential component of language, often used in literature and music to convey complex emotions and abstract ideas. In the realm of contemporary music, particularly pop lyrics, idioms play a crucial role in enhancing expressive depth. However, there remains limited research on how idioms function within modern song lyrics. This study aims to analyze the use of idiomatic expressions in Taylor Swift's song "Dancing with Our Hands Tied" to explore how figurative language contributes to lyrical meaning. Addressing this gap, the research employs a qualitative method, collecting data through close observation, including repeated listening and textual analysis of the lyrics. The idioms identified were analyzed using Seidl and McMordie's classification framework. The findings reveal 22 idiomatic expressions categorized into nine types, including key words with idiomatic uses, idioms with nouns and adjectives, idiomatic pairs, idioms with prepositions, phrasal verbs, verbal idioms, idioms with special subjects, idioms with key words from specific categories, and idioms with comparison. These idioms are shown to reflect emotional tension, love, and inner conflict. The findings suggest that Taylor Swift effectively employs idiomatic language to convey the emotional complexities and nuanced experiences associated with love, thereby enhancing the expressive power of her lyrics.

Keywords: Idiomatic Expression, Semantics, Figurative Language, Song

Abstrak: Ungkapan idiomatik merupakan komponen penting bahasa, sering digunakan dalam sastra dan musik untuk menyampaikan emosi yang kompleks dan gagasan abstrak. Dalam ranah musik kontemporer, khususnya lirik pop, idiom memainkan peran krusial dalam meningkatkan kedalaman ekspresi. Namun, penelitian tentang bagaimana idiom berfungsi dalam lirik lagu modern masih terbatas. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis penggunaan ungkapan idiomatik dalam lagu Taylor Swift "Dancing with Our Hands Tied" untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana bahasa kiasan berkontribusi pada makna lirik. Untuk mengatasi kesenjangan ini, penelitian ini mengadopsi metode kualitatif, dengan data dikumpulkan melalui observasi yang cermat, termasuk mendengarkan berulang kali dan analisis tekstual lirik. Idiom yang teridentifikasi dianalisis menggunakan kerangka klasifikasi Seidl dan McMordie. Temuan ini mengungkap 22 ungkapan idiomatik yang dikategorikan ke dalam sembilan jenis, seperti kata kunci dengan penggunaan idiomatik, idiom dengan kata benda dan kata sifat, pasangan idiomatik, idiom dengan preposisi, frasa verbal, idiom verbal, idiom dengan subjek khusus, idiom dengan kata kunci dari kategori khusus, dan idiom dengan perbandingan. Ungkapan-ungkapan ini terbukti mencerminkan ketegangan emosional, cinta, dan konflik batin. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa Taylor Swift secara efektif menggunakan bahasa idiomatik untuk menyampaikan kompleksitas emosional dan pengalaman bernalar yang berkaitan dengan cinta, sehingga meningkatkan daya ekspresif lirik-liriknya.

Kata Kunci: Ekspresi Idiomatik, Semantik, Bahasa Figuratif, Lagu

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is not merely a medium for communication; it is a powerful tool for expressing emotions, conveying cultural values, and revealing deeper, often abstract meanings. Communication is the process through which individuals share messages within the context of social relationships (Effendy, 2008). In the realm of music, communication transcends spoken interaction; songwriters convey meaning through lyrics, embedding rich layers of emotion and nuance within their songs. One prominent linguistic technique in songwriting is the use of figurative language, particularly idiomatic expressions, which contribute to both the song's poetic artistry and emotional depth.

Idiomatic expressions differ from other forms of figurative language, such as metaphor. While metaphors involve symbolic comparison (e.g., "time is a thief"), idioms are fixed phrases whose meanings cannot be inferred from the literal definitions of their words (Seidl, J., & McMordie, 1988). For instance, the idiom "spill the beans" means to reveal a secret, though the words themselves suggest something quite different. In songs, idioms evoke vivid imagery, encapsulate emotional complexity, and resonate with listeners, yet their figurative nature often leads to misinterpretation, particularly among non-native speakers (Liu, 2008).

