IJEAL (*International Journal of English and Applied Linguistics*)
Volume : 5 | Number 3 | December 2025 | E-ISSN: 2787-9482 | DOI: doi.org/ijeal.v5i3.7198

PRAGMATIC INTERPRETATIONS OF IDIOMATIC PHRASES IN MITSKI'S LYRICISM

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Received: 03/11/2025
Accepted: 16/11/2025
Publication: 01/12/2025

Abstract
This study examines the use of idiomatic phrases in Mitski's selected song lyrics to explore their types, meanings, and pragmatic interpretations. The research is motivated by the limited scholarly attention to idiomatic expressions in contemporary music, particularly in Mitski's works, which intricately combine emotional depth with linguistic artistry. Understanding how idioms function in her lyrics is essential for revealing how language conveys complex psychological and emotional experiences in modern song writing. This study is significant because it contributes to linguistic and stylistic research by demonstrating how idiomatic language in song lyrics communicates meanings beyond literal interpretation, highlighting the relationship between language, creativity, and emotional expression. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were purposively collected from ten songs by Mitski—I Bet on Losing Dogs, I Don't Like My Mind, Bag of Bones, Working for the Knife, I'm Your Man, Fireworks, Stay Soft, My Love Mine All Mine, Washing Machine Heart, and Lonesome Love. The lyrics were documented and closely read to identify idiomatic phrases, which were then categorized using Fernando's (1996) classification of pure, semi-, and literal idioms. Contextual meanings were interpreted through Yule's (1996) pragmatic framework. The findings indicate that literal idioms are the most dominant, appearing six times, followed by five semi-idioms and four pure idioms, expressing themes of vulnerability, self-awareness, and emotional conflict. The study concludes that idiomatic expressions in Mitski's lyricism function as both artistic and pragmatic tools that communicate layered emotions and reflect the intricate relationship between language and human experience.

Keywords— Idioms, Interpretation, Pragmatics, Mitski, Song Lyrics

INTRODUCTION

Language functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a reflection of human thought, emotion, and cultural identity. According to Introducing Linguistics (Culpeper et al., 2023), linguistics is the scientific study of language that systematically investigates how humans use language, how meaning is shaped by social and cognitive context, and how language reflects thoughts, emotions, and identities. This highlights the discipline's crucial role in connecting linguistic theory with real-world communication. Within this field, pragmatics investigates how meaning is influenced by context, speaker intention, and shared social knowledge, emphasizing the interpretation of implied or unspoken messages (Yule 1996). Idiomatic expressions, as an essential component of pragmatic analysis, are particularly significant because their meanings cannot be understood literally and often embody cultural experiences and emotional associations (Fernando, 1996).

In song lyrics, idioms powerfully express complex emotions, identity, and hidden meanings beyond the literal. McCarthy & O'Dell (2002) describe idioms as "Idioms are expressions which have a meaning that is not obvious from the individual words." (p. 6). Songwriters use them to evoke

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emotions and connect with listeners on cultural and emotional levels. Recent studies highlight that idiomatic expressions in songs contribute to meaning-making, emotional depth, and cultural values embedded in music (Artawan & Suastini, 2023; Baharuddin, 2022; Patmawati & Jayantini, 2024). Research also shows a growing academic interest in applying linguistic approaches to contemporary song lyrics, including semantic and pragmatic analysis, to uncover implied meanings and communicative intentions (Diko, 2024; Ndruru, 2024). In addition, corpus-based studies have emerged to identify idioms in song lyrics, demonstrating the relevance of idiomatic analysis in modern music across genres (Amin et al. 2021).

Despite increasing research on idioms in music, most studies examine either semantic, cultural, or educational perspectives and seldom integrate idiom classification with pragmatic interpretation. Limited research applies Fernando (1996) idiom categorization together with Yule (1996) pragmatic framework, particularly in the context of indie or alternative music. This gap is significant because contemporary artists in these genres, such as Mitski, intentionally incorporate symbolic, metaphorical, and emotionally layered lyricism that benefits from pragmatic interpretation.

Mitski, a Japanese-American singer-songwriter, is widely recognized for her poetic, introspective, and emotionally charged lyrics, often expressed through idiomatic, metaphorical, and figurative language reflecting themes of identity, loneliness, emotional conflict, and vulnerability. However, academic studies focusing on idiomatic expressions in Mitski's lyrics remain scarce. Analyzing her lyrics through idiomatic and pragmatic perspectives can reveal how language choices convey subtle emotions, implied meanings, and cultural reflections. Therefore, this study aims to identify the idiomatic expressions found in selected Mitski song lyrics and analyze how these expressions are interpreted pragmatically within their lyrical contexts. The findings are expected to provide deeper insight into how idiomatic and pragmatic features construct emotional resonance, cultural nuance, and layered meaning in contemporary song language.
The research process in this study is guided by the following questions:

1. What idiomatic phrases are found in Mitski's song lyrics?
2. Which types of idioms are most frequently used in Mitski's song lyrics?
3. How are the identified idiomatic phrases interpreted pragmatically within the context of Mitski's song lyrics?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Idiomatic expressions are linguistic units whose meanings cannot be inferred from the literal meanings of their individual components Fernando (1996). Fernando classifies idioms into three categories: pure idioms, semi-idioms, and literal idioms. Pure idioms have meanings that deviate completely from their literal interpretation, semi-idioms combine both literal and figurative meanings, while literal idioms retain their literal sense but are conventionally used in specific contexts. Idioms hold an important role in language because they reflect cultural values, shared social knowledge, and implicitly communicate attitudes and emotions. Recent work further supports this view, arguing that idioms operate as pragmatic messages whose interpretation depends on contextual cues and speaker intention (Alghazo, Alrashdan, Al-Salem, & Salem, 2022), and research further shows that idioms operate as culturally embedded communicative tools that must be analyzed with both cognitive and pragmatic perspectives to account for cross-contextual usage (Senkbeil, 2020).

From a pragmatic perspective, meaning is influenced not only by linguistic form but also by context, speaker intention, and the relationship between interlocutors. Yule (1996) emphasizes that pragmatics examines how meaning is interpreted beyond the literal content of an utterance. Pragmatic interpretation involves understanding implied messages, speaker intention, and contextual background to uncover the deeper meaning behind linguistic expressions. Recent studies support this view, highlighting that idiomatic and figurative meanings are not retrieved through fixed lexical definitions but are inferentially constructed based on relevance and contextual cues (Valero Fernández, Cruz, Teucher, Recio Fernández, & Loureda Lamas, 2025). Another recent study reinforces this view, demonstrating that pragmatic meaning relies on inference, shared contextual knowledge, and speaker-listener interaction to construct intended interpretation (Al-Ghazou, 2023). When applied to idioms,

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pragmatics helps explain how idiomatic expressions deliver emotional undertones, interpersonal attitudes, and implied meanings that go beyond their surface-level definitions, making them a needed tool for expressing subtlety and nuance in spoken and written discourse.

Song lyrics serve as a literary medium where idiomatic expressions are frequently used to express emotions, cultural meaning, and personal experience. Previous studies have explored idioms in films, novels, poetry, and song lyrics; however, most focus on traditional literature or widely commercial music genres. Research on idioms in song lyrics has shown that idiomatic expressions function as tools to convey figurative and affective meaning, enriching listeners' interpretation (Suhendar, Brenda, & Budiarto, 2024). However, much of the existing research tends to analyze only the figurative or semantic aspects of idioms, without integrating pragmatic interpretation. Although several researchers have analysed idiomatic expressions in English song lyrics, limited studies apply Fernando's idiom classification together with Yule's pragmatic interpretation, especially in contemporary indie or alternative music, which offers more symbolic, metaphorical, and emotionally driven lyrical expressions.

Therefore, a research gap exists in examining idiomatic expressions in contemporary song lyrics by employing both Fernando's categorization and Yule's pragmatic framework together. Moreover, Mitski's discography has gained worldwide acclaim for its poetic, reflective, and emotionally complex lyrics, although scholarly research examining idioms in her music is still rare. Her music has many symbolic and figurative expressions, providing a distinct space for idiomatic and pragmatic examination. Consequently, this research seeks to address this void by exploring idiomatic phrases in chosen Mitski song lyrics through linguistic and pragmatic viewpoints to reveal how idioms express emotional richness and suggestive meaning

RESEARCH METHOD

This research used a descriptive qualitative method to analyze idiomatic phrases in Mitski's song lyrics. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research explores and interprets meaning in natural contexts, Lambert & Lambert (2020) further explain that qualitative descriptive research aims to provide a comprehensive summary of events or phenomena in everyday terms. The data were taken from ten Mitski songs: I Bet on Losing Dogs, I Don't Like My Mind, Bag of Bones, Working for the Knife, I'm Your Man, Fireworks, Stay Soft, My Love Mine All Mine, and Washing Machine Heart, Lonesome Love. The researcher identified idiomatic expressions in the lyrics, categorized them based on Fernando's classification of pure idiom, semi-idiom, and literal idioms, and analysed them using Yule's pragmatic theory. The analysis focused on context and speaker intention to reveal the implied meanings and determine the dominant idiom type in Mitski's lyricism

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings and discussion of idiomatic expressions found in Mitski's Puberty 2 album. Each selected song lyric was analysed using Fernando (1996) idiom classification—pure idiom, semi-idiom, and literal idiom—and interpreted through Yule (1996) pragmatic framework to uncover the implied meanings within the artist's emotional expression.

