

Linguistic Ambiguity in The Lyrics of Ariana Grande's song : A Literary Interpretation

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Abstract

This study aims to identify types of linguistic ambiguity in Ariana Grande's songs using Stephen Ullmann's framework and to interpret the multiple meanings created in the lyrics. Using a qualitative textual analysis, the research examines five songs *Supernatural*, *No Tears Left to Cry*, *Break Free*, *Bloodline*, and *7 Rings*. The data consist of official lyrics obtained from AZLyrics and analyzed through identification, classification, and interpretation stages. The findings show two types of ambiguity: lexical ambiguity, which is dominant through polysemy, metaphors, and unclear pronoun references, and grammatical ambiguity through structures such as double negatives. Phonetic ambiguity does not appear. The study concludes that ambiguity is intentionally used as an artistic strategy, enriching emotional depth and expanding interpretive possibilities for listeners.

Keywords: *Linguistic Ambiguity, Lexical, Grammatical, Song Lyrics, Ariana Grande*

Introduction

Language in literature serves not just as a means of communication but also as a way to explore artistic ideas and complexities in interpretation. Language in song lyrics functions not only as a tool for communication but also as an artistic medium that expresses emotion, identity, and cultural meaning. In contemporary popular music, ambiguity and multimeaning often serve as stylistic strategies that invite listeners to interpret lyrics in various ways. This study explores linguistic ambiguity and multimeaning in selected lyrics of Ariana Grande, focusing on how her songs employ layered meanings that reflect emotional complexity and creative language use.

Linguistic ambiguity refers to the coexistence of multiple interpretations within a single word, phrase, or sentence (Empson, 1930). It may occur at different levels lexical, syntactic, semantic, or pragmatic and is often a deliberate technique in poetry and song to enrich meaning. Early scholars such as Empson (1930) viewed ambiguity as a hallmark of poetic language, while Leech (1981) and Grice (1975) emphasized that meaning in language depends on context and implication. Recent developments in Cognitive Linguistics (Evans & Green, 2018; Kövecses, 2020) and Stylistic Studies

(Simpson, 2004; Leech & Short, 2007) have deepened the understanding of how conceptual metaphors, schemas, and contextual cues shape multiple meanings in texts.

Ariana Grande's lyrics, known for their emotional depth richness, frequently contain ambiguous expressions that can be interpreted in contrasting ways between love and empowerment, vulnerability and strength, or spirituality and sensuality. For example, in songs "*Supernatural*" and "*No Tears Left to Cry*," language operates on both literal and symbolic levels, blending linguistic play with personal and cultural narratives. This duality makes her lyrics suitable for linguistic and literary interpretation.

Stephen Ullmann (1964) categorizes ambiguity into phonetic, lexical, and grammatical types. Phonetic ambiguity stems from sound similarities, while lexical ambiguity arises from words with multiple meanings (Crystal, 2008:23). Grammatical ambiguity, also known as structural ambiguity, involves multiple grammatical interpretations (Crystal, 2008:458).

Ambiguity is prevalent in literary works, including songs. Popular singer like Ariana Grande, known for her emotional, iconography, salient visual representations, and comprehensive pop-cultural dominance, often employ lyrics with implicit meanings. This research aims to identify ambiguity types using Ullmann's theory and describe the meanings of ambiguity and multimeaning depicted in selected song lyrics by Ariana Grande: *Supernatural*, *No Tears Left to Cry*, *Break Free*, *Bloodline*, *7 Rings*.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the growing intersection between linguistics and literary studies, emphasizing that popular music lyrics like poetry deserve scholarly attention functions as a bridge between language, emotion, and interpretation in contemporary musical art.

Therefore, this paper asks the following research questions:

Based on the background of issue the researcher identify of issue as follow "What types of linguistic ambiguity are present in selected Ariana Grande's song lyrics?"

Linguistic ambiguity have long been subjects of scholarly attention in both linguistics and literary studies. Stephen Ullmann (1964) categorizes ambiguity into phonetic, lexical, and grammatical types. Phonetic ambiguity stems from sound similarities, while lexical ambiguity arises from words with multiple meanings (Crystal, 2008:23). Grammatical ambiguity, also known as structural ambiguity, involves multiple grammatical interpretations (Crystal, 2008:458).