Several prior studies have highlighted the role of idioms in song lyrics. (Artadiyani, N. M. W., Mawa, I. W., & Wulandari, 2021) investigated idiomatic expressions in Westlife's

songs using Seidl and McMordie's theory. They identified two primary types: phrasal verb idioms and verbal idioms, with the former being the most frequent. Although many fans could sing the lyrics, few grasped their figurative meanings, demonstrating the need for deeper analysis. Similarly, Ayu (2022) identified 56 idioms in Adele's lyrics, classifying them into phrasal verb idioms, *turnure* idioms, and irreversible binomials. Puspita (2018) analyzed Mariah Carey's lyrics and observed a dominance of separable phrasal verbs and various idiomatic structures. These studies affirm that idiomatic language plays a central role in musical expression, yet its meanings often remain obscured.

In another study, Ariyani (2021) examined idiomatic expressions in Bruno Mars' songs and found four types of idioms, such as special categories, noun with preposition, verb with preposition, and preposition with adverb, highlighting how idioms contribute to the emotional tone of the lyrics. Trisnantasari (2017) conducted a semantic analysis of idioms in Ed Sheeran's songs and emphasized the importance of cultural context in understanding idiomatic meaning, especially among EFL learners. Meanwhile, Zahro & Djauhari (2025) focused on Billie Eilish's lyrics and reveals various types of idioms, including phrasal verb idioms and turn-of-phrase idioms, that reflect themes of emotional connection and loyalty. The findings demonstrate how idioms enhance lyrical expression and offer more profound insight into the artist's intended message.

Despite the increasing academic interest in idioms in music, research focusing on idiomatic expressions in Taylor Swift's lyrics remains limited. Taylor Swift is widely recognized for her lyrical sophistication and emotionally resonant storytelling. Her ability to incorporate nuanced language, including idioms and metaphors, makes her work a rich site for linguistic analysis. This study centers on one of her songs, "Dancing with Our Hands Tied," from the Reputation album, which powerfully illustrates internal conflict within a romantic relationship. The song features emotionally charged lyrics that employ idiomatic expressions to convey concepts of fear, entrapment, and vulnerability central to the listener's emotional experience.

While idioms and metaphors often coexist in songwriting, this study focuses strictly on idiomatic expressions, following Seidl and McMordie's framework. This distinction is essential to avoid conceptual overlap and ensure clarity in linguistic categorization.

Although the use of idiomatic expressions in popular music has been studied in general, there is a lack of focused research on single-song analyses, especially those that integrate semiotic and cognitive linguistic perspectives. This study aims to fill that gap by identifying and categorizing idiomatic expressions in "Dancing with Our Hands Tied" and exploring their function in enhancing the song's emotional narrative. The novelty of this research lies in its micro-level focus on a single song, combined with a theoretical approach that views idioms not only as structural units but also as meaning-making signs shaped by cognitive and emotional contexts.

By bridging applied linguistics, semiotics, and popular music studies, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how idioms function in lyrical expression. It also has pedagogical implications for language learners, particularly those who consume English-language music as a cultural and linguistic resource (Chik, 2015).

To guide this analysis, the study draws upon several key theoretical frameworks:

- 1) **Cognitive Linguistics** (Geeraerts & Cuyckens, 2007) posits that idiomatic expressions are grounded in conceptual metaphors—cognitive mappings that relate abstract experiences to more concrete ones. This framework will be used to explore how phrases like "*dancing with our hands tied*" metaphorically express emotional restraint and conflict.
- 2) **Metaphor Theory** (Sullivan, 2016) provides insight into how metaphors in idiomatic expressions transform everyday experiences into powerful symbolic narratives. Expressions such as "*through an avalanche*" or "*hands in my pockets*" will be examined in terms of how they enhance the song's emotional depth.
- 3) **Semiotics** (Chandler, 2022) allows for the exploration of how signs and symbols, including idioms, create meaning within cultural contexts. This theory supports the analysis of how Swift's idioms resonate with her audience by drawing on shared cultural and emotional references.
- 4) **Types of Idiomatic Expressions** (Seidl, J., & McMordie, 1988) offers a classification system that identifies nine categories of

idioms, including idioms with key words, phrasal verbs, verbal phrases, idiomatic comparisons, and others. This taxonomy will be used to categorize and analyze the idioms found in the song.

