

Exploring Linguistic Processes In Ariana Grande's Songs': A Transitivity Study

Friska Dita

English Language and Culture Department, Faculty of Economics and Business
University of Widya Dharma Pontianak
friska_dita@widyadharma.ac.id

Abstract

*Ariana Grande returned to music in 2024, three years after her last album, *Positions*. She introduced the upbeat single "Yes, And?", which garnered significant attention, while "We Can't Be Friends (Wait for Your Love)" presents a more introspective and melancholic tone. This study analyzes the linguistic choices in both songs to uncover themes of empowerment, resilience, introspection, and emotional vulnerability through their transitivity processes. Data was collected by transcribing lyrics from AZLyrics.com. In "Yes, And?", material processes dominate with 22 occurrences, emphasizing action and assertiveness, while relational processes appear 20 times, focusing on identity. "We Can't Be Friends" features 36 material processes and 16 mental processes, highlighting emotional turmoil and deeper introspection, but lacks verbal processes. Future research should extend beyond Ariana Grande to explore various artists and genres, revealing how linguistic patterns reflect themes of love and identity. Studying changes in an artist's language over time can also provide insights into their artistic evolution, enhancing our understanding of the relationship between language and music in storytelling.*

Keywords: Transitivity, Processes, Ariana Grande, Songs, Lyrics.

Introduction

Language in song lyrics plays a crucial role in shaping meaning, evoking emotions, and conveying artistic intent. Researchers have long analyzed figurative language—such as hyperbole, metaphor, and symbolism—as a tool for artists to express their experiences in impactful ways. Studies have shown how hyperbole, for instance, amplifies emotions and enhances personal perspectives, strengthening the listener's connection to a song's message. Several studies have focused on specific artists, including Queen, Jamie Miller, and Maher Zain, to examine the types of figurative language used in their lyrics and how these elements influence interpretation (Hidayatullah, 2022; Datul et al, 2023; Nasrullah, 2023)

Similarly, research on various musical genres has highlighted how linguistic choices shape themes, values, and emotions. For example, an analysis of Haris J's lyrics revealed the role of figurative language in constructing meaning and cultural significance. These studies emphasize the importance of language in music and how artists craft lyrics to resonate with diverse audiences.

Beyond figurative language, another valuable approach to song lyric analysis is **Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)**, specifically Halliday's **Transitivity System**. This framework examines how different process types (material, mental, verbal, relational, behavioral, and existential) contribute to meaning-making. Ariana Grande's recent singles, "Yes, And?" and "We Can't Be Friends (Wait for Your Love)," present a significant opportunity for transitivity analysis. These works exemplify her artistic evolution and provide insightful material for examination. These songs showcase distinct lyrical styles—one emphasizing confidence and empowerment, the other reflecting introspection and heartbreak. Investigating their

transitivity patterns offers deeper insight into the themes and emotions embedded in Grande's lyrics.

Ariana Grande made a highly anticipated return to music in 2024, three years after the release of her last studio album, *Positions* in 2020. Following a period of relative hiatus, she reemerged with music that demonstrated artistic evolution and personal introspection. Her comeback generated widespread excitement, reaffirming her status as one of the most influential pop artists of the decade. (Aniftos et al., 2024).

Ahead of her album release, Grande introduced "Yes, And?", an upbeat and assertive single that quickly became a cultural conversation point. Many media outlets and fans interpreted it as a response to public scrutiny, particularly in light of speculation surrounding her personal life. Released during her filming of the *Wicked* movie adaptation, the song's bold lyrics and energetic production reinforce themes of self-empowerment, confidence, and resilience. Critics praised its unapologetic message, describing it as a declaration of autonomy in the face of external judgment. (Trust, 2024)

In contrast, "We Can't Be Friends (Wait for Your Love)" delivers a more introspective and melancholic tone, resonating deeply with listeners and music critics alike. The song's emotional depth and stripped-down production highlight love, loss, and self-reflection themes. Many praised its raw vulnerability, drawing comparisons to Grande's past works that explore heartbreak and personal growth. Its poignant storytelling further underscores her ability to convey complex emotions through music.

