



# A Multilevel Stylistic Analysis of the Language of Worship in Selected Hillsongs

Dr. Jimboy B. Pagalilauan

Associate Professor I- College of Arts and Sciences, Cavite State University – Indang, Cvaite, Philippines

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the language of worship in selected Hillsong songs through a multilevel stylistic analysis. Using a qualitative descriptive research design, the study analyzed five songs, Oceans (Where Feet May Fail), What a Beautiful Name, Who You Say I Am, So Will I (100 Billion X), and Cornerstone; at the lexical, syntactic, semantic, and discourse levels. The songs were selected through criterion sampling based on their relevance to worship discourse and the availability of their official English lyrics. A researcher-developed multilevel stylistic analysis matrix was used to identify, classify, and interpret significant linguistic features. The analysis was guided by Linguistic Stylistics, with Systemic Functional Linguistics, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Foregrounding Theory, and Appraisal Theory providing support for the interpretation of specific features. The findings show that worshipful expression in the selected songs is constructed through the interaction of lexical choices, repetition, pronoun use, syntactic patterning, figurative language, and discourse relationships. Lexical and syntactic features emphasize faith, praise, devotion, and personal relationship with God, while metaphor, symbolism, personification, and imagery represent abstract religious concepts through concrete expressions. At the discourse level, direct address, references to God, and recurring patterns of affirmation and devotion contribute to the construction of worshipful discourse. Overall, the findings demonstrate that the language of worship in the selected songs is multidimensional, with linguistic features across levels working together to construct and foreground religious meaning. The study highlights the usefulness of multilevel stylistic analysis in examining how worship is expressed through language in contemporary Christian song lyrics.

**Keywords:** Hillsong songs, language of worship, linguistic stylistics, multilevel stylistic analysis, worship lyrics

## INTRODUCTION

Language plays a central role in how people construct and communicate meaning. Through linguistic choices, speakers and writers express ideas, emotions, relationships, beliefs, and experiences. Stylistics offers a systematic way of examining these choices by relating linguistic form to meaning and interpretation. Jeffries and McIntyre (2010) describe stylistics as the linguistic study of style, with attention to how language choices contribute to meaning and interpretation. Leech and Short (2007) likewise show that examining linguistic features systematically can reveal how texts create particular effects and meanings. Stylistic analysis, therefore, is concerned not only with noticeable words or figures of speech but also with the patterns through which language operates within a text.

Song lyrics offer useful material for stylistic analysis because they contain recurring linguistic patterns through which ideas, emotions, and experiences are expressed. Although songs are performed with musical elements, their lyrics can also be examined as texts through linguistic analysis. This is especially relevant to Christian worship songs, where language expresses faith, praise, dependence, devotion, identity, and relationships with God. Previous research has identified linguistic differences across types of Christian songs. Palayon and Dalona (2025), for example, examined Christian songs through corpus analysis and identified differences bet-



ween traditional hymns and contemporary Christian songs. Their findings associated contemporary Christian songs with language concerning personal and spiritual relationships, while traditional hymns contained vocabulary related to scripture, adoration, and appreciation.

Metaphor is another aspect of Christian music that has received scholarly attention. Aslan (2018) examined metaphors in Turkish contemporary Christian music and found that metaphorical expressions contributed to the communication and interpretation of religious and transcendent experiences. This relates to the view of metaphor proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), who argue that metaphor is not merely an ornamental feature of language but a means of understanding abstract concepts through more concrete experiences. In worship lyrics, concepts such as faith, dependence, salvation, divine presence, and spiritual experience may therefore be expressed through concrete images and familiar experiences.

Christian songs also establish interpersonal relationships through language. Wang and Zhang (2019) examined interpersonal meanings in traditional hymns and contemporary Christian songs using Systemic Functional Linguistics and Appraisal Theory. Their analysis included mood, modality, judgment, and evaluation and showed how Christian songs construct relationships between God and human beings. These findings are relevant to worship lyrics, which often use direct address, personal pronouns, evaluative expressions, and other linguistic resources to position the speaker in relation to God.

The cognitive and emotional dimensions of Christian songs have likewise been examined. Tönsing et al. (2015) investigated the cognitive and emotive components of traditional and contemporary Christian songs and discussed their role in the faith life of Christian communities. Their study indicates that Christian songs may communicate theological ideas alongside emotional responses. This makes it possible to examine worship lyrics not only for their religious content but also for the linguistic resources through which that content and emotion are expressed.

Hillsong provides a specific body of contemporary worship lyrics for such an analysis. Its music has also been the subject of academic research. Cowan (2017), for instance, examined Hillsong Music and related materials through discourse analysis, focusing on its changing theological emphases. His study shows that Hillsong lyrics can be examined as discourse and considered within developments in contemporary Christian worship. The emphasis of the study, however, was on the theological development of Hillsong Music rather than on a systematic linguistic analysis across multiple levels.

A multilevel stylistic approach allows the language of worship lyrics to be examined from several related perspectives. At the lexical level, diction, word choice, repetition, pronouns, and evaluative expressions may reveal patterns of emphasis, emotional positioning, and religious expression. The syntactic level considers sentence and clause structures, parallelism, coordination, subordination, and recurring syntactic patterns. At the semantic level, metaphor, symbolism, personification, imagery, and other figurative expressions provide ways of examining how abstract religious concepts are represented. The discourse level focuses on address and reference to God, speaker–addressee relationships, thematic progression, and recurring discourse patterns.

Several linguistic perspectives support these levels of analysis. Systemic Functional Linguistics views language as a resource for making meaning and provides tools for examining grammatical and interpersonal choices (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Conceptual Metaphor Theory offers a basis for examining how abstract concepts are represented through metaphorical mappings (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Appraisal Theory provides a framework for examining evaluation and expressions of attitude (Martin & White, 2005). Linguistic Stylistics provides the broader framework for relating these linguistic choices to textual style and meaning (Jeffries & McIntyre, 2010; Leech & Short, 2007).