From a pragmatic perspective, Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle and theory of implicature suggest that meaning often transcends literal words, depending on context, shared knowledge, and speaker intention. Grande's lyrics exploit these pragmatic features, allowing ambiguity to emerge from context-dependent cues. For example, in "*No Tears Left to Cry*," the line "*Right now, I'm in a state of mind / I wanna be in, like, all the time*" suggests both emotional recovery and spiritual awakening.

Stylistic and discourse-based approaches (Simpson, 2004; Leech & Short, 2007) also inform this analysis, highlighting how linguistic form contributes to literary function. In "*Bloodline*," the recurring phrase "*Don't want you in my bloodline*" can be interpreted literally as rejecting genetic connection or metaphorically as emotional detachment. This layered usage aligns with Leech's (1981) notion of *foregrounding*, where unexpected linguistic patterns draw attention to deeper social and psychological themes. Similarly, "*Supernatural*" employs ambiguity between romantic and metaphysical experience. The lyric "*You're so supernatural, it's out of my control*" invites dual interpretation either the intensity of love or the transcendence of spiritual power illustrating.

Reader-Response Theory (Iser, 1978; Fish, 1980) provides further theoretical grounding for analyzing how listeners co-construct meaning. Ariana Grande's "*7 Rings*" exemplifies this interpretive openness. The line "*I see it, I like it, I want it, I got it*" may signify materialism, self-confidence, or feminist agency depending on the audience's perspective. Such interpretive multiplicity reflects Fish's argument that meaning resides not solely in the text but within the reader's (or listener's) engagement. Grande's use of linguistic repetition and assertive tone enables each listener to derive individualized meaning, reaffirming the interplay between language, emotion, and identity.

Furthermore, contemporary scholars such as Thornborrow & Wareing (2021) note that popular music functions as a site of linguistic innovation where ambiguity operates as a stylistic and cultural code. In Grande's discography, ambiguity enhances her public persona as both vulnerable and empowered an embodiment of postmodern identity fluidity. This aligns with Barthes' (1977) concept of *the writerly text*, in which meaning is open-ended and participatory rather than fixed.

In short, Ariana Grande's lyrics demonstrate how linguistic ambiguity functions as an artistic device that bridges linguistic theory and literary aesthetics. Through metaphor, implicature, and polysemy, her songs enact a dynamic process of meaning-making that invites emotional resonance and interpretive plurality. The integration of linguistic and literary frameworks from Empson's poetic ambiguity to Cognitive Semantics and Reader-Response theory reveals that ambiguity in Grande's songs is not confusion but creative multiplicity, enriching both linguistic and cultural interpretation.

Methodology

Research Design and Participants

This study employs a qualitative research design using a textual analysis approach. This method is appropriate because the research focuses on interpreting meanings that emerge from words and phrases in song lyrics, particularly those containing ambiguity. The aim of this study is not to produce numerical generalizations but to explore meaning interpretation within linguistic and aesthetic contexts. There are no human participants in this study; instead, the data source consists of five selected song lyrics by Ariana Grande: *Supernatural*, *No Tears Left to Cry*, *Break Free*, *Bloodline*, *7 Rings*. The data is in the form of song lyrics and downloaded through digital music platform www.azlyrics.com.

These songs were purposefully chosen because they represent a range ambiguity of which showcase Ariana Grande's complex and poetic language use. The lyrics demonstrate a strong presence of ambiguous that open multiple interpretive possibilities ideal for linguistic and literary interpretation.

Data Collection

The data of this study consist of five selected songs by Ariana Grande, chosen due to their expressive language style, that may generate ambiguity. The official lyrics were obtained from verified lyric databases and cross-checked with Ariana Grande's official music platforms to ensure accuracy. The data include words and phrases that demonstrate potential ambiguity. These songs were selected because their linguistic richness provides opportunities to examine how ambiguous meanings function within lyrics.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed through three major stages: identification, classification, and interpretation. In the identification stage, the researcher located words or phrases that carry more than one possible meaning, such as expressions like “*state of mind*” or “*supernatural*,” which may be interpreted in different ways depending on context. In the classification stage, each ambiguous expression was categorized as ambiguity, focusing on how a single item may present multiple potential meanings. These frameworks support the explanation of how meaning is constructed and how listeners contribute to interpreting ambiguous through contextual understanding.

Finding and Discussion

The analysis of the five Ariana Grande songs, Supernatural, No Tears Left to Cry, Break Free, Bloodline, and 7 Rings, reveals the presence of multiple ambiguities that contribute to layered meanings within the lyrics.