The success of Both singles solidified Grande's continued influence in contemporary pop music. The song co-"Yes, And?" achieved remarkable success by reaching the number one position on the Billboard Hot 100 and dominating both Spotify's global and U.S. charts. Additionally, it excelled across various UK rankings, including the Official Download, Physical Singles, Sales, and Vinyl Singles charts. It also debuted at number two on the UK Official Singles Chart and ranked 45th on the Official Charts Company's End-of-Year Singles Chart. "We Can't Be Friends (Wait for Your Love)" won Best Cinematography at the 2024 MTV Video Music Awards, peaked at number one on the Billboard Hot 100, and amassed 97.5 million streams as of March 14, 2024. Additionally, it reached number two on the UK Official Singles Sales Chart and number four on the UK Official Physical Singles Chart. These achievements highlight the commercial triumph of both songs and their cultural and emotional impact on audiences worldwide. (Denis, 2024; McIntyre, 2024; Trust, 2024; Trust, 2024; OfficialChart.com, 2024)

Examining the linguistic choices in Grande's lyrics offers valuable insight into how she crafts meaning and emotion through language. The dominant transitivity processes in "Yes, And?" and "We Can't Be Friends (Wait for Your Love)" help uncover their central themes, revealing how language constructs empowerment, resilience, introspection, and emotional vulnerability. This study aims to analyze the transitivity patterns in these songs, identifying similarities and differences in their linguistic structures. Understanding these patterns provides deeper insight into how Ariana Grande conveys emotions and messages, further demonstrating the power of language in shaping musical narratives.

Theoretical Review

Transitivity, as outlined in Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), plays a fundamental role in understanding how language represents human experiences. This framework provides insight into the complexities of human communication (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Fontaine (2013) emphasizes its significance in capturing complex experiences, while Thompson (2014) highlights its flexibility in allowing speakers to convey diverse perspectives and intentions. Within this system, verbal phrases (predictors) serve as central elements in structuring transitivity processes, effectively linking actions to participants (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Halliday categorizes transitivity processes into six types:

material, mental, verbal, behavioral, relational, and existential, offering a comprehensive framework for analyzing language and meaning.

Material Processes: Expressing Physical Actions

Material processes, a key component of Systemic Functional Grammar, describe physical or tangible actions performed by an entity. These actions involve two main participants: the Actor (who acts) and the Goal (who or what is affected by it). For instance, in the sentence "The child sings a happy song," the child is the Actor, while a happy song is the Goal. To identify a material process, one can ask, "What did X do?"—a question that helps distinguish these processes from other transitivity types. By analyzing material processes, we gain a clearer understanding of who is performing an action and its impact on others, offering insights into the dynamic nature of language and its representation of real-world activities.

Mental Processes: Representing Thought and Emotion

Mental processes focus on perception, thought, and emotion, converting internal experiences into linguistic expressions (Kristiano, 2021). These processes can be identified by asking, "What do you think/feel/know about X?" The senser, as a participant, is the person who engages in mental activities, such as thinking and feeling. This individual interprets and responds to different stimuli in their environment. The Phenomenon, on the other hand, is the object that the Senser experiences, which can include thoughts, emotions, physical objects, or abstract ideas. Understanding how the Senser interacts with the Phenomenon is important for analyzing how people make sense of their experiences. Gerot and Wignell (1995, p.58) classify mental processes into three categories:

- Perceptive (e.g., sensing, hearing, tasting)
- Affective (e.g., feeling, loving, liking)
- Cognitive (e.g., thinking, believing, understanding)

This classification illustrates the different ways individuals process and express internal experiences through language, reinforcing the depth and subjectivity of human cognition.

Relational Processes: Defining Identity and Attribution

Relational processes establish connections between entities by identifying or attributing qualities. These processes rely on verbs such as "is, am, are, was, were, have been, seem, become, weigh, and cost" to define relationships. Two key roles in relational processes include:

- Token and Value – used in identification (e.g., "Luna was the most beautiful girl in this school" → "The most beautiful girl in this school is Luna").
- Carrier and Attribute – used in attribution (e.g., "The cake is delicious" where cake is the Carrier and delicious is the Attribute).

While identification can be reversed, attribution remains non-reversible, highlighting its role in describing inherent qualities (Prasetyo, Situmorang, & Hutabarat, 2023). Relational processes are essential for defining, classifying, and attributing characteristics within language.

Verbal Processes: The Language of Communication

Verbal processes center around spoken communication, bridging mental and relational processes (Thompson, 2004). These processes involve four key participants:

- Sayer – the one who initiates speech
- Receiver – the intended audience
- Verbiage – the spoken content
- Target – the subject being discussed

For example, in the sentence "*She told him the truth*," *she* is the Sayer, *him* is the Receiver, and *the truth* is the Verbiage. According to Zhao and Zhang (2017, p.34), the Receiver is the person

being addressed, whereas the Target refers to the subject of discussion. Verbal processes highlight the role of spoken discourse in shaping interactions and meaning.

