

## The Denotative and Connotative Meanings in the Song Lyric of “If Ain’t Got You” By Alicia Keys

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### A B S T R A C T

Song lyrics often convey meanings that extend beyond their literal interpretations, making semantic analysis essential for understanding the messages embedded in musical texts. However, studies specifically examining denotative and connotative meanings in English popular songs remain relatively limited. Therefore, this study aims to identify the denotative and connotative meanings found in Alicia Keys' \*If I Ain't Got You\* and explain how these meanings contribute to the song's overall message. This research employed a descriptive qualitative approach using document analysis as the primary method. The data consisted of lyrical expressions selected from the song and analyzed based on semantic theory. The findings revealed 20 lyrical expressions, including 7 denotative meanings and 13 connotative meanings. The predominance of connotative meanings indicates that figurative and implied language plays a significant role in communicating the song's central message. The analysis shows that the lyrics emphasize the importance of genuine love, emotional connection, and personal fulfillment over material wealth, social status, fame, and power. These findings highlight the value of semantic analysis in revealing deeper meanings and enhancing the interpretation of song lyrics.

**Keywords:** *Semantic Analysis, Denotative Meaning, Connotative Meaning, Song Lyrics, Emotional Interpretation*

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## INTRODUCTION

Song lyrics use language that conveys emotional, cultural, and social values through various interpretations beyond literal information. Meaning is often divided into denotative and connotative dimensions in semantic studies (Al Bisri et al., 2025). While connotative meaning includes additional emotional and associative meanings, denotative meaning is the primary conceptual meaning of a linguistic utterance (Leech, 1981). In a similar context, Lyons (1995) highlights that the relationship between expressions and the concepts they represent in a particular context produces linguistic meaning. This theoretical approach emphasizes the importance of semantic analysis in uncovering the deeper meanings contained in texts, especially song lyrics. According to recent research, song lyrics are complex linguistic texts with multiple layers of meaning influenced by figurative language and context. Based on semantic studies, expressions in lyrics often combine lexical and contextual meanings to convey social and emotional messages. A study on modern pop song lyrics shows that denotative and connotative meanings play a significant role in the portrayal of identity and emotional experiences in contemporary songs (Ulfah & Pujiati, 2025). These results imply that meaning in song lyrics necessitates rigorous semantic study rather than literal interpretation. Figurative language has also been found to be a crucial component in improving the emotional expression of music lyrics. Metaphorical and symbolic language frequently coexist with denotative meanings in contemporary song lyrics, providing listeners with a broader level of interpretation, according to research (Gooniartin & Fatoni, 2025).

The combination of artistic expression and emotional transmission in song lyrics makes song lyrics a unique linguistic medium. Songwriters are able to express personal experiences, attitudes, and views through the use of style and metaphor. Semantic analysis of song lyrics reveals complex levels of meaning that go beyond literal interpretation, as previous studies have shown. For example, recent studies have examined semantic relationships in modern pop lyrics (Oktaviana, 2025), lexical and contextual meanings in Indonesian popular songs Nurinsani et al. (2025), and metaphorical and symbolic meanings in specific song texts (Inriani Harahap & Khairi Armis, 2025). These results indicate that the complex linguistic and emotional structures in song lyrics make them a fertile field for semantic research. In addition, a number of studies using semantic theory to analyze popular music have demonstrated how associative and conceptual meanings combine to form a song's central theme. According to recent research using Leech's framework, conceptual and connotative meanings dominate emotional expression and influence listeners' interpretations, particularly in songs addressing issues related to relationships and personal values.

In addition, the use of semantic analysis to examine how song lyrics express cultural and emotional experiences is becoming increasingly common. According to a recent study, connotative meanings often reflect social interactions and individual emotions, suggesting that context plays a crucial role in determining interpretation (Fauziyah et al., 2024). The complexity of semantic patterns in song lyrics is increasingly highlighted by recent studies. Lyric texts create thematic semantic patterns that reveal relationships between words, topics, and stylistic components that go beyond surface meaning, according to a comprehensive semantic study (Karakuş, 2026). These findings support the use of semantic techniques to investigate how literal and inferred meanings interact in song lyrics.

