

LEXICAL AND CONTEXTUAL MEANINGS OF ALIENATION IN RADIOHEAD'S *OK COMPUTER* SONGS

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Abstract

This study investigates how lexical and contextual meanings construct the theme of alienation in three songs from Radiohead's album OK Computer, namely ok, No Surprises, and Karma Police. The primary objective is to examine the interaction between lexical and contextual meanings in constructing alienation, an area that remains underexplored in semantic studies of song lyrics. A descriptive qualitative approach is employed, analyzing nine representative linguistic units, three from each song, selected from the lyrics. The analysis is guided by Kroeger's framework of lexical meaning and Feist's framework of contextual significance. The findings reveal that alienation is encoded through semantic domains such as emptiness, injury, waste, authority, technology, and identity. At the lexical level, expressions like 'emptiest,' 'landfill,' and 'karma' carry stable denotative meanings. However, within the album's thematic context, these meanings transform into symbolic representations of psychological detachment, emotional exhaustion, alienated labor, social surveillance, technological dehumanization, and identity fragmentation. The study concludes that alienation emerges implicitly through the interaction between lexical choice and discourse context, demonstrating that meaning in song lyrics is dynamic and context-dependent. These findings highlight the importance of integrating lexical and contextual perspectives in semantic analysis of contemporary musical texts.

Keywords: Lexical, Contextual Meaning, Alienation

INTRODUCTION

Language functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a powerful tool for expressing complex human experiences, such as emotion, identity, and social alienation (Kumalasari et al., 2022; Nugraeni et al., 2023). Beyond transmitting information, language reflects social values, identities, and power relations within society (Chasanah, 2016). Through linguistic choices, speakers and writers encode personal and collective meanings that emerge from their engagement with social realities. Previous studies have also demonstrated the

important role of language in representing social relationships and facilitating interpersonal communication in various contexts (Krisnisa et al., 2025; Wijayanti & Chasanah, 2021). Through linguistic choices, speakers and writers construct meanings that emerge from their interaction with social realities. Contemporary semantic studies suggest that meaning is not entirely fixed because linguistic expressions may acquire additional interpretations when used in different discourse contexts (Li, 2024; Littlemore, 2019). This dynamic relationship between linguistic form and interpretation becomes particularly visible in literary and artistic texts, where abstract concepts are often conveyed through symbolic and context-dependent language. Despite extensive discussion of language as a social phenomenon, the linguistic mechanisms through which abstract themes are semantically constructed in artistic discourse remain underexplored.

In contemporary linguistic studies, meaning is viewed as a construct shaped by both the lexical properties of words and the contextual environments in which they are used (Littlemore, 2019). This perspective underscores the central role of semantics in explaining how language conveys abstract, nuanced, and emotionally charged concepts. Meaning cannot be fully explained through dictionary definitions alone because interpretation is influenced by discourse environments, situational contexts, and cultural knowledge (Wardani, 2019). Furthermore, words and expressions may develop additional interpretations while retaining their core semantic properties, indicating that meaning is both stable and dynamic depending on its use in discourse (Rahmawati et al., 2022). Chotimah and As Sabiq (2021) have demonstrated that contextual factors significantly shape the interpretation of song lyrics. Fitria (2023) has shown that symbolic meanings in song lyrics emerge through contextual interpretation. Similarly, Munthe et al. (2022) have emphasized that understanding song lyrics requires attention to both lexical and contextual meanings. Consequently, examining the relationship between lexical meaning and contextual meaning becomes essential for understanding how complex themes are represented in literary texts, including song lyrics.

