



## ANALYSIS OF THE EXPERIENTIAL METAFUNCTION IN THE LYRICS OF BOB MARLEY'S "REDEMPTION SONG"

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**ABSTRACT:** *This study employs a qualitative content analysis method to explore the experiential metafunction within the lyrics of Bob Marley's "Redemption Song." The methodology comprises acquiring the song lyrics from credible sources and scrutinizing them to identify the processes, participants, and circumstances depicted within the composition. The analytical approach focuses on understanding how these elements contribute to the narrative and thematic depth of the song. Through the analysis, several key findings emerge: Participant 1 varies between personal pronouns, groups, and abstract entities, representing different facets of the narrative and thematic elements. Material processes predominate, highlighting the tangible struggle for freedom depicted in the song. Participant 2 encompasses various entities affected by the actions of Participant 1, showcasing the multifaceted nature of the struggle for liberation. Circumstances provide additional details about the actions, contextualizing them within specific timeframes, locations, mannerisms, and motivations. This analysis offers a comprehensive understanding of how Bob Marley utilized language to construct a powerful and impactful message of redemption and empowerment in his iconic song. By investigating into the experiential metafunction, this study sheds light on the intricacies of Marley's lyrical style and the enduring relevance of his music in addressing social and spiritual liberation.*

**KEYWORDS:** Bob Marley, Redemption Song, lyrics, qualitative content analysis, experiential metafunction, liberation, empowerment.



## INTRODUCTION

Bob Marley, officially known as Robert Nesta Marley OM (February 6, 1945 – May 11, 1981) was a Jamaican reggae singer, guitarist, and songwriter, widely regarded as a pioneer of reggae music. Marley's innovative blend of reggae, ska, and rocksteady, along with his unique vocal and songwriting style, significantly raised the global profile of Jamaican music (Paprocki & Dolan, 2009; Toynbee, 2007). Throughout his career, Marley emerged as a Rastafarian icon, infusing his music with spiritual themes and becoming a prominent figure in popular culture (Masouri, 2009). He was a vocal advocate for democratic social reforms, the legalization of cannabis, and Pan-Africanism, making him both a cultural symbol and a controversial figure (Marley & Marley, 2019; Toynbee, 2007). Bob Marley is one of the best-selling music artists ever, with over 75 million records sold worldwide (Alleyne, 2019; Nurse, 2001; Unterberger, 2024). Posthumously, he was honoured with Jamaica's Order of Merit and inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1994. Rolling Stone ranked him No. 11 among the 100 Greatest Artists and No. 98 among the 200 Greatest Singers of All Time. Marley's accolades include a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award, a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, and induction into the Black Music & Entertainment Walk of Fame (Burke, 2014; Unterberger, 2024).

Music, as a form of expressive art, has a unique ability to convey profound emotions, narrate engaging stories, and capture the complexity of human experiences. According to Juslin (2013), music's power to evoke deep emotional responses allows it to resonate on a personal level with listeners. This emotional connection is often strengthened by the narrative quality of songs. As Phillips et al. (2020) suggest, music can tell compelling stories that reflect personal or collective experiences, allowing listeners to relate to or gain insight into different aspects of life. The complexity of human experiences is intricately woven into musical compositions. Leman (2016) points out that music can mirror the multifaceted nature of our lives, encompassing a wide range of emotions and situations. This multifaceted reflection is achieved through the combination of melody and lyrics. The melody provides the emotional backdrop, while the lyrics articulate specific thoughts, feelings and views, allowing artists to communicate effectively with their audience.

In the realm of song analysis, one crucial aspect that often garners attention is the functional use of language. Fitch (2006) emphasizes that understanding how language functions within a song is essential for uncovering its deeper meanings. This is where the concept of the experiential metafunction, as discussed by Pranoto et al. (2020), becomes particularly relevant. The experiential metafunction in systemic functional linguistics explores how experiences and actions are represented in language. By analyzing this aspect, we can see how songwriters embed their personal or observed experiences into the lyrics, creating a rich tapestry of meaning. Chappell and Varelas (2020) further elaborate on the significance of the experiential metafunction in song lyrics. They argue that by examining the processes, participants, and circumstances described in the lyrics, we can gain a deeper understanding of the narrative and emotional content of the song. This analysis reveals how artists use language to convey their experiences, thoughts, and emotions, thus forming a profound connection with listeners.

This research aims to dive into the song "Redemption Song," performed masterfully by the legendary reggae artist, Bob Marley, to uncover the hidden dimension of experiential meaning and its role in shaping the song's overall impact on listeners. Released in 1980 as part of his memorable album *Uprising*, the song "Redemption Song" managed to steal the hearts of millions of people around the world with its touch of genuine emotion and introspective



themes. The main objective of this study is to conduct a thorough analysis of the experiential metafunction contained in the lyrics of "Redemption Song."

This research uses the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), also known as systemic functional grammar (SFG), to analyze how the meaning of Bob Marley's "Redemption Song" is conveyed through processes (Susanto & Watik, 2017), participants (Siwek et al., 2017) and circumstances (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005). It is worth noting that SFL has increasingly been applied in meaningful and useful ways (Hutabarat et al., 2020). The speech in song lyrics can function similarly to daily conversations, as they often express common human thoughts and feelings (Bennett, 1999; Perlovsky, 2010).