Previous studies have examined Christian music from several linguistic and discourse perspectives, including metaphor (Aslan, 2018), interpersonal meaning (Wang & Zhang, 2019), cognitive and emotive dimensions (Tönsing et al., 2015), and register and linguistic characteristics (Palayon & Dalona, 2025). Hillsong-specific research has also addressed discourse and theological development (Cowan, 2017). Taken together, these studies provide useful perspectives on Christian songs, but they do not bring lexical, syntactic, semantic, and



discourse analysis together in one integrated stylistic examination of selected Hillsong lyrics. This provides the basis for the present study.

The study examined five selected Hillsong songs: “Oceans (Where Feet May Fail),” “What a Beautiful Name,” “Who You Say I Am,” “So Will I (100 Billion X),” and “Cornerstone.” The analysis covered four linguistic levels: lexical, syntactic, semantic, and discourse. At the lexical level, the study examined diction and word choice, repetition, pronoun use, and emotive and evaluative expressions. The syntactic analysis focused on sentence and clause structures, parallelism, coordination and subordination, and recurring syntactic patterns. The semantic analysis considered metaphor, symbolism, personification, imagery, and other significant figurative expressions. The discourse analysis examined address and reference to God, speaker–addressee relationships, thematic progression, and recurring discourse patterns. The study also identified stylistic patterns across the four levels and examined how these features contributed to the construction of meaning and the expression of worship.

Rather than examining these linguistic features separately, the study considered how they interact across the selected songs. The analysis consequently provides a linguistic perspective on Hillsong worship lyrics, particularly on the ways language choices and recurring patterns contribute to the construction of meaning and the expression of worship.

### ***Statement of the Problem***

This study aimed to conduct a multilevel stylistic analysis of the language of worship in selected Hillsong songs. It focused on linguistic features at the lexical, syntactic, semantic, and discourse levels and examined how these features work together in constructing meaning and expressing worship.

Specifically, the study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What lexical features characterize the language of worship in the selected Hillsong songs in terms of:
  - 1.1. diction and word choice;
  - 1.2. repetition;
  - 1.3. pronoun use; and
  - 1.4. emotive and evaluative expressions?
2. What syntactic features characterize the language of worship in the selected Hillsong songs in terms of:
  - 2.1. sentence and clause structures;
  - 2.2. parallelism;
  - 2.3. coordination and subordination; and
  - 2.4. repetition of syntactic patterns?
3. What semantic features characterize the language of worship in the selected Hillsong songs in terms of:
  - 3.1. metaphor;
  - 3.2. symbolism;
  - 3.3. personification;
  - 3.4. imagery; and



- 3.5. other significant figurative expressions?
4. What discourse-level features are evident in the selected Hillsong songs in terms of:
  - 4.1. address and reference to God;
  - 4.2. speaker–addressee relationships;
  - 4.3. thematic progression; and
  - 4.4. recurring discourse patterns?
5. What stylistic patterns emerge across the lexical, syntactic, semantic, and discourse levels of the selected Hillsong songs?
6. How do the identified stylistic features across these linguistic levels contribute to the construction of meaning and the expression of worship in the selected Hillsong songs?

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The study is anchored primarily in Linguistic Stylistics, with support from Systemic Functional Linguistics, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Foregrounding Theory, and Appraisal Theory. Together, these perspectives provide a basis for examining the language and style of the selected Hillsong songs at different linguistic levels. Linguistic Stylistics serves as the overarching framework, while the other perspectives provide more specific tools for examining grammatical, semantic, foregrounding, and evaluative features.

### **1. Linguistic Stylistics**

The primary theoretical foundation of the study is Linguistic Stylistics, particularly the work of Leech and Short and Jeffries and McIntyre. Stylistics examines how linguistic choices shape the style and meaning of a text. Rather than treating style as a matter of personal impression, linguistic stylistics provides systematic ways of examining vocabulary, grammatical structures, figurative language, and patterns of textual organization.

In this study, Linguistic Stylistics provides the overall framework for examining the selected Hillsong songs at the lexical, syntactic, semantic, and discourse levels. It allows recurring linguistic patterns to be identified and considered in relation to the style and meaning of the songs.

### **2. Systemic Functional Linguistics**

The study also draws on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), developed by M. A. K. Halliday and further developed with Christian Matthiessen. SFL views language as a resource for making meaning and emphasizes the relationship between linguistic choices and their functions in context.

SFL is particularly relevant to the syntactic and discourse levels of the study. At the syntactic level, it provides a basis for examining clauses and their relationships, including coordination and subordination. At the discourse level, the interpersonal metafunction helps examine how the songs establish relationships between the speaker and the addressee, particularly in references and addresses to God. The textual metafunction also provides a basis for considering how ideas are organized and developed throughout a song.

Thus, SFL supports an analysis that considers not only what grammatical structures occur in the lyrics but also how those structures contribute to meaning.

### **3. Conceptual Metaphor Theory**

The semantic analysis is supported by the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. The theory proposes that metaphor is not restricted to decorative or poetic language. Rather, metaphor can structure the way abstract concepts are understood through more concrete experiences.

This perspective is useful in analyzing Hillsong lyrics because worship songs often express abstract ideas through concrete domains and images. CMT therefore guides the identification and interpretation of metaphors used to represent concepts such as God, faith, love, strength, protection, spiritual experience, and other abstract ideas.

The same perspective also supports the analysis of personification when human qualities or actions are attributed to non-human or abstract entities.

#### 4. Foregrounding Theory

Foregrounding Theory, associated with the Prague School and particularly Jan Mukařovský, provides a basis for examining linguistically prominent patterns. Particular features may become noticeable through repetition, parallelism, deviation, or other forms of unusual patterning.

This perspective is relevant to the analysis of repetition and parallelism in the selected songs. Repeated words, phrases, grammatical structures, and other recurring patterns can be examined as stylistically prominent features. Their prominence may contribute to emphasis, rhythm, memorability, and the highlighting of particular ideas.

