

A Linguistic Study of Derivational and Inflectional Morphology in Folklore's Lyric Composition

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Abstract

This study aims to explore derivational and inflectional word-formation processes, including regular and irregular forms in the song lyrics of Taylor Swift's Folklore album. It addresses two research questions: (1) What are the types of derivational and inflectional morphemes found in the lyrics? and (2) How do these morphemes contribute to the overall word formation in the lyrics? A total of 16 songs were selected from Taylor Swift's official YouTube Music channel to ensure authenticity and credibility. Employing a descriptive-qualitative research method, each song was analyzed word by word to identify words of derivational or inflectional word formation. The selected words were organized by song and categorized accordingly into each table on Google Sheets. Duplicated entries were eliminated to retain only one representative word for each song. The total number of words and each word formation were exhibited in Table 1, and each representative word from each subtype was arranged in Table 2, followed by a detailed morphological analysis in the discussion. Findings reveal regular inflectional morphemes such as -ed, -s, -est, etc., and irregular forms like was, were, didn't, etc. Derivational morphemes included -ness, -ly, -tion, etc. Furthermore, several words exhibited combined word formations, such as convictions.

Keywords: Morphology; Word Formation; Derivation; Inflection; Song Lyrics

INTRODUCTION

Song lyrics, as a form of linguistic art, provide a great deal of opportunities and resources for exploring word structure (Alberhasky & Durkee, 2024). They serve as expressions of what songwriters have seen, heard, or experienced. In delivering these messages, the selection of word structure helps songwriters effectively express their emotions or ideas (Alfiani & MZ, 2024). To enhance word structures imposing and striking, the use of derivational and inflectional word-formation processes becomes essential for songwriters. The album Folklore by Taylor Swift, released during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, is a compelling example of word formation, which explores themes of nostalgia, escapism, and love (McGrath, 2023). The lyrics in Folklore stick out for their lyrical expressions and narrative elements (Max, 2022). In crafting the lyrics, Swift frequently manipulates word forms and incorporates both derivational and inflectional morphemes to intensify emotional expression and narrative voice, which makes Folklore an ideal subject for linguistic study, particularly from a morphological perspective (Harrison & Ringrow, 2022).

To better understand the linguistic creativity found in Folklore, it is significant to first examine the theoretical basis of morphology. Morphology refers to the study of the internal structure of words (Aronoff & Fudeman, 2022). The core word-formation processes in morphology are derivation and inflection, which involve the addition of morphemes, such as prefixes or suffixes, to a base word. Morphemes, which serve as the building blocks of word formation, are the smallest meaningful units that cannot be further divided (Spencer & Zwicky, 2001). According to Lieber (2017), derivational morphemes contribute to the word formation of a new

lexeme, either changing its lexical category or altering the central meaning of the base word. In contrast, inflectional morphemes modify the grammatical features of a word to fit in a specific syntactic context without altering its core meaning (Aarts, McMahon, & Hinrichs, 2006). Derivation and inflection particularly play an important role in expanding and fostering vocabulary. Concerning this, Plag (2018) highlighted the productivity of derivation and inflection in English, noting its importance in creative contexts, such as poetry and song lyrics, where morphological word-formation processes are frequently involved and linguistic innovation often develops. Within the scope of morphology, Haspelmath and Sims (2013) identify two types of morphemes: derivational and inflectional morphemes. These foundational concepts underline the significance of derivation and inflection in forming both structural and functional aspects of English. With the framework of derivation and inflection, this study examines derivational and inflectional word-formation processes found in the song lyrics of the album *Folklore* by Taylor Swift. Furthermore, this study explores irregular word-formation processes that do not involve morphemes to provide a more comprehensive analysis of morphological patterns in the lyrics.

Derivational morphemes play a pivotal role in expanding a language's lexicon by enabling the creation of new words, either changing the lexical category or meaning of a base word (Haspelmath & Sims, 2013). For instance, the addition of the suffix *-ness* to the adjective *happy* forms the noun *happiness*, and adding the prefix *un-* to the adjective *kind* forms *unkind*. Lieber (2017) states that a derivational word-formation process occurs when a derivational morpheme, such as derivational prefixes or suffixes, is added to the beginning or the end of a base word, either changing its grammatical category or meaning. Lieber and Štekauer (2014) identify four types of derivational word-formation processes: nominal derivation (nominalization), verbal derivation (verbalization), adjectival derivation (adjectivalization), and adverbial derivation (adverbialization). For example, the noun *movement* is derived from the verb *move*, and the verb *modernize* is derived from the adjective *modern*. Furthermore, derivational word-formation processes in English are productive, especially in creative contexts, such as song lyrics, which contain various types of derivational forms (Plag, 2018).