Building on this understanding of semantics as a core linguistic discipline, it is important to examine how meaning operates in actual discourse. However, meaning in discourse is not always explicitly stated, as it frequently involves implicit elements that require interpretation beyond the literal level. Meaning in spoken and written texts can be conveyed implicitly through presupposition, requiring readers or listeners to infer unstated information based on context (Pratama et al., 2023). Meaning cannot be fully understood by relying solely on dictionary definitions. Rather, it emerges from the interaction between lexical meaning and contextual meaning (Wardani, 2019). Lexical meaning refers to the relatively stable and conventional meaning of words, whereas contextual meaning is shaped by discourse, situational factors, and socio-cultural backgrounds. The interaction between these two types of meaning becomes especially significant in literary and artistic texts, where language often carries implicit, symbolic, and emotionally nuanced messages.

In semantic studies of song lyrics, lexical and contextual meanings constitute central analytical concerns. Lexical meaning refers to the stable, conventional, and relatively context-independent core meaning of a word, commonly represented through dictionary definitions

(Kroeger, 2023). This meaning generally remains stable regardless of how words are used across different contexts (Li, 2024; Wissang, 2026). By contrast, contextual meaning emerges from the situational, cultural, and discursive environments in which linguistic expressions are interpreted (Feist, 2022). The interaction between lexical and contextual meaning is particularly important in literary and musical discourse, where language frequently conveys symbolic, emotional, and implicit meanings beyond literal interpretation.

Previous studies on song lyrics and alienation can generally be grouped into two categories. The first group focuses primarily on contextual interpretation, emphasizing how sociocultural and situational contexts shape the meanings of song lyrics (Chotimah & As Sabiq, 2021; Fitria, 2023; Munthe et al., 2022). Although these studies successfully demonstrate the importance of context in lyrical interpretation, they provide limited explanation of how lexical meanings contribute to thematic construction. The second group examines lexical meanings in song lyrics by identifying dictionary-based or referential meanings of words and expressions ('Ain & Triyono, 2019; Permana & Winarta, 2021; Syahfitri, 2021). However, these studies tend to treat lexical items as isolated semantic units without connecting them to broader socio-cultural and discursive meanings. Therefore, existing studies often analyze either lexical meaning or contextual meaning separately rather than examining their interaction within a unified semantic framework. This study differs from previous research by integrating lexical and contextual semantic analysis to investigate how alienation is linguistically constructed in Radiohead's *OK Computer*.

Song lyrics function as a form of modern poetic discourse through which social and psychological conditions are articulated. A previous study has shown that song lyrics frequently employ figurative language, symbolic expressions, and context-dependent meanings that go beyond literal interpretation to convey emotional and social messages (Fitria, 2023). One prominent theme in alternative and experimental rock music that warrants such integrated analysis is alienation. Alienation is commonly associated with feelings of isolation, detachment, powerlessness, and disconnection from society, technology, or the self (Ghaleb, 2024). Contemporary social transformations, including rapid technological change, the expansion of bureaucratic systems, and shifting forms of personal identity, have intensified experiences of alienation in modern societies (Bogaerts et al., 2026). These experiences are frequently reflected in contemporary cultural products, including popular music, which frequently serves as a medium for expressing social anxiety, disconnection, and critique of modern life.

The British band Radiohead is widely recognized for its critical portrayal of these dimensions of modern life. The album *OK Computer*, in particular, has been interpreted as a cultural commentary on technological anxiety, social conformity, and human alienation. Songs such as *Let Down*, *No Surprises*, and *Karma Police* depict emotional exhaustion, loss of control, and resistance to oppressive systems through carefully selected lexical items and context-sensitive expressions. Although previous studies have examined Radiohead's works from musical, cultural, and pedagogical perspectives, linguistic studies that specifically focus on how lexical and contextual meanings interact to construct the theme of alienation remain limited. Existing studies either emphasize contextual meaning without detailed lexical analysis, or identify lexical meanings without connecting them to broader socio-cultural themes.

This gap indicates the need for an integrated semantic analysis that connects linguistic form, contextual interpretation, and thematic construction. Therefore, analyzing song lyrics through such an integrated perspective allows researchers to uncover how abstract themes like alienation are linguistically constructed and interpreted.