## METHOD

The research design for this study involves a qualitative content analysis of the lyrics of Bob Marley's song, "Redemption Song." The primary data source is the lyrics of "Redemption Song," which can be obtained from reliable sources such as official songbooks, verified lyric websites, or official song releases. Here, the lyrics were gotten from the website ([https://www.streetdirectory.com/lyricadvisor/song/wlule/redemption\\_song/](https://www.streetdirectory.com/lyricadvisor/song/wlule/redemption_song/)).

The data collection process includes acquiring the lyrics from these selected sources. After obtaining the lyrics, the researcher thoroughly reads and analyzes them to gain an initial understanding of their content and context. During this analysis, key elements related to the experiential metafunction, such as processes, participants, and circumstances, are identified and recorded. Qualitative content analysis is selected for its ability to provide an in-depth exploration and interpretation of the text (Sopah et al., 2023), with a particular focus on the experiential metafunctions present in the lyrics (Lestari et al., 2023). The goal is to identify the various types of experiences and processes described in the song, offering insights into the emotions, perceptions, and actions conveyed through the language.

## RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The analytical approach for this study involves three key steps to understand the experiential metafunction in Bob Marley's "Redemption Song." First, identifying processes involves examining the verbs and actions described in the lyrics, which highlight the dynamic elements of the song's narrative. Second, examining participants focuses on the nouns and entities that play roles within these processes, providing insight into who is involved and affected by the actions. Lastly, analyzing circumstances involves looking at adverbs and prepositional phrases that describe the context of these actions, such as time, place, and manner, which enrich the understanding of the song's setting and the tones of its message. This comprehensive analysis is shown in Table 1 below:

**Table 1: Analysis of Experiential Metafunction in Bob Marley's "Redemption Song"**

Lyrics	Participant 1	Process (Type)	Participant 2	Circumstances
Old pirates, yes, they rob I;	Old pirates	Material (rob)	I	
Sold I to the merchant ships,	(Old pirates)	Material (sold)	I	
Minutes after they took I	(Old pirates)	Material (took)	I	Temporal (minutes after)
From the bottomless pit.				Spatial (from the bottomless pit)
But my hand was made strong	My hand	Material (was made strong)		
By the hand of the all mighty.				Agent (by the hand of the all mighty)
We forward in this generation	We	Material (forward)		Temporal (in this generation)
Triumphantly.		Manner (triumphantly)		
Won't you help me sing	You	Material (help)	Me	
These songs of freedom	Songs of freedom			
Are all I ever have:	Songs of freedom	Relational (are, have)	I	
Redemption songs	Redemption songs			
Redemption songs	Redemption songs			
Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery;	Yourselves	Material (emancipate)		Spatial (from mental slavery)
None but ourselves can free our minds.	Ourselves	Material (free)	Our minds	
Have no fear for atomic energy,	(You)	Mental (fear)		Cause (for atomic energy)
'Cause none of them can stop the time	None of them	Material (stop)	The time	
How long shall they kill our prophets,	They	Material (kill)	Our prophets	Temporal (how long)
While we stand aside and look	We	Material (stand, look)		Manner (aside)
Oh! Some say it's just a part of it:	Some	Verbal (say)		
We've got to fulfil de book.	We	Material (fulfill)		



Won't you help me sing	You	Material (help)	Me	
These songs of freedom	Songs of freedom			
Are all I ever have:	Songs of freedom	Relational (are, have)	I	
Redemption songs	Redemption songs			
Redemption songs	Redemption songs			
Redemption songs	Redemption songs			
Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery;	Yourselves	Material (emancipate)		Spatial (from mental slavery)
None but ourselves can free our mind.	Ourselves	Material (free)	Our mind	
Wo! Have no fear for atomic energy,	(You)	Mental (fear)		Cause (for atomic energy)
'Cause none of them cana stopathe time	None of them	Material (stop)		
How long shall they kill our prophets,	They	Material (kill)	Our prophets	Temporal (how long)
While we stand aside and look?	We	Material (stand, look)		Manner (aside)
Yes, some say it's just a part of it:	Some	Verbal (say)		
We've got to fulfil the book.	We	Material (fulfil)		
Won't you help to sing	You	Material (help, sing)		
These songs of freedom?	Songs of freedom			
Are all I ever had:	Songs of freedom	Relational (are, had)	I	
Redemption songs	Redemption songs			
All I ever had:	I	Relational (had)		
Redemption songs:	Redemption songs			
These songs of freedom,	Songs of freedom			
Songs of freedom.	Songs of freedom			



## DISCUSSION

The analysis in Table 1 explores the experiential metafunction in Bob Marley's "Redemption Song," focusing on the articulation of processes, participants, and circumstances. It highlights the action-oriented material processes, identifies key participants like "Old pirates" and "I," and examines the temporal and spatial elements that provide context. The detailed discussions are as follows:

### A. Participant I:

It represents the subject or the main entity performing the action in each line. In "Redemption Song," Participant 1 varies between personal pronouns (I, we), groups (old pirates), and abstract entities (songs of freedom). Bob Marley uses these participants to represent different facets of the narrative and thematic elements:

- i. Old pirates: These represent the oppressors or those who have inflicted harm, tying into historical contexts of slavery and exploitation.
- ii. I: This personal pronoun signifies Marley himself or the collective voice of the oppressed, giving a personal touch to the experiences described.
- iii. We: This collective pronoun includes the broader community, highlighting unity and collective action.
- iv. Yourselves/Ourselves: These reflect a call to individual and collective agency and self-empowerment.
- v. Songs of freedom/Redemption songs: These abstract entities symbolize the themes of liberation and hope central to the song.