Through these theoretical lenses, the study endeavors to reveal how Taylor Swift's lyrical choices contribute to the expressive power of her music and to better understand the role idiomatic expressions play in shaping listener interpretation.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employed a qualitative descriptive approach, which is suitable for examining language phenomena in natural contexts, such as song lyrics. Zaimardiansyah, A., Heriansyah, H., and Inayah (2019) state that qualitative research involves the collection and analysis of non-numerical data, such as words, texts, or images, to understand concepts, opinions, or experiences. This method is particularly effective for interpreting figurative language and identifying patterns of idiomatic usage in lyrical content.

The subject of this study is Taylor Swift's song "*Dancing with Our Hands Tied*", selected due to its emotionally expressive lyrics and relevance to the study of idiomatic expressions. The data source consisted of official song lyrics, accessed through publicly available platforms, including verified lyric websites and streaming services.

Data collection was conducted using documentary observation, in which the researcher carefully reviewed and annotated the lyrics to identify idiomatic expressions. Observation, as defined by Marshall, C., & Rossman (2016), is a systematic process of noting and recording events, behaviors, or artifacts in the chosen context. In this case, the artifact under study is the song lyric as a cultural and linguistic text.

For the data analysis, the idiomatic expressions identified in the lyrics were categorized and interpreted using the framework proposed by Seidl, J., & McMordie, (1988). This framework categorizes idioms into several structural types, including phrasal verb idioms, verbal idioms, idiomatic pairs, idioms with prepositions, and others. Each expression was examined contextually to ensure its classification was accurate and reflected its figurative, non-literal meaning.

In terms of validity, the research employed theory-based triangulation by consistently referencing Seidl and McMordie's definitions during analysis to ensure conceptual accuracy. Contextual interpretation was also guided by the overall meaning of the song, which supports internal validity in qualitative linguistic research.

To ensure reliability, a clear set of coding procedures was followed to identify and categorize the idioms. The lyrics were reviewed multiple times to ensure accuracy and avoid misinterpretation or omission of relevant expressions. Moreover, because the lyrics are publicly accessible and fixed in form, they offer

high stability and consistency, which strengthens the reliability of the data.

This methodological design enables a focused yet in-depth analysis of idiomatic expressions in a contemporary pop song, providing insights into how figurative language enhances musical communication.

3. RESULT

The researchers analyzed the data from listening to and reading the song lyrics. After listening to and reading the song lyrics, there were some idiomatic expressions found in the “*Dancing with Our Hands Tied*” song by Taylor Swift. Based on the classification of idiomatic expressions, the researcher found that there were 22 idiomatic expressions obtained from the *Dancing with Our Hands Tied* song. The following are the lyrics to the song *Dancing with Our Hands Tied* by Taylor Swift:

*I, I loved you in secret
First sight, yeah, we love without reason
Oh, 25 years old
Oh, how were you to know?
And my, my love had been frozen
Deep blue, but you painted me golden
Oh, and you held me close
Oh, how was I to know?*

*I could've spent forever with your hands in my
pockets
Picture of your face in an invisible locket
You said there was nothing in the world that
could stop it
I had a bad feeling*

*And darling, you had turned my bed into a
sacred oasis
People started talking, putting us through our
paces
I knew there was no one in the world who could
take it*

I had a bad feeling

*But we were dancing
Dancing with our hands tied, hands tied
Yeah, we were dancing
Like it was the first time, first time
Yeah, we were dancing
Dancing with our hands tied, hands tied
Yeah, we were dancing
And I had a bad feeling
But we were dancing*

*I, I loved you in spite of
Deep fears that the world would divide us
So, baby, can we dance
Oh, through an avalanche?
And say, say that we got it
I'm a mess, but I'm the mess that you wanted
Oh, 'cause it's gravity
Oh, keeping you with me*

*I could've spent forever with your hands in my
pockets
Picture of your face in an invisible locket
You said there was nothing in the world that
could stop it
I had a bad feeling*

