

DEHUMANISASI MEKANISTIK DALAM LAGU LET DOWN DAN NO SURPRISES KARYA RADIOHEAD: SEBUAH ANALISIS SEMANTIK

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ABSTRAK. Penelitian kualitatif ini bertujuan mengkaji bagaimana dehumanisasi mekanistik dikonstruksi secara linguistik dalam lirik "Let Down" dan "No Surprises" karya Radiohead. Data dianalisis menggunakan teori relasi leksikal (Murphy, 2010), variabilitas kontekstual (Cruse, 2000), dan model psikologis dehumanisasi Haslam (2006). Temuan menunjukkan bahwa secara leksikal, lirik membangun fondasi yang steril dan mekanis melalui antonimi, polisemi, dan hiponimi yang melucuti vitalitas organik dari kosakata yang menggambarkan tubuh dan rutinitas manusia. Secara kontekstual, kosakata kaku tersebut diubah menjadi simbol distopia melalui koersi semantik, perluasan metaforis, dan pergeseran perspektif semantik, yang mengeksekusi dehumanisasi melalui instrumentalisasi, hilangnya kehendak bebas, dan fungibility. Hasil penelitian juga mengungkap kapitalisme sebagai kekuatan utama di balik transformasi ini: hati dikoersi menjadi "landfill" (tempat pembuangan sampah) yang menampung limbah korporat, pekerjaan digambarkan sebagai "a job that slowly kills you" (pekerjaan yang perlahan membunuhmu), dan tubuh difragmentasi menjadi komponen mekanis yang dapat digantikan. Secara khusus, mati rasa emosional muncul bukan sebagai konsekuensi yang dipaksakan, melainkan sebagai perlindungan yang dicari secara sukarela, paling eksplisit dalam permohonan "no alarms and no surprises" (tanpa alarm dan tanpa kejutan). Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa lirik tersebut secara cermat direkayasa untuk menggambarkan objektifikasi manusia, menyoroti ironi tragis di mana masyarakat modern secara aktif mencari mati rasa emosional demi menghindari trauma sistemik kapitalis.

Kata kunci: relasi leksikal; variabilitas kontekstual; dehumanisasi mekanistik; radiohead; semantik

MECHANISTIC DEHUMANIZATION IN RADIOHEAD'S LET DOWN AND NO SURPRISES: A SEMANTIC ANALYSIS

ABSTRACT. This qualitative study aims to examine how mechanistic dehumanization is linguistically constructed in Radiohead's "Let Down" and "No Surprises." The data were analyzed using Murphy's (2010) lexical relations, Cruse's (2000) contextual variability, and Haslam's (2006) psychological model of dehumanization. Findings show that, lexically, the lyrics establish a sterile, mechanical baseline through antonymy, polysemy, and hyponymy, stripping organic vitality from vocabulary describing human bodies and routines. Contextually, this rigid vocabulary is transformed into dystopian symbols through semantic coercion, metaphorical extension, and shifts in semantic perspective, executing dehumanization by manifesting instrumentality, denial of agency, and fungibility. The results further reveal capitalism as the underlying force driving this transformation: the heart is coerced into a "landfill" absorbing corporate waste, labor is depicted as "a job that slowly kills you," and the body is fragmented into replaceable mechanical parts. Notably, emotional numbness emerges not as an imposed consequence but as a voluntary refuge, most explicit in the plea for "no alarms and no surprises." The study concludes that these lyrics are meticulously engineered to portray human objectification, highlighting a tragic irony where modern individuals actively seek emotional numbness to escape systemic capitalist trauma.

Keywords: lexical relations; contextual variability; mechanistic dehumanization; radiohead; semantics

