

# A Semantic Analysis of Polysemy in Conan Gray's "Wishbone" Album Lyrics

Cindy Natalia<sup>1</sup>, Nurma Dhona Handayani<sup>2</sup>

Universitas Putera Batam, Indonesia

<sup>1</sup> pb221210005@upbatam.ac.id, <sup>2</sup> nurma@puterabatam.ac.id

## Abstract

This study aims to analyze the use of polysemy in the lyrics of Conan Gray's *Wishbone* album using a semantic approach. The research focuses on identifying polysemous words, classifying their types based on Asher's (2011) theory of logical and accidental polysemy, and explaining how contextual meanings shape their interpretation. A qualitative descriptive method was applied, and the data were collected through document analysis of the official lyrics from twelve songs in the album. The findings reveal a total of 66 polysemous words, consisting of 45 logical polysemy cases (68.2%) and 21 accidental polysemy cases (31.8%). The dominance of logical polysemy indicates that Conan Gray predominantly uses systematic meaning extension, whereas accidental polysemy contributes symbolic and emotional complexity. The analysis demonstrates that polysemy plays an essential role in expressing themes of love, heartbreak, identity, and emotional vulnerability in the album. This research provides a linguistic contribution to the study of semantics in contemporary song lyrics and offers pedagogical value in helping EFL/ESL learners understand lexical ambiguity and meaning construction in authentic texts.

**Keywords:** Polysemy; Semantic; Song Lyrics

## INTRODUCTION

Language is one of the most fundamental means of human communication. Through language, people express thoughts and emotions to share meaning with others. The study of language and its structure is known as linguistics, a scientific field that explores how language functions in human life. Linguistics covers several branches, including phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics (Yule, 2022). Among these, semantics plays a crucial role because it deals with the study of meaning, how words, phrases, and sentences convey ideas and emotions (Lyons, 1995). One of the important phenomena studied in semantics is polysemy, the condition in which a single word carries multiple but related meanings. According to Cruse (2004), polysemy enriches linguistic expression by allowing meanings to shift and adapt according to context. Similarly, Fromkin et al. (2011) emphasize that polysemy reflects the flexibility of natural language, allowing one lexical form to express various related meanings depending on context.

Polysemy has been widely discussed in linguistic theory. Asher (2011) distinguishes two main types of polysemy: logical (regular) polysemy, in which the relation between meanings is predictable and systematic (e.g., school as an institution and a building), and accidental (irregular) polysemy, in which meanings are less predictable or metaphorically extended (e.g., mouth of a person and mouth of a river). Cruse (2004) also highlights that, unlike homonymy where meanings are unrelated, polysemy involves senses that share a conceptual link. These frameworks help linguists classify and interpret meaning variation across contexts. Song lyrics are a rich medium for semantic study because they combine language, emotion, and artistic expression. Lyricists often choose words that carry layered meanings to evoke multiple interpretations in listeners. This is especially evident in contemporary pop music, where words

can simultaneously express emotional, metaphorical, and literal meanings (Griffiths, 2006; Leech, 1981). Thus, examining polysemy in song lyrics helps reveal the complexity of how language is used aesthetically.

Conan Gray, an American singer-songwriter, is known for his emotionally charged and introspective lyrics. His 2025 album, *Wishbone*, explores themes of love, heartbreak, youth, and identity through poetic language and imagery. Many of his lyrics employ words with multiple meanings, creating depth and ambiguity that invite semantic interpretation. However, despite the growing academic interest in semantics and language in song lyrics, there has been no previous linguistic or semantic analysis of Conan Gray's *Wishbone* album. Research on semantics, particularly on polysemy and lexical relations, has been widely conducted in the field of linguistics. Many scholars have explored how words with multiple related meanings contribute to the depth and artistry of song lyrics. The following section presents six previous studies that are relevant to this research. Each study discusses polysemy or other lexical relations within different song lyrics, using various semantic theories and analytical approaches. Reviewing these works helps position the current study, *A Semantic Analysis of Polysemy in Conan Gray's "Wishbone" Album Lyrics*, within the broader context of semantic research and identify its novelty compared to existing studies.