*But we were dancing
Dancing with our hands tied, hands tied
Yeah, we were dancing
Like it was the first time, first time
Yeah, we were dancing
Dancing with our hands tied, hands tied
Yeah, we were dancing
(Knew, we had our hands tied)
And I had a bad feeling
But we were dancing*

*I'd kiss you as the lights went out
Swaying as the room burned down
I'd hold you as the water rushes in
If I could dance with you again*

*I'd kiss you as the lights went out
Swaying as the room burned down
I'd hold you as the water rushes in
If I could dance with you again*

*Dancing with our hands tied, hands tied
Yeah, we were dancing
Like it was the first time, first time
Yeah, we were dancing*

Dancing with our hands tied, hands tied

*Yeah, we were dancing
And I had a bad feeling
But we were dancing
Hands tied, hands tied*

Based on Seidl and McMordie's (1989) classifications of idioms, here are the idiomatic expressions found in the song "Dancing with Our Hands Tied" by Taylor Swift:

3.1 Key Words with Idiomatic Uses

3.1.1 "I loved you in secret"

Explanation: The phrase "in secret" uses the key word "**secret**" in an idiomatic sense. The expression "in secret" is commonly used to indicate doing something covertly or without the knowledge of others. The word "secret" by itself typically means something hidden or confidential, but when combined with "in", it takes on an idiomatic meaning of keeping something undisclosed.

3.1.2 "I had a bad feeling"

Explanation: While "feeling" has a literal meaning, "**bad feeling**" is an idiomatic expression. It refers to a sense of unease or a foreboding that something unpleasant is going to happen, rather than a literal bad sensation.

3.1.3 "Lights went out"

Explanation: In the context of the song, the phrase has a deeper, metaphorical meaning. "**Lights went out**" is often used to symbolize the end of something, a sudden change, or a loss of hope. When combined with the act of kissing, "*I'd kiss you as the lights went out*", it can describe the final, emotional moment before everything ends or changes.

3.2 Idioms with Nouns and Adjectives

3.2.1 "My love had been frozen"

Explanation: The adjective "**frozen**" is used idiomatically here to describe love as being emotionally stalled or shut off. While "frozen" refers literally to the physical state of being solidified due to cold, in this case, it symbolizes emotional coldness or lack of warmth in love.

3.2.2 "Sacred oasis"

Explanation: "Oasis" is a noun, and "sacred" is an adjective modifying it. While "oasis" typically refers to a fertile area in a desert, the phrase "**sacred oasis**" is an idiomatic expression, emphasizing that the **bed** has become a place of sanctuary and safety, a very personal and intimate space. The word "sacred" adds a spiritual or elevated dimension, suggesting that it is cherished.

3.2.3 "Invisible locket"

Explanation: The adjective "**invisible**" modifies the noun "**locket**". The phrase "*Invisible locket*" is not a common idiom. Still, it serves as a figurative expression for something deeply personal and hidden away, much like a locket often contains a photo or keepsake that is kept close to one's heart.

3.3 Idiomatic Pairs

3.3.1 "We were dancing, dancing with our hands tied"

Explanation: The phrase "**dancing with our hands tied**" uses "**dancing**" and "**hands tied**" as part of a paired idiomatic expression. "**Hands tied**" typically refers to being restricted or unable to act freely, so combined with "**dancing**," the

expression suggests moving forward or struggling to maintain a relationship despite constraints. This combination of two elements (dancing and hands tied) creates a symbolic pair in the song, conveying how the couple remains emotionally engaged despite the challenges.

3.4 Idioms with Prepositions

3.4.1 "With your hands in my pockets"

Explanation: This expression uses the **preposition "with"** to form a phrase that gives an idiomatic meaning of indifference or detachment. In this case, "hands in my pockets" is an idiomatic expression suggesting non-involvement or emotional disengagement, as if the speaker is distant or passive in the situation.

3.4.2 "Through an avalanche"

Explanation: The preposition **"through"** in this idiomatic phrase indicates movement or progression despite difficulty. In this context, an avalanche is not meant to be taken literally, but rather figuratively, referring to a situation that is overwhelming or destructive. "Through an avalanche" suggests moving forward or persevering through challenges.