In addition to these creative functions, inflectional morphemes demonstrate essential materials for maintaining grammatical coherence in English, as they modify words to express tense, number, aspect, case, or agreement without altering their core meaning or lexical category (Haspelmath & Sims, 2013). For example, the suffix *-s* in *books* shows the plurality, and *-ed* in *walked* indicates the past tense. According to Booji (2012), inflectional morphemes are often positioned at the outermost edge of a word, following any derivational morphemes. Furthermore, Aarts, McMahon, and Hinrichs (2006) categorize inflectional word-formation processes into three categories: nouns, verbs, and adjectives. Within these categories, inflectional word-formation processes function, and the primary function of inflectional morphemes is to show grammatical relationships within sentences, ensuring syntactic clarity and coherence (Bauer, 1983).

Previous studies on morphological analysis have underscored the significance of derivation and inflection within both creative and narrative contexts. Siboro and Bram (2020) examined the Brothers Grimm's *Rapunzel*, focusing solely on derivational word-formation processes, and demonstrated how derivational affixes enrich descriptive language. In contrast, Afri and Maulina (2021) explored Adele's song lyrics, examining both derivational and inflectional morphemes. Their findings highlighted the role of derivational suffixes in lexical expansion and the function of inflectional morphemes in maintaining grammatical accuracy and temporal clarity. However, both studies primarily focused on regular morphological processes, offering limited analysis of irregular forms. Furthermore, their explanations of each word-formation process lacked in-depth structural and functional analysis. To address these gaps, the present study analyzes both regular and irregular word-formation processes within the morphological

framework, across all 16 songs from Taylor Swift's Folklore album. By providing a more detailed morphological description, this study aims to present a comprehensive understanding of the structural and functional roles of morphemes in contemporary song lyrics.

In line with these aims, this study identified words that contain derivational or inflectional morphemes in the song lyrics of the album Folklore. The analysis of morphological structures of these words is conducted within the theoretical framework proposed by Aarts, McMahon, and Hinrichs (2006). Accordingly, the study classifies the types of derivational and inflectional morphemes found in the song lyrics and categorizes them according to their respective word-formation processes.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive-qualitative research method to provide a detailed analysis of the morphological structures in the song lyrics of the album Folklore by Taylor Swift (Furidha, 2023). The data were captured from the original lyrics of 16 songs in Folklore on YouTube Music, Taylor Swift's official channel, to ensure accuracy and credibility. All 16 songs were selected as original materials, which provide a plentiful variety of word forms that demonstrate derivational and inflectional processes. Intrinsically, this study concentrated on analyzing data based on the framework of morphology with a specific focus on derivational and inflectional word-formation processes.

This study utilized tabulation to categorize and facilitate the display of the classified data analysis. According to Mills and Gay (2018), tabulation supports condensing raw data into a more manageable form that organizes information into rows and columns for easy reference, analysis, and comparison. Furthermore, it is easier to grasp the overall gist of the table, especially if there are a large number of categories (Mills & Gay, 2018). All 16 song lyrics were analyzed word by word to identify words that show a derivational or inflectional word formation. Second, the selected words were arranged into the table of each song on Google Sheets and classified into either the derivational, inflectional, or combined word-formation (containing both derivation and inflection) category. Third, any repeated words were removed, leaving only one representative word for each song. Fourth, the total number of words, derivational, inflectional, and combined word-formation processes was exhibited in Table 1. Fifth, each representative word from each subtype was arranged in Table 2. Last, a detailed analysis of each case of derivational, inflectional, and combined processes was provided in the discussion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This section presents the results of the morphological analysis conducted on the song lyrics from Taylor Swift's Folklore album, focusing on derivational and inflectional word-formation processes. The total number of words, derivational, inflectional, and combined word-formation processes is displayed in the table below. A detailed description of each subtype of derivational, inflectional, and combined forms is accompanied in the discussion that links the linguistic patterns to their structural and functional roles in the lyrical context. The analysis reveals a wide range of morphological features, including both regular and irregular forms. Furthermore, the analysis accounts for irregular word-formation processes that fall outside traditional morphology but still reflect meaningful morphological variations. This comprehensive approach offers a clear understanding of how word-formation processes are structured and function in song lyrics.