Foregrounding Theory therefore helps explain the stylistic significance of recurring patterns rather than treating them simply as repeated linguistic forms.

#### 5. Appraisal Theory

The study also draws on Appraisal Theory, particularly the framework developed by Martin and White, to examine emotive and evaluative expressions.

Appraisal Theory addresses the ways language conveys attitudes, evaluations, and positions. In the present study, it provides a basis for identifying expressions associated with emotions, appreciation, praise, devotion, gratitude, love, reverence, and other evaluative meanings found in the lyrics.

The analysis remains focused on the language of the texts themselves. It does not assume the personal emotions, beliefs, or intentions of the songwriters. The concern is with how evaluation and attitude are expressed through the linguistic resources found in the selected songs.

#### Conceptual Framework

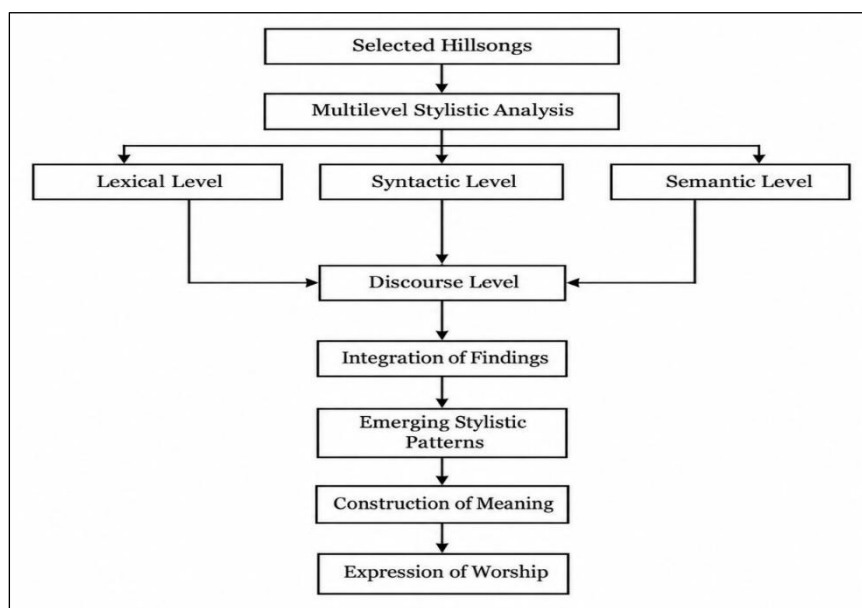


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework



The conceptual framework translates the theoretical foundation of the study into its analytical procedure. The five selected Hillsong songs serve as the textual data and are examined through four linguistic levels: lexical, syntactic, semantic, and discourse.

The analysis begins with the selected Hillsong songs. Each song is examined at the four levels.

At the lexical level, the analysis covers diction and word choice, repetition, pronoun use, and emotive and evaluative expressions.

At the syntactic level, the analysis focuses on sentence and clause structures, parallelism, coordination and subordination, and recurring syntactic patterns.

At the semantic level, the analysis examines metaphor, symbolism, personification, imagery, and other significant figurative expressions.

At the discourse level, the analysis considers address and reference to God, speaker–addressee relationships, thematic progression, and recurring discourse patterns.

The findings from the four levels are then compared to identify stylistic patterns that recur across the songs. These patterns are interpreted in relation to the construction of meaning and the expression of worship in the selected Hillsong songs.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Research Design*

The study employed a qualitative descriptive research design using multilevel linguistic stylistic analysis. The design was used to describe and interpret linguistic features in five selected Hillsong songs rather than to measure variables statistically. The analysis was organized into four linguistic levels: lexical, syntactic, semantic, and discourse.

Linguistic Stylistics served as the overarching analytical framework. It provided the general procedure for identifying linguistic choices, describing recurring patterns, and relating those patterns to textual meaning and style. The supporting theories were not treated as separate or parallel frameworks. Each was used for a specific analytical purpose within the broader stylistic analysis.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) was applied primarily to grammatical and interpersonal features, particularly clause relationships, speaker–addressee relationships, and the organization of ideas. Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) was used mainly in the semantic analysis of metaphor and personification, especially where abstract religious concepts were expressed through concrete domains. Foregrounding Theory was used to explain the stylistic prominence created by repetition and parallelism. Appraisal Theory was applied to emotive and evaluative expressions, including language expressing praise, appreciation, devotion, gratitude, and related attitudes.

The analytical process moved from individual textual features to recurring patterns within each linguistic level and then to relationships across the four levels. This allowed the study to examine not only the presence of particular linguistic features but also how those features worked together in constructing meaning and expressing worship.

The corpus consisted of five officially released Hillsong songs selected through criterion sampling, a form of purposive sampling. The selection was based on the objectives of the study and on the availability of textual material suitable for multilevel linguistic analysis.

### *Sources of Data and Corpus Selection*

The following criteria were applied:



1. The song had to be an officially released Hillsong song.
2. Complete English lyrics had to be accessible through a reliable and verifiable source.
3. The lyrics had to provide sufficient textual material for lexical, syntactic, semantic, and discourse analysis.
4. The song had to be relevant to worship, faith, God, or religious expression.
5. The five songs had to contain sufficient and varied linguistic features for multilevel stylistic analysis.
6. Only the English lyrics of the original songs were included. Live performance variations, translations, instrumental arrangements, melody, harmony, tempo, and vocal performance were excluded because the study focused specifically on the linguistic and stylistic properties of the lyrics.