The first relevant study, *Polysemy Analysis of Song Lyrics in Ed Sheeran's Album "Divide"* by Luli et al. (2025), explores how polysemy enriches the emotional and poetic qualities of Ed Sheeran's music. Using textual analysis and Asher's (2011) framework of logical and accidental polysemy, the authors identify words that carry related yet distinct meanings, deepening the emotional tone of the lyrics. Their findings show that Sheeran employs polysemy to enhance expressive depth and narrative resonance. In contrast, the present research focuses on Conan Gray's *Wishbone* album, which has not yet been analyzed from a semantic viewpoint. Azizah (2024) conducted a thesis entitled *Polysemy Analysis of Song Lyrics in the Album "The Tortured Poets Department"* by Taylor Swift. Using a descriptive qualitative design and Palmer's (1995) theory of polysemy, the study identified four types of polysemy: verbs, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs, with verb polysemy being the most dominant. The research demonstrated that polysemy enables deeper interpretation of Swift's poetic language and emotional expression. While Azizah focused on *The Tortured Poets Department*, this study investigates *Wishbone* by Conan Gray through a semantic approach to explore relational meaning patterns in pop lyricism.

Talohanas & Yuwana (2023) analyzed Katy Perry's lyrics in their study *Semantic Analysis: Lexical Relations in Katy Perry's Song Lyrics*. Drawing on Saeed's (2003) theory of lexical relations, they identified several semantic relations including homonymy, polysemy, synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, and meronymy. Their findings reveal that lexical relations enrich the meaning and emotional quality of Perry's lyrics. Unlike this broad analysis, the current research focuses specifically on polysemy as the central semantic phenomenon in Conan Gray's lyrics, providing a more focused interpretation of meaning and context. In another study, *Lexical Relations in Kelly Clarkson's Songs*, Guntar (2022) applied Saeed's (2003) framework to examine six lexical relations in Clarkson's lyrics using a qualitative descriptive approach. The analysis revealed that polysemy appeared most frequently among all relations, contributing significantly to the expressiveness of Clarkson's songwriting. While Guntar's study explored general lexical relations, the present research narrows the focus to polysemy alone in Gray's *Wishbone*, aiming to understand its semantic implications and emotional dimensions.

Dilapanga et al. (2022), in Polysemy in Justin Bieber's Song Lyrics published in the *Jambura Journal of English Teaching and Literature*, investigated the types of polysemy found across twelve of Bieber's songs. Using Asher's (2011) framework and a qualitative descriptive method, they discovered twenty polysemous words, equally divided between logical and accidental polysemy. Their research concluded that songwriters often reuse words with varying meanings to create nuanced expressions. While their work focused on classification, the current study extends this by interpreting how context shapes meaning and emotional tone in Conan Gray's lyrics.

Ahyaroni (2019), in her undergraduate thesis *A Polysemy Analysis of Song Lyrics in the Albums of "Thank You Allah" and "Forgive Me" by Maher Zain*, conducted at UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya, used a qualitative descriptive approach to identify polysemy types in Zain's spiritual songs. Based on Alwi (2003) and Palmer (1995), she categorized polysemy into verbs, nouns, and adjectives, finding verbs to be most dominant. The research concluded that polysemy enhances the delivery of spiritual and emotional messages. In contrast, the present study explores a secular context, focusing on how polysemy conveys emotional and personal expression in Gray's contemporary pop lyrics. While these studies demonstrate the prevalence of polysemy and lexical relations in song lyrics by artists such as Ed Sheeran, Taylor Swift, Katy Perry, Kelly Clarkson, Justin Bieber, and Maher Zain, none examine Conan Gray's *Wishbone*, a 2025 album rich in emotional intensity and lexical ambiguity. This research fills that gap by focusing exclusively on polysemy through a semantic approach, highlighting how multiple related meanings construct emotional resonance and interpretive depth in Gray's songwriting.

