

Analysis of Inflectional Morphology in Justin Bieber's Songs

Lini Marlina

STAI RAKHA Amuntai, Hulu Sungai Utara, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author email: linimarlina02319@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Morphology is the study of word formation and structure, and inflection is an important aspect that changes word forms without altering meaning or category. This study aims to analyze inflectional forms of nouns, verbs, and adjectives in the lyrics of four Justin Bieber songs: Favorite Girl (2009), Love Yourself (2015), Life is Worth Living (2015), and Ghost (2021), and to observe the patterns of their use. Using a qualitative document analysis method, the researcher identified words with inflectional suffixes, categorized them by type and grammatical function, and described patterns and frequency narratively. The results show that plural nouns are most common, verbs often appear in past tense or progressive (-ing) forms, and adjectives appear in comparative and superlative forms. The songs demonstrate how inflection supports both grammatical correctness and expressive meaning, reflecting narrative, emotional, and thematic purposes. These findings highlight the practical application of inflectional morphology in creative contexts and suggest its usefulness in English language teaching using authentic media such as song lyrics.

Keywords: *Morphology, Inflection, English Grammar, Song Lyrics, Justin Bieber*

INTRODUCTION

Morphology is a branch of linguistics that studies the structure, form, and formation of words, including how words change to express grammatical meaning. According to Kridalaksana (2009 as cited in Salsabila et al., 2023), morphology concerns the process of turning lexemes into words, in which lexemes function as lexical units and words as grammatical units. Similarly, Verhaar (1984) explains that morphology examines how word parts are organized grammatically (Mulyati, 2021). In addition, Tarigan (1995 as cited in Sekarsari et al., 2025) distinguishes between synchronic morphology, which analyzes word forms at a particular time, and diachronic morphology, which studies the historical development of words. From these perspectives, morphology can be understood as the study of word forms and the grammatical changes they undergo.

One central concept in morphology is inflection, which refers to changes in a word's form to express grammatical information such as tense, number, aspect, or degree without altering its basic meaning or lexical category. Bagiya (2017) states that

inflection operates through systematic and predictable rules and preserves the lexical identity of words, particularly nouns, verbs, and adjectives. Unlike derivation, which results in the creation of new words and changes in word class, inflection serves a purely grammatical function within sentences (Lieber, 2009). For this reason, inflection is especially relevant for analyzing how grammatical meaning is realized in authentic language use, including song lyrics.

In English, nouns, verbs, and adjectives exhibit various inflectional forms. Nouns are inflected for number and possession, for example through plural markers such as *-s* or *-es* and possessive *-’s* (McCarthy, 2002). Verbs are inflected to mark tense, agreement, and aspect, such as *-s* for third person singular present tense and *-ed* for past tense, as well as *-ing* and *-ed* participles (Lieber, 2009). Adjectives are inflected to indicate degree through comparative and superlative forms, such as *-er* and *-est*, or through irregular forms like *good*, *better*, *best* (McCarthy, 2002). These inflectional patterns are frequently found in everyday English, including popular music, where grammatical rules interact with artistic expression.

Previous studies on inflectional morphology have explored various contexts, such as child language development (Calder et al., 2021), bilingual language processing (Bosch et al., 2019), political speeches (Ismail et al., 2023), and poetry (Wulandari & Indriani, 2021). However, studies that specifically examine inflectional morphology in popular English song lyrics are still limited. Most existing research focuses on formal texts or literary works, leaving popular music underexplored despite its role as a form of real-world language use. This gap indicates the need for further investigation into how inflectional forms are used in contemporary song lyrics.