INTRODUCTION

Language is a fundamental instrument that never operates in a vacuum, actively recording and constructing how humans respond to their multidimensional reality (Zulaikah et al., 2024). In the realm of popular culture, songwriting occupies a crucial linguistic position, serving as a medium to translate highly abstract social phenomena into psychological realities. The capacity of language manipulation to capture the existential crisis of

modern humanity is demonstrated with razor-sharp precision in the discography of the British alternative rock band Radiohead. Their masterpiece album, *OK Computer* (1997), has consistently been recognized in academic discourse as a monumental dystopian work that reflects the social alienation and dehumanizing effects of capitalist dominance (Sondhi, 2025). Within this album, the songs "Let Down" and "No Surprises" stand out as central thematic pillars, presenting a dense, figurative lyricism that portrays the emotional claustrophobia of urban life. These two songs, rather

than other tracks on the album, were selected because their lyrical density and thematic orientation toward systemic alienation make them the most representative corpus for analyzing mechanistic dehumanization, a selection further reinforced by their sustained cultural resonance: "No Surprises" has surpassed 1.3 billion streams on Spotify (Spotify, n.d.), while "Let Down" debuted on the US Billboard Hot 100 nearly three decades after its original release (Zellner, 2025).

The central issue motivating this study is that the thematic message of these lyrics is frequently misunderstood by mainstream audiences. In public discourse, listeners often reduce this masterpiece to merely a representation of personal depression or a subjective anthem of sadness (radioheadfan99, 2023), inadvertently ignoring the much more massive subtext of sociological critique. This public failure to grasp the dystopian narrative is rooted in the complexity of the linguistics itself. Radiohead's messages of dehumanization are encoded through dense figurative features that cannot be fully understood through a surface-level reading. The true narrative intent of the text is only recoverable by dissecting how inherent word meanings are actively manipulated by their surrounding linguistic environment to construct a system of alienation.

To address this, the present study integrates three theoretical frameworks. Murphy's (2010) framework of Lexical Relations is applied to isolate the inherent, denotative definitions of the vocabulary. Cruse's (2000) Mechanisms of Contextual Variability is employed to analyze how the surrounding text forces these literal words to undergo semantic modulation, coercion, and metaphorical extension. Finally, Haslam's (2006) psychological model of Mechanistic Dehumanization provides the analytical basis for examining how these semantic shifts manifest as a denial of human agency, instrumentality, and fungibility. Guided by these frameworks, this study addresses three research questions: (1) What are the lexical relations of the selected words and phrases found in the lyrics? (2) What are the mechanisms of contextual variability of the selected words? (3) How do these lexical and contextual mechanisms portray mechanistic dehumanization?

The scope of this study is delimited to the official lyrics of "Let Down" and "No Surprises" from the OK Computer album. The analysis focuses strictly on the textual and semantic modes of the lyrics, deliberately excluding musical elements, vocal delivery, and audio-visual music videos. This focus allows for a

concentrated and methodologically coherent examination of how structural linguistic engineering executes psychological objectification.

Several previous studies have examined semantic meaning and alienation in song lyrics. Baene (2023) and Zulaikah et al. (2024) applied lexical semantics to popular music, but they largely reduced their findings to mapping subjective emotions like romance or heartbreak, missing the broader systemic critique. Vanessa et al. (2025) analyzed social alienation in Billie Eilish's songs but lacked a standardized psychological framework to categorize the dehumanization process. Furthermore, studies targeting Radiohead's OK Computer by Pramono & Afifah (2026) and Rahmat et al. (2025) explored themes of technological anxiety using conceptual metaphor and Gricean pragmatics, yet they bypassed the micro-structural semantic architecture of the text. The present study responds directly to these gaps: it examines the lyrics through an integrated semantic approach (Lexical Relations and Contextual Variability) and specifically maps these linguistic findings onto a measurable psychological pathology (Mechanistic Dehumanization).

METHOD

This study firmly employs a Descriptive Qualitative Design based on the theoretical framework of Creswell & Creswell (2018). This specific design is chosen as the ultimate methodological anchor because it accommodates the need to thoroughly explore and interpret the subjective, non-numerical, and deeply contextual meanings embedded in song lyrics, which cannot be quantified. The object of investigation is a bounded textual system consisting of the lexical relations and mechanisms of contextual variability embedded within the lyrics of two songs: "Let Down" and "No Surprises". The two songs were selected through purposive sampling, using lyrical density and thematic orientation toward systemic alienation as the inclusion criteria outlined in the Introduction; rather than functioning as outliers, they are treated as the most representative corpus of OK Computer's broader dystopian narrative.