This study is guided by two theoretical frameworks. For the analysis of lexical meaning, this study draws on Kroeger (2023) framework, which defines lexical meaning as the stable semantic core of a word that provides the foundation for shared interpretation. For the analysis of contextual meaning, this study employs Feist (2022) framework, which posits that meaning extends beyond dictionary reference to incorporate situational, thematic, and cultural dimensions. Together, these frameworks provide a systematic basis for examining how alienation is encoded and interpreted in the selected lyrics (*Let Down*, *No Surprises*, and *Karma Police*). Based on the theoretical frameworks above, this study seeks to answer two research questions: (1) what lexical phrases in the selected songs are semantically related to the theme of alienation based on Kroeger's (2023) framework of lexical meaning, and (2) what are the contextual meanings of those phrases in relation to alienation as interpreted through Feist's (2022) framework of contextual meaning?

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze lexical and contextual meanings in selected song lyrics from Radiohead's *OK Computer*. The data consisted of song lyrics obtained from reliable online sources, specifically the official lyrics platform Genius (genius.com) for *Let Down*, *No Surprises*, and *Karma Police*. The focus of the analysis was on linguistic units in the form of words, phrases, and sentences that represent lexical and contextual meanings related to the theme of alienation. Based on the theoretical frameworks adopted in this study, linguistic units were classified into two categories. First, lexical units were identified following Kroeger's (2023) framework of lexical meaning, which focuses on the stable, context-independent core meaning of words. Second, contextual units were identified following Feist's (2022) framework of contextual meaning, which focuses on meaning that emerges from situational, thematic, and cultural contexts.

In line with qualitative research procedures, data were collected using a documentation technique, which involves analyzing recorded textual data without researcher intervention (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The lyrics were carefully observed and examined to identify linguistic units relevant to the research focus. Only words and phrases that explicitly or implicitly reflected emotional detachment, social pressure, or identity loss were selected as data.

The analytical process consisted of several stages. First, the lyrics were observed to identify relevant linguistic units. Second, lexical items associated with alienation were coded systematically based on Kroeger's (2023) framework. Third, the identified items were analyzed for their lexical meanings using the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (Hornby, 2010) as a secondary data source to establish denotative meanings. Fourth, the same items were analyzed for their contextual meanings within the lyrical and discourse context of the album based on Feist's (2022) framework. Finally, the findings were interpreted to reveal how alienation is

constructed through the interaction between lexical and contextual meanings. Drawing conclusions constituted the final stage of the analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the findings of lexical and contextual meanings related to the theme of alienation in the selected songs from Radiohead's *OK Computer*, namely *Let Down*, *No Surprises*, and *Karma Police*. The analysis is organized in two layers. The first layer examines lexical meanings by identifying the stable semantic core of each selected phrase, following Kroeger's (2023) framework of lexical meaning. The second layer examines contextual meanings by interpreting how those phrases acquire symbolic and socio-cultural significance within the album's broader thematic framework, following Feist's (2022) framework of contextual significance. Together, these two layers demonstrate how alienation is not explicitly stated in the lyrics but is instead constructed through the interaction between lexical choice and discourse context, a pattern in which lexical meaning develops stable referential forms while contextual meaning emerges through processes of contextualization and interpretation within discourse (Li, 2024; Wissang, 2026).