Based on this background, the present study aims to analyze polysemy in the lyrics of Conan Gray's *Wishbone* album using a semantic approach. Specifically, this research seeks to identify polysemous words found in the album, classify their types, and explain how contextual meaning shapes their interpretation. The study is expected to make both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it will enrich the study of semantics by providing real examples of polysemy in modern song lyrics. Practically, it may also serve pedagogical purposes in EFL/ESL classrooms, where understanding polysemy can help learners recognize lexical ambiguity, improve vocabulary comprehension, and appreciate how context influences meaning in authentic language use.

## METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method, which aims to describe and interpret linguistic phenomena as they naturally occur in texts. According to Creswell & Creswell (2017), qualitative research focuses on understanding meaning within a specific context rather than measuring variables. This approach is appropriate for semantic studies because it allows the researcher to explore how meaning is constructed in language use, especially in song lyrics.

The object of this study is Conan Gray's 2025 album *Wishbone*. The album consists of 12 songs: Actor, This Song, Vodka Cranberry, Romeo, My World, Class Clown, Nauseous, Caramel, Connell, Sunset Tower, Eleven Eleven, and Care. All tracks were analyzed in this research to ensure comprehensive data coverage. The data of this study consist of polysemous words and their contextual meanings found in the album's lyrics. The data source is the official lyric texts obtained from verified music platforms such as Genius and Spotify Lyrics.

Data were collected through document analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), involving careful and repeated reading of the lyrics to identify words that potentially contain multiple related meanings. A word was considered polysemous if it had two or more related meanings connected through extension, metaphor, or contextual shift, following the theories of Cruse (2004) and Asher (2011). Words whose meanings were completely unrelated were excluded and considered homonymous, not polysemous.

The data were then analyzed using Miles et al. (2014) interactive model, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. In the data reduction stage, irrelevant words were eliminated. In the data display stage, the selected polysemous words were categorized based on Asher's (2011) classification of logical and accidental polysemy. Finally, conclusions were drawn by interpreting how context influences meaning variation, supported by Cruse's (2004) theory of meaning relations.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

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### Discussion

This study aimed to analyze the occurrence of polysemy in twelve songs from Conan Gray's *Wishbone* album by applying Asher's (2011) classification of logical (regular) and accidental polysemy. The findings indicate that polysemy is a prominent semantic feature throughout the album. From a total of 66 polysemous words identified, 45 were categorized as logical polysemy, while 21 belonged to accidental polysemy categories. This result shows that Conan

Gray's lyrics rely more heavily on systematic meaning extension rather than on unrelated or coincidental meanings.

According to Asher (2011), logical polysemy appears when one word develops several connected meanings that follow a regular pattern of semantic extension. These meanings are generally predictable, such as physical objects becoming abstract concepts or concrete experiences evolving into psychological interpretations. This pattern is clearly represented in many of the songs. Words such as heart, face, world, door, grave, and ghost demonstrate extended meanings that are semantically related to their original sense. For example, heart, which originally refers to a physical organ, is used to signify love, emotional vulnerability, and attachment. In Asher's terms, this extension is logical because the emotional meaning is conceptually grounded in the physical role of the heart as a central and vital organ.

In "Actor", logical polysemy contributes to the theme of emotional deception and hidden truth. The word face does not only refer to a physical appearance, but also represents social identity and pretense. Likewise, the word actor extends its meaning from a stage performer to a person who pretends in real life. These meanings maintain a clear connection and reflect what Asher defines as regular conceptual mapping, in which one meaning grows naturally from another. Similarly, in "This Song", the use of logical polysemy reinforces the feeling of romantic intimacy. Words like heart, lines, and tracks are extended beyond their literal meanings to form metaphors of emotional connection and destiny. The word lines, for instance, refers not only to written words, but to hidden messages of affection. This systematic meaning shift aligns with Asher's idea that logical polysemy is rooted in shared cognitive and emotional experiences that allow listeners to intuitively recognize the relationship between meanings.