Table 1. Classification of Idioms in Mitski's Selected Songs

No	Songs	Pure Idiom	Semi-Idiom	Literal Idiom
1	I Bet on Losing Dogs	1	0	0
2	I Don't Like My Mind	1	0	1
3	Bag of Bones	1	1	0
4	Working for the Knife	0	1	1
5	I'm Your Man	0	1	0
6	Fireworks	0	1	0
7	Stay Soft	0	0	2
8	My Love Mine All Mine	0	0	1
9	Washing Machine Heart	0	0	1

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10	Lonesome Love	1	1	0
	Total	**4**	**5**	**6**

Table 1 shows that In I Bet on Losing Dogs, the idiom identified is a pure idiom, expressing hopelessness and emotional self-sabotage. In I Don't Like My Mind, both a pure idiom and a literal idiom appear, showing a blend of figurative and straightforward emotional expression. Bag of Bones includes a pure idiom and a semi-idiom, symbolizing emptiness, a fragile sense of self, and emotional fatigue. In Working for the Knife, contains a semi-idiom and a literal idiom reflect pressure, burnout, and the loss of passion due to societal expectations. I'm Your Man contains a semi-idiom that portrays guilt, devotion, and the erosion of self-identity within a relationship. Fireworks includes a semi-idiom that conveys the emotional surge and intensity of inner turmoil, while Stay Soft features two literal idioms, illustrating the tension between vulnerability and the need to emotionally harden to survive. My Love Mine All Mine contains a literal idiom that expresses love as one's most valued possession, and Washing Machine Heart also includes a literal idiom, depicting emotional confusion and guilt. Lonesome Love features both pure and semi-idioms, representing emotional regret, longing, and repetitive self-aware heartbreak.

Finding

This section identifies and classifies idiomatic phrases in ten selected songs by Mitski using Fernando (1996) typology—pure idiom, semi-idiom, and literal idiom. The analysis reveals that Mitski frequently employs idiomatic language to express emotional tension, self-reflection, and vulnerability, with literal idioms appearing most often. Each idiom carries both linguistic and pragmatic significance, reflecting how figurative language is used to communicate personal and psychological meaning beyond its literal form. Table 2 presents examples of idiomatic phrases found in the data, showing their occurrence, position in the lyrics, and idiom type.

Table 2. Examples of Idiomatic Phrases Analysis

No	Song Title	Idiom Type	Verse	Lyric
1	I Bet on Losing Dogs	Pure Idiom	Verse 2 Line 1	**I bet on losing dog** I know they're losing and I pay for my place by the ring Where I'll be looking in their eyes when they're down I'll be there on their side, I'm losing by their side
2	I Don't Like My Mind	Pure Idiom	Verse 1 Line 3	I don't like my mind, I don't like being left alone in a room With all its opinions about the things that I've done So, yeah, I blast music loud and **I *work myself to the bone*** And on an inconvenient Christmas, I eat a cake

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		Literal Idiom	Verse 3 Line 3	And then I get sick and throw up and there's another memory that gets stuck Inside the walls of my skull waiting for its turn to talk And it may be a few years, but ***you can bet*** it's there, waiting still For me to be left alone in a room with the things that I've done
3	Bag of Bones	Semi-Idiom	Verse 1 Line 1	I'm all ***used up***, pretty boy Over and over again, my nail colors are wearing off See my hands, pretty boy What do they tell you? 'Cause I've looked down at them, not knowing why
		Pure Idiom	Verse 2 Line 4	And after everything's done and I'm all undone You can hear my high heels walking on Clickety-clacking through the night I'm carrying my ***bag of bones***
4	Working for the Knife	Literal Idiom	Verse 3 Line 1	I always knew ***the world moves on*** I just didn't know it would go without me
		Semi-Idiom	Verse 3 Line 4	I start the day high and it ends so low Cause I'm ***working for the knife***
5	I'm Your Man	Semi-Idiom	Verse 3 Line 4	I can feel it gettin' near Like flashlights comin' down the way

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				One day, you'll figure me out I'll meet ***judgment by the hounds***
6	Fireworks	Semi-Idiom	Verse 4 Line 1	I will be ***married to silence*** The gentleman won't say a word But you know, oh, you know in the quiet he holds Runs a river that will never find home
7	Stay Soft	Literal Idiom	Verse 3 Line 1	***Open up your heart*** Like the gates of Hell
		Literal Idiom	Verse 4 Line 2	You stay soft, get beaten Only natural to ***harden up***
8	My Love Mine All Mine	Literal Idiom	Verse 2 Line 4	Moon, tell me if I could Send up my heart to you? So, when I die, which I must do Could it ***shine down*** here with you?
9	Washing Machine Heart	Literal Idiom	Verse 1 Line 1	Toss your **dirty shoes** in my washing machine heart Baby, bang it up inside I'm not wearing my usual lipstick I thought maybe we would kiss tonight
10	Lonesome Love	Pure Idiom	Verse 3 Line 1	'Cause nobody **butters me up** like you, and Nobody fucks me like me
		Semi-Idiom	Verse 4 Line 2	In the morning, in a taxi