The systematic identification of denotative and connotative meanings as key analytical categories in internationally recognized English language songs is a relatively understudied subject, despite a number of recent studies examining lexical meaning, metaphor, and semantic relationships. Although many studies focus on semantic relationships or figurative language, they do not specifically divide meaning into conceptual and associative dimensions in accordance with accepted semantic theory. As a result, further research is needed to systematically apply the theoretical distinction between denotative and connotative meaning in the analysis of the lyrics of widely recognized English language songs. Therefore, the issue addressed in this study is the lack of a systematic analysis of the denotative and connotative meanings in the lyrics of the song "If I Ain't Got You" and how those meanings contribute to the song's overall message.

Alicia Keys's song "If I Ain't Got You" strongly contrasts material wealth with emotional satisfaction. Concepts such as wealth, fame, power, and possessions are often compared to love and honesty in this song. This song is highly relevant for semantic analysis based on denotative and connotative theory due to its thematic structure. This study attempts to systematically determine how literal meaning and inferred meaning interact to form the song's main moral perspective using Leech's distinction between conceptual meaning and associative meaning.

In order to understand how these semantic layers contribute to the song's overall message, this study will examine the denotative and connotative meanings found in the lyrics of the song "If I Ain't Got You." This study aims to analyze the denotative and connotative meanings found in the lyrics of the song "If I Ain't Got You" through textual analysis, as well as to explain how these meanings contribute to the song's overall message. By offering an organized analysis of denotative and connotative meanings in song lyrics, this study advances semantic research and deepens our knowledge of how semantic layers create theme messages in musical texts. Additionally, these results can encourage future study on the interpretation of meaning in modern song lyrics and be used as a reference by researchers performing semantic analyses of song lyrics using a descriptive qualitative technique.

## METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method to examine the denotative and connotative meanings contained in the lyrics of the song "If I Ain't Got You." A qualitative approach was chosen because the aim of this study is to interpret the denotative and connotative meanings embedded in the song lyrics, rather than to measure variables quantitatively. Understanding how meaning is constructed within a specific context is a central aspect of qualitative inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, the focus is on how linguistic expressions in song lyrics convey material and emotional values through literal and implied meanings.

### Data and Source

The official written form of song lyrics, obtained from reliable sources, constitutes the primary data. Words, phrases, and clauses that may have denotative and connotative meanings are included in the unit of analysis. Because the lyrics clearly compare financial prosperity with emotional satisfaction, they were deliberately selected for semantic analysis. When researchers seek to investigate texts rich in information relevant to specific research objectives, deliberate data selection is recommended (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To enable in-depth semantic analysis in a specific literary context, the analysis focused on a single song.

### Data Collection

Data were collected using document analysis. The lyrics were read repeatedly to identify linguistic expressions representing denotative and connotative meanings. Document analysis allows researchers to systematically review written materials and develop meaningful interpretations from textual data (Bowen, 2020). During the reading process, notes were taken and data were categorized to ensure systematic classification.

### Data Analysis

This analysis process follows the interactive model of qualitative data analysis proposed by Miles et al. (2020), which consists of three interrelated activities: data condensation, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. During the data condensation stage, relevant linguistic expressions containing both denotative and potential connotative meanings are selected and organized based on semantic categories. Next, during the data presentation stage, the categorized data are organized into tables to facilitate the identification of patterns of meaning. This organization helps the researcher systematically compare literal and associative meanings. Finally, in the conclusion-drawing stage, interpretations are confirmed through continuous comparison between the data and theoretical concepts to ensure analytical consistency. To strengthen the credibility of the findings, the analysis is conducted meticulously through a re-examination of the categorized data and by aligning the interpretations with established semantic theory.