In "Romeo" and "Vodka Cranberry," logical polysemy further introduces themes of betrayal and emotional destruction. Words such as poison, grave, blade, and break extend from violent or physical meanings to psychological pain. In "Romeo," the phrase "grave of stone" does not only represent a place of burial but symbolizes emotional death and irreparable trauma. This interpretation remains logically connected because emotional suffering is metaphorically conceptualized as death or destruction, which fits Asher's concept of predictable semantic extension. While logical polysemy dominates the lyrics, accidental polysemy also plays a significant role, particularly in more symbolic and surreal expressions. According to Asher (2011), accidental polysemy occurs when a single form has multiple meanings that show no clear semantic link. In the album, expressions such as 11:11, wishbones, clovers, gaslight, kiss a ghost, and undead wedding demonstrate meanings that are highly dependent on personal, cultural, or situational interpretation rather than linguistic predictability.

In "Eleven Eleven," for instance, the time 11:11 does not simply refer to a moment on the clock. It becomes a symbol of superstition, longing, and a desperate wish for emotional reunion. The connection between time and emotional destiny is not logically derived from the word itself, but from cultural beliefs surrounding lucky numbers and wishes. Therefore, according to Asher, this is a clear case of accidental polysemy, since the meanings emerge independently rather than through systematic semantic development. In "Class Clown" and "Care," accidental polysemy is used to convey internal psychological conflict. Phrases like "blood will just start pouring out" and "parts of me that are yours" do not literally describe physical conditions, but rather emotional wounds and unsolved attachments. The relationship between the literal and figurative meanings cannot be semantically traced; instead, they rely on imagery and emotional metaphor, making them appropriate examples of accidental polysemy.

An important pattern observed in this study is that logical polysemy tends to dominate songs that focus on identity and self-discovery, such as *My World* and *Class Clown*, whereas accidental polysemy appears more frequently in songs that revolve around superstition, nostalgia, and emotional fantasy, such as *Eleven Eleven* and *Caramel*. This suggests that Asher's two categories not only classify words, but also reflect the emotional and psychological tone of the songs. Although accidental polysemy may appear similar to homonymy because the meanings seem unrelated, they are conceptually different. In homonymy, different meanings belong to entirely separate lexical items that merely share the same form (Cruse, 2004), whereas in accidental polysemy, the meanings are still historically or conceptually linked within a single lexical item (Asher, 2011). Therefore, the words identified as accidental polysemy in this study were treated as belonging to one lexeme with loosely related or metaphorically extended meanings, not as separate homonyms.

Overall, the analysis confirms that Conan Gray employs polysemy as an intentional lyrical strategy. Through logical polysemy, he constructs meanings that are psychologically relatable and linguistically systematic. Through accidental polysemy, he adds depth, mystery, and emotional complexity. Both types play a crucial role in shaping the narrative of heartbreak, hope, trauma, and self-awareness throughout the *Wishbone* album. Therefore, polysemy is not merely a linguistic feature in these lyrics, but an essential artistic device that reinforces both the emotional power and semantic richness of Conan Gray's songwriting.

## CONCLUSION

This study has examined the use of polysemy in twelve songs from Conan Gray's *Wishbone* album by applying Asher's (2011) classification of logical and accidental polysemy. The findings indicate that polysemy is a significant semantic feature throughout the album, with a total of 66 polysemous words identified. Of these, 45 words were categorized as logical polysemy and 21 as accidental polysemy, showing that Conan Gray primarily relies on systematic meaning extension to convey emotional depth and complexity in his lyrics.

Logical polysemy was found to be dominant in songs related to identity, self-reflection, and emotional awareness, such as *My World* and *Class Clown*, where words developed predictable and semantically connected meanings. Meanwhile, accidental polysemy appeared more frequently in songs involving superstition, nostalgia, and emotional fantasy, such as *Eleven Eleven* and *Caramel*. These findings suggest that both types of polysemy function not only as semantic features, but also as artistic and expressive devices that strengthen the emotional impact of the songs.

This research contributes to the field of semantics by highlighting how polysemy operates in contemporary pop lyrics. It also provides pedagogical benefits for EFL/ESL contexts, as understanding polysemy can enhance learners' awareness of lexical ambiguity, improve vocabulary comprehension, and encourage critical interpretation of authentic language materials. Future studies may explore other semantic phenomena or analyze different genres to further expand understanding of meaning in music and popular culture.

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