According to Stephen Ullman, ambiguity can be categorized into three types: phonetic, lexical, and grammatical ambiguity. In the context of this research, only two types, lexical and grammatical ambiguity, were identified in the selected Ariana Grande’s song lyrics . Phonetic ambiguity is excluded from the analysis because song lyrics, as literary texts, are presented in both spoken and written forms. The availability of written lyrics reduces the potential for phonetic misinterpretation, thereby limiting the relevance of phonetic ambiguity within this study.

a. Lexical Ambiguity

Lexical ambiguity is the type of ambiguity that occurs when a word in sentence has more than one meaning.

Datum 1: Supernatural

It's like supernatural

This love's possessin' me, but I don't mind at all

It's like supernatural

It's takin' over me, don't wanna fight the fall

From Ullmann’s (1962) perspective, the lyrics demonstrate deliberate lexical ambiguity through the strategic use of polysemous words such as *supernatural*, *possessing*, *taking over*, and *fall*. These lexical items oscillate between literal supernatural meanings and figurative emotional interpretations, creating semantic richness and emotional intensity. The ambiguity is not a weakness but a poetic device that allows multiple interpretive possibilities for the listener.

This is exemplified in “*It's like supernatural*”, where the word *supernatural* can simultaneously signify metaphysical forces and an intense emotional experience. Refers to phenomena beyond natural scientific explanation (e.g., ghosts, spirits, paranormal forces). This ambiguity arises from polysemy, where “supernatural” shifts from a scientific-religious sense to an emotional-metaphorical sense. The lyric allows readers to interpret love as either mysterious or metaphorically magical.

The lexical item “ *This love's possessin' me, but I don't mind at all*” the word “*possessin*” is polysemous and highly ambiguous, in literal meaning could be Spiritually or supernaturally controlling a human body or mind (e.g., demonic or spiritual possession), but in figurative meaning could be emotionally dominated or deeply influenced by intense love. Under Ullmann’s framework, this word represents emotive semantic extension, where a term from the domain of religion and the supernatural is

shifted into the domain of personal emotion. The ambiguity allows the lyric to simultaneously evoke danger and pleasure.

The phrase “*taking over*” operates as a lexically ambiguous phrasal verb. In literal meaning describe The act of seizing control by force (often used in military, political, or supernatural contexts), but in figurative meaning could be Emotional dominance, where feelings gradually overpower rational control. Following Ullmann’s theory, this reflects contextual polysemy, in which a concrete, physical concept of control is extended metaphorically to describe internal psychological processes. The ambiguity blurs the boundary between external invasion and internal emotional surrender.

The lyric “ *don't wanna fight the fall* “ the word “*fall*” is one of the most lexically ambiguous items in the lyric. In literal meaning A physical downward movement due to gravity, but for figurative meaning could be “Fall in love,” emotional surrender, or entering a vulnerable psychological state. According to Ullmann, this kind of ambiguity emerges from semantic broadening, where a concrete physical action develops abstract emotional meanings. In the phrase “*don't wanna fight the fall*,” the ambiguity allows dual readings: a physical loss of balance and a voluntary emotional surrender.

Datum 2: No Tears Left to Cry
Right now, I'm in a state of mind
I wanna be in, like, all the time
Ain't got no tears left to cry
So I'm pickin' it up, pickin' it up
I'm lovin', I'm livin' (Oh hey), I'm pickin' it up
I'm pickin' it up, pickin' it up (Yeah)
I'm lovin', I'm livin', I'm pickin' it up (Oh, yeah)

The phrase “*state of mind*” might indicate mental health or simply a mood shift. It can suggest an underlying emotional struggle, a cognitive condition, or a recovery process from negative experiences. Thus, the lyric could be interpreted as referencing the singer’s transformation toward a healthier psychological state. It reflects a change in attitude, such as choosing positivity after adversity. In this sense, the lyric expresses an uplifting change of mood rather than indicating any clinical mental context.

Lexically, it may denote a broad psychological condition, ranging from temporary emotional states such as mood fluctuations to more enduring cognitive or affective orientations. While the phrase can be associated with mental health in a clinical sense, within the poetic context of song lyrics it more commonly operates at a metaphorical level, referring to shifts in perception, attitude, or emotional perspective rather than diagnosable mental disorders.