**Table 1. Corpus of Selected Hillsong Songs**

| No. | Song                                | Performing/Publishing Unit | Year | Primary Source           | Principal Linguistic Features Examined                                                                                  |
|-----|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|------|--------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1   | <i>Oceans (Where Feet May Fail)</i> | Hillsong UNITED            | 2013 | Official Hillsong lyrics | Water imagery and metaphor, repetition, pronouns, direct address, thematic progression, faith and dependence            |
| 2   | <i>What a Beautiful Name</i>        | Hillsong Worship           | 2016 | Official Hillsong lyrics | Evaluative diction, repetition, pronouns, religious imagery, direct address, praise-oriented discourse                  |
| 3   | <i>Who You Say I Am</i>             | Hillsong Worship           | 2018 | Official Hillsong lyrics | Identity vocabulary, pronouns, repetition, contrast, parallel structures, belonging and identity discourse              |
| 4   | <i>So Will I (100 Billion X)</i>    | Hillsong UNITED            | 2017 | Official Hillsong lyrics | Cosmic and natural imagery, personification, parallelism, conditional structures, creation–response discourse           |
| 5   | <i>Cornerstone</i>                  | Hillsong Worship           | 2012 | Official Hillsong lyrics | Architectural and storm imagery, repetition, evaluative diction, first-person statements, trust and stability discourse |

The official Hillsong lyric pages served as the primary textual sources for the corpus. The songs were checked for completeness and consistency before they were included in the analysis. The corpus was then coded as Song 1 through Song 5 for purposes of systematic comparison.

### Analytical Units

The primary analytical unit was the meaningful linguistic segment in the lyrics, which could be a word, phrase, clause, sentence, repeated expression, figurative expression, or connected sequence of clauses, depending on the feature being examined.

The unit varied according to the level of analysis:

1. **Lexical level:** individual words, lexical items, repeated words or phrases, pronouns, and emotive or evaluative expressions;
2. **Syntactic level:** clauses, sentences, repeated grammatical structures, parallel constructions, coordinated clauses, subordinate clauses, and conditional constructions;
3. **Semantic level:** words, phrases, clauses, or larger expressions containing metaphor, symbolism, personification, imagery, or other figurative meaning;



4. **Discourse level:** connected lines or sequences of clauses that established address, speaker–addressee relationships, thematic progression, or recurring discourse patterns.

This flexible definition of the analytical unit allowed the researcher to examine each feature at the textual level at which it was most clearly expressed.

### Coding Procedure

The researcher first read the five songs repeatedly to become familiar with their vocabulary, grammatical structures, figurative expressions, recurring patterns, and thematic development. Each song was assigned a code from Song 1 to Song 5.

The lyrics were then coded using the Researcher-Developed Multilevel Stylistic Analysis Matrix. Each relevant textual segment was entered into the matrix and assigned to the appropriate linguistic level and analytical category.

### The coding process followed these steps:

1. **Identification of the textual segment.** A word, phrase, clause, sentence, repeated structure, figurative expression, or connected discourse segment was selected when it demonstrated a feature relevant to the research questions.
2. **Classification of the feature.** The segment was assigned to one of the predefined categories: lexical, syntactic, semantic, or discourse.
3. **Linguistic description.** The researcher described what was observable in the text, such as a repeated lexical item, first- or second-person pronoun, parallel structure, conditional clause, metaphorical expression, or direct address.
4. **Theoretical interpretation.** The relevant supporting theory was then applied according to the feature being examined. SFL was used for selected grammatical and interpersonal features; CMT for metaphor and personification; Foregrounding Theory for repetition and parallelism; and Appraisal Theory for emotive and evaluative expressions.
5. **Contextual interpretation.** The feature was considered in relation to the surrounding lines and the developing discourse of the song.
6. **Cross-song comparison.** Similar and contrasting features were compared across the five songs.
7. **Cross-level integration.** Findings from the four linguistic levels were brought together to identify recurring stylistic patterns and their contribution to meaning and worshipful expression.

The same analytical categories were applied to all five songs to maintain consistency. The matrix recorded the textual excerpt, analytical category, linguistic description, theoretical basis, and interpretation. The instrument was reviewed before the formal analysis to ensure alignment with the research questions and theoretical framework.

### Analytical Framework and Use of Theories

The study used a hierarchical theoretical arrangement rather than four independent theoretical frameworks.

### Linguistic Stylistics as the Overarching Framework

Linguistic Stylistics provided the overall analytical orientation of the study. It guided the examination of how particular linguistic choices contribute to style and meaning. The four linguistic levels-lexical, syntactic, semantic, and discourse-were treated as connected components of the stylistic analysis.



## **Systemic Functional Linguistics**

SFL was used selectively for features involving grammatical organization and interpersonal meaning. At the syntactic level, it supported the examination of clause relationships, coordination, subordination, and conditional constructions. At the discourse level, its interpersonal perspective helped explain speaker–addressee relationships and direct or indirect reference to God, while its textual perspective supported the examination of how ideas were organized across the lyrics.

## **Conceptual Metaphor Theory**

CMT was applied mainly to the semantic level. It guided the analysis of expressions in which abstract religious experiences were represented through concrete domains, such as water, architecture, creation, freedom, and family. Personification was also considered where nonhuman entities were represented through human actions or responses.

## **Foregrounding Theory**

Foregrounding Theory was applied to recurring and structurally prominent forms. Repetition and parallelism were examined not simply as repeated linguistic structures but as features that give particular expressions greater textual prominence.

## **Appraisal Theory**

Appraisal Theory was used to examine emotive and evaluative language. It provided a basis for identifying expressions of praise, appreciation, devotion, gratitude, love, reverence, and related evaluative meanings.

The theories therefore performed different but complementary functions within the same stylistic analysis. Linguistic Stylistics established the overall framework, while the supporting theories supplied analytical tools for particular categories of linguistic evidence.

## **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed through qualitative textual and linguistic stylistic analysis. Each song was examined individually before the findings were compared across the corpus.

At the lexical level, the researcher examined diction and word choice, repetition, pronoun use, and emotive and evaluative expressions. At the syntactic level, sentence and clause structures, parallelism, coordination and subordination, and recurring syntactic patterns were examined. At the semantic level, the analysis focused on metaphor, symbolism, personification, imagery, and other figurative expressions. At the discourse level, attention was given to address and reference to God, speaker–addressee relationships, thematic progression, and recurring discourse patterns.