3.5 Phrasal Verbs

3.5.1 "People started talking"

Explanation: The verb **"talking"** in **"people started talking"** functions as a phrasal verb. While **"talk"** refers to speaking, **"start talking"** implies gossiping, discussing behind someone's back, or spreading rumors. In this case, it's a figurative expression used to indicate that others are commenting or making judgments about the relationship, putting pressure on the couple.

3.5.2 "Held me close"

Explanation: The phrase **"held close"** is a phrasal verb that suggests not just physical proximity but an emotional connection or intimacy. "Held me close" implies the act of embracing someone emotionally, keeping them near, and suggesting that the relationship is strong and protective.

3.6 Verbal Idioms

3.6.1 "I could've spent forever with your hands in my pockets"

Explanation: This is a verbal idiom where **"could've spent"** (a verb phrase) suggests a possibility or a missed opportunity. The entire phrase connotes an emotional or nostalgic reflection, where the speaker is imagining an idealized or unrealized future. It's figurative, symbolizing the idea of time being spent in a relaxed, passive, or undisturbed way.

3.6.2 "Put us through our paces"

Explanation: **"Put us through our paces"** is a phrase whose meaning is entirely non-literal and cannot be derived from the individual words. **"Put us through our paces"** is a classic idiomatic expression that means to test someone's abilities or to subject someone to difficult situations or challenges.

3.6.3 "Deep blue, but you painted me golden"

Explanation: Literally, it describes the change from feeling sad or deep **"deep blue"** to something bright and valuable **"golden"**, thanks to someone's actions or influence. Concerning the song, the lyric *"deep blue, but you painted me golden"* describes the emotional transformation in her life, from dark times to happiness due to the love she found.

3.6.4 "Swaying as the room burned down"

Explanation: The meaning can be interpreted as someone who remains in a relationship or situation, even though they know it is likely to end in ruin. There is both beauty and poignancy in this image, as if the characters in the song are dancing through the destruction, accepting or even enjoying what is happening, even if it does not last. In a non-literal sense, the lyrics "I'd hold you as the water rushes in" describe steadfastness and protection in the face of a situation that is approaching destruction or significant change.

3.6.5 "I'd hold you as the water rushes in"

Explanation: "Hold you" represents affection, protection, and emotional support. It suggests someone trying to hold on to something or someone amid a difficult situation. "Water rushes in" is often used to symbolize sudden change, overwhelming feelings, or even inevitable destruction. The water in this metaphor can represent deep emotions, sadness, or an uncontrollable situation. The overall meaning creates the image of someone trying to hold on to a relationship or feeling, even though it is heading towards destruction or significant change. There is a strong sense of desperation and love in this phrase, as if the individuals in the song are determined to stay together even though the situation is no longer under control.

3.7 Idioms with Special Subjects

3.7.1 "Through an avalanche"

Explanation: **Avalanche**, as a **metaphorical term**, is used in this song to represent massive emotional or situational challenges. The song's use of "avalanche" goes beyond its literal

meaning of a natural disaster and instead evokes a personal or relational crisis, where the lovers must navigate through overwhelming difficulties.

3.8 Idioms with Key Words from Special Categories

3.8.1 "Bad feeling"

Explanation: "Bad feeling" is an idiomatic expression where the **key word** is "feeling," a term related to emotions. This phrase uses "bad" to convey a sense of unease or foreboding, which can indicate anxiety or apprehension. In this case, "bad feeling" conveys emotional discomfort or a premonition that something is amiss.

3.8.2 "Gravity"

Explanation: The **keyword** "gravity" is a concept from the field of physics, but in this context, it is used figuratively to represent the powerful force that keeps the lovers together, despite external forces. This metaphorical use of "gravity" implies an invisible pull or inevitable attraction between two people, beyond their control. In the context of the song, "Cause it's gravity, keeping you with me" refers to the magnetic pull or inevitable force that keeps the lovers together despite external challenges.

3.8.3 "Frozen"

Explanation: "Frozen" is used here metaphorically to represent emotional coldness or being stuck, possibly indicating the speaker's love was dormant or unexpressed until a certain point.