Based on Ullmann’s theory, the meaning of “*state of mind*” in the lyric is not fixed but context-dependent and polysemous. The phrase embodies both literal and figurative potentials, yet the dominant reading is metaphorical, highlighting a shift towards a healthier emotional orientation. It symbolizes an uplifting cognitive and emotional transition, expressing empowerment and renewal rather than referring to any clinical mental health condition.

Datum 3: Break Free
This is the part when I say I don't want ya
I'm stronger than I've been before
This is the part when I break free
'Cause I can't resist it no more

The clause *"I can't resist it no more"* may refer to resisting love, expectations, or constraints in general. The clause *"I can't resist it no more"* contains lexical ambiguity primarily because the referent of the pronoun *"it"* is not explicitly stated in the lyric. As a result, the meaning of what is being *"resisted"* becomes open to multiple interpretations. The clause may convey the idea that the speaker can no longer resist romantic feelings. In this reading, *it* refers to an emotional connection or attraction toward someone, suggesting surrender to love or desire.

The clause *"I can't resist it no more"* exemplifies lexical ambiguity as conceptualised in Ullmann's theory of meaning, particularly through the mechanisms of semantic indeterminacy and contextual openness. The central source of ambiguity lies in the pronoun *"it,"* which functions as a semantically empty or under-specified lexical item because its referent is not explicitly articulated within the lyric. According to Ullmann, such ambiguity emerges when a lexical unit lacks a fixed denotatum, enabling a multiplicity of possible meanings that are only partially constrained by context.

Lexically, the verb *"resist"* also contributes to the ambiguity through its polysemous nature. In its denotative sense, *"to resist"* refers to an act of opposition, refusal, or self-control in the face of an external or internal force. However, Ullmann argues that words often undergo emotive and metaphorical extension, particularly in poetic discourse. In this extended sense, *"resist"* may signify an inner psychological struggle rather than a physical or social act of defiance. This semantic elasticity allows the clause to operate across several interpretative domains simultaneously.

Datum 4: Bloodline

Don't want you in my bloodline, yeah

Just wanna have a good time, yeah

And no need to apologize, no

But you gon' have to let this shit go

Don't want you in my bloodline, yeah (Don't want you in my)

The word *"bloodline"* can mean family heritage or a deeper emotional connection. It could imply avoiding romance leading to marriage, or avoiding deeper emotional involvement. In this interpretation, *bloodline* refers directly to biological lineage or family ancestry. The speaker's refusal *"not wanting someone in their bloodline"* suggests a rejection of long-term romantic commitment that could eventually result in marriage, having children, or forming a permanent familial tie. It implies that while affection or attraction may exist, the relationship is not intended to progress into something legally or genetically binding.

The lexical item *"bloodline"* represents a salient example of lexical ambiguity as theorised by Stephen Ullmann (1962), particularly through the mechanism of polysemy, whereby a single lexical form carries multiple related meanings. In its denotative sense, *"bloodline"* refers to biological lineage or genetic ancestry, denoting the hereditary transmission of identity through family descent. Within this literal frame, the speaker's refusal to allow someone into their *"bloodline"* can be interpreted as a rejection of long-term romantic commitment, especially relationships that could lead to marriage, procreation, or the formation of permanent kinship ties.

Datum 5: 7 Rings

You like my hair?

Gee, thanks! Just bought it

*I see it, I like it
I want it, I got it
Yeah*

The repetition of the pronoun “it” in the lyric “*I want it, I got it*” creates referential ambiguity because the referent of “it” is not clearly specified within the textual context. As a result, the audience is left to interpret what “it” represents. In the narrative of the song, “it” may refer to luxury goods, fashion items, or symbols of wealth and success. The lyric aligns with themes of consumerism and financial independence, allowing “it” to signify any desired tangible object.

The phrase may also refer to broader accomplishments such as career success, empowerment, or social status. In this reading, “it” symbolizes the ability to achieve goals and obtain what one wants in life. More abstractly, “it” can denote personal agency the freedom to make decisions and act without restrictions. Here, the lyric emphasizes confidence and self-determination rather than material desire alone.

b. Grammatical Ambiguity

This ambiguity is where a sentence may be interpreted the meaning in more than one way. Grammatical ambiguity is occurs because there are combination and blend of words with other words in a sentence.