For each major interpretation, the researcher distinguished between linguistic observation and interpretation of religious meaning. The linguistic observation described what was present in the text. The subsequent interpretation explained the function or meaning suggested by that textual pattern. Religious or theological meanings were treated as interpretations of the lyrics rather than as statements about the personal beliefs, intentions, or experiences of the songwriters.

For example, identifying a first-person pronoun and a second-person reference to God is a linguistic observation. Interpreting that pattern as establishing an interpersonal relationship between the speaker and God is a discourse interpretation. Describing that relationship as an expression of dependence, trust, or surrender constitutes an interpretation of the worshipful meaning constructed by the text.

This distinction was maintained throughout the analysis.



## Statistical Analysis

The study did not employ inferential statistical tests. Simple frequency counts were used only when necessary to describe the recurrence of particular linguistic features. Such counts served a descriptive purpose and were not used for statistical generalization. Qualitative interpretation of the linguistic patterns remained the primary basis of analysis.

## AI Declaration Statement

I acknowledge the use of ChatGPT (GPT-5.6 Luna), an OpenAI generative artificial intelligence tool, on September 26, 2026, for the purpose of supporting the development and language editing of this manuscript. The prompts used included requests to *“Help me look for theories that would be appropriate for my study”* and to *“Improve the grammar structure and change the words that are not academically sound used in my paragraphs.”*

The outputs from these prompts were used to assist in identifying theoretical perspectives relevant to the study and in improving the grammar, wording, clarity, and academic presentation of selected portions of the manuscript. The researcher reviewed, evaluated, and revised the outputs before incorporating any material into the study. The researcher takes full responsibility for the accuracy, interpretation, and final content of the manuscript.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents the findings of the multilevel stylistic analysis of the five selected Hillsong songs: *Oceans (Where Feet May Fail)*, *What a Beautiful Name*, *Who You Say I Am*, *So Will I (100 Billion X)*, and *Cornerstone*. The discussion follows the six research questions and examines the songs at the lexical, syntactic, semantic, and discourse levels.

To address the need for sufficient textual evidence, representative excerpts are presented for each major finding. The excerpts are analyzed first as observable linguistic forms and are then interpreted in relation to their stylistic and discourse functions. The interpretations refer to the language of the lyrics rather than to the personal beliefs, intentions, or experiences of the songwriters.

Linguistic Stylistics serves as the overarching framework. Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), Foregrounding Theory, and Appraisal Theory are used selectively to explain particular linguistic patterns.

### ***1. What lexical features are evident in the selected Hillsong songs in terms of diction and word choice, repetition, pronoun use, and emotive and evaluative expressions?***

The analysis revealed recurring lexical fields associated with faith, worship, divine identity, grace, love, salvation, dependence, and belonging. However, each song developed these themes through distinct word choices. In *Oceans (Where Feet May Fail)*, words such as “waters,” “unknown,” “faith,” “grace,” and “guide” connected physical uncertainty with religious dependence. In *Who You Say I Am*, expressions such as “free,” “slave,” “child of God,” “Father’s house,” and “chosen” established a lexical field related to identity, freedom, and belonging. Meanwhile, *Cornerstone* combined words such as “hope,” “righteousness,” “trust,” “storm,” “anchor,” and “Cornerstone,” bringing together abstract values and concrete images of stability.

In *So Will I (100 Billion X)*, references to galaxies, stars, mountains, oceans, and creation connected natural and cosmic vocabulary with worship and human response. In contrast, *What a Beautiful Name* prominently used the evaluative adjectives “beautiful,” “wonderful,” and “powerful.” These expressions positively evaluated the name of Jesus and contributed to the song’s praise-oriented language. The findings show that the songs combined religious vocabulary with words drawn from physical, familial, natural, architectural, and interpersonal domains. This pattern supports the view that lexical choices contribute to textual meaning and effect (Leech & Short, 2007).



Repetition further strengthened the prominence of particular words and expressions. In *What a Beautiful Name*, the recurring construction “What a beautiful Name,” followed by variations using “wonderful” and “powerful,” maintained a recognizable grammatical pattern while introducing changes in evaluation. In *Who You Say I Am*, the repeated expression “I’m a child of God” emphasized the speaker’s identity and belonging. In *So Will I*, the recurring expression “so will I” linked descriptions of creation with the speaker’s response. Repetition therefore served not only as a means of emphasis but also as a way of organizing the lyrics and reinforcing their central ideas. This finding is consistent with the concept of foregrounding, which explains how patterned linguistic forms gain prominence in a text (Jeffries & McIntyre, 2010).

Pronoun use also contributed to the interpersonal character of the songs. In “Who You say I am,” the pronouns “You” and “I” established a relationship between the addressee and the speaker. Similarly, *Oceans* used first-person forms such as “I” and “my” alongside second-person forms such as “You” and “Your,” placing the speaker’s experience in relation to God. These patterns indicate that the lyrics often represented worship through direct address and personal expression rather than through detached description.

Evaluative language was particularly evident in *What a Beautiful Name*, while *Cornerstone* used expressions associated with hope, trust, righteousness, and grace. In *Who You Say I Am*, expressions of freedom and belonging presented the speaker’s identity affirmatively. These findings show that evaluation was conveyed through adjectives, nouns, relational expressions, and contrasts. Appraisal Theory provides a useful basis for examining these evaluative meanings (Martin & White, 2005).

## ***2. What syntactic features are evident in the selected Hillsong songs in terms of sentence and clause structures, parallelism, coordination and subordination, and recurring syntactic patterns?***

The analysis showed that the selected songs frequently used short declarative clauses, repeated grammatical constructions, parallel structures, and conditional patterns. These structures helped present central propositions directly and establish relationships between ideas.

