

Derivation and Inflection in Taylor Swift's The Life of a Showgirl: A Morphological Approach

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Abstract: This research aims to analyze the morphological processes found in the lyrics of Taylor Swift's album, *The Life of a Showgirl*, specifically focusing on the use of derivational and inflectional affixes. The study utilizes the morphological theory proposed by William O'Grady to identify and categorize the affixes present in the selected songs. The research method employed in this study is the descriptive qualitative method, which allows for a detailed examination of the linguistic features within their natural context. The data were collected by identifying words containing affixes, with a strict protocol that ensured no repetition; thus, each data point represents a unique instance of a specific affix type, regardless of how many times the word is repeated in the song. The results of the analysis reveal a total of 239 affixes found in the album. Specifically, the data consists of 131 derivational affixes and 108 inflectional affixes. The findings indicate that derivational affixes are the dominant category used by the songwriter. This prevalence suggests that in *The Life of a Showgirl*, Taylor Swift prioritizes the process of word formation to alter meanings and grammatical categories, thereby enhancing the descriptive depth and rhyme scheme of the lyrics, while inflectional affixes are utilized to maintain grammatical cohesion and tense consistency.

Keywords: Morphology, Derivational Affix, Inflectional Affix, Taylor Swift, William O'Grady

INTRODUCTION

This paper delves into the inflectional and derivational affixes processes observable in popular music lyrics, illustrating how artists creatively manipulate language to achieve specific expressive and stylistic effects [2]. Specifically, this research examines the morphological structures within Taylor Swift's album, *The Life of a Showgirl*, offering insights into derivational and inflectional morphology that manifest in contemporary popular music [1,7]. This research analyzes the twelve songs on the album to identify affixes and categorize them into their derivational or inflectional forms. This analysis will contribute to a deeper understanding of how morphological processes, such as the formation of new words or changes in grammatical categories, are employed in artistic linguistic expression [5,2]. This approach allows for an exploration of how artists like Swift leverage linguistic structures to imbue their lyrics with nuanced meanings and emotional depth, reflecting broader trends in lexical innovation within popular culture [2].

In the case of *The Life of a Showgirl*, the album's lyrics reflect a blend of everyday language, storytelling, and poetic devices. This variety enables the analysis of inflectional morphology, which involves how words change form to express grammatical contrasts (such as tense, number, person, and comparative forms). Derivational morphology is formed from other words through affixation, compounding, or other morphological processes to create new meanings or categories (e.g., nouns from verbs or adjectives from nouns). Such linguistic manipulation is not merely incidental but serves to amplify the

affective meaning often dominant in song lyrics, enabling a richer conveyance of personal emotion and thematic expression [4]. Indeed, the deliberate selection and modification of morphemes within these lyrical compositions contribute significantly to the overall aesthetic and communicative impact, extending beyond mere grammatical function to serve as integral components of artistic expression [3].

This research contributes to the body of knowledge in morphological analysis, particularly by applying O'Grady's framework to authentic language data drawn from contemporary music. It focuses exclusively on the lyrics contained in Taylor Swift's album *The Life of a Showgirl*. Only affixation processes that conform to O'Grady's definitions of inflectional and derivational morphology will be included. Other morphological processes, such as compounding or reduplication, are outside the scope of this research. The analysis is limited to written transcriptions of the lyrics and does not consider phonological or performance-based variations. The general objective of this research is to analyze the morphological structures present in the selected song lyrics of Taylor Swift's *The Life of a Showgirl* through the lens of O'Grady's inflectional and derivational affixes. Specifically, the research aims to identify affixes and categorize them into derivational and inflectional affixes found in song lyrics from Swift's album, *The Life of a Showgirl*.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Morphology is a fundamental component of linguistic competence. As defined by O'Grady (2019), a language's morphology consists of the structural rules and categories used to build and interpret words. Central to this analysis is the morpheme, which is "the smallest unit of language that carries information about meaning or function" [8]. While some words are simple, others are complex and consist of a root and one or more affixes. These affixes are divided into two primary categories: derivational and inflectional.

Derivational Morphology

Derivation is a process used to create new words. According to O'Grady (2019), derivation forms a word with a meaning and/or category distinct from that of its base through the addition of an affix.

Category and Meaning Change: A key feature of derivation is its capacity to alter the syntactic category of a word. For instance, prefixes and suffixes can combine with a base to form a new word, and in English, the grammatical category of a complex word is typically dictated by its final morpheme. Even if the grammatical class of a word stays the same, its meaning usually changes. The resulting words often develop specific nuances that go beyond the simple sum of their morphemes [8].