The data take the form of distinct linguistic units (words, phrases, clauses, and select full sentences) found within the lyrics that contain potential lexical, contextual, and psychological significance. The primary source of the data is the official lyrical text of the songs from the OK Computer album. The data collection procedure began with the acquisition of

high-quality audio recordings for repeated listening to ensure sufficient contextual comprehension of the auditory and emotional environment. Following this, the official lyrics were systematically transcribed and cross-verified with reputable music lyric databases to ensure complete accuracy. The core collection technique was documentation through systematic close reading, where terms exhibiting distinct paradigmatic relations, strong metaphorical intent, or thematic connections to machinery and apathy were annotated and extracted into a structured dataset (Stake, 2010).

The data analysis was conducted utilizing Descriptive Qualitative Content Analysis, strictly adhering to the procedures proposed by Creswell & Creswell (2018). The analysis was operationalized in three consecutive stages to address each research question. First, the data were coded to identify lexical relations (Murphy, 2010), isolating the inherent, denotative definitions of specific words before any situational variables were introduced, using standard English dictionaries as a baseline. Second, theme generation was conducted to analyze the mechanisms of contextual variability (Cruse, 2000). At this level, the researcher evaluated how the literal vocabulary was altered by internal textual factors, specifically the syntagmatic pressure of the surrounding co-text, avoiding pragmatic intentionality. Third, the interpretation stage involved a theoretical mapping where the contextualized language findings were critically synthesized with the psychological parameters of Mechanistic Dehumanization (Haslam, 2006). This final mapping identified exactly how the linguistic structures operated to manifest instrumentality, denial of agency, and fungibility within the lyrics

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section systematically presents the extracted linguistic data using a rigorous Two-Tier Semantic Process, culminating in the psychological mapping of these linguistic phenomena into the framework of mechanistic dehumanization

Table 1. Semantic and Psychological Mapping of Selected Lyrics

Song	Data (Lyrics)	Lexical Relations	Context Variability	Mechanistic Dehumanization
Let Down	"Transport, motorways, and tramlines"	Hyponymy	Contextual Modulation	Denial of Agency

Let Down	"Starting and then stopping taking off and landing"	Antonymy	Contextual Modulation	Denial of Agency
Let Down	"Shell smashed, juices flowing"	Hyponymy	Metaphorical	Instrumentality
Let Down	"Wings twitch, legs are going"	Hyponymy	Metaphorical Extension	Instrumentality
Let Down	"Don't get sentimental"	Ambiguity	Shift in Semantic Perspective	Instrumentality
Let Down	"Let down and hanging around"	Synonymy	Metaphorical Extension	Denial of Agency
No Surprises	"A heart that's full up like a landfill"	Polysemy	Semantic Coercion	Instrumentality
No Surprises	"A job that slowly kills you"	Polysemy	Semantic Coercion	Fungibility
No Surprises	"Bruises that won't heal"	Polysemy	Metaphorical Extension	Fungibility
No Surprises	"Such a pretty house"	Ambiguity	Shift in Semantic Perspective	Fungibility
No Surprises	"A handshake of carbon monoxide"	Hyponymy	Shift in Semantic Perspective	Fungibility
No Surprises	"And no alarms and no surprises, please"	Synonymy	Metaphorical Extension	Synonymy

1. Lexical Relations

The first stage focuses on identifying the intrinsic, denotative, or basic meanings of the key vocabularies found within the lyrics, independent of their context. The analysis reveals that the fundamental vocabulary of the lyrics is meticulously engineered to construct a sterile, mechanical baseline

One prominent lexical relation utilized is Antonymy, which is employed to present absolute binary oppositions that eliminate organic human progression:

"Starting and then stopping, taking off and landing" (Let Down)

In Murphy's (2010) framework, these linguistic units strictly operate as complementary antonyms. Denotatively, "starting" and "stopping" refer to the initiation and halting of a mechanical process, presenting a strict binary state devoid of intermediate organic existence. Because they are complementary antonyms, the existence of one entirely negates the other, establishing a rigid operational cycle.