Behavioral Processes: Expressing Physiological and Psychological Actions

Behavioral processes blend material and mental elements, focusing on external manifestations of internal experiences. These processes describe actions like breathing, smiling, listening, and dreaming, which reflect both psychological and physiological states (Gerot & Wignell, 1994, p.60). Unlike other processes, behavioral processes generally involve a single participant, the Behaver, who actively engages in the action rather than merely sensing it. For instance, in the sentence "She sighed in relief," she is the Behaver, performing a physiological action that conveys emotion. These processes provide insight into how language captures human behaviors that exist between mental activity and physical action.

Existential Processes: Expressing Existence and Occurrence

Existential processes describe states of being, existence, or occurrence using verbs such as "be," "exist," "arise," and "occur." These processes typically follow a "there is/are" structure, differentiating them from relational and material processes, which focus on relationships or actions. For example, in "There is a storm approaching," the phrase "there is" signals the existence of a storm (the Existent). Unlike relational processes, which establish relationships, existential processes solely indicate the presence or occurrence of an entity or event. They serve a crucial role in expressing existence within discourse.

Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar provides a powerful framework for analyzing how language constructs meaning through transitivity processes. By examining material, mental, verbal, behavioral, relational, and existential processes, we can gain deeper insights into how language structures human experiences, emotions, and interactions. This approach not only enhances our understanding of linguistic expression but also reveals the intricate ways in which language reflects reality and shapes communication.

Methodology

The initial phase of the data collection process entailed the transcription of lyrics for two songs: "Yes, And?" and also "We Can't Be Friends". The lyrics used here were taken from AZLyrics.com. Personal preferences were considered alongside the commercial success of these songs, as reflected by their rankings on some charts, including the Billboard Hot 100 chart. This ensured the relevance of the chosen tracks for analysis.

Subsequently, a detailed examination of the primary data focused on identifying clauses containing transitive verbs, which indicate an action directed toward an object. To support this analysis, a table was created to delineate the six distinct transitivity processes. This framework facilitated a systematic examination of the lyrics of Ariana Grande's songs. The table documented the frequency of each identified transitivity process and highlighted the predominant types within each song, providing valuable insights into the linguistic techniques employed by the artist.

Findings and Discussion

The examination of the song lyrics enabled a comprehensive identification and detailed quantification of various transitivity processes. The results are thoughtfully displayed in Table 1, which provides a clear breakdown of the frequency and percentage of each identified transitivity process. This analysis reveals that each of the six transitivity processes—material, mental, relational, behavioral, existential, and verbal—is represented in the selected songs of Ariana Grande, highlighting the richness and complexity of her lyrical content.

Table 1. Total Occurrences and Percentage of Types of Transitivity Processes

Types of Transitivity Processes	<i>"Yes, And?"</i>	<i>We Can't Be Friends (Wait for Your Love)</i>	The Processes Occurrences	Percentage (%)
Mental	12	16	28	21,54%
Material	22	36	58	44,62%
Relational	20	11	31	23,85%
Behavioral	0	0	0	0,00%
Existential	0	0	0	0,00%
Verbal	13	0	13	10,00%
TOTAL	67	63	130	100,00%

In *"Yes, And?"*, the dominant transitivity process is the material process, with 22 occurrences, making it the most frequently used type of process in the song. Material processes represent concrete actions, reflecting the song's assertive and confident tone. This suggests that the lyrics emphasize physical actions and movements, reinforcing a theme of empowerment and self-assurance. Following material processes, relational processes occur 20 times, highlighting a strong focus on identity, characteristics, and relationships. This aligns with the song's lyrical content, which presents a declaration of self-worth and autonomy. The mental process, appearing 12 times, indicates moments where the song conveys internal thoughts and emotions, but it is less prominent compared to material and relational processes. Notably, *"Yes, And?"* is the only song between the two that utilizes verbal processes, with 13 occurrences, suggesting that the song places importance on communication, dialogue, or outward verbal affirmations. This reflects the song's message of addressing external scrutiny and standing firm in one's beliefs. The absence of behavioral and existential processes implies that the song does not focus on bodily expressions or existential statements, further reinforcing its emphasis on action and self-definition.