Table 1. Distribution of Lexical and Contextual Meanings Related to Alienation

Song Title	Phrase/ Lexical Item	Lexical Meaning (Kroeger, 2023)	Contextual Meaning (Feist, 2022)
<i>Let Down</i>	<i>"The <u>emptiest</u> of feelings"</i>	Superlative of 'empty': containing nothing, absence and void	Existential void produced by repetitive, impersonal modern structures; extreme psychological detachment
	<i>"<u>Disappointed</u> people"</i>	'Disappointed': feeling sad because expectations were unmet	Collective condition of alienation; structurally produced disappointment, not merely personal
	<i>"<u>Clinging</u> onto bottles"</i>	'Clinging': holding tightly due to insecurity or dependency	Coping mechanism in response to instability; fragility and desperate adaptation to alienating conditions
<i>No Surprises</i>	<i>"A heart that's full up like a <u>landfill</u>"</i>	'Landfill': a site where waste is buried and discarded	Emotional saturation with detritus; numbness from accumulation, leading to stagnation

	<i>"A job that slowly <u>kills</u> you"</i>	'Kills': causes death; 'slowly': gradual process	Alienated labor as ongoing psychological erosion; gradual depletion of agency and purpose
	<i>"<u>Bruises</u> that won't heal"</i>	'Bruises': visible marks from injury; physical damage	Persistent emotional harm in unchanging conditions; alienation as cumulative, unresolved suffering
<i>Karma Police</i>	<i>"<u>Karma</u> police, arrest this man"</i>	'Karma': moral consequences of actions; 'arrest': taken into custody	Internalized surveillance and moral regulation; individuals policed by both external and internal systems
	<i>"He <u>buzzes</u> like a fridge"</i>	'Buzzes': makes a low, continuous mechanical sound	Technological dehumanization; the human reduced to functional noise in a mechanized environment
	<i>"I <u>lost</u> myself"</i>	'Lost': unable to find; displaced or taken away	Identify fragmentation; dissolution of stable selfhood under sustained social and institutional pressure

Table 1 presents the distribution of lexical and contextual meanings identified across the three selected songs. A total of 9 sample linguistic units were examined: 3 from *Let Down*, 3 from *No Surprises*, and 3 from *Karma Police*. The table is organized according to the two analytical frameworks guiding this study. The Lexical Meaning column captures the stable semantic core of each phrase as defined through Kroeger's (2023) framework, providing the denotative foundation for interpretation. The Contextual Meaning column captures how each phrase acquires symbolic and socio-cultural significance within the album's thematic framework, following Feist's (2022) framework of contextual significance. As the table demonstrates, lexical meanings consistently derive from semantic domains such as emptiness, injury, waste, death, authority, and machinery, while contextual meanings transform these domains into representations of psychological fragmentation, emotional resignation, alienated labor, social surveillance, and technological dehumanization. The following subsections discuss these findings in detail for each song.

Lexical Phrases Related to Alienation

Following Kroeger's (2023) framework, lexical meaning constitutes the stable semantic core of a word that provides the foundation for shared interpretation. This framework distinguishes between the denotative sense of a word, that is, its conventional, context-independent

reference, and the interpretive layers that emerge through discourse. Establishing lexical meaning is therefore an essential analytical step before contextual interpretation can proceed. The following analysis presents the lexical meanings of selected phrases from each song, drawing on dictionary definitions as secondary data and supplementing them with the researcher's semantic analysis grounded in Kroeger's (2023) framework.

Let Dwon

In *Let Dwon*, the selected phrases draw from semantic fields of absence, emotional failure, and physical force. The phrase 'the emptiest of feelings' employs the superlative form of 'empty,' denoting total absence and void. From a lexical standpoint, this item belongs to what Kroeger (2023) would classify as a gradable adjective at its extreme pole, indicating not merely emptiness but the maximum degree of it. The phrase 'disappointed people' contains 'disappointed,' which denotes the emotional state arising from unmet expectations, a lexical item within the semantic domain of affective states. Similarly, 'clinging onto bottles' employs 'clinging,' a physical-action verb denoting tight physical attachment, placing it within the semantic domain of bodily contact and dependency. The phrase 'crushed like a bug in the ground' employs 'crushed,' a past participial form denoting violent physical destruction, while 'hysterical and useless' combines an affective adjective with a functional one, together denoting emotional excess and purposelessness. Taken together, these lexical items establish a semantic pattern of negation and depletion, an absence of purpose, emotional fullness, and control, which constitutes the lexical groundwork for the alienation theme in this song.