*Datum 1: No Tears Left to Cry
Right now, I'm in a state of mind
I wanna be in, like, all the time
Ain't got no tears left to cry
So I'm pickin' it up, pickin' it up
I'm lovin', I'm livin' (Oh hey), I'm pickin' it up
I'm pickin' it up, pickin' it up (Yeah)*

The double negative structure can be interpreted literally as having tears, but idiomatically means having none, causing ambiguity in interpretation. Grammatically, in standard English, a double negative typically cancels itself out, which would result in a literal interpretation meaning the speaker actually has tears left to cry. This creates an interpretation in which the speaker still possesses emotional sorrow, contradicting the intended message.

The ambiguity arises because the lyric relies on idiomatic colloquialism rather than formal grammar. Listeners must decide whether to interpret the meaning through the lens of structural syntax or through culturally influenced usage. This grammatical ambiguity contributes to the expressive nature of the lyric by highlighting both vulnerability and empowerment simultaneously.

*Datum 2: Break Free
This is the part when I say I don't want ya
I'm stronger than I've been before
This is the part when I break free
'Cause I can't resist it no more*

Ambiguity arises whether “*break free*” modifies the action in the present moment or a metaphorical transformation. In this interpretation, *break free* implies that the speaker is currently escaping from a direct constraint or situation at that very moment.

The focus is on a present and concrete act of liberation, such as leaving a controlling environment or ending a toxic relationship. Because the lyric does not define what the speaker is breaking free from, the listener must rely on contextual inference. This ambiguity enriches the lyric with multiple possible meanings.

The findings of this study indicate that linguistic ambiguity serves as an intentional stylistic device in Ariana Grande's songs, allowing multiple interpretations to emerge from single expressions. Referring to Ullmann's (1964) categorization, ambiguity in language may occur at the phonetic, lexical, and grammatical levels; however, the analysis confirmed the presence of only lexical and grammatical ambiguity in the selected lyrics, as the written form of song texts diminishes the possibility of phonetic misinterpretation.

Lexical ambiguity was found to be the most dominant type, aligning with Ullmann's claim that ambiguity often originates from the multiplicity of meanings encoded in lexical items. This is exemplified in *Supernatural*, where the word *supernatural* can simultaneously signify metaphysical forces and an intense emotional experience. Similarly, the referential ambiguity of the pronoun *it* in *Break Free* and *7 Rings* enables diversified interpretations depending on listeners' perceptions. These cases support Ullmann's notion that lexical ambiguity broadens interpretive scope and invites semantic plurality within discourse.

The findings are also consistent with contemporary approaches referenced in the study. Pragmatic theory (Grice, 1975) explains that ambiguity can emerge when meaning is shaped by implicature rather than surface structure. Cognitive linguistic perspectives (Evans & Green, 2018; Kövecses, 2020) further support the idea that metaphor and conceptual mappings contribute to ambiguity by merging abstract and literal domains in song lyrics. Stylistic theory (Simpson, 2004; Leech & Short, 2007) highlights that such foregrounded linguistic features enhance aesthetic and emotive impact.

Conclusion

The analysis of Ariana Grande's selected song lyrics *Supernatural*, *No Tears Left to Cry*, *Break Free*, *Bloodline*, and *7 Rings* reveals that ambiguity functions as a significant stylistic element in her musical expression. Guided by Stephen Ullmann's categorization of ambiguity, this study found that two types of ambiguity lexical and grammatical appear prominently within the lyrics, while phonetic ambiguity is not applicable due to the reliance on written text in the analysis.

Lexical ambiguity emerged as the most frequent type, demonstrating how single words or pronouns such as *supernatural*, *state of mind*, *bloodline*, and *it* enable multiple semantic interpretations. This suggests that Ariana Grande often employs words with polysemous potential to construct emotional depth and interpretive openness in her songs.

Grammatical ambiguity was also identified, particularly in constructions like double negatives and unspecified syntactic references, which allow more than one possible structural or contextual interpretation. These findings support Ullmann's view that structural ambiguity results from sentence organization that can be interpreted in multiple ways, reinforcing expressive plurality in meaning.

Overall, this study concludes that ambiguity in Ariana Grande's lyrics is not accidental but constitutes a creative linguistic strategy. By permitting multiple interpretations, ambiguity enhances the aesthetic value of the lyrics and invites listeners to actively participate in meaning-making. This aligns with modern linguistic and

literary views that regard ambiguity as an important feature in contemporary artistic language, strengthening the connection between emotion, identity, and audience interpretation in popular music.

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