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				I'm so very **payin' for**

Discussion

Guided by Fernando's (1996) idiomatic typology and Yule's (1996) pragmatic framework, table 2 identified fifteen idiomatic expressions across ten of Mitski's song lyrics. The idioms are classified into four pure idioms, five semi-idioms, and six literal idioms. Among these, literal idioms appear most frequently, indicating Mitski's stylistic preference for language that preserves its surface meaning while planting emotional and symbolic undertones. This result aligns with Valero Fernández et al. (2025), who found that idioms often retain literal components to enhance emotional resonance and accessibility for audiences.

Each idiom type contributes differently to Mitski's lyrical meaning. Pure idioms such as "I bet on losing dogs" and "bag of bones" express despair and self-deprecation that deviate completely from literal meaning, portraying emotional defeat and fragility. Semi-idioms like "working for the knife" and "married to silence" mix literal and metaphorical layers, revealing the tension between self-discipline, social expectation, and inner emptiness. Literal idioms such as "you can bet," "open up your heart," and "dirty shoes" maintain their recognizable form but gain new emotional nuance depending on context. This variety indicates that Mitski's idioms function not merely as stylistic devices, but as emotional codes that construct her artistic identity through figurative expression.

From a pragmatic perspective, idioms in Mitski's lyrics align with Yule (1996) view that meaning depends on context, intention, and inference rather than literal wording. Listeners must interpret implied emotion and situational cues to grasp the speaker's underlying message. For instance, in "working for the knife," the idiom conveys the burden of creative and emotional labor rather than a literal act of servitude, showing how pragmatic inference reveals hidden meaning. Similarly, "open up your heart" pragmatically signals vulnerability and emotional exposure within an interpersonal context. As Al-Ghazou (2023) emphasizes, idiomatic expressions often function as pragmatic acts that encode social and emotional implications. Likewise, Alghazo et al. (2022) note that idioms reflect pragmatic intention through cultural and psychological dimensions. Comparatively, Senkbeil (2020) further argues that idioms operate as culturally embedded communicative tools, where meaning emerges from shared knowledge between speaker and listener. In this light, Mitski's idioms can be seen as contextual performances of emotions where pragmatic interpretation transforms linguistic ambiguity into expressive clarity.

In general, the analysis shows that idiomatic expressions in Mitski's lyrics serve as pragmatic vehicles for conveying complex emotional and cultural meanings. They bridge literal experience and figurative depth, allowing listeners to infer feelings of love, isolation, exhaustion, and self-awareness beyond explicit language. Through Fernando's linguistic categorization and Yule's pragmatic lens, Mitski's lyricism emerges as a fusion of expressive emotion and contextual implication, illustrating how idioms can encapsulate the human condition within poetic, contemporary song language.

CONCLUSION

After identifying, classifying, and analyzing all the data, it can be concluded that Mitski's lyrics contain various types of idiomatic expressions based on Fernando's (1996) classification, which are divided into three categories: pure idioms, semi-idioms, and literal idioms. The findings reveal that literal idioms are the most dominant, appearing six times, while semi-idioms occur five times, and pure idioms appear four times.

Pure idioms are expressions whose meanings differ entirely from their literal words, such as "I bet on losing dogs" and "bag of bones" These idioms symbolize emotional vulnerability, self-destruction, and acceptance of pain. Semi-idioms, such as "married to silence" and "working for the knife," combine literal and figurative elements to represent emotional detachment, exhaustion, and the burden of societal or internal expectations. Meanwhile, literal idioms, including "hardened up" and "you can bet," maintain their conventional forms but gain deeper emotional significance through context, expressing sadness, guilt, or attempts to seek affection and validation.

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The pragmatic interpretation using Yule's (1996) theory reveals that Mitski's idioms go beyond linguistic meaning, reflecting the speaker's intentions, emotions, and self-awareness. Their meanings depend heavily on context, illustrating the connection between language and emotion. Through her idiomatic expressions, Mitski conveys experiences of loneliness, love, guilt, and emotional fatigue in ways that intertwine literal and figurative meaning. This study concludes that idioms in Mitski's lyricism function as artistic and pragmatic tools to express complex human emotions and internal conflict beyond their literal sense, demonstrating how language, when shaped by context, can reveal profound psychological and emotional depth.

Future studies should look into how idiomatic expressions function in the works of other contemporary artists or across musical genres. Comparative research could reveal whether similar figurative patterns are used to express emotion, identity, or social commentary, extending our understanding of how idiomatic language in song lyrics captures the human condition in a variety of cultural situations.

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