No Surprises

In *No Surprises*, the lexical items are drawn predominantly from semantic domains of waste, destruction, and concealment. The phrase 'a heart that's full up like a landfill' introduces 'landfill,' a concrete noun denoting a disposal site for waste material, a lexical item from the semantic domain of waste management. The expression 'a job that slowly kills you' employs 'kills,' a causative verb of destruction, while the adverb 'slowly' modifies the process to indicate gradual rather than sudden harm. The phrase 'bruises that won't heal' draws on 'bruises,' a medical-register noun denoting visible injury marks, placing it within the semantic domain of bodily damage. The phrase 'a handshake of carbon monoxide' introduces 'carbon monoxide,' a specialized scientific term denoting a lethal colorless gas, notably a lexical item whose danger is lexically encoded through domain knowledge rather than immediate sensory description, a point Kroeger (2023) associates with technical register vocabulary. Together, these items build a lexical network of hidden and gradual harm, structurally preparing the listener for the contextual theme of invisible institutional damage.

Karma Police

In *Karma Police*, the lexical items are drawn from semantic domains of moral consequence, mechanical behavior, and identity. The compound phrase 'karma police' joins 'karma,' a philosophical-register noun denoting the moral consequences of one's actions, with 'police,' an institutional noun denoting enforcers of law, creating a lexical compound that bridges spiritual and institutional authority. The phrase 'he buzzes like a fridge' employs

'buzzes,' an onomatopoeic verb typically associated with the sound of electrical appliances, placing the human subject within the semantic domain of machinery. Finally, 'I lost myself' employs 'lost,' a past participial form denoting the state of being unable to locate something, here applied reflexively to the self. From a Kroeger's (2023) lexical perspective, this constitutes a reflexive use of a displacement verb, semantically categorizing the self as an object that can be misplaced, a lexical construction with significant implications for identity-related contextual interpretation.

Contextual Meanings in Relation to Alienation

While lexical definitions establish denotative meaning, contextual meaning emerges through interpretation within textual and sociocultural frameworks. Contextual meaning extends beyond dictionary reference and incorporates situational, thematic, and cultural dimensions (Feist, 2022). Within *OK Computer*, the selected phrases acquire symbolic significance that articulates modern alienation.

Alienation in *Let Down*

In context, "the emptiest of feelings" signifies more than emotional absence. The phrase represents an existential void generated by the repetitive and impersonal structures of modern life. Emotional vocabulary in poetic discourse often shifts from mere description to a form of diagnosis, identifying systemic conditions rather than isolated personal experiences. The use of the superlative intensifies this sense of emptiness, suggesting an extreme level of psychological detachment in which individuals become disconnected not only from others but also from their own sense of purpose. This interpretation aligns with the broader concept of alienation as a condition in which individuals experience a loss of meaningful connection with their social and existential environment.

The phrase "disappointed people" similarly expands from individual sadness to a collective condition. Rather than referring to isolated emotional responses, the expression reflects a shared experience shaped by monotonous routines and unfulfilled expectations. Emotional descriptors can function as implicit social critique when embedded within broader imagery of repetition and stagnation (Evans, 2019). In this sense, disappointment is not accidental but structurally produced, indicating that alienation operates at a societal level rather than merely as a personal feeling.

Furthermore, "clinging onto bottles" contextually suggests coping mechanisms in response to instability and emotional distress. Physical-action verbs frequently operate metaphorically in lyric discourse, allowing concrete actions to represent abstract psychological states (Evans, 2019). The image of clinging implies fragility, dependency, and desperation, reinforcing alienation as both emotional suffering and a form of inadequate adaptation to external pressures. This expression illustrates how individuals attempt to maintain a sense of stability in an environment that offers little genuine support, thereby deepening the experience of alienation.