In *Who You Say I Am*, the expression “I’m a child of God” is a concise declarative clause consisting of a first-person subject, a copular verb, and a complement. Its structure presents identity as a direct assertion. Similarly, *Cornerstone* uses first-person declarative constructions, including the statement beginning “My hope is built...,” to express hope and trust from the speaker’s perspective. The use of relatively direct clauses allows the songs to present statements of identity, faith, and commitment without extensive grammatical embedding. This finding is comparable to Sharndama and Onyinyechi’s (2018) discussion of sentence structures in Christian praise and worship songs.

Parallelism is especially apparent in *What a Beautiful Name*. The repeated construction “What a beautiful Name” is followed by structurally similar expressions using “wonderful” and “powerful.” The recurring grammatical frame gives prominence to the evaluation while allowing lexical variation. A related pattern appears in *So Will I*, where conditional constructions are followed by “so will I.” The repeated structure links different propositions through a recognizable grammatical relationship.

Coordination, subordination, and conditional constructions also contribute to the organization of the lyrics. In *So Will I*, the recurring conditional-response pattern connects descriptions of creation or divine action with the speaker’s response. In *Oceans*, the sequence of ideas concerning uncertainty, guidance, faith, and dependence similarly establishes relationships between experiences and responses. These grammatical patterns help organize the songs’ central propositions and thematic progression. From an SFL perspective, such structures contribute to meaning by organizing relationships among processes, participants, and propositions (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

Across the corpus, the recurring syntactic features included first-person declaratives, second-person address, repeated chorus constructions, parallelism, conditional clauses, and short statements of identity, trust, praise, or response. Their distribution varied across the songs: identity statements were prominent in *Who You Say I Am*, evaluative parallelism in *What a Beautiful Name*, and conditional-response structures in *So Will I*. These findings indicate that syntax contributes to both the emphasis and organization of worshipful expression.



### ***3. What semantic features are evident in the selected Hillsong songs in terms of metaphor, symbolism, personification, imagery, and other figurative expressions?***

The semantic analysis identified metaphor, symbolism, personification, imagery, and contrast as important features in the selected songs. These features provided concrete ways of representing abstract religious experiences and helped develop themes such as trust, dependence, identity, stability, and worship.

In *Oceans*, the expression “walk upon the waters” places physical movement within an aquatic setting. When considered alongside references to faith, fear, guidance, and divine presence, the image contributes to the representation of trust amid uncertainty. In *Cornerstone*, the architectural term “Cornerstone” is associated with Christ and with expressions of hope, trust, and stability. The image provides a concrete basis for representing security. In *So Will I*, references to galaxies, stars, mountains, and oceans connect the natural world with divine creative action and human response. These patterns support the use of Conceptual Metaphor Theory to examine how abstract concepts are represented through more concrete domains (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Symbolic meanings emerged from the relationships among recurring images and the surrounding lyrics. In *Cornerstone*, storm, anchor, and cornerstone imagery creates a contrast between instability and security. In *Oceans*, waters, waves, and depth occur alongside expressions of faith, fear, guidance, and divine presence. In *Who You Say I Am*, expressions such as “Father’s house” and “child of God” connect religious identity with familial relationships. The meanings of these images therefore depend on their textual context rather than on isolated words alone.

Personification was particularly evident in *So Will I*, where elements of creation were represented through actions associated with worshipful participants. The descriptions of stars worshipping and mountains bowing give natural elements roles within the song’s worship discourse. This representation broadens the perspective from the individual speaker to creation as a whole.

The dominant imagery identified in each song is presented in the table below.

| <b>Song</b>           | <b>Dominant imagery</b> | <b>Representative linguistic evidence</b> |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| Oceans                | Aquatic                 | waters, waves, oceans, walking            |
| What a Beautiful Name | Religious/cosmic        | name, heaven, death, resurrection         |
| Who You Say I Am      | Familial/social         | child, Father’s house, freedom            |
| So Will I             | Cosmic/natural          | galaxies, stars, mountains, oceans        |
| Cornerstone           | Architectural/storm     | cornerstone, storm, anchor, ground        |

The table shows that each song draws on a recognizable imagery system. Aquatic imagery in *Oceans* is associated with uncertainty and trust, while architectural and storm-related imagery in *Cornerstone* contributes to the representation of stability amid difficulty. Familial imagery in *Who You Say I Am* supports the theme of belonging, and cosmic and natural imagery in *So Will I* connects creation with worshipful response.

Semantic contrast also contributes to meaning. In *Who You Say I Am*, “free” is contrasted with “slave,” establishing a movement from one condition to another. The subsequent identification of the speaker as a “child of God” develops the theme of affirmed identity. In *Cornerstone*, storm-related images are placed alongside expressions of hope and trust, creating a contrast between difficulty and security. Overall, the figurative patterns help organize the songs’ representations of faith, identity, transformation, and dependence.

### ***4. What discourse features are evident in the selected Hillsong songs in terms of address and reference to God, speaker–addressee relationships, thematic progression, and recurring discourse patterns?***

The discourse analysis showed that God or Jesus occupied a central position in the five songs, either as the direct addressee or as the subject of praise and description. In *Oceans*, the use of “You” and “Your” directly



addresses God, while first-person expressions describe the speaker's response. In *Who You Say I Am*, the expression "Who You say I am" explicitly connects the speaker's identity with the addressee. In *What a Beautiful Name*, the lyrics move between references to Jesus and direct address, allowing the song to describe and address its religious referent.

First- and second-person pronouns helped construct speaker–addressee relationships. In *Oceans*, "I" and "my" represent the speaker, while "You" and "Your" refer to God. In *Who You Say I Am*, the speaker's identity is connected to what "You" say. These patterns position the speaker as a participant in a relationship with the divine addressee. This finding corresponds with the interpersonal metafunction of SFL, which examines how language constructs relationships among participants (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

The songs also displayed distinct thematic progressions. In *Oceans*, the progression moved from calling and uncertainty toward faith and dependence. In *What a Beautiful Name*, the discourse developed from descriptions of Christ toward saving action, resurrection, and praise. In *Who You Say I Am*, the progression moved from a previous condition toward freedom, belonging, and affirmed identity. In *So Will I*, descriptions of creation and divine action were connected with creation's response and the speaker's response.