Table 1. Number Of Words And Each Word Formation

No.	Song Title	Total Word	Derivational Form	Inflectional Form	Combined Form
1	The 1	17	3	14	0
2	Cardigan	12	2	10	0
3	The last great American dynasty	21	9	12	0
4	Exile	15	4	11	0
5	My tears ricochet	10	1	9	0
6	Mirrorball	14	3	10	1
7	Seven	13	3	10	0
8	August	11	1	10	0
9	This is me trying	17	3	14	0
10	Illicit affairs	13	4	9	0
11	Invisible string	15	5	10	0
12	Mad woman	9	2	7	0
13	Epiphany	6	0	6	0
14	Betty	14	2	11	1
15	Peace	13	2	9	2
16	Hoax	13	3	10	0

Table 2. Representative Word From Each Subtype

No.	Subtype	Word	Word Formation	Song Title
1	Nominolization	<i>Madness</i>	Derivation	The last great American dynasty
2	Verbalization	<i>Breathe</i>	Derivation	Mad woman
3	Adjectivalization	<i>Different</i>	Derivation	The 1
4	Adverbialization	<i>Ferociously</i>	Derivation	Seven
5	Plural noun	<i>Arms</i>	Inflection	Exile
6	Plural pronoun	<i>Those</i>	Inflection	Exile
7	Present participle	<i>Meaning</i>	Inflection	Seven
8	Regular past participle	<i>Twisted</i>	Inflection	August
9	Irregular past participle	<i>Stolen</i>	Inflection	Illicit affairs
10	Regular past tense verb	<i>Pulled</i>	Inflection	This is me trying

11	Irregular past tense verb	<i>Gave</i>	Inflection	Invisible string
12	Irregular present-tense plural verb	<i>Are</i>	Inflection	August
13	Irregular past-tense singular verb	<i>Was</i>	Inflection	August
14	Irregular past-tense plural verb	<i>Were</i>	Inflection	August
15	Irregular past perfect auxiliary verb	<i>Had</i>	Inflection	The last great American dynasty
16	Irregular past auxiliary verb	<i>Didn't</i>	Inflection	My tears ricochet
17	Irregular first-person singular	<i>Am</i>	Inflection	Hoax
18	Regular third-person singular	<i>Goes</i>	Inflection	The last great American dynasty
19	Irregular third-person singular	<i>Is</i>	Inflection	Seven
20	Regular superlative adjective	<i>Better</i>	Inflection	August
21	Irregular comparative adjective	<i>Greatest</i>	Inflection	The 1
22	Nominolization & Pluralization	<i>Convictions</i>	Derivation & Inflection	Peace

Discussion

I. Derivational Word Formation

Several derivational word-formation processes in the *Folklore* album were found. According to Lieber and Štekauer (2014), there are four types of derivational word-formations: nominal derivation (nominalization), verbal derivation (verbalization), adjectival derivation (adjectivalization), and adverbial derivation (adverbialization). In these song lyrics, nominalization and adjectivalization are most frequent.

First of all, the word *madness* in the lyric line “Free of women with madness, their men and bad habits” demonstrates a nominalization. Several parts of speech, such as verbs and adjectives, can become nouns through a derivational word-formation process. In this case, the noun *madness* is derived from the adjective *mad*, adding the derivational suffix *-ness* to the end of the root word *mad*. It is used after the preposition *with* in the line. A noun or gerund can be located subsequent to a preposition. *Madness* is situated after *with* as a noun. Secondly, *breathe* in “Now I breathe flames each time I talk.” shows a verbalization. The base word of *breathe* is *breath*, which is a noun. By adding the derivational suffix *-e* to the end of *breath*, it becomes the verb *breathe*. It is employed as a simple present tense verb after the subject *I* in the lyric line. Next, *different* in “If one thing had been different, would everything be different today?” is derived from the root word *differ*, which is a verb. Therefore, it demonstrates an adjectivalization from a verb to an adjective, by attaching the suffix *-ent* to the end of *differ*. *Different* appears twice in the lyric line. Both are used to modify the subjects *one*

thing and *everything*, completing the subjects' meaning. Lastly, the word *ferociously* in "I used to scream ferociously." indicates an adverbialization from an adjective to an adverb. The base word of *ferociously* is *ferocious*. By adding the suffix *-ly* to the end of *ferocious*, which is usually used for making an adverb from an adjective, it becomes the adverb *ferociously*. It describes the verb *scream* in the lyric line, demonstrating how the action was performed.