Alienation in *No Surprises*

In contrast, *No Surprises* portrays alienation through subdued resignation. The metaphor "a heart that's full up like a landfill" transforms waste imagery into a representation of emotional

saturation. Concrete nouns often undergo metaphorical extension to represent abstract experiences (Geeraerts, 2016). In this case, emotional capacity is depicted as being filled with detritus rather than vitality, suggesting a state of numbness caused by excessive accumulation. This imagery implies that emotional overload does not lead to expression but instead results in stagnation and psychological exhaustion.

Similarly, "a job that slowly kills you" critiques the condition of alienated labor. The semantic extension from physical death to psychological erosion intensifies the critical meaning of the phrase (Riemer, 2016). The adverb "slowly" emphasizes gradual depletion, framing alienation as an ongoing process rather than a sudden event. This suggests that the damaging effects of monotonous work are internalized over time, ultimately diminishing an individual's sense of agency and purpose.

The phrase "bruises that won't heal" reinforces this pattern of sustained harm. Bodily injury vocabulary frequently renders abstract suffering more tangible. The absence of healing implies continuous exposure to damaging conditions, representing alienation as cumulative and persistent harm rather than temporary distress. This expression highlights how emotional wounds, unlike physical injuries, may remain unresolved within oppressive or unchanging environments.

Alienation in Karma Police

In *Karma Police*, alienation is constructed as externally imposed through systems of judgment and control. The compound phrase "karma police" symbolically merges spiritual consequence with institutional authority. Song titles often condense broader ideological critiques into compact expressions (Geeraerts, 2016). In this context, the phrase represents internalized surveillance and moral regulation, suggesting that individuals are not only monitored by external forces but also governed by internalized systems of control.

The simile "he buzzes like a fridge" further emphasizes technological dehumanization. Comparisons between humans and machines reflect a form of absorption into mechanical systems characteristic of post-industrial society. In this case, the human subject is reduced to functional noise, signaling the erosion of individuality and emotional depth. This imagery suggests that human presence is perceived not in terms of meaning or agency, but merely as background disturbance within a mechanized environment.

Finally, "I lost myself" articulates identity fragmentation. Language of self-loss frequently expresses psychological disintegration under social pressure (Riemer, 2016). Although lexically denoting misplacement (Hornby, 2010), the phrase contextually signals the culmination of alienation: the dissolution of stable selfhood. This expression reflects a state in which individuals no longer maintain a coherent sense of identity, as continuous exposure to external expectations gradually reshapes and erodes their sense of self.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how lexical and contextual meanings interact to construct the theme of alienation in Radiohead's *Let Down*, *No Surprises*, and *Karma Police* from the album *OK Computer*. Guided by Kroeger's (2023) framework of lexical meaning and Feist's (2022) framework of contextual significance, the analysis of nine representative linguistic units reveals

that alienation is encoded through semantic domains of emptiness, injury, waste, authority, technology, and identity. At the lexical level, expressions such as 'emptiest,' 'landfill,' and 'karma' carry stable denotative meanings, but within the album's thematic context, these meanings transform into symbolic representations of psychological detachment, emotional exhaustion, alienated labor, social surveillance, technological dehumanization, and identity fragmentation. Alienation thus emerges not through explicit statements but through the interaction between lexical choice and discourse context. The three songs present alienation as a multidimensional experience: existential emptiness in *Let Down*, gradual deterioration in *No Surprises*, and externally imposed control in *Karma Police*. These findings demonstrate that semantic analysis of song lyrics requires an integrated lexical-contextual approach, as neither perspective alone sufficiently explains how abstract themes are linguistically constructed. Future research may extend this integrated approach to broader musical corpora or incorporate critical discourse analysis to further examine how alienation and other social themes are encoded in contemporary music.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data Collection, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing-Original Draft; **Author 2:** Supervision, Validation, Writing-Review and Editing; **Author 3:** Supervision, Validation, Writing-Review and Editing.

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