Constraints: Derivational processes are not universally applicable. According to O'Grady (2019), derivation does not usually apply freely to all members of a given category. For example, phonological constraints may limit which bases an affix can attach to, such as the suffix *-en*, which "can only combine with a monosyllabic base that ends in an obstruent" [8].

Words that work (Acceptable) These words follow the rule because they are one syllable long and end in a hard consonant sound (an obstruent):

- **whiten** (from *white*)
- **soften** (from *soft*)
- **madden** (from *mad*)
- **quicken** (from *quick*)
- **liven** (from *live*)

Words that do not work (Unacceptable).

These words break the rule for two different reasons:

1. **Too long:** The word **abstract** has two syllables, so you cannot say ***abstracten**.
2. **Wrong ending sound:** The word **blue** ends in a vowel, not a hard consonant, so you cannot say ***bluen**. Other examples that fail for similar reasons are ***greenen**, ***slowen**, and ***angryen**.

Inflectional Morphology Inflection differs from derivation as it does not create new lexical items but rather adapts words to grammatical contexts. According to O'Grady (2019), Inflection is defined as morphology used to indicate the grammatical subclass to which it belongs.

Function: The primary function of inflection is to mark contrasts such as singular versus plural or past versus present. Inflection differs from derivation because it keeps the word's part of speech and its basic meaning the same.

Regular vs. Irregular Forms: There is a cognitive difference between regular and irregular inflection. Regular inflected forms are constructed as needed in accordance with a general morphological rule, whereas irregular forms must be stored permanently in the language user's memory [8]. There are three specific criteria to distinguish between these derivation and inflection types of affixes:

1. **Category Change:** derivation can change a word's category, but inflection cannot. For example, when adding a plural suffix, the form produced by adding the plural suffix -s is still a noun and has the same type of content or meaning as the base.



Figure 1. The Output of Inflection [8]

2. **Order:** There is a strict ordering when both types of affixes are present. O'Grady said that the rule is that "a derivational affix must combine with the base before an inflectional affix does".

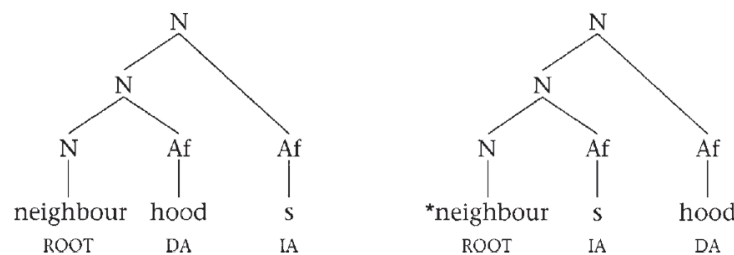


Figure 2. The Relative Positioning of Derivational and Inflectional Affixes [8]

3. **Productivity:** Inflection is generally more productive than derivation. "Inflectional affixes typically have relatively few exceptions," whereas "derivational affixes characteristically apply to restricted classes of bases" [8].

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The method employed in this research is the qualitative method. According to Taylor et al. (2016), a qualitative method is a research approach that generates descriptive data through written or spoken words from people and observations of behaviors [6]. This

method is suitable for descriptive data research. This research employs a qualitative descriptive method to analyze the occurrence of inflectional and derivational morphology in the lyrics of Taylor Swift's album *The Life of a Showgirl*. A qualitative approach is considered appropriate because the research focuses on describing and interpreting linguistic phenomena, particularly word-formation processes, rather than measuring numerical data. The research aims to identify and classify morphological forms based on O'Grady's theory of morphology, which clearly distinguishes between inflectional and derivational processes.

The theoretical framework used in this research is O'Grady's morphological theory, which defines morphology as the research of word structure and morpheme formation. According to O'Grady, inflectional morphemes serve grammatical functions such as tense, number, and comparison without changing the word class or core meaning, whereas derivational morphemes create new words and may change both meaning and grammatical category. These theoretical principles guide the classification and interpretation of the data in this research.

Source of Data and Data

The data source of this research consists of 12 songs included in Taylor Swift's album *The Life of a Showgirl*. The lyrics are obtained from official and authorized sources to ensure accuracy and authenticity. The data are in the form of written texts, specifically words containing affixes that indicate inflectional or derivational processes.

Technique of Collecting Data

The data collection process begins with compiling the complete lyrics of the album and organizing them song by song. The lyrics are then carefully read and examined to identify words that contain morphological markers such as prefixes and suffixes. Each identified word is recorded and categorized according to its morphological structure. The researchers focus only on words that show clear morphological processes, while words without affixes are excluded from the analysis.