Four recurring discourse patterns were identified: divine or created action followed by human response; uncertainty followed by assurance or trust; a previous condition followed by transformed identity; and recognition of God or Christ followed by praise. These patterns were evident across the songs and helped organize the relationship between the subject of worship and the speaker's response. The findings suggest that discourse structure contributes to worshipful meaning by connecting descriptions, evaluations, personal declarations, and responses into coherent sequences.

### ***5. What stylistic patterns emerge across the lexical, syntactic, semantic, and discourse levels of the selected Hillsong songs?***

The findings indicate that the four linguistic levels are interconnected. A single expression can function lexically, syntactically, semantically, and discursively. For example, "I'm a child of God" uses familial and religious vocabulary at the lexical level, a concise declarative structure at the syntactic level, and a familial relationship to represent identity at the semantic level. At the discourse level, the first-person declaration positions the speaker in relation to God.

The repeated evaluative constructions in *What a Beautiful Name* show a similar relationship. The adjectives provide evaluative meaning, the recurring grammatical frame creates parallelism, and the repetition reinforces the song's praise-oriented discourse. In *Cornerstone*, the central architectural image operates as a lexical choice, contributes to metaphorical meaning, and supports the broader discourse of trust and stability. In *So Will I*, the conditional-response construction establishes a grammatical relationship between propositions and contributes to the progression from descriptions of creation to the speaker's response.

The following table presents the integrated stylistic patterns identified in the analysis.

Table 2. Integrated Stylistic Patterns

| Linguistic Level | Representative Evidence                               | Linguistic Function     | Contribution to Meaning   |
|------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|
| Lexical          | Evaluative adjectives in <i>What a Beautiful Name</i> | Evaluation              | Praise and exaltation     |
| Lexical          | I / You pattern                                       | Participant reference   | Personal relationship     |
| Syntactic        | Repeated evaluative construction                      | Parallelism             | Emphasis and memorability |
| Syntactic        | Conditional-response pattern in <i>So Will I</i>      | Clause dependency       | Responsive action         |
| Semantic         | Aquatic imagery in <i>Oceans</i>                      | Concrete representation | Faith amid uncertainty    |



|           |                                                 |                             |                              |
|-----------|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Semantic  | Architectural imagery in Cornerstone            | Metaphorical representation | Stability and trust          |
| Semantic  | Creation as worshipping/responding in So Will I | Personification             | Expanded worship perspective |
| Discourse | I–You relationships                             | Interpersonal positioning   | Human-divine relationship    |
| Discourse | Previous condition → transformed identity       | Thematic progression        | Identity and belonging       |

As shown in Table 5, the same stylistic pattern may contribute to several dimensions of meaning. Repetition can provide emphasis and parallelism; pronouns can establish participant relationships; imagery can support metaphorical interpretation; and conditional structures can organize discourse progression. These interactions demonstrate the value of examining the selected songs through a multilevel framework rather than treating individual linguistic features as separate phenomena. This finding is consistent with the stylistic view that linguistic choices contribute to textual effects and interpretation (Leech & Short, 2007).

#### ***6. How do the identified stylistic features contribute to meaning and the expression of worship in the selected Hillsong songs?***

The analysis showed that worshipful meaning in the selected songs emerged through the interaction of word choice, repetition, grammatical structures, figurative language, and discourse relationships.

In *Oceans*, aquatic imagery occurs alongside first-person expressions, direct address to God, and vocabulary associated with faith and guidance. Together, these features construct a discourse of trust and dependence in the face of uncertainty. The imagery provides the concrete setting, while the pronouns and religious vocabulary position the experience in relation to God.

In *What a Beautiful Name*, evaluative adjectives such as “beautiful,” “wonderful,” and “powerful” combine with repetition and parallelism. The repeated structure foregrounds the positive evaluations of Jesus, while the broader discourse connects these evaluations with salvation, resurrection, sovereignty, and praise. Word choice and syntactic patterning therefore work together to reinforce the song’s praise-oriented expression.

In *Who You Say I Am*, the expression “I’m a child of God” connects first-person reference with familial and religious vocabulary. Its repetition emphasizes the identity statement, while the contrast between “slave” and “free” contributes to a progression from a previous condition toward belonging and affirmed identity. These linguistic features collectively develop the song’s focus on identity.

In *So Will I*, cosmic and natural imagery is combined with personification, conditional constructions, and repetition. Descriptions of creation are connected to the recurring response “so will I,” linking the represented response of creation with that of the speaker. The grammatical and discourse patterns thus support the theme of responsive worship.

In *Cornerstone*, architectural imagery, storm-related vocabulary, first-person statements, and expressions of hope and trust work together to represent stability amid difficulty. The cornerstone provides a concrete image of security, while the contrast with storm-related imagery strengthens the distinction between instability and trust.