Another significant relation is Polysemy, where a single lexical unit possesses multiple interconnected meanings, acting as a critical semantic bridge:

"A heart that's full up like a landfill"
(No Surprises)

The lexeme "heart" operates with strong polysemy. Its primary, literal meaning refers to a hollow muscular biological organ responsible for pumping blood, while its derivative meaning refers to the abstract core of human empathy. This semantic multiplicity creates a linguistic loophole that allows for its subsequent distortion in the text. Notably, the relation of homonymy is entirely absent from the extracted corpus. This structural absence confirms that the lyrical system demands continuous conceptual connectivity between the human domain and the industrial domain, a function homonymy is incapable of providing.

Furthermore, the use of Hyponymy is evident in "Transport, motorways, and tramlines" (Let Down), where "tramlines" functions as a specific hyponym of mechanized urban infrastructure. Similarly, in "Shell smashed, juices flowing" and "Wings twitch, legs are going" (Let Down), biological anatomy is disarticulated into subordinate hyponyms ("shell", "juices", "wings", "legs"), stripping away the biological wholeness of the living organism. Additionally, Ambiguity is utilized in "Such a pretty house" (No Surprises), where the adjective "pretty" lacks precise details, encompassing vague suburban aesthetic standards.

2. Mechanisms of Contextual Variability

The second analytical stage explores how the rigid dictionary meanings established previously are expanded, altered, and violently shifted when deployed in specific syntactic environments (Cruse, 2000).

Contextual Modulation occurs when the text highlights specific mechanical traits of a word while suppressing its dynamic human elements. Returning to the antonymous pairs from "Let Down" (*"Starting and then stopping..."*), the surrounding context aggressively suppresses their association with free human travel. Instead, they are modulated to represent a highly industrialized routine, portraying human activity not as a natural rhythm, but as a heavily programmed cycle synchronized with a sterile corporate schedule.

Semantic Coercion represents a more violent contextual mechanism, forcing a word to change its fundamental nature to satisfy the conceptual demands of the text:

"A heart that's full up like a landfill" (No Surprises)

Here, a dramatic semantic coercion is executed. Lexically functioning as a vital organ or the center of human empathy, "heart" is syntactically attached to "landfill." This linguistic environment coerces the "heart" to abandon its biological functions. It is forced to operate merely as a passive, utilitarian container specifically, a toxic waste repository absorbing the discarded anxieties and industrial garbage of modern society.

Metaphorical Extension is also widely utilized to bridge physical reality and psychological pathology:

"Bruises that won't heal" (No Surprises)

The primary meaning of "bruises" (superficial physical skin discoloration) is extended into the domain of chronic mental health. Driven by the overarching theme of systemic exhaustion, the context transforms the physical wound into a permanent

psychological scar, representing deep, unaddressed mental fatigue caused by capitalist exploitation.

Regarding Shift in Semantic Perspective, the context forcibly alters the perception of human emotion and social agreement. In "Don't get sentimental" (Let Down), emotional sensitivity is contextually shifted from a natural human trait to a systemic malfunction or operational flaw. Similarly, in "A handshake of carbon monoxide" (No Surprises), a traditional symbol of social trust ("handshake") undergoes a perspective shift into a lethal, predatory transaction. Furthermore, additional Metaphorical Extension is applied in "Let down and hanging around" (Let Down), extending temporary loitering into a permanent state of existential paralysis.

3. Mechanistic Dehumanization

The semantic distortions identified across the preceding two stages converge systematically to execute the core mechanisms of Haslam's (2006) Mechanistic Dehumanization model, stripping away Human Nature (HN) attributes such as personal agency and emotional warmth.

Instrumentality occurs when humans are reduced to utilitarian tools or passive objects. The semantic coercion of the "heart" into a "landfill" serves as the ultimate linguistic proof of this mechanism. The human emotional core is instrumentally utilized by the capitalist system to filter corporate waste rather than act as an organ of feeling, completely stripping the individual of their inherent moral dignity.

Denial of Agency strips away self-determination, reducing humans to automatons. This is manifested in the modulated antonyms ("Starting and then stopping"), where the subject's behavior is completely programmed and induced by external stimuli rather than internal volition. This denial of agency reaches a tragic peak through the mechanism of metaphorical extension:

"And no alarms and no surprises, please" (No Surprises)

Rather than a literal desire to silence electronic devices, this phrase symbolizes a desperate, voluntary surrender of human consciousness. The subjects deeply desire to permanently stop their cognitive functions and emotional fluctuations to become static, unfeeling machines, viewing inertness as the ultimate shield against the pain of reality.