### Theoretical and Framework

Leech (1981), the distinction between conceptual (denotative) meaning and associative (connotative) meaning forms the theoretical basis for this study. Connotative meaning includes additional cultural and emotional connotations, while denotative meaning is the basic and literal meaning of a linguistic statement. Lyons (1995), who argues that meaning arises from the relationship between linguistic form and the concept it represents in a given situation, provides further support for this distinction. With this framework, the study systematically determines how the overall message of the song is constructed through the interaction between literal meaning and suggested meaning.

### Validity and Credibility

Theoretical triangulation is used to enhance the credibility of findings by linking these interpretations to well-established semantic concepts. In this study, the identified denotative and connotative meanings were interpreted based on recognized semantic theories to ensure

consistency between the data and the theoretical framework. By comparing findings with accepted academic perspectives, researchers minimize subjective interpretation and strengthen analytical validity. Triangulation enhances credibility by ensuring that interpretations are grounded in established academic views, rather than arbitrary assumptions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study identified 20 lyrical expressions containing denotative and connotative meanings in Alicia Keys' song titled "If I Ain't Got You." Based on the analysis, 7 expressions were categorized as denotative, while 13 were categorized as connotative. These findings indicate that connotative meaning is more dominant than denotative meaning in the song's lyrics.

Table 1. Denotative and Connotative Meanings in the Lyrics of the Song "If I Ain't Got You"

| Lyric  | Denotative Meaning | Connotative Meaning                                  | Interpretation   |
|--|--------------------|--|--|
| <i>Some people live for the fortune</i>                                | ✓                  | -  | This lyric literally refers to individuals who dedicate their lives to pursuing wealth and financial prosperity. It presents fortune as one of the common goals that many people strive to achieve. In the context of the song, wealth is introduced as a worldly pursuit that will later be contrasted with emotional fulfillment.                          |
| <i>Some people live just for the fame</i>                              | ✓                  | -  | This lyric refers to people who seek popularity and public recognition. Fame is portrayed as a desirable achievement that motivates some individuals in their lives. The lyric contributes to the presentation of external measures of success that are commonly valued in society.  |
| <i>Some people live for the power</i>                                  | ✓                  | -  | This lyric literally describes individuals who pursue authority, influence, and control. Power is presented as another form of worldly achievement that people often associate with success. The expression helps establish the material and social ambitions discussed throughout the song.   |
| <i>Some people live just to play the game</i>                          | -                  | Life as a competition for success and status         | This lyric does not refer to an actual game but symbolizes the competitive nature of life. It suggests that some individuals focus primarily on achieving status, recognition, or personal gain. The expression criticizes a lifestyle driven solely by social competition rather than genuine fulfillment.  |
| <i>Some people think that the physical things define what's within</i> | -                  | Material possessions as indicators of personal worth | This lyric criticizes the belief that a person's value can be determined by material possessions and outward appearance. It suggests that some individuals judge identity and character based on wealth and status rather than genuine personal qualities. The expression reinforces the song's criticism of materialistic values and superficial judgments. |
| <i>But that life's a bore</i>  | -                  | Emotional emptiness and dissatisfaction              | The lyric implies that a life focused on material pursuits lacks deeper meaning and satisfaction. Although a person may possess wealth or success, these achievements do not necessarily provide happiness. The expression reflects the speaker's realization that materialistic living can feel empty and unfulfilling.                                     |
| <i>So full of the superficial</i>                                      | -                  | A life dominated by shallow values and appearances   | This lyric criticizes a lifestyle that prioritizes external appearance and social image over genuine values. It suggests that superficial concerns prevent people from experiencing meaningful emotional connections. The expression reinforces the song's criticism of materialistic culture.   |

*The Denotative and Connotative Meanings in the Song Lyric of "If Ain't Got You" By Alicia Keys*