Technique of Analyzing Data

Data analysis is conducted through several systematic steps. First, each identified word is segmented into its smallest meaningful units, consisting of roots and affixes. Second, the morphological forms are classified into inflectional or derivational morphemes based on O'Grady's criteria. Third, each classification is explained by referring to the function and effect of the affix on the base word, particularly whether it changes grammatical function, word class, or meaning. The results are then interpreted to identify patterns in the use of inflectional and derivational morphology within the album's lyrics.

To ensure the validity of this research, the researchers consistently apply O'Grady's theoretical definitions and cross-check morphological classifications with established linguistic references. Reliability is maintained by systematically analyzing the data and re-examining classifications to avoid inconsistencies. Peer discussion or consultation with linguistic sources is also employed to strengthen the accuracy of the analysis.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The table below presents the total number of derivational and inflectional forms identified across twelve songs featured in Taylor Swift's album *The Life of a Showgirl*. The dataset has been curated to include unique lexical items; that is, each form is counted once, with no duplication. In total, 100 distinct morphological items were recorded and are summarized in the following table:

Table 1.

No.	Song Title	Length	Derivation	Inflection
1	The Fate of Ophelia	3:46	19	5
2	Elizabeth Taylor	3:28	4	14
3	Opalite	3:55	22	9
4	Father Figure	3:32	30	8
5	Eldest Daughter	4:06	8	25
6	Ruin the Friendship	3:40	8	15
7	Actually Romantic	2:43	13	20
8	Wi\$h Li\$t	3:27	3	9
9	Wood	2:30	7	12
10	CANCELLED!	3:31	13	16
11	Honey	3:01	12	16
12	The Life of a Showgirl	4:01	16	24
	Total	41:40	131	108

Discussion

This research analyzes derivational and inflectional morphology found in the lyrics of Taylor Swift's album *The Life of a Showgirl*. The data were analyzed using morphological theory to identify how words are formed and how their meanings or grammatical functions are expressed in the songs. The results show that both derivational and inflectional morphemes are commonly used in the album.

Inflectional morphology is the most frequently found type in the lyrics. Inflectional morphemes such as *-s* (plural), *-ed* (past tense), *-ing* (progressive), and *-s* (third person singular) are used to show grammatical information like number and tense. These morphemes do not change the word class or basic meaning of the words.

Derivational morphology is used to form new words or change the meaning of existing words. This type of morphology is found in prefixes and suffixes such as *un-*, *-y*, *-able*, *-ion* and *-ness*.

Table 2.

No.	Song Title	Data	Root	Affix	Type	Function	Word Class Change
1	The Fate of Ophelia	Calling (Line 1)	Call	-ing	Derivational	Present progressive	No

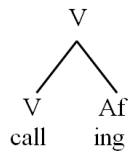
2	Elizabeth Taylor	Lovers (Line 42)	Love	-er -s	Derivational Inflectional	Plural Noun	V → N
3	Opalite	Freedom (Line 104)	Free	-dom	Derivational	Noun	Adj → N
4	Father Figure	Thoughtless (Line 33)	Thought	-less	Derivational	Adjective	N → Adj
5	Eldest Daughter	Uniqueness (Line 9)	unique	-ness	Derivational	Forms abstract noun	Adj → N
6	Ruin the Friendship	Invitation (Line 11)	invite	-ion	Derivational	Forms abstract noun	V → N
7	Actually Romantic	Loved (Line 11)	love	-ed	Inflectional	Past tense	No
8	Wi\$h Li\$t	Blades (Line 2)	blade	-s	Inflectional	Plural noun	No
9	Wood	Unlucky (line 3)	lucky	Un- and - y	Derivational	Adjective	N → Adj
10	Canceled	Matching (line 16)	match	-ing	Inflectional	Present progressive	No
11	Honey	Skies (line 14)	sky	-es	Inflectional	Plural noun	No
12	The Life of a Showgirl	Unforgettable (line 11)	forget	Un- and - able	Derivational	Adjective	V → Adj

Derivation

Datum 1

“I heard you **calling**” (The Fate of Ophelia; Line 1)

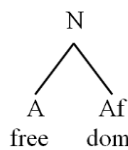
The word “calling” in this sentence is formed through a derivational process. The root of the word “calling” is “call” which belongs to the verb word class. As it is being inserted with the derivational suffix ‘-ing’ (meaning "a strong urge towards a particular way of life or career; a vocation" (Oxford University Press, n.d.)) the word undergoes a change in grammatical category. The suffix –ing functions as a noun-forming affix, creating the word “calling”. This follows the pattern:



Datum 2

“But failure brings you **freedom**” (Opalite; Line 104)

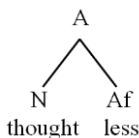
The word “freedom” in this sentence is formed through a derivational process. The root of the word “freedom” is “free” which belongs to the adjective word class. As it is being inserted with the derivational suffix ‘-dom’ (meaning "state or condition of being" (Oxford University Press, n.d.)) the word undergoes a change in grammatical category. The suffix –dom functions as a noun-forming affix, creating the word “freedom”. This follows the pattern:



Datum 3

“Your **thoughtless** ambition sparked the ignition” (Father Figure, Line 33)

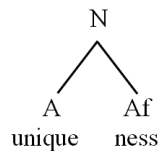
The word “thoughtless” in this sentence is formed through a derivational process. The root of the word “thoughtless” is “thought” which belongs to the noun word class. As it is being inserted with the derivational suffix ‘-less’ (meaning "without" or "lacking" (Oxford University Press, n.d.)) the word undergoes a change in grammatical category. The suffix –less functions as an adjective-forming affix, creating the word “thoughtless”. This follows the pattern:



Datum 4

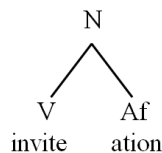
“I have been afflicted by a terminal **uniqueness**” (Eldest Daughter; Line 9)

The word “uniqueness” in this sentence is formed through a derivational process. The root of the word “uniqueness” is “unique” which belongs to the adjective word class. As it is being inserted with the derivational suffix ‘-ness’ (meaning "the quality, state or character of" (Oxford University Press, n.d.)) the word undergoes a change in grammatical category. The suffix –ness functions as a noun-forming affix, creating the word “uniqueness”. This follows the pattern:

**Datum 5**

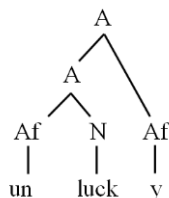
“And it was not an **invitation**” (Ruin the Friendship; Line 9)

The word “invitation” in this sentence is formed through a derivational process. The root of the word “invitation” is “invite” which belongs to the verb word class. As it is being inserted with the derivational suffix ‘-ation’ (meaning "the action, or state of" (Oxford University Press, n.d.)) the word undergoes a change in grammatical category. The suffix –ation functions as a noun-forming affix, creating the word “invitation”. This follows the pattern:

**Datum 6**

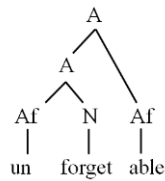
“Penny's **unlucky**, I took him back” (Wood; Line 3)

The word “Unlucky” occurs in this sentence involving two sequential derivational processes. The noun root “luck” the derivational prefix ‘un- (not or the opposite of)’ and ‘-y’ suffix that turns the noun into an adjective. This prefix converts adjectives into negative meaning, forming “unlucky”. Attaches to this verbal root, creating the new adjective “unlucky” (unpleasant things which happen to someone (Oxford University Press, n.d.)). This is a class-changing derivation. The morphological pattern is presented as follows:

**Datum 7**

“Thank you for an **unforgettable** night” (The Life of Showgirl; Line 11)

The word “unforgettable” occurs in this sentence involving two sequential derivational processes. The root of the word “unforgettable” is “forget” which belongs to the verb word class. As it is being inserted with derivational prefix un- and the derivational suffix ‘-able’ (meaning "having the quality of" or "capable of" (Oxford University Press, n.d.)) that denotes noun producing affixes, it creates the word “unforgettable” which belongs to an adjective word class, signifying a derivation process. The morphological pattern is presented as follows:

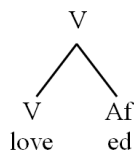


Inflection

Datum 8

“No man has ever **loved** me like you do” (Actually Romantic, Line 11)

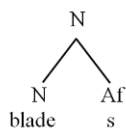
The word “loved” in this sentence is formed through an inflectional process. The base form of the word “loved” is “love” which belongs to the verb word class. When the inflectional suffix “-ed” is added, it marks the past participle form of the verb, which is required by the present perfect construction “has loved”. This suffix does not change the word class, instead it only expresses grammatical information related to tense and aspect. The morphological pattern is presented as follows:



Datum 9

“Yatch life under chopper **blades**” (Wi\$h Li\$t, Line 2)