*Table 3. Summary of Findings According to the Statements of the Problem*

| Statement of the Problem     | Evidence-Based Summary of Findings                                                                                                                                                                          |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>1. Lexical Features</b>   | Religious, relational, concrete, and evaluative vocabulary establishes recurring semantic fields. Repetition foregrounds central expressions, while pronoun use constructs speaker–addressee relationships. |
| <b>2. Syntactic Features</b> | Short declarative clauses, parallel structures, repeated constructions, and conditional                                                                                                                     |



|                                             |                                                                                                                                                                   |
|---------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                             | clauses organize and emphasize the songs' central propositions.                                                                                                   |
| <b>3. Semantic Features</b>                 | Metaphor, symbolism, imagery, personification, and semantic contrast represent abstract religious experiences through concrete domains and patterned oppositions. |
| <b>4. Discourse Features</b>                | Direct address, participant reference, speaker–addressee relationships, and thematic progression construct worship as interpersonal and responsive discourse.     |
| <b>5. Emerging Stylistic Patterns</b>       | Lexical, syntactic, semantic, and discourse features interact rather than operate independently.                                                                  |
| <b>6. Meaning and Worshipful Expression</b> | The interaction of the identified features constructs meanings associated with praise, trust, dependence, identity, belonging, response, and devotion.            |

The multilevel analysis demonstrates that the language of worship in the selected Hillsong songs is stylistically patterned. The evidence does not point to a single linguistic feature as responsible for the worshipful quality of the songs. Rather, worshipful meaning emerges through the interaction of **word choice, repetition, pronoun use, grammatical patterning, figurative representation, and discourse organization**.

The analysis also demonstrates the value of examining short textual segments systematically. A single expression can simultaneously function at several linguistic levels. For example, an identity statement may contain a particular lexical choice, occur in a simple syntactic construction, represent a semantic relationship, and establish an interpersonal position within the discourse.

Accordingly, the findings support a multilevel understanding of Hillsong lyrics in which stylistic meaning is constructed through relationships among linguistic forms. The interpretation remains grounded in the textual evidence and does not extend to claims about the personal intentions or experiences of the songwriters.

## CONCLUSIONS

The study examined the language of worship in five selected Hillsong songs through a multilevel stylistic analysis of lexical, syntactic, semantic, and discourse features. The findings show that worshipful expression in the selected songs is constructed through the interaction of linguistic choices rather than through a single stylistic device. Across the corpus, diction, repetition, pronoun use, grammatical patterning, metaphor, imagery, and discourse relationships work together to present themes of faith, dependence, praise, devotion, identity, and relationship with God.

At the lexical level, the songs make use of recurring words and expressions associated with worship, faith, divine attributes, personal commitment, and emotional response. Repetition gives prominence to particular words and ideas, while first- and second-person pronouns help establish a personal relationship between the speaker and the divine addressee. Evaluative and emotive vocabulary further contributes to the expression of admiration, gratitude, trust, and devotion.

At the syntactic level, recurring clause structures, coordination, parallelism, and repetition contribute to the rhythm and emphasis of the lyrics. These patterns allow particular statements of faith, praise, and commitment to become more prominent. The syntactic organization also contributes to the directness of address that characterizes several of the songs.

At the semantic level, metaphor, symbolism, personification, and imagery provide concrete ways of expressing abstract religious concepts. Images involving water, foundations, names, creation, identity, and movement allow ideas such as faith, dependence, security, divine presence, and spiritual commitment to be represented through more tangible conceptual domains. These semantic patterns demonstrate how figurative language expands the expressive possibilities of worship lyrics.

At the discourse level, the songs frequently organize their lyrics around relationships among the speaker, the divine addressee, and the subject of worship. Direct address to God, references to divine attributes and actions, and shifts between personal testimony and declarations of faith contribute to the development of worshipful



discourse. The lyrics therefore function not only as descriptions of religious experience but also as linguistic constructions of address, response, affirmation, and devotion.

Taken together, the four levels demonstrate that the language of worship in the selected Hillsong songs is multidimensional and interconnected. Lexical choices gain emphasis through repetition and syntactic patterning; figurative expressions reinforce broader themes; and discourse structures establish relationships between the worshipper and the divine addressee. The analysis therefore supports the value of a multilevel stylistic approach for examining how worship is constructed through language.

The study also demonstrates that stylistic analysis can provide a systematic way of examining religious song lyrics without reducing them to theological statements or treating individual expressions independently of their context. By connecting short textual excerpts with observable linguistic features and appropriate theoretical perspectives, the analysis provides a text-based account of how the selected songs construct worshipful meanings.

However, the findings are limited to the five selected Hillsong songs and to the linguistic features examined in their English lyrics. They should therefore not be generalized to all Hillsong songs, contemporary Christian worship music, or Christian worship discourse as a whole. The study describes patterns found within the selected corpus rather than establishing universal characteristics of worship language.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed for individuals and groups who may benefit from the results:

**1. *Language and English teachers*** may use selected Hillsong songs as supplementary materials for teaching lexical features, syntactic structures, figurative language, imagery, repetition, and discourse patterns. Classroom discussions may focus on how these linguistic features contribute to meaning and how language is used to express ideas and emotions in song lyrics.

**2. *Students of linguistics, English, and language studies*** may use the findings to strengthen their understanding of multilevel stylistic analysis. They may examine how word choice, pronoun use, parallelism, metaphor, personification, and speaker–addressee relationships work together to convey meanings in songs and other texts.

**3. *Worship songwriters and lyricists*** may consider the stylistic patterns identified in the study when composing lyrics. The use of meaningful word choices, repetition, parallel structures, imagery, and direct address may help communicate themes of praise, trust, dependence, identity, and devotion clearly and effectively.

**4. *Worship leaders and church music ministries*** may use the findings as a resource for discussing the language of selected worship songs. Examining their imagery, expressions of praise, and relationships between the speaker and the addressee may help participants develop a deeper understanding of the meanings conveyed through the lyrics.

**5. *Researchers in linguistic stylistics and religious discourse*** may apply or adapt the multilevel stylistic analysis matrix used in this study to examine other song lyrics and forms of discourse. The matrix may provide a systematic way of identifying and interpreting lexical, syntactic, semantic, and discourse features, provided that the categories are adjusted to suit the material being analyzed.

**6. *Future researchers*** may expand the corpus to include more Hillsong songs and worship songs from other Christian groups or traditions to determine whether the stylistic patterns identified in this study are consistent across different collections. They may also incorporate musical and performance elements, such as melody, rhythm, and vocal delivery, to complement the linguistic analysis and examine how these elements interact in



conveying meaning. Such studies may provide a broader understanding of the linguistic and musical features of worship songs.

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