In contrast, *"We Can't Be Friends (Wait for Your Love)"* leans more heavily on material processes, with 36 occurrences, making it the most frequently used type in this song. This indicates that the song's lyrics focus on tangible actions, possibly depicting a narrative of emotional turmoil through real-life events. Additionally, the song features 16 mental processes, surpassing the number found in *"Yes, And?"*. This suggests a stronger emphasis on internal experiences, thoughts, and emotions, which aligns with the song's melancholic and introspective nature. The relational process appears 11 times, playing a role in defining relationships and identities, but at a lower frequency compared to *"Yes, And?"*. Unlike *"Yes, And?"*, this song does not contain verbal processes, suggesting that it does not rely on spoken communication or direct statements, but rather on personal reflection and action. The complete absence of behavioral and existential processes mirrors *"Yes, And?"*, reinforcing that the song does not depict involuntary expressions like sighing or laughing, nor does it emphasize existence as a theme. Overall, *"We Can't Be Friends (Wait for Your Love)"* relies on a mix of material and mental processes, creating a deeply emotional and narrative-driven experience.

Examining the total occurrences across both songs, material processes are the most dominant, with 58 occurrences (44.62%), indicating that both songs heavily rely on descriptions of actions and events to construct meaning. The second most frequent process is the relational process, with 31 occurrences (23.85%), emphasizing how both songs explore identity and relationships, though *"Yes, And?"* does so more extensively. Mental processes rank third, with 28 occurrences (21.54%), reflecting the significant role of emotions and thoughts in

shaping the lyrics. Meanwhile, verbal processes, which appear only in “*Yes, And?*”, account for 13 occurrences (10.00%), highlighting the importance of outward expression in that song. Behavioral and existential processes are absent, meaning neither song focuses on involuntary physical expressions or existential statements. This data suggests that Ariana Grande’s songwriting in these two singles is primarily action-driven, focusing on emotions and identity rather than existential contemplation or bodily expressions.

In short, “*Yes, And?*” and “*We Can’t Be Friends (Wait for Your Love)*” employ different transitivity patterns to enhance their respective themes and emotional depth. While both songs heavily rely on material processes to tell their stories through actions, “*Yes, And?*” incorporates more relational and verbal elements, reinforcing a theme of empowerment and self-definition. Meanwhile, “*We Can’t Be Friends (Wait for Your Love)*” leans more on mental processes, reflecting deep introspection and emotional processing. The absence of behavioral and existential processes in both songs suggests that Ariana Grande’s lyrical approach prioritizes deliberate actions, self-perception, and emotions over passive existence or involuntary reactions. These findings provide insight into how linguistic choices shape the storytelling and emotional impact of pop music lyrics.

Conclusion

The transitivity analysis of “*Yes, And?*” and “*We Can’t Be Friends (Wait for Your Love)*” effectively illustrates how Ariana Grande meticulously utilizes linguistic processes to articulate the overarching themes and emotional complexity present in her musical compositions. The first song presents a balance between action, internal reflection, and direct communication, creating a dynamic and assertive narrative that aligns with its empowering message. The second song, on the other hand, leans more heavily on actions and emotions while omitting verbal processes, reinforcing its deeply introspective and melancholic tone. These distinctions illustrate how language choices influence the way a song conveys meaning, whether through bold self-expression or quiet emotional introspection. The presence of material and mental processes in both songs underscores the importance of both external events and internal experiences in Grande’s storytelling, while the contrast in verbal expression between the two tracks signals different approaches to engaging with the listener—one directly addressing the audience and external perceptions, while the other remains more private and reflective. The absence of behavioral and existential processes further suggests that both songs focus on deliberate action and personal identity rather than unconscious reactions or existential musings. Ultimately, this analysis demonstrates how transitivity processes serve as a powerful tool for understanding the deeper layers of meaning in song lyrics, revealing how linguistic choices contribute to shaping the emotional and thematic essence of music.

Future research on transitivity analysis in music lyrics could extend beyond Ariana Grande’s work to explore a wider range of artists and genres, offering valuable insights into how different musicians construct meaning through language. For instance, analyzing transitivity in the lyrics of other contemporary pop artists such as Taylor Swift or Billie Eilish could reveal how linguistic patterns vary across themes of love, self-discovery, or social commentary. Expanding the study to other genres, such as hip-hop or folk music, could provide further depth by examining how artists use language to convey personal narratives, cultural identity, or social critique. Additionally, a comparative study between Western and non-Western music could highlight linguistic and cultural differences in the way artists express emotions and experiences through song. Research could also investigate how transitivity patterns evolve across an artist’s career, exploring whether shifts in language use reflect changes in artistic style, personal growth, or audience reception. By broadening the scope of transitivity studies in music, researchers can continue to uncover the intricate relationship

between language and music, deepening our understanding of how artists craft meaningful and impactful storytelling through their lyrics.

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