### B. Process (Type)

The process types in the lyrics describe the actions or states involving Participant 1 and Participant 2. In "Redemption Song," the processes fall into several categories:

**Material Processes:** These denote physical actions (rob, sold, took, emancipate, free, stop, kill, fulfil). They describe concrete actions of oppression and liberation, making the struggle for freedom tangible.

- i. Mental Processes: These express thoughts or feelings (fear). Marley uses mental processes to address internal states, particularly the rejection of fear.
- ii. Relational Processes: These define states of being or possession (are, have, had). They provide existential statements about freedom and possession.
- iii. Verbal Processes: These indicate speech acts (say). They introduce reported speech, reflecting different viewpoints or societal beliefs.

The predominant use of material processes underscores the active struggle and dynamic efforts toward emancipation.

### C. Participant II

It represents the entity affected by the action of Participant 1. In "Redemption Song," Participant II includes:



- i. I: As the object of oppression or recipient of actions (rob, sold, took), emphasizing the personal impact of these events.
- ii. Merchant ships: Representing the destination of the oppressed, tying into historical narratives of slavery.
- iii. Our minds: Denoting the internal aspect that needs liberation, linking to the theme of mental freedom.
- iv. The time, our prophets, the book: These symbolize broader concepts (inevitability of time, prophetic voices, destiny) and ground the song's spiritual and temporal dimensions.

The variety of Participant 2 elements showcases the multifaceted nature of the struggle for freedom, both internal and external.

#### **D. Circumstances**

Circumstances provide additional details about the actions, such as time, place, manner, or cause. In "Redemption Song," they enhance the narrative and thematic depth:

- i. Temporal Circumstances: Indicate the timing of actions (minutes after, how long). They contextualize the events within specific timeframes, emphasizing urgency or duration.
- ii. Spatial Circumstances: Describe locations (from the bottomless pit, from mental slavery). They highlight the origins or destinations of actions, grounding the abstract struggle in physical or metaphorical spaces.
- iii. Manner Circumstances: Describe how actions are performed (triumphantly, aside). They convey the attitudes or mannerisms associated with actions, adding emotional or descriptive layers.
- iv. Cause Circumstances: Explain reasons or motivations (for atomic energy). They provide causal explanations, linking actions to broader fears or motivations.

The inclusion of various circumstances helps to paint a comprehensive picture of the struggle for redemption and freedom, providing context that deepens the listener's understanding of the song's message.

Consequently, the analysis of Bob Marley's "Redemption Song" provides significant insights into his lyrical style, revealing his adept use of language to convey deep and poignant messages. Marley's emphasis on material processes highlights the physical and social struggles depicted in his lyrics, while the careful selection of participants, such as "Old pirates" and "I," brings a personal and historical perspective to his narrative. The inclusion of temporal and spatial circumstances enriches the context, allowing listeners to grasp the broader implications of his experiences and the call for liberation and empowerment. Marley's lyrical style is marked by a profound ability to blend storytelling with socio-political commentary, making his music not only emotionally resonant but also intellectually and culturally impactful.

#### **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, this study employed a qualitative content analysis method to explore the experiential metafunction within the lyrics of Bob Marley's "Redemption Song." The research



design involved obtaining the lyrics from reliable sources and analyzing them to identify processes, participants, and circumstances present in the song. The analytical approach focused on understanding how these elements contribute to the narrative and thematic depth of the song. Through the analysis, several key findings emerged: Participant 1 varied between personal pronouns, groups, and abstract entities, representing different facets of the narrative and thematic elements. Material processes predominated, highlighting the tangible struggle for freedom depicted in the song. Participant 2 encompassed various entities affected by the actions of Participant 1, showcasing the multifaceted nature of the struggle for liberation. Circumstances provided additional details about the actions, contextualizing them within specific timeframes, locations, mannerisms, and motivations. This analysis offers a comprehensive understanding of how Bob Marley utilized language to construct a powerful and impactful message of redemption and empowerment in his iconic song. By delving into the experiential metafunction, this study sheds light on the intricacies of Marley's lyrical style and the enduring relevance of his music in addressing social and spiritual liberation.

Further research in this area could explore several avenues to deepen our understanding of Bob Marley's lyrical style and its impact. One direction could involve a comparative analysis of "Redemption Song" with other songs from Marley's repertoire, examining how the experiential metafunction is employed across different thematic contexts and musical compositions.

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