Fungibility confirms that individuals are treated as uniform, replaceable commodities. This is evident in the phrase "*A job that slowly kills you*," where the overarching capitalistic system views workers simply as identical mechanical components. Their biological vitality is squeezed entirely until they experience chronic damage ("bruises that won't heal"), after which they are simply discarded and replaced, confirming the complete eradication of Human Nature

The mechanism of Instrumentality is further reinforced in "Wings twitch, legs are going" (Let Down), where the human body is treated merely as biological hardware tasked with executing work instructions despite physical collapse. Meanwhile, Denial of Agency is exemplified in "Transport, motorways, and tramlines" and "Let down and hanging around" (Let Down), where human behavior is strictly programmed onto fixed tracks or trapped in passive suspension. Lastly, Fungibility is demonstrated in "Such a pretty house" (No Surprises), where individuals are forced into uniform, interchangeable suburban categories without personal distinctiveness.

These findings align with Pramono & Afifah (2026) and Rahmat et al. (2025) in confirming that OK Computer functions as a dystopian critique of technological alienation; however, whereas both studies operated at the level of conceptual metaphor and pragmatic implicature respectively, the present study demonstrates that this alienation is already encoded at the micro-structural lexical level, prior to any contextual or pragmatic

activation. This finding also diverges from Baene (2023) and Zulaikah et al. (2024), who applied similar lexical and contextual semantic tools to popular song lyrics but concluded that such devices primarily construct subjective emotional narratives of romance and heartbreak; the present analysis instead shows that identical semantic mechanisms (polysemy, semantic coercion) can be systematically redirected to encode a collective, sociological critique rather than an individual emotional state. Compared to Vanessa et al. (2025), who identified social alienation in Billie Eilish's lyrics without anchoring it to a standardized psychological framework, this study extends the discussion by mapping the linguistic findings onto Haslam's (2006) Mechanistic Dehumanization model, offering a more measurable and replicable account of how alienation is linguistically operationalized as instrumentality, denial of agency, and fungibility.

CONCLUSION

Regarding the lexical relations utilized within the selected song lyrics, it is concluded that the songwriter deliberately constructs a sterile, artificial, and highly rigid semantic baseline at the most fundamental level of vocabulary. By employing specific hierarchical and oppositional meaning relations, the lexical choices inherently strip away organic vitality, emotional warmth, and biological dynamism from the text. The language is intentionally sterilized at its core to ensure that the narrative subjects are lexically trapped within a systematic, unyielding material reality, leaving absolutely no room for natural human progression.

Furthermore, the mechanisms of contextual variability systematically force this rigid vocabulary to shift into profound, psychological metaphors of urban despair. The immediate syntactic surroundings, coupled with the overarching dystopian thematic trajectory, transform innocent structural terms into powerful symbols of psychological confinement and systemic oppression. Words that originally denoted mere physical objects or literal actions are contextually expanded to represent the suffocating stagnation of modern routines and the chronic exhaustion of the working class.

Ultimately, the interplay between lexical relations and contextual variability operates as an active, structurally engineered linguistic system that systematically dismantles the three core attributes of Human Nature: agency, emotional warmth, and individual identity. The mechanisms of instrumentality, denial of agency, and fungibility are linguistically executed through specific semantic operations, evidenced by the reduction of biological organs into toxic waste repositories and the programmed automation of human routines. The culminating stage of this dehumanization is not externally imposed silence, but a voluntary internalization wherein the subject consciously requests the erasure of their own consciousness as the final act of self-preservation within the modern industrial condition.

Based on these findings, it is suggested that future researchers expand the corpus of data beyond a single album or artist to investigate how mechanistic dehumanization is linguistically encoded across different cultural landscapes or musical genres. Additionally, future studies could benefit from adopting a multimodal approach, such as Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) or semiotics, to examine the relationship between language, visual iconography, and vocal delivery. Practically, this study suggests that educators can utilize song lyrics as highly effective pedagogical tools to develop students' critical reading competencies, while encouraging the general public to cultivate a more critical awareness of the sociological critiques embedded within popular entertainment media.

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