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| <i>If it ain't you baby</i>                           | - | Love as the most valuable aspect of life      | The lyric suggests that the presence of a loved one is more important than wealth, fame, or power. It emphasizes that emotional connection provides meaning and fulfillment in life. This expression contributes to the song's central message regarding the importance of love.  |
| <i>If I ain't got you baby</i>                        | - | Life is incomplete without genuine love       | This lyric conveys the idea that material success becomes insignificant when true love is absent. The speaker places emotional relationships above all worldly achievements. As the recurring line in the song, it strongly reinforces the main theme of emotional fulfillment.   |
| <i>Some people want diamond rings</i>                 | ✓ | -   | This lyric literally refers to the desire for expensive jewelry, particularly diamond rings. Such items are commonly associated with wealth and luxury. The expression serves as an example of material possessions that many people consider important.  |
| <i>But everything means nothing</i>                   | - | Material success is worthless without love    | This lyric expresses the belief that possessions, achievements, and social status have little value in the absence of meaningful relationships. It presents a philosophical reflection on the limitations of material wealth. The expression serves as one of the strongest statements supporting the song's overall message. |
| <i>Some people search for a fountain</i>              | - | The search for eternal youth and perfection   | The lyric symbolically refers to the desire for everlasting youth and an ideal life. Rather than describing a literal fountain, it represents humanity's pursuit of impossible dreams and perfection. The expression illustrates how people often seek things that cannot guarantee true happiness.                           |
| <i>Promises forever young</i>                         | - | The dream of remaining young forever          | This lyric symbolizes the desire to escape aging and maintain eternal youth. It reflects unrealistic expectations and the pursuit of perfection. The expression highlights another worldly desire that is contrasted with the value of genuine love.  |
| <i>Some people need three dozen roses</i>             | ✓ | -   | This lyric refers to the desire for roses as gifts or expressions of affection. The statement describes a common romantic gesture found in everyday life. It illustrates how material objects are often used to demonstrate feelings and appreciation.  |
| <i>And that's the only way to prove you love them</i> | - | Love measured through material gifts          | This lyric criticizes the belief that affection can only be demonstrated through expensive presents or grand gestures. It suggests that some people evaluate love based on material evidence rather than sincerity. The expression challenges the idea that genuine love depends on financial displays.                       |
| <i>Hand me the world on a silver platter</i>          | - | Unlimited privilege, success, and luxury      | This expression symbolizes receiving everything one could possibly desire in life without effort. It represents the highest form of worldly success and material abundance. However, the lyric questions the value of such achievements when genuine emotional connections are absent.  |
| <i>And what good would it be</i>                      | - | Questioning the value of worldly achievements | This lyric functions as a reflective question about the true purpose of success and material possessions. It encourages listeners to reconsider what brings meaning to life. The expression emphasizes that achievements alone cannot provide lasting fulfillment.  |
| <i>With no one to share</i>                           | ✓ | -   | This lyric literally describes a situation in which a person has no one to share experiences, achievements, or possessions with. It highlights the absence of companionship in one's life. The lyric emphasizes the importance of human relationships and togetherness.   |
| <i>With no one who truly cares for me</i>             | ✓ | -   | This lyric literally refers to the absence of a person who genuinely provides care, support, and affection. It expresses a condition in which emotional needs are not fulfilled despite the presence of material possessions or   |

*The Denotative and Connotative Meanings in the Song Lyric of "If Ain't Got You" By Alicia Keys*

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|  |   | achievements. Within the song, this lyric reinforces the idea that meaningful relationships are essential for a fulfilling life.  |
| Said nothin' in this whole wide world don't mean a thing | - Love is more valuable than all worldly possessions and achievements | This lyric conveys the idea that all forms of wealth, success, fame, and material possessions become meaningless without the presence of a loved one. The expression emphasizes that emotional connection provides greater value than any worldly achievement. As one of the concluding statements in the song, it reinforces the central message that genuine love is the most important aspect of life. |

The findings of the study show that literal statements about wealth, fame, power, material possessions, and interpersonal relationships have denotative meanings. Examples include "Some people live for the fortune," "Some people live just for the fame," and "Some people want diamond rings. These expressions can be understood based on their literal meanings.

In contrast, connotative meanings appear more frequently throughout this song. Phrases such as "Some people live just to play the game," "If I ain't got you, baby," and "Hand me the world on a silver platter" convey meanings that go beyond their literal sense. These phrases contain implied, emotional, and symbolic meanings that emphasize the importance of true love and emotional fulfillment over material success.