II. Inflectional Word Formation

Inflectional word-formation processes were most dominant in *Folklore*. The number of inflectional word formations is vast compared to derivational and combined word formations. According to Aarts, McMahon, and Hinrichs (2006), inflectional word-formation processes can be classified into three grammatical classes: nouns, verbs, and adjectives. Within the noun category, two distinct subtypes of inflection were identified: plural nouns, typically marked by the regular inflectional suffixes *-s* or *-es*, such as *films* and *clues*, and plural pronouns. These forms serve the primary grammatical function of expressing number agreement. Within the verb category, a wide range of inflectional subtypes were found. These include the present participle, regular and irregular past participles, regular and irregular past-tense verbs, irregular present-tense plural verb, irregular past-tense singular and plural verbs, irregular past perfect auxiliary verb, irregular past auxiliary verb, irregular first-person singular, and regular and irregular third-person singulars. Lastly, the adjective category includes the regular superlative adjective form marked by *-est* and the irregular comparative adjective forms, which do not follow regular suffixation patterns.

1. Nouns

There are two representatives from each subtype in the noun categories. English plural nouns are usually formed by adding either the suffix *-s* or *-es* to the end of countable nouns. However, there are irregular nouns that are not involved with any morphemes to become the plural forms.

The word *arms* in the lyric line "With his arms around your body" is formed by adding the inflectional suffix *-s*, which indicates plurality, to the end of its base word *arm*, altering its quantity without influencing its lexical category or core meaning. It is used in the full prepositional phrase, which demonstrates possession and accompaniment. On the other hand, *those* in "Those eyes add insult to injury." is the irregular plural form of the demonstrative pronoun *that*. It is used in the full noun phrase *those eyes*. It does not contain any morphemes to be plural but changes its form entirely. Functionally, *those* modify the noun *eyes*, specifying which eyes the speaker in the lyric line is referring to.

2. Verbs

Thirteen representatives of each subtype demonstrate the inflectional word-formation processes within the verb category. To become past tense verbs or past participles, the suffix *-ed* is added to the end of regular present verbs. However, irregular verbs do not follow this conventional grammatical pattern. On the other hand, the inflectional suffix *-ing* is used to make a present participle. Furthermore, the suffixes *-s* or *-es* are utilized to make regular third-person singular verbs in cases where the subjects are singular.

The word *meaning* in the lyric line “And I’ve been meaning to tell you” is formed by adding the inflectional suffix *-ing* to the end of the root word *mean* to become a present participle. Basically, present participles themselves are considered as adjectives. However, *meaning* in the context of the song lyrics is used in the verb phrase *have been meaning* with other words, which is the present perfect progressive tense. It shows an ongoing intention or desire that began in the past and continues up to the present. Therefore, it functions as a verb in that context. Next, *twisted* in “And I can see us twisted in bedsheets.” is the regular past participle of the verb *twist*, formed by adding the suffix *-ed* to the end of it. In the lyric line, the word *twisted* functions as a subject complement of *us*, describing the state or condition of it as entangled or wrapped up in bedsheets. Last, *stolen* in “And clandestine meetings and stolen stares” is an irregular past participle, not formed by attaching the regular suffix *-ed*. It does not follow the regular grammatical pattern of inflectional word formation. The base word of it is *steal*, and it becomes *stolen* as the past participle. It describes the type of *stares* in the lyric line, emphasizing their furtive or hidden nature.

The words *pulled* and *gave* in the lyric lines “Pulled the car off the road to the lookout” and “Gave me no compasses, gave me no signs” are past-tense verbs. While *pulled* follows the regular grammatical past tense patterns, adding the suffix *-ed* to the end of its root word *pull*, the word *gave* does not contain any morphemes to be the past form, which is an irregular past tense verb. Comparing the words *pulled* with *twisted*, both words employ the same suffix *-ed*. However, they function differently depending on context, even though the same suffix is used. Whereas *pulled* functions as a past tense verb, the word *twisted* functions as a past participle. *Pulled* is used as a phrasal verb with the preposition *off*, modifying the action performed by the implied or stated elsewhere subject. *Gave* symbolically demonstrates that the speaker received no guidance or direction, implying feeling lost or uncertain.

The base word of *are*, *was*, and *were* in the lyric lines “Whispers of 'Are you sure?'”, “For me, it was enough.”, and “Back when we were still changin' for the better” is the same as *be*. The three words have irregular patterns. First, *are* is used for the second and third person plural present tense. It functions as the copula (linking verb) connecting the subject *you* to the adjective *sure*, meaning to ask about certainty or confirmation. Next, *was* is employed for the first and third person singular. It also functions as the copula linking the subject *it* to the adjective *enough*, indicating a state or condition in the past. Last, *were* is used for second person singular and all plural subjects in the past. It is employed with the other word in the verb phrase, forming the past continuous tense. All three words show subject-verb agreement in the respective tense.