Therefore, this study focuses on the analysis of inflectional morphology in English song lyrics, using four Justin Bieber songs: *Favorite Girl* (2009), *Love Yourself* (2015), *Life Is Worth Living* (2015), and *Ghost* (2021). The research problem of this study is how inflectional forms of nouns, verbs, and adjectives are used in Justin Bieber’s song lyrics to express grammatical meanings such as number, tense, aspect, and degree. This study aims to identify and analyze these inflectional forms and to examine whether they follow regular English inflectional patterns or show stylistic variations influenced by songwriting choices. By focusing on popular songs, this study contributes to morphological analysis by highlighting how grammatical rules operate in creative and widely consumed language texts.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative research design to analyze inflectional forms of nouns, verbs, and adjectives in Justin Bieber’s song lyrics. The data were collected from four songs: *Favorite Girl* (2009), *Love Yourself* (2015), *Life is Worth Living* (2015), and

Ghost (2021). The lyrics were chosen to represent different periods of his career and contain examples of inflectional morphology. The researcher acted as the main instrument, supported by tables to record words with inflectional suffixes. Data were collected through document analysis by identifying nouns, verbs, and adjectives with inflectional markers and recording them in tables. The analysis used qualitative content analysis, categorizing words by type and function, and describing patterns and frequency narratively. To ensure validity, triangulation was applied by comparing multiple online sources and consulting linguistic references (Lieber, 2009; Booij, 2007; McCarthy & Carstairs, 2002), along with peer review to confirm accurate categorization.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This study focused on analyzing inflectional morphology in the lyrics of four Justin Bieber songs: *Favorite Girl* (2009), *Love Yourself* (2015), *Life is Worth Living* (2015), and *Ghost* (2021). The lyrics were examined to identify nouns, verbs, and adjectives with inflectional suffixes. The analysis involved categorizing words by type and grammatical function, and describing patterns and frequency narratively to capture how inflection appears in real language use.

Nouns in English often show inflection through plural forms (-s, -es) and possessive forms (-'s). Across the four songs, 19 plural nouns were identified. The table below shows the distribution:

Table 1. Distribution of Inflected Nouns

Song	Plural Nouns	Possessive Nouns
Favorite Girl (2009)	8	0
Love Yourself (2015)	5	0
Ghost (2021)	1	0
Life is Worth Living (2015)	5	0

The word “girls” appeared four times in *Favorite Girl*, consisting of the root “girl” and the inflectional suffix -s. Another example is “mistakes,” with the root “mistake” and the suffix -s. These findings indicate that plural nouns are frequently used to describe multiple objects or people in the songs’ narratives.

Verbs show inflection through tense, number, and aspect. Across the four songs, 56 inflected verbs were found. The table below summarizes the distribution of verb forms in each song:

Table 2. Distribution of Inflected Verb

Song	3 rd Person Singular Present	Other Present Tense Forms	Past Tense	Progressive (-ing)	Past Participle (-ed)
Favorite Girl (2009)	5	0	5	2	0
Love Yourself (2015)	2	0	3	12	0
Ghost (2021)	0	0	2	0	0
Life is Worth Living (2015)	1	0	3	21	0

In *Favorite Girl*, the most frequent verbs were third-person singular and past tense, e.g., “makes” (root “make” + suffix **-s**). In *Love Yourself* and *Life is Worth Living*, progressive verbs such as “moving” were common, indicating ongoing actions. *Ghost* mostly contained past tense verbs, reflecting past events.

Adjectives showed inflection mainly through comparative (-er) and superlative (-est) forms. Only two adjectives were identified in *Favorite Girl*: “prettier” (comparative) and “coolest” (superlative).

Table 3. Distribution of Inflected Adjective

Adjective	Song	Type	Root + Suffix
prettier	Favorite Girl	Comparative	pretty + -er
coolest	Favorite Girl	Superlative	cool + -est

These examples show how adjectives in songs emphasize degrees, in line with the theoretical framework (McCarthy, 2002; Booij, 2007).