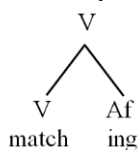
The word “blades” in this line is formed through an inflectional process. The base form “blade” belongs to the noun word class. The addition of the inflectional suffix “-s” marks plurality, indicating that more than one blade is involved. This suffix does not change the word class; it only provides grammatical information related to number. The morphological pattern is presented as follows:



Datum 10

“They're the ones with **matching** scars” (Cancelled; Line 16)

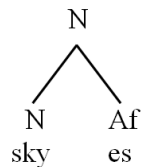
The word “matching” in this sentence is formed through an inflectional process. The base form of the word “matching” is “match” (to find somebody/something that goes together with or is connected with another person or thing). When the inflectional suffix “-ing” is added, it marks the present progressive form of the verb “matching” indicating an ongoing action. This suffix does not change the word class, instead it only expresses grammatical information related to tense and aspect. The morphological pattern is presented as follows:



Datum 11

"Summertime spritz, pink **skies**" (Honey; Line 14)

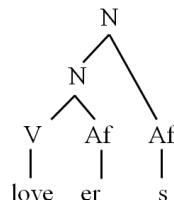
The word "skies" is inflectional morphology to mark plurality. The base form "skies" belongs to the noun word class. The addition of the inflectional suffix "-es" marks plurality, indicating that more than one sky is involved. This suffix does not change the word class; it only provides grammatical information related to number. The morphological pattern is presented as follows:



Datum 12

"All my white diamonds and **lovers** are forever" (Elizabeth Taylor; Line 42)

The word "lovers" is constructed through a sequence of derivational and inflectional changes based on the root love. Initially, the root love, which functions as a verb, undergoes a derivational process with the attachment of the suffix -er. This suffix changes the grammatical category of the word from a verb to a noun and shifts the meaning to indicate an agent (someone who performs the action), resulting in the word lover. Subsequently, the inflectional suffix -s is attached to the noun lover. Unlike the previous suffix, this does not alter the word's grammatical class; instead, it marks the noun as plural. Thus, the word "lovers" contains the root "love," the derivational suffix "-er," and the inflectional suffix "-s."



CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis and discussion presented in the previous chapters, the researcher concludes that Taylor Swift's lyrics contain a wide variety of morphological processes, specifically regarding affixation, as analyzed through William O'Grady's framework. From the data collected, the researcher identified a total of 239 affixes. The analysis revealed that derivational affixes appeared 131 times, while inflectional affixes appeared 108 times. It is important to emphasize that there is no repetition in this data; the researcher ensured that one data point represents a single, unique instance of the affix. This means that if a specific word with an affix was repeated multiple times in the lyrics (e.g., in a chorus), it was counted only once as a distinct data point. Therefore, these statistics accurately reflect the diversity of morphological forms used by the songwriter rather than the mere frequency of repeated words.

The dominance of derivational affixes (131 unique data points) over inflectional affixes (108 unique data points) suggests that in these specific songs, Taylor Swift prioritizes the process of word formation—changing the meaning or grammatical category of words—to create rhyme schemes, rhythm, and descriptive depth. The high volume of unique derivational markers indicates a sophisticated use of language where the songwriter actively transforms base words to fit the narrative and emotional context of the lyrics. Meanwhile, the inflectional affixes, though fewer in number, still play a crucial role in maintaining the grammatical accuracy and tense consistency of the storytelling. Overall, the application of O’Grady’s theory proved effective in categorizing these structures, confirming that the lyrics adhere to standard morphological rules while functioning as a valid source of complex linguistic data.

SUGGESTION

In light of these findings, the researcher offers several suggestions for students, educators, and future researchers. First, students of English Linguistics are encouraged to utilize song lyrics not merely for listening practice, but as a practical medium for understanding morphological processes. By analyzing how base words transform through affixation in familiar songs, students can make the learning of abstract rules more engaging and context-dependent. Additionally, English teachers and lecturers are advised to incorporate authentic materials like Taylor Swift’s lyrics into their curriculum. These materials can serve as effective tools to demonstrate the functional differences between inflectional markers and derivational word formation in a way that resonates with student interests.

Finally, for future researchers interested in this field, it is suggested to expand the scope of analysis. Future studies could benefit from comparing Taylor Swift’s morphological choices across different albums to observe linguistic evolution, or by conducting comparative studies between different genres, such as Pop versus Rap, to see if the ratio of derivational to inflectional affixes shifts. It is also recommended that future scholars apply alternative morphological theories alongside O’Grady’s framework to provide a broader, multi-perspective understanding of affixation processes in contemporary literature and media.

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