Both words *had* and *didn't* function as auxiliary verbs in the lyric lines “The doctor had told him to settle down” and “I didn't have it in myself to go with grace”. *Had* functions as an auxiliary verb in the past perfect tense, *had told*, whose structure is *had* + *pp* (past participle) and does not carry meaning by itself, but indicates tense and aspect. It supports indicating that the doctor’s action happened earlier than another past event, possibly “settling down” or the events that followed. *Didn't* is a contraction of *did not* and is utilized as a past tense auxiliary in negative sentence constructions. It expresses something that did not happen or was not true in the past, adding a tone of regret or inner conflict by utilizing the verb phrase *didn't have* in the lyric line.

The three words *am*, *goes*, and *is* are related to subject-verb agreement. First of all, *am* in the lyric line “I am ash from your fire.” is an irregular present tense verb, which is used with the first person singular subject to link the subject to the complement “ash from your fire”. Next, *goes* in “There goes the last great American dynasty.” is a regular present-tense verb, formed by adding the inflectional suffix *-es* to the end of its root word, *do*. The phrase “there goes...” is an idiomatic construction meaning “there it departs” or “there it disappears or falls apart”, describing the end or downfall of the American dynasty. Lastly, the word *is* in “Your dad is always mad and that must be why.” is the irregular third-person singular of the base word *be*. It acts as a copula connecting the subject “your dad” to the adjective “made”, expressing a consistent emotional state of the subject.

3. Adjectives

Two representatives demonstrate inflectional word-formation processes in the adjective category. Intrinsically, comparative and superlative are formed by respectively attaching the suffixes *-er* and *-est* to the end of the base words. However, irregular adjectives do not apply those morphemes to become comparative or superlative.

The word *better* in the lyric line “Back when we were still changin' for the better” is an irregular comparative form of the root word *good*, functioning to compare two entities in degree of quality. It acts as the object of the preposition “for”, describing the implied result or purpose of the change. It does not employ the regular *-er* suffix to become comparative. On the other hand, *greatest* in “You know the greatest loves of all time are over now.” is a regular superlative form of the base word *great*, formed by attaching the inflectional suffix *-est*, showing the highest degree of the adjective *great* in comparison. It modifies the plural noun “loves”, showing that these were the most significant, intense, or admired loves.

III. Combined Word Formation

When it comes to morphological word-formation, derivation and inflection can appear within a word. However, there are certain patterns and sequences in which word formation occurs first. One example below demonstrates combined word-formation processes.

The root word of *convictions* in the lyric line “I never had the courage of my convictions” is *convict*, which is a verb. By attaching the derivational suffix *-tion* to the base form, the derivational word-formation process occurs first, becoming *conviction*. Then, the inflectional suffix *-s* is added to the end of the word *conviction*. Finally, it becomes *convictions*, which derivationally demonstrates a nominalization from a verb to a noun and inflectionally shows a pluralization. In the lyric line, the word *convictions* refers to strongly held beliefs, principles, or moral values. Furthermore, it is used in the prepositional phrase “of my convictions”, which functions as the complement of the noun *courage*.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the morphological word-formation processes of derivation and inflection in the song lyrics of Taylor Swift’s *Folklore* album. By analyzing the lyrics of all 16 songs, this

study identified several regular derivational and inflectional morphemes. This study found 22 subtypes from derivational and inflectional word-formation processes. However, it could not find any morphemes in irregular word-formation processes since irregular words do not follow the regular grammatical word-formation patterns and do not involve any visible morphemes. Regular inflectional morphemes, especially tense markers (e.g., *-ed* & *-s*), played a pivotal role in maintaining grammatical consistency, while derivational morphemes contributed significantly to expanding lexemes and creating new word forms (e.g., *-ness* & *-ly*). Conducting this study is significant since it elucidates how contemporary music, especially song lyrics, can be a rich resource for comprehending English word formation and teaching morphological word-formation processes in creative contexts.

The implications of these findings are educationally impactful, meaning that they can be applied to English teaching and learning processes, especially in supporting students' understanding of word formation. For English language instructors, the results support the use of song lyrics in teaching vocabulary, particularly through morphological structures. Moreover, song lyrics provide plentiful opportunities and authentic examples of how words are formed and used in various tenses and functions. This study only discovers regular and irregular word-formation processes in both derivation and inflection. Future studies could expand upon this study by analyzing the foreign word-formation processes in song lyrics. This study contributes to the field of morphology by enriching the amount of derivational and inflectional morphemes in the song lyrics of *Folklore*. In addition, these findings are offered to English educators or teachers as valuable resources for teaching English vocabulary and word formation.

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