Discussion

The results of this study show that nouns, verbs, and adjectives in Justin Bieber’s songs generally adhere to standard English inflectional rules, yet they also reflect creative usage appropriate for song lyrics. The plural nouns found across the songs highlight the presence of multiple subjects or objects in the lyrics’ narratives. For instance, the frequent appearance of “girls” in *Favorite Girl* emphasizes relational themes and storytelling about social interactions. This supports McCarthy’s (2002:34) assertion that noun inflection indicates number without altering the grammatical category. Possessive forms, although less frequent in these songs, serve to denote ownership or personal relationships, adding nuance to the lyrical content.

Verb inflection in these songs provides insights into temporal and aspectual focus. Third-person singular present forms, such as “makes” in *Favorite Girl*, reflect direct actions performed by subjects in the narrative. Past tense forms in *Ghost* align with the song’s retrospective theme, indicating events that have already occurred. Progressive verbs, common in *Love Yourself* and *Life is Worth Living*, such as “moving” or “living,”

emphasize ongoing actions and experiences, reinforcing the present or future-oriented messages of these songs. These patterns illustrate how verb inflection not only conveys grammatical tense and aspect but also supports thematic storytelling, aligning with Lieber's (2009:99-100) framework that verb inflection signals grammatical context while retaining semantic meaning.

Adjectives, although fewer in number, reveal the expressive use of comparative and superlative forms in song lyrics. Words like "prettier" and "coolest" in *Favorite Girl* demonstrate how degree inflection emphasizes qualities or rankings, adding emotional intensity and stylistic emphasis to the lyrics. This finding aligns with Booij (2007:101), who notes that inflectional morphology of adjectives conveys grammatical agreement while enhancing descriptive meaning. The limited number of inflected adjectives may indicate that songwriters prioritize nouns and verbs for narrative and action over descriptive complexity.

When comparing these findings to previous studies on English inflectional morphology (Lieber, 2009; Booij, 2007; McCarthy & Carstairs, 2002), this research provides a nuanced perspective on how morphology functions in creative contexts. While traditional studies focus on written or formal texts, song lyrics demonstrate that inflectional morphology remains consistent but is also adapted for artistic and emotional purposes. The use of progressive verbs to convey continuity or reflection, for example, shows how inflection can support thematic goals rather than just grammatical correctness.

The study also highlights patterns of inflection related to the chronological release of songs. Earlier songs like *Favorite Girl* show more third-person singular and past tense verbs, reflecting straightforward narrative storytelling. Later songs, such as *Life is Worth Living* and *Love Yourself*, emphasize progressive forms, reflecting more introspective or motivational themes. This temporal shift in verb usage suggests that songwriters may consciously or unconsciously select inflectional forms to match the emotional or thematic focus of the song.

In summary, inflectional morphology in Justin Bieber's songs serves dual functions: grammatical and stylistic. It structures words to fit proper grammatical contexts while simultaneously enhancing the narrative, emotional tone, and artistic expression of the lyrics. Understanding these patterns offers valuable insights for linguists studying morphology in authentic, creative language and for educators exploring practical examples of English grammar in media. This study also opens avenues for further research into how morphology is used in different genres of music and by other artists, highlighting the intersection between linguistic theory and popular culture.

CONCLUSION

From the results of this study, it can be concluded that in the four Justin Bieber songs analyzed, nouns, verbs, and adjectives generally follow standard English inflectional rules, with plural nouns, past tense verbs, and progressive (-ing) forms appearing most frequently. The findings indicate that the songs often convey narratives of personal struggle, emotional reflection, and ongoing experiences, where past tense verbs reflect past events and progressive forms express continuity or hope for the future. These results highlight the practical application of inflectional morphology in creative contexts, showing how grammatical forms can support thematic and emotional expression, which has implications for both linguistic theory and teaching English through authentic materials like song lyrics. A limitation of this study is the small sample of only four songs, which may affect the generalizability of the findings; therefore, future research could expand the analysis to include a wider range of songs or compare different music genres to deepen understanding of inflectional morphology in popular media.

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