3.8.4 "Golden"

Explanation: "Golden" is often used to describe something precious or idealized. It implies the

speaker's love or perception was transformed into something beautiful and cherished.

3.9 Idioms with Comparisons

3.9.1 "*Like it was the first time*"

Explanation: The phrase “**like it was the first time**” involves a **comparison** (using “**like**”) between the present situation and an experience, specifically the first time something happened. This idiomatic expression evokes a sense of freshness, novelty, or a fresh start, suggesting that the relationship feels as intense or exciting as it did at the very beginning, despite the passage of time.

Each of these expressions adds emotional depth, figurative meaning, and complexity to the song's lyrics, which contribute to the overall theme of love in the face of obstacles and challenges.

Through a detailed qualitative analysis, several idiomatic forms were identified, including phrasal verb idioms, verbal idioms, idiomatic pairs, idioms with prepositions, and key words with figurative meanings.

The findings revealed that idiomatic expressions are central to the lyrical and emotional structure of the song. Many idioms reflect internal emotional states (“*frozen*,” “*deep blue*,” “*bad feeling*”), interpersonal struggles (“*hands tied*,” “*through an avalanche*”), or metaphors of hope and transformation (“*painted me golden*,” “*gravity keeping you with me*”). These idioms not only embellish the lyrics but also shape the listener's understanding of the emotional depth of the relationship being described.

This supports Geeraerts & Cuyckens's argument (2007) that metaphorical and idiomatic language is not ornamental but conceptual, shaping how speakers and listeners construct and interpret experiences. For instance, the phrase “*dancing with our hands tied*” blends the joy of movement (dancing) with the restriction of constraint (hands tied), illustrating the emotional paradox of a constrained but passionate relationship.

In line with previous studies, which found phrasal verb idioms to be the most dominant in Westlife's lyrics, this study also observed frequent use of phrases that convey emotional or relational tension. However, unlike previous works that analyzed idioms across multiple songs, this study focused on a single, emotionally charged track, offering a deeper contextual and thematic analysis.

The study echoes findings by Ayu (2022) and Puspita (2018), who noted that many listeners can sing along with popular English songs but struggle to grasp the embedded idiomatic or figurative meanings. This reflects a broader gap between surface-level language comprehension and deeper interpretive understanding, especially for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners.

From a linguistic perspective, this study underscores the need for idiomatic analysis to extend beyond structural classification into semantic, pragmatic, and cognitive interpretations. It also highlights the pedagogical potential of using music as a tool to teach idiomatic expressions in ESL or EFL contexts.

Moreover, understanding idioms in music can enhance students' critical reading and listening skills, encouraging them to go beyond

literal interpretations and develop sensitivity to tone, metaphor, and cultural context.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of idiomatic expressions in the song lyrics of *Dancing with Our Hands Tied* by Taylor Swift, the researcher identified 21 idioms, which were classified into nine types: key words with idiomatic uses (3 idioms), idioms with nouns and adjectives (3 idioms), idiomatic pairs (1 idiom), idioms with prepositions (2 idioms), phrasal verbs (2 idioms), verbal idioms (5 idioms), idioms with special subjects (1 idiom), idioms with key words from special categories (4 idioms), and idioms with comparison (1 idiom). These idioms play a significant role in enriching the song's emotional and narrative depth by expressing themes such as emotional struggle, hidden affection, resilience, and vulnerability.

The findings of this study demonstrate how idiomatic language in popular music can function as a powerful tool for conveying complex emotions and enhancing lyrical storytelling. From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to the understanding of idiom usage within contemporary music as a medium of authentic, emotionally charged language. Pedagogically, it offers valuable material for incorporating idioms into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, using familiar and culturally relevant content to support learner engagement and idiomatic competence.

In conclusion, this research underscores the pedagogical potential of popular song lyrics in teaching idiomatic expressions and encourages further exploration of music as a resource in linguistic and literary studies. It affirms that idioms, when used effectively in lyrics, not only enrich artistic expression but also serve as accessible and meaningful input for language learners and researchers alike.

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