The predominance of connotative meaning indicates that the song conveys its message primarily through implied meaning rather than through the literal language. Although denotative meaning forms the semantic foundation of the lyrics, connotative meaning actually plays a more significant role in conveying the song's overall message.

Table 2. Distribution of Denotative and Connotative Meanings

| Meaning Type        | Frequency | Percentage |
|---------------------|-----------|------------|
| Denotative Meaning  | 7         | 35%        |
| Connotative Meaning | 13        | 65%        |
| Total               | 20        | 100%       |

As shown in Table 2, a total of 20 lyrical expressions were identified, consisting of 7 denotative meanings (35%) and 13 connotative meanings (65%). These findings indicate that connotative meanings appear more frequently than denotative meanings in the song's lyrics. These results indicate that the song primarily conveys its message through implied and symbolic meanings, rather than through literal language.

The findings revealed that the lyrics of *If I Ain't Got You* contain both denotative and connotative meanings, with connotative meanings occurring more frequently than denotative meanings. Of the 20 lyric expressions identified, 13 were categorized as connotative meanings and 7 as denotative meanings. This predominance indicates that the song conveys its message primarily through implied and symbolic expressions rather than through literal language.

Leech (1981) defines connotative meaning as the associative, emotional, and evaluative meaning associated with a linguistic expression, whereas denotative meaning is the intellectual or literal meaning. Expressions such as "Some people live for wealth," "Some people live only for fame," and "Some people live for power" serve as examples of denotative meaning in this study. These lyrics serve as clear references to material prosperity, social status, and authority all of which are often viewed as markers of social success.

However, the song's connotative meaning serves as the primary vehicle for conveying its core message. Lines such as "But everything means nothing," "If I ain't got you, baby," and "Hand me the world on a silver platter" carry a deeper meaning than their literal translations. These statements reflect the belief that without love and emotional bonds, worldly achievements, fame, power, and material possessions cannot bring true happiness. Consequently, the song emphasizes the importance of emotional fulfillment over financial success.

*The Denotative and Connotative Meanings in the Song Lyric of "If Ain't Got You" By Alicia Keys*

The predominance of connotative meaning reinforces the idea that understanding language often requires interpretation that goes beyond its literal form. This finding aligns with the views of Liliyan et al. (2023), who argue that contextual interpretation is often necessary to determine the message intended by the speaker, as meaning is not always clearly conveyed through language. Similarly, the connotative terms in this song convey a deeper meaning that cannot be fully understood through literal interpretation alone.

Furthermore, these findings support Lyons (1995) theory that meaning is formed through the interaction between verbal expressions and the context in which they are understood. Although wealth, fame, luxury, and material possessions are frequently mentioned in the song's lyrics, these concepts essentially serve as contrasts to highlight the importance of true love and enduring bonds. Through this contrast, the song invites listeners to reexamine conventional views of success and happiness. These results indicate that the song's message is primarily conveyed through connotative meaning. Although the literal content of the lyrics conveys a denotative meaning, the song's deeper moral and emotional values are conveyed through connotative meaning. Therefore, our research shows that the song emphasizes love and emotional fulfillment over material possessions, fame, money, or power.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study examines the denotative and connotative meanings found in the lyrics of Alicia Keys' song "If I Ain't Got You." The analysis identified 20 lyrical expressions, consisting of 7 denotative meanings and 13 connotative meanings. Denotative meanings represent the literal references found in the lyrics, while connotative meanings convey deeper emotional and symbolic messages. According to the study, the song's main message is conveyed primarily through its connotative meaning. Although the lyrics touch on fame, wealth, power, and material possessions, these elements ultimately serve as a contrast that highlights the importance of true love and emotional fulfillment. The underlying message of the song is that deep emotional bonds are more meaningful than financial success. These findings indicate that semantic analysis is useful for uncovering the deeper meanings contained in song lyrics. Furthermore, this study contributes to the field of semantic research by presenting a systematic analysis of denotative and connotative meanings in contemporary song lyrics, and may serve as a reference for future research in this field.

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